

# Lesson Plan - Third Session - Northridge Presbyterian Church - Understanding God in the Bible

I. Introduction and Re-cap

II. Discussion of Biblical Treatment of Slavery

III. Discussion of Biblical Treatment of the Death Penalty

IV. Verses to Consider vis-à-vis War and Cruelty

A. Now we'll look at just a small sampling of verses in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament that suggest a cruel God. The first is of the conquest of Canaan. The second is of God's anger at Judah and threat of its destruction. The latter two are from the New Testament.

1. "Then the Lord said to Joshua, 'See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands.'" And it followed that "they destroyed with the sword every living thing in it - men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys."  
Joshua 6:2, 21

2. "For I am bringing evil from the north, and great destruction. A lion has gone up from his thicket, and a destroyer of nations has set out; He has gone out from his place to make your land a waste. Your cities will be ruins without inhabitant." Jeremiah 4:6-7

3. "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."  
Matthew 10:34

4. "I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth." Revelation 6:8

We're going to look at other Biblical verses that show, much as we have seen in our past sessions, that there is a trajectory from these perspectives to more advanced ones. Clearly, this is not the only, or even most significant, image we have of the two testaments, Jesus, or God.

But, before moving on, let's ask these questions: why is this language in the Bible? What purposes did it serve? Understanding that this more violent orientation is from an ancient time, can we think of reasons that explain it or, with caveats perhaps, suggest a basis for it?

Keep in mind as you address the verses that deal with the conquest in Canaan that the predominant archeological finding has been that the occupation of Canaan by the Israelites appeared not to happen in any way remotely like that described in the Bible.

(Discussion)

B. Now let's look at verses in Deuteronomy that reflect advances in understanding as the redaction of that book is effected.

1. "When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace...If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. When the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, put the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, they shall spare and take as their booty." Deuteronomy 20:10-14

This is an advance, to be sure. But there's an interesting caveat. And there's a further advance in subsequent verses.

The caveat is that it applies only to lands outside the Promised Land. What explains the caveat?

It's complicated. (Was it due to the need to avoid abandoning the earlier text altogether, or the presence of ongoing threats? Or was it due to the continuing appeal of idolatrous practices?) Shall we rather call it the "change is slow" process, which accounts for change, even in the Bible?!

2. A huge advance can be seen in Deuteronomy 20:19:

"When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its fruit-bearing trees by putting an ax to them...Do not cut them down."

What does this teach? How do you think the rabbis and sages take this verse and expand upon it, with the effect

of making these new rules the basis for revolutionary and enduring ethics of war?

(Discussion)

3. Another advance follows in Deuteronomy 21:10-15. Let's read those verses (in our Bibles at home and at church.)

We moderns obviously would go much further than this, but let's count and discuss the ways in which the requirements here modify ancient practice radically.

(Discussion)

C. Accounts of divine war occur less frequently as we move through Kings. There are very few in Chronicles

and none of substance after Hezekiah. Chronicles is virtually silent about the conquest of Canaan.

D. We'll conclude by looking briefly at the following words from Micah, which show the continuing trajectory:

"In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains: it will be exalted above the hills and peoples will stream to it.

Many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go to the mountain of HaShem, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths...

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for HaShem has spoken.

All the nations may walk in the name of their gods; we will walk in the name of HaShem, our God for ever and ever." Micah 4:1-5

How far have we come today? Explain how and why.

(Discussion)

V. Conclusion – what are our takeaways from our study?