

Killing and War in the Old Testament

Question: *The Sixth Commandment reads, "You shall not kill" yet in other places in the Old Testament we read where God commanded the Israelites to wage war and sometimes to even exterminate their enemies. How can we understand this?*

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In the Old Testament, the taking of life in war was not considered murder. Soldiers were sent into battle charged to fight bravely and destroy the enemy. In a few cases, according to the texts, God commanded Israel to put whole villages, towns and cities to the sword. "Destroy them utterly." Israelites were commanded to kill even the elderly, women and children, and even the animals. They were to spare nothing living.

This aspect of the Old Testament faith grates against modern sensitivities. *The Old Testament is not a modern book.* It records the violence of war and reports what today we would call genocide. Because of this some people, troubled by these kinds of stories, reject the Church and the Bible and say, "Look what a blood thirsty religion it is." This poses a challenge to our faith. We believe that the Israelites entered Canaan with a mandate purported to be from God to exterminate the inhabitants of the land. How can we understand this in the light of Jesus Christ? Did God really command them to kill so fiercely and destroy so utterly? Is this the same God revealed in Jesus Christ?

I know of many Christians who have also wondered about this. Usually we just avoid the question. But those texts stand written in our Bibles in all of their offensiveness and crudity. How shall we think of them?

The social context of the ancient world

First, in those days most every nation, tribe and clan slaughtered their enemies and enslaved able bodied survivors whom they chose to spare. The women and children were loot for the conquerors. That was nothing new. Such practices were the order of the day. Such behaviors in war were not considered wrong or immoral (just like child sacrifice was accepted among many pagans). Theirs was a "dog eat dog world."

Might was right and only the strong survived. They fought for land and for resources, much the same as we do today. They battled over control of the trade routes. They fought for access to the sea or to a river. They struggled to gain the land of hills laden with iron or pregnant with rich veins of gold. Peoples clashed over who resides in the land of the best fields of fertile soil or which terrain offered the most strategic defensive positions. Wars were fought to acquire land and resources for survival and safety. The best went to the mighty. Spoils went to the strong. Theirs was a brutal world. Thomas Hobbes summed it up when he wrote, "*The life of man is solitary, poor, nasty,*

brutish, and short.” The world then was a violent place, as it is also today. We are not much different from those ancient people. Nations today fight wars over control the oil reserves of the world or for access to the water sources.

In the world of the Old Testament Israel behaved in ways typical of the surrounding nations and their Gentile neighbors. The Bible was not a modern book and it does not reflect modern sensibilities. So how can we understand the world “red in tooth and claw” back then? Did God, in fact, command the massacres, order the slaughtering of whole populations and require the mass killings? This has troubled many sensitive consciences of those who read the Old Testament. How shall we regard those passages?

God accommodates to the present social realities

Here is how I have come to understand the situation. *God accommodated to the human reality and the necessities of the era.* It is as though God *comes down* to our level and *adapts* to the realities of thought and life in that ancient world. Israel would hardly have survived at all as a people in the world if they had turned the other cheek towards their enemies. They would have been annihilated in quick order. That almost happened many times. Outside of Divine intervention Israel would have been eradicated.

God *accommodated* to the realities of the world in those days. In order to speak to us and establish a nation for Divine purposes God adapted and used the conventions of that time. In this case God employed the “Holy War” to allow Israel to establish itself as a people. This did not reflect either God’s heart or God’s perfect will. It was an accommodation to the situation of the real world, a world of violence, brutality, injustice and sin.

Jesus Christ reveals the true heart of God

The death and mayhem inflicted by Israel, though necessary for the time, did not reflect the mind and heart of God. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. The prophet Ezekiel cried out, As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Ezekiel 33:11

The true heart and mind of God was not fully revealed until Christ came. God’s bigger purpose was made known fully in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus completes, fulfills and corrects whatever views people had of God derived from the Old Testament. The Old Testament people lived according to the light they had. It was a dim light indeed compared to “...the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ”!

God led Israel in terms that they understood. God was working a much larger plan in the history of salvation. God called a nation of slaves out of their oppression and slavery. They were idol-worshipping pagans. God chose to form them into a people. God established a covenant and

revealed to them the holy law. They must give up their other gods and swear allegiance to Yahweh alone. God promised to provide them with their own land. To do that it was necessary to accommodate to the realities of that tribal world. *God works in and through ordinary human history.* That history is warped and distorted by sin. God can use even sin for the divine purposes. God used Israel as an instrument of Divine judgment on the nations and in turn God used the nations as instruments of judgment against Israel. If we don't understand that, chances are we will grasp little of the story of Israel or the words of the prophets in our Bibles.

We cannot use methods of warfare that were appropriate for a primitive tribal people in the 12th Century before Christ. We must not use these ancient texts to justify modern wars of genocide, ethnic cleansings, wars of extermination, or policies of wholesale slaughter today. Today we do well not to look to a particular Old Testament text to gain our insights about just cause or just behavior in war. Rather, once Christ came, we look to Jesus. We seek his divine counsel. The crucified Jew guides us.