

Jesus and the Gibeonites

We start with Joshua 9, which tells the story of the Gibeonites. These were inhabitants of a large city named Gibeon, in the land of Canaan, and were part of the Canaanite population which it was Israel's job to exterminate. We are told in the next chapter that Gibeon was a greater city than Ai, which Israel had just destroyed, and that Gibeon's men were mighty warriors. As news of Joshua & Company's destruction of Jericho and Ai spread throughout Canaan, several Canaanite kings banded together to war against Israel; but the inhabitants of Gibeon did not join this league. Instead, they acted craftily by going to Joshua's camp wearing worn and patched sandals, carrying stale and crumbly bread, and torn winesacks. Their purpose was to make it seem as though they had come from a great distance, thus distancing themselves from Israel's enemies and the territory Israel was conquering. They came bedraggled to Joshua and asked to enter into a treaty or covenant with Israel. Not consulting Yahweh in the matter, and believing the Gibeonites' testimony that they live outside the territory destined for destruction by Israel, Joshua and the leaders of Israel made a covenant with them, pledging that they would not harm their people. Three days later, however, Israel received intelligence that these people were, in fact, neighbors definitely part of that population whom Yahweh had said Israel should destroy, and with whom Israel was not to enter into any covenants. In fact, it took Joshua only three days to travel from his camp at Gilgal to Gibeon and the other four cities belonging to these people. But now it was too late: Joshua and his men could not strike against these cities because they had taken an oath not to harm them, and this oath was sworn in the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Oaths in the ancient near east were sworn while invoking curses upon the one careless, foolish or evil enough to break the agreement. Were they to break this oath now and attack the Gibeonites, it would call down Yahweh's curse upon Israel, even though Yahweh had originally commanded that these Canaanites (which would have included the Gibeonites) should be utterly destroyed.

In this situation, what were Joshua and his leaders to do? They decided to let the

Gibeonites live but not as free people. They made them slaves, whose job would ever be to hew wood and draw water for the people of Israel and in the service of the tabernacle. At the same time, Joshua invoked a curse upon them. He wanted to know why the Gibeonites deceived Israel. This was their answer: Because it was certainly told your servants that Yahweh your god had commanded his servant Moses to give you all the land, and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land before you; therefore we feared greatly for our lives because of you, and have done this thing. And now, behold, we are in your hands; do as it seems good and right in your sight to do to us. And so Joshua did not kill them: he delivered them from the hands of the sons of Israel. But the Gibeonites became a cursed people, dwelling unequally in the midst of the congregation of Israel, doing work which, while not hard labor, was traditionally assigned to women in that culture.

This story constitutes the entire ninth chapter of the book of Joshua. It is quite a prominent tale. And the story has immediate consequences, narrated in the very next chapter. Here we find five Canaanite kings attacking Gibeon because of the alliance the Gibeonites have made with Israel. The men of Gibeon send a request to Joshua for help, a request that Joshua would be bound to honor because of the covenant he has made with Gibeon. Israel receives word from Yahweh not to fear, and that not one of the Canaanites will be left alive. So Joshua marches all night from his camp and comes upon the enemy suddenly. Yahweh throws the enemy camp into confusion. Joshua wipes out the army and pursues those who flee; and Yahweh pitches in, literally, by throwing large stones from heaven. To buy more time to pursue the enemy, Joshua prays his famous prayer commanding that the sun stand still, and the sun stops in the middle of the sky for almost an entire day so the slaughter can continue. When the Canaanite army is fully routed and destroyed, the five kings are discovered hiding in a cave. Joshua kills all five, whose bodies are then hung on five trees until evening. At sunset, the bodies are taken down, thrown back into the same cave in which the kings hid while alive, and a stone rolled over the mouth of the cave; and there the matter of the Gibeonites ends for a while.

How is a Christian to find meaning in this story? Will a Christian find the same meaning in the narrated events as the original author's, or will the Christian have a different take? Certainly, Joshua's stopping of the sun has always captured the imagination of the Church as one of those stories repeated in Sunday school and celebrated as one of God's

most spectacular miracles. But, beyond that, what kind of meaning has Christian homiletics found in this story? A typical example is a sermon published on the internet by a Baptist minister entitled, How to Whip A Gibeonite. One might already suspect from the title that, however the author of the sermon interprets the story, he is not going to be very sparing towards the Gibeonites. Right from the start the sermon makes a very typical move when dealing with violent biblical texts: Israel's violence towards the Canaanites, assumed justified because commanded by God, is quickly spiritualized and interpreted as symbolic of the spiritual warfare in which Christians are daily involved. In this way our imaginations are quickly discouraged from conjuring up visceral images of the real violence the text is narrating. We move rapidly past the horrendous violence and any uncomfortable feelings it might arouse, and make the whole thing a kind of analogy for spiritual warfare. (Please note that the reality of Satan, demons, the realm of spirit, or supernatural warfare – whatever one might believe about such things – is not the issue here.)

The book of Joshua is a vivid reminder in pictorial terms of our spiritual warfare,[@] says the author. You are wrestling with the demons of Satan! The sermon asks us to think of the Canaanites as images for modern merchandisers and advertisers who try to sell us superfluous goods. The Hittites represent our daily anxieties, the Hivites represent the stupid and crazy things we do when we lose our sense of better judgment, and so on. These internal, spiritual defects are our enemies today.

Yahweh is still a Man of War with sin. Our spiritual enemies that have invaded our hearts have to be exterminated. There are times when we as believers must be like cancer surgeons who must remove the malignity. With this kind of sermonizing, the Canaanites have ceased to be real people. The story is not of interest as a historical happening. This is particularly interesting in view of the fact that fundamentalist and evangelical Christians are generally zealous to defend the historicity of the Bible; but in cases like this one where the text contains elements that make us uncomfortable, it becomes convenient to leave history to one side and move quickly into spiritual allegory. This kind of allegorizing can make a text say anything it wants, since the textual elements become mere symbols of whatever interests us; and yet the author of the sermon quoted above is no doubt fiercely loyal to the idea of Biblical inerrancy and the literalness of Bible stories.

Having taken the sting out of the historical violence, and diverted any questions that

might have arisen had we contemplated this history too closely, the sermon seeks to draw edifying lessons from the story. As is true for many of the Joshua 9 sermons I have seen, this sermon locates the chief spiritual lesson of the story in the fact that Joshua failed to consult with the Lord before he made the decision to covenant with the Gibeonites. Joshua fell for the Gibeonite's flattery when they told him that they had heard of the fame of Yahweh, and what He had done for Israel in Egypt. Joshua was also naive: he believed the Gibeonites because they sounded evangelical. That is, they seemed to have become convicted believers in God, when in fact they were liars who talked the talk but did not walk the walk. So, by relying upon his own perceptions and not consulting God in the matter, Joshua was deceived. The application is that we are to take everything to God in prayer, always, even the little things that seem inconsequential. We are to pray without ceasing. The matter of the Gibeonites seemed unimportant to Joshua, and yet this treaty was soon to pull Joshua into a war he became obligated to fight on the Gibeonites' behalf, with the end result that Gibeon became the resting place for the Ark of the Covenant for the next several centuries until the time of David and Solomon. Satan often comes as an angel of light, like the Gibeonites, to trick and enslave us, and so we must be sure to run all our intentions, great and small, past God first. Lesson learned.

According to the sermon, there are also ethical lessons to be learned from the story. One lesson comes from the behavior of the Gibeonites. Because of their deception, the Gibeonites must now suffer slavery and bondage for all generations to come. It would have been different if the Gibeonites had come to Israel as Rahab the harlot did, with a genuine confession of faith, but instead they used deceit; and so they suffered the consequences. As craftiness one of the methods you use to get your way in the home, office, school or social relationships? Do you act one way before the eyes of people and in an evil, crafty, sly way behind their backs?

Another ethical lesson has to do with the way Joshua behaved, and with covenant making. We can easily find ourselves making commitments with individuals and organizations that place us in positions of compromise, says the sermon writer. Joshua committed Israel to these people, and the result is that almost immediately Joshua had to go to war to defend them when the five Canaanite kings attacked Gibeon. One compromise leads to another. The sermon quotes an observation by F. B. Meyer: "Before entering into

any alliance, taking a partner in life, going into business with another, yielding assent to any proposition which involves confederation with others be sure to ask counsel at the mouth of the Lord” says the author of the sermon: Begin every day with a simple prayer and commitment, Lord Jesus this is your day. I give it to you.’ If you consult with the Lord in this way every day, you will not be ambushed’ by a ‘Gibeonite.’

I have seen these lessons summarized in other sermons as the danger of failing to commit their way to the Lord, the peril of prayerlessness, and the peril of walking by sight; that is, allowing one’s spiritual judgment to be clouded by the deceptive way things appear on the outside. Googling the Gibeonites on the Internet uncovered many examples of the ways in which these lessons are taught. One website for Bible teaching commends the following object lesson based on the Gibeonite story: The teacher brings a box of candy into class and tells the students that they are getting treats today. The students are surprised and disappointed when the teacher starts handing out paperclips instead of candy from the box. The teacher tries to justify this by talking enthusiastically about all the wonderful things a paperclip can do, but the students know that a paperclip is not a treat. This leads into a discussion about deception, summed up as follows: Many people today rename activities, or products, to sound better than they are. They call sinful behavior an ‘alternative lifestyle’. They call murder a ‘choice’. They are trying to make a sinful thing look better than it is. As children of God, we must carefully examine what others are trying to convince us of, just like in this lesson [i.e., the Gibeonites].

The same site suggests that the teacher have two students don a work shirt and a dress jacket, and then switch. Students then discuss how changing the way we look on the outside does not really change the character of the person on the inside. You can dress like a Christian, and act like a Christian, but God said that our fruit, or actions, show what’s inside. Our life and behavior show whether we really are good. The lies of the Gibeonites showed their character. Joshua’s refusal to break his oath showed his.

These lessons are further developed by pointing out that two wrongs don’t make a right. The Gibeonites’ deception was wrong, and Joshua’s treaty with Gibeon was wrong; but Joshua had the character to recognize that a commitment is a commitment, and he felt bound to honor the treaty, for in so doing he brought honor to God. Joshua may have been ignorant of the Gibeonites’ bad faith, but ignorance is no excuse for sin, and God held Israel

to the treaty they made with Gibeon. Applying this to our own lives, the question is asked whether we have to keep a promise we made if it was based on a deception? The answer is yes: breaking such an oath would just be another sin. One must repent of the sin of making the treaty in the first place; but a deal is a deal, and one must deal with the sad consequences that will no doubt flow from it. Of course, for proponents of this kind of interpretation, a classic application is the abortion issue: if a sinful act begets a child, tough luck. You repent and deal with the consequences. The same with marriage. The sin of divorce cannot make right the sin of entering foolishly into a for better or for worse commitment. Says Dr. Joseph A. Webb, talking about the Gibeonite story in an essay entitled, *Don't Confuse a Sin with a Covenant!*: "How many times have you heard people try to get out of a promise by saying, "I didn't know what I was saying," or "I didn't understand the seriousness of what I was saying at that time." To that, God says, "A covenant is a covenant, is a covenant, and I am a 'Covenant honouring God.' even a covenant that may have been born in deception, or through flippancy."

Another spiritual lesson sometimes drawn from the story of the Gibeonites is that we should be wary of putting too much trust in our own victories and religious experiences. The idea is that Joshua had foolishly trusted the Gibeonites without consulting the Lord just after Israel's mountain top experience of having the Law of God read to them from Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (Deut. 27), and after the great military victories at Jericho and Ai. But it is when we are on a spiritual high that Satan is most likely to attack, because that is when we are most likely to trust our own judgment rather than God's.

Readers may have different opinions about the soundness and value of these lessons extracted from Joshua 9. Some of them seem obvious: who can argue with the idea, for example, that we should consult God prayerfully about our decisions? But apart from what we might think about the individual lessons as such, I am interested in the overall interpretive strategy that seeks to draw these kinds of lessons from a text like this. I spent many years reading the Old Testament in the same basic way, struggling to get meaning out of a text that, had I been fully honest with myself, felt alien to me in many ways. I believed that God had commanded Israel to decimate the population of Canaan because that is the point of view the text obviously takes, and I looked for ways to justify that idea so it would cause me as little disturbance as possible. Not, however, being able to justify it to my complete

satisfaction, I simply ignored the problem as much as possible. But there was always a level of dis-ease with the whole bloody thing, and if one is going to make the text palatable to oneself and to a contemporary audience, one has to develop strategies for reading that will move one past the violence, while completely ignoring the issues that would be raised were one to read the text more realistically and historically.

The first such strategy is to adopt what I call a sociopathic reading of the text. This is not to imply that the people who offer the kinds of interpretations we have seen above are sociopaths. But they do seem to have developed a kind of literary sociopathy, meaning that, wonderful people though they be, when it comes to reading Biblical stories like the one in Joshua 9, they adopt a convention of reading that allows them to distance themselves from the events and people of the story, eliminating all possible feelings of compassion and sympathy for the victims. Perceiving the Gibeonites as 'victims' never even occurs as a possibility. I, too, used to read this story, and dozens of others like it in the Old Testament, with a complete lack of sympathy for the victims.

When we read stories about how the Jews survived under Nazi rule in the ghettos of Western Europe, using trickery and deception of various sorts, we feel tremendous compassion for them, we root for them, and we recognize them as victims. These were people struggling for their lives, living always a breath away from death for themselves and their loved ones, and we usually applaud their cunning deceptions that kept them alive. We certainly don't criticize them for being less than forthright with the Nazis. They could not use blunt force against the Nazis, so they did what all such underdogs do in their attempts to survive: they resorted to various forms of passive resistance based upon deception, and we admire the more brilliant examples of this. Why, then, do we not read the Gibeonites in the same way? When we come to the text of Joshua, why does such sympathy and compassion completely evaporate? The answer, of course, is because the text of Joshua tells us that the Canaanites were evil and deserved to be wiped out, and that God was using Israel to accomplish this destruction as a form of His judgment. The Canaanites, after all, had been given hundreds of years to repent of their idolatrous ways, and didn't. When the time of the Amorites mentioned by God to Abraham in Genesis 15:16 was complete, God's wrath fell upon them, and Israel became His instrument of judgment. There can thus be no question of compassion. God's wrath is what happens when time runs out, and compassion and

forgiveness are no longer options.

I spent many years reading the Bible the way one reads a western novel, with a clear knowledge of who are the goodies and who are the badies. The Bible itself seems to encourage such a reading by taking the same point of view. When Moses shouts, 'Who is on the Lord's side?' there is no doubt that the subsequent shakedown will reveal who is good and who is bad. When Elijah's altar is consumed by the fire, putting Elijah in a position to yell, 'Seize the prophets of Ba'al,' the line between black and white could hardly be more definitely drawn. There is no doubt that in the book of Joshua, sides are to be taken; and it is obvious on which side one wants to find oneself. It should be no surprise, therefore, that the Bible has throughout history become a rallying point around which those who consider themselves 'the good' gather, in opposition to 'the bad.' The Bible has served as a never-ending well for dredging up bucket after bucket of interpretation as many different interpretations as there are buckets every one of them used ultimately as the criterion by which we can tell the good and true from the bad and false. The variety of theologies is endless, but their end result is consistent: the creation of insiders and outsiders, those who know God and those who are ignorant, those who are chosen and those who are rejected, those who are good and those who are bad, the wheat and the chaff. I have discovered after many years of making the same mistake that there is another way to read the Bible, in which we do not come to the biblical text with a desire to know who is in and who is out. Bringing that desire to our reading of the Bible is what I sometimes call the 'Queen's reading' of the Bible, based on Disney's *Snow White*, in which the queen looks into the mirror and says, 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?' It is very common that people come to the Bible with that motive, looking into it in order to catch reassuring reflections of their own goodness. It is not easy for human beings to feel good about themselves: it is much easier to cast our eyes upon what appears evil to us, and by giving evil a clear face and shape in the world, secure our own position in righteousness. Using this technique, our sense of goodness comes to be based more upon what we are *not*, rather than what we feel we are positively. We are *not* 'one of them.' We must therefore learn from the Bible who the bad guys are, in addition to learning about the good guys. As has often been remarked (particularly well by Dorothy Sayers), in fiction the bad guys are usually far more imaginatively conceived than the good guys. It is notoriously difficult to conceive goodness in

an engaging way, which led George Bernard Shaw to comment on the boringness of heaven, and led C.S. Lewis, among others, to attempt fictional portrayals of goodness that would possess real literary power. I think part of the reason for this is precisely the sad fact that human beings find it easier to construct their social identity over against those whom they consider to be the bad outsiders, than to build it positively within themselves. And so we become fascinated by the 'evil other' whose incorrigible wickedness offers us an opportunity to shore up the boundaries of our own constantly threatened sense of goodness. We come to our reading of the Bible with these fears, fascinations, and desires well stimulated, and the Bible becomes captive to interpretive strategies that reinforce this dynamic. Instead of 'taking all thoughts captive to Jesus Christ,' we make the Bible captive to our own fears and desires.

Now, part of the problem is, as I mentioned above, that *we discover the same dynamic in the Bible itself*. This is because the Bible was written by human beings, not angels, humans who had their own fears and desires. The Bible is a religious book, and possesses the various shortcomings to which religious minds are subject. In order to eliminate the scandal caused by the Bible's humanness, we subject it to a 'flattening.' That is, we flatten out the human and historical dimensions of the Bible, and read the text literally from start to finish, giving equal authority to all the words and stories, as though the whole thing were dictated straightaway by God at one sitting into voice recognition software and spit out on a laser jet printer for publication. But the Bible carries its treasure in an earthen vessel, and there are a lot of old wineskins in the Bible that have long since worn out their capacity to contain the new wine that the people of God, since Jesus, have become privileged to drink.

The important thing to realize about recognizing the human dimension of the Bible, is that *it is from the Bible itself* that we learn to make this critique. In its reading of the Old Testament, for example, the New Testament writers often take liberties to the point of reading *against* the Old Testament text rather than with the text; indeed, the Old Testament often criticizes and revises itself. The Bible, we might say, is a religious book that "deconstructs" religion, and thus, ironically, deconstructs *itself* insofar as it is a religious book. This is where revelation comes into play ^B but more on that later.

It is through the lens of the above reading strategies, polished to a sharp focus on the wickedness of the Canaanites, and sterilized of all compassion, that so many Christians read

the story of the Gibeonites. The whole issue of the legitimacy of the genocide practiced upon the Canaanites by Israel – or, if it comes to that, the appropriateness of the very word ‘genocide’ in this context – is seldom addressed directly. Most Christians feel the question of all this violence as a kind of embarrassment, something they really don’t want to deal with, and don’t know how to deal with, and so they simply ignore it. The thought that the Father of Jesus Christ could order the murder of babies and infants who could not yet speak a word, much less have any idea of the Canaanite sins for which they were being annihilated, is a thought most Christians with any appreciation for the heart of Jesus would find disturbing. Some interpreters, on the other hand, go to great lengths in an attempt to justify this kind of violence. *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, published by Zondervan in 2003, is one of the few books from the Evangelical press to deal directly with this issue, which is openly admitted in the preface. Commonly, violent texts are simply justified as God’s command, and so nothing seems to require discussion.

As we saw in the material examined previously, once we have achieved detachment from the pathos of the historical event, then we develop strategies for discovering edifying lessons from the text: spiritual lessons, religious lessons, ethical lessons, psychological lessons, practical lessons, and so on. This is the only way most Christians know to read and use much of the Old Testament. I believe that the content of the Gospel, the good news, is something unique, something unheard of in the world, something Jesus and the apostles took great joy in announcing. I do not believe that Jesus came to reinforce spiritual, religious, and ethical principles already operative in the world which is what so many ‘lessons’ derived from Old Testament texts seem to be. The most popular lesson that every preacher wants to derive from this story, for example, is the importance of consulting God in our decision making, something Joshua neglected to do with respect to the Gibeonites, and which, admittedly, may be something the writer of Joshua wants us to note. And, indeed, the idea that we should consult God in our decision-making is certainly a good idea – but it is by no means unique. There is nothing specifically Christian about it. The idea was not even unique to Israel. In fact, it is a notion that all of religious humanity seems to have always possessed. Every culture that has had gods has also had ways to consult those gods, hoping to make wise decisions that the gods would bless. When we read in Joshua 10:8 that Yahweh told Joshua not to fear, for he will win the battle against the five Canaanite kings, it is implied that

this time Joshua *did* consult the Lord. Most likely, Yahweh 'speaking' to Joshua is a euphemism referring to some kind of divinatory practice: a practice, in the opinion of many scholars, probably related to the 'Urim and Thumin' in the breastplate of the high priest that would yield an answer: this action is blessed, this action is not blessed. In this the religion of Israel was not unique. Lessons like this may be important, but they are also commonplace, which Jesus never was.

The other main lesson popularly drawn from the Gibeonite story, which we have seen illustrated above, is the ethical lesson concerning the importance of honoring commitments, vows, oaths, and so on. In all the sermonizing about God being a covenant God, and about Joshua having the ethical character to honor the oath he made to the Gibeonites despite the fact that he had been deceived for this, we are told, is what God demands of us when we make commitments and take oaths in all this talk I have seen no mention made of another sermon that deals with the topic of oaths and commitments. Matthew 5 is part of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. Here, in verses 33-37, Jesus says:

"Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.' But I say to you, make no oath at all; either by heaven, for it is the throne of God; or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no;' and anything beyond these is of the evil one.

Now, Jesus' comment here, Make no oath at all, is extremely emphatic, and stands in sharp contrast to the Old Testament law, and how that law was being interpreted and applied in Jesus' day. Deuteronomy 6:13 and 10:20 say that Israelites should swear by the name of the Lord; that is, Yahweh's name is to be invoked whenever one takes an oath. This guarantees truth in the statements made under oath, because now one has called the deity to witness, and has made God's honor and dignity a party to the action. Of course, this means that fearsome wrath awaits the one who offends God's honor by dishonoring the oath that invoked His name. This is what Joshua was afraid of when he says, in 9:10-11, 'We have sworn to them by Yahweh, the God of Israel, and now we cannot touch them. This we will do to them, even let them live, lest wrath be upon us for the oath which we swore to them.'

As thinking about oaths and vows developed in Jewish history, people tried to provide themselves with exit doors from the vows they made and the oaths they took. Since a literal reading of Deuteronomy says that one should swear *by* the name of the Lord,^a then perhaps, it was thought, one could create some wiggle room by swearing by things that do not directly mention God's name: like heaven, for instance, or calling the earth to witness. God made the earth, so one swears by the earth; but because one did not directly invoke the name of the Lord, one can back out later. There was much debate and discussion among the Jews about such things in Jesus' day. Jesus rejects all of this casuistry, this legal hairsplitting. God is everywhere, and every word we utter is uttered in God's presence. If we think that God is only concerned in our affairs when we directly invoke His name, we're way wrong. Everything is related to God, whose concern is truth, and every word we speak needs to come from a place of reverence.

Vows and oaths are the product of suspicion. In fact, Jesus says, they are the product 'of the evil one' (v. 37). Satan (the evil one) is known in the Bible as the 'accuser.' We see Satan in this classic role, for example, when he points the finger at Job, accusing him before God. Oaths and vows are of the evil one because the whole idea behind them is to invoke an *accusation* upon oneself should one be found untrue. God Himself will accuse me should I break the oath that oath that invoked God as witness. Note what this does, however: it places God, as accuser, in the role of Satan. It is not God's purpose to accuse His children. Nor is it His purpose that they should approach one another in the untrusting and suspicious manner that oaths imply.

The main point here is that Jesus levels a stunning critique against the Old Testament ethical law, reading, we might say, *against* the text of passages like Numbers 30, the entire chapter of which is devoted to the taking of vows, and the circumstances under which vows shall and shall not be valid.

It is interesting to note that Deuteronomy 6:13 is the verse that Jesus quotes to the devil in the wilderness temptation scene, when the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for Jesus worshipping him. Jesus answers, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.'" Dt. 6:13 has an extra phrase, however, that Jesus left out: '. . . and swear by His name.'

What I am trying to say in all of this is that drawing lessons from Joshua 9 regarding

how to behave with respect to oaths and commitments has nothing whatsoever in common with what I would call a *Christian* reading of the text. Nor do I believe we have this text because God wants us to learn from it to beware of modern day advertisers who cloak sinful consumer goods in seductive, beautiful wrappings. There is, of course, a genuine critique to be made of consumer society and its wrappings; and one can certainly take a text like the Gibeonite story and use it as an analogy for such a critique; but, again, that is not what I would call a specifically Christian reading of the text.

How, then, might we read this text from a Christian point of view? Certainly, through the eyes of Jesus. But I do not have Jesus' eyes, so I must attempt to train myself to see as Jesus saw, and, in this case, to read the Old Testament as Jesus would have read it. This, I take it, is part of what it means to imitate Jesus, who said, 'Be imitators of me.' I must ask myself, 'How would Jesus have felt in his heart when reading this story?' If I could answer that question, it seems to me, I would stand a chance of achieving a truly Christian reading of the text. Now, here we run into the problem that much of Biblical theology sanctions an independent interpretation of the Hebrew Bible on its own terms. It goes straight to the Hebrew text and exegetes it on its own terms, seeking to learn about God directly and independently of Jesus' authority, then seeks a way to harmonize the results with what Jesus told us about God. But it seems to me that an approach which imitates Jesus would begin, rather, with a statement such as, 'He who has seen me, has seen the Father,' and use that astonishing claim as the lens through which to interpret the Hebrew Bible (and the New Testament as well). Rather than drawing conclusions about the nature of the Father from reading the Hebrew Bible on its own terms, we learn the nature of the Father from observing and listening to Jesus, and then look for where that is intimated in the Hebrew Bible. Doing this, we will find that Jesus' Father is sometimes revealed in striking clarity, and at other times not at all; but we will not be confusing the Father with an ancient Hebrew deity, or the spirituality of Jesus with ancient Israelite religion.

Christianly, I am reading Joshua from the point of view of the one who said, 'He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword.' How can we believe that the same person who said this for he claimed to be one with the Father also commanded the Israelites to decimate entire populations of Canaanites with the sword? Far from commanding it, I think Jesus would have wept over it. After settling into the land of Palestine, Israel continued to be

plagued by the sword on all sides, until the entire land was overrun, the temple destroyed, and the people murdered or deported. I wonder if Jesus didn't gain his insight into the sword precisely from studying the approximately 2,000 years of Israelite history recorded in the Hebrew Bible, along with its more than 600 explicit references (by one count) to violence? As Raymond Schwager says about violence in the Hebrew Bible (*Must There Be Scapegoats*, 1987, p.47), "No other human activity or experience is mentioned as often, be it the world of work or trade, of family and sexuality, or that of knowledge and the experience of nature." The author of the book of Joshua believes in the sacredness of the violence against Caanan, and presents it as commanded by Yahweh, but I do not think Jesus saw the world with eyes of sacred violence, and I do not see Jesus, or the Father he claimed to reflect perfectly, implicated in such violence. What I do see is something common to societies throughout history and around the planet: the forging of group identity through scapegoating others, violence against others in the name of a sacred cause in order to consolidate one's own social group. This does not mean that I therefore reject the book of Joshua out of hand because its author was caught up in humanity's addiction to sacred violence. If I condemn the text then I simply repeat the same error myself: violently expunging the text in an attempt to establish my own sacred virtue. This only proves that I am blind to my own violence. This cannot be a Christian approach because it in no way imitates Jesus who does not expel but includes, who does not create sacred distinctions but *demolishes* them by leading 'good' people to the recognition that those they condemn are their brothers and sisters, and 'bad' people to the recognition that, whereas the righteous might condemn them, God does not condemn them. No, Christianly, I must *recognize* myself in the Joshua text, and repent of my own violence.

Also, if I am reading the story Christianly, then I have to see the Gibeonites sympathetically. That does not mean that I see them as upstanding models of ethical humanity, or place myself in denial concerning Caananite violence and the darkness of their practices, far from it! Nor does it mean that I must condemn the Israelites. In other words, I am not simply trying to *reverse the polarities*, so that now the Israelites become the badies and the Canaanites become the goodies. That takes us nowhere, and it does not reflect the heart of Jesus who said that God makes his sun to shine on the good and the evil, who told us not to judge, but to remove the log from our own eye before trying to remove the splinter

from the other's eye (a process lasting, no doubt, for the rest of our earthly lives!). I am trying to read with eyes that are learning to go to the text without judging the other, without catering to the desire to justify oneself. Nevertheless, in Joshua 9, at least, the Gibeonites are victims and scapegoats, and insofar as they are that in this particular story, I feel sympathy for them. I understand and feel for their desire to preserve their lives, and the lives of their children, their babies, their pregnant women. I feel sympathy for them even if I feel repulsed by various aspects of their cultural practices. I cannot but feel for the babies, who have no desire at this point but to eat, drink and draw breath. And so I cannot help but find myself rooting for them, chuckling at the trick they pull on Joshua. Using their wits, they avoid genocide. They did not thereby avoid becoming scapegoats: for centuries thereafter they were doomed to live on the edge of "righteous" society, like Jews within medieval Christendom. But they did manage to hold onto their lives in the face of implacable violence, and secured for themselves a place, albeit a precarious one, on the (for the time, at least) *Awinning@* side.

A Christian reading means trying to see, or read, with Jesus' eyes. It also means trying to 'see Jesus' in the text. The two forms go together, of course, since it we cannot expect to see Jesus in the text if we are reading through some other lens than that which Jesus himself provides. This, I assume, is why the men walking the road to Emmaus had not been able to understand the Hebrew texts they had grown up with and knew so well: they had to learn to read it from Jesus' point of view, with *his* eyes. And once they could do so, not only did they recognize Jesus in the text, they suddenly realized that it was Jesus himself who was teaching them. To see like Jesus and to see Jesus go hand-in-hand.

Let's apply this to the continuation of the Gibeonite story in Joshua 10, which tells of Israel's battle with the five Canaanite kings in defense of Gibeon, a battle Joshua had to undertake because of the treaty he had made with the Gibeonites. Any doubt as to whether Yahweh was directly involved in the violence is laid to rest in this episode, where we are told that 'Yahweh threw large stones from heaven on them,' and 'there were more who died from the hailstones than those whom the sons of Israel killed with the sword.' Nevertheless, the sword still plays an important role in the battle, important enough for Yahweh to make the sun stand still in the noon sky all day long so that Joshua and his army will have time enough to pursue and destroy the enemy. It is extraordinary how something so utterly horrifying has

been turned into a delightful children's Sunday school story. Our fascination with the miracle of the sun frozen in its path completely steals the show, effectively diverting attention from the grisly reality the sun illuminated on that long, long day.

The five kings hide themselves in a cave, and Joshua receives word of it. He has his men roll large stones against the mouth of the cave to trap the kings, while Israel continues the mopping up operation, trying to pursue and destroy the enemy before survivors can reach fortified cities. When the bloodshed is over, Joshua has the cave opened and the kings brought forth. Joshua's chiefs put their feet on the kings' necks (an ancient symbol for total subjugation) while Joshua yells, 'Do not fear or be dismayed. Be strong and courageous, for thus Yahweh will do to all your enemies with whom you fight!' So saying, Joshua kills the kings. Their bodies are hung on five trees until evening, as was done with the king of Ai earlier. The Romans crucified people to execute them, while the Israelites killed the criminal first and hung the body after he was dead; but the two practices were similar in that the purpose of both was to expose the crucified victim to public humiliation and shame. It gave the community the opportunity for a little scapegoating, as citizens hurled physical abuse and mockery at the criminal, whether dead already or in the process of dying. The Old Testament law said, 'He who is hanged on a tree is accursed of God' (Deut. 21:23). The corpse had to be taken down at evening, otherwise the curse would spread like a plague and the land around it would become defiled. So at sunset, Joshua had the five bodies taken down from the trees. They threw them back into the cave and rolled large stones over the entrance, and there the bodies remained and rotted.

Commenting on this scene, David R. Reid, in an essay called "Five Kings In A Cave," part of a devotional series for Christians on the internet, has this to say: *Joshua is a wonderful picture of the Lord Jesus. As Joshua led God's people into the Promised Land, so the Lord leads His people into the land of spiritual blessings and spiritual battles. As Joshua called for the five kings to be brought out into the open, so the Lord Jesus wants us to acknowledge and bring out the hidden sins of our hearts before Him* " This may be how Mr. Reid pictures Jesus; it is certainly not where I see him in this story. I *do* see Jesus very clearly in this story, but *not* in the image of Joshua, a man without mercy on a merciless mission. I see Jesus in the image of the five kings who have been hung from the trees, then taken down and thrown into a cave, after which large stones were rolled over the entrance,

sealing it. There was another King who was *‘hung from a tree’* (Gal. 3:13), taken down at evening (Matt. 27:57), and sealed in a cave with a large stone rolled over the entrance (Matt. 27:66). Like the kings before him, this King was displayed publicly as a curse, while a community of insiders celebrated and consolidated their identity as the *‘good guys’* over against the accursed one.

Several centuries after the era of Joshua, the story of Gibeonite history enjoys a brief reprise in 2 Samuel 21, during the reign of David, whose kingdom had been suffering a three year famine. David *‘sought the presence of Yahweh,’* and Yahweh told him that the reason for the famine was that Saul, Israel’s previous king, had murdered Gibeonites, thus breaking Joshua’s oath – and the curse of Yahweh’s wrath was falling upon Israel as a result.

Two things in particular need to be said about this story. First, the idea that natural events such as plagues and famines were sent by the gods in response to some kind of human guilt – which is the point of view from which the author of Samuel obviously writes – is certainly not theologically unique to Israel; it was a commonplace among ancient peoples. Since the gods were causing the havoc, a guilty party, or a substitute, must be discovered and sacrificed to appease the gods’ wrath and stop the natural disaster. We see this attitude, for example, among the sailors who accompanied Jonah aboard ship, and in Jonah himself. When a threatening storm kicked up at sea, Jonah volunteered himself as the guilty party, and they sacrificed him over the side of the ship in order to stop the storm.

We need to realize that in stories like 2 Samuel 21 we are not talking about a god of ‘justice’ as we understand the term. A three-year famine that wipes out thousands of innocent people in response to the guilt of one man’s murder of perhaps a few hundred Gibeonites is hardly our idea of justice. The ‘wrath’ of God in this text has nothing to do with justice; rather, it is a typical expression of the outbreak of the primitive, violent sacred. When a god of sacred violence breaks out against human beings, until some kind of sacrifice is made to appease the wrath there is no telling how many innocent people might perish in its wake. It is important to find a scapegoat that can be sacrificed to stop the plague. I cannot imagine Jesus reading such stories and nodding his head with approval. It was Jesus, after all, who corrected his disciples’ belief that the people crushed by the falling tower of Siloam had been guilty of some crime. He told them to look to their own guilt and repent, rather than seek scapegoats. And it was Jesus who, in his so-called ‘Little Apocalypse,’ stripped famines

of theological significance as “acts of God” by listing them along with earthquakes, wars, and rumors of war as “business as usual,” guaranteed to happen in the ongoing movement of history. He refused to interpret such events as specific acts of God in response to human sin (unlike Pat Robertson, for example, who in 1988 warned that a gay pride event in Orlando could invite hurricanes to hit Florida; or Mayor Ray Nagin, who said in the wake of hurricane Katrina, “Surely God is mad at America. He sent us hurricane after hurricane after hurricane, and it’s destroyed and put stress on this country.”)

The second thing that needs to be said about this story is that despite the fact that the text says David inquired of the Lord concerning the cause of the famine and the Lord revealed the guilty party to him, what David is really doing is no different than what all ancient peoples did when faced with famine, plague, and other forms of chaos. Such events became the perfect excuse to seek out scapegoats who could be blamed for the natural disaster, but these scapegoats were valuable for reasons that went far beyond stopping a famine: they were valuable for the unity that mutual hatred of them could bestow upon society.

David is looking for the cause of the plague that is destroying Israel. But, as Girard has demonstrated so brilliantly in his work, physical plagues and natural disasters were not the primary issue ancient tribal societies had to deal with; the constant, underlying issue was always *human violence*, the endless cycle of vengeance that threatened to tear such societies apart in societies that had to survive without our modern, sophisticated system of criminal justice. When domestic violence and internal chaos reached an intolerable level, with various factions tearing each other apart, involved in blood feuds and reprisals, something like a plague or earthquake could offer the opportunity to fix blame. The important thing wasn’t the natural disaster itself so much as the fact that the society needed a way to rally and save itself from internal violence; and there has never been a better way of achieving that than when everybody joins together in mutual hatred and loathing of a common enemy or guilty party. The earthquake actually saves the society because it allows them an excuse to place a very high magnitude of guilt upon some unfortunate victim(s). When the guilty party is eliminated, the plague eventually stops (as it eventually will anyway, of course). The community’s self-destruction is halted because everyone has joined together to persecute a common guilty victim. This is not a consciously deliberated practice. Religious

and mythological beliefs hide the reality of the sociological process from the participants, who want and need to feel justified in their persecution of victims.

The Gibeonites had no doubt been Saul's and Israel's victims in exactly the same way. We can surmise that the Gibeonites had been living quite tenuously within the community of Israel since the time of Joshua, living, as I mentioned previously, like the Jews in Christendom. At times they were accepted, at times barely tolerated, and at times persecuted. Saul had a troubled reign, and one can easily understand why he would pick on a group like the Gibeonites in order to bolster his own control. This is standard operating procedure for world leaders to this very day. If a president or dictator has domestic problems and the nation is falling apart, the solution is to go to war, or persecute an underdog. And so the Gibeonites became Saul's scapegoats.

David's reign, like Saul's, was also 'plagued' with domestic problems. The famine offered David an opportunity. He could now strengthen his own disordered house by making *Saul* the scapegoat, and finally destroy Saul's house utterly. How convenient that this plague came upon Israel because *Saul* broke the oath Joshua made to the Gibeonites. Of course, since Saul was already dead, it was his children that would have to be sacrificed B potential threats to David's throne. How did David bring this about? He held a conference with the Gibeonites and asked them how he could make amends for Saul's sins. The Gibeonites answered that they didn't want money (actually, according to the law in Deuteronomy, the Jews could not use money to atone for murder anyway), and that they themselves had no authority to put anyone to death in Israel. David promised to do whatever they wished B the plague *had* to be stopped! Their answer was:

The man who consumed us, and who planned to exterminate us from remaining within any border of Israel, let seven men from his sons be given to us, and we will hang them before Yahweh in Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of Yahweh. And the king said, I will give them. (21:5-6)

David took two of Saul's children, and five of his grandchildren and handed them over to the Gibeonites, who killed them. And so the Gibeonites had some revenge, finally, against Israel. Those who were slain by the sword now had their chance to slay in turn. David, in the meantime, found ideal scapegoats in Saul's descendants to help him to pull his own violence-torn dynasty and nation together for a short while, until the sword once again caught

up with the house of David.

But where in all this is the Lord? The writer of this story seems to believe that the Lord is the one who sanctions all this murder and killing of innocent victims. But to find the *Lord Jesus Christ*, I have to look elsewhere in the text. The Gibeonites murdered Saul's children and grandchildren, and hung them exposed in the mountain 'before the Lord,' which brings us up against one of the most haunting images in Scripture, 2 Samuel 21:9-10, which reads as follows:

Then he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them in the mountain before Yahweh, so that the seven of them fell together; and they were put to death in the first days of harvest at the beginning of barley harvest.

And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth and spread it for herself on the rock, from the beginning of harvest until it rained on them from the sky; and she allowed neither the birds of the sky to rest on them by day nor the beasts of the field by night.

Rizpah had been Saul's wife, and two of the five victims of this lynching were her sons. Her pathetic efforts to fend off the vultures, from the beginning of barley harvest until the first rains fell, refers probably to a much longer period of time than one might suspect who has no knowledge of the seasons of Palestine: from April to autumn. The full dimensions of Rizpah's grief, and her heroic, motherly mission, are well expressed by Alfred Edershim in the following commentary:

From the commencement of the barley harvest in April, until the early rains of autumn evidence the removal of the curse from the land, hung those lifeless, putrescent bodies, which a fierce Syrian sun shriveled and dried; and beneath them, ceaseless, restless, was the weird form of Saul's concubine. When she lay down at night it was on the coarse hair-cloth of mourners, which she spread upon the rock; but day and night was she on her wild, terrible watch to chase from the mangled bodies the birds of prey that, with hoarse croaking, swooped around them, and the jackals whose hungry howls woke the echoes of the night.

Where is Jesus in this text? Is he present in the sacred, violent wrath that slew thousands with hunger? Or is he present in Yahweh's finger that points accusingly to Saul as the 'real' source of the trouble? Or in the Gibeonites demand for satisfaction? None of these, I think. But I am eerily reminded of another story in which a group of wrathful people who 'have no authority to put a man to death,' request that death from their ruler who is able to wash his own hands of the blood since it was not his own personal act of vengeance, while at the same time using that blood as a convenient way of defusing the community tensions that threatened at every moment to turn the Passover festival into chaotic violence. That later story, however, is not told from the theological point of view of the perpetrators, but from the point of view of the victim; and it is from the victim's perspective that we must go back and reread stories like 2 Samuel 21. Once we recognize the victim in this story, we realize that *the real 'wrath' needing to be propitiated was not God's, but the Gibeonites'. They were the ones who demanded victims. And David was only too anxious to satisfy them.*

Where is Jesus in this text? How can we fail to hear his voice in the sobs of Rizpah B he, who also wept over death? How can we not catch a glimpse of his own mangled death in the image of seven innocent victims hanging exposed on the trees, and cursed? The text gives two of them names: Armoni and Mephibosheth, Rizpah's two sons. The other five are not even dignified with a mention of their names; they are simply the five sons of Saul's daughter, Merab. Anonymous victims of the crazed and deranged ways of human wrath. Victims, ultimately, of the Accuser.

Some readers will want to point out the *substitutionary* nature of the deaths of these seven men. the fact that they died in order to save Israel from the famine and see in this an image of the work of Jesus. As these five innocent victims took upon themselves Israel's punishment, so the innocent Jesus died in our place so that we might avoid the just punishment that was our due. But such an interpretation simply buys into the religious illusion that this story has not been able to rise above: the idea that God is a violent, wrathful being who demands sacrifice. This kind of thinking only serves to enmesh Jesus' death with ideas that have their basis in sacred violence. The theology that explains Jesus' death as a sacrifice to quell the wrath of God that should have fallen upon us continues to bind God up with images of violence gleaned from stories like this one in 2 Samuel 21. Rather than

reading them through the eyes of Jesus Christ, these stories are given their own independent authority and are taken as prima facie witnesses concerning the nature of God. We end up with a God that has much in common with ancient deities, but little in common with Jesus Christ and his Father.

No, the real image of Jesus in this story is plain and stark. Jesus is here only as victim, pathetic and tragic, an image which encompasses the innocent, crucified men, but also those who loved and missed them, especially Rizpah. Shall we pass by this text and not hear Rizpah's mourning and loud lamentations, not attempt to console her? Would not Jesus say, 'Insofar as you have done it to Rizpah, you have done it to me?' When we read the scriptures, and especially stories like these of the Gibeonite history, do we miss the real victims, passing right on by them in our reading; or, even worse, erecting 'spiritual lessons' upon the foundations of their dead and mangled bodies? I believe that Jesus is present in hundreds of guises throughout the Hebrew Bible as victim; and a Christian exegesis must pay attention and bring that out. Otherwise, we read scripture like the priest and the Levite who ignored the victim who lay wounded along the road, passing by on the other side. So much of Old Testament exegesis passes by those victims on the other side of the road, constructing interpretations that could not function were it not for the victims it either ignores or vilifies.

I have argued that the attempt to draw edifying lessons from these stories is an essentially misplaced effort, regardless of the relative spiritual or ethical merit of whatever lessons one creatively fabricates from the text. But what are we left with in that case? Simply an ancient, pre-Christian text through which no light shines, something that, with Marcion, we should completely reject? I would say that it is true that not much light shines through these texts despite their constant references to 'God said' and 'God did.' They are enmeshed in a particular form of religion that the Bible itself comes to critique, and for the most part reject. Yet the darkness of these passages helps us appreciate the light that elsewhere in the Bible – even in the Hebrew Bible itself – bursts through resplendent. If we come to understand these texts differently than the point of view within which they were originally written, it is not because we arrogantly desire to impose upon them our own arbitrary opinions; rather, we have turned upon them the light of Jesus Christ revealed to us in the Gospels. To use Jesus' own image, as we pour the new wine of Jesus Christ into the stories of the Old Testament,

many of those stories are going to burst apart at their most vulnerable seams. Their ancient perspective of sacred violence is not a fit vessel to carry the new truth about the nature of God revealed in Christ, and so they burst. But that does not mean they must be completely destroyed and forgotten. The surprising thing is that when they break open, those stories do reveal Jesus ^B but not within the text's own perspective. Instead, textual mountains are made low, while valleys are exalted; the righteous are set to removing logs from their eyes, while sinners are made to rejoice. From the point of view of Jesus Christ, there is not much revealed about God, and God's way, in the stories of the Gibeonite saga; but there is *plenty* revealed about *us* and our bondage to violence, and our religions of sacred violence. The story of the Gibeonites leaves us, finally, on the mountain mourning with Rizpah, wishing we could help her to bear her grief and loss, wishing we could impart to her some of that fuller understanding that will only arrive for Israel when the grisly story of David is rewritten in the life of one of his descendants . . . a son of David from Nazareth.

So how can we sum up the 'lesson' of these stories, a lesson not based upon the victimization of innocent people, or upon the exploitation of Biblical characters who become the victims our need to be good? An 'accusatory reading' of the Bible creates textual scapegoats that become the basis for our self-identity as the good, chosen people of God. We thus remain blind to our own violence, hiding it from our eyes, just as the Pharisees did, repeating the mantra that "had we lived in those days, we would not have done what they did." But if this is true when fundamentalists and evangelicals make scapegoats out of the Canaanites, it is also true when I make a scapegoat out of Joshua. For this reason, I cannot accuse Joshua and his conquering Israelites. If I did that I would have learned nothing, but would only be repeating exactly the same mechanism, albeit with a different set of victims. Rather than seeking to expel Joshua, I must recognize how much I *need* him. this favorite of Moses, this man in good standing within his 'church,' this leader of his people, to remind me of the many victims that support the foundations of my own righteous religiosity. The point of reading the Gibeonite text as I have in this chapter is not to convince us to adopt a violent reading strategy which simply switches allegiances from Joshua to the Cannanites, thus assisting us in continuing to deny our own violence. The point is to read the text in such a way that we recognize our own violence, and repent – which I take it was the point of Jesus' response when his disciples wanted to impute guilt to those crushed by the falling tower:

“No, but unless you repent you shall all likewise perish.” (Luke 13.:5)

Although I believe that the Bible is a vessel for the revelation of Jesus Christ, it is also a very violent book written by people steeped in a religion of sacred violence. The Hebrew Bible documents Israel’s progress in understanding who God is B a journey never completed within the Hebrew Bible itself (although astoundingly beautiful insights abound, the story of Joseph being a prime example). At the same time that the Bible puts forth stories written from the perspective of sacred violence, it is also wrestling with that ancient and very human religious perspective, and critiquing it – in some texts more than in others. Ultimately, then, it is only *because* of the Bible that we can look back on the Bible this way and read it in a new light.

The so-called ‘flat’ reading that simply takes the words on the page in their literal significance and gives more or less equal weight to every word and sentence as divinely authoritative, is itself a perspective of sacred violence, and as such is forced into complicity with the sacred violence of the texts. It becomes a technique for denying the reader’s own violence, joining the same violent move against victims that unfortunately is part of the all-too-human history recorded in the Bible. The revelation of the compassion of God through the victim Jesus reverses this move, through another move called repentance, and brings to light the way of reading that was revealed when Jesus first shared his way of reading, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to those confused and blind souls on the road to Emmaus.

The task for me as an imitator of Jesus is to discover my own violence as I read the text, to read in such a way that I can feel my human solidarity with both Canaanite and Israelite brothers and sisters, to read without accusation, sympathetically and mercifully, as Christ was merciful, showing the text and the characters within it the same mercy I would like to receive myself. Again, *it is the Bible itself that has taught me to read in this manner*, for the Bible critiques its own violence, leading us, ultimately, to the revelation of Jesus Christ and his mercy. If our reading of the Bible is a drawing up of sacred boundaries that points fingers at the ‘badies,’ then we have not seen Jesus in the text and we are still walking confused on the way to Emmaus. If, on the other hand, our reading leads us to Rizpah, mourning over history’s many victims, grieving for the victims we ourselves have no doubt created in the course of our own personal histories, convicted by a deepening insight into the depth of our own violence, both subtle and gross, then, I believe, we have read well, and Christianly – for

it is just like Jesus to break human denial and reveal to us the hard truths about ourselves. Once we have dropped the pointing finger, when we have no more will to accuse, and no one left to accuse because we accusers have all dropped our stones and gone home ^B *then* the Bible can open to us its riches as a stunningly honest revealer of the human condition, and the love of God. For then there will be no wall left standing between us and the mercy we ourselves so desperately need. We will see with Christian eyes the Christ in the text, and receive from him that mercy which alone can free us to read Scripture truly.