

**CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF  
BIBLE &  
VIOLENCE**

# Reading the Bible Responsibly Three Case Studies

This study was written for the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence  
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## Introduction

Suicide attack, genocide, attempted child sacrifice. Not things you would expect to find in the Bible, but think of Samson, Moses / Joshua / Saul, and Abraham, and as part of their stories you have got just those three things!

The problem is that many Christians do not recognise the present-day resonances of their scriptural stories. Brought up as they are to read the stories from within the community of faith, it is not always easy to see them as others do, and so it can be quite a shock to realise that the figure you have been brought up to think of as a hero, or the event you have been brought up to understand as an act of faith, is seen by others as anything but. Sometimes this is as a result of events in the wider world, as for example with the figure of Samson. As one scholar put it:

9/11 revealed connections between Samson and terrorism that nobody had seen before ... and the association of Samson and terrorism is now here to stay.<sup>1</sup>

The aim, therefore, of these three Bible Studies is to introduce those within the community of faith to another way of looking at three well-known biblical stories: Abraham's Near-Sacrifice of Isaac; Moses / Joshua / Saul and the Occupation of Canaan; Samson's Suicidal Defeat of the Philistines.

This short list of stories is not exhaustive, and the approach suggested here could be applied to any biblical text – whether from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) or New Testament. It could also be applied to theological statements – for example, there are approaches to the Theology of Atonement which raise very real questions, and call for a responsible reading, as many have pointed out.

### Reading the Bible Responsibly

What does it mean to read the Bible responsibly? I would suggest that responsible reading of the Bible is reading aware of other ways in which our sacred texts can be understood and interpreted. A responsible reading will be open to the voices of all who have read and engaged with the text, whatever their perspective, and will seek to engage with the challenges they raise for our understanding of the story, however difficult this might be for the community of faith.

Above all else, we need to be honest, both about the way in which the text in question has been interpreted through the Christian tradition, and the important ethical and religious questions it raises now. This means that we need to look beyond our own assumptions about the text, informed as they may be by sermons and commentaries, and approach it with an openness to having our minds changed.

The first step towards a responsible reading of the Bible is to take seriously the very real questions and concerns posed by the story instead of ignoring them or spiritualising them away. Responsible reading of the Bible starts here, by facing up to the challenging and uncomfortable questions posed by our sacred texts.

Once we have recognised the very real questions posed by the text, the second step towards a responsible reading is to re-read the story at face value, putting aside what we may have been brought up to believe about its true meaning, and experiencing its full implications.

Once we have re-read the text, the third step towards a responsible reading is to recognise our blind spot with regard to the story, the ways in which it has been sanitised or spiritualised for us through familiarity of content and interpretation, and to commit ourselves to looking beyond these as we continue to read and engage with our sacred texts.

### **Just a Beginning**

These are not the only examples of texts that call for a responsible reading. But it is my hope that the approach outlined and exemplified here can, and will, be used more extensively as we seek to be responsible readers of the Bible.

Genesis 22: 1 – 8  
**Abraham & Isaac**  
*Killing A Child For God ?*

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**Read:** Genesis 22: 1 – 8  
Hebrews 11: 17 - 19

- What are we to make of this story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac ? The author of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews commends Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son: He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son<sup>2</sup>
- Reflect for a moment on this story. How do you react to it ? How comfortable are you with it ? Are you content for it to be in the Bible ? How do you feel about the fact that Abraham is commended both within the Bible and beyond as an exemplar of faith ?

**Reflect:** Now reflect for a moment on the following:

The evening was just passing into darkness, the first stars were becoming visible. Cristos Valenti took his youngest child, his most beloved child, with him in his truck. He often took her with him to visit friends, and she liked to accompany him. They drove to the place he had been directed to - to the place in the park where all the trees are. They got out of the truck. He took her hand, and together they walked into the park. It was dark and quiet. She held onto his hand more tightly. 'Don't be afraid', he said, trying to allay her fears. 'We are going to meet God.' 'I don't know anyone named God.' 'You will meet him soon', was the answer, and they walked on in silence. When they arrived at the place God had appointed, her father told her to lie down on the grass. 'Start praying the Our Father who art in Heaven', he said as he took the knife and took her life.

He sat next to her body and prayed for several minutes. When he looked up, he saw her star shining brightly in the night sky; he saw two stars moving closer together. He knew then he had fulfilled her destiny, he knew he had done the right thing. He picked her up and took her home. When his oldest daughter opened the door she saw her father holding the child, like a pieta. 'Call the police', he said. 'I have given her to God.'

3

This is a true story. The case came to court in California in 1990, and the defendant was eventually found "not guilty by reason of insanity".

## Towards a Responsible Reading

### *Step One*

Two stories. One myth, one history; separated by thousands of years; but with one thing in common - belief in a God capable of calling people to do something which in other circumstances would clearly be seen to be wrong.

Psychoanalyst Alice Miller notes how Isaac has been turned into an object. He has been dehumanized by being made a sacrifice ...<sup>4</sup> Another commentator asks:

what are we to make of Abraham's silence when God demands that he sacrifice his son, Isaac? ... Four chapters earlier, he presses God again and again for the sake of the righteous of Sodom and Gomorrah whom he does not know; but now in the face of this scandalous demand, he remains silent.

What are we to make of Abraham's docility and his blind obedience to God? Given the tragic history of the twentieth century, is this model of submissive faith one we want to encourage in our own time?<sup>5</sup>

A study guide to the story invites us to engage in role-play, and suggests the group ask of Abraham:

Why didn't you refuse, or at least protest and argue? Can you find the words to explain to us why you kept silent, why you seemingly obeyed God so willingly?<sup>6</sup>

All sorts of questions arise from the story:

- (1) Why did Abraham not protest as he is presented as doing over the fate of Sodom & Gomorrah earlier in the Book of Genesis ? (See: Genesis 18: 16 – 33)
- (2) Why is the unprotesting Abraham, prepared to kill his own son at the command of God, presented as the epitome of faithfulness ?
- (3) Why has Abraham's call to sacrifice Isaac caught the imagination of generations of Christians, and been seen by some as a foreshadowing of the death of Christ ? Furthermore, if some understandings of the death of Christ can be described as amounting to "cosmic child abuse"<sup>7</sup>, what then of Abraham and God in this story ?
- (3) What are we supposed to do with this story given its place in the Biblical narrative and Abraham's subsequent commendation in the New Testament ?

## Towards a Responsible Reading

### *Step Two*

#### *Solo Reading:*

1. Read the story again, imagining first that you are Abraham and then that you are Isaac. How do you feel ? About yourself ? About the other person ? About God ?
2. Ask yourself, if this story was not in the Bible, how would you react to it ?
3. Ask yourself, is the Abraham described in this story a good parent or an exemplar of faith ?
4. Recalling the news item cited above, how would you react if someone came to you and told you that they were going to sacrifice their child to God, citing this story as their inspiration ?

#### *Group Reading:*

1. Allocate the roles of Abraham, Isaac and Sarah and then, in role, have a conversation between yourselves about the story, why you acted as you did, your feelings about what is going on, and what the story says about Abraham, Isaac, Sarah - and God.
2. Have a conversation about questions 2 – 4 above, allocating roles for Q4.
3. Reflect together on your responses to the story. What common ground and what differences can you identify in your various responses ?

#### *Some Suggested Questions to Ask:*

##### **Abraham:**

- How did you react when God first told you to sacrifice Isaac ?
- Did it occur to you not to obey ?
- Why didn't you protest ?

##### **Isaac:**

- What were you thinking as Abraham took you up the mountain that day ?
- Did you think he really was going to sacrifice you ?
- How do the events of that day leave you feeling about your father and his God ?

##### **Sarah:**

- Did it ever occur to you that your husband might feel called to sacrifice Isaac ?
- How do the events of that day leave you feeling about your husband and his God ?

## Towards a Responsible Reading *Step Three*

Many biblical commentators seem strangely untroubled by the story. One suggests that “the special circumstance of Abraham’s role as the father of the covenant requires a test without parallel”<sup>8</sup> and the traditional Christian reading of the story has indeed seen it as a test to see whether Abraham loved God or Isaac the more.

Yet what these commentators seem to miss is the fact that Abraham wasn't being called to give up a car or even a career, but to kill a person. According to the logic of the story Isaac is not a person in his own right but a simply another possession of Abraham.

In her discussion of Christian interpretations of the story, Carol Delaney quotes the early church theologian Origen who commends Abraham who "though he loves his son, preferred the love of God to human love".<sup>9</sup> Many believers today would echo Origen's words, so much so that Delaney suggests that we have created "an environment that has made it sacrilegious to question these issues"<sup>10</sup> But question them we must !

I wonder how many of us would fail to pass any test or temptation because of our unwillingness to sacrifice our own child. Many of us who would refuse, thus proving our faithlessness, would rather choose to be punished by God – that is, to sacrifice ourselves, rather than let harm touch a head of one of our children. ... Some might argue that no one, not even immediate family, should come before God. ... Yet the major biblical Jewish figure, Moses (Exod. 32: 32), and the major biblical Christian figure, Paul (Rom. 9: 2 – 3), were each willing to be cut off from God for the sake of their people. ... And in reality, isn't laying down one's life for another the heart of the Christian gospel as emulated by Jesus (John 15:13) ?<sup>11</sup>

- In light of your reading and reflection on this story, how would you approach it now ?
- How do you think the Christian community should read and explain this story in the future ?
- What other questions (if any) does your reading and reflection on this story raise for you?

Deuteronomy 7: 1 - 6  
**Occupying the Promised Land**  
*Divine Genocide ?*

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**Read:** Deuteronomy 7: 1 – 6  
Deuteronomy 20: 16 - 18 / 1 Samuel 15: 11 - 3

- What are we to make of these commands to do something which to twenty first century readers sounds like genocide ?
- Reflect for a moment on these three passages. How do you react to them ? How comfortable are you with them ? Are you content for them to be in the Bible ?
- How do you feel about the fact that the Exodus theme is central to both the Old Testament and to Christian faith ? The Exodus may be about freedom and liberation for the chosen people, but what about the Canaanites ?

**Reflect:** Now reflect for a moment on the following:

... indiscriminate and promiscuous slaughter, making no distinction of age or sex, but including alike women and children, the aged and decrepit, might seem an inhuman massacre, had it not been executed by the command of God. But as he, in whose hands are life and death, had justly doomed those nations to destruction, this puts an end to all discussion. (John Calvin) <sup>12</sup>

Oliver Cromwell drew a parallel between his revolution and the exodus and proceeded to treat the Catholics of Ireland as the Canaanites. He even declared that "there are great occasions in which some men are called to great services in the doing of which they are excused from the common rule of morality," as were the heroes of the OT. A generation later, the Puritans of New England applied the biblical texts about the conquest to their own situation, casting the Native American tribes Canaanites and Amalekites. In 1689, Cotton Mather urged the colonists to go forth against "Amalek annoying this Israel in the wilderness." A few years later, one Herbert Gibbs gave thanks for "the mercies of God in extirpating the enemies of Israel in Canaan." He was not referring to biblical times. <sup>13</sup>

"These Blacks have deserved death before God and man ... because they have built no houses and dug no wells ... God has let us conquer here because we are the nobler and more advanced people .... To the nobler and more vigorous belongs the world. That is the justice of God." (Gustav Frenssen, *Peter Moor's Journey to Southwest Africa*, 1908)  
<sup>14</sup>

## Towards a Responsible Reading *Step One*

To constitute genocide, there must be a proven intent on the part of the perpetrators to physically destroy a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.<sup>15</sup>

Given the clarity of Old Testament commands regarding the destruction of the Canaanites, ascribing to them the label “genocide” is almost unavoidable. Even in its own terms, what God appears to be commanding here is the complete destruction of a national and religious group, a group seen as a source of idolatry and religious pollution.

Although there is much debate about the exact nature and extent of Israel’s occupation of the promised land in practise, and there are also many examples in the Old Testament of less extreme calls to military action not involving genocide, these particular texts have taken on a life of their own and, irrespective of how accurately they reflect historical reality, have served to justify mass killings in places as far apart as Ireland and the early USA.

So how should we react to them ? Rachel Held Evans poses the question with characteristic force:

If the slaughter of Canaanite children elicits only a shrug, then why not the slaughter of Pequots ? Of Syrians ? Of Jews ? If we train ourselves not to ask hard questions about the Bible, then where will we find the courage to challenge interpretations that justify injustice ? How will we know when we’ve got it wrong ?<sup>16</sup>

Even within the tradition itself there are misgivings:

According to a midrashic interpretation ... the angels, who sought to sing a hymn to God as the Egyptians were drowning ... [were rebuked by God] saying “While my creatures are drowning in the sea you would sing a hymn ?”<sup>17</sup>

Whatever we think actually happened, the stories of genocide remain, and the picture of God they paint is of a God for whom the response to wrong belief is death and destruction ! Is this the God in whom we believe ?

The research of Old Testament scholars, however much it provides an answer to the historical question ... does not resolve the narrative problem. People who read the narratives read them as they are, not as scholars and experts would like them to be read and interpreted. History is no longer with us. The narrative remains.<sup>18</sup>

## Towards a Responsible Reading *Step Two*

### *Solo Reading:*

1. Read the three passages again, imagining that the words are being addressed directly to you. How do you feel? About yourself? About God?
2. Ask yourself, if these passages were not in the Bible, how would you react to them?
3. Ask yourself, who is this God who is portrayed as calling for “annihilation” and “no mercy”?
4. How would you respond to someone who sought to justify a specific example of genocide by citing these passages or ones like them?

### *Group Reading:*

1. Allocate the roles of hearer; hearer but dissenter (ie hearing the commands but refusing to carry them out); victim (eg Canaanites) and then, in role, have a conversation between yourselves about one of the stories, why you acted as you did, your feelings about what is going on, and what the story says about perpetrator, victim and God.
2. Have a conversation about questions 2 – 4 above, allocating roles for Q4.
3. Reflect together on your responses to these passages. What common ground and what differences can you identify in your various responses?

### *For Reflection / Discussion:*

‘He compared the Tutsis to the Amalekites, and said Saul was rejected by God because he failed to exterminate all of the Amalekites. He said “If you don’t exterminate the Tutsis, you’ll be rejected. If you don’t want to be rejected by God, then finish the job of killing the people God has rejected. No child, no wife, no old man should be left alive.” And the people said “Amen” ‘. <sup>19</sup> (Sermon preached prior to the Rwanda Genocide)

- How would you respond to this sermon?
- Can you think of ways in which we too create an “other” in the way that the preacher has with the Tutsis, and how “otherness” can lead us to deny the full humanity of those who are different from ourselves?

## Towards a Responsible Reading *Step Three*

Biblical scholars respond to these texts in different ways. For some, there is no escaping that this was God's command for then, but (other than in a "spiritual" sense) these are not words for now. For others, this is what the people believed God was calling them to do at the time, or looking back, what they believed they should have done. For yet others, these words do represent God's call, but a call accommodating itself to the context and limitations of a particular time and place.

In the end, there is no completely satisfactory response to these texts. Even today, however much historians reassure us that Old Testament talk of genocide is largely rhetoric, the stories remain with their invitation to identify ourselves as one of "us" or one of "them". Furthermore, this "us and them" rhetoric of the Old Testament has continued to inform much Christian self-understanding up to our own time, sometimes leading to violence

So, whether we are considering the three specific texts referred to here or the story of the escape from Egyptian captivity or indeed the more general theme of Exodus, the question remains "What about the Canaanites?" – what about those who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and to worship the wrong gods?

Therefore, as we read of the escape from captivity in Egypt and the occupation of the promised land let's not forget about those who have suffered as a result of these stories and the imperatives they appear to commend.

The Bible has contributed to violence in the world precisely because it has been taken to confer a degree of certitude that transcends human discussion and argumentation. Perhaps the most constructive thing a biblical critic can do toward lessening the contribution of the Bible to violence in the world, is to show that certitude is an illusion.<sup>20</sup>

- In light of your reading and reflection on these passages, how would you approach them now?
- How do you think the Christian community should read and explain these passages in the future?
- What other questions (if any) does your reading and reflection on these passages raise for you?

Judges 16  
**Samson**  
*Suicide Killer for God ?*

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**Read:** Judges 16  
Hebrews 11: 32 - 40

- What are we to make of this story of Samson's death ? The author of the Letter to the Hebrews commends Samson, amongst others, as one of whom the world was not worthy<sup>21</sup>
- Reflect for a moment on this story. How do you react to it ? How comfortable are you with it ? Are you content for it to be in the Bible ? How do you feel about the fact that Samson is commended both within the Bible and beyond as an exemplar of faith ?

**Reflect:** Now reflect for a moment on the following extracts, one from a retelling of the Samson story, the other from a news report from 2003:

The last thing I saw, before I became unconscious, was the slave. He had not moved from his spot between the pillars. His great head was lifted up, and his sightless face gazed aloft. I heard him give a great cry of joy, as if he were welcoming his God, and then he died. I swear I have never seen such peace and joy – yes and gratitude – on a human face.<sup>22</sup>

'Some of them were elated, apparently. Ecstatic, in the last moments,' says Merari. 'You probably remember the description of the suicide guy who drove a truck into the Marine Barracks in October 1983. He was described by the guard at the entrance to the compound, and the guy said amazingly, "He was smiling" '<sup>23</sup>

## Towards a Responsible Reading *Step One*

Just two years after 9/11, political scientist Shadia Drury noted what she called an “uncanny resemblance” between the biblical story of Samson’s suicide and the 9/11 terrorist attack:

Morally speaking the two crimes were identical. In both cases innocent victims were buried alive in the rubble – innocent people met a gruesome death that they could not have anticipated or deserved. It is difficult not to conclude that Samson was as much of a terrorist as Atta. Yet, we regard Atta as a criminal, and the incarnation of evil, but we go along with the Bible in portraying Samson as a hero. Is there any difference between them that would justify such radically different assessments? <sup>24</sup>

Drury goes on to acknowledge that

It may be argued that Samson ... was merely an instrument of God’s will ... [sacrificing] his own life in order to carry out the justice of God.

But, she continues, ‘If we accept this excuse for Samson, we must also accept it for Atta.’ <sup>25</sup>

Drury was not the only one to notice the disturbing resonances between Samson’s suicide and 9/11. Dutch Old Testament scholar Klaas Spronk first heard of the 9/11 attacks on his way back from a scholarly presentation on Samson and realised that there were very real similarities between the two:

In both situations, the hero of the story had dealt a big blow to the enemy in a place that symbolised the power and glory of the enemy. <sup>26</sup>

The central question posed by the Samson story today is whether such a figure can any more be seen as a hero of the faith as, for many, he undoubtedly still is. For at the heart of the story, at least on a face value reading, would seem to be the assumption that faith can, and should, be spread by force.

Despite the fact that a careful reading of the Samson cycle of stories in the context of the overall narrative of the book of Judges arguably gives a less favourable verdict on Samson than one might expect:

There is no escaping the thought that Samson was, in a sense the first suicide-killer; and although the circumstances of his deed were different from those familiar to us... it may be that the act established in human consciousness a mode of murder and revenge directed at innocent victims which has been perfected in recent years. <sup>27</sup>

## Towards a Responsible Reading *Step Two*

### *Solo Reading:*

1. Read the story again, imagining first that you are Samson and then that you are one of the Philistines. How do you feel? About yourself? About the other person? About God?
2. Ask yourself, if this story was not in the Bible, how would you react to it?
3. Ask yourself, is the Samson described in this story an exemplar of faith? If you think he is, why do you do so? If you do not think he is, why do you think that he has been held up to be one through so much of the Christian era?
4. Mindful of 9/11 and other similar events, how would you react if someone came to you and told you that they were going to commit a suicide attack, citing this story as their inspiration?

### *Group Reading:*

1. Allocate the roles of Samson and a Philistine and then, in role, have a conversation between yourselves about the story, why you acted as you did, your feelings about what is going on, and what the story says about Samson, the Philistines - and God.
2. Have a conversation about questions 2 – 4 above, allocating roles for Q4.
3. Reflect together on your responses to the story. What common ground and what differences can you identify in your various responses?

### *For Reflection / Discussion:*

‘all I can say is that the next time somebody tries to re-tell the Samson [story] he or she had better put the rights of the Philistine crowd ... at the centre of the action.’<sup>28</sup>

- In the light of Wicker’s suggestion, are there other stories in the Bible where it might be helpful for us to put ourselves in the shoes of those who are presented as the villains of the piece, to try to understand their perspective on things?
- How might this help us in our relationships here and now with those who hold different beliefs and views to our own?

## Towards a Responsible Reading *Step Three*

Whilst acknowledging that he was not perfect, the majority of biblical commentators present Samson as a flawed instrument of God. One observes how Samson grasps the pillars of the temple and observes the 'cruciform position' with which he destroys the temple, before concluding:

It was not Samson's finest hour in a moral or spiritual sense; it was too clouded with bitter self-interest for that. But it was certainly his greatest achievement ... for he had demonstrated the vulnerability of their leadership and Yahweh's superiority over their God" <sup>29</sup>

Indeed, for much of the Christian tradition, and still for some today, despite all his faults Samson is seen as "a forerunner of the greatest Saviour of all." <sup>30</sup>

Yet how can this claim continue to be made after 9/11 ? Drury puts it neatly when she concludes that

Once the world is understood in these terms it becomes clear why Samson is a hero and Atta is a villain. Samson is on our side. That is all. <sup>31</sup>

Looked at this way, the Samson story looks rather different. It is clear that "ours" is not the only reading, and that we are easily blinded to the full horror of his final act.

A measure of the impact of the Samson story (amongst others) upon our culture is that the term "Philistine" (and similarly "Philister" in German) has come to have what one commentator describes as "very negative connotations". Furthermore, in relation to the biblical narrative itself:

We have been conditioned to see Philistines as categorically bad and deserving of death. We are not encouraged to feel any degree of compassion for them, and most of us do not. It is a testimony to how well the biblical writers have done their work. <sup>32</sup>

- In light of your reading and reflection on this story, how would you approach it now ?
- How do you think the Christian community should read and explain this story in the future ?
- What other questions (if any) does your reading and reflection on this story raise for you?

## In Conclusion

The Bible Should Never Be Used To Harm Others

Eric Siebert<sup>33</sup>

It is my hope that working through these three examples of what it might mean to read the Bible responsibly will open up a new way of approaching these familiar yet sometimes disturbing writings.

If we start from the principle that “The Bible should never be used to harm others”, then it is clear that responsible reading is an imperative if Christianity is to live up to its call to work to make the world a better place for all.

These are, of course, just three examples of an approach that could be applied to any Biblical (or indeed any religious) text or story. The New Testament doesn't escape (look at the passages that appear to commend slavery or sexism, and even Jesus' own apparent references to eternal separation), and it is perfectly possible to apply the same approach to Christian beliefs too. Understandings of the death of Christ which speak of a father sending his son to die in order to preserve the father's own honour or justice have already raised questions within the Christian community, as has been noted above.

In the end, it is precisely because religious rhetoric so easily conceals social and political reality that responsible reading is so important. Without it we risk missing the violent and oppressive tendencies lurking within our own tradition, leaving it to others to identify and address them.

## What Now ?

What if we treated the voices behind these texts respectfully but refused to let them serve as blind guides ? What if we saw these ancestors in the faith as both insightful and fallible and thus capable of both revealing and distorting God ? <sup>34</sup>

Ultimately, there are no definitive answers to the questions raised by texts such as those explored here. The original events are inaccessible to us. We have only the Biblical narratives, with their various agendas.

And it is what we can discern of their agendas which can shed further light on these texts. For example, reading the story of Samson in the wider context of the Book of Judges, mindful of that book's Jewish categorisation as one of the "Former Prophets" (rather than as one of the Historical Books, as in the Christian canon), will show that the book's narrative is a warning, and its conclusion 'narrates the failure of the era of the Judges'.<sup>35</sup> The purpose of the book, therefore, is to warn against the breakdown in community that can result from the domination of what we might today refer to as the "autonomous individual":

The book of Judges, from beginning to end ... demonstrates in a compelling manner that idolatry – for instance, in the form of the elevation of the self to the status of a god - will inevitably result in chaos and violence. <sup>36</sup>

Recent events, both in the UK and USA, show that this warning is as relevant today as it was at the time of Israel's Judges !

Looking more generally at the stories of the occupation of the "Promised Land", some commentators identify a tension between earlier simple promises of land and the much more complex reality of occupation. For,

real land, unlike theologically promised land, is always contested, disputed, and conflictual <sup>37</sup>

Therefore, these narratives reflect the faith journey of the ancient writers as they (just like we ourselves) move

from simple, one-dimensional, childlike claims to the real world, where every claim is endlessly contested <sup>38</sup>

In reading their stories, therefore, we too join the journey as we ask how God speaks to us in our world of child murder, genocide and suicide bombings and, indeed, in a world where violence is sometimes, possibly, a tragic necessity.

In our world, too, apparently simple theological and ethical claims face complex realities and we are reminded daily of the truth of Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day's favourite quote that:

Love in practise is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams <sup>39</sup>

Therefore, like the Biblical writers, we too find that our lives both reveal and distort God, we too sometimes claim God's sanction for our own hopes and dreams. And so as we engage with their stories we are invited to ask ourselves what we can learn from their insights and blind spots. Whatever else we may, or may not, mean by the word, one part of the truth of the Biblical writings resides in their truthfulness to their writers' experience, and hence their relevance to our own.

So it is important that we do not give up on the Biblical stories, however much they might shock and disturb us. Books such as Helen Paynter's *God of Violence Yesterday God of Love Today* ? <sup>40</sup> offer thoughtful and creative ways into a continued engagement with these difficult texts, and ways in which they might speak to us today. It is my hope that the Christian community will continue to engage with the troubling texts of its tradition in ways that are both creative and responsible and that these three studies have in some way inspired and encouraged that journey.

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## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Hebrews 11: 17 – 19 (NRSV)
- <sup>3</sup> Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth*, Princeton, 1998, p. 35
- <sup>4</sup> Alice Miller, Cited in Walter Capps, *The Child's Song*, WJK 1995 p. 82
- <sup>5</sup> Rosann Catalano, "Arguing with God" in Bill Moyers (ed) *Talking About Genesis: A Resource Guide*, Doubleday, 1996), p. 110
- <sup>6</sup> "Activities For Groups & Families # 3 Imagining: On Mount Moriah" in Moyers (ed), p. 115
- <sup>7</sup> For example, in very different contexts, by Steve Chalke and Jeffery John.
- <sup>8</sup> Kenneth A Matthews, *Genesis 1 – 11: 26* (New American Commentary), Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 285
- <sup>9</sup> Delaney, p. 149
- <sup>10</sup> Delaney, p. 14
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- <sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on Joshua*, quoted in Gundry, Cowles et al, *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God & Canaanite Genocide*, Zondervan 2003, p. 17
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