

LIBERTY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE DILEMMA OF GENOCIDE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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ABSTRACT

THE DILEMMA OF GENOCIDE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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The Old Testament command to destroy every breathing thing within the cities of the Promised Land has long been a problem for those who seek to understand God. In some cases this has become welcome fodder for those who desire to question the credibility of Scripture, while for others it just creates an ethical gap that is simply too far to cross. This thesis will address the challenging issue by demonstrating how God's command to destroy the Canaanites was an essential component of his redemptive plan in that it brought to fruition the goals of the Abrahamic Covenant and established a line to Christ who would become the ultimate redeemer of the world.

ABSTRACT LENGTH: 113 WORDS.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The issue of genocide in the Old Testament is truly a dilemma for both Christians and those who seek God as well. The very thought of genocide and ethnic cleansing evokes a strong emotional response from most people and so the thought that God might have endorsed such an activity is beyond comprehension. Textual phrasing from Deuteronomy 20:10-18 such as “you shall not leave alive anything that breathes” and “you shall utterly destroy them” are words from God that can be quite disturbing and difficult to process. An example like this has caused atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, to make strong comparisons to events most people absolutely abhor.

In one such statement, Dawkins says:

The ethnic cleansing begun in the time of Moses is brought to bloody fruition in the book of Joshua, a text remarkable for the bloodthirsty massacres it records and the xenophobic relish with which it does so. And the Bible story of Joshua’s destruction of Jericho and the invasion of the Promised Land in general, is morally indistinguishable from Hitler’s invasion of Poland, or Saddam Hussein’s massacres of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs. The Bible may be an arresting and poetic work of fiction, but it is not the sort of book you should give your children to form their morals.¹

These comparisons which evoke a demonstrative response are compounded further when the connection is made to morality. John Hartung, a physician and anthropologist draws the following conclusion:

The Bible is a blueprint of in-group morality, complete with instructions for genocide, enslavement of outgroups, and world domination. But the Bible is not evil by virtue of its objectives or even its glorification of murder, cruelty, and rape. Many ancient works do

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 247.

that - The Iliad, the Icelandic Sagas, the tales of the ancient Syrians and the inscriptions of the ancient Mayans, for example - but no one is selling the Iliad as a foundation for morality. A wolf, no matter how big and bad, cannot be evil. In distinction, a wolf in sheep's clothing is pure evil. Therein lies the problem. The Bible is sold and bought as a guide to how people should live their lives. And it is, by far, the world's all-time best seller. But the effort to make the Bible a universal guide to morality is impossible, because although orally transmitted myths can make 180 degree turns across a series of generations and get away with claims to authority based on antiquity, distortions and selective dismissals of written myths can only, at best, fool most of the people most of the time.²

The analysis of Dawkins and Hartung does contain flawed presuppositions as world domination was never God's intention and murder was never glorified. However, the command of God to pre-emptively strike down the Canaanite people does pose difficult questions. This in turn presents a problem for the Christian who not only hates the very thought of genocide but also views God quite differently.

Second, Christians traditionally can be characterized as possessing a high value for life. They are often a part of the pro-life movement, they recognize the image of God in man, and they take seriously the words of Jesus found in John 10:10: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." The significance of each individual life, a core value that many Christians retain, seems to be at odds with a God who would condone and command genocide.

Third, the issue of genocide creates a dilemma in regard to the unity of Scripture. By default, the God of the Old Testament is often portrayed as vindictive and violent while the God of the New Testament is described as gracious and loving. Many Christians simply do not know what to do with this seemingly incompatible strain of thought which in turn creates doubt for individuals in their faith.

² John Hartung, "Love Thy Neighbor: The Evolution of In-group Morality." *Struggles for Existence*. <http://strugglesforexistence.com/pdf/LTN.pdf> (accessed April 13, 2012).

Statement of the Purpose

The central purpose of this thesis is to better understand the issues relating to the concept of genocide found in the Old Testament. This will be done by taking a step back from the specific passages that are in question and considering the larger context. An examination of Canaanite culture is certainly in order as a foundation. But also, since Israel entered the land with the intention of occupying it, an analysis of their intentions and motivations must also be a priority. An exploration of God's overall plan and his role as Divine Warrior will be researched because it was God who was directing and commanding the Israelites to engage in war. Additionally, because the problem of genocide poses so many connections to modern day events, an assessment will be considered for how the events of the Old Testament relate to people today.

Statement of Importance of the Problem

The dilemma of genocide in the Old Testament matters because it keeps people from believing in God. While it is true that some only use the issue as a justification for unbelief, for many others it is a legitimate question that brings the very nature and character of God into question. The modern age is filled with intellectual thinkers who are attempting to make logical, rational sense of the world around them while at the same time desiring to understand the spiritual element of their intrinsic soul. This questionable activity of God then becomes a stumbling block to their faith journey.

Second, Many Christians simply do not know how to respond to the hard questions posed not only by atheists but also by their neighbors, co-workers, and friends. The question of genocide in the Old Testament is a fair question that must be addressed so believers can have confidence both in their faith and in the God of the Bible.

Potential Responses to the Problem

Men and women struggle to understand a God that is unable to be fully comprehended by the brightest and best minds. Furthermore, for Christians, genocide is difficult to defend. Thus many Christians do not seek an answer to the problem of genocide. Rather, they take a blind faith approach and simply steer clear of the issues that crop up in the Old Testament. This approach is problematic, however, because atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hutchins are more than happy to elaborate their perspectives on the issue. Consequently, silence is counterproductive.

A second common response to the issue of genocide is to spiritualize the Old Testament passages that are difficult to interpret. This approach is not relegated to those who favor allegory but could fit the approach of an ordinary Sunday school teacher as well. However, to spiritualize the text does a disservice, not only because it ignores the narrative but also because it never addresses the actual problem. Related to this approach, some attempt to reconstruct the accounts in such a way that they become inoffensive. The thinking goes that because the act of genocide could not ever be equated with a merciful and loving God, then the facts must be changed in order to fit a different hypothesis. In so doing, it is not only Scripture that is reconstructed but also God himself.

A more beneficial approach to a proper understanding of genocide must begin by taking the words of Scripture at face value and understanding the time, cultures, and context within which they were given. Dr. Paul Hanson, professor of the Old Testament at Harvard's Divinity School, views this effort "to understand their specific context, their particular meanings, their historical sequence, and the interrelationships which exist between them" as critical for a proper

understanding of the issues related to war and peace.³ Furthermore, the conquest narratives must be understood as part of a larger story of redemption. Even with all of this information being taken into consideration, it still does not mean the issue can be fully resolved. However, it allows the problem to be treated with the purpose and plan of God in mind.

Statement of Position

The author of this thesis believes that the dilemma of genocide in the Old Testament can be best understood in the context of the broader plan of God through the ages. It is not healthy to isolate specific passages and attempt to interpret them through a modern lens without any consideration for the culture, the context, and the people involved. However, when the separate pieces are all put together as God fully intended, a much clearer understanding begins to unfold. With this broader interpretive approach, it is possible to make better sense of what God was attempting to accomplish and his reasons behind it. Specifically, the conquest was meant to emphasize a separate and holy people where even the land itself was undefiled. The removal of the Canaanite people along with their pagan practices was a necessary part of the purification process whereby God would establish a people for himself. Ultimately, the conquest fulfilled the promises God had made to Abraham, it served as a tool of judgment against the wickedness of the Canaanites, and it established a line to Christ who would eventually make true redemption available for all who would receive it.

Limitations

This thesis will focus specifically on genocide and is therefore limited in scope though some concepts are interrelated and therefore must be identified and understood. For example, the concept of war in the Old Testament is an interconnected topic and therefore must be a part of

³ Paul D. Hanson, "War and Peace in the Hebrew Bible." *Interpretation* 38, no. 4 (1984): 345.

the research. However, this study will not explore the models and theories of *just war*, nor will it examine *pacifism*. The use of Scripture will primarily be focused upon the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua though some comparison of New Testament texts will be necessary in order to show the continuity and unity of the entire Bible.

Scope of Research

Research for this thesis has come primarily through the compilation of scholarly resources. This exploration and discovery of material has been accomplished in large part through internet databases including ATLA, ProQuest, Ebscohost, WorldCat, and Liberty University's Digital Commons. Scholarly journals were accessed through the Liberty University library system as well as a variety of online subscriptions such as *Bibliotheca Sacra* from Dallas Theological Seminary and *The Master's Seminary Journal*. Research was conducted through the Cleveland Library System and the Lorain County Library System, both of which allow the sharing and transferring of resources along with the ability to perform interlibrary loans.

CHAPTER 2

THE JUSTIFICATION FOR TAKING THE LAND

Introduction

The justification for taking the land revolves largely around God's promises to Israel—first through Abraham and later through Moses. It is therefore impossible to gain a clear understanding of the conquest without first considering what God was attempting to accomplish, not only through his elect, but also in the world at large. There were several key elements at play with the conquest. The first relates to the unique relationship between Israel and God and the fulfillment of his promises to them. The second has to do with his judgment of the pagan nations who were in possession of the land God has promised to his people. The third is preventative in nature and relates to God's expectations for Israel.

The Election of Israel

The first justification for taking the land has to do with the election of Israel. Initially, the election of Israel may seem unrelated to the issue of genocide. However, election provides the foundation for God's plan of redemption and the conquest of the Promised Land is but one element of that scheme. Ultimately, the election of Israel is what gives the people their divine approval for taking the land. This was not a situation where Israel was selfishly taking a land which was not rightfully theirs to possess. Rather, they were being used and directed by God as the conduit through whom God would work his plan—part of which involved the judgment of other nations. On a practical level, if the component of election is missing from the genocide

argument, then inevitably the method will become the focus. However, the Abrahamic Covenant should be in full view as the framework for the conquest.

This concept of election is unmistakably identified in Scripture.⁴ However, the reason why Israel was the recipient of God's favor is not so clear. The idea that God chose Israel because they were morally better than other nations is not supported by Scripture. In fact the Old Testament almost seems to put the failure of Israel on display as an indication that other factors were clearly in play. Moses goes so far as to say of the elect in Deuteronomy 9:24: "You have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you."

It also was not the size or strength of Israel that influenced God's decision. Deuteronomy 7:7 says: "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples." Scripture seems clear that God did not choose the people of Israel because of something they had done or even because of who they were. Rather, he chose them out of his abundant grace based upon the covenant he had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut. 10:15).

So why was Israel chosen? God did single this nation out but he did so with expectation.⁵ First of all, God sovereignly chose Israel to be the conduit of his revelation. Deuteronomy 4:7-8 specifies Israel as the nation through whom God's statutes and righteous judgments originate. Paul affirms this responsibility in Romans 3:1-2 when he says that the oracles of God were committed to them. In this way, Israel was God's chosen channel through whom the Word of God would come to mankind. Hence almost all of the human authors of Scripture were Jewish.

⁴ Deut. 4:37; 7:6-8; 14:2; 26:18.

⁵ God chose Israel out of the other nations (Deut. 14:2; 4:37; 7:6-7; 10:15). The Israelites were to be his people (Deut. 4:20; 7:6; 26:18; 27:9; 28:9-10; 29:13; 9:26, 29; 21:8; 26:15). Israel was to be a holy nation (Deut. 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; 28:9). T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 175.

Second, in a culture of polytheism, Israel was chosen to reveal the one true God. Isaiah 43:11-12 states: “I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior. I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you; and you are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and I am God.” Israel was meant to be a light among all nations that would point to the one true God (Deut. 14:2; Isa. 42:6; 43:21; 60:3; Lk. 2:32).

Third, Israel was chosen in order to establish the line through whom the Messiah would come. From the opening pages of Scripture (Gen. 3:15), the message of the Bible is one of redemption. This is reinforced by the prophets as they signal the coming Messiah. However, both the Savior and his salvation came through the Jews (Isa. 11:1; Rom. 9:5; Jn. 4:22).

Fourth, Israel was chosen to introduce the concept of the prophet-priest relationship (Ex. 19:6). It was only through this means that Israel would come to know God and become a blessing to all nations. It was through Israel that the idea of a mediator between God and man became apparent which paved the way for understanding how Christ would make peace with God and allow for a fully open and grace-filled relationship with mankind (1 Tim. 2:5).

The Land as a Gift

A second justification for taking the land has to do with the land itself. Today many Christians refer to the estate of Israel as the *Holy Land*, and this is because it was by definition “set apart.” The land and its people were meant to be unique; both the land and the people were intended for God’s special purposes. Gary Burge states: “It is a gift that has expectations for covenant holiness and justice. God is watching this land. He has personal expectations for this land. It is a land that should evoke memories of his own holiness.”⁶ It has already been established that Israel did not merit its election. But according to Deuteronomy 9:6, the land was

⁶ Gary M. Burge, *Jesus and the Land* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 4.

also undeserved: “Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people.” Peter Craigie goes so far as to say: “If, in fact, the gift of the land was to be contingent upon the righteousness of the people, it was a gift that would never be received.”⁷ It was God who chose Israel, not Israel who chose God and it was God who chose to give Israel the land, not some reckless pursuit by the nation to enlarge their territory.

In comparison to other countries, Israel is quite small. In fact, it is only slightly larger than the state of New Jersey, the fifth smallest state in America. That being the case, it would be easy to dismiss the nation of Israel as insignificant. Yet a day does not go by where Israel is not in the news. How is it that such a small country could possess a global presence? Why is the real estate of Israel something that men continue to fight over?

In Genesis 12 God calls Abram to leave his country and go to the *land* that would be shown to him. By faith, Abram obeys and God makes an unconditional covenant with him which is revealed in verses 2 and 3: “And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” This covenant was initiated by God and consisted of three aspects: land, seed, and blessing. The importance of this covenant cannot be understated:

From an interpretive standpoint, the Abrahamic covenant is the single most important event in the Old Testament. It governs God’s entire program for Israel and the nations and is thus determinative of God’s program in history. The Abrahamic covenant is foundational to all of Scripture. It is the key to both the Old and New Testaments and is foundational to the whole program of redemption. All subsequent revelation is the outworking of this covenant. This covenant, and the subsequent covenant framework, is the key to understanding Scripture.⁸

⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 193.

⁸ Mal Couch, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 27.

The Abrahamic covenant itself demonstrates that Israel was meant to be set apart from all other nations. Up to this point there was no law—God had been silent. But now it is as if God is starting over with Abraham as the first piece of cleaning up the mess man had made of the world. The promise to Abraham was that all nations would be impacted through him and this is something that continues to this day. The promise, however, did not only set a people apart, it also set apart a land. Thus the Promised Land became a central component, not only of history, but also as a part of the larger story of redemption. It is within the borders of this land that the ultimate redeemer would be born. Furthermore, Christ will reign during the Millennial Kingdom from Mount Zion in Jerusalem. A line, therefore, can be drawn from the Abrahamic covenant all the way through to the future Millennial Kingdom and it all pivots on the land.

When it comes to the land, it is important to understand that God is the owner. He is the creator, and thus the titleholder of all land, but in this case he allocates, or sets apart a portion of the land for his elect. God as proprietor, gifts the land to his elect, the boundaries of which are specified in Genesis 15:18-21. Ironically, this is not the only time God gifted land. Walter Kaiser points out: “The Emim, the Horites, and the Zamzummim had been dispossessed and destroyed by the Lord (Deut. 2:9, 12, 21), and their lands had been divinely given to Moab, Edom, and Ammon, just as Israel had similarly received Canaan from his hands.”⁹ God was the owner of the land, and it was his to disperse as indicated in Leviticus 25:23: “The land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers.”

That the land was a gift cannot be missed: “Sixty-nine times, the writer of Deuteronomy repeated the pledge that Israel would one day ‘possess’ and ‘inherit’ the land promised to her” and “in some twenty-five references, the land was called a gift from Yahweh (Deut. 1:20, 25;

⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 94.

2:29; 3:20; 4:40; 5:16).”¹⁰ God is the giver of every good gift (Jam. 1:17) and in the book of Deuteronomy, this includes “blessings (12:15), flocks and herds (12:21), crops and rain (11:14-15), towns (13:12), gates (16:5), and sons and daughters (28:53).”¹¹ The land therefore plays a special role in the development of God’s program with Israel. Not only was it the fulfillment of promise but it illustrates the grace of God who freely bestows his salvation.

The land is distinctive because it was set apart for God’s purposes. No other parcel of land features this attribute. In many ways both the election of Israel and the gifting of the land parallel the tithe requirements of the law. God expected a portion to be set aside and given to him. Here, out of all the people groups, God selects Israel and sets them aside. Then out of all the land territories, God divides up a plot of land and sets it aside for his purposes. Both the people and the land are meant to be his and are meant to be holy. In this way the land is not simply related to occupation but rather to relationship.¹² This special relationship is important because though both the people and the land itself were chosen, the Israelites did not yet occupy that land. However, the land would be possessed, in some cases through the act of what would come to be known as “holy war”—a path that would culminate in the redemption of mankind.

To Judge the Canaanites

Scripture provides a third justification for taking the land in the middle of Deuteronomy 9:5: “Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations...” As part of his redemptive program, God intended to use the Israelites as his agents of justice against the pagan Canaanite

¹⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹¹ Norman C. Habel, *The Land is Mine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 40.

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 45.

people. As the first part of the verse points out, this certainly did not stem from the righteousness of the Israelites. They too deserved God's hand of justice. Daniel Gard makes this remark: "It is divine mercy in that the human family is allowed to continue to exist."¹³ Ronald Goetz points out that "Israel is helped in *spite* of her sins, while the Canaanites are destroyed *because* of theirs."¹⁴ Israel was not chosen and preserved based upon her moral superiority; rather, the culpability of the Canaanite's sin had amassed over the previous several hundred years to the point where God's justice had to be meted out. The Canaanites had been given ample time to repent of their sins and turn to God but eventually it got to the point where the time for judgment became imminent. Biblical history, including the history of Israel, demonstrates those breaking points where God finally says, "Enough!" From the human perspective, a tension does exist in that the timing of God's judgment is not always on the same timetable that one might expect. Other nations also deserved God's judgment yet they did not always receive it in the same way or with the same timing as did the Canaanites. However, the lesson remains that God holds all nations responsible for their wickedness and all will stand under his judgment.

On the other hand, history also demonstrates a willingness on God's part to work with those nations who reveal a repentant spirit. Jeremiah 18:7-8 makes this clear: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it." In other words, if the Canaanites had turned from their evil ways at any point, then God would have relented in his judgment. The conquest then was not human

¹³ Daniel L. Gard, "A Response to Eugene H. Merrill," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 104.

¹⁴ Ronald Goetz, "Joshua, Calvin, and Genocide." *Theology Today* 32, no. 3 (1975): 266.

genocide; it was divine judgment.¹⁵ This does not make the conquest less bloody or gruesome. However, placing the conquest narratives within the framework of judgment does change how they are viewed. Christopher Wright explains:

Punishment changes the moral context of violence. We can see this in other situations in life that involved violence at some level. There is a huge moral difference between violence that is arbitrary or selfish and violence that is inflicted under strict control within the moral framework of punishment. This is true in human society as much as in divine perspective. Whatever personal codes of parental discipline, there is surely a moral difference between a smack administered as punishment for disobedience and vicious or random child abuse. Similarly, there is a moral difference between the enforced captivity of someone imprisoned as punishment under due process of law for a defined criminal offence and the captivity of someone kidnapped as a hostage for no offence whatsoever.¹⁶

Among other characteristics, the holiness of God is put on display through the conquest. This feature of God's nature is found throughout the Old Testament (Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; Josh. 24:19; 1 Sam. 2:2; 6:20; Ps. 22:3; 99:3, 5, 9; Isa. 5:16; 6:3; 57:15) but it emerges as a major aspect in the war narratives. Walter Kaiser notes: "God's anger and wrath are his legitimate expressions of his abhorrence of all that is sinful, wrong, unjust, and against his very nature and being. God did not flare up with impetuosity against the Canaanites, but gave them centuries and millennia to get the point and right the wrong. In the end, he had to act or he would not be holy, just, righteous, and fair."¹⁷

The judgment of the Canaanites is an essential element of God's character and response toward sin and thus has critical significance in his redemptive plan. Gard makes this observation in regard to the final judgment: "He returns as the righteous Judge who speaks the final word of judgment on the living and the dead—and a fierce judgment it is for those who face it apart from

¹⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 93.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

¹⁷ Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan*, 110.

him. The final judgment with its utter destruction of the heavens and the earth and all those at enmity with God makes the most bloody warfare narratives of the Old Testament seem like children's bedtime stories."¹⁸ The reality is that all people stand guilty before God and are subject to his justice. All are in need of his grace and all are offered the opportunity for redemption.

The Wickedness of the Canaanites

The term "genocide" is probably not the best term to use when referring to the conquest of the Canaanites. It is true that God commanded Joshua to kill off the inhabitants of the land so in the technical sense, "genocide" is accurate terminology. However, the word has come to have racial connotations and is often equated with ethnic cleansing. It is with these concepts in mind that Atheist Richard Dawkins concludes: "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."¹⁹ While there is much to dispute in this characterization, in keeping on point with the topic, it should be stated that the conquest of Canaan was never justified on the basis of race. Rather, God used one nation as his agent to judge a wicked and perverse culture—an act God would use against Israel as well in the future.

The judgment of wickedness is a recurring theme of the Old Testament. Though the conquest episodes bear a unique utilization of Israel in the process of judging others, the fact that God judged sin is not a new concept. As early as Genesis 6, worldwide judgment is introduced in

¹⁸ Daniel L. Gard, "A Response to C. S. Cowles," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 56.

¹⁹ Dawkins, 31.

the form of a flood: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.’” The destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah is yet another example of God’s justice and judgment in action: “Then the Lord said, ‘Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know.’”²⁰

When it comes to the sin of the Canaanites, a description of “wicked” is certainly fitting:²¹ Deuteronomy 12:29-31 provides this description:

When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, “How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.” You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.

I Kings 14:24 also reflects a similar tone and message: “And there were also male cult prostitutes in the land. They did according to all the abominations of the nations that the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.”

The practices of the Canaanites included every form of incest, adultery, child sacrifice, homosexuality, and bestiality (Lev. 18:6-23).²² The emphasis on sexual acts stemmed from the

²⁰ Genesis 18:20-21

²¹ Other references include: Lev. 18:24-25, 20:22-24, Deut. 9:5, 18:9-14, 1 Kgs. 21:26, 2 Kgs. 16:3, 21:2, Heb. 11:31.

²² Leviticus 18-19 contains a comprehensive list of sins which the Israelites were not to commit. However, according to Lev. 18:27 and 20:23, this was also a list of the sins of the Canaanites. Hence, the land was defiled.

belief that the ground's fertility depended upon sexual relations between the gods. Bernard Anderson states: "When the rains came and the earth and water mingled, the mysterious powers of fertility stirred again. New life was resurrected after the barrenness of winter. This astonishing revival of nature, people believed, was due to sexual intercourse between Baal and his partner, Baalath."²³ The rain and crops the people received were viewed in direct correlation with the fertility of their gods. However, the people also played a role as they believed they could offer assistance to the gods with their own deviant behavior.

The name Baal means "lord" or "owner" and occurs about 90 times in the Old Testament as a reference to a god.²⁴ Though not the supreme deity in the Canaanite religion, Baal was certainly the most well-known. He is prominently featured in the Ugaritic texts and is presented in the Old Testament as the principle threat to the God of the Hebrews. The worship of Baal can be seen as increasingly problematic for the Israelites during the time of Gideon (Judg. 6:25, 31) and again during the reign of Ahab (1 Kgs. 16:31-33). The latter reference is of particular significance because Baal was known as the storm god. In the broad sense, Baal was the "giver of all fertility."²⁵ This certainly had a sexual component to it, but in this passage the issue was drought. In a land that was dependent upon the rain for its fertility, the temptation for the Israelites to call upon the *storm god* was especially enticing. The ensuing contest between Elijah and the prophets on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs. 18:20-40) demonstrated the superiority of Yahweh over the god Baal.

²³ Bernhard W. Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament* (London: Longmans, 1968), 103.

²⁴ K. van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible DDD* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 132.

²⁵ William Foxwell Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 74.

Three goddesses, Astarte, Anath, and Asherah were the most common of the Canaanite female deities, each of whom were principally concerned with sex and war with sex as their primary function.²⁶ However, in spite of their sordid sexual relationships, these deities are also depicted for their violent nature. In an attempt to avenge Baal's death, Anat is portrayed in this way as she responds to his killer:

She seizes the Godly Mot—
 With sword she doth cleave him.
 With fan she doth winnow him—
 With fire she doth burn him.
 With hand-mill she grinds him—
 In the field she doth sow him.
 Birds eat his remnants,
 Consuming his portions,
 Flitting from remnant to remnant.”²⁷

The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* describes the goddess Anath as a “fierce, invincible warrior, slaughtering people, tying their heads and hands to her person, wading knee deep in the blood and gore of those she has slain, and reveling in fighting and destruction.”²⁸

The relationships within the Canaanite pantheon can be appropriately described as highly sexual in nature. Baal is presented as having sex with his mother Asherah,²⁹ his sister Anat, and his daughter Pidray.³⁰ In each case, these incestuous relationships are not cast in a negative light. As a religion of fertility, the Canaanite gods were involved with all kinds of deviant sexual behavior including temple sex, child sacrifice, homosexuality, and bestiality. For example,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁷ James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 140.

²⁸ David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary. Vol.1, A-C* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 226.

²⁹ James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: Supplementary Texts and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 519.

³⁰ William Foxwell Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1968), 145.

Inanna, a god known as the Queen of Heaven, “became the patron of eroticism and sensuality, of conjugal love as well as adultery, of brides and prostitutes, transvestites and pederasts.”³¹

Furthermore, Baal’s escapades are captured in “The Baal Cycle” poem:

Mightiest Baal hears
He makes love with a heifer in the outback
A cow in the field of Death’s Realm.
He lies with her seventy times seven
Mounts eighty times eight
[She conceiv]es and bears a boy.”³²

It really should not be surprising that such aberrant sexual behavior would be found among the Canaanite people since the gods they worshiped practiced such deviancy themselves.

The religion of the Canaanite people is described by Scripture in several ways. It is said to be evil (Judg. 2:11, 10:6, 1 Kgs. 22:52-53) and an abomination (Deut. 7:25-26, 20:18). Exodus 34:15 and Judges 2:17 go so far as to speak of their acts in terms of “whoring.” Then Deuteronomy 12:31 includes the words “for even” as an indicator of just how serious those abominations had become—even to the point of sacrificing children.

Another point to be made is that God did not single out the Canaanites for judgment. The examples of a worldwide flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah have already been cited, but God threatened the same judgment against Israel as he had against the Canaanites, which demonstrates how race was not the issue. The God who judged the Canaanites would also exact the same judgment upon the Israelites should they fall into the same sins. Deuteronomy 28:25-68 is one such passage that outlines the extent of this threat which includes being defeated in war, experiencing sickness and disease, and suffering through times of famine.

³¹ Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 57.

³² Mark S. Smith, trans. *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997), 148.

Sadly, this was not just an idle threat. Repeatedly, throughout the Old Testament, God acts in judgment against Israel. Ironically, the same language that described the conquest episodes (“destroy”, “drive out”, “scatter”) is the same language employed to depict how God dealt with sinful Israel.³³ Christopher Wright points out that “over the whole history of Old Testament Israel, far more generations of Israelites felt the judgment of God at the hands of their enemies than a single generation of Canaanites experienced the judgment of God at the hands of the Israelites.”³⁴

The Response of the Canaanites

Numbers 14:18 is one of many verses that stresses the patience of God: “The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.” There is no question that God was patient in the case of the Canaanites. Genesis 15:16 reads: “And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”³⁵ Here God had predicted to Abram that the Canaanites would be judged but not before his justice absolutely required it. God did eventually fulfill his word to Abram through Joshua but not until some 600 years later!³⁶

³³ The same language was employed against Israel as demonstrated in Deut. 4:27, 7:4, 28:64; Eze. 22:15, 25:7; Neh. 1:8; Isa. 36:10; Jer. 15:6-7, 27:10, 15; Hos. 9:15.

³⁴ Wright, 95-96.

³⁵ “The Canaanites may best be described as the inhabitants of the land of Canaan. They should not be thought of as a race in modern terms. People in ancient times were identified by the political group to which they belonged—city, tribe, clan, or state. The land of Canaan, which was never politically unified in the historical period, contained citizens of various political groups living side by side with aliens and stateless persons.” The term Canaanites is often a generalized reference without specifying ethnic relationships. Genesis 36:2 says that among the Canaanite wives of Esau is a Hittite, a Hivite, and an Ishmaelite. Ezekiel 16:3 says of Israel: “Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite.” Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 586.

Even in a culture of unspeakable wickedness, the patience of God must be noted. The Old Testament demonstrates a pattern of delayed judgment, in spite of guilt, in order to allow the opportunity for repentance. According to 1 Peter 3:20, this was true of the flood judgment during the time of Noah: “Because they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.” This was also the case for the city of Nineveh. Instead of destroying the inhabitants of this city, God sent Jonah to call for their repentance. Though Jonah did not agree that the people deserved an opportunity to turn from their sin, according to Jonah 3:10, God was merciful to the Ninevites when they turned to him. The same could be said for Rahab who was saved during the invasion of Jericho.

It is always precarious to speculate how God would have responded in any given situation. However, as previously noted, the pattern of Scripture and the character of God seem to indicate that if the Canaanites had turned to God in a state of repentance that he would have acted favorably toward them. How that scenario would play out in light of God’s election of Israel, his gifting of the land, and his overall plan of redemption would also be altogether hypothetical. However, this turning to God never took place. In fact, the response of Rahab seems to contrast the response of the Canaanites. According to Hebrews 11:31, Rahab aligned herself with Israel in an act of faith: “By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.” In this case, even a prostitute was spared apparently because there was some level of faith and repentance. Richard Hess says of Rahab’s rescue: “Rahab switched her allegiance from Canaan and its deities to

³⁶ Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan*, 102. Others, such as McConville and Lamb, mark this date as 400 years. J. Gordon McConville, and Stephen N. Williams, *The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary: Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 117. David T. Lamb, *God Behaving Badly* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), 41.

Israel and the God of Israel.”³⁷ On the other hand, those who perished are simply known as “disobedient.”

Joshua 5:1 reveals that the hearts of the Amorites and Canaanites “melted” leaving no “spirit in them” after they had heard how God had parted the waters of the Jordan River. In spite of this, Joshua 9:1-2 indicates that their response was not to repent but to fight. It is one thing to think that the kings and rulers were simply defending themselves against being unfairly attacked. However, it is clear that they understood it was God who had led the Israelites across the Jordan and into battle. In this way, their battle was not against Israel—it was against God. It was their god against Israel’s God and surrender or repentance from their perspective was not an option. The story of Rahab demonstrates God’s willingness to be merciful but the response of the Canaanites reveals that God will enact his justice upon those who resist him.

To Keep Israel from Worshiping Other Gods

A final justification for taking the land was preventative in nature. McConville says: “Joshua’s action was designed to be the decisive step towards establishing in the land a people that would be holy and conduct itself in ways that would be a witness to the beauty of divine justice, compassion, and, ultimately, peace.”³⁸ The Canaanites, however, were living lives that promoted the opposite of what God desired. Alexander contends that “a major factor was their idolatrous worship and its associated practices.”³⁹ The annihilation of the inhabitants then was commanded not only to judge their wickedness but also in order to protect the Israelites from

³⁷ Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 45.

³⁸ McConville, 122.

³⁹ Alexander, *From Paradise*, 180.

their pagan practices. The passages that indicate God's directive may seem overly harsh but a complete purging of the land was necessary in order to remove the sin. Deuteronomy 7:2-5 states:

And when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.⁴⁰

Throughout Israelite history, the issue of idolatry would surface over and over again. This struggle is referenced in Joshua 24:14: "Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord." Idolatry was a problem in Egypt that followed the children of Israel after the Exodus. While in the desert, God gives Moses the Ten Commandments, the first of which centered on this temptation:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The need for this command was made evident by God's command for Moses to proceed back down the mountain in Exodus 32:2-6. In this passage, Aaron listens to the concerns of the people and responds by forging a golden calf out of their jewelry. He then proceeds to declare this to be the god who brought them up out of Egypt. It took no time at all for the Israelites to revert to what they knew. Even after their experience of watching God deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians through the ten plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, still they fall back into their patterns of behavior. This is a reminder that the children of Israel did not leave Egypt

⁴⁰ See also Deut. 7:25-26, 16:21-22, 18:14, 20:16-18, Josh. 9:24, 11:11.

as an organized nation who was ready to follow the one true God; rather, they were starting a journey and they needed forty years in the wilderness as a time of preparation for what they would encounter in the Promised Land.

Ironically, in this passage that describes their worship of the golden calf, they too faced severe consequences for their idolatry. Initially Moses takes action in verses 25-28 by instructing the sons of Levi to exercise judgment which resulted in the deaths of three thousand men. Moses then pleads with God for the people and God responds in verse 35 by sending a plague because of their worship of the golden calf. This passage of Scripture provides conclusive support for the fact that God hates idolatry. The judgment upon the Canaanites was not an isolated event—even God’s chosen people were punished severely for this deviation and in Israel’s case it was a lesson they had to learn over and over again throughout their history.

God demanded that the Canaanites and all of their possessions were to be destroyed so that the Israelites would not be corrupted by their practices. However, the Israelites allowed for these practices to creep in which would eventually lead to their exile from the land which had been promised to them. The book of Judges is a prime example of what happened as a result of Israel’s failure to fully carry out God’s command. The turbulent events described in this book contrast with the victories of Joshua because the people did not follow through with God’s directives. The Israelites did not drive the inhabitants out of the land and instead decided to live with them. This led to compromise in the form of idolatry and eventually to judgment.

King Solomon is a later example of a person who initially led the nation in serving God and was even given the privilege of building the temple. However, later in life Solomon compromised and allowed himself to be influenced by pagan nations. 1 Kings 11:1-13 chronicles

his downfall by citing the 700 wives and 300 concubines who turned his heart after their gods. The result of not following God with his whole heart was the loss of the kingdom.

Tertullian once said: “The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry. For, although each single fault retains its own proper feature, although it is destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet it is marked off under the general account of idolatry.”⁴¹ It is not surprising then that God chose to place this as the first of the Ten Commandments and it should not come as a surprise that as Moses hands off the reigns to Joshua that he would issue a charge related to idolatry. This exhortation, found in Deuteronomy 30:15-20, challenges the new leader to be careful not to be drawn away by other gods but to fully obey and follow the command of the Lord.

Likewise, Joshua, after the conquest and before his death, issues a call to the Israelites to choose which God/gods they will serve. This dual emphasis, placed directly before and after the conquest, serves to put the issue of idolatry front and center. The response of the people, as indicated in Joshua 24:14-24, is one of unity where they together declare their desire to serve and obey the Lord.

Conclusion

As difficult a task as it is for the contemporary reader to digest the conquest events of the Old Testament, it should be noted that the biblical writers did not seek to solve this problem. In other words, what is a problem for modern scholars to solve was not necessarily a problem for those who were living during that time period. There was a time when Abraham pleaded with God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah but at the time of the conquest no such request is made. God gives specific directives, and the Israelites follow through. The only moral

⁴¹ Tertullian, *On Idolatry* (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2007), 61.

justification is provided by God and repeated several times for emphasis.⁴² Ultimately, the justification for taking the land is set against the broader purpose of God: “The land of Canaan is not just destined by God to be a possession for the Israelites; it is destined to become the scene of corruption reversed and the place where God’s universal holiness shines forth.”⁴³ Beginning with the promise to Abram and culminating in part with the Joshua conquest, the land represents a new beginning when God steps in and commences a program that eventually climaxes with the cross.

Legally, Israel is entitled to the land because of God’s promise. The progression flows in this way: God owns the land. . . God gifts the land. . . God directs the Israelites to enter and possess the land (Gen. 15:18, Lev. 26:42, Deut. 1:8, Josh. 1:6, 1 Kgs. 8:48, Jer. 16:15). The action taken to enter and possess the land is directly related to God’s authority and promise.

In summary, the justification for taking the land contained a moral element—because of the wickedness of the Canaanites, and it contained the fulfillment of a promise. In possessing the land, the Israelites were obeying the command of God which they viewed in direct correlation to his promise. His word was given to their father Abraham and in the conquest they were obeying God’s word which was spoken through Moses and Joshua.

⁴² Deuteronomy 9:5 “Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations...”

⁴³ McConville, 103.

CHAPTER 3

A HOLY WAR

Introduction

Psalm 85:15 describes God as “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” So when a person opens up to Joshua 6:21 and reads “Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword,” the broader context of what God has been doing must be taken into consideration. This is not the approach of famed atheist Christopher Hitchens who writes: “One mutters a few sympathetic words for the forgotten and obliterated Hivites, Canaanites, and Hittites, also presumably part of the Lord’s original creation, who are to be pitilessly driven out of their homes to make room for the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel.”⁴⁴ However, the point of this study is to look at the acts of the conquest from the broader script of God’s narrative. The emphasis, once again, is not so much upon the Israelites but rather upon what God is doing. Yes, God used Israel as his vehicle to accomplish his will in the world but it was *his* will, *his* strategy, and *his* objective.

Understanding the culture of the ancient Near East is an essential component of this study because it puts the conquest into context. *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible* refers to the slavery, polygamy, war, patriarchal structures, kinship, and ethnocentrism of that day as “totally alien” and “utterly unlike” a modern social setting. Bruce Birch goes on to state: “These

⁴⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 99.

texts are rooted in a cultural context utterly unlike our own, with moral presuppositions and categories that are alien and in some cases repugnant to our modern sensibilities.”⁴⁵ While the modern era contains its fair share of wars, the threat today tends to be on a larger, global scale. War in the ancient Near Eastern culture was much more localized and daily threats were more regular in nature. Almost every book of the Hebrew Bible mentions the subject, with the verb “to make war” occurring 164 times and the noun form, “war,” appearing about 320 times.⁴⁶ The sheer number of times the topic occurs demonstrates how commonplace war was so it is not surprising that it would compose such a large part of Israel’s history. Though war was common does not mean it was God’s ideal, however, it was the reality of that period of time. Because of that reality, the Old Testament does not attempt to defend or argue for or against war; rather it assumes and expects them to take place. 2 Samuel 11:1 is an example of this: “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel.” In this culture, spring was not associated with flowers; it was associated with war. It seems that it was a customary routine for the kings to go out to war once the seasons changed and the weather permitted such activity.

War was commonplace in history, not only against Israel but within Israel as well. At times Israel was the aggressor, but often war was not instigated by Israel. For example, during the Exodus, Moses led the Children of Israel out of Egypt toward the Promised Land. This event came after serving as slaves for some 16 generations at the hands of cruel and exploitive task masters.⁴⁷ However, the Israelites, in pursuit of their freedom, found themselves being attacked

⁴⁵ Bruce C. Birch, "Old Testament Ethics," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Leo G. Purdue (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 297.

⁴⁶ Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens, *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 20.

on two fronts: The Egyptians pursued them in an attempt to recapture their slaves, and the Amalekites attacked them simply for entering their region.⁴⁸ Even when the Israelites finally arrived at their eventual destination, the land itself indicated the fact that “warfare was a standard feature of that scene.”⁴⁹ Numbers 13:28 says, “However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there.” Likewise Deuteronomy 1:28 says, “Where are we going up? Our brothers have made our hearts melt, saying, ‘The people are greater and taller than we. The cities are great and fortified up to heaven. And besides, we have seen the sons of the Anakim there.’”

War was normal operating procedure for nations in the ancient Near East and because of this, it became fused to the whole of life as they knew it. Certainly the practice of war does not depict the moral ideals identified in Genesis 1 and 2 when all of creation was said to have been good. Furthermore, the Mosaic Law, according to Hebrews 10:1 was but a “shadow of the good things to come.” But the culture of war during this interval was a moment when God stepped into time and began a program with a specific set of people, which at that moment was filled with dehumanizing practices and social norms.

How God Fought

As a Divine Warrior, God chose to fight on behalf of the Israelites in what is often referred to as “holy war.” The term “holy war” is used quite often by different authors in

⁴⁷ Exodus 1:11-14 ESV "Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves."

⁴⁸ Exodus 17:8-13 describes how God orchestrated a victory over the Amalekites after they had attacked the Israelites at Rephidim.

⁴⁹ McConville, 111.

reference to the wars of conquest. Gerhard von Rad is largely responsible for this terminology and is by far the most referenced scholar on the topic. However, in light of modern day *jihad* and the fact that “holy war” is not found in Scripture, “Yahweh’s war” is preferred, not only to distinguish it from terrorism, but also because these wars were initiated by God himself. That these were “Yahweh’s wars” can be derived from texts such as Ex. 17:16; Num. 21:14; 1 Sam. 17:47; 18:17; 25:28.

Gerhard von Rad has identified some common characteristics that are most often present in what he calls “holy wars”:⁵⁰

1. Blowing the trumpet serves as the call to war (Judg. 6:34f.; 3:27; 1 Sam. 13:3).
2. The Israelites are sanctified through rituals of purity (Josh. 3:5; 1 Sam. 21:5; 2 Sam. 11:11f; Deut. 23:9-14; 2 Sam. 1:21).
3. A sacrifice is offered and/or Yahweh is consulted (1 Sam. 7:9; 13:9-10, 12; Judg. 20:13, 18).
4. The proclamation is exclaimed: “Yahweh has given the enemy into your hand” (Josh. 2:24; 6:2; 6:16; 8:1; 8:18; 10:8; 10:19; Judg. 3:28; 4:7; 4:14; 7:9; 7:15; 18:10; 20:28; 1 Sam. 14:12; 17:46; 23:4; 24:4; 26:8; 1 Kgs. 20:28).
5. The war is declared as “Yahweh’s war” and the enemy as “Yahweh’s enemy” (Judg. 4:14; 5:31; Deut. 20:4; 2 Sam. 5:24).
6. The people are told not to fear (Ex. 14:13f.; Deut. 20:3; Josh. 8:1; 10:8, 25; 11:6; Judg. 7:3; 1 Sam. 23:16-17; 30:6; 2 Sam. 10:12).
7. The enemy loses courage (Ex. 15:14-16; 23:27f.; Deut. 2:25; 11:25; Josh. 2:9, 24; 5:1; 10:2; 11:20; 24:12; 1 Sam. 4:7f.).
8. The battle cry is shouted (Josh. 6:5; Judg. 7:20; 1 Sam. 17:20, 52).
9. Yahweh brings terror upon the enemy (Ex. 23:27; Deut. 7:23; Josh. 10:10; 24:7; Judg. 4:15; 7:22; 1 Sam. 5:11; 7:10; 14:15, 20).
10. The “ban” is enacted (Josh. 6:18f.).

⁵⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, trans. and ed. by Marva Dawn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 41-51.

11. The soldiers are dismissed with the cry, “To your tents, O Israel” (2 Sam. 20:1; 1 Kgs. 12:16).

In Yahweh War, God sometimes held the role of sole warrior with the Israelites being somewhat passive in the process while at other times they were active combatants. The idea of a holy war was not a foreign concept during this time period as other Near Eastern groups also believed that their gods would act on their behalf. Roland de Vaux explains: “Among all the peoples of antiquity, war was linked with religion. It was begun at the command of the gods, or at least with their approval, manifested by omens; it was accompanied by sacrifices, and conducted with the help of the gods who ensured victory, for which they were thanked by an offering of part of the booty. In antiquity, then, every war was a holy war, in a broad sense.”⁵¹ Israel, however, was different than her neighbors. While other nations fought for their gods, in Israel’s case, God fought for them and in some cases Israel did not actively fight at all. At other times, the people of Israel are told by direct command to take possession of the land and they are to be the agents by which the warring is to take place. In both cases God fights for Israel and gives the victory. Even after Israel has battled, the credit goes to God for the success. For example, Joshua 24:12-13 says: “And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant.” That God was the one who fought is emphasized in several other passages such as Amos 2:9 which speaks of the destruction of the mighty Amorites and Psalm 78:53-55 which describes the way God drove the nations out of the land.

⁵¹ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 258.

Actively

Many times throughout Israel's history, God "actively" fought on behalf of the people. These holy wars can be described as active because they were ones in which the people of Israel did relatively little, if anything, to obtain success over their enemies. Probably the best example of God fighting actively on behalf of his people, and what can be classified as the most important holy war, is the Exodus. Even Jews today continue to celebrate the Exodus with the Passover meal because it serves as the prime illustration of God rescuing and delivering them from the hands of their enemies.

The climax of this narrative is when Pharaoh gathers together his army and prepares to go to war against the children of Israel in an effort to recapture his slave workers. The people of Israel are at this point homeless and have nothing with which to defend themselves, but it is at this moment when God fights for his people. Moses, in Exodus 15:13-14 says to the people: "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent." In this case, the people of Israel did no fighting whatsoever—their only job was to trust God and allow him to be the sole warrior against their enemy, the Egyptians. By God's action alone the enemy was defeated as he miraculously parted the waters of the Red Sea, allowing the Israelites to cross over on dry ground, and then closing the waters over the Egyptian soldiers.

The events of the Exodus are encapsulated in a worship song titled "The Song of the Sea" which can be dated as early as the twelfth century B.C.⁵² In this song found in Exodus 15:1-21, the language of war is employed to describe what God had done for them: "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea."

⁵² Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1980), 47.

Though the deliverance from the Egyptians is the most well-known and celebrated instance of God fighting for his people, it is not the only time such an event occurred. The battle at Jericho in Joshua 6 is an example of where both active and complementary elements are present, however, the work of God is highly emphasized as the key to their success. The people were instructed to walk around the walls of the city once a day for six days and then seven times on the final day. God then responded by causing the walls to fall down, after which the Israelites destroyed the city. In this case God was active in providing access to the fortified city but he was complementary in giving the Israelites the ability to successfully conquer it.

In 1 Samuel 7, the Philistines went up against Israel in war. Verse 10 describes God's intervention with these words: "But the Lord thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were routed before Israel." The Israelites then pursued and engaged the Philistines in battle.

2 Kings 6 describes a unique situation when the Syrians had been warring against Israel. The king of Syria decided to confront Elisha by surrounding the city of Dothan in hopes that he could capture the prophet and thereby keep information from reaching the king of Israel. The king of Syria did not end up fighting against Israel, however, because God fought for them by striking the people with blindness.

The account in 2 Kings 19, regarding King Sennacherib's army, is likely the largest recorded loss by the hand of the Lord. Verse 35 reads: "And that night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies." Again, this is an event that is entirely orchestrated by the Lord as he fights for his people.

In 2 Chronicles 20 a time is recorded when the Moabites and Ammonites had prepared for battle against King Jehoshaphat and the people of Judah. In verse 17, God gives them the following assurance: “You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.” The next day God confused the men of Moab and the men of Ammon so that they ended up fighting against each other. Verse 24 reports the result: “When Judah came to the watchtower of the wilderness, they looked toward the horde, and behold, there were dead bodies lying on the ground; none had escaped.”

Though some of these scenarios are difficult to characterize as being strictly active or complementary, there is no question that God acted on behalf of his people. Even in the conquest of Jericho, God provided the means for their success and ensured their victory. The Divine Warrior not only commanded and directed the Israelites in war, at times he actively fought for them without any need for participation on their part.

Complementary

More often than not, the Israelites were responsible for engaging the enemy in war. However, even when God did not actively do the fighting in place of Israel, it is evident that he worked behind the scenes in order to ensure their victory. This is very apparent in both the loss and the victory against the city of Ai. Joshua 7 records the Israelite defeat as they went up against this city without the hand of the Lord being upon them due to the sin of Achan. Being overconfident, they attacked Ai without consulting the Lord and ended up losing thirty-six men. However, after reconciling with God and being assured by him of their victory, they again attacked the city which was given to them. This time, as recorded in Joshua 8:25-25, they struck down 12,000 people from the city. In this case, God clearly caused both the loss and the success

of each battle. However, the Israelites still came up with a strategy, engaged the enemy, and actually fought the war on the ground in hand-to-hand combat.

Judges 4 provides another example of God providing victory over the enemies of Israel yet doing so in a complementary manner. In this case, the text says that God routed the enemy into the path of Barak's men allowing the army of Sisera to be defeated. Behind the scenes, God worked to ensure the victory but it was still up to the people to fight and to enact the will of the Lord. However, in spite of the work of the people, the success is credited to the Lord as indicated in verse 23: "So on that day God subdued Jabin the king of Canaan before the people of Israel."

Gideon, in Judges 7 goes up against the Midianites in battle. He started with 22,000 soldiers but God whittled them down to 300 before they engaged the enemy against impossible odds. Verse 12 puts it this way: "And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance." Nonetheless, God told Gideon that he had given the enemy camp into his hands so Gideon formulated a plan, engaged the enemy, and defeated the host of Midian.

The familiar story of David and Goliath is yet another example of God fighting for his people in a complementary manner. Here is a situation where the odds are completely stacked in the enemy's favor yet a young shepherd boy is able to go up against a warrior giant and gain the victory. 1 Samuel 17:46 makes the point that killing this giant is not simply a stroke of luck: "This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand." Yet while the Lord is involved in bringing success to the battle, David was the active participant. He had to have the courage to step up, he had to formulate a strategy, gather his weaponry (a slingshot and five smooth stones), and he had to engage the enemy. In this case, as with all the other example types, the people were active

participants. God was still involved and still ensured success but it was done in tandem with their action and obedience.

The Ban

The concept of the “ban” comes from the Hebrew root *hrm* which occurs 80 times in the Old Testament. Of those incidences, the verb form *haram* is found 51 times and the noun form *herem* is found 29 times. The verb is most commonly translated as “to devote to the Lord” or “to devote to destruction” or “to completely destroy,” while the noun can mean “devoted things” or “destruction.” Brown-Driver-Briggs says of the verbal form: “[to] ban or devote, especially religiously, followed by objects hostile to the theocracy; this involved generally their destruction; when a city was ‘devoted’ the inhabitants were put to death, the spoil being destroyed or not accusative to the gravity of the occasion. . . . most often of devoting to destruction cities of Canaanites and other neighbors of Israel, exterminating inhabitants and destroying or appropriating their possessions.”⁵³ Wilson defines the word as “a total separation to certain respects from which is cannot be redeemed.”⁵⁴ VanGemenen cites the story of Jericho as a clear example of utter destruction since the entire city is called a devoted thing (Josh. 6:17). However, he distinguishes between its uses. The verb form “involves [the] consecration of something or someone as a permanent and definitive offering for the sanctuary; or in war, the consecration of a city and its inhabitants to destruction.”⁵⁵ Thus, the verb form of the word refers to the total annihilation of the enemy during a war (Deut. 7:2; Josh. 6:21). The noun form also refers to the

⁵³ Francis Brown, Edward Robinson, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, and Francis Brown, *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979), 355.

⁵⁴ William Wilson, *Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies* (McLean: MacDonald, 1978), 123.

⁵⁵ Willem VanGemenen, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 276.

act of consecration but does not usually refer to the extermination of human beings (Lev. 27:21; Josh. 6:17-18). Rather, he explains: “It involves the exclusion of an object from the use or abuse of humanity and its irrevocable surrender to God. Surrendering something to God meant devoting it to the service of God or putting it under utter destruction.”⁵⁶ Gerd Ludemann makes this observation:

The Hebrew word for “ban” belongs in the semantic field of the holy, hallowed, which in fact justifies the translation ‘consecration to destruction’. It is then the negative side of the holy, the content of which is making something inaccessible to general use, whereas the better known Hebrew expression for the holy, *qds*, indicates its positive qualities, those to be preserved. Thus a person could consecrate an animal or a field to Yahweh and these might then no longer be put to normal use.⁵⁷

In the context of war, when *herem* was declared, everything within a city was destroyed—whether it be men, women, children, livestock, or material possessions. However, it was not just for the sake of destruction, it was also an offering, a giving-back to the Lord what was rightfully his.

The first occurrence of the word is found in Exodus 22:20 with an emphasis on the person who is presenting sacrifices to a god other than Yahweh. Chapter 27 of the book of Leviticus uses the term six times—twice for the verb and four times for the noun. These verses demonstrate that items classified as property such as a field (Lev. 27:21) could be set apart for sacred use.⁵⁸ Leviticus 27:28 also shows that a person could be placed under *herem* and separated out for the Lord. Up until this point and including Numbers 18:14, the term functions in relation to the priesthood and/or worship. It is used to designate something as sacred and carries with it a connection to holiness. However, the first usage of the word in the context of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 277.

⁵⁷ Gerd Ludemann, *The Unholy in Holy Scripture*, trans. by John Bowden (London: SCM, 1997), 40.

⁵⁸ Gold and silver were also set apart for sacred use in Joshua 6:17-18.

war occurs in Numbers 21:1-3. The Israelites ask Yahweh if they can invoke *herem* upon a Canaanite king who had fought against them and captured some of their people. God accepted the Israelite's vow so they *devoted* the enemy and their cities to *destruction*. Throughout the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua, *herem* is almost always used in similar fashion as a reference to the destruction of the Canaanites. In Deuteronomy, "every instance of the use of the term is associated with matters of national security, whether directly in matters of warfare or indirectly by those who violate the covenant and thus expose the community to the displeasure of God."⁵⁹ In Joshua, the term is used 27 times, 14 as a verb, 13 as a noun, and always in the context of war. As indicated previously, however, war was not the only context for *herem* and even in war the purpose remains the same: Someone or something devoted to *herem* was to become a possession of Yahweh and withdrawn from use. In some cases this meant total destruction while in other cases the possessions were given over to the priests for divine use.

The rules of the "ban" sometimes varied, and at times a limited amount of information is provided in the text. At times a reason for the *herem* is provided as in Numbers 21:23-24 and Deuteronomy 2:30-35; 7:2-6. In other cases only the command or description of its fulfillment is found (Josh. 6:17, 21; 8:24-29; 10:28, 30, 31-32, 35, 37, 39, 40). Sometimes what is to be destroyed is specifically stated. For example, 1 Samuel 15:3 identifies "man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."⁶⁰ At times the Israelites were to burn everything in the city (Deut. 7:25) while in other situations everything was to be burned except for the silver and gold (Josh. 6:24). In Deuteronomy 2:34-35, the livestock was not to be destroyed, however, in other cases the destruction of all living creatures is commanded (Josh. 10:28, 37, 39, 40).

⁵⁹ T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 385.

⁶⁰ See also 1 Sam. 22:19; Deut. 2:34; Josh. 6:21.

The two key uses for the word *herem* can be depicted from a few prominent passages. Leviticus 27:28 and Deuteronomy 7:26 use the term in the realm of setting something apart for the Lord. The exception, in these passages, is the pagan idols which have no place with God and must be destroyed. Leviticus 27:28 shows the positive side of *herem* and refers to things that should be devoted to God: “But no devoted thing that a man devotes to the Lord, of anything that he has, whether man or beast, or of his inherited field, shall be sold or redeemed; every devoted thing is most holy to the Lord.” Deuteronomy 7:26, on the other hand, demonstrates the destructive side of the word: “And you shall not bring an abominable thing into your house and become devoted to destruction like it. You shall utterly detest and abhor it, for it is devoted to destruction.”

The other use of the word *herem* has to do with the thorough extermination of the Canaanites. Joshua 11:14 provides these instructions: “And all the spoil of these cities and the livestock, the people of Israel took for their plunder. But every man they struck with the edge of the sword until they had destroyed them, and they did not leave any who breathed.”

Failing to carry out the “ban” as directed by the Lord had severe consequences. Joshua 7:1 records the sin of Achan: “But the people of Israel broke faith in regard to the devoted things, for Achan the son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things.” In this case, Achan kept some clothing, silver, and gold for himself when it was under the “ban” and should have been devoted solely to Yahweh. As a result of this sin, Achan’s family not only lost their lives but thirty-six others did as well when the people ignorantly attacked the city of Ai.

King Saul is another example of an individual who attempted to make an exception to the “ban.” 1 Samuel 15:9 says: “But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and

of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.” As with Achan, Saul decided to keep for himself what God had commanded to be destroyed/devoted to him in *herem*. As a result, King Saul lost his right to the throne.

It is important to remember what God was attempting to accomplish through the “ban.” Not only was he fulfilling his promise of land but he was also judging the Canaanites in an attempt to remove the sinful practice of idolatry. The “ban” was not a destruction of people per se, but rather a destruction of religious infidelity. The Canaanites, in their opposition to God’s plan, stood in the way of his purposes. At any point they could have repented, and like Rahab saved themselves from destruction. Philip Stern puts it this way: *Herem* was for Israel “a reenactment of creation, a way of achieving a world order in which they could live and thrive.”⁶¹ In other words, God was attempting to reestablish a system in which the people of the earth had a chance at fulfilling their divine destiny.

That God had something deeper in mind can be ascertained by the fact that he repeatedly commands the Israelites to be compassionate based upon their personal experiences as slaves in the land of Egypt (Deut. 15:15; 24:18, 22; Ex. 23:9). These commands stand in contrast to God’s directive of destruction for the Canaanites but can be reconciled by an understanding of what God was attempting to accomplish in the world at that time. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Israelites conducted warfare differently under circumstances that did not relate to the conquest. Deuteronomy 20:10-15 provides warfare instructions for two scenarios as they relate to “all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here” (Deut. 20:15). Verses 10 and 11 describes Israel’s normal battle procedures. First, they were to make an offer of

⁶¹ Philip D. Stern, *The Biblical Herem: A Window on Israel’s Religious Experience* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 219.

peace. The city then could respond in one of two ways. The first alternative was to accept the terms of peace, enter into a vassal type of relationship with Israel, and avoid bloodshed. The second alternative was to reject the offer of peace and instead wage war against the Israelites. Verses 12-15 address the rules of war that governed the Israelites under this second scenario when peace was not an option. In this case, they were to besiege the city and kill every male (presumably because surviving males would be an ongoing threat). However, women, children, cattle, and all the spoil of the city were to be spared and enjoyed as a gift from God. This constituted the normal operating procedures for war, meaning that blood was only to be shed in cases when the terms of peace were rejected.

Alternative Approaches to the Ban

In an attempt to resolve the ethical difficulties presented under the “ban,” a number of viewpoints have been espoused in order to make some sense of this practice. On one side stand those who simply cannot accept the text as it is and therefore attempt to provide an alternative explanation. C. S. Cowles, professor of Bible and theology at Point Loma Nazarene University, argues in this vein for what he refers to as Radical Discontinuity. His lens is one in which the Old Testament is transcended by the New Testament and the conquest accounts in the Old Testament are viewed through the filter of Christ. In this way, all of Scripture, including the holy war accounts, is categorized as pre-Christ, sub-Christ, or anti-Christ. He states: “If we believe that Jesus is truly ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col. 1:15), then we must resist all efforts to defend Old Testament genocidal commands as reflective of the will and character of God.”⁶² This view is problematic because it has negative implications on the authority of Scripture. Furthermore, it overlooks the fact that Christ is also involved in a violent war (Rev. 19:11-15).

⁶² C. S. Cowles, “The Case for Radical Discontinuity,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 36.

Christopher Wright calls this the practice of dissociating God from the issue of war.⁶³ In this case the Israelites are blamed for mistakenly doing something that they thought God had commanded. Rather than God being the initiator, the idea here is that the Israelites took it upon themselves to attack the Canaanites and take over their land. They then went back and wrote the “God commands” into the text making the assumption that their actions were sanctioned by God when in reality they were not. The problem with this view is the fact that God not only commanded the Israelites to war against the Canaanites but he actually did the fighting at times. Furthermore, the Bible makes no attempt to explain or fix the “mistake.” Rather the conquest “is anticipated, commanded, achieved, and remembered as something that accomplished God’s will.”⁶⁴

Perhaps a more common explanation for the “ban” is to explain it in terms of an allegory. This approach to interpretation espouses the idea that when the text presents a difficulty, one must look to find the deeper spiritual meaning. The actual content of the text then does not serve as the determining factor for understanding the meaning of the narrative. In some cases the historicity of events is upheld while in other cases the narrative is strictly viewed as fictional allegory. In both cases, however, the normative interpretation is discarded in favor of a spiritualized version. Origen is perhaps the most well-known proponent of this approach. He would seek to uncover the “secret mysteries” in the Old Testament war accounts concluding that these narratives were representative of heavenly things—more like the spiritual warfare of Ephesians 6.⁶⁵

⁶³ Wright, 82.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 84.

⁶⁵ Origen, Paul Koetschau, and G. W. Butterworth. *On First Principles; Being Koetschau's Text of the De Principiis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 284, 307-309.

Typology is yet another common approach in interpreting the “ban.” This method can be similar to allegory in that parallels can be made that were never intended by the author.

Proponents who follow this approach generally do not discount the historicity of the original text. However, by overemphasizing the parallel, spiritual meanings, they can overlook and miss the main thrust of the narrative. For example, Henri Rossier, a Plymouth Brethren writer, follows this approach in his commentary on Joshua:

The Book of Joshua gives us, in type, the subject of the Epistle to the Ephesians. The journey across the desert had come to an end, and the children of Israel had now to cross the Jordan led by a new guide, and to take possession of the land of promise, driving out the enemies who dwelt there. It is the same for us. The heavenly places are our Canaan, into which we enter by the power of the Spirit of God, who unites us to an ascended Christ, and seats us together in Him in the glory, so that thus we enjoy anticipatively this glory which He has acquired for Himself, into which He will introduce us, and which we shall share, ere long, with Him.⁶⁶

This approach is also shared by Alan Redpath as expressed in his 1955 commentary on Joshua. In each case, the authors view the concepts found in the book of Joshua as typologically representative of the spiritual warfare as revealed in the New Testament. This is, in and of itself, not all bad. However, Woudstra warns: “With proper caution and restraint, some typological use may be made of the revelation the author imparts in Joshua, provided that this is not the one and only use to which this revelation is put for the present.”⁶⁷ Simply put, typology is prone to overuse. The caution here is not to discard the original text in favor of a parallel meaning.

These three views, as presented, seek to make sense of the “ban” by offering an alternative to what is offered in the text of Scripture. However, these explanations, though

⁶⁶ H. L. Rossier. *Meditations on the Book of Joshua* (Sunbury: Believer’s Bookshelf), 2. Full English translation available at: http://wabasha-server.net/Old_Writings/The%20writings%20of%20HL%20Rossier/Joshua.pdf

⁶⁷ Woudstra, Marten H. *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 35.

possibly helpful in assuaging the difficulties presented with genocide, do little to reconcile the issue to the broader storyline and plan of God.

Clarifying the Nature of the Ban

In contrast to some of the direct commands by God to devote the Canaanites to *herem*, there are textual considerations that have a bearing on the outcomes of such a command. These considerations should be viewed as “additional information” and not an attempt to alter or water down the perceived ethical difficulties. What God commanded in the conquest and his reasoning for it is not in question. However, it should also be understood that the “ban” was a rarity and not the norm. In fact, the treaty with the Gibeonites in Joshua 9 is an example of the compromises that were made with the inhabitants of the land. Even though the Gibeonites deceived the Israelites into making peace with them, the point is that the “ban” was limited in scope. Likewise, the wording of Judges 1 indicates that the Canaanites were not ever fully exterminated. Of course the possibility exists that Israel simply did not obey the Word of the Lord and fully fulfill his commands. However, the text seems to suggest that the “ban” was only to be enacted when absolutely necessary. For example, one of the common elements of Yahweh War was when God would send terror upon the enemy which would cause them to flee rather than fight. Certainly God was more than capable of destroying the enemy and had proved his ability to do so, yet this was not the option he invoked in many cases. For example, Exodus 23:27 says: “I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you.” Additionally, Joshua 10:10 states: “And the Lord threw them into a panic before Israel, who struck them with a great blow at Gibeon and chased them by the way of the ascent of Beth-horon and struck them as far as Azekah and Makkedah.”

Another important consideration is the number of times “driving out” (the English phrase is represented by the Hebrew *yarash* in Ex. 34:24; Deut. 4:38; 9:3-6; 11:23; 18:12; Josh. 3:10; 14:12; 17:18; 23:5 and with *garash* in Ex. 23:28-31; 34:11; Num. 22:11; Deut. 33:27; Josh. 24:12; 24:18) is used to describe what took place in the land as opposed to the idea of wholesale slaughter. Again, this does not whitewash the realities of Joshua 10:40 and 11:12 but it does add the perspective that the “ban” was not the primary means of battle. Furthermore, “driving out” was the same means God used of Pharaoh in Egypt to move the Israelites out of the land. Exodus 6:1 says: “But the Lord said to Moses, ‘Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them out, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land.’” Likewise, Exodus 11:1 describes the process of the exodus: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Yet one plague more I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt. Afterward he will let you go from here. When he lets you go, he will drive you away completely.’” The point here is that even though being “driven out” is an act of force, it should not be equated with slaughter.

Joshua’s Exaggeration

As with the previous section, it is necessary to understand the literary elements that were often utilized when writing about warfare. When it came to warfare in the ancient Near East it should not come as a surprise that warriors tended to embellish their conquests. Wright describes this as “conventional rhetoric that liked to make absolute and universal claims about total victory and completely wiping out the enemy. Such rhetoric often exceeded reality on the ground.”⁶⁸ This of course served an important purpose—that of intimidating other nations and therefore it became a commonly used ploy. Paul Copan notes these examples:⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Wright, 88.

1. Egypt's Tuthmosis III (later fifteenth century) boasted that "the numerous army of Mitanni was overthrown within the hour, annihilated totally, like those (now) not existent." In fact, Mitanni's forces lived on to fight in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BC.
2. Hittite king Mursilli II (who ruled from 1322-1295 BC) recorded making "Mt. Asharpaya empty (of humanity)" and the "mountains of Tarikarimu empty (of humanity)."
3. The "Bulletin" of Ramses II tells of Egypt's less-than-spectacular victories in Syria (around 1274 BC). Nevertheless, he announces that he slew "the entire force" of the Hittites, indeed "all the chiefs of all the countries," disregarding the "millions of foreigners," which he considered "chaff."
4. In the Merneptah Stele (ca. 1230 BC), Rameses II's son Merneptah announced, "Israel is wasted, his seed is not," another premature declaration.
5. Moab's king Mesha (840/830 BC) bragged that the Northern Kingdom of "Israel has utterly perished for always," which was over a century premature. The Assyrians devastated Israel in 722 BC.
6. The Assyrian ruler Sennacherib (701-681 BC) used similar hyperbole: "The soldiers of Hirimme, dangerous enemies, I cut down with the sword; and not one escaped."

Like other warriors who embellished their war efforts, Joshua also utilized this common literary warfare rhetoric. That he exaggerated can be deduced from several passages. For example, several places record that all the land was captured, all the kings were defeated, and all the Canaanites were destroyed (Josh. 10:40-42, 11:16-20, 23). Based on the testimony of these verses, one would think that the conquest was comprehensive in nature. However, the book of Judges affirms that not all inhabitants had been driven out after all (Judg. 1:21, 27-36). Joshua himself makes this assertion by warning the Israelites not to intermarry with the Canaanites (Josh. 23:12-13) which would not have been an issue had they been killed off through the "ban." In yet another passage, Joshua declares in 11:22 that "there was none of the Anakim left in the land of

⁶⁹ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 172. Copan's summaries were taken from: K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 173-174; and K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 227-228, 245.

the people of Israel” but this was not literally the case because Caleb later had to drive them out of the “hill country” (Josh. 14:12). Finally, passages such as Deuteronomy 7:22 and Judges 2:23 also introduce the idea that the conquest would be a long process.

In spite of language that suggested a large-scale annihilation, the truth is that Joshua exaggerated the results “just as we might say that a sports team ‘blew their opponents away’ or ‘slaughtered’ or ‘annihilated’ them, the author likewise followed the rhetoric of his day.”⁷⁰

About Jericho

Anyone who has grown up attending church as a child has likely heard the now-famous story of Jericho and how God caused the walls to fall down allowing the Israelites access to the city. However, the word “city” is probably a bit misleading. It seems likely that Jericho was not a population center in the sense of the word “city,” but rather a military fort whose soldiers helped to protect the surrounding communities. Richard Hess contends that though the word *‘ir* (translated “city”) can take on the general meaning of “population center,” this is not always the case.⁷¹ It can also refer to a village (1 Sam. 20:6), tent encampments (Judg. 10:4; 1 Chron. 2:22-23), and forts. That the word was used to refer to a fort or citadel can be ascertained from several passages. 2 Samuel 12:26 refers to the “royal city,” and both 2 Samuel 5:7 and 1 Chronicles 11:5, 7 uses the terminology of “the stronghold of Zion” to refer to the city of David.

The likelihood that Jericho was a military settlement and not a large population center can also be deduced from the number of times the Israelites were instructed to march around it. For the first six days they were to march around the “city” once but on the seventh day they encircled it a full seven times. The ability to do so and still maintain the energy to engage in

⁷⁰ Copan, 171.

⁷¹ Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray Jr., eds. *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 35.

battle with the inhabitants suggests Jericho was probably a military outpost filled with warriors and not women and children. The exception, of course, is Rahab and her family who were innkeepers but no other noncombatants are mentioned in the text.

Another significant piece of evidence is that *'ir* is the only term used to describe Jericho. This stands in contrast to other uses of the word where additional information, such as a descriptor, is provided. For example, passages that describe both Gibeon and Hazor provide terms of classification. In Joshua 10:2, Gibeon is referred to as “a great city” and Joshua 11:10 calls Hazor “the head of all those kingdoms.” In light of Joshua’s tendency to exaggerate the conquest results, it seems counterproductive at this point for him to minimize the size of Jericho. If in fact Jericho was a large metropolitan center, then the writing style would have promoted it as such in order to invite fear in neighboring cities.

Other evidence that Jericho may have been a military fort rather than a population center is deduced from the use of the term *melek* in reference to the king of Jericho. The king is referred to eight times in the book of Joshua (Josh. 2:2, 3; 6:2; 8:2, 10:1, 28, 30; 12:9) and it is possible that a traditional king who rules over a specific population is in order as the appropriate representation in these passages. The text itself does not provide further details nor does it mention anything about the occupants of the city. However, it is possible that this term was used in a more administrative sense: “The term for ‘king’ in the Canaan of Joshua’s time could envision a local leader who recognized the sovereignty of a leader of many towns and cities, such as the pharaoh. The same may be true for the *melek* of Jericho. In his capacity as the governor of a fort, he would have held primary military responsibilities to govern the troops placed at his disposal and to maintain security against possible enemies and their agents.”⁷² In this role, the king serves more as a regional supervisor rather than in the traditional sense of the

⁷² Ibid., 40.

word where a monarch rules over the population of a city. Though this usage of *melek* in Joshua is stated as a possibility, it is not the only place in the Bible where it was used in this way. The phrase “King of kings” in Ezra 7:12, Ezekiel 26:7, and Daniel 2:37 all validate the same point. *Melek* was not always used in the traditional sense but at times signified a broader governing responsibility.

If Jericho was a small military outpost, then an explanation must also be made for the command to devote all living things (including women and children) to *herem*. After all, if women and children are not present then why would such a command include them? It appears that the phrase “men and women” is being used as a general description to categorize all of a city’s inhabitants. This expression occurs in several other passages including Joshua 8:25, 1 Samuel 15:3, 1 Samuel 22:19, 1 Chronicles 16:3, 2 Chronicles 15:13, and Nehemiah 8:2. In each case the phrasing appears to be synonymous with “all” or “everyone.”⁷³ By way of example, when King Saul enacts *herem* against the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15, they were not all exterminated. This is evidenced by 1 Samuel 27:8, 30:1 which indicates they were still large in number. In this case, as with Jericho, it appears that Israel was attacking soldiers who were located at a strategic military outpost whose job it was to secure the region.

A word of caution must be reiterated at this point. In an attempt to clarify the nature of the “ban,” it is desirable on the part of many scholars to explain away the comprehensive destruction as depicted by what is placed under *herem*. As described above, alternate possibilities do exist and there is scholarship to support such claims. However, these approaches must be evaluated in light of what God was attempting to accomplish through the “ban.” Paul Copan views many of the Jericho events as hyperbole as his way of providing an adequate explanation for the conquest incidents. However, Thom Stark, who does not believe God commanded the

⁷³ Ibid., 39.

Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites, compellingly argues against every single one of Copan's assertions in a thorough response to Copan's *Is God a Moral Monster?* book.⁷⁴ The purpose of including this additional material is not to water down or attempt to explain away the difficulties found in the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua. Hence, it is not necessary to present a full exposé of competing viewpoints. Rather, the information should be used to further refine the nature of the "ban." Because exaggeration language was utilized, full clarification may never be realized which is also why alternate theories have emerged. However, this only further demonstrates why the overall plan of God must be taken into consideration when considering these issues. Even in-depth analysis of the conquest does not fully satisfy inquiring minds and can lead to misinterpretations and a willingness to compromise the integrity of Scripture in an effort to reconcile the nature of God with what is presented in the text. However, an interpreter who is committed to the inerrancy of Scripture is still able to approach the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua with confidence when they place the conquests within the context of God's overall plan of redemption.

⁷⁴ Thom Stark's full 344 page response titled "Is God a Moral Compromiser? A Critical Review of Paul Copan's *Is God a Moral Monster?*" can be found at: http://thomstark.net/copan/stark_copan-review.pdf. Stark also addresses many of Richard Hess' arguments in his book *The Human Faces of God* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011). Richard Hess has responded in scholarly fashion to many of Stark's attacks in this blog: <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2011/06/richard-hess%E2%80%99s-response-to-thom-stark>.

CHAPTER 4

RECONCILING THE OLD TESTAMENT WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

It is disheartening to sometimes hear Christians speak of the God of the Old Testament as if he were altogether different than the God of the New. However, it can seem as if the New Testament portrays God as one who singularly exhibits love and grace, while the Old Testament depicts an angry God who is only about judgment. It is no wonder that Patrick Miller would write: “The picture of God as warrior forms the real *skandalon* of the Old Testament for modern man, including the Christian.”⁷⁵ Waldemar Janzen writes in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*: “It has been the theme of war, more than anything else, that has led to a repeated devaluation of the Old Testament throughout our history as a peace church.”⁷⁶ Consequently, many people struggle to connect the dots between what God was doing in the Old Testament and how that correlates with his overall program as depicted in the church age. As a result, scholars have attempted to provide a lens through which the conquest can be viewed. For example, Eugene Merrill, professor of Old Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, makes a case for Moderate Discontinuity. He views Yahweh War as part of the covenantal relationship God had with Israel. It therefore is completely distinct from war in general and should be viewed as something that happened at a singular point in time. This approach is influenced by his dispensational point of

⁷⁵ Patrick D. Miller, “God the Warrior: A Problem in Biblical Interpretation and Apologetics.” *Interpretation* 19, no. 1 (January 1, 1965): 40.

⁷⁶ Waldemar Janzen, “War in the Old Testament.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 46, no. 2: 155.

view so he is able to conclude that while holy war was authorized in the Old Testament, there is no place for such practices during the church age. Daniel Gard, professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, argues for Eschatological Continuity. He contends that there is a trajectory that reaches from the beginning of the Old Testament and culminates in Revelation. This is demonstrated by setting up the Old Testament holy wars as a typology of the way Christ will carry out holy war judgment in the future. Therefore the conquest can be viewed as an eschatological event that contains continuity with all of Scripture. In keeping with his emphasis on eschatological unity, Gard concludes that “the great and final *herem* will be imposed not by the church but by the Lord of the church. Thus vengeance belongs to the Lord.”⁷⁷ Finally, Tremper Longman III, professor of Old Testament at Westmont College, makes a case for Spiritual Continuity. His lens is one of consecration in which warfare is to be understood in terms of holy, worshipful activity. He suggests that the presence of God is the overarching principle that must be taken into account when attempting to understand *herem*. Thus he reasons, “Where God is present, he must be worshiped.”⁷⁸ In the end, Longman incorporates both the eschatological and the dispensational into his view so redemptive history can be explained in phases. Thus the spiritual elements of Old Testament holy war carry forward to the spiritual conflict of the New Testament.

The strength of these three views is that they do not seek to alter or reinvent the Biblical text; rather, the text is taken as is but viewed through a specific perspective of Scripture. There is not an attempt by these authors to change the words of Scripture and thus alleviate the issue of

⁷⁷ Daniel L. Gard, “The Case for Eschatological Continuity,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 138.

⁷⁸ Tremper Longman III, “The Case for Spiritual Continuity,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 164.

genocide. Instead, they take the words of Scripture at face value and struggle to find meaning by comparing the holy wars to the broader message of Scripture.

Ironically, the Bible Jesus quoted from was the Old Testament. People living in the modern age tend to be very accepting of what Jesus had to say, yet they forget that so much of those words were rooted in Israelite history. In fact, many modern churches base their mission statements and logos on Mark 12:30-31 which says: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.” However Jesus pulled these commands from the Old Testament. Both Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 say the very same things. The fact of the matter is that Old Testament problems also turn up in the New Testament because there is unity in the text. The problem is not that love and compassion cannot be found in the Old Testament; the problem is one of perception. Both Yahweh and Jesus got angry but in the Old Testament, the repercussions seemed excessive. However, the punishment for sin has always been death (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 6:23). In some cases, such as Uzzah in the Old Testament (2 Sam. 6:7), and Ananias and Saphira in the New (Acts 5:10), that death came instantly. In many other instances the grace and mercy of God allows for the opportunity to repent. This was true even in the Canaanite conquest where God patiently waits for hundreds of years, but eventually justice is served as is always the case.

The plan of the Warrior is really no different than the plan of God because they are one and the same. Redemption is the thread that runs through the storyline of the Old Testament and connects it with the New. Paul Hanson states that the issue of holy war in the Bible can only be

adequately addressed “on the basis of biblical theology in which both Old and New Testaments are viewed as bearing witness to one universal redemptive drama.”⁷⁹

War Language Found Throughout the Bible

Though some would like to relegate the idea of war to the Old Testament, the truth is that the language of war, along with the concepts of wrath and judgment, can be found throughout Scripture. This really should not be surprising, particularly in the Gospels, because of the politically charged environment the Jews found themselves in. Based upon their understanding of the Old Testament, the Jews were looking for a kingly messiah—a deliverer. Though Jesus did not fit the mold of what they were anticipating, even his name contained these connotations. “Jesus” in its Hebrew form is “Joshua” and means “savior, deliverer, the leader of the liberation army.”⁸⁰ That they were expecting a ruler type of king can be supported from John 6:15: “Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

Other sections of the New Testament are particularly graphic when describing God’s judgment. In fact, the author of Hebrews, in 10:26-31, goes so far as to say that the judgment of the New Testament is far worse than that of the Old. John Wenham puts it this way:

It is fallacious to regard this as essentially an Old Testament problem, and to set the “bloodthirsty” Old Testament over against the “gentle” New Testament. Possibly this phenomenon is more crude in the Old Testament than in the New, but of the two the New Testament is the more terrible, for the Old Testament seldom speaks of anything beyond temporal judgments... whereas the Son of man in the Gospels pronounces eternal punishment.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Hanson, 344.

⁸⁰ Lois Barret, *The Way God Fights* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1987), 63.

⁸¹ John W. Wenham, *The Goodness of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1974), 16-17.

One of the most well-known passages that utilizes war language is Ephesians 6:10-20. Here a soldier, along with a full array of weaponry, becomes the symbol for how a Christian should respond to the attacks of Satan. The war terminology in this passage is unmistakable: “armor of God,” “rulers,” “authorities,” “withstand,” “stand firm,” “belt,” “breastplate,” “shoes,” “shield,” “flaming darts,” “helmet,” and “sword.” However, it should be pointed out that the warfare presented in this passage is very different from the holy war of the Old Testament. Holy war involved soldiers fighting against other soldiers while Ephesians 6 is referring to a spiritual battle. This battle, as portrayed in the New Testament, has an emphasis on temptation and is defensive in nature. However, like the *herem* of the Old Testament, spiritual warfare is still meant to produce holiness. Just as the Israelites were called to be separate from the sin of the Canaanites, so the New Testament believer should recognize that standing for righteousness requires a fight against the powers of darkness.

Finally, the war language in the book of Revelation cannot be missed. Jesus is viewed as a warrior as introduced in Revelation 2:16: “Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.” Furthermore, the language is so graphic that it pales in comparison to the “ban” of the Old Testament. Revelation 19:11-21 vividly portrays Christ and the armies of heaven striking the nations in violent judgment. Daniel Gard goes so far as to call this the “great and final *herem*.”⁸² As with the conquest this is a stunning description of God’s justice as it is enacted against sin. Once again he assumes the role of Divine Warrior and fights against the powers of darkness. This outpouring of wrath, however, is not just a spiritualized version of Old Testament realities. The Divine Warrior wages a final war, at the end of which, comes the final judgment.

⁸² Daniel L. Gard, “A Response to Eugene H. Merrill,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 103.

The Mercy and Compassion of the Old Testament

The concept of mercy generally conveys the withholding of judgment even though guilt has already been established. In spite of the justice of God that was demonstrated against the Canaanites, there are also examples of his mercy as well. The fact that anyone lives at all is an act of mercy since the penalty for sin is death. However, the pattern of Scripture, even under the darkest of circumstances, is for God to show mercy by preserving a remnant. When God judged the world with a global flood, he demonstrated his mercy by preserving Noah's family. When God allowed other nations to take Israel into exile, he still preserved a remnant (Jer. 29:10-14, Ezra 9:13-15). Even in the conquest narratives there are instances of mercy to be found; one of those has already been mentioned in the person of Rahab. This gives further credence to the idea that God is up to something. Richard Hess makes this remark: "The destruction of Jericho in vv. 16-25 is described with 102 words. Not many fewer, some 86, are used in the same verses to describe the salvation of Rahab and her family. In light of this, it is fair to say that the author placed about the same worth on the salvation of the family of Rahab as on the destruction of Jericho."⁸³ God had every right and every opportunity to wipe mankind off the face of the earth and he would have been justified in doing so. However, here in the midst of judging the Canaanites for their generations of sinfulness, God shows mercy to a Canaanite prostitute who turns to him in faith. God gave the Canaanites every opportunity to repent, and it seems evident that he would have been merciful to them even in the final moments if they had turned to him.

Not only is violence and warrior language not limited to the Old Testament but the traits of mercy and compassion are also common elements of the text. While Richard Dawkins refers to God as "the cruel ogre of the Old Testament," the instances of forgiveness and benevolence

⁸³ Hess, *Critical Issues*, 38.

are quite astounding even in the midst of the war culture.⁸⁴ Some of these examples have already been mentioned—Rahab who was extracted from the conquest and the Ninevites who were commissioned for destruction yet were spared after they had repented. Not only that, the text demonstrates that even in cases where the wrath of God is fully justified, he is one who is full of compassion and slow to get angry (Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15).

Then there is the example of Abraham who pled for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this case God was more than willing to spare the city if only a handful of righteous could be found. Even though the justice of God ended up being put on full display, it is important that the mercy of God be recognized in this narrative as well.

The story of Hosea is yet another reflection of God's redeeming character. In Hosea 3:1, God directs Hosea to return to his faithless wife: "And the Lord said to me, 'Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.'" The actions of Hosea were meant to symbolize the forgiving and compassionate spirit of the Lord.

The book of Deuteronomy should also be mentioned because it contains a certain irony. On the one hand, the book of Deuteronomy contains many of the initial commands in regard to the extermination of the Canaanites. Yet the same book repeatedly admonishes the Israelites to show compassion to slaves and foreigners based upon their own experiences in Egypt (Deut. 10:17-19; 15:15; 24:18, 22). This paradox just goes to show that God had a specific plan he was enacting through the conquest episodes yet his character remained the same. Whether one looks at the Old Testament or the New Testament, in both cases, like two sides of a coin, the characteristics of justice and grace can be legitimately found and argued for. God is not one-dimensional but he is good. Though he hates sin and must judge it, he is also loving—so much so

⁸⁴ Dawkins, 250.

that his Son became flesh and dwelt among men. God had a plan of redemption in mind and he made the ultimate sacrifice so people could become the sons and daughters of God. Romans 5:8 describes the depths of his love: “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Likewise, 1 Peter 3:18 demonstrates Christ’s goodness and grace even when it was not merited: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”

God’s Ideal

The violence that has been a part of this world’s history and the violence that is experienced today is not how it always was nor is it how it will always be. It is easy to assume that since God acted in certain ways that it must be his ideal when the story of Scripture is one of intervention. God takes what is and does something with it. Waldemar Janzen states: “War belongs to the fall of man; it does not characterize the God-intended state of man.”⁸⁵

To find God’s true ideal, one need only to start at the beginning. When God created the world, it was peaceful and it was good. There was no bloodshed in the Garden of Eden and it was not until the fall of man that sin and death entered the world. Yet by chapter 4 of Genesis the taking of one’s life has already been recorded twice (Gen. 4:8 Cain; Gen. 4:23 Lamech) and by chapter 9 an official law is pronounced: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” (Gen. 9:6). Clearly sin had changed the original paradigm and mankind has not stopped their effort to find lasting peace ever since.

That God desires peace can be revealed in his choice of Solomon over David for the building of the temple.⁸⁶ 1 Chronicles 22:8-10 discloses the reason:

⁸⁵ Janzen, 159.

You have shed much blood and have waged great wars. You shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood before me on the earth. Behold, a son shall be born to you who shall be a man of rest. I will give him rest from all his surrounding enemies. For his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quiet to Israel in his days. He shall build a house for my name. He shall be my son, and I will be his father, and I will establish his royal throne in Israel forever.

A time is coming when that peace will finally be realized once again. The Millennial Kingdom will be characterized by peace among nations who were previously at war with each other (Isa. 2:2-4; 10:23-25; Mic. 4:1-4; Zeph. 3:9), the Messiah is referred to as the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6-7), and violence will have no place. Isaiah 11:6-9 describes a future time that is reminiscent of Eden:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

War as Redemption

The overall plan of God has redemption in full view but what if the wars themselves also had redemptive value? God was able to take a bad situation that if left unattended could have developed into a “Noah’s time” type of scenario where the judgment would have been much more devastating. Thus the conquest itself had the potential of redeeming what otherwise would have become catastrophic in nature. Ronald Goetz makes the following statement in regard to the value of the book of Joshua: “I find it having a direct bearing on my own understanding of

⁸⁶ This should not be viewed as a punishment since it was God who had pledged military victory (1 Chron. 14:10, 14, 17:11) and empowered him to achieve it (1 Chron. 18:6, 13, 19:13). Rather, it seems God wanted to contrast David’s reign with Solomon’s, whose reign would be characterized as one of peace and rest. Andrew Hill draws a comparison to Moses and Joshua: “The repetition of theme and the transfer of royal authority from David to Solomon reflect the commissioning of Joshua by Moses as his successor. For example, both Moses and David are disqualified from achieving their ultimate goals, while both Joshua and Solomon lead God’s people into an era of ‘rest’ and ‘blessing.’” Andrew E. Hill *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 & 2 Chronicles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 298.

God's love, of God's culpability in the agony of human history, and God's acts for the redemption of the world, culminating in the atoning work of Jesus Christ."⁸⁷ In other words, the picture of war is one in which God steps into what is a fact of life and brings value to it.

It has already been established that the Israelites lived in a culture of war. This was the inevitable destiny for anyone living in the ancient Near East. Yet much like the testimony of Joseph, God took what was evil and used it for good. This concept is reiterated in Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Evil, violence, and war were not created by God but he was and is able to redeem them and use them to accomplish his sovereign purposes.

It is important to remember that the conquest episodes are not isolated texts. They are part of a larger storyline that God has been playing out with specific intentions and outcomes in mind. Even within the book of Joshua, there are multiple references that state "just as the Lord had commanded" (Josh. 10:40; 11:12, 15, 20, 23). In other words, this was not just one nation warring against another—this was a divine plan. Beginning with Abraham and culminating with Joshua, for hundreds of years God has been working up to this moment. The underlying purpose behind Yahweh War was the acquisition of the land and the establishment of a people whereby redemption would ultimately be centered. Here a land was set apart as holy, as were the people, which stands in contrast to the Canaanite civilization. In this land idolatry could not be tolerated because it stood not only in the way of Yahweh worship but also because it would keep Israel from becoming all it was meant to be. In a world of disorder and wickedness, Israel was meant to be different. Jeph Holloway puts it this way: "An entire society, one that embodied all that is wrong with a fallen world, was to be replaced by another that was to bear witness to God's hope

⁸⁷ Goetz, 263.

for this world.”⁸⁸ The conquest was not simply about the acquisition of the land or even the judgment of the Canaanites. As important and part of the plan as those things were, the broader goal was that God’s creation would find redemption. The people of Israel were to be the agents through whom that redemption was realized. This is why God could promise Abraham that through him all nations of the earth would be blessed—because both the land and the people of Israel were placed on a course through which the redemption of all mankind would be focused.

Sadly, Israel did not live up to the ideal plan of God. However, this did not divert his overall plan of redemption. It was through Israel, in the line of David, that the Savior, Jesus Christ was born who became the ultimate Redeemer. A line can be traced through the sands of time from Abraham to the conquest of the Promised Land through the Old Testament and to the Redeemer. Yes, Yahweh was a warrior but he was a warrior with a plan.

⁸⁸ Jeph Holloway, "The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War." *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 41, no. 1 (1998): 61.

CHAPTER 5

MODERN APPLICATION

Introduction

The tactics and strategies of war have evolved over time but the threat of war remains strong in the modern age causing an increased sense of uncertainty. For America, the past ten years, since the attack in New York on 9/11, has brought with it increased attention on both terrorism and peace. During this time the United States has engaged in several wars on foreign soil in an attempt to avert a crisis here at home. It is with this as the backdrop that a modern application of this topic takes particular significance.

The Role of Government in Relation to War

Interestingly enough, “in the Bible, war itself is not portrayed as inherently wrong, immoral, or ungodly.”⁸⁹ However, the role of government today cannot be compared to what took place in Israel during the conquest either. Yahweh War is compatible with the function of Israel because they were under a theocracy while today’s governments are not. Absolute authority always rests with God but how that power was and is disseminated has changed. The acts of government today are no longer the direct acts of God.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ John MacArthur, *Terrorism, Jihad, and the Bible* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2001), 88.

⁹⁰ Tom Fitts, “A Dispensational Approach to War.” ThM Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary (1975): 32.

That said, the New Testament does teach that citizens should willingly live under submission to the governing authorities. Romans 13:1-4 makes this point:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

These verses bring several points to the table. First, citizens have a duty to submit to their government. Second, the government is ordained by God. Third, the role of government is to protect its citizens and enforce its laws. Government has the authority to punish those who do wrong which sets it apart from individuals. For individuals, murder in the Bible was never acceptable, however, capital punishment and the waging of war was permissible under the authority of the government. J. Daryl Charles puts it this way: “While justice in the *private* realm is illegitimate, in the *public* realm it is not only legitimate but required.”⁹¹ In addition, according to Romans 13:6, the people who represent the government are meant to function as ministers of God. In other words, they become God’s agents of justice. “Governors, policemen, soldiers, and duly constituted officials who represent the government’s authority are authorized to use violence to protect law-abiding citizens and to apprehend criminals, bring them to justice, and judge them for their crimes.”⁹²

How Jihad Differs from the Holy War of the Old Testament

Because of the world-wide impact of terrorism the subject of *Jihad* cannot be avoided. It is of particular relevance to this paper because the word itself is often translated as “holy war.” It

⁹¹ J. Daryl Charles, *Between Pacifism and Jihad* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 177.

⁹² MacArthur, 96.

also has strong ties to religion so an association with Yahweh War is to be expected. That said, the similarities between Yahweh War and *jihad* end there. While some view the Arabic word as a reference to an “inner spiritual struggle,” Eugene Merrill reports that “scholarly consensus holds that it also has to do with aggressive, militant action in defense of and for the propagation of the Muslim faith.”⁹³ Surah 9:5 stresses this definition: “But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever you find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.”⁹⁴ This is one of several key differences Reuven Firestone has identified between the Yahweh War of the Old Testament and the practice of *jihad*.⁹⁵ The point of Yahweh War was not to convert the Canaanite people. Rather it was meant in part as a possession of their promised inheritance and in part as an act of judgment to free the land of idolatry. Furthermore, Yahweh War was limited to a specific geographic region. *Jihad*, on the other hand, does seek to aggressively convert people to Islam and their wars have the expressed purpose of supremacy and domination. Additionally, those who practice *jihad* do not have many of the same limiting factors as Old Testament holy war. For example, while Yahweh War was geographically limited to Canaan, “the Qur’ānic injunction to kill idolaters was not confined to a specific geographic area. Rather, it was to be applied universally.”⁹⁶ Also, Yahweh War was limited in time while *jihad* is meant to be an ongoing battle.

⁹³ Eugene H. Merrill, “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 93.

⁹⁴ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Qur'an Translation; Translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali* (Elmhurst: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 2006), 114.

⁹⁵ Reuven Firestone, “Conceptions of Holy War in Biblical and Qur'ānic Tradition.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, no. 1 (March 1, 1996): 99-123.

The holy war of the Old Testament and the modern day practice of *jihad* really should not be confused. The fundamental difference lies in the core purpose of each. While the Old Testament conquest had two objectives, *jihad* really only has one: to convert all people groups to Islam.

The Relationship Between Murder and War

It is important to discuss the relationship between murder and war because Scripture seems to place a high value on each individual life. Examples of this are numerous such as Luke 12:24 which makes the point that God will take care of his children: “Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!” Then Luke 12:7 demonstrates the intricacy with which God knows mankind: “Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Parables such as the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the prodigal son reveal the fact that people deeply matter to God.

Outside of God’s demonstration of his love through the suffering of Christ on the cross, there is probably no passage of Scripture that encapsulates the intimacy God shares with his creation more than Psalm 139. In these verses, God is described as one who searches and understands: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.”

It is not surprising that God would place such a high value on life since he is the Creator of mankind. However, man was placed in an altogether separate category from other creative elements. According to Genesis 1:26-27, God, in his own image and likeness, created man. This

⁹⁶ Ibid., 115.

makes the concept of a relationship possible and distinguishes man from animals and plants. Though the human nature is marred by sin, God is represented in each person in the following ways: Morally in his image: Man was created morally good (able not to sin) with the ability to determine right from wrong (Gen. 2:15-17; Ecc. 7:29; Rom. 5:12; Eph. 4:24); Intellectually in his image: Man was created with the ability to think logically and make choices (Gen. 2:15-20; Ecc. 3:11); Spiritually in his image: Man was created with a soul/spirit in the likeness of God who is spirit (Heb. 4:12; Jn. 4:24); Physically in his image: Man was created with a physical body. Although that physical body does not reflect God as having a physical body, it does reflect abilities that God has such as eyes (1 Sam. 16:7), ears (Ps. 34:17), and hands (Isa. 41:20); Relationally in his image: Man was created with the ability, desire, and need for relationships with God and other men (Gen. 2:18-25). Clearly, man was the pinnacle of God's creation making the prohibition against murder, as part of the Mosaic Law, consistent with God's character and actions.

Particularly because of the intrinsic value each human possesses, murder is prohibited as commanded in Exodus 20:13. However, there are certain qualifiers to this prohibition. Leviticus 24:17 says, "Whoever takes a human life will surely be put to death." The qualifier in this verse makes it clear that capital punishment was permissible when a murder had taken place. In other words, an executioner had the authority to take the life of a murderer without being penalized for his action. The law also made special provisions for an accidental death (Ex. 21:12-15, Num. 35:6-34, Deut. 19:1-13). Even in the case of an accidental death where no anger, hatred, or negligence was involved, the taking of one's life was still considered quite serious. However, when the death was accidental, God provided the cities of refuge as a means to escape capital punishment.

Most certainly there are similarities between murder and war as both involve killing. However, only war takes place under the authority of governmental law. A murderer, on the other hand, takes life away from another person because it is personally advantageous to them. War often serves a different kind of objective. For practical purposes, the only real differences between murder and war are premeditation, intent, and legalities. Understandably the lines can easily get blurred and the Holocaust is just one example of how murder can take place under the guise of war. The role of government will be explored further in the next section, but in the case of Israel, God commanded the nation to engage in war. This was not an individual who selfishly took the life of another, rather, the command came from God who is the author of life and reserves the right to give and take away.

The Old Testament clearly sees murder and war in two separate senses. Murder always brought consequences and was absolutely forbidden (Ex. 21:14, Deut. 19:11-14, Num. 35:16-21) while war and capital punishment were not prohibited. Because of the image of God in man, the taking of one's life is always a serious thing; however, there are qualifiers that allow for killing under certain circumstances.

The Relationship Between War and Peace

The relationship between war and peace is in and of itself a fascinating study. At its core is an understanding that "peace, regardless of its form, *always* comes with a price."⁹⁷ When it comes to the establishment of peace, violence must often be enacted and is often readily accepted particularly when it is acting as the means to protect the indefensible and preserve life. However, there is a cost to that violence which is often weighed against the outcomes of such an effort. For example, was war necessary in the case of Hitler? It cost countless numbers of lives to go up

⁹⁷ Charles, 180.

against the Germans but in the end was there another option? Would peace have been attained by any other means? Likewise, President Harry Truman had to make the agonizing decision of whether or not an atomic bomb should be dropped on Japan during World War II. On the one hand, a prolonged war would only result in more American casualties. On the other hand, dropping the bomb would kill hundreds of thousands of people almost instantaneously. Yet he understood that in this case, only war could bring peace. It was extremely costly, but it was the only option.

These things of course are always better understood in hindsight. Looking back there is no question that Adolph Hitler and his militia had to be engaged or evil would overtake the world. However, the confidence of such decisions in the midst of battle is rarely the norm. Take America's decision to invade and overthrow Iraq—only time will tell if the cost of such a choice results in securing the peace.

Of course the ultimate price was paid by Jesus Christ when he secured our peace. Romans 5:1-2 says: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." Peace always comes at a price.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Unquestionably the issue of war in the Old Testament is challenging—so much so that atheists seem delighted to engage the subject matter. To make things worse, Christians often have little in the way of substantial answers to address such complexities. However, a discussion of the issue is not something the believer needs to fear. Taken in isolation the verses regarding Yahweh War do create an un-comfortableness—and they should! Then again, when the conquest episodes are understood within the overall plan of God, much of the tension can be resolved. The writer of this paper attempted to do that very thing— to understand the role of Israel in regard to the land, to place the conquest episodes within the broader context of the war culture that was prevalent in the ancient Near East, and to discover the character and function of the Divine Warrior. Subsequent chapters bridged the gap between what was and what is by demonstrating how the New Testament is aligned with the Old Testament and by showing how this issue has relevance in the modern world.

What became evident throughout the study is that the conquest episodes were a part of something bigger. The Warrior had a plan of redemption that began with Abraham and culminated with the cross. Though God used the Israelites as his agents of justice and though the acquisition of the land was a fulfillment of his promises to Abraham, the wars of Joshua were also integral to the plan of redemption.

As thorough as one hopes to be in a study such as this, the issue is one in which some questions are left unresolved. Yet that is also what makes God, God. His ways are higher than

mankind can possibly understand and in those cases it is important that a lesson is learned from the person of Job. The story of his life was one in which he was not privy to the things that God was doing behind the scenes. However, he knew enough. When it comes to the conquest of Joshua there are things the modern mind will simply not understand, but when it is placed within the context of the overall plan of God, it is enough.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. 2 Peter 1:3-4

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