

WARS BEGIN IN THE MINDS OF CHILDREN - Part I



The Attempted Murder of Isaac by His Father Abraham (Gn 22:1-12)

An excerpt from THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE (2011) by Steven Pinker, PhD, Professor of Psychology, Harvard University.

“Homer’s Odysseus put it this way, [We are men] to whom Zeus has given the fate of winding down our lives in painful wars, from youth until we perish, each of us.’ Human ingenuity, applied so resourcefully to weapons and strategy, turned up empty-handed when it came to the earthly causes of war. Rather than framing the scourge of warfare as a human problem for humans to solve, the Greeks concocted a fantasy of hotheaded gods and attributed their own tragedies to the gods’ jealousies and follies.

THE HEBREW BIBLE

Like the works of Homer, the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was set in the late 2nd millennium BCE but written more than five hundred years later.

But unlike the works of Homer, the Bible is revered today by billions of people who call it the source of their moral values. The world’s bestselling publication, the Good Book, has been translated into three thousand languages and has been placed in the nightstands of hotels all over the world. Orthodox Jews kiss it with their prayer shawls; witnesses in American courts bind their oaths by placing a hand on it. Even the

President touches it when taking the oath of office. **Yet for all this reverence, the Bible is one long celebration of violence.**

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God took one of Adam's ribs, and made he a woman. And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all the living. And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bares Cain. And she again bares his brother Abel. And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. With a world population of exactly four, that works out to a homicide rate of 25 percent, which is about a thousand times higher than the equivalent rates in western countries today.

No sooner do men and women begin to multiply than God decides they are sinful and that the suitable punishment is genocide. (In Bill Cosby's comedy sketch, a neighbor begs Noah for a hint as to why he is building an ark. Noah replies, "How long can you tread water?") When the flood recedes, God instructs Noah in its moral lesson, namely the code of vendetta: "whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed."

The next major figure in the Bible is Abraham, the spiritual ancestor of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Abraham has a nephew, Lot, who settles in Sodom. Because the residents engage in anal sex and comparable sins, God immolates every man, woman, and child in a divine napalm attack. Lot's wife, for the crime of turning around to look at the inferno, is put to death as well.

Abraham undergoes a test of his moral values when God orders him to take his son Isaac to a mountaintop, tie him up, cut his throat, and burn his body as a gift to the Lord. Isaac is spared only because at the last moment an angel stays his father's hand. For millennia readers have puzzled over why God insisted on this horrifying trial. One interpretation is that God intervened not because Abraham had passed the test but

because he had failed it, but that is anachronistic: obedience to divine authority, not reverence for human life, was the cardinal virtue.

Isaac's son Jacob has a daughter, Dinah. Dinah is kidnapped and raped, apparently a customary form of courtship at the time, since the rapist's family then offers to purchase her from her own family as a wife for the rapist. Dinah's brothers explain that an important moral principle stands in the way of this transaction: the rapist is uncircumcised. So they make a counteroffer: if all the men in the rapist's hometown cut off their foreskins, Dinah will be theirs.

While the men are incapacitated with bleeding penises, the brothers invade the city, plunder and destroy it, massacre the men, and carry off the women and children. When Jacob worries that neighboring tribes may attack them in revenge, his sons explain that it was worth the risk: "Should our sister be treated like a whore?"

Jacob's descendants, the Israelites, find their way to Egypt and become too numerous for the Pharaoh's liking, so he enslaves them and orders that all the boys be killed at birth. Moses escapes the mass infanticide and grows up to challenge the Pharaoh to let his people go. God, who is omnipotent, could have softened Pharaoh's heart, but he hardens it instead, which gives him a reason to afflict every Egyptian with painful boils and other miseries before killing every one of their firstborn sons. (The word Passover alludes to the executioner angel's passing over the households with Israelite firstborns.) God follows this massacre with another one when he drowns the Egyptian army as they pursue the Israelites across the Red Sea.

The Israelites assemble at Mount Sinai and hear the Ten Commandments, the great moral code that outlaws engraved images and the coveting of livestock but gives a pass to slavery, rape, torture, mutilation, and genocide of neighboring tribes. The Israelites become impatient while waiting for Moses to return with an expanded set of Laws, which will prescribe the death penalty for blasphemy, homosexuality, adultery, talking back to parents, and working on the Sabbath. To pass the time, they worship a statue of

a calf, for which the punishment turns out to be, you guessed it, death. Following orders from God, Moses and his brother Aaron kill three thousand of their companions.

God then spends seven chapters of Leviticus instructing the Israelites on how to slaughter the steady stream of animals he demands of them. Aaron and his two sons prepare the tabernacle for the first service, but the sons slip up and use the wrong incense. So God burns them to death.

As the Israelites proceed toward the Promised Land, they meet up with the Midianites. Following orders from God, they slay the males, burn their city, plunder the livestock, and take the women and children captive.

When they return to Moses, he is enraged because they spared the women; some of whom had led the Israelites to worship rival gods. So he tells his soldiers to complete the genocide and to reward themselves with nubile sex slaves they may rape at their pleasure: "Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves."

In Deuteronomy 20 and 21, God gives the Israelites a blanket policy for dealing with cities that don't accept them as overlords: smite the males with the edge of the sword and abduct the cattle, women, and children. Of course, a man with a beautiful new captive faces a problem: since he has just murdered her parents and brothers, she may not be in the mood for love. God anticipates this nuisance and offers the following solution: the captor should shave her head, pare her nails, and imprison her in his house for a month while she cries her eyes out. Then he may go in and rape her.

With a designated list of other enemies (Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites), the genocide has to be total "Thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: But thou shalt utterly destroy them'...as the Lord thy God has commanded thee."

Joshua puts this directive into practice when he invades Canaan and sacks the city of Jericho. After the walls came tumbling down, his soldiers "utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword." More earth is scorched as Joshua "smote all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale, and of the springs, and all their kings: he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded."

The next stage in Israelite history is the era of the Judges, or tribal chiefs. The most famous of them, Samson, establishes his reputation by killing thirty men during his wedding feast because he needs their clothing to pay off a bet. Then, to avenge the killing of his wife and her father, he slaughters a thousand Philistines and sets fire to their crops; after escaping capture, he kills another thousand with the jawbone of an ass. When he is finally captured and his eyes are burned out, God gives him the strength for a 9/11-like suicide attack in which he implodes a large building, crushing the three thousand men and women who are worshipping inside it.

Israel's first king, Saul, establishes a small empire, which gives him the opportunity to settle an old score. Centuries earlier, during the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, the Amalekites had harassed them, and God commanded the Israelites to "wipe out the name of Amalek." So when the judge Samuel anoints Saul as king, he reminds Saul of the divine decree: "Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass. Saul carries out the order, but Samuel is furious to learn that he has spared their king, Agag. So Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord.

Saul is eventually overthrown by his son-in-law David, who absorbs the southern tribes of Judah, conquers Jerusalem, and makes it the capital of a kingdom that will last four centuries. David would come to be celebrated in story, song, and sculpture, and his six-pointed star would symbolize his people for three thousand years. Christians too would revere him as the forerunner of Jesus.

But in Hebrew scripture David is not just the sweet singer of Israel, the chiseled poet who plays a harp and composes the psalms. After he makes his name by killing Goliath, David recruits a gang of guerrillas, extorts wealth from his fellow citizens at sword point, and fights as a mercenary for the Philistines. These achievements make Saul jealous: the women in his court are singing, "Saul has killed by the thousands, but David by the tens of thousands." [O, the glory of it all! The more human slaughter the greater the glory for a man and for God!] So Saul plots to have David assassinated. David narrowly escapes before staging a successful coup. [Saul commits suicide by means of his servant's hand.]

When David becomes king, he keeps up his hard-earned reputation for killing by the tens of thousands. After his general Joab "wasted the country of the children of Ammon," David "brought out the people that were in it, and cut them with saws, and with harrows of iron, and with axes." Finally he manages to do something that God considers immoral: he orders a census. To punish David for this lapse, God kills seventy thousand of his citizens.

Within the royal family, sex and violence go hand in hand. While taking a walk on the palace roof one day, David peeping-toms a naked woman, Bathsheba, and likes what he sees, so he sends her husband to be killed in battle and adds her to his seraglio. Later one of David's children rapes another one and is killed in revenge by a third. The avenger, Absalom, rounds up an army and tries to usurp David's throne by having sex with ten of his concubines. (As usual, we are not told how the concubines felt about all this.) While fleeing David's army, Absalom's hair gets caught in a tree, and David's general thrusts three spears into his heart. This does not put the family squabbles to an end. Bathsheba tricks a senile David into anointing their son, Solomon, as his successor. When the legitimate heir, David's older son Adonijah, protests, Solomon has him killed.

King Solomon is credited with fewer homicides than his predecessors and is remembered instead for building the Temple in Jerusalem and for writing the books of

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs (though with a harem of seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines he clearly didn't spend all his time writing). Most of all he is remembered for his eponymous virtue, "the wisdom of Solomon." Two prostitutes sharing a room give birth a few days apart. One of the babies dies, and each woman claims that the surviving boy is hers. The wise king adjudicates the dispute by pulling out a sword and threatening to butcher the baby and hand each woman a piece of the bloody corpse. One woman withdraws her claim, and Solomon awards the baby to her. "When all Israel heard of the verdict that the king had rendered, they stood in awe of the king, because they saw that he had divine wisdom in carrying out justice.""

The distancing effect of a good story can make us forget the brutality of the world in which it was set. Just imagine a judge in family court today adjudicating a maternity dispute by pulling out a chain saw and threatening to butcher the baby before the disputants' eyes. Solomon was confident that the more humane woman (we are never told that she was the mother) would reveal herself, and that the other woman was so spiteful that she would allow a baby to be slaughtered in front of her – and he was right! And, he must have been prepared, in the event he was wrong, to carry out the butchery or else forfeit all credibility. The women, for their part, must have believed that their wise king was capable of carrying out this grisly murder.

The Bible depicts a world that, seen through modern eyes, is staggering in its savagery. People enslave, rape, and murder members of their immediate families. Warlords slaughter civilians indiscriminately, including the children. Women are bought, sold, and plundered like sex toys. And Yahweh tortures and massacres people by the hundreds of thousands for trivial disobedience or for no reason at all. These atrocities are neither isolated nor obscure. They implicate all the major characters of the Old Testament, the ones that Sunday-school children draw with crayons. And they fall into a continuous plot-line that stretches for millennia, from Adam and Eve through Noah, the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, the Judges, Saul, David, Solomon, and beyond.

According to the biblical scholar Raymund Schwager, the Hebrew Bible contains over six hundred passages that explicitly talk about nations, kings, or individuals attacking, destroying, and killing others. . . . Aside from the approximately one thousand verses in which Yahweh himself appears as the direct executioner of violent punishments, and the many texts in which the Lord delivers the criminal to the punisher's sword, in over one hundred other passages Yahweh expressly gives the command to kill people Matthew White, a self-described atrocitologist who keeps a database with the estimated death tolls of history's major wars, massacres, and genocides, counts about 1.2 million deaths from mass killing that are specifically enumerated in the Bible. (He excludes the half-million casualties in the war between Judah and Israel described in 2 Chronicles 13 because he considers the body count historically implausible.) The victims of the Noachian flood would add another 20 million or so to the total.”

With a public relations and brainwashing operation like this working for governments and their military 24/7/365 in most of the Churches and Synagogues in this country and in most of the countries of the world, why do the militaries need to spend billions of dollars a year propagandizing children in order to recruit them into an organization that will make them into paid, competent killers of other human beings in obedience to orders of the local politicians du jour? By the time a Christian or Jewish child is old enough to sign up for the military, he or she is well-primed to succumb to the advances of the military recruiter, due to his or her intense and long term religious training in the glories of "holy homicide," From the cradle forward the little ones have had drilled into their underdeveloped brains by Pastors and Rabbis that enmity, homicidal violence and atrocities are justified and holy if they are done in conformity with the will of God. Since both religions fill their children's minds with these murderous stories as God's will in just about every country on the planet, this pretty much guarantees that there will be an abundant supply of young Christian and Jewish warm bodies, flush with enmity, ready to kill and be killed, to maim and be maimed in every country on earth—even to the point of being ready to kill members of one's own faith. Piously filling a child's mind from his or her earliest years with **"the Bible's one long celebration of violence"** is the Way to the Peace of Christ, Pax Christi? Is this the Way to Shalom?

To justify an evil is to propagate an evil. To justify and to propagate evil as good to children, before they can possibly be aware of what is being done to them in the moment and its long range consequences, is the most heinous of evils—child abuse.

Emmanuel Charles McCarthy