

The Problem of Violence in the Old Testament

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Introduction:

- Non-believers, especially New Atheists, assert that God is portrayed in the Old Testament as a cruel and ruthless God who orders the execution of innocent men, women, and children.
- In his book *The God Delusion*, atheist Richard Dawkins writes
 - “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; homophobic, racist, genocidal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”¹
- Are such descriptions of God accurate?
- We will briefly address the subject so that you may understand for your own sake
- There are answers to unbelievers that we will also attempt to cover

The Main Account in question

[The killing of the Canaanites \(Deu 7, 20\)](#)

- Some of the most difficult passages of the OT are commands to kill the Canaanites
- And other acts of war sanctioned by God.

I will share with you 9 points to address this subjects:

1. The Canaanites were extremely wicked
 - Canaan, who was a descendant of Ham (Gen. 10:6), was cursed by Noah (Gen. 9:20-25).
 - His descendants became an incredibly sinful people who practiced
 - Extreme cruelty, incest, idolatry, bestiality, homosexuality, cultic prostitution
 - (Duet 9, 12:31)
 - They offered their children as sacrifices.
 - They pound their drums so parents will not hear how their children scream when sacrificed to Molech, the God of Canaanites (Jer. 7:31)
 - After 400 years of iniquity the Canaanites had become so wicked that the Bible says:
 - The land vomited out its inhabitants
2. God was concerned with sin, not ethnicity.
 - The language used about the Canaanites is the same language used about Israel
 - God threatened to “vomit” out Israel from the land just as he had vomited out the Canaanites (Leviticus 18:25, 28; 20:22, Jer. 25:9).
 - So it wasn't genocide but sinaside

¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Great Britain: Bantam Press, 2006, 31.

3. The judgement was intended to be **expulsion** from the land rather than **annihilation**
 - Deut. 9:3 brings these two ideas together: “**you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the LORD has promised you**”.
 - God wanted to allow the Canaanites to flee the land as the Israelites advanced.
 - In they resisted then they would be annihilated
 - If the Canaanites left, they would then have been treated like all other nations and the Israelites could have made treaties with them and would have been bound by the more general codes of conduct in warfare given in Deuteronomy 20
 - So, this was not *genocide* (the extermination of an ethnic group) but rather forced removal from the land of Canaan.
 - Why? Here is the answer...

4. God's judgment was intended to prevent the Canaanites from corrupting the Israelites.
 - Why?
 - A) Through the Israelites the savior of the world was to come
 - a. God gives is this reason in the Scriptures:
 - b. Deuteronomy 20:16-18 “**Otherwise they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God**”.
 - B) The Israelites are to serve as a witness to His power and goodness to other nations.
 - a. Gen 18:18 “**Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him**”
 - b. Sadly, many Israelites were influenced to follow the false religions of the Canaanites
 - c. Read about this in the book of Judges, during the period of the kings.

5. The language of “totally wiping out and leaving no survivors” is used as a **hyperbole**
 - Kenneth Kitchen, *British Bible scholar, Ancient Near Eastern historian, and Personal and Brunner Professor Emeritus of Egyptology and Honorary Research Fellow at the School of Archaeology*, says — not military campaigns resulting in utter decimation. And this is exactly what the archaeological record shows.
 - **These verbs were commonly used as hyperboles in Near Eastern war accounts. They are not to be taken literally**
 - We sometimes use this language in sports
 - The Bible reports that Canaanite people were still alive after the conquest of the land

“Thus Joshua struck all the land, the hill country and the Negev and the lowland and the slopes and all their kings. He left no survivor, but he utterly destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded... Thus Joshua took all that land: the hill country and all the Negev, all that land of Goshen, the lowland, the Arabah, the hill country of Israel and its lowland” (Joshua 10:40; 11:16).

Joshua reports that God commanded “utter destruction,” and that he had followed that command “to the T” (Joshua 11:12, 15, 20); however, if we read the text further, we find that Joshua did not take all of the land (Joshua 13:1-5), and that many of the people who were supposedly either annihilated or removed

from the land were, in fact, still living there (Joshua 13:13). The author is clear that the people of Anakim had been “utterly destroyed,” (Joshua 11:21-22); however, if we continue reading, we find Caleb asking for permission to drive out the people of Anakim (Joshua 14:12-15; 15:13-19).

Moreover, the book of Judges records that “the Canaanites persisted in living in that land” (Judg. 1:21) and “they did not drive [the Canaanites] out completely” (Judg. 1:28).

This gives us good reason to conclude that modern readers might be making a hermeneutical error in trying to read ancient text through modern lenses.

This is corroborated by the words of Moses regarding a future generation of Israelites, He says Israel “will be utterly destroyed” (Deut. 4:26).

Now, the nation of Israel has experienced some great defeats in the past; however, the nation of Israel has not been “utterly destroyed” at all. In fact, the nation of Israel thrives today.

- These people who were allegedly wiped-out regions return to the story later.
Judges 1:21 **“But the children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites who inhabited Jerusalem; so the Jebusites dwell with the children of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day.**
 - After commanding the Canaanites be destroyed completely the very next verse says you should not intermarry with them Deut 7:3.
 - How could you intermarry with people who are to be completely wiped out?
6. God was patient with the Canaanites and gave them 400 years of warnings
- This was no ‘spur of the moment’ decision by God.
 - In Genesis 15:13-16, God tells Abraham that his descendants will be slaves in a foreign country for 400 years but that they will return to the land of Canaan after “four generations”.
7. The Canaanites could have repented for they had some knowledge of the true God:
- The judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were close to Canaanite territory
 - The deliverance of Lot were evidence of God’s judgement against sin (Genesis 18-19).
 - Abraham lived among them. His faith in God should have been a witness to the Canaanites.
 - (He was even able to rescue Lot from the united forces of four kings according to Genesis 14).
 - Melchizedek was king of Jerusalem and also “priest of God Most High” (Genesis 14:18).
 - He must surely have taught his people about the true God (Genesis 14:19).
 - They had heard about what God had done for the Israelites in delivering them from Egypt and giving them victory over the Amorite kings east of the Jordan (Joshua 2:8-12), yet they did not repent and turn to God.

Who was the only ones saved from Canaan?

- Rehab and her household, which helped Israel in the attack on Jericho.
- **If she knew of Israel’s fame, then it is reasonable to assume the rest of the city knew it as well.**

Answers Apologetically

8. Atheists cannot “logically” accuse God of immorality.
 - On what basis can they label an act as “immoral”?
 - Atheists reject the existence of objective moral laws. How can God violate a moral law that does not exist?
 - Charles Darwin understood this truth perfectly. He wrote: “A man who has no assured belief in the existence of a personal God or of a future existence with retribution and reward, can have for his rule of life, as far as I can see, only to follow those **impulses and instincts** which are the strongest or which seem to him the best ones” (1958, p. 94, emp. added)
 - Richard Dawkins Says:
 - “In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at the bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no other good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.”
 - Defining Evil in 2 ways
 - Loss & corruption of Good (Presupposes a standard of goodness)
 - Departure from what ought to be (Presupposes a purpose & a design plan)
 - Both point to God whose character is the standard of goodness and who is the designer of the universe
9. God is the Author of life
 - He authored it and He can take away whenever He deems appropriate
 - Simply because it is only Him who can also restore this life
 - **Ecc. 12:7 “Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.” If God gives life to all humans, then only He has the right to say when that life has accomplished its purpose, or under what circumstances life may be legitimately terminated.**

What about the innocent children?

- How do we know who was innocent and who was not?
- How do we ensure that these children will not continue in the path drafted to them by their ancestors?
- Only God can make this kind of judgement, since He alone possesses all knowledge and wisdom. Our finite minds are incapable of understanding every dimension of such a dilemma. Like Paul, we must acknowledge that God’s judgements are unsearchable and His paths are “*beyond tracing out*” ([Romans 11:33](#)).

[The Destruction by the Flood \(Gen 6\)](#)

- The Bible makes it clear that violence and evil had grown to be extremely pervasive so that it literally touched everything and everyone that existed at that time.
- Genesis 6:5 states: “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”
- Moses indicates that some of the sin was sexual in nature (cf. Gen. 6:1-2) and that the evil permeated and filled the earth. This erases the argument that God drowned "innocent" people in the flood.
- During the construction of the ark, which lasted at least 100 years, Noah is described as a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5) to the people around him.
- This means the people had 100 or so years to listen to the message of Noah and repent of their sin that was bringing the flood waters upon them. So in the end, we find God using His messenger to proclaim the truth of repentance and judgment before a fully corrupt culture that refused to be moved even after 100 years of being exposed to it.
- And we find God’s mercy being displayed on the one family who followed and obeyed what God had commanded.

[The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah \(Gen 19\)](#)

- In Genesis 13, Abraham and his nephew Lot separate from one another because their flocks had grown too large for the land they both lived in.
- Lot chose to move into an area that Genesis describes as “like the garden of the Lord (Gen. 13:10),” which was the area of Sodom.
- In spite of the wickedness that already existed in the city (Gen. 13:13), God still blessed the land in which they were living, illustrating what is sometimes called His common grace where He causes His rain to fall on the just and unjust (Matt. 5:45).
- Genesis 14 states the story of Sodom and Gomorrah’s war, initial defeat, and plunder by rival kings but then also details how Abraham rescued Lot who had been taken captive and others who had been with him.
- It also speaks about how Melchizedek came out to meet the king of Sodom as well as Abraham whom he blessed. From this it seems plausible that the people of that land had been exposed to God’s truth by Melchizedek, and perhaps others, for about 25 years.

- But even though they lived in a land that was blessed by God and they were rescued from enemies by God’s servant and had been given spiritual truth by God’s priest, the people chose to live sinfully before their Creator.
 - Genesis 13:13 says, “Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord.”
 - In Genesis 18, the Bible records God as declaring, “The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave,” (Gen. 18:20).
- As God contemplates carrying out judgment against the cities, Abraham asks if God would dare destroy good people with the bad. He then begins to whittle down a hypothetical number of good people left in the city of Sodom, starting with fifty and ending with ten, asking after each amount if God would still destroy the city if that particular number of good people resided within its walls.

In the end, God says that He would not destroy the city if He could find at least ten good people within it.

- In Genesis 19, two angels come into the city and are sheltered by Lot. The Scripture then says this: "Before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; and they called to Lot and said to him, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them," (Gen. 19:4-5). Evil men were both young and old and came from everywhere.
- The account of Sodom and Gomorrah, which culminates in the encounter involving Lot, the angels, and the men of the city, is a vivid description of the type of pervasive evil that causes God to act after He blesses circumstances, rescues from harm, and gives spiritual guidance.
- The New Testament refers to the destruction of these cities as an example of judgment yet to come (2 Peter 2.6) with the sexual perversion aspect of the sin being specifically cited (Jude 7).

[The Judgment against Amalek \(1 Samuel 15\)](#)

- The Book of 1 Samuel contains the account of God's orders for Saul to destroy the people of Amalek. The Amalekites were descended from Amalek (whose name means "plunderer"), who was the son of Eliphaz and grandson of Esau.
- They were a wicked and warlike people and were the first to oppose Israel after her liberation from Egypt (Exodus 17:8).
- As descendants of Esau, they were likely aware of God's promises to Jacob, but rather than honor God's choice of Israel, they instead elected to be their enemy.
- The Amalekites were cowardly in their attacks on Israel and would deliberately murder the weak and elderly who sometimes lagged behind the core group of Israelites who were making their way to the land promised them by God (Deut. 25:17-19).
- The Book of Judges (6:3-5) records that they consistently allied themselves with other nations to commit genocide against Israel.
- God chose not to destroy the Amalekites until 400 years had elapsed from their first sinful acts against His people. This shows the patience of God and dispels any notion that God is quick-tempered and rushes to judgment against those who are sinning before Him.
- Scripture also contains God's warnings to the Kenites, who were a people living among the Amalekites, to depart so they would not be caught up in the coming judgment (1 Sam. 15:6).
- Such a warning had to have also been heard by the Amalekites, and it is reasonable to assume they could have fled the land as well, but they chose not to.

[Samson and the Sons of Ashkelon \(Judges 14\)](#)

- Ashkelon was a city of the Philistines, a people who persistently oppressed Israel.
- The Philistines were notorious for their idol worship of the false gods Dagon, Ashtoreth (the spouse of the false god Baal), and Beelzebub. The rituals of Ashtoreth typically included temple prostitution.
- The thirty "companions" of Samson were of Ashkelon descent and clearly lived up to their reputation for violence and cruelty. When challenged by Samson's riddle and bet, they threatened to murder his fiancée and destroy her father's home by fire if she did not get Samson to reveal the riddle's answer to them (which she did).
- The acts that Samson carried out were simply an act of judgment by God upon the people of Ashkelon and are part of a larger sweeping story of God using Samson (and others) as His weapons of justice against a blasphemous and evil people.

[God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. What kind of God requires such obedience? \(Genesis 22\)](#)

- Context to this story will help the reader understand it better. First, we are reminded of God's previous promises to Abraham that he would make his descendants as numerous as the stars. Gen 26:4. Also, God's choice of words when he commands him to go up one of the mountains has a very similar construction to God's earlier calling of Abraham to go from his hometown of Ur. in Gen 11. Abraham was reminded by God's faithfulness in the past.
- Given this backdrop that shows Abraham's trust in God, we read that Abraham told his servants that "we" would return from the mountain, confident that God would either spare his son or even raise Isaac from the dead. Gen 22:5

Final Remarks

- There is a distinct pattern emerging from the judgments brought by God upon various peoples:
 1. God declares an annihilation form of judgment to eradicate cancerous evil
 2. The judgments are for public recognition of extreme sin.
 3. Judgment is preceded by warning and time to repent.
 4. Any and all "innocent" adults are given a way of escape with their families--sometimes all given a way to avoid judgment via repentance or leaving a particular region. It should also be noted that expulsion from a land was the most common judgment, not extermination.
- What if these acts as noted in the Old Testament were existing into the twenty-first century and globally broadcast via CNN? No doubt we nations would rise with military power to halt them.
- Why then do God's critics feel justified in labeling the Creator as morally unjust even when God waited--in some cases--for centuries to punish the peoples involved?

The God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament

- We must note that the revelation of God in the Bible is progressive, and our understanding of God becomes clearer as the story of Scripture unfolds.
- This is true when we consider the doctrine of the Trinity.
 - In the Old Testament the idea that God is Three Persons yet One in Essence is barely mentioned.
 - In the New Testament, however, it becomes clear, although it remains a mystery that cannot be explained.
 - It was only with the coming of Christ that a profound truth like this could finally be made clear and that God's character and the extent of His love could fully be revealed.
- The Old Testament presents God as the One who is both just and loving (see Exodus 34:6, Psalm 85:10 and Psalm 86:15 for example), and this perfect balance is also seen in the character of God as revealed in Christ (John 1:14).