

The Cry of the Canaanites
Passover Seder Supplement 2017/5777
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After singing Dayenu, we say:

Our telling of the Exodus story is not yet complete. It is not “*dayenu*” – it is not enough for us – to sing joyfully of the Israelites entrance into the Promised Land without noting that this promise came with a command: to dispossess and annihilate the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan:

So the trumpets were sounded, and when they army heard the sound, they raised a great shout, and the wall collapsed. The army advanced on the city, every man straight ahead, and they captured it. And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city; both man and woman, young and old, as well as the cattle, the sheep and the donkeys, with the edge of the sword.

(Joshua 6:20-21)

As difficult as it may be to read such as these in our most sacred text, it is even more unsettling when we consider that the conquest tradition of the Bible has inspired centuries of colonial dispossession of indigenous peoples throughout the world. It has also been used in various ways by early Zionist ideologues, the political founders of the state of Israel and by the present day religious settler movement.

Therefore, we cannot continue with our seder until we honestly face – and disavow – the immoral conquest tradition that is embedded within our Exodus story. We now take this time to read and discuss the teachings of three liberation theologians: one Native American, one African American and one Palestinian. As we consider their challenge to us, let us ask one another: how will we hearken to the cry of Canaanites past and present? Are we ready to admit our complicity in their dispossession? Can we transform the dream of a Promised Land into the reality of a land that is truly promised to all?

From “Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians”

By Robert Warrior

The land, Yahweh decided, belonged to these former slaves from Egypt and Yahweh planned on giving it to them – using the same power used against the enslaving Egyptians to defeat the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan. Yahweh the deliverer became Yahweh the conqueror.

The obvious characters in the story for Native Americans to identify with are the Canaanites, the people who already lived in the promised land. As a member of the Osage Nation of American Indians who stand in solidarity with the other tribal peoples around the world, I read the Exodus stories with Canaanite eyes.

From “Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk”

By Delores Williams

Womanist theologies, in concert with womanist biblical scholars, need to show the African-American denominational churches and black liberation theology the liability of its habit of using the Bible in an uncritical and sometimes self-serving way. This kind of usage has prohibited the community from seeing that the end result of the biblical Exodus event, begun in the book of Exodus, was the violent destruction of a whole nation of people, the Canaanites, described in the book of Joshua. Black liberation theologians today should reconceptualize what it means to lift up uncritically the biblical Exodus *event* as a major paradigm for black reflection.

From “Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation”

By Naim Ateek

For the Jews who came to establish the State of Israel, their journey to Palestine was an exodus from the different nations where they had been living and a return to the promised land. Obviously, for them the imagery has connected the ancient past and the present. This uncritical transposition, however, makes the Palestinians appear to represent the old Canaanites who were in the land at the time and who at God’s command needed to be dispossessed. The Exodus and the conquest of Canaan are, in the minds of many people, a unified and inseparable theme. To choose the motif of conquest of the promised land is to invite the need for the oppression, assimilation, control, or dispossession of the indigenous population.