

Biblical Genocide?

Ever since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the Western world has been appalled at Islamism, *jihad*, and “holy war.” Critics of the Bible often cite Old Testament teaching to demonstrate that Christianity is really no better than Islam when it comes to the practice of genocide. For example, in the book of Deuteronomy, God gives an instruction to the Israelites that cannot help but puzzle and trouble us.

¹ When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you—² and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then *you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy.* (Deut. 7:1-2 emphasis added)¹

“Show them no mercy”? Is that really what God commanded?

The New Testament

Some people deflect the entire issue by saying, “That’s Old Testament teaching, not New Testament teaching.” That response provides a quick escape, but it doesn’t hold up to scrutiny. If you read the accounts of Jesus’ teaching in the New Testament, you don’t find Jesus denying or criticizing the Old Testament. On the contrary, he endorses the teaching of the Old Testament.

Many religious leaders today say that Jesus replaced the message of judgment with the message of love. That sounds good until you actually read what Jesus teaches in the New Testament. Jesus warns us against making quick judgments on insufficient evidence. He warns us against assuming that we are unquestionably more righteous than others (Matt. 7:1-5). But Jesus never backs away from teaching that God judges. In fact, Jesus talks more about hell than anybody else in the Bible (see Matt. 5:29-30).

Let’s also remember that the New Testament ends with the book of Revelation. While we may disagree over all the precise details of what that book teaches, there is no doubt that the book presents a picture of Christ judging the world.

The Old Testament

What is an adequate answer? Close attention should be paid to three important aspects of Old Testament teaching.²

First, it needs to be understood that the specific instructions about destroying other nations are set within the Old Testament’s overall teaching about God’s love for all tribes, nations, and ethnic groups. God’s covenant with Abraham sets out God’s plan: “I will make you into a great nation, . . . and *all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*” (Gen. 12:2-3 emphasis added). That same concern for

¹ This is not the only passage in the Old Testament that speaks in such harsh terms. See Exod. 17:8-16; 34:11-14; Deut. 15:17-19; 20:15-18; 28:16-19.

² For a much more complete treatment of this issue, I recommend Paul Copan’s *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2011). Along with examining other issues that contemporary Christians struggle with when they read the Old Testament, Copan devotes three chapters to addressing the subject of indiscriminate massacre and ethnic cleansing.

all people is embodied in Old Testament law. God commanded the Israelites to treat foreigners living in their midst with justice and love. “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 19:33-34).

Old Testament history should be understood against the backdrop of God’s ultimate desire. His purpose in choosing Abraham’s descendants as his own people was not to establish ethnic superiority; God chose Israel to be his means to accomplish his ultimate purpose of bringing his love to all people.

Second, modern readers need to consider the actual language that was used and how it was understood in its original setting. What is shocking and repelling to twenty-first readers may be due to a huge cultural misunderstanding. Evidence from the ancient world indicates military victories were described in terms similar to the ways that today’s sports teams are said to have “slaughtered” or “annihilated” their opponents.

Joshua’s conventional warfare rhetoric was common in many other ancient Near Eastern military accounts in the second and first millennia BC. The language is typically exaggerated and full of bravado, depicting total devastation. The knowing ancient Near Eastern reader recognized this as hyperbole; the accounts weren’t understood to be literally true.³

This understanding of Old Testament terminology finds additional support in the Old Testament narratives themselves. For example, consider what 1 Samuel records about the Amalekites. Samuel gives instructions to Saul to “go, attack, the Amalekites and *totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys* (1 Sam. 15:3 emphasis added). The narrative records that Saul “took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and *all his people he totally destroyed with the sword*” (1 Sam. 15:8 emphasis added). So that was the end of the Amalekites!

But 1 Samuel 27 finds David fighting the Amalekites once again! “David and his men went up and raided the Geshurites, the Girzites and the Amalekites. . . . Whenever David attacked an area, *he did not leave a man or woman alive . . .*” (1 Sam. 27:8-9 emphasis added). But the Amalekites are still around even after David’s complete victory over them! In 1 Samuel 30:1 says, “Now the Amalekites had raided the Negev and Ziklag,” and 1 Chronicles 4:43 records that there were still Amalekites alive two hundred and fifty years later during the reign of King Hezekiah.

Examining the military rhetoric of the ancient world and looking carefully at the historical records of the Old Testament lead to the conclusion that God did not command a literal and all-encompassing slaughter of the Canaanites. “In short, the conquest of Canaan was far less widespread and harsh than many people assume.”⁴

Third, it should be kept in mind that the instructions for God’s people to obliterate their enemies was limited to their initial conquest of Canaan and their ongoing warfare with the Amalekites. Those commands were not a general and permanent principle of Israelite warfare.

The use of *herem* [“ban” or “consecration to destruction”] language for the conquest period—with its additional application to Israel’s longstanding Amalekite enemies—indicates that the language is *restricted*. The language is not applied to Israel’s warfare with other nations, nor do Israel’s “holy wars” with other nations go beyond this limited time period.⁵

³ Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, 171.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

Taking these three elements into consideration should caution us against jumping to conclusions from a surface level reading of Old Testament history. “We have many good reasons to rethink our paradigm regarding the destruction of the Canaanites. On closer analysis, the biblical text suggests that much more is going on beneath the surface than obliterating the Canaanites.”⁶

Theological Considerations

Critics of the Bible are unlikely to be completely satisfied with this explanation. It takes little imagination to hear them saying, “OK, so the slaughter did not amount to complete genocide. But there was still an awful lot of killing going on! What kind of God would command even that amount of slaughter?”

At this point a key theological consideration must enter into the discussion. Do we understand the heinous character of sin?

When Abraham first enters the land that God promised him, he tells Abraham that his descendants will live in another land for a period of four hundred years. Then they will return to the promised land. “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, *for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure*” (Gen. 15:16 emphasis added).

Two important points contained in that verse need to be grasped. First, the Israelites’ return from Egypt was not intended to be just a provision of land for them; it would also be God’s act of judgment against the sin of the people living in the land at that time. Second, God was not anxious to judge the Amorites. Instead he was extremely patient. He was going to wait four hundred years until their sin had grown to “its full measure” and their judgment was undeniably just.

Right before God has the Israelites enter the promised land, God once again stresses the sins of the people already living there and how they deserve his judgment.

After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, “The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.” No, *it is on account of the wickedness of these nations* that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but *on account of the wickedness of these nations*, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Deut. 9:4-5 emphasis added)

How wicked were those nations? One Old Testament scholar summarizes it this way: “Canaanite religion . . . presents us with no pretty picture. It was, in fact, an extraordinarily debasing form of paganism, specifically of the fertility cult.”⁷ The Canaanites worshiped the god Baal. It was a fertility cult that employed “holy prostitutes,” both male and female. They also worshiped the god Molech who required child sacrifice. Young boys would be thrown into fires as sacrifices to Molech.⁸

We should also notice that God’s people are warned that if they persist in rebellion against him, they will receive the same judgment that the Canaanites did. “. . . they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, *and the LORD’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you*” (Deut. 7:4 emphasis added).

God warned the Israelites that he would deal with them in the same manner that he dealt with the Canaanites, and that’s exactly what he did. For hundreds of years he regularly sent prophets to warn

⁶ Ibid., 185.

⁷ John Bright, *A History of Israel* 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 118.

⁸ John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 125-127.

his people of judgment and to plead with them to repent, but they refused. So God finally sent the Babylonians against the Israelites in 586 B.C. They destroyed Jerusalem and carried the people off into exile.

The underlying issue is sin. God reluctantly and impartially judges sin whether it is found in the Canaanites or the Israelites.

A Final Thought

Taking sin seriously eventually leads us to Jesus and his crucifixion. As strange as it may sound, God's wrath against sin led to his greatest act of love. Jesus took the full punishment for sin when he died on the cross.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:6-8)

It's been said that "God is more willing to delay judgment than we are to ask him for mercy."⁹ God did judge the Canaanites and the Amalekites in the Old Testament, but he delayed that judgment for hundreds of years. God judged the Israelites too, but before that judgment he sent his prophets for hundreds of years urging the people to confess their sins and turn back to him.

In the New Testament Jesus warns us about a judgment at the end of time when each one of us will stand before the living God. But the New Testament tells us that Jesus offered himself as the full sacrifice for sin so that all who turn to him now in faith can escape God's righteous judgment and instead enjoy his love in this life and for eternity.

⁹ D.A. Carson, *For the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 1: Dec. 29.