

Reading the OT
Week 5

Violence

In the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. But you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the Lord your God has commanded you, so that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the Lord your God. (Deut. 20:16–18)

Declaration of bias

One response to a passage like this is to argue that the God of the OT was evil, and to reject the bible and Christianity on this basis.

A lesser version of the same response is to reject the OT or not to read it.

I believe that the whole of the Bible is God's word to us and we have to grapple with what the OT says.

Why we have difficulties
(a random list—what have I left out?)

- We have not advanced beyond our childhood Sunday School days
- Wrong approach to scripture: "example to follow" etc.
- It takes some hard work to understand a different culture
- Misunderstanding of language and thought forms of ancient Israel
- Scripture is "for us" but not "to us"
- Lack of context
 - what God is doing (not ethnic cleansing, though it looks like it)
 - what were the Canaanites like?
 - how had God dealt with them in the past?
- We are ignoring the exceptions
 - e.g. Rahab (Joshua 2)
- Faulty understanding of judgment, including NT
- Selective reading of Scripture
- Failure to distinguish between what is commanded for all time and what is meant just for one specific occasion
- Faulty understanding of "progressive revelation"

1. This command was given to specific people in a specific situation.

It was part of a much bigger plan

Were the Canaanites that wicked?

According to the biblical text, Yahweh was willing to wait about 430 years because **“the sin of the Amorite [a Canaanite people group] has not yet reached its limit”** (Gen. 15:16 NET). In other words, in Abraham’s day, the time wasn’t ripe for judgment on the Canaanites; the moment wasn’t right for them to be driven out.

Sodom and Gomorrah, on the other hand, were ready; not even ten righteous people could be found there (Gen. 18–19).

Even earlier, at the time of Noah, humans had similarly hit moral rock bottom (Gen. 6:5).

But it was only after Israel’s lengthy enslavement in Egypt that the time was finally ripe for the Israelites to enter Canaan—“because of the wickedness of these nations” (Deut. 9:4–5).

These laws weren't the permanent, divine ideal for all persons everywhere.

God informed his people that a new, enduring covenant would be necessary (Jer. 31; Ezek. 36). By the Old Testament's own admission, the Mosaic law was inferior and future looking.

The ideals are established at the very beginning (Gen. 1–2). The Old Testament makes clear that all humans are God's image-bearers; they have dignity, worth, and moral responsibility. And God's ideal for marriage is a one-flesh monogamous union between husband and wife. Also, certain prohibitions in the law of Moses against theft, adultery, murder, and idolatry have enduring relevance. Yet when we look at God's dealings with fallen humans in the ancient Near East, these ideals were ignored and even deeply distorted. So God was at work in seeking to restore or move toward this ideal.

"The law at Sinai is given for a specific period of time and is then set aside—not because it was a bad thing now happily abolished, but because it was a good thing whose purpose has now been accomplished." N. T. Wright

Copan, Paul. *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (p. 59). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

God met Israel partway.

As Jesus stated it in Matthew 19:8, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way." We could apply this passage to many problematic structures within the ancient Near Eastern context: "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted servitude and patriarchy and warfare and the like, but from the beginning it has not been this way."

Commands like the one to kill the Canaanites were not ideal and universal.

- Acts 17:30: Previously, God "overlooked the times of ignorance" and is "now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent."
- Romans 3:25: God has now "demonstrate[d] his righteousness" in Christ, though "in the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously committed."

First, the Mosaic law was temporary and, as a whole, isn't universal and binding upon all humans or all cultures.

Second, Mosaic times were indeed "crude" and "uncultured" in many ways.

God works with Israel as he finds her. He meets his people where they are to show them a higher ideal in the context of Near Eastern life. He didn't impose legislation that they weren't ready for. He moved *incrementally*.

"Devoted" things

Something “devoted” to the Lord, or “placed under the ban” (NEB), was forbidden to common use. The *ḥērem* was particularly associated with warfare. Yahweh instructed Israel that when she entered the cities of the land promised to her she was to put to death everything that breathed (Dt. 7:1f; 20:16–18; cf. Nu. 21:2f), so that the inhabitants would not teach Israel their abominable practices. Everything flammable was to be burned, while the precious metals were to be put into the treasury of the house of the Lord (Dt. 7:25f; Josh. 6:24). Thus all that was in the city was to be offered as a whole burnt offering to Yahweh.

Because Achan broke the ban placed on Jericho (Josh. 7:1, 20f; cf. 6:17–21, 24), all Israel was punished with defeat at the hand of Ai, and Achan and his family and all his belongings were placed under the ban (7:11–15, 24f).

An Israelite city that turned to practicing idolatry was to be devoted to destruction in the same way as the Canaanite cities, as well as any individual who sacrificed to another god (Ex. 22:20). No devoted person or thing could be ransomed (Lev. 27:28f).

Jesus' teaching on the letter and the spirit of the law

In Jesus' day many religious leaders couldn't see beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the text.

See, for example, Mark 2:23-28 where Jesus looked to the spirit of the legislation, that the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.

Old Testament "heroes"

On closer inspection, the hero status accorded to Abraham, Moses, and David in the Old Testament (and echoed in the New Testament) is rooted not in their moral perfection but in their uncompromising dedication to the cause of Yahweh and their rugged trust in the promises of God rather than lapsing into the idolatry of many of their contemporaries.

Copan, Paul. *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (p. 67). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

When we journey back over the millennia into the ancient Near East, we enter a world that is foreign to us in many ways.

Life in the ancient Near East wouldn't just be alien to us—with all of its strange ways and assumptions. We would also see a culture whose social structures were badly damaged by the fall.

Within this context, God raised up a covenant nation and gave the people laws to live by; he helped to create a culture for them. In doing so, he adapted his ideals to a people whose attitudes and actions were influenced by deeply flawed structures.

Copan, Paul. *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (p. 59). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

God's purposes

The law of Moses didn't stand on its own as a mere ancient law code. It is unique in that it is interwoven into a dynamic historical narrative of a covenant-making God's activity through Israel from its beginnings: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2–3).

God's act of gracious deliverance—along with his interaction with human beings in history—sets the context for God's giving the Mosaic law. In fact, the events in Israel's story often illustrate and clarify matters raised in the Mosaic law.

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God's purpose in choosing the Israelites was to bless all nations

Not only does God threaten Israel with the same judgments he brings on other nations, but he also reminds Israel that he is at work in the nations of the world: “Are you not as the sons of Ethiopia to Me, O sons of Israel? . . . Have I not brought up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” (Amos 9:7). When we encounter Melchizedek, Abimelech, Job, Rahab, Ruth, and other non-Israelites in the Old Testament, we are reminded of Paul’s words—that a rescuing and redeeming God isn’t far from each one of us (Acts 17:27), whether before or after Christ. And God’s choosing Israel was not an end in itself but a means of blessing all the nations.

Israel often forgot this.

Copan, Paul. *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (pp. 72-73). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Judgment

Sometimes God simply gives up on nations, cities, or individuals when they've gone past a point of no return. Judgment—whether directly or indirectly—is the last resort.

It's no different for us as individuals today.

"That there will be a final judgment is regarded as axiomatic (Rom. 3:5–6). "Eternal judgment" is one of the "elementary teachings about Christ" (Heb. 6:1–2), and all face it (Heb. 12:23). It is as inescapable as death (Heb. 9:27). Even "the family of God" is included and indeed judgment begins with them (1 Peter 4:17). Sinners may not trust that somehow their worst failings may be hid for God will judge our secrets (Rom. 2:16). All evil will be reckoned with for on the day of judgment "every careless word" will be called to account (Matt. 12:36). Judgment will be on the basis of works (Matt. 16:27). An important passage is that in which Paul makes it clear that salvation is on the basis of Christ's saving work and that alone, but what we build on that foundation will be tested "with fire" (1 Cor. 3:10–15). Believers will be saved by Christ, but their work will be judged on judgment day." (Evangelical dictionary of Biblical Theology)

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Some finer points:

Key ideas in this chapter. ("Is God a moral monster?")

- The language of the consecrated ban (herem) includes stereotypical language: "all," "young and old," and "men and women." The ban could be carried out even if women and children weren't present.
- As far as we can see, biblical herem was carried out in particular military or combatant settings (with "cities" and military "kings"). It turns out that the sweeping language of the ban is directed at combatants.
- The ban language allows and hopes for exceptions (e.g., Rahab); it isn't absolute.
- The destruction language of ancient Near Eastern warfare (and the Old Testament) is clearly exaggerated. Groups of Canaanite peoples who apparently were "totally destroyed" were still around when all was said and done (e.g., Judg. 1).
- The greater concern was to destroy Canaanite religion, not Canaanites per se, a point worthy of elaboration (see the next chapter).
- The preservation of Rahab and her family indicates that consecration to the ban wasn't absolute and irreversible. God had given ample indications of his power and greatness, and the Canaanites could have submitted to the one true God who trumped Egypt's and Canaan's gods, sparing their own lives.
- The biblical text, according to some scholars, suggests that peace treaties could be made with Canaanite cities if they chose to, but none (except Gibeon) did so (Josh. 11:19). The offer of peace was implicitly made to Jericho.
- The biblical text contains many references to "driving out" the Canaanites. To clear away the land for habitation didn't require killing; civilians fled when their military strongholds were destroyed and soldiers were no longer capable of protecting them.
- From the start, certain (more cooperative) Canaanites were subjected to forced labor, not annihilation (Judg. 1:27–36; 1 Kings 9:20–21; Josh. 15:63; 16:10; 17:12–13; cf. Ps. 106:34–35). This was another indication that the ban wasn't absolute.
- Joshua carried out what Moses commanded (Deut. 7 and 20), which means that Moses's language is also an example of ancient Near Eastern exaggeration. He did not intend a literal, all-encompassing extermination of the Canaanites.
- The archaeological evidence nicely supports the biblical text; both of these point to minimal observable material destruction in Canaan as well as Israel's gradual infiltration, assimilation, and eventual dominance there.

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 all the Canaanites. Taking the destruction of anything that breathes at face value needs much reexamination.

Further Reading Goldingay, John. *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Life*. Vol. 3. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009. See esp. chap. 5, "City and Nation." Hess, Richard S. "The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua." In *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, edited by Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray Jr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008. ———. *Joshua*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentary 6. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996.