

A Moral Dilemma?

In this chapter, we seem to confront an ethical dilemma. How can the vengeance against Midian called for in **Numbers 31** be consistent with a God of love?

Can God command his followers to commit genocide?

A similar problem emerges in the story of Abraham and Isaac and the Akedah (**Genesis 22**), in which Abraham is told to sacrifice his son. In that case, an Angel stopped the act and a substitute was provided. No substitute is provided for the Midianites, or the Amalekites, or the Canaanites.

We've seen previously that God destroyed Sodom and God plagued the Egyptians, killed all the firstborn, and drowned Pharaoh's army. Israel battled the Amalekites and are told to make war on them "from generation to generation."

There is an important observation by Paul:

Romans 3:25 - "In the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed."

And...

Acts 17:30-31 - "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

To understand this chapter, we need to step back and contemplate the setting in which these scriptures were written.

As Martin Luther King said, quoting earlier sages: "The Arc of the Moral Universe Is Long, But It Bends Toward Justice." But in the Bible, it seems to follow an inverted trajectory. It went down first, then up. The Old Testament is always pointing back to the original moral ideals of **Genesis 1 and 2** - that each human is created in the image of God for instance - and pointing forward to their fulfillment and perfection in the character of Jesus. In between, the fallenness of humanity resisted this progression and continually dragged humanity toward self-seeking, lust and violence.

Put another way, God makes the revelation of any given truth increasingly clear as the word proceeds to its consummation in Christ.

For instance, the picture in Genesis is of one man with one wife, but later polygamy was allowed by the patriarchs. The same with divorce, allowed by Moses, but condemned by Jesus.

Jesus speaks specifically to the question of hate and warfare:

Matthew 5:43-44 - "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."

I believe the commands to exterminate the Canaanites should be viewed as one of these "you have heard it said" scriptures.

God's creational ideals were clouded and distorted by human fallenness.

Nevertheless, God, in the unfolding of His purposes in the Torah, was incrementally "humanizing" the social and cultural norms and structures common to the Ancient Near East, moving against the current of popular cultural values to diminish cruelty and elevate the status of slaves and women. (The slave in Israel was given human and legal rights unheard of in contemporary societies).

Why didn't God just snap His fingers and fix everything? It had to be incremental if people were to be treated as real human beings who possess the power of choice, rather than robots.

Recall Abraham, pushing God to relent in destroying Sodom, if only 10 righteous people could be found (**Genesis 18:16-33**). "Will the judge of all the earth not do justice?" But to confront God in this way, he had to emphasize that he was "but dust and ashes." This humility, compassion and sensitivity to injustice was exactly what God intended to cultivate in His people. But God's wrath was also employed to emphasize the difference between evil and righteousness.

God is actually long-suffering as He seeks to influence his stubborn, idolatry-prone people Israel. But in fact, despite a gradual awakening of understanding in Israel over time, only Jesus was able to provide the clarity and reflection of a perfect moral character.

War Against the Canaanites

The command to exterminate the Canaanites was limited to Joshua's generation.

In Talmudic commentary, Joshua sent the Canaanite nations a message giving them the opportunity to leave (or else) but they refused. Thus, the rabbis said the onus of blame for the conquest and Joshua's extirpation of the Canaanites lay at the feet of the victims.

According to Maimonides, in warfare on any other than the Canaanites, "on besieging a city in order to seize it, it must not be surrounded on all four sides but only on three sides, thus leaving a path of escape for whomever wishes to flee to save his life."

Jewish law prohibits the use of outright vandalism in warfare. It forbids destruction of fruit trees as a tactic of war. It is also forbidden to break vessels, tear clothing, wreck

that which is built up, stop fountains, or waste food in a destructive manner. Killing an animal needlessly or offering poisoned water to livestock are also forbidden.

Israel's social legislation ran counter to all their neighbors' practices:

Hammurabi's law code called for the death penalty to those helping runaway slaves. Israel, however, was to offer safe harbor to foreign runaway slaves (**Deuteronomy 23:15-16**). In Babylon, a one-hundred-stroke beating was the "mildest form of punishment." Contrast this with **Deuteronomy 25:1-3**, which sets a limit of 40 strokes for a criminal: "He may beat him forty times but no more, so that he does not beat him with many more stripes than these." The reason? So that "your brother is not degraded in your eyes."

Instead of seeing strangers as less than human, as the Greeks saw "barbarians," God demanded love toward them:

Deuteronomy 10:18-19 - "[God] executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Spiritual Types

Many of the events acted out in Israel's history were to serve as spiritual paradigms and "types" for later generations.

Romans 15:4 - "For everything that was written in the past was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope."

1 Corinthians 10:11 - "Now these things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come."

Take for example **Psalms 137:8-9** - "O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us – he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks."

The Babylonians had done this first to Israelite children that they thought could not survive the journey to exile. Now the psalmist is angry and wants tit-for-tat revenge. Killing babies is evil. But he places himself one step away from personally carrying out the deed. He probably is thinking God will do this Himself. Later Jeremiah goes a step further away from vengeance and tells Jews to "seek the welfare" of Babylon while they are in exile (**Jeremiah 29:7**).

This is another example of that incremental developing moral awakening that would culminate in Jesus' "Turn the other cheek."

Quoting **Deuteronomy 32:35** - "To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence", Paul

restates this:

Romans 12:19 - "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

That same chapter says (**Deuteronomy 32:4**) - "all God's ways are justice... just and upright is He."

In fact, God "avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people's land" (Deuteronomy 32:43).

Types and Allegory

1 Corinthians 10:11 - "Now these things happened to them as examples (*typikos* - types) and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come."

Many rabbis allegorized Amalek, taking it as a euphemism for the "evil inclination" within us, always at war with God's purposes.

C. S. Lewis says we can look at these passages like the early church fathers did, as allegories and types of our inner, spiritual struggles.

"I know things in the inner world which are like babies; the infantile beginnings of small indulgences, small resentments... which woo us and wheedle us with special pleadings and seem so tiny, so helpless that in resisting them we feel we are being cruel to animals." And, he continues: "Against all such pretty infants (the dears have such winning ways) the advice of the Psalm is the best. Knock the little bastards' brains out."

i.e. Babylonian infants will grow up to be enemy oppressors. Small sins grow up to persecute Christ within us.

See **2 Corinthians 10:5-6** - "Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled."

But that's still a pretty harsh and disturbing analogy.

God's Authority to Determine Good and Evil

God waited to redeem his people from slavery in Egypt because the "sin of the Amorites was not yet full" (**Genesis 15:16**). Their sin had not reached the threshold of destruction. (Amorite is a general term for all the Canaanite tribes and surrounding peoples) What was that threshold that caused God to determine their sin was "full?" It must have been pretty horrible, involving social injustice, child sacrifice, bestiality and religious prostitution, etc.

Deuteronomy 9:5 - "Not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thine heart, dost thou go to possess their land: but for the wickedness of these nations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee, and that he may perform the word which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

But that is up to God to decide, not humans with limited and frail knowledge. The whole point of the book of Job is that our view of what is right and just is flawed.

And the coming of Christ has fulfilled and superseded all previous Law, with the law of Love. He absorbed God's wrath on the cross so that we could manifest love for all.

Look to Jesus

In the words of N. T. Wright, "the Torah is given for a specific period of time, and is then set aside - not because it was a bad thing now happily abolished, but because it was a good thing whose purpose had now been accomplished."

Whenever we're at a loss for a satisfying explanation of something in the Bible (like now), remember that scripture is always pointing us to Christ. This is not a cop out, it's what Jesus told us:

John 5:39 - "You Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me."

Hebrews 1:1-2 - "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds..."

Even with this clearest of communication to us from God in Jesus, we still see "darkly," obscurely as Paul says, "like puzzling reflections in a mirror," understanding things only incompletely. But then, at the end of time when we see Him "face to face" (**1 Corinthians 13:12**), we will know all things perfectly.