

# The temptation of the “promised land” and the law of “thou shalt not murder”

## Abstract

The rules of civilization, formed during the Axial Age, center on resolving conflicts peacefully. The commandment “Thou shalt not kill” from the Ten Commandments serves as one of their sources. However, this principle was later violated by genocidal campaigns aimed at seizing the “Promised Land.” The same rule of force was employed by the Romans to conquer Israel, leading to the Jewish diaspora. This demonstrates that the rules of civilization are rooted in natural law. It was not until after World War II that these rules were universally implemented worldwide. The return of Jews to the Promised Land contravened the law “Thou shalt not kill” and ran counter to global trends of the time, making permanent and peaceful possession of the land impossible. The solution lies in adhering to the civilized rule of exchanging land for money and granting minority veto rights.

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## Introduction: The rules of civilization

It is obviously wrong to choose side in the Palestine-Israel conflict now. Then, what should we do? It is to support neither Israel nor Palestine? It is better to support both. How is that possible? Of course, it is possible to stand on the side of the rules of civilization. The rules of civilization are expressed most simply as the use of peaceful methods instead of force to solve problems. This is at least beneficial to both parties because “peace” means that no person’s property, freedom and life will be harmed. Conceptually, “problem resolution” is to find a solution that is satisfactory to both parties, regardless of whether it seems possible now. We cannot guarantee that any party will completely or forever follow the rules of civilization, so we cannot stand on one side without distinction. If one of them happens to follow the rules of civilization, we praise that side’s actions; if they violate the rules, we condemn it.

The Hamas terrorist act on October 7 that caused the death of more than a thousand people should be condemned. It should also be condemned that Israel’s water and electricity cutoffs, siege, bombing and driving out of the residents of Gaza caused the death of the Palestinians as many times that of Israelis. Condemnation is to uphold the rules of civilization, which are not only used for condemnation but also a just way to resolve the deadlock between Palestine and Israel. The rules of civilization are very ancient. The “Ten Commandments of Moses” were recorded in the Jewish classic “Hebrew Bible” (equivalent to the “Old Testament”), which said, “You shall not murder.” Other classical civilizations of the Axial Age had similar precepts. This should be the most fundamental rule in Jewish civilization.

## The promised land and genocide

Unfortunately, this basic rule was broken shortly thereafter. This was the “land flowing with milk and honey” that Jehovah promised to the descendants of Abraham. This was the land of Canaan, which would later be Israel. However, this “promised land” was actually inhabited by people. To fulfill His promise, “the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites” were to be “driven out” (Exodus 33:2), which means killing and deportation.

It is very cruelly in the realization process. The Jews conquered 31 kingdoms, including Jericho, Ai, Jerusalem, Hebron, Lachish, Eglon, Gezer, Debir, and Kidd, and beheaded all the residents. According to the Hebrew Bible, “The Israelites carried off for themselves all the plunder and livestock of these cities, but all the people they put to the sword until they completely destroyed them, not sparing anyone that breathed.” (Joshua 11:14), and to do so was under the will of Jehovah and according to His law of “destroying” (Deuteronomy 3:6).

This is completely against the precept of “Thou shalt not murder,” and it is also quite different from the rules of civilization that have been following down to the modern age. To resolve the conflict between this act of genocide and the creed of “Thou shalt not murder,” Bible decipherers later made various efforts. One explanation is that this is just a metaphor that did not actually happen. On the other hand, as Augustine said, since this is the will of Jehovah, then it is right.<sup>1</sup> The explanations for these two tendencies are actually one, that is, whether the massacre occurred or not, it is affirmed in the classics.

In short, this classic account had an important influence on later generations. The Jews who were in the diaspora for 2,000 years learned from a painful experience and decided to return to the original “Promised Land” to restore their country. This is the place given by the LORD. As then, the place was full of people—many Arabs. The Jews’ methods were also implied in the methods of obtaining the “Promised land” in the beginning. “You must destroy them totally.

Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy.” (Deuteronomy 7:2). It is deeply ingrained in the hearts of contemporary Jews. In his book “My Promised Land”, Israeli writer Ali Shavit said that he conducted interviews with the persons involved in the Lydda massacre. This act of killing hundreds of Arabs and then intimidating and deporting a large number of Arabs made them disgusting, but it had to be done. The author himself believes that only in this way, “my compatriots, myself, and my children can live” (2016, p. 127). The prerequisite for the establishment of a Jewish State of Israel is to “ensure the clearing of a land without single Arab” (p. 115). Why did the Zionist government want to “not leave a single Arab”? This does not make sense logically. Only Jehovah’s “extermination and complete extinction” can explain it.

In fact, I think the records in the Hebrew Bible about the conquest of Canaan are close to the truth. The key is to return to the context at the time. At that time, the rules of human civilization had not yet been established, and killing someone was considered normal and even a symbol of bravery and power.

The tireless narration of the city massacre in the Book of Deuteronomy and the Book of Joshua is to promote the might of Jehovah. They need not have to cover up. The “Ten Commandments” of Moses appeared later than the promise of the Canaan land. It completely broke the previous common sense and upended the concept of honor and disgrace, which is earth-shattering. The Jews have not yet had time to comprehend and digest it. In addition, there are many “exceptions.” One was the foreigners, who must be heathens who did not believe in Jehovah; the other was for the land. This involves what a “human” is. If the infidels are not human, then it is okay to kill the infidels. If it is for the sake of land, the precept of killing can also be broken. If both are present, the motivation to kill will be further strengthened.

### Those who kill to seize land will themselves be killed and lose land

The civilizational rule of “you shall not kill” was not generally implemented for at least the next two thousand years. In some nation-states or empires, there was indeed a law “that kills the murderer,” but this was not effective when dealing with military groups. Military groups made profits by killing people. The methods used by military groups to profit from killing are as follows: first, compete for the power to levy taxes, i.e., defeat and drive away the military group that occupies a certain territory and levy taxes and take over its taxation power; second, conquer another nationality or country, merge its land into the existing ones, and in addition to taxation, the land property rights in the area can also be directly occupied.

This is the true rule of the land in the traditional world. The rule was that whoever had the strongest force could seize a piece of land and drive out the aboriginals. Relying on this rule, the Roman Empire possessed a large amount of land in Eurasia. In addition to exercising rule and collecting taxes, the Roman Empire also distributed the land to meritorious generals and armies. According to the same rule, Rome also conquered Israel. Roman rule may have provided some public governance, but it also oppressed the Jews. In the end, the Romans burned the Second Temple and razed Jerusalem, and the Jews were forced to disperse. They began a history of having no homeland for nearly 2,000 years.

This rule has continued into modern times. Relying on the advantage of force, European colonists appropriated most of the land of Native Americans and killed and expelled them. Most of these colonists were Christians. They not only actually followed the rule of the jungle but also derived their legitimacy from the stories of the “Promised Land” in the Old Testament. The Native Americans-Indians in America were considered savages if they did not believe in Jesus. They were even suspected of being “not human”, and therefore, they were not one of the “humans” that could not be killed. The vast land of America is the “Promised land” of these chosen people to build their ideal nation. The tragedy caused by this rule intensified later.

During World War II, there was an attempt by Nazi Germany to annex the entirety of Europe and North Africa by force and an attempt by Japanese militarism to annex China and Southeast Asia. Approximately 70 million people died in the war. During World War II, the persecution of the Jews and the massacre of 6 million Jews by

the Nazis in Germany was another manifestation of this rule; that is, the people under their rule could be disposed of, deprived of their properties and even lives arbitrarily. The underlying rule is still the rule of force. At that time, the Jews hardly offered any resistance because they did not have their own country and could not organize their own force, while the Nazis were armed to the teeth.

Since modern times, constitutional democracies have gradually risen, which has brought new rules that are closer to the true rules of civilization. Its concept of the nation has also taken on a new look. It implements Mencius’s concept that “the people are the foundation of the nation” into practice. The rights of each person as an individual are the foundation of the state, and the state is created to protect the rights of all individuals, which of course includes the right to land.

The purpose of state violence is to protect the rights of this group from foreign conquerors and to mediate and stop rights conflicts within the group. In such a country, no interest group takes the power to levy taxes as its own business; instead, taxes are entirely used to protect the interests of taxpayers. It can also be said that taxpayers themselves have the power to levy taxes. Therefore, rights and power are not contradictory, and individual rights and state sovereignty complement each other.

As long as territory is not infringed upon, land property rights will be protected. Extending this theory to the international arena is that each main nationality should not be subject to the rule of a foreign nationality, and the subjugation of other countries or nationalities by force is defined as “aggression” and “slavery.” Any ethnic minorities in another country should also enjoy the equal rights of citizens of that country without discrimination. This has been the moral value foundation of the principle of national self-determination and the national liberation movement after World War II, and it is also the inherent meaning of the principle of constitutional government and the rule of law.

It should be said that until the end of World War II, the rule that “the occupation of land by force is justified” that has been in force for thousands of years basically came to an end. It not only stopped the territorial ambitions of German Nazism and Japanese militarism but also made the original colonial empires, such as the United Kingdom and France, withdraw gradually from the rule over other nation-states. This should be a major turning point in human history. Humanity eventually reached this conclusion not only because of the painful lessons of World War I and World War II but also because of the summary of thousands of years of historical experience. The mighty Western Roman Empire ruled for no more than a few hundred years. During its decline, it was suddenly hit by the barbarians with hatred around it, and the city of Rome was destroyed. We do not know where the descendants of the Romans are today. The fall of Rome was based on the same rule of force that applied to Rome’s hegemony. The “Promised Land”, which the Jews obtained through the “extermination”, was conquered and ruled successively by the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Macedonians, and the Romans and was finally destroyed by the Romans, and the diaspora began. By this time, the Jews had acquired this land for more than 1,500 years. From the first diaspora to the restore of the country in 1948, there was a history of 2,500 years; from the third diaspora, there was also a history of more than 1,900 years. The loss of the “Promised Land” follows the same rule of force that was used to gain it.

### The hebrew bible and natural law

It is said that the “Hebrew Bible” was completed in 200 BC and was confirmed as the Hebrew canon in 90 AD.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the

latest description of historical record in this classic started from the Third Great Diaspora of the Jews, and it had not had time to describe the tragic experience of the Jews thereafter. We are curious, if this period of history was described according to the value and logic of the Hebrew Bible, what would it say? Why did Jehovah not help the Israelites during the Roman invasion? According to its usual philosophy, “there will be blessings if keeping the law, and disasters if forsaking the law.” It will say that this is the punishment that the Jews suffered because they disobeyed the will of Jehovah.

However, it seems wrong to say that the Jews were punished for occupying the “Promised Land” and “exterminating” the aborigines, because isn’t this the land that Jehovah gave the Jews, and for it, ordered them to massacre the cities? Perhaps there is an explanation that makes sense. The “Ten Commandments of Moses” and the “Thou shalt not murder” should be regarded as the above all laws. In contrast, the promise of the “Promised Land” and the order to massacre cities may just be Jehovah’s test to the Jews, to see if they truly implemented the law of “Thou shalt not murder.” It is a pity that the Jews could not bear the temptation of the “Promised Land”.

Maybe many people disagree with my explanation. Then, we can only regard Jehovah as the God of the Jews themselves. He cannot look at issues from the perspective of all mankind and only considers the interests of His people, the Jews. Then, the scriptures about Him can only be regarded as the scriptures of a sect. It does not transcend the vision of a race; therefore, it must be replaced by more transcendent universal values. This universal value is, you shall not kill. As a Jew, whether he or she agrees with my above explanation or is aware of the racial limitations of the Hebrew Bible, should he or she reflect on the misleading nature of the “Promised Land”? When talking about the “Promised Land,” was he or she remembering it as a complete story? It includes not only promises but also massacres and occupations. This package includes the “Promised Land” and the “Extinction”.

Therefore, at the beginning of the 20th century, when the Jews considered the restoration of their country, they had several choices. However, the overwhelming majority agreed to return to the “Promised Land” of Palestine. There must have been the sacred spiritual power of the Hebrew Bible to play a role. What is doubtful is, did they consider that returning to the “Promised Land” would inevitably include the essential premise, which is the killing and deportation of the aboriginals there? Furthermore, have they ever thought about how the “Promised Land” was lost at that time?

In fact, beyond religion, we can see that the laws of Jehovah and its rewards and punishments are natural laws. This is because humans can take revenge. The murderer will be killed. The land obtained by killing would be lost by being killed. Of course, retribution may not be immediate or even within a few generations but can take place after hundreds of years, and the advantage of force may change and be reversed. The avengers may not even be the people who were killed and lost their land but a third party. They can return the methods of murderers to the murderers. They even had no grudge against the former, but the serious lack of legitimacy of the existing land occupants’ seizure methods can also be used as a reason for them to seize the land again. Therefore, the rule of force will not always be in favor of a certain race or nation. The interval for this natural law to play a role is becoming shorter and shorter. After the fall of the Roman Empire, no empire in Europe could last for such a long time. Napoleon’s France only ruled for a while while Hitler’s Germany was immediately destroyed. This is because human beings have gradually realized the truth in this natural law. If you do not want to be killed,

do not kill; if you kill, be killed. Isn’t this “Thou shalt not murder”? Because this is natural law, the group of people covered by it far exceeds the believers in the Hebrew Bible. This is also the consensus reached by mankind after World War II.

## The contradiction between zionism and the rules of civilization

The background of Zionism was precisely at this historical turning juncture. Before World War II, even though there was the concept of condemning “aggression,” the rule of force was still prevailing in the world. After World War II, the primary purpose of the establishment of the United Nations was “to save future generations from the scourge of war that has happened twice to mankind in the present generation.” One of its important roles is to “response to breaches of peace and aggression.” The rule of land occupation by force is completely denied. Related to this is the proposal of the principle of national self-determination, the basic meaning of which is that a nation should not be subject to the rule of a foreign race because this kind of rule is achieved through conquest by force.

These two international rules are interlinked with the basic rules of the constitutional democratic system. That is, disputes between people can only be resolved by peaceful means and not by force. Force must be used by the constrained state power, and it can only be used to protect the basic rights of citizens in the country, and it cannot be used for other purposes. Protected citizens’ rights include land rights. This is the concrete implementation of the “Thou shalt not murder” rule. During World War II, because the Jews had no state protection and because the states where they lived did not protect them but instead mutilated and killed them, as many as 6 million Jews were killed. This is what the violation of the “Thou shalt not murder” law entails.

To solve this problem, the country where they live should treat them as equal citizens and protect their freedom, property and life. However, in reality, there was no guarantee that all countries with Jews could do this. Even constitutional democracies had an anti-Semitic tradition. Another way is Zionism. However, their return to the “Promised Land” and the restoration of the nation implied “extermination” of other people and violated the precept “Thou shalt not murder.” In fact, the strategy and process of the return of the Jews were to establish a country on the lands originally inhabited by the Arabs.

The country means a violent organization used by a nationality to fight against other nationalities. This is equivalent to parachuting a country on a piece of land and the sudden appearance of a foreign armed force, which can just fit the definition of “invasion”. However, ruling the land will be tantamount to alien rule, which in turn is contrary to the right of nations to self-determination. Therefore, the Zionist move ran counter to the general trend of the world at that time. Ironically, when the United Nations, out of sympathy for the serious harm to the Jews, wanted to solve the long-standing Jewish issue that was highlighted during World War II and passed a resolution supporting Zionism, the means to achieve it had to follow the rules of force that the United Nations had previously denied.

For this revived country to be a Jewish country and adopt a democratic system, its population must play a dominant role. “The only solution is a Palestine without Arabs”.<sup>3</sup> This would involve the adoption of ethnic cleansing measures, or the large-scale immigration of one’s own ethnic population, or both. To achieve these two goals in a short period of time, they can only rely on violence. This is because the major flaw in the tyranny of the majority exists in the democratic



system, i.e., the passing of laws beneficial to the majority ethnic groups and thus the oppression of ethnic minorities gains democratic legitimacy.

The superficial solution is to rapidly replace the population so that their own nationality has a numerical advantage. Once such a country is born, it is impossible to protect all its citizens because even if the basic rights are equal, due to cultural or religious differences, the laws passed by the majority nationality will deeply harm ethnic minorities. This is precisely one of the important flaws in democracy that Professor Buchanan pointed out. As a result, this country is not an ideal country that protects the rights of all citizens. Its birth was bound to infringe and deprive the rights of some original citizens, and after that, it would continue to use the advantage of state violence to further deprive the rights of citizens of another nation. It would become a tool of oppression by force.

Our goal today is to resolve the deadlock between the Jews and the Arabs and to replace the rules of force with the rules of civilization. Although we admit that today's actions may not be free from the influence of history, we must emphasize that the more important significance of today's actions is to determine the future. The reason why “Thou shalt not kill” is a law is not only that killing is inhumane and cruel but also that violations will surely be punished, that is, there is either revenge from the injured person or the imitation of a third party, just as in Canaan, which was lost after being gained. Before Hamas brutally killed Israelites, they could have expected a doubling of Israel's revenge. Therefore, their killing must lead to being killed.

In addition, when the Israeli state killed more Arabs in the name of fighting Hamas, it should not think that they would not face other forms of retaliation. Even if Hamas is completely killed, their killing of more civilians will not be forgiven by the Muslim world. More like the Greek adage quoted by Kant, “The harm of war is that it creates more bad guys than it eliminates.” Therefore, the current behavior of the two sides is only with the past in mind and not the future. Their actions will only bring more tragedies.

## Conclusion: Money for land plus minority veto rights

For Jews, it is certainly impossible to return to the past and make a new choice. What they can do is how to improve the state of Israel so that it can be a state that protects all its citizens and where no citizen is discriminated against. This means that Israel must recognize the rights of aboriginal peoples, especially their land property rights and other property rights. The land can be returned directly, the deprivation of Jews' property rights in some Arab countries can be used as a hedge, or funds can be used to purchase the land. The owner of these property rights can be a foreign owner who is not present in the area or an Israeli citizen. Arabs in Israel should be given full citizenship rights. To avoid the tyranny of the majority in democratic voting, the right of veto by ethnic minorities on bills involving the culture or religion of that people should be added to the institutional rules. To make Israel a country where the Arabs are free from oppression and discrimination. In this way, Jews will not worry about becoming a minority due to changes in the population ratio in the future. These suggestions may be ridiculed as “too naive”. Maybe so. However, this is much better than using the wisdom of the Jews to maintain the state of Israel by force. The truly great wisdom is the law that “Thou shalt not murder.” History tells people that the real heritage of Jehovah is not a piece of land but a law. If obtained illegally, the land will be lost again. However, if the law is followed, not only will the land be regained, but the ethnic group will always be in an invincible position.

For the Arabs, Hamas' actions have not only lost over gain but also seriously weakened the sympathy of the international community for the Arabs. In the face of a serious asymmetry in military power, the Arabs should not use their weakness to fight against the advantage of the other side. Doing so will inevitably cause enormous losses and further deviate from the original intention. When I saw young people in Gaza throwing stones at the Israeli side on the border in 2014 and being shot and killed by the Israeli army, I felt that it was an act of hitting a rock with an egg. Their actions also give some legitimacy to the actions of the Israeli military. The Palestinians should use their comparative advantage to win the sympathy of the international community through peaceful demonstrations and appeals and thus put pressure on Israel to fight for their rights. For them, the establishment of a Palestinian state to run parallel to Israel may not be the best strategy.

In the end, conflicts among countries cannot be avoided, and these conflicts may be even greater. The one-country solution is more ideal. Jews and Arabs live together in the same country, as long as this country is a truly democratic country with the rule of veto power for protecting ethnic minorities, the state power will not be used to oppress or discriminate against any citizen. When there is a conflict between two ethnic groups, an impartial judiciary can use “just judgment” instead of repeated retaliations against each other.

Of course, the above discussion is similar to that of the Arabian Nights. It is not. It is just that its realization is an arduous and long process. Even the United States, a model of constitutional democracy, has taken more than 200 years to become a country that does not oppress ethnic minorities and protects all citizens fairly. The Declaration of Independence of the U.S. states that “all men are created equal,” when the Constitution of U.S. was enacted, black people were still regarded as “four-fifths” of an individual. It was only after the Civil War that the 15th Amendment to the Constitution stipulated that “the voting rights of citizens of the United States shall not be deprived or restricted by the United States or any state on the grounds of race, skin color, or forced labor.” After that, and until the civil rights movement in the 1960s, the remaining laws of racial discrimination in each state were basically abolished. In 2008, they elected a black president.

As Native Americans of the United States, the Indians did not receive U.S. citizenship until 1924, and all obtained U.S. citizenship after 1940; they have not only become “human” that cannot be killed but also become citizens that the U.S. government is obliged to protect, and citizens who have the right to participate in U.S. public governance. This shows that, no matter how long the process is, this goal is achievable. The key is that first of all, we must set such a goal and continue to work toward this direction, and there is hope.

According to the Hebrew Bible, the Jews and the Arabs are both descendants of Abraham (or Ibrahim). The historical accounts in the Qur'an overlap with the former in many places. However, although there is a promise by Allah to Israel's “holy land”, there is no record of the “extermination”. At least in the memory of the Arab nation, this kind of thing has never happened. This has historically made the Muslim world relatively friendly to Jews. Compared with the relationship between American Indians, black Africans and white Europeans and the more complicated and bloody history at the beginning, the grievances between the two brotherly nations, the Jews and the Arabs, may be expected to come to an end.

In addition to the sacredness of the Promised Land, the friendliness of the Arabs compared to European Christians might be another important factor when the Jews decided to restore their country in Palestine. Another factor that was not emphasized is that the Arabs

were not as powerful as the European powers at the time, and the advantage in force would be reversed. However, from a historical point of view, the Arabs also had the advantage in force for a long time; perhaps one day in the future, they will. In addition, if more and more countries in the world can equally protect all their citizens, becoming a “dominant people” may not be so important. The Jews are recognized as a wise nation. Especially fortunate is that they have a God of great wisdom—Jehovah, whose law that “Thou shalt not murder” surpasses all other wisdom of the Jews.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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