

WHY DOES GOD APPROVE OF WAR AND VIOLENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

Frankly, parts of the Old Testament are sometimes difficult to accept, especially as they relate to God's character. Take his command to King Saul of Israel: "Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys" (1 Samuel 15:3, TNIV). Camels and donkeys? Children and infants? Or how about this statement regarding Israel's destruction of Jericho at God's prompting: "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" (Joshua 6:21, TNIV)?

Is the God of the Old Testament a lover of war and destruction? Is God a warmonger who arbitrarily takes out his frustration? Reading certain passages, one could get this impression. This issue presents quite a challenge for Christians who have come to believe that love is the defining attribute of God. Even more so, these passages often propagate the doubts of non-Christians who are skeptical of God in the first place. But perhaps the issue of God and war in the Old Testament is more complex than we realize. Could there be other factors that we need to take into consideration? Before we judge God's character based on a few verses, let's examine the matter a little closer.

For starters, God often used warfare as an instrument of justice. The people that God commanded Israel to fight against had often committed extremely wicked acts. For example, the aforementioned Amalekites had attacked the Israelites in an especially atrocious way. Moses later reminded them: "Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God" (Deuteronomy 25:17-18). Rather than waging war against the army of Israel, the Amalekites attacked the women, children, sick, and elderly after the soldiers and healthy men had passed by. Other nations that Israel fought practiced child sacrifice, tortured prisoners of war, and engaged in rampant prostitution and perverse sexual acts. Therefore, it's important to recognize that God did not randomly "pick on" innocent nations. Rather, he often used Israel to execute justice upon people who were thoroughly sinful. And lest God be accused of favoritism, he also used other nations to conquer and judge Israel itself for its sins.

Second, while God sometimes used warfare to bring justice upon entire societies, political structures, and nations, it does not mean he judged every specific person who was part of that nation. Rather, the societal values that produced these detestable acts were the target of God's actions. Unfortunately, some "innocent" people faced the consequences, but such are the ramifications of living in a world entirely stained by human sin. A modern day example of this phenomenon is World War II. Most would agree that the nations of Germany and Japan needed to be resisted, defeated, and ultimately "judged" for their aggression and atrocities, even if it meant that some civilians of those societies suffered consequences they did not explicitly deserve.

But why, you might ask, did God sometimes command the entire annihilation of nations? Drastic times often call for drastic measures. Thus, a third reason that God often approved of total war was to demonstrate his grace to others and to future generations. Perhaps in his wisdom, God recognized that half-measures would not be effective in certain circumstances. (In fact, there were several occasions when Israel did not completely destroy a nation and eventually adopted the idolatry and cultic practices it left behind.)

Fourth, we should interject that the events described in the Old Testament took place during a unique period of human history. God used the nation of Israel in a distinctive way at that time, but today Christians comprise a multinational community of faith that does not follow the political and military example of ancient Israel. Therefore, Christians cannot claim the same instructions God gave specifically to ancient Israel. Moreover, in ancient Near Eastern culture, triumph in warfare was commonly associated with the strength of a nation's god. Consequently, the annihilation of Israel's enemies conveyed that the one, true God of Israel had asserted his power and rule over the false gods of the Canaanites. In other words, God often utilized the currency of that culture—warfare—to make himself known. Listen to the words of one Canaanite woman when she met some Israelites: "When we heard of [the destruction your armies wrought], our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Joshua 2:11, TNIV).

Finally, God is also portrayed in the Old Testament as having tremendous patience, grace, and compassion. God often gave wicked nations generations to repent of their sin before he judged them, and he extended mercy to those who did (e.g., the city of Nineveh in the book of Jonah). The law that God gave to Moses also instructed the Israelites to offer peace before attacking a city (Deuteronomy 20:10). God even told Abraham that he would not destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if there were just ten righteous people living there (Genesis 18).

The issue of war in the Old Testament is complex. God himself appears conflicted at times when faced with the need to exercise justice: "Though [God] brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to any human being" (Lamentations 3:33-34, TNIV). Nevertheless, the Bible also portrays a hopeful future when "[God] will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4, TNIV). This is God's redemptive design for our world. While he sometimes used warfare to judge wicked nations in the Old Testament, and while the depravity of human sin often makes war inevitable today, we can anticipate a chapter in God's story when war will be no more.