

## Reading the Canaanite Genocide

### The Problem

I suppose you know what I mean when I talk about “the Canaanite genocide.” I’m thinking especially of a commandment given in the name of the LORD, the God of Israel, by Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. He speaks to the people of Israel as they are about to enter the promised land, where they will encounter many nations (usually given in a list of 6 or 7, including Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites and so on) whom they are commanded to exterminate: “in the towns belonging to the peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction.” Deut. 20:16f (cf. Deut. 7:1-5). In the book of Joshua we have narratives of this commandment being partially carried out.

I suppose it's obvious that this poses a moral problem. This doesn't look like acceptable Christian behavior. I want to think about this problem from a particular angle, which will change the shape of the problem in what I hope will be a helpful way. The angle is that of someone who must teach and preach the Bible as God's Word. I'm thinking of the kind of questions that pastors must ask themselves as they prepare to preach on a text such as this. But also a bit more broadly: how shall passages such as these be understood when they are read in church, as part of the worship of the Christian community which, like the worship of the Jewish community, centers in large part around the reading aloud of sacred Scripture, its use in liturgy and song and worship, as well as in preaching and exegesis. In all these uses Scripture is formative: it is meant to form the hearts of believers in faith, hope and love. So how can we possibly use a scripture commanding genocide to form hearts in faith, hope and love? That's the central question I want to consider today.

### The Shape of the Question (Teaching, Tradition, Theology)

Let me start with some general remarks about what follows from asking the question this way. First of all, to ask about the use of Scripture in the church, and especially in its worship, is to ask about Christian *teaching*. Or, to put it in more Latin terms, it is to ask about Christian *doctrine*. Doctrine (from the Latin term *doctrina*) is simply another word for teaching. But we often forget that and talk about doctrine as if all it means is a set of propositions to be learned or perhaps debated. This I think is a mistake: doctrine is first of all the *act* of teaching, or rather a coherent set of practices of teaching, which includes things that are taught but also the human social life in which they are taught, such as the setting of worship in which Christian teaching in the church properly takes place.

To ask the question about the Canaanite genocide in the way I am suggesting, therefore, is to reflect on Christian teaching not just as a set of propositions but as a longstanding practice of handing down the Christian faith in the teaching of the church as a community of worship. This handing down, again translated into Latin, is *traditio*, the word from which we get “tradition.” Again, it is first and foremost a longstanding set of practices—a process, not just a set of

doctrinal propositions. It's a name for what happens when Christian hearts are formed in faith, hope and love: the faith of Christ, the hope of his calling, and the love of God and neighbor that he commanded.

So we are reflecting on how this process of *traditio* and *doctrina*, tradition and teaching, should take place in the life of the church. And now one last piece of terminology: the name for this reflection on Christian teaching and tradition is Christian *theology*. To do theology is not just to debate about a set of doctrinal propositions, though sometimes it can involve such debate. It is first and foremost to reflect on how the faith should be taught, how Christian hearts should be formed in the faith of Christ, the hope of his calling, and love of God and neighbor. How do we teach this, especially in the context of the church's worship, where the reading and hearing and preaching of Scripture is a central formative act?

### Who's "We"?

Now you may have noticed that I've started to say, "we." I think it's always worthwhile to ask, "Who's we?" when a speaker starts talking this way. (For example, when there's talk about how "we" can help the poor. Who is it who's talking here as if they're not the poor, and the poor are just waiting there for them to help? It's a question of agency: who's doing what to whom? Why are the poor not the agents doing something here, but "we" are? This is usually a question worth asking). In the case of theology, I think there is a very good, clear answer to the question, "who's we?" "We" means the body of Christ, the people whose identity is made clearest when they gather together to worship God in the name of the Lord Jesus. And here we are, today, reflecting on how we should teach when we gather in that way. Of course, when we ask "how should we teach?" this "we" also has a kind of center: it centers on those who teach in the church, its pastors and preachers and theologians. But it includes also all of us who reflect together on the tasks of Christian teaching.

Theology *should* be able to give a good clear answer to the question, "who's we?" because good theology, I think, will be centrally concerned with "who" questions: who is the church? who is Israel? Above all, who is Jesus Christ? And indeed, I think it is precisely by answering such "who" questions that theologians can offer the most help to the church in reading the Canaanite genocide. For in this regard, I think, the question "Who are we?" is in fact the decisive question. Everything depends on giving a good answer to that question, an answer which locates us properly in the Biblical story.

We locate ourselves in the Biblical story by noticing that we are there in the story, because the story tells us who we are. Without the Bible, which is the Word of God addressed to us as his people, we could not identify ourselves as the church or the body of Christ—indeed, we could not *be* the body of Christ. (This is, by the way, the Protestant point overlooked by those who like to argue, in favor of Catholicism, that the church established the canon of Scripture. There would *be* no church without the *content* of the canon of Scripture, the testimony of prophets and apostles which is the Word of Christ that called the church into being to begin with). We find out who we are by reading the Scriptures; this is why reading Scripture is a central act of Christian worship, defining the very being of the church as it gathers as the congregation or *ekklesia* of God, the assembly of his people.

To see ourselves in the biblical story requires certain habits of reading that theologians should constantly work to inculcate. The key habit is called typology. It is the kind of reading that takes place when you look at Scriptural figures, at Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and David, Peter and Paul, or Jesus Christ himself, and you say, “Ah yes, that's me!” or, very often: “that's us!” It's the way the prophet Nathan wanted king David to understand the parable he told him about a criminal who deserved to die: “Thou art the man!” (2 Sam. 12:7). That could serve as the key motto for theological exegesis: you're the one in the story who's gotten into trouble—do you get it?

### **We are the Canaanites**

So now I'm in a position to propose to you an answer to our question about how to read the Canaanite genocide. How can we possibly use a scripture commanding genocide to form hearts in faith, hope and love? The key move, I suggest, is that we recognize ourselves in the Canaanites. “Thou art the man!” here means: “Those Canaanites that deserve to be wiped out - - that's us.” That is to say: we shouldn't put ourselves in a position to identify with the Israelites, God's chosen people who are commanded to kill. Rather, we should see ourselves as those who deserve to die, those who are an abomination before God who should be wiped off the face of the earth. That is much truer to who we actually are.

This is a hard word, of course. But surely no reading of this Scripture which wasn't hard could possibly be convincing. And I think you can already see how different it is from the usual way of approaching the problem. This is not about what counts as acceptable Christian behavior. This is about God's judgment on people like *us*. That's where we should locate ourselves in the story. We are not the ones commanded to do something here; we are the ones who are to have something done to us. The question is not, “Ought we to go and kill all the bad people?” but rather, “what hope can there be for bad people like us?” And asking *that* question, we can perhaps begin to see how we might read this Scripture in a way to form hearts in faith, hope and love. We are not stuck in the impossible position of being good Christians who are supposed to show how good we are by exterminating our neighbors. We are stuck in the difficult position of people who have no hope unless the undeserved mercy of God extends well beyond the boundaries of the chosen people.

### **The Good News of Election**

Now of course, we haven't solved the problem yet, for (among other things) my suggestion raises a new question: well, then, if that's who *we* are, then who are *they*—those people who are supposed to kill us? And here comes another hard answer: They are God's chosen people, the Jews, whom he loves more than us. I propose this hard answer to you because, first of all, I think it's true, it's clear Biblical teaching and absolutely essential to understanding our difficulties about the Canaanite genocide, and finally because I think it is essential to how we are to be formed in love. We need to learn to love those whom God loves. And it will do us great good to learn to rejoice in God's loving someone other than us. I think, from a Biblical perspective, that such rejoicing is essential to love of neighbor. It is what is lacking in Cain, when he sees how God favors his brother, and goes and kills him for it. That presents the

problem that *God* must solve if he is ever to teach us how to love. We will not love our brothers or our neighbors until we see that God loves them and that this is a good thing.

Since our hearts are murderous, like Cain's, God has a difficult problem to solve, and he has to do something difficult and hard to solve it. What he does is this: he loves someone else more than us. He chooses a beloved people, and it is not us. He does this so that we may learn to love those who are not ourselves, and find our blessing in them. And that's the good news within this hard word. He chooses Israel for the blessing of all nations. It is good news for all nations that Israel is his people, chosen and beloved. If we could hear such news and believe it, then we would learn to love. We would be choosing the way of life, not death.

The election of God is good news, the foundation of the Gospel. I'm using the word "election" in the old theological sense of the term, where it refers to the choice God makes. ("Election," of course, comes from a Latin word meaning "choice." Its original meaning was close to "selection"). The doctrine of election is about how God selects some people, not others, as his own special people. This is good news, because in the Bible when God chooses particular people, he always chooses them *for others*, for their salvation and blessing. Israel is chosen as God's own beloved people for the sake of all other nations, to be the source and means of God's blessing for the Gentiles.

We can see this best in the Israelite who most clearly fulfills the purposes of God's election, Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Christ, which is to say Messiah, the king of the Jews. He is *the* elect one—so says the voice from heaven when he is transfigured in Luke (9:35), calling him "my chosen one"—and this is clearly good news for all people. He is the chosen one, the beloved Son (Mark 9:7); we are not. And this is the best news in the world for all the rest of us. For the love of God for his only-begotten Son does not mean he lavishes good things on Christ instead of us. No, "he did not spare his own Son but delivered him up for us all," (Rom. 8:32) and precisely for that reason, because this chosen one humbled himself even to the point of death on a cross, God has highly exalted him and given the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:8-11). That is how much God loves his Son—not that he gets all the good things of life and we don't, but rather that he is the one appointed to be worthy of all praise by becoming the savior of the world, and therefore is glorious above all. As a result, the angels themselves are perpetually singing: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing!" (Rev. 5:12). All these are rightly his, and God his Father rightly honors, glorifies and loves him above all creatures. And that is the best news in the world for all of us, who are given "the hope of his calling, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints" (Eph. 1:18).

So if we want to understand the doctrine of election we should look at Christ, as Karl Barth, the great 20th century theologian, forcefully insisted (*Church Dogmatics* II/2, p. 53ff). For in Christ we will see most clearly the *structure* of the doctrine of election. It is not that God chooses to save some people instead of others. That has often been thought to be the structure of the doctrine of election, but that is plain contrary to how God's choice actually works in the biblical narrative. The LORD does not choose some people for blessing and salvation *instead of* others; he chooses some people as his own *for the sake of* others, to be the source of blessing and

salvation for them. The doctrine of election is therefore good news for all of us who are not the chosen people.

We can see this structure, I think, in one of the most fundamental OT passages about the election of Israel. It's a passage from which the apostle Paul quotes when he talks about God preaching the Gospel beforehand to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). It's the passage where God first calls Abraham, the grandfather of Israel, to be a blessing for all nations. The primal call to Abraham concludes like this:

I will bless those who bless you,  
Him who dishonors you I will curse,  
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:3)

Those last words, about blessing all the families of the earth, is echoed many times in the book of Genesis (Gen. 18:18, 22:18), and repeated in blessings that the LORD pronounces upon Isaac Abraham's son (26:4), and on Jacob, Abraham's grandson (28:14) who is re-named Israel. They give us, I take it, the essential structure of the election of God: he chooses his beloved people Israel to be a blessing for all nations.

### **Curse and Covenant**

Now, of course, blessing is not what things are looking like for the Canaanites when Israel comes upon them. But now I think we can see where the Canaanites fit into the story, because we can see where they fit into the structure of the doctrine of election. The words of blessing themselves enfold a curse, which is sandwiched in the middle, between the two words of blessing: "I will bless you" and "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed". In between these two good words is the word of curse, not blessing: "him who dishonors you I will curse."

What are we to make of this curse? First, a general point—again something pointed out (repeatedly) by Karl Barth. In the calling of Abraham, the curse does not have equal status with the blessing, as if God simply blesses some and curses other. No, the curse serves the blessing, it is a word spoken and carried out so that the blessing may be spoken and carried out. In Barth's memorable language, God's No always serves God's Yes (*Church Dogmatics* II/2, p.13). "I kill and I make alive" says the LORD, God of Israel (Deut. 32:39), but he commands his people to choose life, not death (Deut. 30:19), and his whole purpose for them is blessing and life, not cursing and death. So when we encounter death in Scripture, we must understand that it serves life. The biblical story has an ultimate direction, which is life, not death. We will encounter death in this story, it will be our very own death, and it will come from God. But because it comes from God, death is never the last word. For at the center of this story is the cross of Jesus Christ. (It's Friday, but Sunday's comin').

That's a general point about the structure of election. Now to be more specific. The curse that is sandwiched in between the blessings given to Abraham and all the families of the earth anticipates the covenant that follows from the election of God. When God chooses his beloved people, he takes them to himself forever. It's a lot like a wedding vow. The LORD says to Israel repeatedly, throughout Scripture: "You will be my people, and I will be your God" (e.g., Exodus 6:7, Lev. 26:12, 2 Sam. 7:24, Jer. 7:23, Jer. 31:33, Ezek. 36:28, Zech. 13:9, 2 Cor. 6:16, Heb. 8:10, Rev. 21:3). That means forever. These are the words of the covenant, which is to say, in

the ancient near eastern context, that they have the force of a kind of treaty between a king and his vassal. Israel is the LORD's servant, which means they are like vassals, subordinate to a great king who protects them and preserves their life. The terms of the covenant require loyalty (*chesed*) on both sides. On the one hand, the vassal must be faithful and obedient, not serving the king's rivals behind his back. Israel is not permitted to worship any gods besides the LORD their God, who brought them out of Egypt (Exod. 20:2f). On the other hand, the LORD also has obligations. He has promises to keep. The covenant requires him to fight for Israel against the enemies that threaten to destroy them.

This is why the Old Testament displays so little embarrassment at what has recently been called "the violence of God." "The LORD is a warrior," Israel sings in celebration after Pharaoh and his chariots are drowned in the sea, "the LORD is his name!" (Exod. 15:3). They celebrate the strong hand with which the LORD their God has brought them out of Egypt, freeing them from the house of bondage and killing the enemies who were trying to kill them. "Him who dishonors you I will curse." There's no clearer example of this than Pharaoh in the book of Exodus (as the apostle Paul realizes in Rom. 9). The Bible is not embarrassed by this divine violence but celebrates it, praising God for his victory over Pharaoh, not just because it is a display of his might but also because it is a demonstration of his covenant faithfulness. (It is good news, as the old spiritual recognizes: "Pharaoh's army got drowned; O Mary don't you weep!") It displays the goodness of God when he drowns Pharaoh and his army in the sea. The God of the covenant has promises to keep. He has indeed kept his word, and therefore Israel, his beloved, has not died but lives.

So here is the hardest part of this good news about the election of God. *God takes sides*. In the Bible he does not behave like a universal principle, treating everybody equally, but like a real person. Real people don't love everybody equally—and they shouldn't. It would be immoral not to love your family and friends more intimately and fiercely than you love others whom you have never met. Real love by real people cannot be as abstract as that, loving every person on the planet equally. And that means, in consequence, that when there's a war and your beloved is threatened, you have an obligation to take sides. You have promises to keep. So it is with God, who acts a particular person in the bloody, cruel mess of human history. The LORD has favorites, people he loves best. "Israel is my firstborn son" he orders Moses to tell Pharaoh (Exod. 4:22). And he promises in his covenant to take sides with Israel against the enemies who want to destroy them. "Him who dishonors you I will curse."

But there's another side of the covenant that is also the ground of divine violence or, in Biblical terms, the wrath of God. The LORD punishes his covenant partner for their disobedience. So there is violence and wrath directed against Israel as well as against their enemies. Indeed when you put these two aspects of the covenant together—God loyally defending his covenant partner Israel and God punishing his covenant partner when they're disobedient—you've covered pretty much all the divine violence in the Old Testament.

### **A Hermeneutical Decision**

Now there's a very important sense in which the violence of God in the Old Testament is a thing of the past. But when we try to explain why that is, I think we are faced with a very fundamental

and consequential hermeneutical decision. Should we see the history that takes us from OT to NT as a kind of progress of Enlightenment, a gradual overcoming of the narrow loyalties of an ancient tribalistic culture, as the Bible moves toward a more universal ethic which treats everyone equally—so that one of the lessons of the NT is that we can gratefully leave behind the kind of ancient near eastern covenantal thinking that underwrites divine violence? OR should we see Jesus Christ, in N.T. Wright's words, as the *climax* of the covenant, the true fulfillment rather than the overturning of the election of Israel and the covenant that follows from it?

As you might suspect, I'm arguing for the second option. Call it “the particularist option” as opposed to the “universalist option.” There's a philosophical point here as well as a hermeneutical one. If you want to understand Biblical teaching, you have to reckon with answers to “Who” questions that identify particular people, not universal characteristics of human nature. Even the question “Who is God?” receives in the Bible an answer pointing to particular people: the one true and living God, creator of heaven and earth, is the LORD, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

It seems to me that an attempt to tell an Enlightenment story of progress toward a more universal ethic would have us reading at cross purposes with the whole shape of the Biblical narrative. It would make it impossible, in the end, to see God's election and covenant with Israel as good news. And if election and covenant are not good news in the Old Testament, then the Old Testament itself cannot really be good news, and the New Testament can only be good news by overturning the old. The consequence of this approach, which can be realized more or less clearly by this or that biblical scholar, is that Jesus can only be a savior, or even an acceptable teacher, by outgrowing his connection with Israel and its religion, breaking free of the constrictions of the Law and the Prophets of Judaism, bringing a message that goes beyond anything in his first century Jewish environment. The Protestant liberal heirs of the Enlightenment, who were the driving force in the development of historical-critical scholarship of the Bible in 19th and early 20th century Germany, often tried to give us such a savior, a Jesus who is not really Jewish, as they engaged in their famous quests for the historical Jesus. And in both OT and NT studies, the result was a kind of higher criticism that often amounted to “higher anti-Semitism,” as one Jewish scholar famously notes. (Honestly, Christians need to stop conducting their biblical scholarship as if there were no Jews left in the world to overhear the obnoxious things we say about them).

The particularistic option I'm arguing for takes the election of Israel, one particular people as God's beloved, to be the fundamental form of the good news for all people in both testaments of the Bible. The blessing of Abraham, with that curse sandwiched in the middle, gives us the basic shape of the biblical narrative from beginning to end. We need to reckon with that curse, and the death it brings with it in the middle of the story, for this is the story in which we find ourselves, if by faith we inhabit the same story as Abraham.

### **Typology and Our Identity**

We reckon with the curse, I'm suggesting, by identifying ourselves with the Canaanites. I want to conclude this talk by spending some time thinking about the consequences of that identification. But first I want to reflect a moment on what it means to “identify” with biblical

people in this way. I've already mentioned the old theological term for this: it's called typology. It comes from the Greek word *typos*, translated into Latin as *figura*, from which of course we get our word "figure." It's a style of reading that focuses on Biblical figures like Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Esau, Moses and David, Mary and Peter and Paul. It uses them to give the identity and meaning of later figures in the story, like when Jesus is described as the second Adam or the Son of David, or when he founds the church by appointing 12 apostles, just like the 12 sons of Jacob who became the 12 tribes of Israel. Typology, in other words, is not just a way that we read Scripture today, but is built into the way Scripture reads itself, and into the way it was originally written. Every biblical scholar recognizes, for instance, that when Abraham goes down to Egypt in Genesis 12, that pre-figures the nation of Israel going down to dwell in Egypt at the end of Genesis, during the time of Joseph. It's clearly the intention of the original biblical writer that we should see this prefiguration of Israel in Abraham. Typology is thus the way the Scriptures themselves are written from the very first book of the Bible.

It's also how the Bible extends the story it tells beyond itself. By reading typologically we enter the Biblical story, and just so typology extends the story beyond the text. The figures of Abraham and Jacob are clearly meant to extend not just to later figures within the biblical text, but to the living readers of the text who are descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—the Jewish people. So also the 12 apostles are clearly meant to be the founding figures of the church that endures until Jesus' return. Thus the text itself demands that we locate ourselves in the story it is telling. It's as if to say: Do you want to know who you are, really? Find yourselves here: in Adam, in Abraham, in Jacob, in David (whose words you say when you pray the Psalms), in the people to whom God says: "I am the LORD *your* God, who brought *you* out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage: *you* shall have no gods besides me" (Exod. 20:2f). Above all, find yourself in Christ, the Son of David who prays the Psalms with you, and who alone has perfectly fulfilled the commandments.

So typology is how the biblical text itself demands to be read. To read the Bible with faith is precisely to identify ourselves with the people addressed by the 10 commandments, with the Israelites praying the Psalms of David, with the church of the 12 apostles appointed by the man we call our Lord. (That's how we end up reading the Bible in the way I sketched in the beginning of this talk, asking how we are to teach it in church, using it to form Christian hearts in faith, hope and love.) Thus in theological reading of the Bible we properly ask not just what the Bible meant but what it means, because we believe that we are indeed the people it addresses, still. It is not just an old book about people long gone, it is the Word of God addressed to us today. And we must hear it the same way the Jews do when they sit down at the Passover Seder to celebrate the day when the LORD their God brought them out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. They are the same people to whom this was done, the people they read about in Scripture. That is precisely the difference faith makes in reading the Bible: it means you identify yourself with the people God speaks to, and the people he speaks *about* in the biblical story, because you really do believe that this story is about you, too.

### **Seeing Ourselves in the Canaanites**

When it comes to the doctrine of election and the covenant, however, we must add that we have to be mindful of the difference between Jew and Gentile, Israel and the nations—for it is



precisely in this difference that God has a blessing for all the families of the earth. Most of us here—perhaps all—are Gentile Christians, who have received the blessing of God only through the Jews. As our Lord says, salvation is from the Jews (John 4:22).

That means that when we despise the people of Israel, we earn a curse. And when have we earned such a curse? Well, let's consider the history of Gentile Christians and their relation with the Jews since the time of the New Testament. Let's think about it typologically, remembering our answer to the question: "Who's We?" We're the church, the body of Christ which for about 1800 years and until very recently, has been almost entirely Gentile. And in that time we Gentile Christians have killed a lot of Jews. Looking upon the people whom the Bible tells us are God's own beloved, his firstborn son, we have behaved with frightening consistency like Cain, who cannot stand it that God should prefer this brother of his to himself. We cannot *stand* it that they should be the chosen people, not us. And so we kill them.

But there's something that makes it even worse, which will help us identify yet more fully with the Canaanites in the Biblical story. It will also give us an alternative to the deeply unconvincing apologetic that attempts to defend the biblical genocide on the grounds that the Canaanites were somehow extra specially bad, and that's why God had the Israelites kill them. After all, the defense goes, doesn't God have the right to judge? It's true, of course, that God is our judge. But the problem is that his judgment of the Canaanites is not about their moral character in general. The judgment of God in this biblical narrative is not moralistic. It's an outgrowth of his prerogatives and responsibilities as Israel's covenant partner, demanding that Israel cleanse the land he is giving them from all idolatry. God passes judgment on the Canaanites because their religion will lead the Israelites astray from their covenant loyalty to him (cf. esp. Deut. 7:1-5).

Now when have *we* ever done that? That's a question we have to ask if we are to identify with the Canaanites. And I have recently come upon an answer in a fine book (*Postmissionary Messianic Judaism*, Brazos Press, 2005) by Mark Kinzer, a messianic Jew who helps us see what was at stake over the centuries when Jews would rather die than accept Christian conversion. We Gentile Christians offered them a choice: accept Christ and be saved or hang on to your Jewish religion and die. For we assumed—and required them to assume—that in order to become Christians they must give up being Jews. This is, of course, strikingly contrary to the New Testament, where most believers in Christ are Jews, including Paul, the 12 apostles and Jesus Christ himself. Kinzer suggests that by refusing this false choice and clinging to their ancient covenant loyalty, Jews were in fact remaining faithful to the one true and living God, the God of Israel, whom the New Testament identifies as "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:5, 1 Cor. 1:3, Eph. 1:3, 1 Pet. 1:3) Their refusal to accept Christ at the price of abandoning God's covenant with Israel was in fact their deepest faithfulness to Christ and to God his Father. And we killed them for it.

What should God *do* with people like us, who persecute his beloved when they are faithful to him? Well, if Deuteronomy were the last word, we'd all be dead. Rightly so. I'm suggesting that when we look at ourselves in light of the Biblical story, we have to see ourselves as those deserving of death. This is a hard word to be sure, but not at all out of step with the way the Christian tradition has been reading the Bible ever since Paul spoke of the reign of death that began in Adam (Rom. 5:17). When we face God, who both kills and makes alive, then first of

all we face our own death. That's not the end of the story, for in the Bible God's judgment of death always serves life. His No serves his Yes. But we do have to face his No, his judgment which is our death.

What the judgments in the Old Testament typically add to this point about facing death is an ethnic rather than individual focus. The point of the Canaanite genocide really is *genocide*, the destruction not of individuals but of whole tribes and nations. And it is true: those 6 or 7 nations no longer exist. I will venture to say that the lesson here is a good one for us to learn. None of our nations and ethnicities has the right to an everlasting lease on life. There is on this earth no "empire without end" as the Roman empire was described by its greatest poet, Virgil. There is, thank God, no "thousand year Reich" as the Nazis said in praise of their "Third Reich." Not even America, my friends, has a right to everlasting life. And that's a *good* thing. The Jewish people is the only one that lives in God's sight for as long as the earth endures.

### **From Death to Life**

So where does that leave us, enemies of God's beloved people—we who can only meet the God of Israel as those who are facing their own well-deserved death? Well, that's the astonishing thing. It leaves us with no hope but the utterly undeserved mercy of God in Jesus, the Messiah of the Jews. It leaves us justified by nothing but faith, by which we find our lives only in him. It leaves us, therefore, grafted into the covenant with Israel, as Paul says (Rom. 11:17), receiving life from the same root—so that we too can truly say, thanks to the king of the Jews who died so that we might live, that it is to us—to us also—that God speaks today when he says, "I am the LORD, *your* God, who brought *you* out of Egypt."

At this point, I hope, the story gets more familiar. It is the same old story of undeserved mercy for sinners in the birth and death and resurrection and eternal life of Jesus Christ our Lord. Yet I hope it is clear now that this wonderful, familiar old story cannot be the good news that it really is, unless it is the fulfillment of the purpose of God in the election of Israel, whom he chose for the blessing of all the families of the earth. If we do not believe in that good news, we will find bad news, unexpectedly but pervasively, all throughout the Bible. In other words, to find Scripture to be good news rather than a story of horrors, we need to begin by learning to love what God loves (the apple of his eye, he calls them in the Bible) which is his own people Israel. Imagine how much better we would be, we Gentile Christians, if we learned to do that instead of playing the role of Cain for a few more centuries. There are even reasons to be hopeful that, since the well-deserved destruction of the Third Reich, we may have learned something. But at such terrible cost! Once again it is those God loves most who suffer most for the healing of the world. How can we not love them for the unspeakable gift they have been to us?

For the story of the Canaanite genocide is, like the story of Noah's flood, the story of what did not happen. It is the story of those who, by all rights, have no place on the face of this earth, but nonetheless here we are, by the mercy of God exercised through the elect who found favor in his sight. If we see in this way how God's No serves his Yes, how the well-deserved judgment of death becomes for us life in Christ Jesus, I do think even this story will build us up in faith, hope and love. By faith we recognize that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Gospel preached beforehand to Abraham, in which we are among all the families of the earth which are blessed

through him. That means we have hope of salvation and blessing only through the blessing of Abraham, only through the people of Israel, whose king and messiah is Jesus our Lord, the chosen one who is savior of all. And that means we will not see how the OT can be good news until we learn to love the Jewish people, to be glad that they are God's beloved through whom, at great cost, he blesses the world. I say: at great cost, for they too, like their king Jesus, have suffered greatly in order to be a blessing to the world, and that is all the more reason why we should love them.