

The nature of God in the Old Testament

(A shorter version of this paper is included in "The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture".)

Jesus had a high opinion of the Old Testament and the New Testament regards it as "God-breathed." Some of the loftiest descriptions of God are found in it but there are also some serious questions we must face. We look first at those descriptions, then at the questions.

The nature of God

a. The kindness of God in the OT

Immediately after Moses was given the Ten Commandments "Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin'" (Ex 34:5-7). This is a foundational statement about the nature of God revealed in the OT.

There is a similar statement in Deut 7:7-9: "The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments."

Jeremiah writes that "The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness'" (Jer 31:3).

Hosea writes a beautiful passage about the tension between compassion and wrath in God as he deals with his rebellious people:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them. Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? A sword will flash in their cities; it will devour their false prophets and put an end to their plans. My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man—the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities. They will follow the LORD; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. They will come from Egypt, trembling like sparrows, from Assyria, fluttering like doves. I will settle them in their homes," declares the LORD. Ephraim has surrounded me with lies, Israel with deceit. And Judah is unruly against God, even against the faithful Holy One' (Hosea 11:1-12).

There are many other references to the love of God in the OT.

b. The justice of God in the Old Testament

Scripture teaches that God is a God of justice; he loves justice. The kingdom of God, established ultimately through Christ, is a kingdom of love, faithfulness, justice and righteousness. He will bring justice to the nations and particularly to the poor. He defends, sustains and secures justice for the fatherless, widows, alien, oppressed, weak, needy and poor.¹

God hates injustice, oppression, extortion, dispossession, dishonest business, bribery and commands us to avoid them.² He commands us to defend the rights of the weak, needy, fatherless, poor and oppressed; to rescue the

oppressed and administer justice.³ Under Old Testament law the poor are to be provided with food, not to be charged interest or sold food at a profit. Their debts may be cancelled.⁴

God watches over foreigners (or people from another tribe, race, social or religious background) and condemns those who ill-treat or withhold justice from them. All human beings are equal in God's sight (Gen 1.26-27; Gal 3.28). He commands us to love foreigners as ourselves, to treat them as our native-born and help them where necessary (Lev 19.33f). Even the offender is to have humane punishment and is not to be degraded (Deut 25.2f).

c. God does not change and cannot be untrue to himself

God does not change. He is “the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). He says “I the LORD do not change” (Mal 3:6 cf. Psa 55:19). This is the classical doctrine of the immutability of God.

“If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Tim 2:13). Another translation is that God “cannot be untrue to himself.”

Secondly, we must note the high view which the New Testament has of the Old Testament.

The claims of Scripture

It must be remembered that the New Testament references to the inspiration and authority of Scripture almost entirely refer to the Old Testament.

Old Testament Scripture is “God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16).

No *Old Testament* “prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:19-21).

Old Testament Scripture must be fulfilled (Matt 26:54; Mark 14:49; Luke 4:21; John 2:22; 7:38, 42; 10:35; 13:18; 17:12; 19:24, 28, 36-37; Acts 1:16; Jas 2:23).

Jesus himself said of the *Old Testament*: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matt 5:17-18).

However, although Jesus affirmed the OT he didn’t hesitate to reject its teaching on divorce (Mark 10:4-9) and violence (Matt 5:38-44). He also didn’t uphold the OT death penalty for adultery in the case of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11).

We must not put the Bible above God, i.e. we must not defend the Bible in a way which impugns the unchanging character of God. Fundamentalists and some conservatives can be in danger of this in their zeal to uphold the authority of Scripture. This surely is bibliolatry – raising Scripture almost to the level of a god. We have noted above that God is a God of justice who hates injustice. He therefore hates such things as oppression, cruelty, punishing the innocent and genocide. This, of course, raises various questions with respect to the Old Testament. At the same time we must treat Scripture with great respect and always seek to solve problems with biblical content positively, as far as we are able.

Thirdly, we should note what the church has said about Scripture.

The witness of the church

Article 6, 20 and Canon A5 of the Anglican formularies, make it quite clear the Old Testament is Scripture and the Word of God. More specifically Article 7 states: “Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in

any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.”

Most of those who regard Scripture as totally inerrant readily accept this three-fold distinction and in accordance with NT teaching consign to history the ceremonial law with its regulations about circumcision, food laws, Sabbath observance etc, and the civil law with its ban on charging interest and its death penalty for adultery or Sabbath breaking as relevant only to the Israelite people. Obviously they also regard the sacrificial laws as fulfilled in Jesus.

So, clearly some of the teaching of the OT is generally seen as not applying to us in the NT era. Then, of course, there is a good deal of symbolism and apocalyptic used, particularly in the Prophets which is not always easy to interpret and certainly is not literal. Furthermore the OT describes the words and actions of people who were children of their age. Some of these words and actions conflict with the teaching of the NT but this is not a big issue since it is not claimed that their words and actions were inspired or commanded by God.

The problem arises when words and actions which conflict with the teaching of the NT are claimed to have been inspired or commanded by God. This is a question of major importance vis a vis the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

The challenge of Morality

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy confidently affirms: “Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God’s saving grace in individual lives (*Point 4*). It accepts progressive revelation and adds: “We deny that later revelation, which may fulfil earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it.” (*Article V*)

It continues: “We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit. We deny that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood” (*Article XII*).

More specifically to do with the Old Testament, it states: “Moses, whom God used as mediator to carry his words to His people at the time of the exodus, stands at the head of a long line of prophets in whose mouths and writings God put His words for delivery to Israel. God’s purpose in this succession of messages was to maintain His covenant by causing His people to know His name--that is, His nature--and His will both of precept and purpose in the present and for the future” (*III. EXPOSITION A. Creation, Revelation and Inspiration*).

It is all very well to make such strong and confident statements on a dogmatic theological basis. But we need to examine just what this means in practice.

There are numerous questions.

1. The problem stated

a. Does God really flare up in anger?

The OT quotes the Lord speaking of being slow to anger (Ex 34:6) but also of his anger being aroused by Israel’s disobedience, even of it burning against them (Ex 32:10; 2 Kings 22:17 cf. Ex 22:24; Lev 26:28; Num 25:11; Deut 32:21; 1 Kings 14:9; 16:2; 21:22; 2 Kings 21:15)

Deut 29: 24, 27-28 says: “All the nations will ask: “Why has the LORD done this to this land? Why this fierce, burning anger?” “Therefore the LORD’s anger burned against this land In furious anger and in great wrath the LORD uprooted them from their land” (vv. 24, 27, 28).

“Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled” (Num 11:10). Moses said: “I feared the anger and wrath of the LORD, for he was

angry enough with you to destroy you” Deut 9:19, cf. “Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel” (2 Sam 24:1, 10-17).

How does this relate to Article 1 of the 39 Articles “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, *or passions...*”? Divine Impassibility is a mainstream doctrine. We shall return to this.

b. Did God approve of genocide amongst the Canaanites?

Did God approve of the killing of women and children, as well as men of fighting age?

Num 31:15-18 Moses orders the killing of women and boys whom the army had spared. “Have you allowed all the women to live?” he asked them. “They were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the LORD in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the LORD’s people. *Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man*, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man.” See also Deut 2:34; 3:6

In Deut 2:34; 3:6 Israel killed all the children “At that time we took all his towns and completely destroyed them—men, women and children. We left no survivors.” “We completely destroyed them, as we had done with Sihon king of Heshbon, destroying every city—men, women and children.”

The OT teaches the Lord destroyed the Canaanites (Josh 24:11-12). In fact, he hardened the hearts of the Canaanites so he could destroy them: “For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses” (Josh 11:20).

“When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you— and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy.’ ‘You must destroy all the peoples the LORD your God gives over to you. Do not look on them with pity and do not serve their gods, for that will be a snare to you” (Deut 7:1-2, 16, cf Josh 23:5-9).

Nothing must be left alive in the Canaanite cities: “However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, *do not leave alive anything that breathes*. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you” (Deut 20:16-17).

Even though the Canaanites were depraved, why were equally sinful nations not destroyed?

“*Whenever David attacked an area, he did not leave a man or woman alive*” (1 Sam 27:9). He took care to execute two thirds of the captive Moabites (2 Sam 8:2, cf. Ezek 9:5-6).

We should also note that Israel committed genocide against the Israelites in Jabesh Gilead, who had failed to assemble before the Lord, because they wanted to provide virgins for the decimated Benjaminites (Judg 21:5-14).

We shall return to this subject.

c. Other issues

i. Did God dread the enemy thinking they had defeated Israel not him?

Deut 32:19-27, esp. 27 God sends famine, pestilence, plague, wild animals and the sword but says “I dreaded the taunt of the enemy, lest the adversary misunderstand and say, ‘Our hand has triumphed; the LORD has not done all this.’”

ii. Did God approve of slavery?

Ex 21:1-32; 22:18-20 make regulations about slaves but the OT does not condemn slavery. (Neither does the NT).

iii. *Does the Lord inflict horrible diseases or plague?*

Deut 28 records the words of Moses but he says in 29:1 “These are the terms of the covenant the LORD commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb.” He proclaims that, if they disobey, the Lord will plague them with wasting disease, fever and inflammation, boils, tumours, festering sores, the itch, madness, blindness, confusion of mind, anxiety. They will experience scorching heat and drought, blight, mildew, crop failure, locust swarms. They will suffer defeat, siege and disaster. They will be reduced to cannibalism. They will be exiled and shipped back to Egypt as slaves (vv 23-68).

However, if they obey “the LORD will keep you free from every disease. He will not inflict on you the horrible diseases you knew in Egypt, but he will inflict them on all who hate you” (Deut 7:15 cf. Ex 32:33-35).

2 Sam 24:1-17 states that God incited David to carry out the census then punished Israel with plague.

iv. *What about the large amount of very strong and violent prophetic language in the OT?*

v. *Did God really call Abraham to indulge in human sacrifice?*

How do we answer these questions in a way which is consistent with the full revelation of God in Christ? God is love and Jesus teaches we should love our enemies. For example, he rebuked James and John for asking: “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them [the Samaritans]?” (Luke 9:54). He orders Peter to put away his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane.

First we need to note that there is a balance in God’s character in both the OT and the NT.

2. The kindness and sternness of God in the NT

Paul writes of “the kindness and sternness of God” In Romans 11:22. This balance is shown in Jesus himself. The passages on the love of God are too numerous to mention but we must note that:

a. Jesus had a message which was quite stern at times

He rebuked hypocrisy publicly calling the clergy (Pharisees) a "brood of vipers" who were "evil" and therefore couldn't say anything good (Matt. 12:34). He publicly called them "hypocrites" (Matt, 22:18) "sons of Hell", "blind guides", "blind fools", "whitewashed tombs" (Matt. 23: 13-17, 19? 23-32). He said, "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matt. 23:33). He was angry at their hardness of heart (Mark 3:1-6).

On another occasion he said to them, "You are of your father the Devil and do as your father desires ... He who is of God hears the words of God the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God If I said, I do not know (God), I should be a liar like you" (John 8:44, 47, 55).

Then there was the famous occasion when in love he drove the moneychangers out of the temple courts, scattering their coins (John 2:14-16).

Jesus demanded sacrificial commitment (Luke 14:25-33). He also rebuked unbelief in his disciples (Matt 14:31; Mark 4:40; Luke 9:41).

b. Jesus speaks explicitly of hell/eternal punishment which needs to be avoided

He urged people to “be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28 cf. 5:22, 30; 18:8-9). He warned of “eternal punishment” (Matt 25:41-46 cf. Mark 9:43-48; Luke 16:19-31).

He speaks of people not being forgiven in the next age (Matt 12:32 cf. Mark 3:28; Luke 12:8-10; 13:28-30).

c. The NT speaks of the “wrath of God”

Paul writes that “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people” (Rom 1:18). He writes about the Second Coming of Christ: “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you” (2 Thess 1:6-10) cf. Heb 10:26-31.

The writer to the Hebrews says: “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:26-31).

James warns that God does not always show mercy (James 2:12-13).

Revelation speaks of eternal torment (Rev 14:9-11; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:7-8) – although some Christians believe that hell and death itself are “swallowed up,” so bringing hell to an end.

In comparing the NT with the OT it is important to remember the Book of Revelation, which has a very OT feel about it and relates to the problem areas mentioned above. It has to be remembered, though, that it is apocalyptic, whereas the moral questions about the OT above are about literal events. In Revelation we have divine judgment described as follows:

- The four horsemen (Ch. 6): conquest, removal of peace, famine, sword, plague, wild beasts.
- The wrath of the Lamb
- A star (asteroid?) colliding with earth.
- The trumpets (Chs. 8-9): hail destroying a third of Earth, an asteroid(?) destroying a third of the sea, another causing fatal bitterness, one third of the sun, moon and stars darkened, scorpions and torture, locusts, half of the population killed by fire, smoke and sulphur.
- The bowls (Ch. 16) producing sores, turning the sea and rivers to blood, the Sun scorching, darkness and hailstorms.
- The collapse of Babylon (the economic system?) (Ch. 18)
- The birds eating the flesh of armies (Ch. 19).

3. Progressive revelation

It is generally accepted that revelation in Scripture is progressive. Truths are first hinted at or briefly alluded to and later are expanded. So the bud of the OT blossoms in the NT. The ultimate revelation is, of course, in Christ. God didn't try to change his ancient people too quickly.

Professor Paul Copan is helpful on this subject.⁵ He points out that God began by establishing the ideals: all human beings are equal – made in the image of God; marriage is a life-long exclusive relationship between husband and wife; idolatry, theft, adultery and murder are wrong.

However, he met the Israelites where they were - in a very defective pagan culture which often ignored these ideals and sought to move them forward towards those ideals. Some of the early laws are therefore accommodations to the weaknesses in Ancient Near Eastern culture and are not therefore permanent rules for all time. The Sinai covenant wasn't a universal ideal. A new covenant would be necessary.

God met Israel half way as Jesus pointed out: “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning” (Matt 19:8). This also applied to slavery, male dominance and warfare. This same divine attitude is referred to by Paul. “We should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 19:29-30). “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished” (Rom 3:25).

Some OT laws are similar to laws found elsewhere in the Ancient Near East. Proverbs has some remarkable similarities with the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope*. Joshua 10:13 and 2 Samuel 1:18 quote from the poetry of the Book of Jashar. However, Israel's laws were a huge improvement on those of other Ancient Near Eastern peoples. Their religious outlook was quite unique.

So God did not impose laws for which Israel was not ready. He moved forward gradually. Sometimes, therefore, the Lord adapted his law to meet new circumstances. So the law was adapted to meet the special needs of Zelophehad's daughters over their inheritance (Num. 27:1-11).

It follows from all this that we cannot and should not justify some of the actions of the ancient Israelites.

However, this does not answer the basic moral questions we are asking. We are not speaking of truths which develop but genocide and other crimes against humanity said to be commanded by God or said to be approved by God.

4. Some answers

We need to look again at the moral questions raised earlier about the Old Testament:

a. Does God really flare up in anger?

Divine Impassibility is a mainstream doctrine. It is not the same as impassivity. God is impassible, not impassive. The latter means without emotions. God does have emotions but he is transcendent and immutable (unchanging and unchangeable). He is not subject to surprise or fear or mood changes. When Scripture describes God as angry, laughing or repenting, it is using anthropomorphisms and should not be taken literally. But he does experience love, joy, compassion, mercy and wrath. God's emotions are not reactive. We cannot change his mood. If we could it would mean that he was not sovereign. He is: "the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). It is "because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail" (Lam 3:22). The Lord says through Malachi: "I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed" (3:16).

Jim Packer writes: "This means, not that God is impassive and unfeeling (a frequent misunderstanding), but that no created beings can inflict pain, suffering and distress on him at their own will. In so far as God enters into suffering and grief (which Scripture's many anthropomorphisms, plus the fact of the cross, show that he does), it is by his own deliberate decision; he is never his creatures' hapless victim. The Christian mainstream has construed impassibility as meaning not that God is a stranger to joy and delight, but rather that his joy is permanent, clouded by no involuntary pain."⁶

He writes elsewhere that impassibility is "not impassivity, unconcern, and impersonal detachment in face of the creation; not insensitivity and indifference to the distresses of a fallen world; not inability or unwillingness to empathize with human pain and grief; but simply that God's experiences do not come upon him as ours come upon us, for his are foreknown, willed and chosen by himself, and are not involuntary surprises forced on him from outside, apart from his own decision, in the way that ours regularly are."⁷

The response to this question therefore is to say that whenever the Old Testament speaks of the "fierce, burning anger" of the Lord in response to some misdemeanour of human beings, it is using anthropomorphic language for the settled chosen attitude of the Holy One to human sin.

b. Other questions raised above

Before turning to the major question of genocide I will look at the other difficult questions raised above:

i. *Did God dread the enemy thinking they had defeated Israel not him?*

Deut 32:19-27, esp. 27 God sends famine, pestilence, plague, wild animals and the sword but says “I dreaded the taunt of the enemy, lest the adversary misunderstand and say, ‘Our hand has triumphed; the LORD has not done all this.’”

As we shall see later, God, on the principle of the incarnation, addressed his people in their natural context as Ancient Near Eastern people. He spoke in ways they could understand and that were in harmony with the culture and terminology of that time. So it is not strange to find him using anthropomorphic language (language which attributes human characteristics to God). God is said to be “jealous.” Copan explains that this jealousy is not self-centred but out of concern for Israel’s well-being. He doesn’t want Israel harmed by idolatry and associated immorality and other evils. God is love and therefore vulnerable. He is wounded by Israel’s unfaithfulness. This is the background to God’s “dread” that the enemy, rather than he, would claim to have defeated Israel. Since all warfare was seen as a battle between gods, such a claim could encourage idolatry. Christopher Wright points out that Moses had this sort of dread in mind in Deut 9:26-28 when he urged God not to destroy disobedient Israel “Otherwise, the country from which you brought us will say, ‘Because the LORD was not able to take them into the land he had promised them, and because he hated them, he brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness.’ He comments: “Does the song suggest that the merging of identity between God and Moses is such that not only does Moses think God’s thoughts, but God thinks Moses’?”⁸

ii. *Did God approve of slavery?*

Ex 21:1-32; 22:18-20 make regulations about slaves but the OT does not condemn slavery. (Neither does the NT).

It is important to understand that slavery in ancient Israel was very different from the sort of slavery seen, for example, in the United States. Paul Copan quotes Professor John Goldingay as saying that “there is nothing inherently lowly or undignified about being an *ebed* [slave].” J A Motyer comments: “Hebrew has no vocabulary of slavery, only of servanthood.”⁹ Being such a servant wasn’t much different from being a paid employee. When a slave was sold it should be seen as similar to a football player being sold by one club to another. A slave could go free when he had paid his debt or was released under the law in the 7th or jubilee year. It was forbidden to kidnap a person into slavery. No physical abuse of slaves was allowed (Exodus 21:26-27).

If a slave married and was released he could either work elsewhere whilst he waited for the family to complete their term or he could commit himself to work for his employer for life (Exodus 21:2-6).

There are stricter arrangements with respect to foreign slaves (Lev 25:42-49), possibly partly for security reasons, but Copan points out that such slavery is not like that which used to happen in the United States. Foreigners couldn’t own land in Israel and so a poor foreigner was more or less obliged to become a slave. If they were, or became people of means they could be released.¹⁰

iii. *Does the Lord inflict horrible diseases or plague?*

Deut 28 records the words of Moses but he says in 29:1 “These are the terms of the covenant the LORD commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb.” He proclaims that, if they disobey, the Lord will plague them with wasting disease, fever and inflammation, boils, tumours, festering sores, the itch, madness, blindness, confusion of mind, anxiety. They will experience scorching heat and drought, blight, mildew, crop failure, locust swarms. They will suffer defeat, siege and disaster. They will be reduced to cannibalism. They will be exiled and shipped back to Egypt as slaves (vv 23-68).

However, if they obey “the LORD will keep you free from every disease. He will not inflict on you the horrible diseases you knew in Egypt, but he will inflict them on all who hate you” (Deut 7:15 cf. Ex 32:33-35).

This is a case of the OT cultural approach of attributing everything to God, both good and bad, and not taking into account secondary causes. Since the Lord promised physical blessings to Israel if they were obedient, so we might say he would remove his protection from the people if they were disobedient. So they would be vulnerable to these various evils.

iv. *What about the large amount of very strong and violent prophetic language in the OT?*

Various thoughts may be helpful here:

- The prophets, being men of their age, used Ancient Near Eastern concepts and terminology to express genuine divinely-inspired prophetic messages and this terminology, not just the prophetic concepts behind it, was attributed to God. Hence a good deal of the condemnatory prophetic language in the OT does not appear to square with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (however, see above on the sternness of God in the NT). Is this contradicting 2 Peter 1:20-21 “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”? Not at all. Michael Green writes:

“The prophets raised their sails, so to speak (they were obedient and receptive), and the Holy Spirit filled them and carried their craft along in the direction He wished. Men spoke: God spoke. Any proper doctrine of Scripture will not neglect either part of this truth. Certainly those who are convinced of God’s ultimate authorship of Scripture will take every pains to discover the background, life situation, limitations, education and so forth of the human agent who cooperated with God in its production. For revelation was not a matter of passive reception: it meant active co-operation. The fact of God’s inspiration did not mean a supersession of the normal mental functionings of the human author. The Holy Spirit did not use instruments; He used men. God’s way is ever one of truth through personality, as was perfectly demonstrated at the incarnation. Moreover, He did not use any men, but holy men, those who were dedicated and pledged to His service. And even with such men, He did no violence to their personalities, but co-operated with them while revealing Himself through them.”¹¹

- On the principle of the incarnation, God communicated with the Israelites as Ancient Near Eastern people using the concepts and terminology of their culture (see above on Progressive Revelation). However, again, we must take seriously the sternness of God in the NT.
- As some still do nowadays, Ancient Near Eastern people saw bad events as divine judgment. Sometimes the prophets foresaw such events and proclaimed them as coming judgment. That is not to say that God was not communicating his judgment through these events. In fact they spoke very effectively to the people. Nor is it saying that God does not judge people through bad events. As stated above, we today might say he would remove his protection from the people if they were disobedient. However this is not straightforward. For example, God blessed evil kings such as Jereboam II who reigned 41 years and restored boundaries of Israel according to Jonah’s prophecy (2 Kings 14:23-25), yet good kings such as Joash suffered invasion and assassination (2 Kings 12:17-20; 14 3-4, 19). This is part of the enigma of innocent suffering. We are all subject to “the changes and chances of this mortal life” and life is not always fair.

A related issue is the severity of some of the judgments meted out in the OT. One example is Uzzah being struck dead when he tried to steady the ark. The Sinai law addressed both moral impurity (especially idolatry, murder and incest) and ritual impurity (through contact with the natural processes of birth, sexual relations and death). Ritual impurity was taken very seriously and the holiness of the sanctuary etc., was a very important and sacred matter.

God did warn Israel about judgment if they disobeyed, whether in moral or ritual ways. So when Uzzah touched the ark of the covenant to steady it, he was struck dead because the law required it to be carried securely on poles, not on a cart. This was an exemplary judgment but we also find such in the NT with Ananias and Sapphira being struck dead for lying about their giving to God (Acts 5). This exemplary judgment struck fear into the early church (Acts 5:11).

Another matter taken very seriously indeed in the OT was idolatry. To commit idolatry was a cardinal sin. Hence Jehu’s widespread execution of Ahab’s idolatrous sons and supporters was approved by God (2 Kings 10:30).

v. *Did God really call Abraham to indulge in human sacrifice?*

It seems that God was accommodating to Abraham as an Ancient Near Eastern man who, coming from a pagan background, would not have a problem in principle with human sacrifice (more about divine

accommodation later). The surrounding culture accepted child sacrifice. In this context God was asking him to be willing to make a huge sacrifice to show his faith and allegiance to God. On the other hand, as the story indicates, God never intended that Abraham should actually reach the point of killing Isaac.

vi. *Did God kill the firstborn of Egyptian, many of whom were innocent?*

See the Appendix 1: “The killing of the firstborn of Egypt.”

c. **Did God approve of genocide amongst the Canaanites?**

It is important to remember that Israel’s motive for the conquest was not racist or anti-foreigner. That would have been contrary to the way God had led them with respect to foreigners:

- They knew that God’s aim in choosing them was so that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through” them (Gen 12:3).
- Israel was called to show concern for foreigners (Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10: 18-19).
- Foreigners living in Israel had the same legal rights as Israelites – “You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the LORD your God.” (Lev 24:22).
- Individual foreigners could become a member of the Israelite community if they embraced the covenant. It is true that Deut 23:3 says: “No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, not even in the tenth generation.” This was because they mistreated Israel. But Ruth the Moabitess was accepted into the community because she embraced the covenant. John Goldingay writes: “Being of non-Israelite origin is not a disqualification for membership of the [Israelite] community in any period. The question is, what God do you serve? The reason for not marrying a Canaanite is that this will turn you away from following Yhwh and lead to your serving other deities (Deut 7:3-4). A Canaanite who has made a commitment to Yhwh is a different matter.”¹²

However the issue is: Did God approve of the killing of women and children as well as the wholesale slaughter of the adult males of various tribes?

We have already looked at Num 31:15-18 where Moses orders the killing of women and boys whom the army had spared and at Deut 2:34; 3:6 where Israel killed all the children. We read that God hardened the hearts of the Canaanites so he could exterminate them without mercy (Josh 11:20). Israel must totally destroy them (Deut 7:1-2, 16, cf. Josh 23:5-9). Nothing must be left alive in the Canaanite cities (Deut 20:16-17).

Here are some possible responses which have been made:

1. *God says it, that settles it!*

Some say that, whatever we think, if God told Israel to commit genocide on the Canaanites that settles the moral issue. John Calvin states: “Indiscriminate and promiscuous slaughter [of the Canaanites], making no distinction of age or sex, but including alike women and children, the aged and decrepit, might seem an inhuman massacre, had it not been executed by the command of God. But as he, in whose hands are life and death, had justly doomed those nations to destruction, this puts an end to all discussion.”¹³

Eugene Merrill writes: “The issue, then, cannot be whether or not genocide is intrinsically good or evil—its sanction by a holy God settles that question. Rather, the issue has to do with the purpose of genocide, its initiator, and the particular circumstances of its application At the risk of cliché, all that can be said is that if God is all the Bible says he is, all that he does must be good—and that includes his authorization of genocide.”¹⁴

William Lane Craig writes on his Reasonable Faith website about children being slaughtered by saying: “God knew that if these Canaanite children were allowed to live, they would spell the undoing of Israel.” I want to ask how this could be with young children. Were the Israelites incapable of retraining youngsters? He then adds: “Moreover, if we believe, as I do, that God’s grace is extended to those who die in infancy or as small children, the death of these children was actually their salvation Therefore, God does these children no wrong in taking their lives.” Lane concludes that God therefore didn’t wrong the children because they were transported to heaven. This seems to me like special pleading which seems abhorrent to many of us.

On the other hand, John Wesley wrote that to say God commanded the genocide is to say he is “more false, more cruel, and more unjust than the devil. . . . God hath taken [Satan's] work out of [his] hands. . . . God is the destroyer of souls.”¹⁵

Thomas Noble wrote: “Theology is ... only truly *theocentric* if it is *Christocentric*. It is not, as Donald Baillie reminded us, theism with Christology tacked on. There is no knowledge of God except ‘through the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the Image of God,’ no knowledge of the Father except through the Son, so that our theology then must be *Christonormative*.”¹⁶

It is significant that God’s commands to exterminate children do not square with the teaching of Deut. 24:16: “Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin.” This is surely a moral law and not just one to be applied to Israel.

More important, genocide seems totally alien to the revelation of God as love in Jesus and his teaching on non-violence and loving one’s enemies. It is totally inadequate simply to say that God ordered the genocide so it must be right. We have to think about how it relates to the full revelation of God in Christ.

2. *The Last Judgment will be an even worse genocide, so don’t balk at the Canaanite genocide*

Those who hold this view point out that Jesus is described as a warrior in Revelation 19:13-15 “He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron sceptre.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.”

2 Peter 3:7-13 foretells that “the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.”

Daniel Gard, Associate Professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, calls this “Divinely executed genocide.”¹⁷

However 2 Peter 3:9 states: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” This contrasts with the idea of exterminating the Canaanites without regard to the guilt or innocence of individuals.

Some respond that the Book of Revelation teaches that “Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death.” (20:15; 21:8). Are we to conclude that, as with the Canaanites, this is irrespective of individual knowledge or belief, mental understanding or age?

Tremper Longman III writes: “It must be said that those who have moral difficulties with the genocide in the conquest of Canaan should have even more serious difficulties with the final judgment. In the latter, all those who do not follow Christ—men, women, and children—will be thrown into the lake of fire.”¹⁸

However:

- Revelation speaks of wrath falling on those who refuse to repent. Are we to believe that adults with inadequate understanding through no fault of their own will be eternally damned just as they would be exterminated in genocide?
- Revelation does not refer to the fate of children, which is a very relevant issue to this discussion. Are we to believe that young children who do not have sufficient understanding will be eternally damned just as they would be exterminated in genocide?

3. *Israel had to destroy the Canaanites because they were so wicked and would be a spiritual and moral snare*

In Deut 9:4-6 the Israelites are told: “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. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

Lev 18:27-30 lists incest, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, sacrifice of children to Molech and makes it clear the Canaanites were involved in all these practices. The Lord says: “this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.”

The fact that Israel only fully embraced ethical monotheism after the exile indicates how important it was for her to be protected against the idolatrous depravity of the Canaanites. In the event, Israel was so disobedient that God eventually allowed some of the Canaanites to remain in the land in order to test the Israelites (Judges 2:10-3:6).

Canaanite religion was very debased as Albright confirms. Their religion emphasised depraved sexual relations between the gods and the people themselves imitated that behaviour as a form of magic. This sexual magic was thought to stimulate the fertility god Baal to have sex with his consort Anath, producing semen i.e. rain to fall on earth. The behaviour of its gods included violent multiple rape, incest, massacre and wallowing in blood and cannibalism. Baal was associated with the goddesses Anath and Astarte. Anath was both his sister and his consort. Albright writes: “While she was in the form of a heifer, he raped her in an epic myth ‘77—even 88 times.’¹⁹ He adds that Baal ‘raped her with a chisel.’²⁰

Anath herself was extraordinarily cruel. She is described as delighting in slaughtering mankind. “The blood was so deep that she waded in it up to her knees—nay, up to her neck. Under her feet were human heads, above her human hands flew like locusts. In her sensuous delight she decorated herself with suspended heads while she attached hands to her girdle. Her joy at the butchery is described in even more sadistic language: ‘Her liver swelled with laughter, her heart was full of joy, the liver of Anath (was full of) exultation (?)’ Afterwards Anath ‘was satisfied’ and washed her hands in human gore before proceeding to other occupations.²¹ She was also involved in cannibalism.

This is horrific but it has to be said that other nations and people groups had similar religious ideas. Why were the Canaanites singled out for destruction? It would appear that the only reason is that stated clearly in Scripture – to protect the vulnerable Israelites from such debased idolatry (Num 33:51-56; Deut 7:16; 11:16-17; 12:4-5; 29-31; 20:16-18). Living in Canaan, the promised land, they would provide strong temptations to the Israelites to indulge in immoral idolatry, thus frustrating the plan of God for universal salvation. God alone can know when a people group can only be dealt with by judgment.

Four hundred years before the entry into Canaan, God had told Abraham that his descendants would return and possess the promised land later because the sin of the Amorites had not yet reached its full measure (Gen. 15:13-16). This means the Amorites had 400 years in which to change their ways, but they didn’t.

The land was to be holy to the Lord so the Canaanites had to be removed. In fact, the Israelites were condemned for not driving all the Canaanites out and consequently God said he wouldn’t drive them out and they would become snares (Judg. 1:19-2:3).

This contrasts with what they were told to do to “the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby,” namely they could offer peace and only put the people to forced labour. If the peace terms were rejected they were only to kill the men (Deut 20:10-15). They were not to take over lands belonging to relatives: Edom (given to Esau), Moab and the Ammonites (given to Lot). In addition, Israel was called to love the foreigners amongst them, as God did (Deut 10:18-19).

But why were they told to kill the women and children? It is perhaps not difficult to see that the Canaanite women could be as much into debased idolatry as the men. Also they could seduce, in more senses than one, the Israelites to join them in their behaviour.

It is, to say the least, much more difficult to see why the children had to be killed. Maybe it was thought that the children would inevitably grow up to follow the ways of their parents, and maybe some older children were already involved. Some people have thought that the children, having been abused in a depraved society, were carriers of sexually transmitted diseases.

The big question is: did God really tell them to kill all the men, women and children (except virgins)?

There are a number of statements made mainly by Moses which speak of the Lord's attitude towards their warfare against the Canaanites. Some would say that, being human statements, they are not immune from error. It could be a case of the OT inerrantly recording the errant statements of individuals. The details of the 19 relevant passages in Numbers to Judges are in the Appendix 2.

4. *The Canaanite genocide was a Yahweh War – a holy war*

Some of those who defend the genocide of the Canaanites call it an example of Yahweh War. Only a prophet (not a king or tribal leader or a priest) could call for such a war. God did not allow Israel to have a standing army and soldiers fighting a Yahweh war received neither payment nor plunder. This was a holy war, fought for spiritual reasons.

So God commanded Israel not to attack other nearby nations: Ammon (Deut 2:19), Edom (Deut 2:4-5) and Moab (Deut 2:9) despite their bad treatment of the Israelites. Israel was not allowed to take over any lands other than those they were told to do so by God.

This Yahweh War was divinely ordained war against idolatry, against other gods. Christopher Wright says it is about Yahweh's supremacy over all other gods.²²

He adds: "One must be careful to set the whole issue of war in the OT in the theological context in which it is clearly set in Deut. It is seen not merely as a matter of Israel's supremacy over the nations (on the contrary, the reverse was usually the case in military terms, cf. 20:1), but of Yahweh's supremacy over all other gods and as the exercise of Yahweh's legitimate moral judgment on human wickedness in the context of God's overall sovereignty in history."²³

J A Thompson comments: "Although the concept of the Holy War may seem a strange one to the enlightened Christian conscience, it nevertheless has positive values. Its context is that of the universal divine Monarch whose concern is to maintain universal order. In such a context the picture of the divine Warrior finds its place. He works by mediate means through agents who act as is appropriate in the immediate situation in which they find themselves. At times, Israel is His agent. But Assyria, Babylon, Persia might serve His purpose also. Positively, the concepts of God the Warrior and the Holy War stress the fact that there is a power in the universe set against forces of evil. In the warfare He pursues He will not be defeated. The end will be judgment on wicked men and redemption for those who acknowledge His sovereignty."²⁴

Eugene Merrill writes: "Yahweh war can perhaps more properly be termed deicide rather than homicide."²⁵ The plagues in Egypt were an example of such war – a war against Egypt's gods. The Lord hardened the hearts of the Canaanites, encouraging them to attack Israel to facilitate Israel annihilating them.

Merrill continues: "Once it is recognized that the battle ultimately is cosmic and that what is at stake is God's reputation and sovereignty, it is easier to see why radical destruction of those who oppose him is an absolute necessity. The matter cannot be left only on the spiritual plane. Human agents in the employ of supernatural handlers must also suffer the same fate if they remain unrepentant those that most directly confront his chosen people Israel are especially subject to his judgment."²⁶

The Hebrew word '*herem*' means 'destruction' and it is used of what the Israelites are to do with the Canaanites. Tremper Longman comments: "Indeed, it is not too strong to say that herem warfare is worship. The battlefield is sacred space. To be involved in warfare is a holy activity analogous to going to the temple Prayer, religious song, and celebration all accompanied the waging of war in ancient Israel. Why? Because herem warfare was worship."²⁷

“We must point out that the Bible does not understand the destruction of the men, women, and children of these cities as a slaughter of innocents. Not even the children are considered innocent. They are all part of an inherently wicked culture that, if allowed to live, would morally and theologically pollute the people of Israel.”²⁸

C S Cowles writes on Longman’s comments: “It is a definitive and chilling portrait of a God who is ontologically violent. He is a God who conceived, commanded, and commended the indiscriminate and wanton slaughter of the Canaanites and whose ‘presence’ is ‘at the heart of herem warfare.’ He is a God for whom ‘herem warfare is worship’ and ‘the battlefield ... sacred space.’ He loathes ‘enemies’ and wills their total destruction. He is so determined to destroy the Canaanites that he ‘hardened their hearts ... so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy’ (Josh. 11:20). He made sure they didn't have a chance.

“When you take God incarnate in the historical Jesus out of the picture, what you have left is a God more concerned about ritual purity than the lives of human beings, a God for whom herem is not only the essence of Yahweh war but its ‘climactic aspect,’ and ‘the vanquished enemies become ... a [human] sacrifice, something ‘devoted to God.’ Yahweh is a God who does not consider the killing of children as ‘a slaughter of innocents,’ since ‘not even the children are considered innocent’ but ‘are part of an inherently wicked culture.’”²⁹

Merrill also says that “The pedagogical value of Yahweh war is that its display of God's power and wrath on the one hand, and of his grace and glory on the other, would lead both Israel and the nations of the earth to recognize his sovereignty, especially in connection with and on behalf of his chosen people.”³⁰

C S Cowles responds: “What ‘message of salvation,’ we might ask, did the Canaanites hear as the Israelites were cutting them to pieces and burning them with fire? What were they to conclude about the character of Israel's God other than that he was more vicious, more cruel, and more merciless than Baal, Chemosh, Molech, or any of their gods? In destroying the Canaanites, the Israelites betrayed their own unique covenantal destiny as the ones through whom ‘all peoples on earth will be blessed’ (Gen. 12:3). It fixed a dark blot on salvation history that lingers to this day. Not a single nation was attracted to Israel's God, nor were they drawn to swear allegiance to Yahweh's sovereignty.”³¹

He continues: “If the indiscriminate slaughter of human beings for any reason can be called a ‘good’ and ‘righteous’ act, and if the sanctity of human life established in creation, reaffirmed after the Flood, reinforced in the seventh commandment, reiterated by all the prophets, and incarnate in Jesus—if this can be set aside by a supposed divine ‘authorization of genocide’—then all moral and ethical absolutes are destroyed, all distinctions between good and evil are rendered meaningless, and all claims about God's love and compassion become cruel deceptions. It represents the ultimate corruption of human language and makes meaningful theological discourse virtually impossible.”³²

This is a strong statement but I have to say that Cowles is making a hugely important response.

5. *‘Herem’ doesn’t necessarily mean genocide*

Israel is sometimes said to have totally destroyed the Canaanites (Num 21:1-3; Deut 7:1-2, 22-23; 9:6; 25:19). At other times Moses or others say that God destroys them (Deut 7:23; 9:3-6; 12:30; 31:3-5). This perhaps infers genocide although the Hebrew term “*herem*” meaning “destruction” is not always used of killing, so it may not be referring to genocide. *Herem* used to be thought of as meaning an offering to God. The object or person destroyed was deemed to be a sacrifice. On this view the Israelites, opposing a society which practised child sacrifice, killed the children as a sacrifice to the Lord! However Christopher Wright comments in line with more recent scholarship: “A better explanation seems to be that it is an absolute and irrevocable *renouncing* of things or persons, a refusal to take any gain or profit from them. Thus in obedience to this command, things or persons could be renounced without necessarily being destroyed.”³³

Some people try to make out that, since ‘*herem*’ does not always mean killing, Israel was never involved in genocide but only in driving the Canaanites out. They point out that in Deut 7:2-4 Moses orders Israel to destroy the Canaanites totally (‘*herem*’) and then adds that they mustn’t make a treaty or intermarry with them, which, it is claimed, shows that there are at least some survivors. However this passage could be read differently as “Do not make a treaty or intermarry with them, destroy them.”

It is also true that the OT teaches that Israel should honour and provide justice for foreigners in her midst (Deut 21:10-14; 24:17-18) and they showed mercy to Rahab and the Gibeonites. Then there are inconsistencies such as Josh 11:23 stating Joshua “took the entire land” whereas 13:1 says when he was old there were “still very large areas of land to be taken over.” Some would see these as militating against the idea that Israel removed the Canaanites fairly swiftly by genocide.

Nevertheless these passages do not alter the fact that in Num 31:1-2 Moses is angry that the army has not killed the Midianite women and children (except virgins) and orders them to do so. This is the first explicit statement about genocide but it comes from the lips of Moses. In Deut 20:4 Moses commands Israel not to leave alive anything that breathes amongst the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. See also Joshua chapters 8:24-26 where everyone in Ai is killed (women are specifically included) and Joshua 11:11-14 where Joshua kills all who live in various cities.

More often, though, they speak of driving them out or dispossessing them (Deut 11:22-23; 12:29-30). Sometimes Moses or others say that God drove them out (Deut 7:22-23; 33:27; Josh 3:9-10; 23:3, 5, 9-10).

The above passages may speak about the Lord but they do not quote him. However in a few passages the Lord tells Israel to take vengeance, conquer or dispossess the Canaanites and Israel took that to mean genocide (Num 31:1-2, 15-17; Deut 2:30-34; Josh 6:2-5). The Lord tells Joshua to do the same to Ai cf. Deut 3:2 where a similar thing is said about Og, king of Bashan. These passages do not say that the Lord intended genocide. However it is interesting that the Lord was angry with Israel in Josh 6 because, contrary to his command, Achan had taken spoil. But he does not express any disapproval of the genocide (Josh 7). However, it is one thing to say that God didn't rebuke Israel for being a child of its age and carrying out genocide. It is quite another to say that God called them to do it or approved of it.

Incidentally, it is instructive to remember that the OT teaches that God wiped out virtually the whole of human kind in the Flood and, on a smaller scale, he wiped out the whole of Sodom and Gomorrah and all the firstborn of Egypt. However, *the Flood* was a natural disaster through which God brought judgment, not a deliberate act of genocide and Noah is depicted as a preacher of righteousness in 2 Peter 2:5 which presumably means he warned people about the coming judgment. We should also remember that there is relevant material later in the OT. For example, 1 Sam 15:1-3 states: “Samuel said to Saul, “I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the LORD. This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. 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.’” This was a message from God through a great OT prophet.

Sodom and Gomorrah was also probably a natural disaster through which God brought judgment.

In the case of the *firstborn of Egypt*, there are some mitigating factors although questions still remain. Glen Miller of the Christian Think Tank³⁴ makes some important points. He calculates that “4 out of every 100 children (unmarried, under 15-20 years of age or so) were possible victims of the plague, while 96 out of that 100 were not.” This may sound like special pleading but he has detailed argument on the website.

He points out that Pharaoh had more than sufficient warning to prevent the plague happening but he chose not to. It was also in the context of a policy of infanticide of Israelite male babies enforced by Pharaoh. Miller calculates that for every Egyptian child killed in the plague 40 Israelite children would have been killed on Pharaoh's orders. Also the Egyptian children presumably died peacefully in bed but the Israelite children were thrown into the river. Miller also argues that there was some Lex Talionis justice involved. Pharaoh had many Israelite children slaughtered and the plague affected the children of Egypt.

Some of these points can be debated, no doubt, but this event is clearly not comparable in size and seriousness with the Canaanite genocide. However, as we have noted, it is also interesting that the Deuteronomic law states: “Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin.” (Deut 24:16). Ezekiel also spoke against the idea of inherited guilt (Ezk 18:4).

6. Israel mistook what God was saying about the Canaanites

Another view is that Israel wrongly thought God's intention to oust the Canaanites meant that they should wage war on them and exterminate them. In Exodus 23:20-33 the Lord said he would send his angel ahead of the Israelites to wipe out the Canaanites. He would throw them into confusion and make all their enemies "turn their backs and run." He would do this gradually so they must not make a treaty with them or share in their worship. So, it is argued, God intended to remove the Canaanites himself but Israel tried to do it for him.

We can see just how culturally conditioned Israel was by noting statements made by the Psalmist. Psalm 58:10 says: "The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked." Psalm 137:8-9 says of Babylon: "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks."

7. *Israel did not always hear God accurately*

It is clear that Moses actually heard God's voice at times, especially when receiving the Ten Commandments (Ex 34 vv 1, 4, 27-28; Num 7:89; 12:6-8; Deut 5:4ff). Israel as a whole heard God's voice at Horeb (Deut 4:12, 15, 33; 5:22-26). He also prophesied to the people (Num 11:16-17, 24-29; 12:2). The Lord's word was given through him (Num 36:13; Deut 4:2).

In Numbers 12:6-8 the Lord rebukes Miriam and Aaron, saying: "When there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" The cloud or pillar of fire guided Israel in the wilderness (Num 9:15-23).

However more regularly the Lord's guidance was sought through the Urim and Thummim, a form of casting lots (Num 27:21 cf. 1 Sam 14:18-19; 41-42; 28:6; 30:7-8). Casting lots to discern God's will was still used in the NT (Acts 1:23-26). God also spoke through dreams and prophets (1 Sam 28:6, 15). To enquire of God was to consult a "seer" or prophet (1 Sam 9:9; 2 Sam 16:23). On one occasion Jonathan sought guidance through whatever the Philistines said to him (1 Sam 14:8-10). All of these means of communication were fallible. Some prophets prophesied out of their own imagination (Ezek 13).

Is it possible that, using these means of guidance, the Israelites sometimes misunderstood what God was saying to them? Again, this sort of question worries many conservative Christians. They subscribe to the idea that if we accept that any historical detail of Scripture is inaccurate that undermines the whole of Scripture, including what it teaches on matters of salvation.

I am reminded of Og's bed! Deut 3:11 states "Og king of Bashan was the last of the Rephaites. His bed was decorated with iron and was more than nine cubits long and four cubits wide. It is still in Rabbah of the Ammonites." Are we really to believe that if Og's bed was actually only eight cubits long or three cubits wide this undermines the Faith? I think not! There has to be a great deal of material, particularly in the OT which has no importance with respect to the message of salvation.

It is, of course, much more important if we are dealing with a description of God. If the description is simply someone's opinion which may or may not be correct that is of no great significance to our study. The Bible records the wrong actions and words of individuals, and that does not undermine any idea of inerrancy. In other words, the Bible can inerrantly describe the errant opinions of individuals!

It is important to remember:

a. The three-fold basis of our faith

Some people feel that if the OT is ever wrong on theological, spiritual or moral issues this undermines everything – its infallibility and ultimately the Gospel. How can we trust the Bible even over the Gospel? Surely we must examine what our faith is based on. We looked earlier at the triangle of Scripture, Tradition and Reason/Experience. In my own case, my faith is based as much on a deep conversion experience and subsequent experience of God as upon Scripture. It is also based upon the witness of the believing community. I should add that rational considerations are important too – examining the evidence for the truth of Christianity, which means a great deal to me. Surely all this is true (whatever the secondary differences in experience) of all of us. Our faith is not solely based upon an inerrant Bible, although we check experience and church teaching by Scripture.

b. The accurate recording of fallible opinions

If the OT contains any incorrect views on theological, spiritual or moral issues, it would be recording the opinions of fallible individuals whose views can be checked by the teaching of the NT. However we would need to be sure that the teaching is genuinely incorrect and not a matter of culture.

c. The neglect of secondary causes

It is well known that the OT culture often tends to ignore secondary causes and to ascribe directly to God actions which we would see as human, perhaps initiated by God or overruled by him. So the Israelites spoke of God fighting battles which were actually battles fought by humans (2 Chr. 14:12; 18:31; 20:22; 21:16; Jer. 25:9-14). On one occasion it says God sent lions to attack the syncretistic Samaritans (2 Kings 17:24-28).

Israel also spoke of God making them sin. Isaiah asked the Lord why he made the people wander from his ways and harden their hearts not to revere him (Isa 63:17). Jeremiah says “The LORD has made Zion forget her appointed festivals and her Sabbaths” (Lam 2:6).

Are we really to believe that God makes people sin? Surely James addresses this: “When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed” (1:13-14).

We note that whereas 2 Sam 24:1-17 says God enticed David to take the census, 1 Chronicles 21:1 says it was Satan. So God simply allowed it to happen at Satan’s instigation then meted out punishment for it. This is much more in line with NT thinking. Compare Job 1-2.

As we saw above it says God inflicts disease and plague and he sent a lying spirit. The OT writers omit secondary causes such as natural disaster, the normal spread of disease and Satan inspiring people to lie. They see it as God’s action and sometimes as direct, deliberate divine judgment.

“To the Hebrew mind what we call secondary causes scarcely exist, at least in the sphere of religion. That which, in given circumstances, is the inevitable result of God’s providential dispensations is viewed absolutely as a distinct divine purpose” (J Skinner, Isaiah, Cambridge Bible, p. 47). It would be possible to argue, therefore, that if genocide were a result of God’s command to Israel to drive out the Canaanites, we could expect the Hebrew mind to understand this as God’s intention.

However, an argument against the idea that Israel mistook what God was saying about the Canaanites was stated above, namely that the Lord was angry with Israel in Josh 6 because, contrary to his command, Achan had taken spoil. But he does not express any disapproval of the genocide. If God did not want Israel to undertake its violent actions why did he not rebuke them? After all, Moses and Joshua claimed God had told them to take its violent actions.

d. The importance of a Christological approach

We need to approach the OT through the NT and particularly through Christ. In addressing this matter of what many call genocide we approach it through Christ who spoke of God as love and of loving one’s enemies. But we must not forget the other side of the coin – the wrath of God expressed in the NT against those who refuse to repent.

e. God’s sovereignty being worked out through the changes and chances of this life

God could have removed the Canaanites himself, rather than having Israel conquer them. But this is not the way God works. He normally works through human processes which are far from perfect, to achieve his aims. For example, he could have taken Joseph down to Egypt in a positive way, in order that he would be able to further the divine purpose for the Israelites. But he worked through Joseph being rejected and sold into slavery by his brothers. As he later told them: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen 50:20).

God sometimes gives way to what people want. For example, he allowed Israel to have a king (1 Sam. 8-10) which was not his ideal will. He also allowed divorce, polygamy and concubines because of human weakness. He allowed slavery but prescribed humane treatment. He used the aggression of pagan nations to discipline and defeat Israel when she was disobedient. Even the Roman Empire is God's servant for good and to punish wrongdoing (Rom 13:1-7). The ultimate example is "God made him who had no sin to be sin [or sin offering] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). God even became the sinbearer.

However, it is one thing to say God compromised over divorce and even slavery. It is another to say he compromised over genocide.

So some people argue that, although God doesn't approve of war and genocide, he used Israel, as a child of its age, genocide and all, to achieve his purposes. It is instructive to remember that God called Abraham to offer Isaac as a human sacrifice. God clearly didn't intend the sacrifice to happen, but rather to teach Abraham about substitutionary sacrifice, but that doesn't alter the fact that he called Abraham to do something which was acceptable in his culture but which is condemned in Scripture (Lev 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut 12:31; 18:10). He was relating to Abraham as a child of his age.

One view, based on NT teaching about the love of God, is that God wanted Israel to fight his battles but not through killing. God works through the human activities of his chosen people, who, of course, are sinful people. God is prepared to use even sinful behaviour to achieve his purposes. He is willing to compromise. After all, other than direct intervention and miracle, he only has sinful people (or natural processes) to work through. Establishing the nation of Israel means relating to violence because nation states are, at times, violent. God is present even in war and can achieve his purposes.

It is obvious that the ancient nation of Israel (as with the modern state) could not be established without military action (unless God had chosen to perform a major miracle, which is not his normal way of working. Rather he works through human activity, natural processes etc).

Christopher Wright comments: "Is it possible (and as I say, I am not convinced I can answer this one way or the other to my own satisfaction), that in a fallen world where struggle for land involves war, and if the only kind of war at the time was the kind described in the Old Testament texts, this was the way it had to be if the land-gift promise was to be fulfilled in due course? If anything along these lines can be entertained--that is to say, if *herem*-style warfare can be even contemplated in the same moral framework as slavery and divorce (and many might reject the thought outright)--then we might be dealing with something God chose to accommodate within the context of a wicked world, not something that represented his best will or preference."³⁵

However, is it really acceptable to say that God made a concession to killing children? If he did, would he also make a concession to rape which very often accompanies warfare? Can we really say this is compatible with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who says: "I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:44-45)?

f. God allowing violence and legalism to show their futility

Another view is that God was involved with the violent military activity of Israel in order to show ultimately that such activity does not succeed. The Israelites themselves were defeated militarily by the Babylonians and later by the Romans. God actually used the Assyrians, whom he called the rod of his anger and club of his wrath, to judge Israel (Isa 10:5-19). The same is true of the Babylonians, and Nebuchadnezzar whom he called his servant (Jer 25:8-14; 27:6-7).

God initiated and enforced the Law in the OT ultimately to show that salvation does not come through keeping the Law, but through faith in Christ. The new covenant is required. God promoted salvation by works, which contradicts the Gospel, in order to show ultimately that salvation was not by works. Is God doing a similar thing by using war in the OT to show that ultimately it will not bring in his Kingdom? In fact, that Kingdom is not one of violence and military action.

The problem with this view is that the Law is good whereas warfare in general, and genocide in particular, is evil. Those holding this view argue that that is the point. God wanted us to be revolted by the violence of the OT and to see how futile it was, and so to embrace the Kingdom as taught by Jesus.

g. The OT uses Ancient Near Eastern Exaggeration Rhetoric

In this section I am indebted to Professor Paul Copan's book "Is God a moral monster?" Copan makes the following points:

- i. Israel followed the ways of Ancient Near Eastern peoples of making exaggerated claims about the destruction of enemies. This was not seen as lying but as an accepted convention. We sometimes do the same thing. We might say that a football team "annihilated" the opposing side. We are fully aware this is not literal. Although this might sound like special pleading it is a historical fact that Ancient Near Eastern peoples did that about warfare. Paul Copan³⁶ gives various examples of such exaggerated, non-literal claims from:
 - Tuthmosis III of Egypt who "annihilated" the Mitanni (but the Mittani lived to fight again)
 - Ramses II of Egypt who made a similar claim about the Hittites.
 - Mesha, king of Moab claimed to have utterly destroyed Israel over 100 years before the Assyrians invaded Israel.
 - Sennacherib of Assyria claimed to have totally destroyed the soldiers of Hirimme and not one escaped, which was not literally true.

Similarly Joshua used the same warfare rhetoric: "Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded" (Josh 10:40). He said of the Canaanites: "it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses" (Josh 11:20).

Yet, after Joshua's death, according to Judges 1-2 the Israelites were still having to fight the Canaanites in Jerusalem, Hebron, Debir, Zephath, Bethel, Luz and other places in the Negev and elsewhere.

What is more, Judges records that they could not drive out the Canaanites from Beth Shan, Taanach, Dor, Ibleam, Megiddo and their surrounding settlements, Gezer, Kitron, Nahalol, Akko, Sidon, Ahlab, Akzib, Helbah, Aphek, Rehob, Beth Shemesh, Beth Anath, Mount Heres, Aijalon, Shaalbim. I list them all to show we are not talking about the odd small corner of the country.

Judges 2 records that the Lord had decided not to drive out the Canaanites from before Israel because of her disobedience. "I will not drive them out before you; they will become traps for you, and their gods will become snares to you" (Judges 2:3). "The LORD was very angry with Israel and said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant I ordained for their ancestors and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their ancestors did." The LORD had allowed those nations to remain; he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua" (Judges 2:20-23).

It is important to stress that Joshua was not telling lies or making mistakes, any more than we would by saying our team "annihilated the opposition." Joshua was clearly seen as having fulfilled Moses command to him which indicates that both of them were using the Ancient Near East Exaggeration Rhetoric.

David Howard, Professor of Old Testament at Bethel Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, states: "the stereotypical model of an all-consuming Israelite army descending upon Canaan and destroying everything in its wake cannot be accepted. The biblical data will not allow for this."

In 1 Samuel 15 Samuel orders Saul: "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." (v.3) Saul captured the Amalekite king Agag "and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword" (v. 8). He reported to Samuel that he had "completely destroyed the Amalekites" (v. 20).

However in 1 Sam 27:8 David attacked the Amalekites and the writer comments: "Whenever David attacked an area, he did not leave a man or woman alive" (v. 9). But in chapter 30 the Amalekites raided the Negev and Ziklag. "David fought them from dusk until the evening of the next day, and none of them got away, except four hundred young men who rode off on camels and fled" (v. 17).

This is not the end of the story. In the reign of Hezekiah, 250 years later, 500 Simeonites “killed the remaining Amalekites who had escaped” (1 Chron 4:43).

So, despite the language used in the biblical account Samuel did not totally annihilate the Amalekites. This is surely another example of Ancient Near Eastern Exaggeration Rhetoric.

- ii. Another important fact is that scholars say Israel did not attack civilian communities but only military settlements. In any case, civilians would doubtless flee before any conflict began. Copan³⁷ points out that:
- For example, there is no archaeological evidence of civilian populations at Jericho or Ai. Jericho was probably a military settlement with up to a hundred soldiers.
 - The 14th century BC Amarna letters indicate that in places like Jerusalem and Shechem the military settlements were quite separate from the civilian settlements. The Canaanites often used the word “king” of a military leader who was responsible to a higher leader elsewhere.
 - Dr. Richard Hess, professor of Old Testament and Semitic languages at Denver Seminary argues that Israel targeted political leaders and their armies, not civilians. He states that, for example, Deuteronomy 20:10—18 mentions the “ban” or “dedication to destruction” (*herem*, its verb form is *haram*), which refers to the complete destruction of all warriors in the battle rather than noncombatants.³⁸
 - The expression “men and women” seems to be a phrase which refers to all inhabitants, whatever their age or sex.
 - However, in the case of the Midianites, Moses specifically asks the army commanders: “Have you allowed all the women to live? They were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the LORD in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the LORD’s people. Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man” (Num 31:15-18). As this quotation shows, the Midianites women were a special threat because they had seduced the Israelite men into the sexually immoral worship of the Baal of Peor. They were therefore included in the attack. But why kill the boys? Copan comments: “The death sentence for *all* males is unusual. However, males were the potential enemy army to rise up against Israel. (Keep in mind that *the Israelite males* who participated in the seduction were also put to death.) Midian’s brazen, evil intent to lead Israel astray called for a severe judgment. The intent of Moses’s command was to undermine any future Midianite threat to Israel’s identity and integrity.”³⁹
 - The story of Rahab shows that Canaanites who turned to Yahweh would be spared, despite the *herem* ban. It is likely that Rahab ran the fortress’s tavern or hostel and didn’t run a brothel, though these taverns were sometimes run by prostitutes.
 - Whereas most scholars think that Israel was required to offer peace terms to nations but not to the Canaanites, some believe this applied to the Canaanites too. They think that this is implied by Joshua 11:19-20, which refers to the Canaanites: “Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle. For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally
 - There are many more references to “driving out” the Canaanites than there are references to annihilating them.
 - Also the verbs ‘annihilate/perish (*abad*)’ and ‘destroy (*shamad*)’ are used of God ‘destroying’ Israel, which means exiling them: “Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess” (Deut 28:63).
 - In this context it is instructive that the Lord says in Exodus 23:27-30 “I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would

become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land.”

- Archaeology confirms this. There is no evidence of widespread destruction of cities. Only Jericho, Ai, and Hazor were burned.
- Gordon McConville, Professor of Old Testament Theology at the University of Gloucestershire, comments on Joshua: we don't have “a simple conquest model, but rather a mixed picture of success and failure, sudden victory and slow, compromised progress.”⁴⁰

Paul Copan sums up his response to the question: How could the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ order genocide – the killing of men, women and children? “If our scenario doesn't cover all the bases, it still goes a long way in providing perspective on what happened and didn't happen in Canaan. Simply put, the damage to and death of noncombatants would have been far less serious and extensive than what critics and believers alike have maintained based on a traditional surface reading of the text.”⁴¹

But that still leaves the question about *God* commanding Israel to kill all the men women and children.

Professor Peter Enns has addressed this issue.⁴² He points out that every Ancient Near Eastern society had prophets and there are parallels between the OT and older writings of other ANE nations (which is not to say that the biblical accounts are dependent on the other writings). There are similarities between the Genesis creation accounts and the Babylonian Enuma Elish account (early 2nd millennium BC),⁴³ and between the Genesis flood account and between the Genesis flood account Atrahis (early 2nd millennium BC) and the Gilgamesh story (early 2nd millennium BC).⁴⁴ There are parallels in legal matters in the Nuzi tablets (mid-2nd millennium) to the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. The Code of Hammurabi (King of Babylon in the 18th century BC) has close parallels to some of the OT laws and very similar wording in some cases. The Hittite Suzerainty Treaties (mid-2nd millennium BC) have similarities with Deuteronomy and especially aspects of the ten commandments.⁴⁵ Finally, Proverbs 22:17-24:22 is very similar to the Instruction of Amenemope (early 1st millennium BC) and scholars have seen this as the source of that part of Proverbs.⁴⁶

Scholars have reacted in different ways to these facts. Some have said the Bible is just like any other ancient book. Others have tried to deny the parallels. Enns regards these reactions as inadequate. He says God did not intend the Bible to be unique in these ways, i.e. necessarily and thoroughly distinct from the surrounding culture. Scripture is an *incarnation* of God's word. He writes: “Are the early stories in the Old Testament to be judged on the basis of standards of modern historical inquiry and scientific precision, things that ancient peoples were not at all aware of? Is it not likely that God would have allowed his word to come to the ancient Israelites according to standards they understood, or are modern standards of truth and error so universal that we should expect premodern cultures to have understood them? The former position is, I feel, better suited for solving the problem. What the Bible is must be understood in light of the cultural context in which it was given.”⁴⁷

Enns believes that the incarnational nature of the OT does not in any way undermine its divine inspiration. He is quite clear that he is not saying Genesis borrowed from the Babylonian stories in a direct way. For example there are strong arguments that differences between Genesis and Enuma Elish are too great for there to have been a direct relationship. What he is saying is that there is a “conceptual similarity.”⁴⁸

He adds that it is wholly incomprehensible to think that thousands of years ago God would have felt constrained to speak in a way that would be meaningful only to Westerners several thousand years later. To do so borders on modern, Western arrogance. Rather, Genesis makes its case in a way that ancient men and women would have readily understood—indeed, the *only* way.”

God meets people where they are and accommodates to their understanding, just as he met people where they are in the person of Jesus. “We must resist the notion that for God to enculturate himself is somehow beneath him. This is precisely how he shows his love to the world he made.”⁴⁹

Linking together the work of Paul Copan and Peter Enns, the argument can be made that God accommodated to the Israelites as Ancient Near Eastern people in the terminology he used to communicate with them about dealing with the Canaanites. He spoke using the concepts and terminology of the culture in which they lived. This was a much earlier stage in progressive revelation and therefore is not to be seen as applying to us today in the Christian era.⁵⁰

Conclusion

If we believe genocide actually took place, the fundamental question is: why couldn't the Canaanites merely have been expelled from the territory? Yes, that would have meant people being killed in battle but it would not have been genocide. Some might say that means they would have spread their evil idolatry elsewhere. But it was already in the surrounding people groups, whom Israel was forbidden to exterminate. And why should the Canaanites have been singled out for immediate judgment if they were no longer in the Promised Land?

Some will be convinced that genocide did not take place but rather a driving out of the Canaanites in line with the main meaning of the word *herem*. There is substantial evidence for the survival of Canaanites despite the commands to kill them.

Some will be convinced that the Canaanites were such a debased society and such a threat to God's purposes for Israel and plans for worldwide salvation that this warranted genocide. It is not difficult to see that the danger was posed by women as well as men, but why were the children killed? Is there really enough threat even from older children and even if many of the children had sexually transmitted diseases is that justification for killing them? But again, why were the virgins not seen as a threat in Num 31:15-18?

Admittedly it was a holy war to establish the Lord's rule and to protect his purposes. But did it have to be genocide?

Some will be satisfied with the thought that God works out his sovereign purposes through human activity, natural processes etc. Just as he works through nature red in tooth and claw, so he works through human violence and sin. He worked through pagan empires such as Assyria and Babylon. He also appears sometimes to compromise with human weakness, allowing activities which are contrary to his perfect will. However, ultimately God showed that the way of violence does not bring about his kingdom on earth.

Others will conclude that even if genocide of men and women, though extreme, is justified (although it may not always have been carried out) there does not seem to be any adequate justification for genocide amongst children. Yet the OT teaches God approved it, which does not square with God being love and calling us to love our enemies. However it also says God reacts to Israel's failings with burning, fiery, furious anger which does not square with divine impassivity. It says God caused people to sin which does not square with NT teaching. These Christians will conclude that such views together with the teaching that God approved of genocide particularly amongst children are mistaken theology stemming from an earlier stage in progressive revelation, because they are contradicted by Jesus and the NT. Is it possible they "misheard" God in their reliance on Urim and Thummim, dreams and prophets? I have argued above that such a view does not undermine the Bible's teaching on salvation through Christ – its *raison d'être*.

Others will be convinced that the OT uses Ancient Near Eastern Exaggeration Rhetoric and makes exaggerated claims about the destruction of enemies, which was not seen as lying but as an accepted convention. There is substantial biblical and archaeological evidence that many Canaanites were not exterminated. These people will accept that, on the principle of the incarnation, God communicated with the Israelites as Ancient Near Eastern people using the concepts and terminology of their culture (as part of Progressive Revelation).

MY VIEW

Whatever questions might remain with this latter view, it seems the most acceptable to me, i.e. that the OT uses Ancient Near Eastern Exaggeration Rhetoric. (Some conservatives worry that emphasising progressive revelation and understanding the cultural conditioning of Scripture will lead to accepting, for example, that homosexual practice is now morally acceptable - just as it has been accepted that slavery is wrong and the ministry of women is acceptable. I deal with this in Appendix 4 of my paper on *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*).

The only other alternative would seem to be that the OT references to divinely-sanctioned genocide are mistaken. However, I firmly believe that Scripture (OT and NT) is divinely- inspired (God-breathed) and that its prophecies and promises are being and will be fulfilled. I believe it to be inerrant in all matters necessary to our salvation. It is the authoritative Word of God which is normative over tradition and individual reason and experience, although it must be interpreted correctly. I believe that Scripture also shows remarkable consistency and reliability over matters of general history and that some of the remaining difficulties may well be solved, given further information. I accept that what the Chicago Statement says about some of the conventions current among ancient writers which were acceptable in those days but not in ours, namely "lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations."⁵¹

However, it seems clear to me that basically, this statement is saying that, if evaluated by modern criteria, the Bible does contain errors, although they would not have been regarded as errors in the ancient world, as they were accepted conventions. It speaks of “a lack of modern technical precision.” It then refers to “topical arrangement of material” which means that ancient writers didn’t always bother with what we would see as accurate chronology. This could explain John putting the Cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry because it served his theological purpose. By “variant selections of material in parallel accounts” it is referring to the inconsistencies we see in some of the above biblical examples. The phrase “the use of free citations” refers to what we would see as inaccurate quotations of one biblical passage in another part of Scripture. Today the convention is to quote people verbatim. In the ancient world the convention was to give an accurate account of what a person said, not necessarily a verbatim quotation.

We have noted a number of problems in Scripture, including questions of morality in the OT. However, they are not in matters to do with salvation. To say that allowing any, even small, error in Scripture undermines all of Scripture is, in my view, what I have called Og Theology!

What Scripture says of itself is: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16), i.e. it is inspired to teach about salvation. It is inerrant in all matters necessary to our salvation.

(For more on this see my paper “*The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*” (which contains a shorter version of this paper).

Tony Higton

Appendix 1: The killing of the firstborn of Egypt

Exodus 12:29-30 states “At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.”

This raises a moral issue in that many of the firstborn were doubtless innocent. It is possible that some were involved in the oppression of the Israelites or even the genocide of Israelite male children. But most would not have been. How can their killing be justified?

To answer this question we need to examine the nature of the account of the plagues. Firstly we note that the accounts had a theological purpose.

The theological purpose of the plagues account

Professor Terence Fretheim⁵² sees the account as a contrast with the creation stories. He records that people in the Ancient Near East, including Israel, saw their laws for the just ordering of society as closely related to the order of creation. Pharaoh’s oppression of Israel was therefore seen as ‘antireational’ and contrary to God’s promises of fruitfulness in Israel (Gen 1:28; Ex. 1:7). God’s mission can only be fulfilled if the earth is teeming with life and God intends to work out this mission through Israel. So Pharaoh’s behaviour is a threat to all this.

However, Lee Gatiss⁵³ believes that the plagues are leading to the great credal statement in Exodus 34:6-7 “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.”

Scholars such as Professor Don Benjamin have pointed out that the plagues were seen as judgments on Egypt’s gods. The Nile was worshipped as the god Hapy. The Egyptian goddess of fertility Heket had the head of a frog. Geb was god of the earth (dust). Khepri, the god of creation had the head of a fly. Hathor, the goddess of love had the head of a cow. The sky goddess Nut would have controlled the hail. The storm god Seth was associated with the hail and thunder. The sun god Re (or Ra) was blotted out. Yahweh claimed the firstborn yet the god of the dead was Osiris. The plagues would have been seen as Yahweh being superior to those gods.

It is important to remember that the plague story has a theological purpose and is not simply a record of events. We now turn to examine if the plagues could have been brought about by natural causes.

The natural background to the plagues

The water turned to blood could have been toxic red algae which would have flourished in the Nile Delta in hot weather if floods had carried a great deal of nutrient rich soil there. The fish would die and rot forcing the frogs to leave. But the frogs would have died of dehydration and starvation. Their rotting bodies would have encouraged swarms of gnats and flies, which would flourish in the absence of the frogs. Livestock could have contracted diseases spread by the insect larvae. (Professor Don C Benjamin thinks this was foot and mouth disease). The plague of boils may have been caused by insect bites.

Then followed a massive hailstorm which, apart from its destructive power (killing animals, crops and humans) would have made the sand damp, which is an ideal condition for locusts to lay their eggs. The darkness could have been a sandstorm which can blot out the sun for several days.

L. Hlass points out that even the death of the firstborn could have a natural cause – eating grain which had been contaminated by poisonous fungi which thrive in damp conditions. This causes internal bleeding. He adds: “In a food-scarce environment, first-born sons would have been fed first and would have died almost instantly.”⁵⁴ The Israelites lived in Goshen more or less isolated from the bulk of the Egyptian population,

which tended to concentrate more to the south and west, because shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians (Gen 46:34) .

Fretheim points out that the word used for ‘plague’ in this case is *nega*’ which is regularly translated ‘disease’ in Leviticus. He think the last plague was caused by disease “though its timing and scope are clearly hypernatural in character.” He adds: “This killing of firstborn only ought not be interpreted literally (its possible historical basis is that no household remained untouched). As with the other plagues, the emphasis on "all" is intended to portray an aspect of creation gone berserk. The moral order has "boomeranged" in such a way that the order of nature (which includes epidemics) has become something it ought not to be.”⁵⁵

It is at least possible that the death of the Egyptian firstborn was due to natural causes, although with very significant timing. But how could it have been all the firstborn of Egypt? This brings us to the extravagant language used in the account. (See above for information on Ancient Near Eastern Exaggeration Rhetoric).

Extravagant language

Fretheim writes about this in the plagues account: “This is an extravagance of language, perhaps a failure of language: every tree, all the fruit, no one can see, not a single locust, the whole land. Everything is affected or nothing. A hyperbolic way of speaking has taken control of the narrative.” In fact he thinks that the accounts may have arisen as “a dramatized reading in a cultic setting.”

The signs associated with the plagues show nature in chaos: water is not water, light and darkness are not separate, insects and amphibians swarm. There are as many gnats as grains of dust. Hail is big enough to beat down every plant and strip every tree (Ex. 9:25). The signs climax in darkness like a return to the first day of creation. Fretheim calls the plagues hypernatural (nature in excess) in timing, scope and intensity.

The biblical language is extravagant:

- After the Nile turns to blood “*Blood will be everywhere* in Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone.” (Ex 7:19).
- “The Nile will teem with frogs. They will come up *into your palace* and your *bedroom* and onto your *bed*, into the houses of your officials and on your people, and into your *ovens* and *kneading troughs*. The frogs will come up on you and your people and all your officials.” (Ex. 8:3-4).
- “*All the dust throughout the land of Egypt became gnats*” (8:17).
- “Dense swarms of flies poured into Pharaoh’s palace and into the houses of his officials; throughout Egypt *the land was ruined by the flies*” (8:24).
- “*All the livestock of the Egyptians died*” through plague (9:6).
- *All the Egyptians were plagued by boils* (9:12).
- Then followed “*the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt, from the day it was founded till now*” (Ex 9:17).
- Then there was the plague of locusts. “*Never before had there been such a plague* of locusts, nor will there ever be again. They covered all the ground until it was black. They devoured all that was left after the hail—everything growing in the fields and the fruit on the trees. *Nothing green remained* on tree or plant in all the land of Egypt” (10:14-15).
- Then came the plague of *darkness which could be felt*. “*No one could see anyone else or move about for three days*” (10:21-23).

In the final plague: “At midnight the LORD struck down *all* the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for *there was not a house without someone dead*” (12:29-30).

In Goshen, where the Israelites worked no cow died, no flies swarmed, not hail fell, no darkness came. It is hypernatural in the opposite way to that affecting the Egyptians. So the plagues are not merely natural occurrences. Creation has gone berserk.

Conclusion

We have noted that the plague accounts have a theological purpose, mainly to show Yahweh is superior to Egyptian gods. We have also seen that all the plagues, including that coming upon the firstborn could have natural causes (though miraculous timing). Finally, we have noticed that extravagant language is used in the accounts (which fits in with the polemical theological purpose). It is possible, therefore, that the description of all the firstborn in Egypt dying is an exaggeration (cf. Ancient Near Eastern Exaggeration Rhetoric) and that what we have is the death of many firstborn due to natural causes, but that the timing was due to divine overruling, as was the case with all the plagues. Nevertheless it must have been bad enough to convince Pharaoh finally to let the Israelites go.

Appendix 2: Passages about driving out and destroying the Canaanites

Num 21:1-3: Israel makes a vow that they would “totally destroy their cities” if God enabled them. It adds: “They completely destroyed them and their towns.” The Hebrew term “*herem*” meaning “destruction” is not always used of killing, so it may not be referring to genocide.

Deut 7:1-2, 22-23: Moses says they “must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy.” However in v. 22-23 he adds: “The LORD your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little. You will not be allowed to eliminate them all at once, or the wild animals will multiply around you. But the LORD your God will deliver them over to you, throwing them into great confusion until they are destroyed.”

Deut 9:3-6: Moses says the Lord is a devouring fire who will destroy and subdue the Canaanites. He adds: “And you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the LORD has promised you.” The emphasis of the whole passage seems to be on driving them out

Deut 11:22-23 Moses speaks of the Lord driving out and dispossessing the Canaanites.

Deut 12:29-30: Moses speaks of invasion, dispossession, driving out but also destroying them.

Deut 20:4: Moses says the Lord fights with Israel. He talks about seeking peace with distant peoples but adds: “However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy[a] them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you” (vv16-17). This explicit statement about genocide is by Moses.

Deut 25:19: Moses says they are to “blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven.”

Deut 31:3-5 Moses says God will destroy the nations.

Deut 33:27: Moses says God will drive them out.

Josh 3:9-10: Joshua says the Lord will drive them out.

Josh 21:43-45: The writer says God gave all Israel’s enemies into their hands.

Josh 23:3, 5, 9-10: The Lord is said to have pushed/driven them out. He fought for Israel.

Judg 3:1-6: The Lord is said to have left various Canaanite groups in the land to test the loyalty of the Israelites.

Num 31:1-2: “The LORD said to Moses, “Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites.” After the army had only killed the men Moses was angry. “Have you allowed all the women to live?” he asked them. “They were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the LORD in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the LORD’s people. Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man” (vv. 15-17). The passage does not say that the Lord intended genocide.

Num 33:50-53: the Lord tells Israel to drive out the Canaanites.

Deut 2:30-34: The Lord is said to have hardened the heart of Sihon, king of Heshbon so that he could give him into Israel’s hands. The Lord told Israel to conquer and dispossess Sihon’s land. Israel took this to mean they should

commit genocide. “At that time we took all his towns and completely destroyed them—men, women and children. We left no survivors.”

Deut 3:1-2 The Lord tells Israel to do to Og king of Bashan what they did to Sihon.

Josh 6:2-5: The Lord gives Jericho into Israel’s hands and Israel took that to mean genocide. “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” (v. 21). The Lord tells Joshua to do the same to Ai and its king, except they could take spoil. They destroyed all who lived in Ai and did the same in Makkedah, Libna, Lachish, Hebron and Debir (Josh 8). The chapter ends: “So Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded. the LORD, the God of Israel, fought for Israel” (v. 40).

Josh 11:1-20: When Israel was attacked by a coalition of kings Joshua attacked Hazor, Madon, Shimron, Akshaph, etc. The writer comments: “Everyone in it they put to the sword. They totally destroyed them, not sparing anyone that breathed all the people they put to the sword until they completely destroyed them, not sparing anyone that breathed” (vv. 11, 14).

Josh 24:8, 11-12, 18: The Lord gave the Amorites into Israel’s hands and destroyed them. He drove out the Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Gergashites, Hivites and Jebusites cf. Judges 1:1-2.

¹ See Isa 30.18; Ps 11.7; 33.5; 61.8; Isa 9.7; 11.4; 16.5; 33.5; 42.1,4

² Deut 27.19; Prov. 20.10, 23; Isa 10.1-2; Amos 8.4-7

³ Lev 19.33-34; Ps 82.1-4; Isa 56.1; Jer 22.3; Mic 6.8

⁴ Lev 25.35-38; Deut 24.6, 17, 19-21; 15.3

⁵ Paul Copan, *Is God a moral monster?* Baker Books, Grand Rapids 2011. Copan is a theologian and Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University in Florida.

⁶ J. I. Packer, "God," in Sinclair Ferguson and David Wright, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 277.

⁷ J I Packer "Theism for Our Time," in Peter T. O'Brien and David G. Peterson, *God Who Is Rich in Mercy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 16.

⁸ Christopher Wright, *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, Hendricksen, Peabody, Massachusetts, 1998 p. 302

⁹ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 239.

¹⁰ Copan, op. cit. p. 141.

¹¹ Michael Green, 2 Peter and Jude: an introduction and commentary, Tyndale NT Commentaries, London 1968, pp. 91-92.

¹² John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Life*, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 618, quoted in Copan op. cit.

¹³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Joshua*, Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh 1855, p. 97

¹⁴ Eugene Merrill, *The Case for Moderate Discontinuity* in *Show them no mercy – 4 views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. S N Gundry, Zondervan, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2003, p. 93-94

¹⁵ John Wesley, 'Free Grace', *Works of John Wesley* Wesleyan Conference Office, London 1872.

¹⁶ Thomas Noble, *The Knowledge of the Glory of God*, in *The Tower*, ed. Harold Raser, Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City 1997, 1:19.

¹⁷ Daniel Gard, *The Case for Eschatological Continuity* in *Show them no mercy – 4 views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. S N Gundry, Zondervan, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2003, p. 136.

¹⁸ Tremper Longman, *The Case for Spiritual Continuity* in *Show them no mercy – 4 views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. S N Gundry, Zondervan, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2003, p. 185.

¹⁹ W F Albright, *Yahweh and the gods of Canaan: a historical analysis of two contrasting faiths*, p 128.

²⁰ *Ibid* p. 129.

²¹ William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), 77.

²² Christopher Wright, *New International Biblical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, Hendrickson, Peabody, Mass. 1996, p.231.

²³ Christopher Wright, *New International Biblical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, Hendrickson, Peabody, Mass. 1996, p.231.

²⁴ J A Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, Tyndale OT Commentaries IVP, Leicester 1974, p. 73.

²⁵ Eugene Merrill, *The Case for Moderate Discontinuity* in *Show them no mercy – 4 views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. S N Gundry, Zondervan, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2003, p. 71.

²⁶ Merrill op. cit. p. 82-83.

-
- ²⁷ Tremper Longman, *The Case for Spiritual Continuity* in *Show them no mercy – 4 views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. S N Gundry, Zondervan, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2003, p. 164, 169.
- ²⁸ Tremper Longman, *The Case for Spiritual Continuity* in *Show them no mercy – 4 views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. S N Gundry, Zondervan, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2003, p. 173-4.
- ²⁹ C S Cowles, *A Response to Tremper Longman III* in *Show them no mercy – 4 views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. S N Gundry, Zondervan, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2003, p. 192.
- ³⁰ Merrill op. cit., p. 87
- ³¹ C S Cowles, *A Response to Eugene H Merrill* in *Show them no mercy – 4 views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. S N Gundry, Zondervan, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2003, p. 99.
- ³² C S Coles, op. cit. p. 100
- ³³ Christopher Wright, *New International Biblical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, Hendrickson, Peabody, Mass. 1996, p.109.
- ³⁴ <http://www.christianthinktank.com/killheir.html>
- ³⁵ Christopher Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, Zondervan, 2008, p. 89.
- ³⁶ Copan, op. cit p., p. 172
- ³⁷ Copan, op. cit p. 175f.
- ³⁸ Richard S. Hess, "War in the Hebrew Bible: An Overview," in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008).
- ³⁹ Copan, op. cit p. 180.
- ⁴⁰ Gordon McConville, "Joshua," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 159 quoted in Copan, op. cit p. 170.
- ⁴¹ Copan, op. cit p. 188.
- ⁴² Peter Enns is Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Hermeneutics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. His book is *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the problem of the OT*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005.
- ⁴³ The Babylonian Enuma Elish account (early 2nd millennium BC) has:
- a similar sequence of days
 - creation of the firmament, dry land, luminaries, and humanity, followed by rest.
 - Darkness preceding creation
 - Division of waters above and below firmament
 - Light existing before sun, moon and stars
- However creation is a cosmic battle between the god Marduk and his great-great-grandmother, the goddess Tiamat. Maybe the writer of Genesis is deliberately drawing a contrast with this latter point.
- ⁴⁴ Atrahis (early 2nd millennium BC) is similar to Noah and builds a boat, sealed with pitch, to house animals because the god Enlil is destroying humans for making too much noise. The Gilgamesh story (early 2nd millennium BC) is similar and eventually the ship landed on Mount Nimush. Gilgamesh sent out a dove, a swallow and a raven.
- ⁴⁵ The Hittite treaties were also produced on two tablets, one for the king and one for the vassal, which some think might be why the ten commandments were on two tablets.
- ⁴⁶ It should be noted, however, that OT accounts of the reigns of Israel's kings are different from other literature of the time. They tend to be negative assessments.
- ⁴⁷ Peter Enns, *Evangelicals & Incarnation: Evangelicals and the problem of the OT*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2005, p. 41
- ⁴⁸ Peter Enns, op. cit., p. 55
- ⁴⁹ Peter Enns, op. cit., p. 56
- ⁵⁰ In *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism* G K Beale seeks to critique Enns' book. Beale is a Conservative Evangelical, concerned to emphasise the propositional nature of Scripture and appears to take the Genesis creation accounts as totally literal (having "essential historicity"). He writes: "To say that ancient people could not narrate history in a way that sufficiently represented actual events of the past because they were not modern historians is a false dichotomy." Much of his book criticises Enns' methodology in what I think are secondary matters and it did not seem to undermine Enns' thesis.
- ⁵¹ *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, Article XIII.
- ⁵² Terence Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1991. Fretheim is Elva B. Lovell Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, Minnesota.
- ⁵³ Lee Gattis is an Anglican priest who did a ThM in Historical and Systematic Theology with Westminster Theological Seminary in the USA and is currently doing research on 17th century biblical interpretation at Peterhouse and Tyndale House, Cambridge.
- ⁵⁴ <http://www.goodshepherdberkeley.org/sermons/lh080907.pdf>
- ⁵⁵ Fretheim, op. cit., p. 141