

Wrestling with Old Testament “Holy Wars,” Pt. 2: Biblical Considerations

In the first installment of this series, we asked whether prominent atheist Richard Dawkins—or anyone else subscribing to a similar worldview—really has a leg to stand on when expressing moral outrage toward God for commanding the Israelites to “completely destroy” the inhabitants of Canaan (Deut. 20:16-17). Dawkins’ incoherence aside, however, this aspect of biblical history remains a challenging one, not only for those considering the merits of the Christian faith, but also for Christians themselves.

That’s a good reason to spend some time wrestling with this whole issue from a biblically shaped perspective. That’s not to say that we’ll leave everything nice and tidy in a handful of paragraphs. Still, considering a few relevant points may help us to see God’s command in an appropriate, if still very sobering light. With the understanding that none of the following can be addressed in a comprehensive manner in a forum like this, we can dive in:

1. On what basis are we qualified to criticize God?

If we are to take God to task for his actions, on what basis do we do so? On the grounds of a commonly held moral consensus in our culture? If so, we might want to remember that, like it or not, much of that consensus has arisen from a Christian worldview. But then such a course would mean that we’re effectively accusing God with the standards that are grounded in his own character and expressed in his revelation. And do we really think we’ll be able one day to stand before God—the one who is the very definition of love, justice, holiness, etc.—to shake our fist at him and charge him with wrongdoing? Are we saying that we have a better understanding of morality than its very source does? That would be ambitious to say the least. Anyone who doubts this might want to read through the book of Job, particularly the last few chapters.

But if we don’t use a biblically shaped notion of morality that is grounded in God himself, what other standard may we use? Our own personal views? A majority opinion in our society? The point I made last month is relevant again here: how do such judgments qualify as objectively better than any others? For those unable to appeal to a genuinely good moral lawgiver (i.e., God) to substantiate their claims, that question is not so easy to answer.

2. God is qualified to judge human beings.

Most of us recognize that our own failures and limitations make it problematic for us to issue condemnatory moral judgments. “Who am I to cast the first stone?” Who indeed? But at the risk of sounding terribly obvious, God is not you or I. When God peels back the curtain to reveal something of his holy and glorious presence, even his followers can be gripped with fear arising from their own sinfulness (e.g., Isa. 6:9). Additionally, the secrets of the human heart are not hidden from God, and he possesses the wisdom

sufficient to create and sustain everything in the universe, as well as govern it according to his purposes. We could go on, but I point these things out simply to say that God is supremely qualified to exercise judgment on human beings, be it the Canaanites or anyone else.

3. The Canaanites deserved judgment (just like we all do).

To discuss a human being's innocence is certainly appropriate in many instances. But according to the Scriptures, human innocence is always a relative term. Compared to God, everyone—no exceptions—is deeply reprehensible because of his or her sin and therefore deserving of punishment. This is a clear biblical fact (see, e.g., Isa. 64:6; Rom. 3:23, 6:23). Because of this, many have observed that the most unusual aspect of God's actions is not that he punishes some, but that he has mercy on any.

More specifically, however, the Bible is clear that the Canaanites in particular were guilty of great sin. Moses warns the Israelites that God did not choose to give them the land of Canaan on account of their own righteousness, but rather "it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you" (Deut. 9:4). Further, chapter 19 of Leviticus finds God issuing a number of prohibitions to the Israelites. In so doing, God makes this statement: "Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants" (vv. 24-25). In the context, "these things" include numerous forms of sexual immorality as well as what is surely one of the most abominable practices found in the ancient world: child sacrifice (to a false deity no less). Tragically, such sin was pervasive enough to pollute the very land. The bottom line? The Canaanites had a great deal for which to answer.

4. God had exercised great patience toward the Canaanites.

God's command in Deuteronomy 20 comes at the time of Israel's Exodus from slavery in Egypt. But consider what he had to say to Abraham many years earlier in Genesis 15:13-16:

Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

Notice carefully what God is saying here. He solemnly assures Abraham that his descendants will indeed inherit the Promised Land. But first they will need to migrate to a foreign country, where they will eventually be enslaved for centuries. They must do

that at least in part *because he is willing to exercise patience toward the Canaanites for 400 years!* (Here the prominent tribe of the Amorites is used to designate the whole.) To put that in perspective, turning the clock back 400 years from the present day it would put us roughly at the time of the Mayflower's voyage to Plymouth Rock. God's judgment on the people in Canaan was anything but capricious. It came only after centuries of patiently enduring actions that were contrary to his will.

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In the next installment, we'll wrap up our discussion of this topic by looking at a few more important factors to consider in light of God's command regarding the Canaanites.