

What About... Old Testament Genocide?

Introduction

Good evening, everyone. This is the special bonus limited edition director's cut sermon in our What About series, where I'm going to talk to you about the so-called genocide in the Old Testament. There's actually a lot going on here, so it's going to be a bit of a whirlwind of a trip, but I suppose you may be wondering why I'm doing this anyway. It's not like, as Bruce said last week, a case where you're chatting at work and mention you're a Christian, and someone says, "Ah, then what is your interpretation of Deuteronomy 7, with reference to chapter 20 and the book of Joshua?" But you will know, if you've talked religion with your non-Christian friends for any length of time, that there's this idea floating around that the God of the New Testament is full of love and nice things, but the God of the Old Testament is angry and vengeful and horrible, like they're two different people.

And this passage is one of those that is seen to play into that picture, as noted biologist and philosophy enthusiast Richard Dawkins says: "The ethnic cleansing begun in the time of Moses is brought to bloody fruition in the book of Joshua, a text remarkable for the bloodthirsty massacres it records and the xenophobic relish with which it does so."

Now, Dawkins isn't one to let facts get in the way of emotive bombast, but you've got to admit, even sitting in our uber-comfy red pew chairs, reading passages like these is uncomfortable. I mean, yes, God does say that this will only be a gradual thing. Yes, God says that he is judging the Canaanites because of their wickedness. But he's still wiping out a whole people group. Are they that much worse than any other nation? How do we fit this into our knowledge of God as a loving, merciful and gracious Father who has promised to bless all the nations through his chosen people? It certainly doesn't sound like there's a lot of blessing going on from the Canaanites' point of view.

Context

Of course, context is important here. It's easy to fly off the handle and get outraged when you haven't heard the whole story. There are many factors in play here that we need to be aware of. Firstly, let's look at the big picture. Here we have the nation of Israel, lately saved from slavery to Egypt by God's mighty hand and outstretched arm, to be brought into a covenant with God, one that God had promised to their ancestor, Abraham. They're standing at the border of the land promised to them, but God is making it clear from the outset that this not because they deserve it. God's gift of this land is a matter of grace; he is the one who ultimately owns the land, not the Israelites – nor, indeed, the Canaanites – and it is God's to give. Israel are too small and lame a nation to walk in and take it; that's what God is doing for them.

So who is God fighting? Well, in answer to Dawkins' statement I read previously, this is not an ethnic cleansing, where God is waging war against a particular people group, this is theocide, where God is waging war against a spirituality. Leviticus 18 outlines some of their practices that God is seeking to protect his people from, such as unlawful sexual acts and child sacrifice, but it goes further than that. Ancient Near Eastern religion wasn't and couldn't be just a Christmas and Easter thing, where the rest of the time your religion had no real bearing on your everyday life. Their gods justified their Canaanite culture, where justice meant maintaining social order and the vested interests of the elite.

Remember the story of Naboth's vineyard from 1 Kings 21? The king at the time, Ahab, wanted this guy Naboth's vineyard so he could plant a vegetable garden. Naboth said no because, you know, it was his share of the land. So Ahab and his queen, Jezebel, concocted a plan whereby a

couple of ne'er-do-wells would accuse Naboth of blaspheming, getting him killed, and the king and queen could happily grab his land for themselves. And this was perfectly acceptable to a Canaanite mindset: the rich get richer, the poor deal with it. But that sort of injustice doesn't fly with God, and its prevention is at the heart of so much of the Old Testament Law. This is the sort of injustice and sin that God goes to war against, he hates it so much. He plans to destroy an entire culture.

There is an Out

But, interestingly enough, this doesn't necessarily mean destruction of the people themselves. The key to all this lies with one woman: Rahab. We read her story in Joshua chapter 2, where she says this to the spies she was sheltering: "I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. 10 We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. 11 When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."

The Canaanites are fully aware of who God is. They're not in a situation where this people have magically sprouted up out of nowhere to arrive on their doorstep. Even though news travelled at the speed of camel back then, if you've lost two neighbours to these guys, you want to know about them. The thing is that now, based on what they have found out, they've got a choice before them, a choice that we see Rahab having to make. When the authorities came knocking, looking for the Israelite spies, she could have just said, "Yeah, up on the roof," maintained that status quo and gone about her normal life. But she didn't. She knew who God was by reputation and knew she had before her the choice of life or death. As the Israelites were encouraged to do, she chose life and chose to become part of the Israelite covenant community. There was always a chance for peace, a chance for surrender and to make that same choice. Unfortunately, Rahab and her family were the only ones who did.

Language

At this point I think I need to say something about language, because one of the big things that make us uncomfortable is that we have is because of phrases like "do not leave alive anything that breathes" from Deuteronomy 20:16 and in Joshua 6:21 "They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it – men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys." This all sounds very extreme, but once again, it should be put into context. Have a look at these statements:

Egypt's pharaoh Merneptah writes on a stele, "Israel is wasted. His seed is not."
Moab's king Mesha also brags "Israel has utterly perished for always."

But these are written 500 and 100 years before the actual destruction of Israel by the Assyrians. This also happens in Scripture, where Saul apparently destroys all the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15, but then they're still around for David to fight against in 1 Samuel 27, and even in the time of Hezekiah 300 years later. What we've got here is a traditional Ancient Near Eastern hyperbole for battle accounts. We still use this today, but in a slightly different way. For example, last week the Sydney Swans played Greater Western Sydney Giants and beat them by 129 points. The Giants got slaughtered, absolutely annihilated. I'm not saying that any of them had to be carted off to the morgue, what I'm saying – and what you know I'm saying – is that they got well and truly defeated. So it is with these war stories.

God's Plan

But let me bring us back to what this is really about, and that's the unfolding of God's plan, not only for Israel but for the whole of humanity. In the first place, God is concerned about his people being able to hold up their end of the covenant. He knows – and is unfortunately proven right – that if Israel starts associating with the Canaanites, they're going to lose their distinctiveness as God's people. Rather than being his light to the world, they're going to become just like all the rest. Then how is the good news of God's saving relationship going to spread? God knows that the Canaanites have an infectious, evil spiritual and social system that must be eradicated if his plan is to be realised, so he takes decisive action against it.

Secondly, there's also a warning here to the Israelites because, as I said, this is not about God versus the Canaanites but God versus the Canaanites' gods and the society that flows from it. Wherever injustice, cruelty and opposition to God exists, there God will bring judgment. It doesn't matter if you're a Canaanite or an Israelite, or whoever. God has proved his power and authority in the past; it's now up to the Israelites to make a choice of whether they are going to take the hard road and be obedient, or take the easy road and join the Canaanites under the shadow of God's judgment.

But What About Us?

So we have whittled away a bit at our passage and those like it with questions of context and language, but what remains? What can we learn from this? Let me sum it up and explore what we can do with it ourselves.

Firstly, “is” does not mean “ought”. Just because the figures in the Bible – God included – do something does not mean it is a command forever and all time. God does not expect us to go out and commit genocide against our enemies in his name. I mean, that should go without saying, but occasionally throughout history passages such as Deuteronomy 7 have been used to justify some really horrific things. The Old Testament itself makes it clear that this was a once-off event initiated by God with specific revelation about it for specific circumstance. In every other war that Israel engages in, this command isn't cited at all. I'm not saying that I think anyone here is about to go out and start some sort of holy war. What I am saying is that when we read the Bible, we have to be careful, especially the Old Testament because it tends not to editorialise. We need to engage our brains and read responsibly in view of what we know about God's character and his intentions.

Secondly, we find out here that God treats sin deadly seriously. He recognises it as an incredibly infectious disease that spreads rampantly throughout the human population and drags us further and further away from him. And that involves some very aggressive action on his part. This is a God who has judged and will judge a hell of a lot of people, and we have to deal with the fact that that is who God is. When we read these passages, we can become uncomfortable that God would wipe out a whole people because of sin, but we should be aware that humanity as a whole is naturally in the position of the Canaanites. However, as with the Canaanites, God still extends to us the choice between life and death. His aim is not to destroy but to have all people reconciled to himself, as we can clearly see in the person of Jesus. God is just and God is gracious and merciful, so he satisfied his own justice by taking that death penalty on himself. Our choice is whether we accept this payment from God or not. Do we choose death or the life he graciously extends to us?

Thirdly, if we have chosen life, this passage speaks to us even more powerfully. After all, what Deuteronomy is all about is how to live in light of a covenant relationship with God. Like Israel, we are called to holiness, different to those around us. Now, we're not a nation-state like Israel, so notions of possession of land can't apply to us, but the call is still a distinctness in the midst of our

counterparts. Being the covenant people of God is not a matter of being free to do whatever, but specifically free to live a life of obedience to God, which means having a heart like his, one that, as we've seen, acknowledges sin as a deadly serious thing that we should be alert to. Like God, we must decry all forms of injustice and seek to make a change in our community for those who need it: talk to your political representatives about changes you think they could make, or support charities that work for those the system has left behind, like Mission Australia or our friends the Salvos. This is a hospitable holiness that reaches out and brings God into people's lives, and it's going to be countercultural, but we answer to God, not other people's expectations.

What these verses really don't let us do is pass judgment on other people. It's God who's doing the judging here; Israel is just a tool by which he carries it out. It's not for us to say who is deserving of what sort of punishment based on what we think they've done. Many evils have been done in the name of God by people who have forgotten this, giving us – and, more importantly, God – a bad name. None of us wants to be that guy. We really need to be careful, especially in a zeitgeist like ours that likes to propagate fear, that we don't fall into the same trap of hate and judgmentalism. Our job is to love, not to judge. That's God's prerogative, and we have to – and can – trust him that he knows what he's doing.

Let me share with you these verses from Deuteronomy 30 just to finish: “This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him.”