Continuing last week’s post: “A Mixed Report Card on ‘Damn is Not a Dirty Word’ and ‘Preaching from OT Texts'”

Colleagues,

Last week’s ThTh 521 got us this far in responses to: Preaching from OT Texts.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

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6. Several pointed questions came from someone who’s new, he says, to Crossings stuff, but (mostly) likes what he’s reading. However, there were items in my reading of the Old Testament where he found Biblical texts saying YES to w here I said NO—and vice versa.

> *You say in ThTh 518: “My own view is that this text about the decimation of Jericho is a text of Hebrews committing mass murder and genocide—the theology of the Deuteronomist, but not the theology of Yahweh.” I am trying to reconcile that with what you said in an email to me about God involved in everything that happens. You said: “Key Bible passage for Luther was Deut. 32:39, where God claims to be making ‘everything’ happen. We either have to confess ONE God for everything, or else two gods—one for the good stuff and one for the bad stuff.”*

If God makes everything happen, couldn't we just as easily say that Israel was the instrument of God's judgment on the Canaanites, a people whom He had cursed (Gen 9:25, Lev 18:25)?

If Deut 32:39 is key, how about the rest of it? The context is pretty bloodthirsty and genocidal, esp. v. 43, "He will…take vengeance on his adversaries; he will repay those who hate him, and cleanse the land for his people." If the verse is key, is not the context also? Can you accept the one and not the other?

EHS: This may sound far-fetched to begin with, but please hang on.

Two issues are involved here. At least. One is the theology at work in those "curse, kill, totally exterminate" passages in the OT narratives of the conquest of Canaan. The other is Luther's call for us to distinguish between hidden-God and revealed-God in our reading the Bible—especially the OT.

The two texts you quote, Gen 9:25 and Lev. 18:25, are samples of deuteronomic theology, in my understanding. The normal deuteronomic principle is "law-abiding Israel" is blessed by God, "law-breaking Israel" comes under God's condemnation. Non - Israelite "nations," the Goyim, are cursed from the git-go because they never have been law-abiding. No wonder, they never had a Sinai revelation. How could they even possibly be law-abiding? [There is no way that I can read the Sinai "contract" in Exodus 20 other than this: "command ment-keepers get rewarded," and "commandment-breakers get punished." No forgiveness for sinners at Sinai.] Contrary to that is the Yahwist theology running through these same Pentateuch texts, one highpoint of which is God's later covenant with David (2 Samuel 7) where "forgiveness of sins" is specifically put into the contract.

The difference between Yahwist and Deuteronomic is already seen back in the Cain and Abel story, where Cain, the founder of agriculture and city-civilization, is the "Ur-canaanite." He's the Ur-bad-guy—as are all Canaanites—killing his nomadic herdsman brother (=the Ur-Israelite). He's under God's condemnation, yes, but note the "mercy-mark"—very non-Deuteronomistic—God gives to preserve his life. AND the sanction God sets: "whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold punishment." So killing Cain-connected Canaanites is contra-Yahwist, even if it is Kosher-deuteronomist. By that axiom, Canaanite genocide carried out by the Israelites merits sevenfold genocide of Israel.

Canaanites come specifically under the specs of God's mercy-covenant to Abraham, where not only he and his offspring, but "in you all the families of the earth [Canaanites included] shall be blessed."

It seems to me that deuteronomist theology—because it is so contra-Yahwist at the center—is in large chunks "man-made" to justify Israel's behavior when they abandoned God's Abrahamic covenant God with them. Especially this "wipe out the Canaanites" business. You can't trust the Abraham covenant and then draw genocidal conclusions. Canaanites are "one of all the families of the earth," thus candidates for blessing. Sure they're sinners, but so is every Israelite. That's why both people-groups need the mercy-covenant where sinners can be forgiven.

One OT prof (Missouri Synod even) told me this a couple of years ago: Ed, why do you think there are those passages in the OT where God tells Israel: "Don't sacrifice your first-born children to me or any other deity"? Why was God saying that? Because that is exactly what the Israelites were doing! Ditto for all the laundry lists of prohibitions against gosh-awful

“Canaanite” practices. That’s what they were doing. The Israelites were living like Canaanites and using their legalist theology to justify it all. Ditto for genocide. It’s a Canaanite custom. So legalist theology baptizes it and says: Our God says we can do it too.

But the God of Abraham had said something else.

Possibly better expressed, it is analogous to the theology that St. Paul confronts in his opponents in Galatia, the Galatian Judaizers, where once more God’s unique mercy-promise-covenant with Abraham is the touchstone. In Galatia the Judaizers were Christ-confessors, but when push came to shove, they grabbed for the law as their final justification—forgetting that it was precisely from the law’s curse (always the law’s last word on everybody stuck with being a sinner) that Christ had set them free.

If this sounds bizarre, my claim is that I’m practicing Lutheran exegesis—distinguishing law from promise in these texts.

Yahweh is also the voice who speaks in the law, when the law is left to do its own God-given work. Which is what? If we don’t see it in OT texts, St. Paul makes it perfectly clear that the “Law was our taskmaster [=critic] to drive us to Christ,” to the Abrahamic mercy-covenant. But Yahweh is not the voice speaking in the legalist distortion of his word of Law. All the more so when that legalism (as it must do) deserts the mercy of the Abrahamic promise covenant and the Davidic forgiveness-covenant. That is the constant drumbeat of the Hebrew prophets—and also of Jesus as the Gospels present him. And the rest of the NT writers follow in that train.

My interrogator continues:

You say, “Rahab gets saved, but not sola fide.” What about Heb 11:31: “By faith, the prostitute Rahab did not perish”?

You say, “There is no promise-trusting that I can find in Joshua.” Isn’t the book about how God remains faithful to his promises (The Promised Land) and blesses those who trust in those promises? Barry Bandsra says about the book of Joshua in his book, Reading the Old Testament, “the Deuteronomistic historian framed the book with a theology of promise…On this promise, projected into the future again by the exiles who heard this story, Israel based its hope.”

EHS response: Touche! on Rahab. Not so, I think, on Joshua.

I’d forgotten that passage in Hebrews. Rahab also gets mentioned as exemplary in the NT book of James. These are the only places where she’s mentioned in the NT. But they don’t exactly agree. Hebrews says Rahab was saved by faith. James says she was “justified by works.” [Is it only a coincidence that both of these NT books are on the “antilegomena” list in the early church, namely, books that some folks in those days said should not be included in the NT canon?]

“Faith” in the book of Hebrews is given a definition that is not complete, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”(11:1) Missing in this definition, seems to me, is the “Abrahamic” element. Faith is trusting God’s promise. So what was Rahab’s faith? When you get to Rahab back in the book of Joshua, she does confess that from all they’ve heard about Israel’s bloody victories, Israel’s God is bigger than Jericho’s gods and that Jericho’s destruction is assured. But the “faith” she confesses sounds a lot like despair. “As soon as we heard this, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven

above and on earth below." Is this Abrahamic-style promise-trusting? Well . . . maybe. The de facto promise she trusts is the one offered by the two spies. "Since you saved us, we'll promise to save you and your family when the walls come tumbling down." And when the walls do come tumbling down, Rahab's household survives, but every other living thing—human and animal—is genocided. Is that Abrahamic theology in action or Canaanite theology in action?

By faith Rahab survived that holocaust, but the Hebrews writer doesn't give Abrahamic grounds for either the faith or the survival. Rather it was "because she had received the spies in peace."

But let's say Rahab did survive by trusting a promise, possibly even a promise from God. The Hebrews writer in the NT doesn't stop there, but asks: "which" promises are being trusted in the many "by faith" examples cited? Some promises—even from God—are not as good as other promises. The Hebrews writer lumps the OT faith-promise-trusting under the rubric of an "old covenant," even calls it "faulty." Now that Jesus has come,"the mediator of a BETTER covenant, which has been enacted through BETTER promises," God's own self "has made the first covenant obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear." (Heb. 8)

The "by faith" hyped in those many examples in Hebrews 11 (Rahab included) is still incomplete because the covenant involved is itself "faulty." As the writer moves into chapter 12 we see why. It lacks the "something better that God has provided . . . in Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of OUR faith." That reference to "our faith" is contrasted with "all these [previously mentioned, who] though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised." That "something better" at the center of "our faith," is what these ancients too needed "to be

made perfect." Abraham is the super-star in the long list. Yet his "better" faith is linked to his hook-up with Melchizedek, the "better" high-priest, qualitatively different from the Levitical ones (stuck with their "faulty" covenant). And, of course, that Melchizedek, mystery priest of old, is directly hooked up to Jesus the final high-priest once and for all. And the pun in his name cannot be accidental – "My king is righteousness personified." In Jesus that righteousness personified was shared with sinners.

Doesn't this also shed light on your citation from Barry Bandsra, whose work I do not know. You cite him: "the Deuteronomistic historian framed the book with a theology of promise…On this promise, projected into the future again by the exiles who heard this story, Israel based its hope."

I would ask the question from the Letter to the Hebrews: which promise? The promise in the "faulty" covenant, or the better promise in the better covenant? The Hebrews writer gives a long citation from Jeremiah 31 of that "better" covenant. It doesn't just show up for the first time in Jesus. It's all the way back there to Abraham. Jesus fulfills it. But it's been there from the beginning of Israel's history. There is no land mentioned in Jeremiah 31 about the "new" covenant. It's clear to me that Israel's hope for land, which Bandsra highlights, even when you call it the "promised" land, is not based on the "better" promise of the "better" covenant. [I think that is true for the state of Israel today. But that's another topic.]

The "land" is an ambiguous component in OT covenant texts—in the Abraham story it isn't there in the first covenant offer (Gen. 12) , but is there in the second (Gen 15). Might that be an addendum? Even deuteronomic? Seems to me that the Letter to the Hebrews is specifically "anti-land" both in its reading of the OT and for sure in its proclamation of Christ's better

promise/covenant. Isn't that exactly what Hebrews 11:13-16 is saying? Even for Abraham, the Hebrews writer claims, the land was irrelevant. The "home"-land for Abraham and all the "by faith-ers" celebrated in Hebrews 11 is NOT Canaanite geography. Ditto for present-day Christ-trusters who are now on that same pilgrim path. It's not a homeland to get back to, but a "land" where none of us has ever yet been. It's still up ahead for us and for Abraham too. "They desire a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them." It's still up ahead for all of us Abrahamites.

God hidden, God revealed

After that long, long sortie, there is the hidden God, revealed God distinction, that Luther discovered in the Old Testament. The issue here in this disctinction is not an "intellectual" problem (e.g., the genocide of the Canaanites, the infanticide of Psalm 137), but the personal problem of God not keeping his mercy/blessing promise to the promise-truster. Here God himself seems to be contradicting his own "better" promise. Primordial example of this for Luther was God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the very "child of [the better] promise." What to do, asks Luther, when such a mega-onslaught comes to us in our own lives—Anfechtung he called it— attacks on our trust in God coming directly from God? Answer: do not try to "figure it out." Do what Abraham did. Trust the "better" promise in the very face of God's contradicting it himself. Abraham did just that. God did indeed keep his promise. For Abraham it was like resurrection, getting Isaac back from the dead. So says the Hebrews writer (11:19). That happened again with God's own beloved Son. That Son verifies that his Promising Father will do likewise for all promise-trusters.

Here's a Luther paragraph that popped up in our morning

devotions a few days ago:

> *God Hidden, God RevealedThe hidden Will of God should not be investigated but adored, with trembling, as a deep, holy secret of God's High majesty, which He has reserved to Himself.*
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> *Thus we must not search God's nature and His hidden will. For therein we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He desire to have anything to do with us. God is at work in many ways which He does not reveal to us in His Word. Likewise He has many intentions which he has not revealed to us in His Word. Therefore we should behold the Word and leave the unfathomable Will alone, for we have received no command about it.*
>
> *For we must direct ourselves in accordance with His revealed Word and not with His unfathomable Will. It behoves us not to seek the high, great, holy se crets of the Majesty who dwells in light which no man can approach, as Paul says (I Timothy 6:1). We should cleave unto God who permits us to draw near to Him, and to Him who was made man, Jesus Christ the crucified (as St. Paul says), in whom are hidden all the treasures of God's wisdom. For in Him we have superabundantly received all things which we know and which it behoves us to know. [From "On the Enslaved Will"]*

[And then this recent arrival about "Damn is not a Dirty Word."]

As an American who has lived and worked outside the US for 23 years now, I find the whole Jeremiah Wright incident both interesting and disturbing. From the beginning the US media (unfortunately the Canadian media have tagged along) has failed to understand the content or context of Pr. Wright's ministry and preaching. It is as if the media never heard of the Black church or never had any consciousness of its culture and

history. I am truly saddened, though, that so many Americans allow their consciousness of Pr. Wright to be shaped by carefully edited sound bites on Fox News. Are Americans so totally ignorant of propaganda techniques that they do not recognize it when it bites them in the nose? Has anyone compared the sound bites to the full text of the sermons from which they are so skilfully extracted? Has anyone read the full text of Pr. Wright's interview with Bill Moyers?

Of all people Pr. Wright credits Martin Marty with making him what he is today! He says his whole approach to ministry in South Chicago is based on what he learned from Marty at U of C Div. School. Take that, Lutherans!

Anyway, I wish that people would stop being such suckers for these media circuses. Jeremiah Wright is not who Fox News claims he is, and before we condemn him (not to mention the abomination of making psychological diagnoses from TV!) we should get the whole story. I'm no great fan of Obama (too conservative for me) and I am deeply disappointed that he caved in on his own pastor, but this was so obviously a ploy to divide people along racial lines that I would hope that intelligent, theologically astute people would refuse to participate. From outside the US the whole thing is really embarrassing.

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