

JOSHUA

THE PROBLEM OF JIHAD/GENOCIDE

WHAT IS JIHAD?
WHAT ARE ITS PRIMARY REQUIREMENTS?
WHAT ARE THE SPIRITUAL/MORAL PROBLEMS
ASSOCIATED WITH ITS PRESCRIPTIONS?

Here are the formulae for Jihad in the book of Joshua:

Be **strong and very courageous**, being careful to act in accordance with **all the law** that my servant Moses commanded you; **do not turn from it** to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go.

(Joshua 1:7)

They [the Israelites] answered Joshua: “All that you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go. Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so **we will obey you**. Only may **the LORD your God** be with you, as he was with Moses! **Whoever rebels** against your orders and disobeys your words, whatever you command, **shall be put to death**. Only be strong and courageous” (1:16-18).

The omens are favorable:

The spies sent into Jericho report: “Truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands; moreover all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before us” (2:24).

Then Joshua said to the people, “**Sanctify yourselves**; for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you. . . . When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the LORD, the LORD of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.” (3:5, 13)

And so it was: “While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan” (17).

And then the fun began. After crossing the Jordan, the whole new generation is circumcised and the Passover is celebrated. Then the city of Jericho falls without offering any resistance. And then Joshua’s armies “devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys. . . . And they burned down the city, and everything in it; only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD” (6:21, 24)

This wholesale destruction becomes the pattern for the conquest of the Promised Land: “So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but **utterly destroyed all that breathed**, as the LORD God of Israel commanded” (10:40).

Here is the rationale for genocide—according to “Joshua”:
“Be very careful . . . to love **the LORD your God**. For if you turn back, and join the survivors of these nations left here among you, and intermarry with them, so that you marry their women and they yours, know assuredly that **the LORD your God** will not continue to drive out these nations before you; but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a scourge on your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land that **the LORD your God** has given you. . . . But just as all the good things that **the LORD your God** promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the LORD will bring upon you all the bad things, until he has destroyed you from this good land that **the LORD your God** has given you. If you transgress the covenant of **the LORD your God**, which he enjoined on you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from the good land that he has given to you” (23:11-16).

There are a few points to be observed about this formula.

1) For better or worse, it was not adhered to: the recurrent formula, *but X did not drive out Y*, signals the imperfect fulfillment of Yahweh's/Joshua's commands.

2) The words of "Joshua" (*Yah saves*) are really the words of Deuteronomic historians written centuries afterward (621-587 B.C.E.) in an attempt to explain what went wrong. Language that appears predictive and prescriptive is in fact retrospective and, ostensibly, descriptive. The prescription for genocide was an anguished expression of rage on the part of a people who were themselves faced with the threat of national extermination. The Kingdom of Judah was being swallowed up by the neo-Babylonian Empire. The last Davidic King, Zedekiah, saw his sons slaughtered "before his eyes" (2 Kings 25:7) and then had his eyes put out. G*d had promised this land to us; now our heritage is taken from us, and with it our very identity as Yahweh's people.

So the question, again, becomes:

What went wrong?