

# Chapter 31 - Why Does God Seem So Violent in the Old Testament?

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Many skeptics assert that God is portrayed in the Old Testament as a cruel and ruthless God who orders the execution of innocent men, women, and children.

In his book *The God Delusion*, atheist Richard Dawkins writes, "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."<sup>201</sup>

Are such descriptions of God accurate? Is there a contradiction between what Christians profess about God vs. what is recorded in the Old Testament books of the Bible?

The short answer to this question is "No!"



often by people trying to prove that God is cruel. From this example, you can draw parallels to similar actions God performed elsewhere in the Old Testament.

To begin understanding this event, and its circumstances, let's take a closer look and examine the following:

**The Canaanites were extremely wicked:** Canaan, Noah's grandson, was cursed by Noah (for an act about which Scripture is vague - Gen 9:20-25). His descendants became an incredibly sinful people who practiced extreme cruelty, incest, idolatry, bestiality, homosexuality, and cultic prostitution. They offered their children as sacrifices. They pounded their drums, so parents would not hear how their children screamed when thrown into the fire to appease Moleck, the God of Canaanites (Jer 7:31).

After 400 years of iniquity the Canaanites had become so wicked that the Bible says the land vomited out its inhabitants (Lev 18:25).

**God was concerned with sin, not ethnicity:** Critics fail to acknowledge that the language used about the Canaanites is the same language used about Israel—just one indication that this is not "genocidal" (the extermination of an ethnic group).

God threatened to "vomit" out Israel from the land just as he had vomited out the Canaanites (Lev 18:25, Jer 25:9). It was not genocide but "sin-acide."

**The judgment was intended to be expulsion from the land:** There is a range of verbs used in the commands to Israel concerning how they should treat the Canaanites. Some of these clearly speak of extermination but others speak of *driving them out* (Deut 7). Deuteronomy 9:3 brings these two ideas together,



God's intention was that the Canaanites could flee the land as the Israelites advanced. As it happened, the Canaanite kings and citizens who refused to escape were annihilated by the Israelites.

If the Canaanites had left Canaan, the Israelites could have made treaties with them and would have been bound by the more general codes of conduct in warfare given in Deuteronomy 20. Their hostile occupation of the land of Canaan necessitated their forced removal. God's judgment was primarily that the Canaanites would lose the land because of their detestable practices, but it was their resistance to God's punishment that lead to their destruction.

The language of "totally wiping out and leaving no survivors" was a **hyperbole** common in the ancient Near Eastern war accounts. This hyperbole may also be found in Old Testament passages like Joshua 10:40 or 1 Samuel 15 that describe entire cities being wiped. These expressions are not to be taken literally, as is seen from the references below.

- After commanding the Canaanites be destroyed the very next verse instructs the Israelites not to intermarry with them (Deut 7:3). How could you intermarry with people who are to be completely wiped out?
- The people who were allegedly wiped-out appear later in the story (Judges 1:21).
- Caleb later asked permission to drive out the supposedly annihilated Anakites from the hill country (Josh 14:12-15).
- Joshua's military campaign in Canaan was not a territorial conquest but a series of disabling raids, as



**God was patient with the Canaanites and gave them 400 years of warnings:** This was no spur of the moment decision by God. In Genesis 15:13-16, God tells Abraham that his descendants will be slaves in a foreign country for 400 years but that they will return to the land of Canaan after "four generations." The reason given for this delay is because "the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

**The Canaanites could have repented, for they had some knowledge of the true God:** This is evidenced by the following examples:

- Abraham lived among them and was a wealthy and powerful man (he was even able to rescue Lot from the united forces of four kings, according to Genesis 14). His faith in God should have been a witness to the Canaanites.
- The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (which were close to Canaanite territory) was evidence of God's judgment against sin (Gen 18-19).
- Melchizedek was King of Jerusalem and "priest of God Most High" (Gen 14:18). He must surely have taught his people about the true God (Gen 14:19).
- Even at the time of Joshua, the Canaanites had heard about what God had done for the Israelites in delivering them from Egypt and giving them victory over the Amorite kings east of the Jordan (Josh 2:8-12).

Over the many generations from Abraham to Joshua, the Canaanites had gradually rejected what they knew about God and moved deeper into sin.

It was only when their sin reached a certain level of severity that God decided to bring judgment on them, and to use the Israelites



The only Canaanites to be spared were the prostitute Rahab and her household, because she helped Israel in the attack on Jericho.

Rahab knew of Israel's victories and the blessings of God upon the nation. If she knew of Israel's fame, then it is reasonable to assume the rest of the city knew it as well. They could have easily escaped their destruction. However, they stubbornly chose to remain and fight against Israel instead.

**God's judgment was also intended to prevent corruption of the Israelites:** Israel, through whom the savior of the world was to come, needed to remain pure and completely removed from the wickedness of the Canaanites.

In Deuteronomy 20:16-18, when God commands the Israelites to drive out the Canaanites, the reason He gives is that, "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."

**God is the Author of Life:** He authored all life and He can take it away whenever He deems appropriate. In fact, people never cease to exist—at death, they change locations. God is perfectly just to move you from this life to the next life at any time He chooses. "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (Eccl 12:7).

## **THE ATHEISTS' DILEMMA**

Back to the charge of the "New Atheists" about the immorality of God by annihilating the entire race of the Canaanites. On what



If atheism is true and humans evolved from non-living, primordial slime, then any sense of moral obligation must simply be a subjective outworking of the physical neurons firing in the brain. Charles Darwin understood this truth perfectly.

He wrote, "A man who has no assured and ever-present belief in the existence of a personal God or of a future existence with retribution and reward, can have for his rule of life, as far as I can see, only to follow those *impulses and instincts* which are the strongest or which seem to him the best ones."<sup>202</sup>

While the atheist may claim not to like God's actions, if they admit that there is a legitimate standard of morality that is not based on subjective human whims, then they have forfeited their atheistic position. If actions can accurately be labeled as objectively moral or immoral, then atheism cannot be true.

An example of this can be found in atheists Richard Dawkins and Peter Singer's beliefs. They both believe that parents should have the right to kill their diseased children even after they are born.<sup>203</sup>

In his debate with John Rankin, Dan Barker said that abortion is a "blessing". One line of reasoning used by atheists to justify the practice is the idea that humans should not be treated differently than animals, since humans are nothing more than animals themselves.<sup>204</sup>

Sam Harris, famed atheist, wrote, "Many of us consider human fetuses in the first trimester to be more or less like rabbits; having imputed to them a range of happiness and suffering that does not grant them full status in our moral community."<sup>205</sup>

The atheist contends that human life can be taken by other humans based solely on reasoning about benefits to society and other relativistic ideas. The biblical position shows that God is the Giver of life.



## GOD OF BOTH TESTAMENTS

The God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. We must note that the revelation of God in the Bible is *progressive*, and our understanding of God becomes clearer as the story of Scripture unfolds.

This is especially true when we consider the doctrine of the Trinity. The Old Testament barely mentions that God is Three Persons, yet One in essence. It was only with the coming of Christ that a profound truth like this could finally be made clear and that God's character and the extent of His love could fully be revealed in the New Testament.

It is a misreading of the text to suggest that God's love is unknown in the Old Testament. In fact, God's love to Israel is a major theme of the Old Testament, and His judgment of their enemies can even be an expression of this love. Likewise, it would be equally wrong to suggest that the God of the New Testament is not capable of righteous judgment.

The Old Testament presents God as the One who is both just and loving. Here are just three examples though there are many more:

- "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth" (Exod 34:6).
- "Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed" (Ps 85:10).
- "But You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth" (Ps 86:15).



The perfect balance of the character of God as revealed in Christ:

- "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

A careful examination of the Old Testament's incidents that atheists use to label God as unjust will show that these criticisms are unfounded, and their understanding of the various situations is flawed.

It is true that the Bible contains graphic stories of sin, evil, and death. But it is an overarching grand story of love, redemption, and grace. God tells us firmly we are in no position to criticize His acts of justice—but He kindly encourages us to come alongside Him and grieve over a world that has misused His gift of freedom.

He allows us to choose right or wrong, and laments when we choose wrong. When God acts in His righteousness, the world discovers that consequences exist for evil behavior, which is something the prophet Isaiah alluded to when he said, "For when Your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness" (Isa 26:9).

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