

IS TERRORISM A “HEREM” OR A “CRIME”?

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1. KWANGJU MASSACRE –TERRORISM ON KWANJU CITIZENS

Background Information

Footage from Kwangju Video

2. DISCUSSION/ARGUMENT

3. CONCLUSION

INTRODUCTION

After 9-11 attack, “terrorism” has become a grave concern for nations and religions in the world. As we know, terrorism has been employed as means of achieving political, religious and racial purposes by various groups throughout the history. Terrorism has been exercised by both people in power and the oppressed who protest against the power to overthrow the existing order. In addition, terrorism was more often than not deeply tied with religion. As we have seen from the interviews of Jessica Stern, most religious extremists and terrorist groups have proudly carried out brutal acts of terrorism in the name of God. Therefore, terrorism is very serious faith issue for Christians and people of other faiths as well. We, as Christians, must concern seriously about our responsibility in world terrorism that is taking place in the name of God. How Christians read and interpret the Old Testament texts in which God ordered to kill everyone including children (Joshua)? But the people in the text took the order as God’s *herem* to wipe out all non-Israelites in the land of Canaan without any doubt or even guilt. Another example can be the Crusaders and Puritans who practiced terrorism as God’s *herem* against pagans in their days. Furthermore, their terrorisms were justified as “holy wars.”

I will disclose the misperception of *herem* when I show the documentary film of Kwangju massacre in which the command of an army General was carried out exactly the way as the “herem” of God was carried out by the ancient believers both of which had resulted in devastating outcome. As we watch such a monstrous crime scene, we must address our Christian responsibility in interpreting biblical text of “herme.”

REFLECTION ON “HEREM” CONCEPT

As John J. Collins has shown¹, the God of Israel characterized by the *herem* was a warrior, an avenger, a blackmailer, and a homicidal mania. As we have seen the texts presented by Collins, Exodus 15:3, Judges 5:23 ; 11:31, 1 Samuel 15:3, Numbers 21:1-3 ; 33:55-56, Joshua 7-8, Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10, 20 etc, we can recognize that *herem* was YHWH’s central characteristics as the early Israelite understood.

Facing this problem, a handful of theologians tried to comment and interpret on the biblical texts. For example, Gerhard von Rad dealt with the texts in the ‘Holy War Ideology’. According to von Rad, the conquest of wars achieved by *herem* was not historical facts but understood in line with salvation history. Therefore, the problem of violence generated in the conquest stories seems to relate to the worship of YHWH in antiquity.

Recent scholarly hypotheses about the origins of Israel seems to think that the biblical texts are not historically reliable accounts of early Israelite’s history but is an ideological fiction from a much later time. In addition. The core argument about “the texts of *herem* is not whether the narratives are fact or fiction, the problem is that, whether fact or fiction, the ritual destruction is commended.”²

Reread the *herem* from the non-Israelite perspective

In spite of scholar’s attempts to reconstruct the new concept of the biblical texts of *herem*, religious extremists constantly made a use of the texts to commit terrorism and this process continues. In this reality of terrorism, how shall we interpret these ancient documents?

For this matter, I suggest that we may reread and re-interpret the *herem* from the non-Israelite perspective. In other words, we need to read the texts not from the conqueror’s point of view but a loser’s. For example, according to Puritans’ custom, Christianity has been celebrating *Thanksgiving Day*. But from the perspective of Native American, this is not a thanksgiving day at all. Likewise, we need to read and interpret the biblical texts of the *herem* from non-Israelite’s perspective.

As we know, God of Israel in the Old Testament liberated the Israelite slaves from the Egyptian bondage. God is the liberator for all peoples. But the problem is that people misuse and misinterpret God’s intention to liberate people.

¹ John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), pp. 4-10.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Let us now watch the documentary film of Kwangju Massacre in Korea.

Before we watch the movie, I would like to explain the background of the Kwangju Massacre.

In 1979, as President Park, Chung Hee was assassinated by his henchman, all Korean people hoped to end the past dictatorship of 18 years and open a new era of democracy in Korea. But soon after the assassination, a handful of military generals tried to take over the government in the political vacuum. They made up their minds to pursue their goal despite the huge resistance from citizens. Protests spread throughout the nation. The Military, in their effort to present rationale for the coup de tat to the nation, they accused the uprising in Kwangju to be led by communists insurrection. In Korean political context if someone is a communist, he/she deserved to die in those days. Finally, the Korean Military arrested over 2000 dissidents and political leaders who were opposing military coup de tat and dispatched paratroops into Kwanju city to butcher all who participated in the uprising against the military coup. They chose Kwangju because Kim, Dae Jung was the native of Kwangju and was very popular to be the next leader for Korea and the military coup needed to get rid of him some way. Therefore, accusing Kwangju demonstrators as communists and Kim, Dae Jung to be the leading insurgent of the nation-wide uprising including Kwanju, served as a good excuse and permission to get rid of Kim. For military to grab the political power, Kwangju massacre was carried out on May 18-25, 1980. Thus the military coup de tat in Korea succeeded at the cost of lives of Kwangju citizens and many others in the nation as scapegoats.

I would like to point out the absolutely unjust command of the Airborne General to kill innocent citizens who participated in the demonstration protesting against the military coup and the absolute obedience of paratroops in butchering demonstrators. Question is how different the order of the Paratroops General to kill the innocent Kwangju citizens and God's order – hereme- to kill all the innocent citizens including young children in the land of Canaan? In whose name the innocent people had to die?

1) 16:25-17:03 / A huge assembly for support of democracy and protesting against the new military authorities. The military arrested most of protesters everywhere in the country, and finally they proclaimed martial law to the whole country.

2) 17:20 / In Kawngju, one of the southern cities of Korea, University students

peacefully demonstrated but the military dispatched the toughest airborne troops to put down the protest. The tragic event began to take place. The brutal suppression of soldiers caused more students and sympathetic citizens to engage in bigger protest in Kwangju city.

3) 17:49 / Lee, Kyung Nam, later ordained as Methodist pastor, was one of the paratroopers at that time. Later he witnessed that his superior officer told all soldiers that the protesters were communists, who must be killed.

As a result of brutal suppression, a lot of citizens were butchered, slashed, and wounded.

4) 20:40 / The testimony of pastor Lee again.

He talks about his own experience in the street. When he found a wounded man, he moved him to a safe place away from dangerous streets. But his officer questioned him, "Are you one of us or enemy?"

At that time, by instigation and commandment, most of soldiers came to think that the protesters were not civilians or citizens in their own country, but their enemies.

5) 22:06 / When the people in KW witnessed the brutal and inhuman suppression of the soldiers against students and civilians, their anger exploded and they became to join in the movement. If the shooting was scarce and unorganized before, now suppressing troops began to shoot on the target against the unarmed people in the street.

Finally, the civilians began to arm themselves with guns and rifles which they could find in the police stations and booths. As the protest became severe and citizens began to arm, the soldiers withdrew for the time being and surrounded the city of Kwanjoo.

6) 41:45 / The citizens organized a civil army to keep their city and gathered in the provincial office. But, instead of fighting against the regular army hopelessly, they tried to negotiate with the military authority. But the military rejected them and decided to continue attacking the civilians and take over the city by force. Without any negotiation, military force asked them an unconditional surrender.

7) 43:55 / After deciding to dissolve the self-organized army and leave the provincial office, but final decision depending on individuals, about 150 persons remained in the end.

8) 46: 39 / The troop came into the city and advanced to the provincial office. They took over the place and completed their operation in only two hours. Now comes the testimony of survivors in the final stage of the suppression in the provincial office.

He says that he experienced monstrous fear.

In Korea, my country 1980, there brought about mass slaughters named *The May 18 Democratic Uprising*. The political military committed a great massacre in order to take power. In this process, the troops of Korea killed hundreds of innocent people with their sword and gun. As we know, a soldier should obey their chief's command. But I ask a question, "Why can not the unfair command of chiefs disobey? I mean, the unfair command of chief should be disobeyed I think the mass murder of Kwangju in May is clear terrorism from above in order to take power.

I will try that this massacre of Kwangju is connected with the *herem*, so the command of God, *herem* and the absolute unfair order of chiefs, why cannot be refuse them?

I will prepare for this presentation about the ban, in Hebrew *herem*. As we have well-know, *herem* is not only the absolute command of God YHWH but also surely doing the practice by Israelite. As John J. Collins asks questions, "Does the ban of God justify violence or terrorism?" My answer, "No" Although the absolute command of God, terrorism caused a lot of innocent victims can be never justified.

My answer "No" But the problems have used *herem* to justify terrorism by fundamental terrorists and this process continues nowadays.

I have to pick up the text, Numbers chapter 33

I will prepare for the documentary movie of The May 18 Democratic Uprising. So let us watch the movie in 10 or 15 min. during my presentation.