

Joshua: Show Them No Mercy

“Show Them No Mercy”

Pop-Quiz—Multiple Choice Test—Who said, “You shall utterly destroy them, show them no mercy” and “You shall not leave alive anything that breathes”?

1. Attila the Hun
2. Al Capone
3. Osama bin Laden
4. God to Israel in Deuteronomy 7:2 and 20:16-17

The correct answer for our purposes is D, although I’m sure the others said something like that too. We expect quotes like this from evil ruthless warriors, but find it hard to believe that the Christian God could have said these things. In fact many theologians would tell you that there is a “radical discontinuity” between the Old Testament and the New Testament. That is a fancy academic way of saying that these parts (or even all) of the Old Testament are not inspired by God but incorrectly written by men. Some theologians would even go so far as to say that there are two different Gods in the Bible, an O.T. God of Israel, and a new and improved version—the Christian God of the N.T. The question these people struggle with is, “How could the God of the N.T., the God of love, command such an indiscriminate slaughter of an entire people? In the N.T. Jesus commands us to love and pray for our enemies, and 1 Jn. 4:8 says “God is love”. What difference is there between modern ethnic cleansing (genocide), and the Canaanite genocide commanded in the O.T.?”

What Do the Scholars Say?

Let me try to give what I think is the incorrect argument of Dr. C. S. Cowles: “The O.T. tells a bloody tale of violence and wholesale slaughter. The smoke of burning towns and the stench of rotting flesh hangs over its pages. To attribute such atrocities to the will of God poses insurmountable difficulties for Christian theology. The only defense the other side can offer is the slaughter was justified to purify the land and punish wickedness. What could possibly be just about the slaughter of women and children, the aged and the decrepit? To attribute genocidal violence to God poisons the well of His attributes of love, mercy, and compassion. It is a fact that Jesus never used His power to hurt, coerce, conquer, or destroy. The God revealed through Jesus is not one who summons his warriors to carry out his wrath. The two testaments have different “great commissions”. Israel’s commission is to annihilate all the peoples in the land of Canaan, while the N.T. commission is to convert, heal, and reconcile all people. Jesus’ command to love your enemies represents a total repudiation of Moses’ genocidal commands.”

What Does Your Humble Servant (me) Say?

While Dr. Cowles argument is thought provoking, I think we can agree it has more holes in it than a minnow bucket. First of all he managed to de-canonize more than 2/3 of the Bible. Cowles’ comments must permit the existence of two gods or take away inspiration from the O.T., thus removing it from the Canon. Cowles solution is to re-interpret the texts if they differ with our perception of God’s love. The problem is the O.T. passages say “The Lord said to Moses”. What are we to do with the fact that the N.T. consistently quotes and refers to the O.T. as both factual and inspired? Are there two different Gods in the Bible? Not according to the very New Testament that Cowles hangs his hat on. Cowles seeks to “disconnect” the real God from the O.T. by saying Christians should not view God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but only as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The problem with this statement is that Jesus Himself defined God as “not the God of the dead but of the living” in referring to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Matt. 22:32. Peter was even clearer in Acts 3:13, “He IS the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. New Test. authors never make any distinction between the God of Israel and the God of the Christian church. They are referring to the same and only God.

New Testament Eschatology (end times study)

The biggest problem for “discontinuity” is that the N.T. is as violent and bloody as the O.T. I am referring to the many passages about judgment, and of course the end times passages such as Matt. 24-25, and the book of Revelation. How about Matt. 25:41, “Depart from me accursed ones into the eternal fire”, and Rev. 19:13-21 concerning the second coming of Christ as a conquering king and judge, “in righteousness He judges and wages war...He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood...from His mouth comes a sharp sword so He might smite the nations...He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God...the rest were killed with the sword..”. We must not overlook these many passages about Jesus’ return as the conquering king who judges and makes war against the unrighteous and unbelieving world.

Synthesizing

How do we then understand the O.T. commands to “show them no mercy”? Let’s start back in Genesis 15 when God promised the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham. In Gen. 15:13-16, God told Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved in Egypt for 400 years and then they would return to Canaan when the “iniquity of the Amorites (Canaanites) would be complete”. By this God was saying that He would be patient with the Canaanite’s evil ways for another 500-600 years, but when His patience wore out, God would judge them as He did Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18. The difference being instead of using a flood or an explosion, God would use the Israelites as His instrument of judgment. When you read God’s commands to destroy the Canaanites in Exodus 23:22-30, God repetitively says, “I will drive them out...I will deliver the inhabitants into your hand.” We also find that God has several other purposes in destroying the Canaanites: 1. To bring justice to a wicked and evil civilization, culture, and idolatrous religion. 2. To give the land to the true owners as God promised Abraham back in Gen.15 and 17. 3. To prevent the Canaanites from influencing Israel with their evil and idolatry, “for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods” (Deut. 7:4). 4. God had been patient, but the Canaanites were beyond remedy and could be dealt with only by destruction.

What are we to say about Cowles’ assertion that the God of the N.T. is a God of love, which differentiates him from the violent God of the O.T.? I believe he is wrong for at least four reasons :

1. God has more than one attribute. God is also a holy and just God who cannot overlook sin (Ex.34:7, Nahum 1:3). This is why God said in Ex.34:6-7 that He is “compassionate and gracious, abounding in lovingkindness, and forgiving; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished”.
2. When Jesus returns, it will be as a conquering king to render judgment upon all people. This is consistent with God’s actions of judgment in the O.T.
3. The God of both testaments is patient and does not wish for any to perish (2 Peter 3:9, Jonah 3:10), but at a point in time determined by God, they reach the point of no return when God has decided enough is enough, so He flooded the world, He destroyed Sodom, He destroyed Nineveh (in Nahum), and (as Jesus predicted) He destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The Canaanites were irretrievably lost to anti-God idolatry. When you consider the gross sins that the Canaanites were guilty of, like infant sacrifice, you should be amazed at God’s patience in taking so long to displace them.
4. Terms like jealousy, vengeance, and wrath may be used as prohibitions to fallen human beings, but in God’s hands they are actually appropriate. God alone has a righteous wrath and a just vengeance whether meted out on the Canaanites in the O.T. or at the final judgment in the N.T. Who alone can wage a “holy war”? Only the one true God can because He alone is holy.

What About the Church?

God war as displayed against the Canaanites in the O.T. has no justification in the Church Age except in terms of spiritual conflict. Since we believe the Canon is closed (new revelation has ceased), God war will not be applicable then until the end times. Therefore, for us there is no “holy war”.

Conclusion

God is holy, righteous, and just. Therefore, He cannot overlook sin. It must be punished, yet God is also loving, merciful, and gracious. These traits appear to fallen human beings as mutually exclusive yet they coexist in the nature of God. This coexistence is best displayed in the atoning work of Christ on the cross. At the same time, in the same Person, and by the same act, God has displayed both His love and His justice. All of our sins were judged and punished, and God was gracious, merciful, and loving at the same time.

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