

Mr. G Video – The Violence in the Old Testament

So let's dive right in to what is probably one of the hardest things about the Old Testament, and that is the violence that God commands the Israelites to carry out against other groups of people, mainly the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, which was the "Promised Land" which God had promised to Israel. This is hard for Christians to read, it's hard to understand it, it's hard to know how to explain it, and it's something that many skeptics find repulsive and love to bring it up in discussions about Christianity and the Bible. Richard Dawkins famously said that the God of the Old Testament is a "moral monster." So we need to face this issue head-on and try to understand what this is all about. Hopefully you've read the passages I gave you in the previous lesson. Those are not the only places in the Old Testament where this kind of thing occurs; there are others as well, and you can look them up on your own if you want to.

Now first of all, there's one way to approach this topic that is commonly heard from Christians who don't have a high view of the authority of the Bible. We could say they don't believe in the verbal-plenary inspiration of Scripture. You remember what that means, right? They might say something like "the Bible has some barbaric things in it left over from earlier times before humanity became more enlightened" or "all the peoples in the ancient Near East believed that their gods told them to kill and conquer, so it's not surprising that the Israelites believed the same." We need to reject these kinds of explanations that dismiss the violence as something not really from God, assuming that God wouldn't really command such a thing, because these kinds of explanations are rejecting the truth of the Bible when it says God commanded these things (and you could then feel free to reject any other truth you find inconvenient or unpleasant).

So what is the explanation? Well, there's a number of different things to consider here. So I think the best way to talk about this is to go through each of the four principles which I gave you in the intro to this section, and see what we can say about each of these in relation to the issue of violence.

1. Consider context. There are actually several aspects to the context question.
 - a. Historical context. This was a time of constant brutal warfare between tribes and nations. In their warfare they used the most horrific torture and violence imaginable. These people of Canaan also were guilty of horrible evil against children and women. You may have heard of the Canaanite god Molech, to whom they would sacrifice their children by burning them alive.
 - b. Biblical context. This was a time that was earlier in the history of redemption. At this time physical Israel were the people of God, and He was their King. Warfare was sometimes commanded by God at this time. It was before the time of Jesus and the age of the Church, when the Kingdom of God is not a physical kingdom but a spiritual one.
 - c. Context of what they are to do and why. You read Deuteronomy 7. They are to remove these people from the land, and not mix with them at all, for two

reasons: (a) so the Israelites can live there, it's the Promised Land, and not be tempted to go to idols... and (b) because in their great wickedness they had reached the limit of God's patience and He decided to use the Israelites to judge them. It seems that God gave them at least 400 years to repent of their evil. There's an interesting verse in Genesis 15:16 where God tells Abraham many hundreds of years before the Israelite conquest of Canaan that Abraham's descendants would be slaves in Egypt for 400 years, and then return to the land of Canaan, "for the sin of the Amorites is not yet complete." The Amorites represent the people of Canaan. It seems God was being patient with them in a sense. So this is not an ethnic cleansing, it has nothing to do with their ethnicity; it's about the evil they are committing as a result of their idol worship as well as protecting the people of God from the temptation to idol worship.

2. Avoid assuming that you know best, better than God. We feel upset about what seems to us to be unjust killing. But actually we all deserve death because of our sin, so we can't complain when God decided to judge someone by taking a life. And He is allowed to use human agents to do it. God is just, even if we don't understand; He has all understanding. And we saw that He is not just ordering random killing.
3. Sin is deadly. A couple things here:
 - a. Remember that this is judgment on a morally degraded people who have been given a long time to repent. Actually we could say that God is stopping evil, which ironically is the very thing that skeptics sometimes complain about God NOT doing when they think about the evil in the world.
 - b. God wants to keep His people holy (meaning set apart to Him), and worshipping and loving only Him, because He knows that's best for them. He knows idol worship will be deadly, and He's protecting His people. Also He's working a plan of salvation to bring people to Him, he's bringing about this plan of salvation which will culminate in coming of Jesus, and He knows the Canaanites will be a stumbling block to the people of God. And this actually happened; the Canaanites were not all destroyed, and ended up causing all kinds of problems for Israel down the road.
 - c. It's important to note that God does not show favoritism to the Israelites when it comes to sin; God judges his own people with destruction and captivity as well later on when they go after idols, and oppress the poor, because He knows that stuff is death for them. All of this seeming harshness against sin and idol worship actually comes from God's heart of love for people.
4. And this brings us to the last principle, and the one that ties them all together: we need to view this violence through the lens of God's love. A couple things:
 - a. He wants His people to be with Him, and knows it's best for them to be with Him, worshipping and obeying Him, and rejecting idols. In Psalm 16:11 it

says: "You will make known to me the way of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever." That was God's desire for them, but the Canaanites would drag them away from that. In Psalm 18 we see what it's like when God's people call to Him for help and He "goes Mamabear" against their enemies. So it's based in God's love for His people.

- b. But what about the non-Israelites? Well, we saw first of all that God was very patient with them, giving them time to repent. Just think of the story of Jonah, when God cared so much about this wicked non-Israelite city that He sent the reluctant prophet Jonah to try to turn them around, and they did turn around temporarily at least. Also, we see that even people in these groups can be saved and be part of God's chosen people if they fear God – Rahab and also Ruth, a Moabitess, are examples. Also if you read the story of the Exodus from Egypt carefully, you'll notice that it says in Exodus 12:38 that a "mixed multitude" left Egypt with the Israelites. That seems to be Egyptians who had seen the power of God and wanted to be on the side of the God of the Israelites. Joshua 8 talks about "strangers" being among the Israelites as they listened to the Law being read, and a lot of scholars think those would have been Canaanites who were interested in the God of Israel.
- c. People are horrified at the death of children in these accounts, and it is hard to think about. But viewing it through the lens of God's love, it's actually salvation for these children, since we believe the Bible indicates that children who die before reaching the age of accountability are taken to heaven. Otherwise they would have grown up, most likely, to be evil idol worshippers.

So, this is a big, hard topic, but let's try to sum up. Whenever you are thinking about who God is and what He does, always think about Jesus. Jesus is God. Colossians 1:15 tells us that Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. We can look at Him to see God. How did Jesus treat people? Think of His compassion and kindness, His defense of the children of Israel against their leaders that were leading them astray. Think of the self-sacrifice of Jesus because of His love for the whole world, His desire that all might be saved. That's the heart of God. You can look at God in the Old Testament through the lens of Christ. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He is unchanging. And, He's the same God who is going to come with His armies at the end of the age and there will be many killed in His wrath, as it says in the book of Revelation. This is all done with justice and to protect His children. It's the same God. It's all done in righteousness, goodness, kindness, and love. He is always good. He is always just. He is pure. He is holy. He is always kind. He is love. It's impossible for Him to not be any of those things. You can know that when He acts, He must have a heart of love behind it. This explanation might not be satisfying to someone who doesn't know God, but those of us who know Him know that that's Who He is.