

A friend tells you he is put off the Old Testament by its violence. How would you go about creating a more positive evaluation of this aspect of the Old Testament?

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Module: 1001

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Date: 4/9/03

In assessing this theme, we highlight the book of Joshua, Chapters 10 and 11 where there are repeated descriptions of annihilation in Canaanite cities. See for example 10:40 “So Joshua subdued the whole region... He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded.” and 11:18-20 “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.” In this essay I shall seek to assess whether a positive side to this violence can be presented, or whether it is an aberration best discarded from our theology.

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. We read that not just fighting men but also women, children and even animals were destroyed in city after city. It is clear that not all were “guilty” under the Law of Moses as set out in Deuteronomy. God is said to sanction the destruction when it is carried out by the Israelites, with “dedication of towns to God” by total destruction. And at times he is directly involved (such as in the hailstorm destroying an army). The enemy are demonised and dehumanised in the words of Joshua (see Birch et al 1999). These are features of Holy War – as well as being strongly characteristic of wars in the twentieth century.

How can we evaluate this violence and God’s involvement in it? One suggestion is that we should accept that the God of the Old Testament is violent in a way absent from the New Testament. Marcion in the Second Century suggested that there is a simple distinction between a harsh Old Testament God whose actions are morally repugnant and the loving New Testament one. Hence the Christian should ignore much of the Old Testament.

This is hard to sustain if the Bible is seen as seamless and God’s infallible word throughout. Chapman (1999) suggests rather that God works to transform the ideas of a people whose culture was imbued with concepts of war. Whereas at the time of Joshua this sort of Holy War could be appropriate given their stage of development, 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 in Jonah) – so all sides must be treated equally. Unnecessary acts of violence were condemned, even committed by Israelites, for example in Hosea 1:4 Then the Lord said to Hosea, “Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel”. More generally, the Israelites realised via the prophets and ultimately the exile that they were not guaranteed God’s allegiance if they failed to meet his standards. 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 developing God’s thought went further in the New Testament when the concept of physical war to further the cause of God is abandoned. In Luke 6:35 there is Jesus’ command to “love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back”, and 2 Corinthians 10:3 “though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does”. But this does not imply a different God who changes his concept of war. Instead, one can argue that the Old Testament focuses on this life, and the New Testament on the life to come (reflecting the development of ideas about death under God’s guidance; the Old Testament does not discuss the life to come until late on – as in Daniel and Isaiah). In the Old Testament, the Kingdom was a physical kingdom – it was the nation of Israel. Jesus’ inauguration of the Kingdom of God is a very different thing – it is now a spiritual Kingdom. The principles of Holy War still apply in the spiritual Kingdom of God, but there are key

differences – that it is not a battle against other people requiring us to kill them. 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.” (Eph. 6:12).

The 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, see Atkinson (1994). They stated for example that war was justified for defensive purposes, under the authority of a sovereign, with a just cause and to secure peace, not to conquer. An important basis 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 extending the passages above to wage war on spiritual evil and emphasising God’s desire for justice for the oppressed as in Isaiah 10:1-2 “Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people”.

Our 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”. Soldierry is a familiar concept throughout the Bible. Jesus is also a warrior against demons in his lifetime, and 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, albeit not directed to human enemies; besides spiritual warfare there is intellectual warfare (2 Cor 10:3-5), believers are more than conquerors (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”.

Even the violence in Joshua does not give carte blanche to evil in man; it is limited to the Lord’s express will, whose ways are “higher than your ways” (Isaiah 55:8). This is made clear when Joshua meets the angel in Josh 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.”” A corollary is that we are not permitted to affix the name of God to any humanly conceived aggressive military campaign, as soldiers invariably do (even the Nazis did). Following the “just war” idea, defending against attack, as well as fighting to protect the weak and innocent could be just, but not initiating war in the name of God. The distinction between a humanly conceived campaign and God’s can be made in terms of signs and wonders, and God’s actual participation and promises. As recorded in Joshua, the Israelite nation had watched the Jordan part and the walls of Jericho fall and the hailstones kill the enemy before the destruction, as well as remembering God’s words to Abraham, Moses and Joshua.

Throughout the Old Testament, war is not sought by Yahweh for its own sake but in pursuit of his justice. It is emphasised that the Canaanites were sinners – for example sacrificing their own children, boiling kids in mothers’ milk. Abraham was told the Israelites would return later” for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.” (Genesis 15:16). Hence Canaanites were under God’s judgement and the Israelites were agents of God’s punishment – with God himself also playing a role (as in the Flood and Sodom/Gomorrah). Moses was already commanded in Deuteronomy 20:16-17 “However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them...as the Lord your God has commanded you.”

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. The just punishment for our evil is death and hell. As stated in Deuteronomy 9:5 “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”. In both the Old and New Testaments there is a theme of harsh punishment for such sin, but in the Old Testament it comes via earthly slaughter, in the New 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”.

In this context, 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.” Since there is sin and temptation in a fallen world, holiness can only be retained by avoiding such sin. It was failure to remove the Canaanites and the temptation to worship other gods that led the Israelites to repeatedly betray God, and ultimately led to their own destruction as a nation. As an early warning to Israel, we may note that Yahweh is not merely a partisan for Israel but also punishes Israel when there is sin such as Achan’s theft in Joshua 7.

We are reminded thereby that God is and remains a pure God whose wrath against sin is infinite and with whom we have an unbridgeable gulf unless we eradicate sin in our lives as the Israelites eradicated the Canaanites. The means (in the Old Testament) was to seek to follow his Law or (in the New) when Jesus takes on the just punishment that God metes out to sinners.

The Old Testament teaches a number of important characteristics of Yahweh relevant to Joshua. 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”. 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”. But he also reaches out to us in love to offer salvation, as in Isaiah 44:22 “I have swept away your offences like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.”. Without such passages, backed up the destruction wrought in Joshua this could easily be forgotten and God seen as a kindly old man who is “soft on sin” and not a mighty implacable judge and warrior king who nonetheless loves and seeks to redeem fallen humanity.

A further positive aspect is that the invasion is to fulfil God’s promise “the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfil the promise the Lord made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” (Deut 9:5) “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 (Josh 21:44-45). We are reminded thereby of God’s faithfulness to us.

Obedience is also taught by these passages. A key word is the Hebrew term “charem” used often in relation to the utter destruction which is commanded in Joshua. It refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the Lord, often by totally destroying them. This implied restraint by the Israelites from their natural inclination to pillage and take property and slaves for themselves. This is a useful lesson for mankind in putting God’s requirements first out of gratitude for what he has done for us, and obeying his will. Other instances in the Old Testament are the devoting of first sons to God, the tithe and the tribe of Levi as priests.

Before concluding, there is a social point to make, complementing the theological. Historically there is some evidence that the Israelites were akin to oppressed peasants and the Canaanites to rich and exploiting city dwellers (Bright 2000). While it does not condone the

violence, it may make it more understandable in that desperation and poverty can easily breed behaviour that would not be warranted among the rich.

In conclusion, 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 that we need to eradicate – 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 the Israelites through, culminating in Jesus' call to love our enemies and His example for us in the face of opposition and persecution. There remains warfare in the New Testament but it is purely spiritual, while later Christians developed the concept of just war, still needed in a fallen world.

References

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