

Judgment of the Nations

Reading about the conquest of Canaan, particularly in the books of Numbers and Joshua, is like walking into the middle of a horror movie or watching brutal scenes in *Braveheart*, over and over. We recoil from these stories that make us sick to our stomach, and ask how God could be the author of such barbaric events. It makes us wonder if the God of the Old Testament could possibly be the God we see portrayed by Jesus. And above all, we feel morally offended by this God of Moses.

If this is our starting point, we find it almost impossible to discover a satisfactory apologetic for these stories. We find them to be too brutal to justify, and thus reject any effort to explain how such things could be. Only an unfeeling person could work out a way to rationalize the obvious evil involved.

But perhaps ... just maybe ... our gut reaction to these stories isn't a sufficient basis for our analysis or for shaping our perspective. What if we start with God's vision for a beautiful creation? Trusting that He is actually Good?

C. S. Lewis once said something along the lines of, "If you come into a conversation halfway through the discussion, you may very well misunderstand almost everything that is said." Perhaps an analogy might help in seeing how this applies in the case of Israel.

During WWII, the German forces were gradually reduced to the point where they could no longer hold the lines. So Hitler began recruiting younger and younger boys to be sent to the various fronts. Now imagine an American GI who has to pull the trigger, knowing that the soldier firing back at him might be a minor. The question we need to ask here is, Who is responsible for the trauma and death of the 15 year-olds in this war? If we keep our eyes on the larger picture, it is Hitler who bears the guilt of these deaths, despite the fact that they were shot or bombed by the Allies. And it was Hitler who was ultimately responsible for the Allied bombing of Berlin.

Yet, if you enter the movie at the wrong time, all you see is adult men shooting boys, or British bombers destroying a modern city. And we immediately react with, Where is the outrage at this horrible violence? Why doesn't somebody stop this evil? Without the back story, we are unable to make any sense of what we are witnessing, and none of it is justifiable.

To bring this to bear on how God and Israel could destroy the nations in and around Canaan, first try this on: Imagine the horror of being required to attend a Molech ritual of child sacrifice. It would not take much of that before we demanded the total annihilation of the priests and kings and adults who hatched this evil and perpetuated it for generations, dedicating even the living toddlers to the demons they worshiped. And surely, almost to a person, every one of them at some point in their existence knew there was something terribly wrong with what they were doing. So for God to put an end to this abomination is actually merciful! and Kind! Purging this kind of evil from the planet is truly a gift to the world!

Yet if we skip over this context of unimaginable evil practices and do not begin our observations until after the judgment begins, all we see is genocide of the worst kind, instigated by a blood-thirsty god. Can you see that where we begin the story changes our perceptions?

The Bible itself offers a glimpse of the larger picture. First, when God is revealing to Abram something about the future of his descendants, God tells him that it will be at least four hundred years before they possess the land of Canaan. God says one of the reasons for the delay is that, "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen. 15:10). That is, their evil has not yet reached its climax. Then twice in Jeremiah, God pulls back the curtain a bit to let us see the evil that took place when Israel adopted some of the cult practices of the people they failed to purge: "They go on building the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire—which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind" (Jer. 7:31); "They have filled this place with the blood of the innocent and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind" (Jer. 19:4-5). The evil was so great, it never occurred to God that anyone would do such a thing! And then in the extra-Biblical book of *Wisdom of Solomon* (ch.2) we get an even more graphic picture of this evil. It's so awful that I don't want to quote it here. But you can look it up on Bible Gateway.

The point is that purging these people from the earth was an act of God cleansing the world to make it a safer place for humanity in general and His people in particular. And the fact that they did not finish the job is why generations later they adopted these vile practices themselves, for which God had to send them to Babylon in order to once again purge the evil from the land.

And yes, there were children and women who were caught in these judgments, most of whom were not directly responsible for the evil of those nations. That's hard for us to take. But if we go back to viewing the whole story, and resist the urge to enter it halfway through, then it is neither God nor the Israelites who bear the burden of guilt for the death or servitude of the people. The blame lies entirely with those who created and perpetrated so much evil that only a total annihilation would suffice to cleanse the land. The real aim of both death and servitude was to put an end to the worship of demons and the evil that came from that.

What's more, if I might stretch our theology a bit, what if God has a place in heaven for the innocents who died in these purges? What if His mercy is as great as His judgments? We don't really know. But I suspect that God is good enough to care about those who did nothing wrong, but were dedicated to demons without their consent. In any case, their death might even be viewed as merciful when compared to spending a lifetime in a death cult.

Now if none of this feels satisfying, I get it. Evil is an appalling reality, and judging evil is a bloody awful business. We can easily find the details of either end of this process to be repulsive. But the truth is that our only hope for the future of humanity is that one day God will purge the earth of all that revels in evil and hates goodness and defies redemption. In the meantime, when certain people go too far into depravity and cross a line in the sand, God may take the necessary steps to purge them from the earth, for the sake of those who still remain.