

“The Slaughter of the “Innocents” – Is God Unjust?”

Joshua 6:21

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In the writings of which religion would you expect to find the following statements?

“A curse on him who keeps his sword from bloodshed!” Jeremiah 48:10

“You must destroy all the peoples... Do not look on them with pity...
Deuteronomy 7:16

“The Lord says: `Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth ... killing... And that day about three thousand of the people died.” Exodus 32:27-28

“When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city... Put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder...from your enemies. This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby. However, in the cities of the nations (nearby) do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them... Deuteronomy 20:10-18

Islam?

You’d think so, to hear some evangelical leaders in our country.

It is reported that:

- A year ago Franklin Graham called Islam “very evil and wicked.”
- Pat Robertson said Muslims “want to coexist to control, dominate, and if need be to destroy.”
- Southern Baptist Jerry Vines said Muhammad was a “demon-possessed pedophile.”
- Jerry Falwell said Mohammed was a terrorist. (All from CT p28 Dec 9, 2002)

But it is still true that “people who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.”

The quotations on killing, bloodshed and destruction that I read just a minute ago are taken from the Bible not the Koran.

But I now refer you to the specific texts in Joshua that have prompted this sermon today which is something of an excursus on the text.

When God caused the walls of Jericho to fall as we saw last week from Joshua chapter 6 the soldiers of Israel moved into the city and this is what the text says:

Joshua 6:21 “They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it--men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

And this was in obedience to what God said, in the passage I read earlier, to “not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them”... Deuteronomy 20:18

And after the defeat of the next city Israel fights we read the following:

Joshua 8:24-25 “When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the desert where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword, all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it. Twelve thousand men and women fell that day--all the people of Ai.”

Passages such as these have bothered people down through the centuries.

- In A.D. 150 a church leader by the name of Marcion wanted to remove from the NT all references to the OT God because he thought the OT God was too full of wrath to reflect the real God.
- In the 1700’s Thomas Paine, in his treatise “The Age of Reason,” a provocative attack on Christianity, wrote:
- “Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and tortuous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness with which more than half the

Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon, than the word of God. It is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind; and, for my part, I sincerely detest it, as I detest anything that is cruel." Thomas Paine

- One writer said, "The book of Joshua is (an) embarrassment... with its ferocity and its religious advocacy of mass murder... (Oh) the guilt of the living God." (R. Goetz in "Joshua, Calvin, and Genocide" in TToday 32 (1975) p213-216 quoted in Howard 184)
- A current web-site called "Evil Biblical Stupidity" cites many biblical passages and rates them like motion pictures for violence, injustice, immorality, family values, etc.

Among the passages cited is the one from Josh 6.

The moving picture at the top of the home page of this web-site is of a leering satanical face the web creators call "God".

How do we answer this criticism of the Bible and of God?

How do we answer our own questions about such wholesale bloodshed as when we read, they "destroyed with the sword every living thing in it--men and women, young and old..?"

Some, as I suggested earlier, tried to eliminate the problem by eliminating the Old Testament as any kind of revelation from God.

They said the God of the OT was simply a tribal god and not the real God of the New Testament.

They said that the Old Testament was just one group's attempt at finding God and the war-like talk was simply an expression of the times in which those authors wrote; an unsophisticated, barbaric time.

And what the authors did was project their own attitudes onto their God.

But if we take that approach, while we may solve the immediate problem of what seems like God's violence in the OT, we raise a much more serious issue of the authority of the Bible both OT and NT.

Consider that Jesus believed in the Old Testament.

Consider that the New Testament is based on the Old Testament.

If you dismiss the Old Testament as simply one tribe's religious quest, you dismiss the basis of the entire Bible.

We believe, with Jesus and the New Testament writers, that the Old Testament is part of God's revelation of himself.

Therefore, in one sense, we are stuck with it and we must understand the passages that speak of warfare and bloodshed – even when they speak of shedding the blood of people we might consider “innocent”.

Others have attempted to solve the problem by saying that such bellicose rhetoric and bloodthirsty wars were common in ancient history and the OT is just reflecting what was standard warfare.

Raids, tribal wars, small nation-states amassing armies and attacking other nation-states was common through the ages and even in our own day: Catholic Irish versus Protestant Irish; Hutus versus the Tutsis of Rwanda; Israelis and Palestinians.

We call it genocide today but it has always been part of humanity's inhumanity.

But to dismiss Israel's actions against Jericho as simply expressive of warfare in that day and age has two problems:
Just because it was commonplace doesn't make it right.

And more importantly we are not ready to say that historical precedent was controlling God.

There must be another explanation.

Let's look at the specific situation that prompted this whole issue: Israel's military watched the walls of Jericho fall and then they marched into the city.

Joshua 6:21 "They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it--men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

What bothers us about that?

Several things:

- What right did Israel have to invade land that belonged to other people?
- What right did they have to kill people?
- How could they possibly justify killing everyone: men, women, young and old?
- How could **God** possibly have commanded such wholesale slaughter, such genocide?

We have made several assumptions when we ask such questions:

- We assume that the people who lived in the land had the right to it.
- We assume that killing is always wrong.
- We assume there is a moral difference between killing soldiers, compared to other men, compared to women, or compared to children.
- We assume that a God of love couldn't possibly order the killing of people.

I think I can reduce those questions to one issue:

We think that people are sufficiently innocent so as not to be worthy of death.

Or to state it more simply in a question: **How could Israel and, much less, how could God sanction and execute the deaths of innocent people?**

We misunderstand Joshua 6 and other passages like it because we misunderstand what the Bible says about God and what it says about humanity.

Let me start with what the Bible says about humanity, most specifically, the citizens of Jericho and the rest of Canaan.

God says that they were not innocent.

Nearly 500 years earlier God told Abraham what was going to happen and one of the reasons why it would happen.

God would give Canaan to the descendants of Abraham in part because the people of that land were increasingly wicked to the point that one day God would finally judge and destroy them.

In Genesis 15:16 God said to Abraham, "In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here (to Canaan), for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

When, centuries later, God tells Moses to invade the land, he warns Moses, but in doing so he also justifies his actions against the current culture in Canaan:

Leviticus 18:24-25 "Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. ²⁵ Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants."

The text lists the sins being committed by those people for centuries: incest, adultery, child sacrifice, homosexual relations and bestiality.

In another place God specifically says what brought about his judgment on the people of Canaan:

Deuteronomy 9:4 "After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, "The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness." No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you.

He goes on to again mention the some of the specific sins that brought about this judgment by God.

Deuteronomy 18:9-12 "When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. ¹⁰ Let no one be found among you who

sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft,¹¹ or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead.¹² Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you."

According to both the Bible and extra-biblical data the Canaanites were steeped in idolatry and the evil, detestable practices of child sacrifice and ritual prostitution that went with their idolatry. (see Religions of the Ancient Near East by Ringgren)

No, the people of Jericho and the rest of Canaan were not innocent.

You might say, "What about the babies?"

There isn't much that can be said biblically on this subject but I refer you to both the Testaments, New and Old.

In Romans 5 God describes each person's inherent **connection to the human race** and he declares that by virtue of Adam's sin we are all sinners from conception.

Unless there is intervention, eternal death is our lot.

We inherit that condition simply by being human.

The point is that God says even babies are not innocent.

And of course we all ratify our condition by our actions as we see in Romans 3.

If that were all Scripture said on the topic we would have little reason to hope, even for infants.

But two passages in the Old Testament give us insight into this matter that leaves us with hope for infants and imbeciles.

The first is weak because it is anecdotal, but it gives us something.

When King David learned that his infant son had died, he took comfort in saying: 2 Samuel 12:23 "But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

We don't think David was expressing fatalism but hope-hope that he would see that son again.

The hope was that the God who secured David's future would somehow secure the future of his son.

A far more significant passage for me is found in Genesis 18:25.

There Abraham says of God: "Far be it from you to do such a thing--to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

It is that last statement that gives me hope "Will not the judge of all the earth do right?"

I do not mean that infants are righteous, because that would contradict other significant passages of Scripture.

But I choose to believe that God will somehow, apart from faith, apply the death of Christ to those who are mentally incapable of responding to the revelation of God.

I do not know that, but I leave it in the capable hands of the Judge of all the earth who will do right.

But let's go back to the more obvious subjects of God's judgment – the rest of the people of Jericho.

God had not only given the people 500 years to repent but he had given the people of Canaan and Jericho specific opportunity to repent.

That is demonstrated by what happens earlier in the book of Joshua.

Two spies from Israel's camp went into Jericho and met the woman named Rahab.

She told them what the people of Jericho knew and felt: Joshua 2:10-11 "We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."

Rahab's response to hearing about the one true living God was repentance and faith.

But what did the others do with that truth about God?

They resisted and rejected it.

Centuries later we learn what might have happened in Jericho if they had responded as Rahab did.

We see it in what happened at Nineveh.

When repentance and faith in God was preached to **that** pagan city, they responded and God withheld his judgment.

It can be demonstrated from Scripture that in spite of the Canaanites recognition of what God was doing they rejected God.

Rahab, and much later Nineveh, are examples of what God was prepared to do **if the Canaanites had repented.**

But they did not, and they met divine judgment.

Our problem with Joshua 6:21 and other passages is that we think people, and ourselves most specifically, are basically innocent – at least sufficiently innocent so as not to be worthy of death.

But you who believe the Bible, know that is not true.

God says every human being has sufficient truth about God, just from the creation around us, to condemn him or her for not responding to God.

Romans 1:18-20 "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

In fact, God says, not only does everyone have the evidence from creation but **everyone also has a conscience** that condemns them because we don't even do what we intuitively know is right:

Romans 2:15 "The requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness..."

So he concludes in Romans 3:8,10 "Their condemnation is deserved... There is no one righteous, not even one."

And the final conclusion of the whole matter is spelled out in Romans 3:23 and 6:23:

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."
And "the wages of sin is death."

In Romans 5 we learn that we are sinners from conception because we are descendants of Adam and thus part of the failed human race.

I don't have time to expound on that subject at this time but in summary, **for at least these three reasons** there was no innocent person in Jericho and there is no innocent person in Lakewood- Littleton.

The battles of Jericho and Canaan were **not** examples of indiscriminate genocide.

They were **not** examples of one tribal god bettering another.

They **were** examples of judgment – God's judgment against sin.

Israel was God's means of carrying out that judgment. God had made it clear to Israel that it was not because of Israel's righteousness that God was doing this.

It was because of Canann's wickedness.

I said earlier that our problems with what happened at Jericho are because of **two misunderstandings** – a misunderstanding **about humanity**, incorrectly assuming we are basically innocent **AND a misunderstanding about God**.

It is the second of those two we now consider, be it ever so briefly.

We find it hard to accept that God would judge and especially that he would kill anyone because we have such a lop-sided view of God.

We see him only as loving, patient and tolerant.

We want to see ourselves as sufficiently innocent so as not to deserve judgment and God as sufficiently benevolent so as to make up any possible shortfall in our innocence.

But the God of the Bible is a God of holiness and justice as well.

- God cannot be tolerant of sin and be holy.
- God cannot fail to judge sin and be just.

What we have in Joshua 6 is God meting out judgment on a long rebellious people.

What we will see in Joshua 7 is God meting out judgment on his own willfully disobedient people.

What we will see at the end of the age is God meting out complete judgment.

Genesis 6 records for us what God once did in response to the willful rebellion of humanity – it was called a flood.

Revelation 19 and 20 tell us what God will yet do in response to the willful rebellion of humanity – it is called final judgment.

If you believe the Bible then you know that God is also a God of holy judgment.

That is what the cross is all about.

On the cross judgment and mercy met.

Jesus took His own judgment against the sins of his people and suffered the consequences for us so that we could be forgiven and have life eternal instead of death.

In this context I love the words of God through the Apostle Peter when questioned as to why the final judgment had not yet come:

2 Peter 3:8,10,15 “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He

is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance... But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.... Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation..."

When we keep in mind the **truth about humanity**; that we all deserve judgment, **and the whole truth about God**; that he is holy and just, much of our difficulty with God's actions at Jericho disappear.

When we read the Old Testament we must bear in mind the sinfulness of sin and the holiness and justice of God.

We can also, wonderfully, bear in mind the patience of God – patience that means salvation for those who respond.

This discussion today and for that matter Israel's wars in the Old Testament, raise another issue I haven't had time to address.

- Do other nations, even America, have the right to wage war?
- Can we rightly and safely assume that God is on our side?

Before the allied invasion at Normandy in WWII **General Montgomery** sent these words in closing in a message to his troops: "Let us pray that the Lord Mighty in Battle will go forth with our armies, and that his special providence will aid us in our struggle."

General George Patton, on January 1, 1944 wrote his famous Soldier's Prayer in which he says, "God of our fathers, who by land and sea has ever led us to victory, please continue your inspiring guidance in this the greatest of our conflicts... Grant us victory, Lord."

(in Craigie The Problem of War in the OT p33-34)

President Bush is not Joshua and America is not ancient Israel.

We are not under a "manifest destiny" to expel the enemy from the "Promised Land".

Even Israel misunderstood its unique role and began to think it was entitled to God's favor in war.

As God demonstrated to Joshua even before the battle of Jericho commenced, the issue was **not whose side God was on** but who was on God's side – who was doing his will.

Jesus makes it clear that the Kingdom of God will not be brought in by mankind's wars.

The Crusaders of the middle ages may not have been wrong to wage war but they were clearly wrong to wage it in God's name.

War is not God's invention it is man's invention.

Mankind has no solution for the problem of evil except more evil.

We wage war to combat war.

At best, war is a necessary evil and we should consider it only with great humility.

But God has a solution for the problem of evil and war: It is called Salvation for the repentant and its called Judgment for the unrepentant.

In the end it will not be a matter of whether God is on our side or our enemy's side, but whether we are on God's side.

God's call to us has always been and is still the same – repentance and faith.

There is coming a day when evil and war will cease to exist. Theologian Millard Erickson writes:

“As Jurgen Moltmann has pointed out, one solution to the problem of evil is not how to explain evil, or explain it away, **but to eliminate evil**, thus removing the necessity of explaining it. Christianity has many themes for alleviating the reality of evil, such as God's assumption of the effects of sin himself, in the incarnation. Yet (Christianity's) greatest contribution to the resolution of the problem is the eschatological dimension, according to which, beyond this life there will be a great judgment in which justice will be administered and all evil and pain will be eliminated. The drama in which good and evil have been in conflict for so long will come to a satisfactory resolution.”