

is God a genocidal monster?

In the first of a two-part series, a special correspondent examines a common apologetic question



One of the commonest objections to Christianity is that the God of the Old Testament is rather unpleasant. Richard Dawkins has called him *'a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser...a racist, infanticidal, genocidal...capriciously malevolent bully.'*¹ Typically strong words, but it is fair to ask how we can make sense of the violent acts commanded by God:

'When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations – the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you – and when the Lord your God

has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy.' (Deuteronomy 7:1-2)

Critics have said: *'We rightly condemn the killing of an ethnic group when carried out by Nazis or Hutus. But Israel got a divine order to do the same thing to the Canaanites!'*²

And it's not just atheists who face this question. After all, isn't God against murder?³ And didn't Jesus tell us to love our enemies, not exterminate them?⁴

The question of whether God is a genocidal monster is best answered by examining four smaller questions. This article will consider the

first two, and the second the other two.

1. Is divine violence ever justified?
2. Why did God judge the Canaanites in particular? Is God racist?
3. What about non-combatants, women and children in Canaan?
4. Do the 'holy wars' of the Old Testament legitimise violence in the name of religion?

is divine violence ever justified?

Crimes against humanity

Firstly, would a God who simply ignores human brutality be a just or loving ruler? For instance, Dawkins is rightly enraged by priests who abuse children. But how much more enraged is the priests' creator, whose love and compassion far outstrips ours? Any offence against our neighbour is more fundamentally an offence against God, who will not stand idly by. God does not need to read the papers to be concerned about his world: 'God heard their groaning' (Exodus 2:24).

the need for punishment

Can the need for justice ever justify violent force? Doesn't that reduce the law enforcer to the level of the perpetrator? Hasn't society become more enlightened, leaving retribution behind us?

In fact most cultures throughout history have recognised the need for God to call man to account, and judge wrongdoing. Western post-Christian culture is the exception in imagining a god who simply turns a blind eye. While it is certainly true that God prefers genuine remorse, reconciliation and rehabilitation (see below), his love provokes him to anger against evil, and to a costly rescue plan that provides

an escape for those who turn back to him.

Perhaps many modern people who object to punishment are naïve about the realities of crime, and insensitive to the pleas of victims. Here is the perspective of a Croatian, who lived through the horrors of the Balkan war:

'My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. To the person who is inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone. Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and levelled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit... Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die.'⁵

But perhaps even secular society does recognise the need for decisive punishment at times. A South African gang became notorious for their brutal action against their rivals. They would take a bike spoke, sometimes infected with faeces, hold down their victim, and pierce the abdomen repeatedly to cause an inoperable peritonitis, and a lingering death. Sometimes they performed lumbar punctures designed to leave their victims paraplegic and incontinent. The police might have been inclined to concede a no-go zone to the gangs. But instead they moved in to end the horrors. In the firefight that ensued, every gang member perished. Surely sometimes force is justified?

Similarly, when notorious killers such as Fred West or Ian Huntley were arrested, the authorities tore down the house, crushed every brick, and burned every timber. They wanted to thwart souvenir hunters, and eradicate any memory that might infect the community.⁶

crimes against divinity

Secondly, we easily forget that wrongdoing is not solely harm done to people, but offence against God. Not only is he an advocate for victims of crime, he is himself an injured party. The story of the prodigal son (Luke 15) illustrates the scandal of sin. The son's main wrongdoing was not wild partying, but his attitude to his father. He wanted him dead so that he could take his inheritance early and live as if his father never existed. Jesus taught that we all act in this way towards our heavenly Father, through rebellion or neglect. It's what the Bible calls sin. We must not be naïve about the reality of sin, and the need for God's judgment on it. Would a God who ignores it really be a worthy or credible God?

the mystery of mercy

So if God is right to judge, why hasn't the final judgment already happened? Part of the answer is that God delays out of mercy. We are given a glimpse of this when the Amorites were given a suspended sentence of 400 years before they reached the point of no return (Genesis 15:16). This act of mercy was costly, delaying God's chosen people from entering Canaan, who were taken into slavery in the interim. The Bible is littered with examples of God's patient mercy, such as Noah's 120 years of preaching (Genesis 6:3; 2 Peter 2:5), Jonah's commission (Jonah 4:10-11), and God's willingness to spare Sodom for just ten righteous people (Genesis 18:32).

Paul uses a beautiful obstetric image to describe the patient mercy of a God who delays judgment. Like an expectant parent, he is excited about having a family, which will make the pain, blood and tears worthwhile: 'For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.' (Romans 8:19-21)

So atheists are wrong to portray God as naturally wrathful, like a tetchy schoolmaster who enjoys caning pupils. The Bible describes God's judgment as an 'alien task', a 'strange work'.⁷ His anger is a right reaction to our sin. But without our provocation, before the fall and within the trinity, there is no wrath in the godhead, only love. Wrath is not a primary characteristic of God. So rather than being a vindictive bully who enjoys violence, God is a reluctant judge: 'Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!' (Ezekiel 18:31-32)

God desires that we turn back to him before it is too late, because judgment is necessary and inevitable: 'The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise...Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.' (2 Peter 3:9-10)

Or take another biblical figure, who said:

'But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.'⁸

Of course, this was not a fiery Old Testament prophet, but Jesus himself. If he is right that judgment is coming, then premature death on a battlefield may not be the worst outcome that exists. And the smaller scale advanced judgments we see in biblical history are kind warnings of a worse fate that might befall us.⁹ Perhaps we recognise the principle from medicine. A patient seeks help for a pang of pain, which alerts them of a cancer that needs urgent attention. How much more would a loving God want to warn us of an inevitable reckoning to come?

why did God judge the Canaanites in particular? Is God racist?

If you are with me so far, it may still seem a bit arbitrary to pick on the Canaanites. Haven't there been worse nations?

Canaanite notorious culture



Firstly, there is a longer story that needs telling.

The father of the nation, Canaan, was the grandson

of Noah. When he was involved in indecent acts, Noah demoted the whole family: 'Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.'¹⁰ We find it difficult to think of a family or nation being morally accountable in the same way as an individual, but all groups have cultures that predispose to particular forms of evil. Cultures have legitimised racism in South Africa, or financial risk taking with other people's money in the West, and are

passed down from generation to generation. Similarly, Canaan's culture and religion legitimised rape, incest, child sacrifice and bestiality.¹¹ There is historical evidence that human sacrifice and sexual abuse lasted longer in Canaan than amongst her neighbours in Egypt and Mesopotamia.¹²

God does not show favouritism



'Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am

the Lord....Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled....And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.' (Leviticus 18:21-28)

Secondly, despite the bad press, God is not a racist and he does not show favouritism.¹³ He gave Israel the chance to supplant the Canaanites, but on the crucial condition that they did not become like them. They had no diplomatic immunity as 'most favoured nation'. They were warned that they would be treated like just other nations if they followed them. In fact, they were judged by higher standards than other nations, and were driven from the land themselves.¹⁴

the God who welcomes outsiders

Thirdly, Israel's purpose from the very beginning was to be a pipeline of blessing to other nations. It all started with the promise to Abraham, whose mission was to benefit the entire human race (Genesis 12:3). Therefore God would not allow Israel's enemies to succeed in exterminating them.

The Old Testament is littered with examples of Israel welcoming outsiders, such as the 'mixed multitude' of the Exodus, Jonah's mission to Israel's nemesis Assyria, Elijah's healing of Naaman the Syrian. Israel's laws were to give foreigners equal rights,¹⁵ as God has concern for the excluded, such as Israel had been. The bloodline of Jesus reveals God's inclusivity, as it includes foreigners such as the Canaanite Tamar, the Amorite prostitute Rahab, the Moabite Ruth and Bathsheba the Hittite.¹⁶

Hence God had no less concern for the Canaanites than other nations. A remnant even of the Philistines and Jebusites would soon become incorporated into God's people,¹⁷ and even arch enemies Assyria and Egypt were to have their own exodus, released to worship Yahweh just as much as Israel.¹⁸ Jesus later recognised the faith of a Canaanite woman,¹⁹ and extended the kingdom of God to Gentiles.²⁰ Finally, the rescue plan was completed when Jesus did what Israel could not do, by taking the judgment that we all deserved.

summary

A God worthy of that name must take wrongdoing seriously. In fact, his anger and punishment is a sign that he cares for his creation. The judgments in Old Testament flesh and blood history are sobering warnings of what sin deserves. But God has deferred the

Questions to ask sceptics:

- Once we establish that God should hold man to account for obviously wicked acts, ask where he should draw the line. Above or below me? Why?
- Why do you think murder/genocide is objectively wrong if God does not exist, if we are merely highly evolved tribal monkeys? Are you not borrowing biblical values to critique the Bible? Without a creator, isn't might right, and wrong simply personal preference?
- What if there is a larger judgment is coming, and God is delaying out of mercy, waiting for you and me to turn back to him?

Recommended reading

- Copan P. *Is God a moral monster? Making sense of the Old Testament God*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2011

final judgment, that we might have time to turn back to him. In the meantime his rescue plan started with Israel, and fulfilled in Jesus, calls people of all nations to turn back to him, without favouritism or bias.

In the next edition, we will look at the two remaining questions, What about non-combatants, women and children in Canaan? And do the 'holy wars' of the Old Testament legitimise violence in the name of religion? ■

1. Dawkins R. *The God delusion*. London: Bantam Press, 2006:51
2. Shermer M. *The science of good and evil*. New York: Henry Holt, 2004:39
3. 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.' Genesis 9:6
4. Matthew 5:44-45
5. Volf M. *Exclusion and embrace*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996:304
6. What happens to the houses of horror? *BBC News* 5 April 2004 bbc.in/183U6jC
7. Isaiah 28:21
8. Matthew 10:28
9. Luke 13:1-5
10. Genesis 9:25
11. Leviticus 18
12. Albright WF. *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*. London: Athlone, 1968: 'We are as yet in no position to say that the Northwestern Semites were more 'depraved' (from a Yahwist point of view) than the Egyptians, Mesopotamians and Hittites, but it is certainly true that human sacrifice lasted much longer among the Canaanites and their cogeners than in either Egypt or Mesopotamia. The same situation seems to hold true for sexual abuses in the service of religion.'
13. Acts 10:34-5; Romans 2:11
14. Amos 2:4-16
15. Leviticus 24:22
16. Matthew 1:1-16
17. Psalm 87:4; Zechariah 9:7
18. Isaiah 19:23-25
19. Matthew 15:22
20. Acts 15:16-17, Ephesians 3:4-6