

DOES GOD APPROVE OF “HOLY WAR”?

Reading: Joshua 10.40-10.42 and 11.10-22

So Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded. Joshua subdued them from Kadesh Barnea to Gaza and from the whole region of Goshen to Gibeon. All these kings and their lands Joshua conquered in one campaign, because the LORD, the God of Israel, fought for Israel. [...]

At that time Joshua turned back and captured Hazor and put its king to the sword. (Hazor had been the head of all these kingdoms.) Everyone in it they put to the sword. They totally destroyed them, not sparing anything that breathed, and he burned up Hazor itself.

Joshua took all these royal cities and their kings and put them to the sword. He totally destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded. Yet Israel did not burn any of the cities built on their mounds--except Hazor, which Joshua burned. The Israelites carried off for themselves all the plunder and livestock of these cities, but all the people they put to the sword until they completely destroyed them, not sparing anyone that breathed. As the LORD commanded his servant Moses, so Moses commanded Joshua, and Joshua did it; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD commanded Moses.

So Joshua took this entire land: the hill country, all the Negev, the whole region of Goshen, the western foothills, the Arabah and the mountains of Israel with their foothills, from Mount Halak, which rises toward Seir, to Baal Gad in the Valley of Lebanon below Mount Hermon. He captured all their kings and struck them down, putting them to death. Joshua waged war against all these kings for a long time. Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle. For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses.”

What we have just heard are descriptions of sheer annihilation in Canaanite cities, reminiscent of the worst outrages of the Serbs in Bosnia and the Nazis in occupied Europe. But this is in the Bible. Can there possibly be a positive side to this violence – or is it an aberration best discarded from our faith? Recall that the violence takes place during the Israelite invasion of the promised land of Canaan, a country already populated and civilised. It is clear that the violence was extreme. Not just fighting men but also women, children and even animals were destroyed in city after city. And God is said to sanction the annihilation, with “dedication of towns to God” by total destruction.

What are your initial thoughts on violence in Joshua?

How can we evaluate this violence and God’s involvement in it? What can it mean in the light of the love that Jesus shows? One suggestion is that we should accept that the God of the Old Testament is violent in a way absent from the New Testament. The heretic Marcion in the Second Century even suggested that there is a total difference between a harsh Old Testament God whose actions are morally repugnant and the loving New Testament one. Hence, Marcion said that the Christian should ignore the Old Testament. But this is hard to sustain if the Bible is seen as seamless and God’s infallible word throughout. I’m going to explore a more positive approach in two sections, first looking at God’s holiness and justice, then God and war in the Bible.

1 God's holiness and justice

Who is like our God?

We have to start with God's unchanging character as revealed in Scripture. A key text is 1 John 1:5 "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." For God is Holy – he is completely pure and cannot abide with sin. He is separated from us by an unbridgeable gulf unless we somehow eradicate sin in our lives. Second, he desires exclusive worship, as in Deuteronomy 4:24 "do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the Lord your God has forbidden. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God". And third, he is passionate and mighty and powerful as in Nahum 1:4 "The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath".

We often prefer not to think about these terrifying aspects. But without such passages as these, God can easily be seen as a kindly old man who is "soft on sin". As one preacher puts it a "kindly old grandpa, full of good ideas and helpful suggestions but frail and slow and safe". No. There is a tension. God is a mighty holy, implacable judge and warrior king who nonetheless is merciful and loves and seeks to bring fallen humanity back into relationship with him. As Isaiah wrote, "I have swept away your offences like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you". We must keep these elements of holiness and mercy in balance.

Finally, it's clear throughout the Old Testament, God hates violence, which desecrates his good creation. He abhors Cain's murder of Abel, cursing him for that crime in Genesis 4. The key reason for the Flood was shedding of blood; the "earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence" (Genesis 6:11). Later, even David was forbidden to build God's temple "because you are a warrior and have shed blood." (1 Chronicles 28:3).

Does this discussion broaden your concept of God's character?

God's justice and mercy

It's in the light of God's character that we can understand Joshua. It's evident that God does not seek war for its own sake. Why then this violence? The answer is that it is in pursuit of his justice. So judgement comes from God's hatred of sin, the utter antagonism of his holiness to sin – still tempered by mercy.

The Bible emphasises repeatedly that the Canaanites were depraved – for example sacrificing their own children, indulging in bestiality. Maybe a recent comparison is what we know of the brutal regime in North Korea. God mercifully gave the Canaanites chances. Abraham was told in Genesis 15 that the Israelites would be 400 years in Egypt before returning to Canaan "for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." God implicitly gave the Canaanites time to reform. In Jericho from Joshua 2, the inhabitants hear of the great works of God and Rahab the prostitute puts her trust in God and is saved, but the other Canaanites don't. In effect, unrepentant Canaanites were under God's judgement and the Israelites were agents of God's punishment. There are strong parallels with the Flood in Genesis that I preached on in January.

Furthermore, it can be argued that God sanctioned the violence to keep his people holy, as God said to Moses in Deut 20:18 "Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God." Indeed, the Israelites were told in advance not to think God favours them due to their virtue "It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going to occupy their

land; but because of the wickedness of these nations” (Deuteronomy 9:5). As we know, Israel failed to completely remove the Canaanites. This led the Israelites to worship other gods, and ultimately led to their own destruction as a nation by the Babylonians and Assyrians, as God in turn disciplined Israel his chosen people.

I don't think we should scoff at the Canaanites either. The punishment of the Canaanites reminds us that all of us are under God's judgement for falling short of his purity in our behaviour. We go astray in our pride and self-centredness and worship idols too, like money, house, family, career, sports and so on. Though they are wonderful gifts that God has given us to enjoy, all too often we love them before God, and even worship them.

God's holy character is unchanging. Hence, throughout the Bible, there is a theme of judgement leading to destruction for flagrant and persistent sin. In the Old Testament such judgement for sin focuses on earthly means as in the flood at the time of Noah, the war in Joshua that we are discussing today and the later exile of the Israelites. In the New Testament judgement for sin comes in the flames of hell as stated by Jesus in Matthew 5:30 “if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell”. The Kingdom of God is now a spiritual one instead of a physical one in Israel. But at all times, as Paul puts it in Romans 6:23 “the wages of sin is death”.

But thanks be to God – the just punishment for our sin who have faith in Jesus was mercifully taken by the slaughter of the sinless Jesus on the cross. The cross is where we see the equivalent of the violence in Joshua in the New Testament. But this time, the innocent died to save the guilty and we may, as it says in Hebrews 10:22 “draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience.” Completing Romans 6:23 “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”

2 God and war in the Bible

God's war and our obedience

The war in Joshua is God's war, whose ways are “higher than your ways” (Isaiah 55:8). Joshua was on God's side and not God on Joshua's. This is made clear in three ways. First, when Joshua meets the angel in 5:14: ““Are you for us or for our enemies?” "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.”” Second, God sent a mighty hailstorm on the enemy such that “more of them died from the hailstones than were killed by the swords of the Israelite” and third God sends a further mighty sign as the sun stood still “till the nation avenged itself on its enemies”. A corollary is that we may not claim that “God is on our side” and “enlist him” in any humanly conceived aggressive military campaign, as nations invariably do. Even the Nazis marched with badges saying “Gott mit uns” (God is with us) under the swastika. We should be suspicious of a leader who claims we should go and fight an aggressive Holy War in God's name.

The invasion of Canaan is also to fulfil God's promise (Josh 21:44-45) “the Lord had given all their enemies into their hands... not one of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed, all came to pass. We are reminded thereby of God's faithfulness to us.

And God is teaching us obedience to his commands by these passages. A key word is the Hebrew term “charem” which crops up many times in Joshua. It refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the Lord, sometimes to be destroyed. In Joshua's war, this implied restraint by the Israelites from their natural inclination to pillage and take property and slaves –

they would much rather have kept cattle and slaves and property to get rich themselves than destroy them. Other examples of “charem” obedience in the Old Testament are the devoting of first sons to God, the tithe and the tribe of Levi as priests. We too must put God’s requirements first in our lives out of gratitude for what he has done for us, and obeying his will.

Is there anything we should be devoting to God, that we are keeping to ourselves?

God’s gradual education of his people

Finally, I think the Bible shows how God worked to transform the ideas of his people gradually, taking them where they are but moving them on. Ancient Near Eastern culture was infested with concepts of war, so the sort of warfare in Joshua could also be understandable given their stage of development. In 2 Samuel 11:1 it talks of “In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war” as if it were the football season. Later the concept of war in the Bible evolved under God’s direction.

The Israelites increasingly realised that Yahweh is God of the human race and not just Israel (for example when in Jonah God shows he loves the Ninevites, whom Israel hated) – therefore all sides must be treated equally. Unnecessary acts of violence were increasingly condemned in the Old Testament, even committed by Israelites, for example in Hosea God condemns the killing of Ahab’s descendents by Jehu. And the psalmist began to dream of a day when war would be abolished under Yahweh’s rule of justice as in Psalm 85:10 “righteousness and peace will kiss one another”.

This process of development under God’s tutelage went further in the New Testament when the concept of earthly war to further the cause of God is abandoned. In Luke 6:35 Jesus commands us to “love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back”, and he preaches in Matthew 5:9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” Jesus is the king who arrives in Jerusalem “gentle and riding on a donkey” and not in a war chariot. How can we understand this? Through Jesus’ advent, God is seeking a new agreement with his people which violence cannot achieve, transformation of the heart set out in Jeremiah 31 “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” We are not called to eradicate those who are not pure, as Osama bin Laden imagines he is doing, but inviting those who are not pure to become pure as they accept Jesus love in their lives!

Onward Christian soldiers?

But two aspects of war remain even for us as Christians. First, this development of God’s teaching underlies the later Christian concept of the just war (developed by Augustine and Aquinas) which has helped to civilise if not eliminate warfare. As Augustine wrote to General Boniface “Peace should be your aim; war should be a matter of necessity so that God might free you from necessity and preserve you in peace. One does not pursue peace in order to wage war; he wages war to achieve peace.” The just war concept states for example that war was justified if there was a just cause, a just intention, limited means, a last resort, reasonable expectations of success, a formal declaration by a legitimate authority and protection for non combatants. This raises interesting questions about Iraq, which I leave for your reflection. An important basis for the just war was Paul’s view of the state as having a role to punish evil in Romans 13:4 “He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer”, as well as God’s desire for justice for the oppressed, as for the Israelite slaves in Egypt.

Second, the principles of Holy War still apply against Satan's evil, that seeks to twist men's hearts away from allegiance to God. According to Paul, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12).

Let me expand briefly on soldiery, which is a concept viewed positively throughout the Bible. One image of God in the passages of Joshua is as a soldier, as is made explicit also in Exodus 15:3 "The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name". Jesus is to return as a warrior at the second coming as in Revelation 19:11 "With justice he judges and makes war". The New Testament too is full of military themes. There is intellectual warfare "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor 10:5), believers are "more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom 8:35-37), and even "soldier" is used in approbation as a title as in Philippians 2:25 "Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier". But most of all there is spiritual warfare, as stated in Ephesians 6:11 "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes"; and we are called to arms.

I encourage you to reread that passage on God's armour. But let me remind you that our weapon is prayer and the Bible. As Paul says in Ephesians 6:17-18 "Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints". There is a famous image that Jesus death and resurrection was like D-Day which made eventual victory against Satan certain, but Bands of Brothers and Sisters are still needed to fight the spiritual enemy. The more prayer warriors the church has the stronger it will be!

Conclusion

Let's draw things together. The picture in Joshua of God as mighty warrior in battle in pursuit of his justice is part of who God is. It is not an Old Testament archaism. It reminds us of his purity and our sin, but also God's desire for love and relationship. Thanks to his mercy in sending Jesus we can eradicate our sin – in Jesus' blood - to become holy. At the same time, though, it is the start of an evolution in thinking about war which God led his people through, culminating in Jesus' call to love our enemies and His example for us in the face of opposition and persecution, and to always seek peace. Meanwhile later Christians developed the concept of just war, still needed in a fallen world. And there remains spiritual warfare – and we are still in the front line of that Holy War.

Call for prayer for those:

- (1) Who need to pray through God's holiness and the obedience he requires in us**
- (2) For whom the discussion of war arouses painful memories of the past**
- (3) For those who feel called to engage more in "spiritual warfare"**