

Wrestling with Old Testament “Holy Wars,” Pt. 3: Biblical Considerations Continued.

For people both in and outside of the church, God’s command for the Israelites to destroy the people inhabiting the promised land of Canaan (Deut. 20:16-17) remains one of the most challenging features of the Old Testament. For that reason—let alone the other lessons we may draw from it—it’s worth giving this particular biblical episode careful consideration. In the first installment on this topic, we examined the criticism leveled by a leading contemporary atheist toward God and Christianity as a result of this account. The second attempted to consider the topic from a biblically informed perspective. In this final installment, we’ll continue in this latter effort.

So without further fanfare, here are a few more points to keep in mind when thinking through the Old Testament “holy wars”:

1. God’s command was not absolute.

There is one rather conspicuous group of Canaanites who escaped God’s commanded destruction: Rahab and her family. The reason? She acknowledged the Lord as God and aligned herself with Israel. Rahab’s own words indicate that she did this after hearing of the Lord’s great deeds in bringing his people to Canaan. Nor was she alone in having heard this news. As she tells the Israelite spies she chooses to hide:

I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. (Joshua 2:8-11)

Presumably, others could have made the same choice as Rahab. As Paul Copan points out, “The preservation of Rahab and her family indicates that consecration to the ban [of destruction] 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” (*Is God a Moral Monster?*, 184).

2. Other qualifying factors, briefly considered.

It’s also important to note a handful of factors that qualify, or at least potentially qualify, God’s command of destruction. Even taken together, these points don’t completely blunt the severity of the biblical account, nor should they. But we should seek to

understand the extent that the Bible itself may give us warrant to temper God's command.

- a. As the rest of the Old Testament clearly demonstrates, God's command was not an enduring ordinance for Israel to carry out against all her enemies. For example, David did not seek to exterminate the Philistines during a later period in the nation's history. God's orders regarding the Canaanites were germane only to a particular historical circumstance.
- b. On balance, the language of the biblical accounts give us reason to believe the greater concern was to *drive out* or *dispossess* Canaan's inhabitants, rather than hunt down and kill every person (see, e.g., Exo. 23:27-30, 34:24; Num. 21:32, 32;21; Deut. 9:1, 11:23, etc.). Indeed, most noncombatants would have likely fled before Israel's advance, meaning that it was primarily military defenders who would have perished.
- c. Consistent with the above point, many scholars note that conventional warfare rhetoric in the Ancient Near East regularly employed exaggeration. Notably, this included references to the total destruction of one's enemies. And since the Bible often communicates through the conventions of the cultures in which it was written, we shouldn't necessarily be surprised to find this same manner of speech in its pages. For example, though the book of Joshua recounts Israel's conquests with all-encompassing destruction rhetoric in places (10:40-42, 11:16-23), it later acknowledges the danger of being tempted by the remnant of the nations *still living in the land* (e.g., 23:12-13). Copan is again helpful: "Some might accuse Joshua of being misleading or of getting it wrong. Not at all. He was speaking the language that everyone in his day would have understood. Rather than trying to deceive [in the earlier instances], Joshua was just saying he had fairly well trounced the enemy" (*Is God a Moral Monster?*, 171). This convention of exaggeration may seem strange to modern readers, but then again, we don't get to make up the rules of discourse for those who lived thousands of years ago. Nor would the war against the Canaanites be the only time the Bible employs considered exaggerations (e.g., Mat. 5:29-30).

3. God's love demands his wrath.

On this point, it's hard to improve upon the words of Croatian-born Yale theologian Miroslav Volf:

I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and

over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to that carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandfatherly fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love (quoted in Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster*, 192).

4. God's other "shocking" decision.

While there are certainly many other things to say in this discussion, we should never lose sight of the larger context provided by Scripture. Seemingly discordant or confusing episodes need to be weighed in light of the clear and foundational truths found within the Bible's pages.

Understanding this helps us to remember that the God who commanded the Canaanites' destruction was the same God who, in an act that would be shocking if not for our familiarity with it, chose to send one of his triune persons to become a man and suffer horribly...*all to save people who deserve eternal punishment*. Jesus bled and died a criminal's death for the very people who had rebelled against him.

In the last installment of this series, I mentioned how implausible it is to think that anyone will be able to stand before God—the very standard of righteousness—and question his character. But he who taught Job this reality simply by asking a series of questions has also provided a response of a different kind. Whether sparked by the severe judgment placed on the Canaanites, the ravages of globe-spanning evil, or wrenching personal trials, many have shouted, "What kind of God are you?" And for nearly 2000 years, God's unchanging reply has been to point to the cross on which his beloved Son died.

*As the citations in this series indicate, my discussion of this topic is heavily indebted to Paul Copan's *Is God a Moral Monster?*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011. I highly recommend it for further reading and bibliography on the discussion of Israel's wars against the Canaanites, particularly chs. 15-19.*