

Biblical Moral Dilemmas: The Case of Canaanites

Jimyung Kim
Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, TX

Introduction

The Bible is believed to provide principles of conduct in every aspect of Christians' daily lives. In other words, Christians have used the Bible to legitimize certain decisions and to criticize certain social events. One of the problems of the appropriation of the Bible is that the Bible is often used against the Bible itself. For example, some people criticize colonialism while others legitimize it using the same Bible. If the Bible is God's word, how can God's word contradict God's word? Such a biblical moral dilemma leads us to a fundamental question: what is the Bible? When people use the Bible, they use the authority of God to legitimize or criticize certain events, but what really happens is to justify their own world views using the authority rather than following God's will. Thus, it is important for the readers of the Bible to get critically engaged with the problems of the appropriation of the Bible. In this regard, what I wish to do in this article is to let the Bible readers to revisit the notion of the Bible and to become more responsible Bible readers. To do so, I will introduce some conflicted biblical interpretations and appropriations centering around the exodus/conquest narratives.

The Conquest and the Bible

According to Jace Weaver,¹ there was a belief among European Christians that America was the Promised Land, and the indigenes of the land were the sinners or "wholly possessed of Satan" who deserved to be slaughtered.² A couple more examples are notable to see how Christianity was in complicit in the conquest of America.

Sir George Peckham, a prominent Catholic nobleman.... regarded the Native population as the Canaanites inhibiting conquest of the Promised Land; these heathens would either be exterminated or, like the Gibeonites, submit 'as drudges to hewe wood and carie water'³ (16th century)

Pope Alexander VI issued his encyclical *Inter Caetera*. The bull sanctioned the conquest, reading, 'Among the works well pleasing to the Divine Majesty and cherished in our heart, this assuredly ranks highest, that in our times especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion be exalted and everywhere increased and spread, that the health of souls be cared for and that the barbarous nations be

1 Weaver is a Cherokee and the director of Institute of Native American Studies at the University of Georgia.

2 Jace Weaver, "From I-Hermeneutics to We-Hermeneutics: Native Americans and the Post-Colonial," in *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson, (Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1996), 159-60.

3 *Ibid.*, 159.

overthrown and brought to the faith itself.⁴ (15th century)

Not to mention the sanction of the conquest given by the religious authority, a part of the conquest was the theological constructions of America as the Promised Land and its indigenes as Canaanites.

The consequences of such a use of the Bible were deadly destructive. For example, Laura E. Donaldson, a Cherokee, reports that the militia of Massachusetts Bay Colony killed about 400 Pequot people, and the massacre was justified by their understanding of Judg 20.⁵ As if God put the Benjaminites to the sword of Israelites, the colonizers justified the mass murder of Pequot as God's will. There are many other tragic reports about the mass murder of the indigenous Americans, but the following may show a bigger picture of the conquest of the "New World." According to Jay Hansford C. Vest's survey of two historical sources,⁶ the native population of modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic was reduced "from 8 million to 28,000 in just over twenty years."⁷ In addition to this record, Eduardo Galeano, an Uruguayan journalist reports that the indigenous population in pre-columbian America was no less than 70 million, but about 150 years after the Europeans' arrival, it became 3.5 million.⁸ Vest argues that what the colonizers did in Americas was "the greatest genocide in world history."⁹

The Peace and the Bible

The appropriation of the Bible of European Christian colonizers might seem just an extreme case or misuse of the Bible. But the Bible in fact has the story of the violent conquest of Canaan that no one can deny. However, we see a different story from a different part of the Bible

4 Ibid., 159-60.

5 Laura E. Donaldson, "Postcolonialism and Biblical Reading: An Introduction," in *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading*, (Atlanta: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1996), 8-9.

6 Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish missionary of the fifteenth century and Kirkpatrick Sale, a twentieth century historian.

7 Jay Hansford C. Vest, "Weeds From the Under World: The Conquest of Tsenacomoco and Monascane," in *Eating Fire, Tasting Blood: Breaking the Great Silence of the American Indian Holocaust*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), 151.

8 Eduardo Galeano, "A Flood of Tears and Blood: And Yet the Pope Said Indians Had Souls," in *Eating Fire, Tasting Blood: Breaking the Great Silence of the American Indian Holocaust*, ed. MariJo Moore (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), 2.

9 Vest, "Weeds From the Under World: The Conquest of Tsenacomoco and Monascane," 151. Some people argue that the reduction of population is a result of unintentional/purely accidental epidemics and pandemics that Europeans brought to America. Vest acknowledges that diseases were indeed a major cause of the reduction of the indigenous population, and it is uncertain whether or not the European colonizers intentionally and systematically used the diseases to wipe out indigenes from America. However, European settlers are not innocent of the extreme depopulation of indigenous population because Europeans after all brought the diseases, whether intended or not, and they did not try to prevent the diseases from spreading. See Ibid., 148. See also the footnote number six of Vest's article: Ibid., 164-65. Ward Churchill, a member of the Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, raises one of the most controversial claims that the colonizers indeed deliberately used the diseases to kill indigenous Americans. Churchill's claim is, however, turned out as fabrication, and he had to be fired for his academic misconduct. It seems that Churchill shows an extreme case that has been affected by the history of the conquest, especially the drastic depopulation of indigenes, in one of the most negative ways. See Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present* (City Lights Books, 1997), 151-157. Cf. Thomas Brown, "Did the U.S. Army Distribute Smallpox Blankets to Indians? Fabrication and Falsification in Ward Churchill's Genocide Rhetoric," *Plagiary* 1 (2006), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.5240451.0001.009>.

about the Canaanites.

In his article, Naim S. Ateek argues that though many Jews and fundamentalist Christians believe that Palestine was given to the Jews by God and it belongs to them forever, the Hebrew Bible does not fully support the idea and criticizes this view as an abuse of the Bible.¹⁰ For Ateek, the land does not belong to any human group but to God according to Lev 25:23 and Jer 16:18;¹¹ there are two exodus stories in the Hebrew Bible, one in the Exodus and the other in the narrative of returnees from Babylon—according to Ezek 47:21-23, God commends Israel to "treat them [indigenous population] as citizens of Israel."¹² Ateek's counter-reading reveals that the Hebrew Bible does support a peaceful life of Israel with indigenous populations. It also reveals that the exodus and conquest narratives are being appropriated in political hegemonic discourse. As a Christian, Ateek uses the Hebrew Bible to tell the ones who believe that the Jews' ownership of Palestine is sanctioned by God that Palestine in fact belongs to God, and God is equally benevolent to the indigenes of the land.

While Ateek's reading enables his reader to see a fuller picture of the theologies related to the land, it is equally selective as the reading that is circulated in political hegemonic discourse of Israel and fundamentalist Christians. Ateek's reading can hardly be criticized in terms of its moral implication and political justice, but his emphasis on peace and God's ownership of the land do not remove the texts that legitimize antagonism and violence. After all, the limit of Ateek's reading is that it cannot erase the violent conquest story of exodus.

Contradictions and Moral Dilemmas

The Bible contain contradictions, and the Bible readers use the Bible to legitimize their decisions by selecting certain passages and ignoring certain other passages. But, can such selective readings be justified? In this regard, can we ever use the Bible to legitimize our moral decisions? It is not my intention to provide an answer to those questions, but rather to provoke debates among Christians who have believed that the Bible is God's word but never critically reviewed such a belief. Hoping to encourage my reader to engage with the ontological questions about the Bible, in the following, I will provide a thought provoking discussion about the Bible between two indigenous American scholars.

Robert Allen Warrior, an Osage, reads the Bible not as a Christian but as an indigenous American who rejects Christianity.¹³ In this article, Warrior criticizes liberation theology as

10 Naim S. Ateek, "A Palestinian Perspective: Biblical Perspectives on the Land," in *Voices From the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 227-234. Ateek is an Arab, a Palestinian Christian, the founder and director of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem, and an ordained Anglican priest. See "Naim Ateek," American Friends Service Committee, accessed August 21, 2014, <https://afsc.org/story/naim-ateek>.

11 Ibid., 228.

12 Ibid., 230.

13 Warrior is a professor of American Indian Studies, English, and History as well as the director of American Indian Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Warrior argues that if Canaanites are to be liberated by the god of outsiders (YHWH) who oppress their own people (the Canaanites), they should be assimilated into the outsiders (Israelites) not to be a threat to Israelites, and that is considered to be betrayal against their own people who choose to remain as the Canaanites. For Warrior, pursuing justice based on the teachings of the Bible is impossible due to the legitimized violence in many stories in the Bible. see Robert Allen Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today," in *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (New York: Routledge, 1996), 99.

being ignorant of the violent and oppressive aspect of YHWH because it only emphasizes the liberation of Israel.¹⁴ Warrior argues that, for indigenous Americans, YHWH is the conqueror rather than the liberator.¹⁵ Moreover, Warrior also challenges indigenous Christians that, in order to pursue justice within Christianity, they must deal with the inherent violence of the story of Exodus.¹⁶ In fact, according to David Gunn, three hundred Maori men led by Te Kooti also committed a massacre against European settlers at Poverty Bay in Aotearoa/New Zealand with their religious fervor based on the story of the conquest in 1868.¹⁷ Warrior urges Christians to see the both sides of YHWH's plan for Israelites: liberation and conquest.

In his response to Warrior's article, however, William Baldrige¹⁸ remarks that indigenous Americans still can appropriate the Bible in a favorable way for indigenous Americans. Concerning the passage where a Canaanite woman who was humiliated as a dog by Jesus appears, Baldrige argues that Jesus, who exhibits nationalist's exclusivism against the Canaanite woman, is set free from his restriction due to the woman's faith, and Jesus's contact with the Canaanite woman eventually becomes the foundation of Christian faith for all.¹⁹ In other words, he tries to promote the position of the Canaanite woman as a means of promoting indigenous Americans' status as a helper of the son of God.

Baldrige, however, does not directly address the problem of violence and oppression sanctioned by God in Exodus stories. Thus, Warrior's concerns about liberation and violence are remained the same. Moreover, for Warrior, the Canaanite woman's elevated status is obtained not without a miserable humiliation. In response to Baldrige's reply to Warrior, Warrior once again writes that "like the Canaanite woman, we must go begging to the people who colonized us in order to secure the bare minimum of justice."²⁰ The conversation between these two scholars reveals that the Bible is fundamentally unfavorable to the indigenous peoples because, after all, YHWH is the God of Israelites, not of Canaanites.

Concluding Remarks

Under what authority can we use the Bible to legitimize our behaviors and decisions? Can we remove violent passages from the Bible to "safely" use the Bible? How do we know that Ateek's more peaceful reading of the Bible is closer to God's will than the European conquerors' use of the Bible? Can we ever use the Bible to legitimize our moral decisions? The Bible is a complex book that can generate various controversies due to its contradictions. The most common notion

14 Ibid., 93-104.

15 "The obvious characters in the story for Native Americans to identify with are the Canaanites, the people who already lived in the promised land. As a member of the Osage Nation of American Indians who stands in solidarity with other tribal people around the world, I read the Exodus stories with Canaanite eyes. And, it is the Canaanite side of the story that has been overlooked by those seeking to articulate theologies of liberation. Especially ignored are those part of the story that describe Yahweh's command to mercilessly annihilate the indigenous population" Ibid., 95.

16 Ibid., 99.

17 David M. Gunn, "Colonialism and the Vagaries of Scripture: Te Kooti in Canaan (A Story of Bible and Dispossession in Aotearoa/New Zealand)," in *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann*, ed. Tod Linafelt and Timothy K Beal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 127-42.

18 Baldrige is a Cherokee and a professor at Central Baptist Theological Seminary as well as an ordained minister of American Baptist.

19 William Baldrige, "Native American Theology: A Biblical Basis," in *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada*, ed. James Treat (New York: Routledge, 1996), 101.

20 Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today," 102.

of the Bible, "God's word," in this regard, should be revisited and reconsidered because the appropriation of the Bible means to take advantage of the authority of God regardless God's will.

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