

The God of the Old Testament

1. Introduction

There is a huge question that arises from Joshua 6, verse 21: 'it says 'they destroyed with the sword every living thing in the city – men and women, young and old, cattle sheep and donkeys. How can a holy, just, loving God have commanded such harsh actions? Can this be the same God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ with such tenderness and compassion? We shouldn't be surprised: God had already told Moses in Deuteronomy that Israel was to carry out complete destruction in Canaan, and Moses had so instructed Joshua.

Many people today are repelled by the bloodthirstiness displayed by the Israelites and the God who demanded the annihilation of the city. A writer called R Goetz says: 'The book of Joshua is embarrassment enough, with its ferocity and its religious advocacy of mass murder. Were these not committed or commanded by God, we would condemn these as unspeakable and unjustifiable atrocities

Christian writer and preacher John Huffman tells of spending time with Madalyn Murray O'Hair, an outspoken representative of atheism in the United States. As a young girl, she used to occasionally attend First Presbyterian church of Pittsburgh of which later on, Huffman was the pastor. Huffman asked her what had turned her from her Presbyterianism to atheism. And she described one weekend how she, as a teenager, had read the bible from cover to cover and noted that most Christians had never done so. She said the stories of God ordained cruelty and even genocide in the Old Testament along with the hypocritical way that many Christians live had turned her away from Christianity.

Some even say 'I can believe in a God of the New Testament, the God of Jesus, the God of love, but not that other God of the Old Testament, the one who kills innocent babies and women, that wrathful, vengeful God. There are two Gods – the one of the Old Testament, the God of law, and the One of the New Testament, the God of grace. I can accept the New Testament God but not that Old Testament God

Remember the case of Marcion. He was a wealthy shipowner who came to Rome in AD 140. He was raised in the Orthodox Christian community but then was excommunicated. He had concluded that there was such a radical contrast between the New Testament gospel and the Old Testament Law that he ultimately rejected the whole Old Testament. This God of law and righteousness, he called a demi-urge, a secondary deity who made the world. To Marcion, the Old Testament and its morality became a document of an alien religion and its God a dangerous power. So, what might be our response?

2. The God of the Old Testament and the God of the new are the same

I'm going to quote writer Peter Craigie: 'to be faithful to our Christian legacy, it is necessary to keep the whole Bible. Alternatively, one may reject the whole bible. It is very difficult to settle in a halfway house, for the canonical Scriptures include both Testaments; while the relationship between those Testaments may be difficult to understand, nevertheless, to question a part of the canon of scripture is to question the whole. To oversimplify a very complex issue, the canon of Scripture places us in a take it or leave it situation; either alternative may be chosen in honesty, but the logic of a mid-way position is dangerous

As writer Huffman says, there is one God, the God who is both associated with the wars of ancient Israel and at the same time is the God who yearns for peace, who begs us to love each other, even our enemies. Simply to dismiss the Old Testament would be to dismiss a part of God and remove from Him a certain quality that actually enhances his holiness, his majesty, his sovereignty, his grace

3. God is choosing a holy people for himself

Israel was to keep itself holy and undefiled and the land itself was to be undefiled. It was vital that they should be uncontaminated by pagan worship. Yet already Israel had yielded to the temptation in connection with the Baal of Peor in the wilderness in Numbers 25. In Deuteronomy 20, the Lord made his desires clear. In verse 17 and 18, it says ‘completely destroy them. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God’ When Israel did not obey the command to utterly destroy things, this did indeed contaminate their religion. We’ll see that in Joshua 7

The overriding concern in all such episodes is that he demands holiness and obedience and purity of worship

4. The Canaanites

There was the issue of the Canaanites sin.

4.1 First we should note that from God’s perspective, all have sinned and fall short of his standards according to Roman 3:23 and deserve severe punishment according to Romans 6:23. At this level, the Canaanites got what all peoples, then and now, deserve and any who are spared are spared by God’s grace. Sin is a harsh reality, but its absolute affront to a holy God is clearly taught in scripture

4.2 But there was something about the sins of the Canaanites

In Leviticus 18:24-30, Israel is solemnly warned to abstain from the many abominations that the Canaanites had practiced. The larger context of sins in this chapter makes it clear that they were guilty of all these sins. These include engaging in incest, adultery, child sacrifice, homosexual activity and bestiality By the standards of most cultures, it seems that the Canaanite sins were particularly heinous: Child sacrifice and ritual prostitution were particularly prevalent

Furthermore, in Deuteronomy 9, verses 4 and 5, in the context of Canaan, God says ‘it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God will drive them out before you. So, Israel’s arrival was part punishment for Canaan’s wickedness. Finally, the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 also included the provision that God would curse anyone who cursed Israel. We’ll see later in Joshua that the Canaanites tried destroying Israel several times

4.3 The Canaanites attitude

One might add also that the Canaanites rebelled against God and his people. We see later on in Joshua 11:19,20, that ‘except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites who took them all in battle. One has to say that this passage also says that ‘it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel so that he might exterminate them without mercy, as the Lord had commanded Moses’. This reference to God hardening the Canaanites hearts harks back to Egypt where God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. But if you look closely, God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was closely tied to Pharaoh’s own stubbornness and resistance to God. Ultimately, it was not doing to Pharaoh anything that his heart was not predisposed to do. The Canaanites were the same

Had the Canaanites been willing to react as Rahab or even the Gibeonites had done, the result could have been quite different. It’s quite significant the way that the people in Jericho securely barred the gates against the Israelites. They refused to hear about Israel’s God. They’d heard about Israel’s victories and most of them resisted Israel and its God. As a result, they were shown no mercy and were annihilated

4.4 Geography

One should also say that the instructions for Israel to annihilate the Canaanites was specific in time, intent, and geography. Israel wasn't given blanket permission to do the same elsewhere. It was limited to a time when Israel was just establishing a theocracy under God to protect Israel's worship, as well as to punish these specific peoples

Christians should remember today that whilst God abhors evil and we should oppose it vigorously, we don't practice this kind of destruction today. The entry into Canaan was limited. God worked against evil in most of the Old Testament period in less dramatic ways

Remembering the Crusaders, the first crusade culminated in the capture of Jerusalem and the defeat of Muslim defenders in 1099. The victory was achieved by terrible bloodshed and slaughter. The Christian historians at the time noted that ten thousand Muslims were beheaded in the Great Mosque. These Chroniclers, mainly Christian clerics, accounted these facts with joy, applauding that justice was done. A favourite text of the Crusaders was drawn from the Old Testament Jeremiah 48:10: 'a curse on anyone who keeps their sword from bloodshed'. This was not God's will

4.5 God is a God of Grace, even in the Old Testament

Finally, with the wilderness journey over, the people of God - a stiff necked stubborn people – have now humbled themselves. So, God is ready to move for them in great power. And the destruction of Jericho in the same section as the rescue of Rahab a harlot – and her family. Inside the walls of Jericho was a woman who hungered for righteousness. So, God delivered her from Jericho and ultimately drafted her into the very same genealogy of the promised Messiah. This is the same God who breathes his shalom into the lives of those who sincerely trust him. This is the same God who yearned for his people to be a holy people, a people uncontaminated by what would destroy their spiritual and personal vitality. This is also the same God who sent Jonah to preach in Nineveh to repent. And the people of Nineveh did repent. They believed God and a fast was proclaimed: all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. As God says to Jonah in Jonah 4:11: 'should I not have a concern for the great city of Nineveh'. We see God's grace in the Old Testament too