One of the most important discoveries of critical Biblical scholarship over the past two hundred years – arguably the single most important discovery – is that the Bible does not have a single message about virtually anything. The Bible is an extremely diverse, multi-faceted book, written over many centuries by many different authors with many different views. The fact that these sixty-six books were all gathered together and called “Scripture” does not change the fact that the author of one of the books may well have a very different view of a particular matter, even an extremely important matter than another.

Let’s take the question of how we are to treat those who are not like us. People who aren’t from our same nation; who don’t look like us; who are of different ancestry; who are not from our own cultural background; who do not share our political views or religious beliefs; who are of a different gender or sexual orientation or race. How do we treat such people? Depends whom you ask within the pages of the Bible.

Let’s ask two people named Jesus. The name “Jesus” is the English word we use for the Greek word ἸΗΣΟΥΣ. ἸΗΣΟΥΣ is the Greek word for the Aramaic word (I’ll use English letters now, since my keyboard won’t type Aramaic) YESHUA. YESHUA is the Aramaic word for the Hebrew יְהוּשָׁע

If you were to put that Hebrew name into English letters it would be Joshua. So why don’t we call Jesus of Nazareth “Joshua”? We could, but that wasn’t his name. His name was YESHUA, spelled with Aramaic letters. We are speaking English, not Aramaic or Hebrew, and so when reading or talking about the Bible we use the English equivalents. That’s why we speak of God rather than ELOHIM or Mary instead of MIRIAM or John instead of IOANNES, etc….

There is a famous Joshua/Jesus in the Old Testament and an even more famous one in the New Testament. If you were to consider their two stories, how do they deal with the “Other,” those who are different from them in significant ways? About as differently as you can imagine, yet both, apparently, upon divine instruction.

I will give a representative snippet from each.

The book of Joshua is about the Conquest of the Promised Land. God had promised the ancestors of Israel, starting with the patriarch Abraham, then his son Isaac, then his son Jacob (whose other name was “Israel”) that he would grant them the land area that comprises most of what we today think of Israel, Palestinian territory, and Jordan. Centuries after these promises were made the people of Israel had still not inherited the land. They were enslaved in Egypt. But they were delivered from there under Moses (book of Exodus), given God’s law (books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) and were now poised under Moses’ successor, Joshua, to enter into the land and take it for themselves (the book of Joshua)

The difficulty with taking the land was that other nations and peoples were living in it. They had to be killed or displaced. That was not only because the Israelites wanted the cities, fields, and houses of the people living in what they called “Canaan,” but also because the peoples living there (Canaanites, and others) did not worship the same God, did not observe the same religious practices, followed different customs, had completely different ancestry, and were simply the “Other.” Israelites had to be distinct, worshipping only Yahweh, their God, following his law, keeping the established customs, maintaining their racial purity, and keeping separate from everyone else as the one Chosen People of God.
So God ordered them to destroy everyone else. The most famous incident occurs at the outset of the narrative, in Joshua 6. God orders the Israelites to take the walled city of Jericho. They are to march around the city once a day for six days; on the seventh day they were to march around it seven times. They do so. And after the seventh time around on the seventh day, on divine instructions, they blow trumpets, the people shout, and the walls protecting the city of Jericho “come a-tumblin’ down” and Joshua/Jesus issues the divine command to kill every living being in the city. And so the Israelites rush in and kill “with the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys” (6:21).

What do you do with those who are different from you? You murder them. From the elderly to the infants and everyone in between. You want their city and their houses, but you don’t want them. And God has ordered you to destroy them all. So you do.

That’s one model.

Let me stress a very, very, very important point. I am NOT insisting, claiming, suggesting, or even hinting that the Old Testament God is a God of WRATH and that the New Testament God is a God of MERCY, as is so often said. I’m not saying that Israelites were blood-thirsty criminals and the followers of Jesus were mercy-loving saints. NO. I’m not saying that at all. There are scads of passages – passage after passage after passage – in the Old Testament that advocate love, mercy, and universal peace. And there is PLENTY of divinely driven violence in the New Testament. Anyone who doubts that has never read the final book. When it comes to divinely-inspired violence, the book of Revelation makes Joshua look like children’s literature.

What I AM saying is that there are different models in the Bible of how to treat those who are different from us.

We’ve seen one Joshua/Jesus. Now let’s look at the other. In Luke 10:25-37 Jesus tells his famous parable of the Good Samaritan. He has just been teaching that it is important to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But someone in the crowd wants to know “Who is my neighbor”? That is, whom do I need to love? The guy next door? The family across town? My fellow Israelite? Whom?

Jesus tells the parable to explain.

A Jewish fellow is walking from Jerusalem to Jericho and is attacked by a band of robbers who mug him, rob him, and leave him half dead by the side of the road. Soon, a Jewish priest (one who participates in the sacrificial practices of the Jewish temple) comes along and, seeing the collapsed body, walks past on the other side. Then a Levite comes along (a Levite is a minor temple functionary who participates in the sacrificial practices in the temple), and he, too, passes to one side.

Neither stops to help. Why? It’s not because “Jews are hard-hearted and unloving” (as I’ve heard); it’s because they were cultic officials involved in Temple sacrifices and touching a corpse meant ceremonial impurity that would temporarily make it impossible for them to perform their cultic duties. They thought the guy was dead and couldn’t risk becoming ceremonially unclean.

And then a Samaritan comes along. Samaria was located between Galilee in the north, where Jesus was from, and Judea in the south, where Jerusalem and the temple were. The
inhabitants of Samaria traced their ancestral lineage back to Abraham, but were known to have descended from gentile stock as well from centuries before, when the northern kingdom of Israel fell some 700 years earlier to the Assyrians and the northerners intermarried with other peoples. Even though Samaritans subscribed to the law of Moses, they were not considered “Jews” by most of those in Judea and by the Jews of Galilee (or elsewhere) but were thought of as a kind of “half-breeds” and “outcasts” with bad lines of ancestry, misinterpretations of the religion, and strange customs. They were viewed with hostility as the “Other” that “true Jews” wanted nothing to do with.

So back to the story. And then a Samaritan comes along. Unlike the two Jewish religious leaders, he has pity on the man, binds his wounds, takes him to an inn, arranges for his recovery, and pays for his time there.

That’s the story. When Jesus finishes, he asks his questioner who the “neighbor” was in the story. It was the outcast Samaritan. The outsider. And Jesus then ends by saying “Go and to likewise.” Jesus’ followers are to treat outsiders as neighbors.

So what does it mean to fulfill the law of God, to Love your Neighbor as yourself? It’s a law, by the way, from the Old Testament! (Leviticus 19:18). It means working to help those in need, even if they are different from you, even if they come from a different country, are of a different race, don’t look like you, don’t follow your customs, are widely seen in your society as alien, foreign, strange, and threatening.

How should we treat such people? Should we ignore them (think the priest and the Levite)? Should we murder them and drive them out of our land (think the book of Joshua). Should we close our borders to them, deprive them of legal rights, remove their civil rights, prosecute them, brutalize them, torture them, drive our knees into their necks until they can’t breathe?

You say, well, our society is very complicated and the complexities make it very different. And I reply, societies have always been very complicated and complexities make every situation different. Do we want to hate, abuse, mistreat, and kill the other? Or love them?

The Bible gives us a couple of options. I’m not a Christian, but I know which Jesus I want to follow.

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*A Plea for Humility in the Face of the Universe*
*Views of Suffering Among Those Who Suffer*