

Hofgeismar Message: Violence in the Name of God?

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"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24)

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The world is filled with violence. Too often, the violent narratives contained in the Bible are used to perpetuate rather than limit worldly violence. We are called, therefore, to confront the violence in the biblical texts and work through them toward a world of peace. As Christians, we respond to pain with empathy, looking to love and respect even those who would be our enemies.

Christians and Jews from around the world gathered in Hofgeismar, Germany, on February 23-27, 2012, in a conference organized by the Palestine-Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in cooperation with the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Evangelical Church of Kurhessen-Waldeck. Framed by daily experiences of liturgy and prayer that opened the spiritual dimensions of the texts, the conference aimed to intensify ecumenical reflection on theological aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Following three previous conferences organized in Amman, Bern, and Balamand, the Hofgeismar gathering was intended to promote ecumenical awareness of the various contexts influencing biblical interpretations and theologies along with the challenges inherent to contextual approaches. The Book of Joshua was deliberately chosen as the foundation of the gathering because of its obvious references to land claims, its linkage of religion and violence, and its frequent use by certain Jewish and Christian movements to justify the occupation and settlement policies of the modern State of Israel.

In Bern, we affirmed that “the Bible must not be utilized to justify oppression or supply simplistic commentary on contemporary events, thus sacralizing the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict and ignoring its socio-political, economic and historical dimensions.” The Book of Joshua, with its mythic descriptions of intended genocide, mass slaughter, ethnic cleansing, forced servitude and ethnic separation, is an extremely provocative text. Certain readings of the book—especially those taking the text as prescriptive—can lead to dangerous conclusions. With this awareness, the conference structure was grounded in intentional Bible study in plenary and in working groups, as well as in lectures addressing exegetical, historical, and contemporary aspects of the Book of Joshua, as well as violence in other biblical narratives.

Our gathering was blessed with global participation and perspective. Previous conferences in this series have benefited from robust engagement between the contextual perspectives of Palestinian Christians and western Christian practitioners of western forms of Jewish-Christian dialogue. The gathering in Hofgeismar broadened the conversation by inviting Jewish participation and welcoming global perspective. Expanding beyond the Middle East and the Global North, the conference included presentations from Latin America, Africa, and eastern Asia. Our time together showed that open discussions between people with very different contexts are possible and fruitful, especially when listening to scriptures held in common. Beyond the shared concern for biblical interpretation, this broad participation demonstrated that what happens in the Middle East affects not only the people in that region, but peoples throughout the world.

The broad diversity of participation in Hofgeismar resulted in a variety of perspectives being shared. Throughout the conference, it was clear that many valid interpretations of biblical texts are possible and that each of us approaches the Bible from our own context. Within Christian communities, for instance, it is helpful to provide both Christological readings of the Old Testament and readings in which the Old Testament interprets itself. In both approaches, the Old Testament is affirmed as an essential part of our living Christian Bible.

There are many problematic ways of approaching the biblical witness. In the mainline western churches we can find many examples where scholars and pastors produce good exegesis but ignore the consequences of their interpretation for people living today. On the other hand, literalistic, flat readings are disrespectful to the text itself and can lead to even more harmful implications for human dignity and life.

The Book of Joshua continues to inspire and sanction violence by some Christians and Jews. Given the variety of available hermeneutical approaches and the possibility of multiple cogent interpretations, there are several ways to approach the text. We have agreed, therefore, on the hermeneutical key of justice. Justice includes a variety of other topics, including ethics, human rights, and socio-economic realities, including greed. Justice itself is a contested category, making the concept a fruitful area for intra-Christian and interreligious engagement. Central to a justice-oriented interpretation of the Bible will be the nature of responsibility. Before God and our communities, we are responsible to Jews for the historical and ongoing realities of anti-Semitism, to Palestinians since the Nakba, to Muslim neighbors in light of Islamophobia, to persons who are vulnerable, and to victims of colonial conquest, among others.

It was suggested several times during the conference that the Book of Joshua and similar biblical texts are potentially extremely harmful when used to sanction political and military power. Palestinian Christians present at the conference shared how such uses of Joshua have implications politically as well as for their lives of faith. Several narratives in the Old Testament, especially the Book of Joshua, have been used by powerful groups to justify the continuing occupation of Palestinian territories and the settlement policies of the State of Israel. One result of these political realities is that Palestinian Christians have been alienated not only from their land but from the bulk of their Christian scriptural canon. We heard how Palestinian Christians are seeking to reclaim readings of the Old Testament in ways that affirm the whole of the canon while not sanctioning the historical and political processes that have supported their suffering.

The text of the Book of Joshua is filled with violence, which is found throughout the Bible. In the Bible and in our world today, killing is not the only form of violence. Subjugation and exclusion, including unequal systems of rights and privileges, are forms of systemic violence. Gender analysis is an insightful tool for interpreting both biblical texts and political realities. At the same time, we recognize that creative peaceful means of resistance to violence and oppression should be supported and encouraged. We were reminded of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's hard-won insight of reading the Bible "from below." The biblical narratives empower those who are oppressed to become active agents of their own emancipation.

The Book of Joshua is about creating meaning. It is a project of national memory-making. We recognize that it can be an act of violence to deny the memories of other communities; such intentional amnesia can be a prelude to denying the right of communities to exist.

The Book of Joshua has been a source that has justified the colonization of Africa, Latin America, North America, Australia and the Middle East itself. This history has left a heritage of violence throughout formerly colonized territories. Where those ideologies are informed by religious commitment, the church has work to do. When religiously-motivated violence is condemned by the church, we must not forget that this sensitivity has developed only in a time when the church's own power is declining, even as we recognize prophetic voices in all ages of the church. Until relatively recently, religious violence was a feature of European life. One lesson from the confessional wars is the desirability of political frameworks for society that allow for religious difference and in which all are treated equally under civil law. Self-critical perspectives from western/northern contexts can be very helpful as we consider the current ideologies, structures and systems of power at work in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other contexts.

Our call is clear: no more violence in the name of God!

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"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (Matthew 5)

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Adopted by conference participants in Hofgeismar: February 27, 2012