

Why Did God Command and Approve of the Killing of Men, Women and Children During the Conquest of the Land Under Joshua?

How could the God of love and mercy approve of the blanket destruction
of entire groups of people?

1. God is the righteous Judge of all men. He has every right to execute judgment against wicked sinners. It is His responsibility as a just Judge to “justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked” (Deut. 25:1). “Upon the wicked He shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their cup” (Psalm 11:6). “The LORD preserveth all them that love Him: but all the wicked will He destroy” (Psalm 145:20).
2. God has demonstrated His righteous judgment against the wicked in the past.
 - A. In the Genesis flood, every man, woman and child on the face of the earth was destroyed and drowned, with the exception of eight souls. As Jesus said, “The flood came, and destroyed them all” (Luke 17:27).
 - B. Every man, woman and child of Sodom was destroyed by fire and brimstone, and according to the Lord Jesus, this judgment “destroyed them all” (Luke 17:29).
 - C. The final plague or judgment upon Pharaoh’s Egypt: every firstborn son of every Egyptian family was killed by God, no matter if the son were 20 years old or 15 or ten or five or three or one. Exodus chapter 12.
3. God will demonstrate His righteous judgment against the wicked in the future.
 - A. The judgments of the tribulation period will be severe, as God’s wrath is poured out on a Christ-rejecting world. Consider the fourth seal judgment (Revelation 6:8): “And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.” This passage indicates that one-fourth of the world's population will die. Consider the sixth trumpet judgment (Revelation: 9:18): “By these three was the third part of men killed, by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone, which issued out of their mouths.” See also verse 15. This passage indicates that one-third of the world's population will die. The implications

from the fourth seal judgment and the sixth trumpet judgment are astounding when compared together. If one fourth of the world's population will die, and later one-third will die, this means that the original population of the world will be reduced by one half, just by these two plagues alone!

- B. At the second coming, Christ will come as Judge, to judge the wicked. This will involve a great slaughter resulting in a huge feast for the birds of prey (Rev. 19:17-19; compare Psalm 2). Who knows how many thousands or millions will be slain at this great final battle?
 - C. At the end of the millennium, there will be the total destruction of an innumerable company of rebels. God will destroy them with fire (Rev. 20:7-9). It will make what happened to Sodom seem like a minor judgment.
4. God can judge the wicked directly (as in the above examples) or God can choose to judge the wicked by using other people.
- A. God used the wicked empire of Media-Persia to destroy the Babylonians; Persia in turn was conquered by Greece; Greece was conquered by Rome. God allowed empires to rise and fall according to His all-wise purposes.
 - B. God used the wicked Babylonians to destroy the Southern Kingdom of Judah, including the city of Jerusalem. Thousands of Jews were slaughtered, including men, women and children. Women were raped; pregnant women were slit open. The brutality of the Babylonians was unbelievable. God allowed this because of Israel's sin, rebellion and idolatry. See 2 Chron. 36:15-17 which describes the reason for and the horror of this judgment. Earlier in Israel's history God used the brutal and murderous Assyrians to judge the Northern Kingdom of Israel.
 - C. Does not God also have the right, if He so chooses, to use His nation Israel to be His instrument of judgment against the nations that were in the land at the time of the conquest under Joshua?
5. We must understand the depth of the wickedness of the nations that were in the land. Their depravity, and the ways in which it was manifested, showed that they were ripe for judgment.

- A. These nations were totally idolatrous, serving false gods (Deut. 7:4-5; 12:2-3; Exodus 23:24; 34:13).
- B. These nations were morally depraved and were practicing the abominations listed in Leviticus 18, including homosexuality, bestiality, and the like. “For in all these [things] the nations are defiled which I cast out before you” (Lev. 18:24; see also the preceding verses). See also Lev. 20:23.
- C. These nations had given themselves over to every kind of occult, demon-inspired practice (Deut. 18:9-14).
- D. The depravity of these nations is further demonstrated by the fact that they burnt and killed their children as a sacrifice to their gods (Lev. 18:21).

“The land of Canaan, which had long before been promised by God to Abraham and his seed, had become so defiled by the time of Joshua that God was completely vindicated in ordering the extermination of its incorrigibly wicked inhabitants, lest the people of Israel and eventually the whole world be corrupted by their influence, as in the world before the flood. This chapter (Leviticus 18) gives a representative listing of their pervasive sins: promiscuity, incest, homosexuality, bestiality, even burning their children in sacrifice to a pagan god (Leviticus 18:21) and blaspheming the true God. God had been longsuffering for four hundred years, but now their iniquity was full and their time was up (Genesis 15:13-16).” Henry Morris, *Defender’s Study Bible*, p. 156, note under Leviticus 18:25.

- 6. The command was given by God for these nations to be destroyed by Israel.

“And when the LORD thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them, thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them” (Deut. 7:2 and compare verse 16).

“But of the cities of these people, which the LORD thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: but thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely, the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee” (Deut. 20:16-17).

See also Numbers 33:51-53.

7. The reasons why these nations must be destroyed by Israel

- A. The Amorites and other peoples of the land were ripe for judgment. God would not tolerate their wickedness any longer. Previously God had told Abraham, “the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete” (Genesis 15:16). This statement implies that when the wickedness of the inhabitants of Canaan would reach a predetermined accumulation of guilt and then God would judge them. At that time God would remove them from the land of promise which was intended for Abraham and his seed.

“God waited for centuries while the Amalekites and those other Canaanite groups slowly filled up their own cups of condemnation by their sinful behavior. God never acted precipitously against them; His grace and mercy waited to see if they would repent and turn from their headlong plummet into self-destruction” (*Hard Sayings of the Bible*, by Kaiser Jr., Davids, Bruce and Brauch, p. 206).

- B. If they were to remain, they would turn away Israel from following the LORD (Deut. 7:4). See Deut. 6:14; Exodus 34:12-16.
- C. The false gods of these nations would be a snare to Israel and could cause Israel to sin against God (Deut. 7:16; Exodus 23:32-33).
- D. If allowed to live in the land, these peoples would teach Israel to do after all their abominations which they had done unto their gods (Deut. 20:18). That is, Israel would follow their immorality and idolatry.
- E. If these wicked, idolatrous people were to be allowed to dwell in the land, then they would make Israel sin against God (Exodus 23:33).

Cancer Illustration:

These nations had so corrupted themselves that they were like a cancer. There are times when only radical surgery will save the life of a cancer-stricken body. When a person has a deadly cancerous tumor, then there are only two choices: 1) Let the tumor remain and the person will die; 2) Totally remove the cancer and the person will live. Israel must totally remove the cancer. Either these nations must be destroyed or Israel would be destroyed.

Another similar illustration: Surgeons do not hesitate to amputate a gangrenous limb. It is better to lose a limb than to lose a life.

8. What of the heathen children who were killed in Joshua's extermination of the nations?
 - A. If the innocent children had been spared, they would most likely have grown up to practice the same sins as their parents, and ultimately would have had to face the judgment of God and an eternity in hell.
 - B. God takes care of infants and young children who die under the age of accountability. For a study on this, see <http://middletownbiblechurch.org/salvatio/infantsa.htm>
So, in a sense, this judgment on infants was a mercy killing, and made it possible for these souls to have a positive eternity with the Lord.
9. How is what God ordered under Joshua different from examples of genocide practiced by extreme Islamic terrorists?
 - A. Joshua received his orders from Jehovah, the true and living God. Muslim murderers receive their orders from Allah, a god who does not exist.
 - B. What Joshua did was sanctioned by the Word of God and by the God of the Word. What Muslim terrorists are doing is strongly condemned by the Word of God and lacks any kind of divine sanction.
 - C. What Joshua was commanded to do was limited to a very specific period of history pertaining to the conquest of the land which God had given to Israel by way of the Abrahamic covenant. God never gave Israel permission to kill the heathen at just any time, under just any circumstances. Even during the conquest, Israel was not permitted to kill the Gibeonites with whom they had wrongfully made a covenant. During the Babylonian captivity, for example, Israel was not permitted to murder their Babylonian captors, but they were to submit to their captivity and to seek the peace of the city they were in (Jeremiah 29:7).

In contrast to Israel's limited mission at a particular point in history, Islam's entire history is full of bloody conquests. Islam's goal is to bring all nations under submission by force. Totalitarianism is a political doctrine that seeks to control all aspects of a society: its economy, its laws and government, its culture. Islam is a complete way of life, a total civilization, not just a religion. It is also a culture and a political system of Sharia laws which establish its supremacy. There is no aspect of personal and public life that is not included in the Sharia. Not just Muslims, but all people, must submit to the Sharia. The very name, Islam, means to submit, submit to Mohammed and the Koran in all things: religious, political and cultural. Mohammed practiced totalitarianism. All people around him had to submit to his demands. After Arabia submitted, Mohammed left Arabia and began his mission to have Sharia rule the world. Both the Koran and Mohammed command the terror of jihad on non-Muslims (or Kafirs) until Islam dominates. After Mohammed died, the caliphs killed all apostates and conquered all the Middle East and northern Africa. After Islam enters a society, over time the society usually becomes totally Islamic. This is totalitarianism.

For more information on the true nature of Islam see
<https://www.politicalislam.com>

- D. The purpose of the conquest of the land under Joshua was to claim the land that God had given to Israel and to conquer and defeat the nations that were then possessing that land. The purpose was never to make this conquest a starting point for world conquest. World domination was never Israel's goal. Islam, in sharp contrast to this, has always had world domination as an ultimate goal, and Muslims historically have always tried to enlarge their territory and extend their influence everywhere in the world. Israel never sought world domination, nor did they ever seek to convert the world by force.

Even in the Millennium (the kingdom reign of Christ) when Israel will be the favored nation enjoying God's promised blessings, there will be other nations which will have a prominent role. For example, Egypt and Assyria, both formerly enemies of Israel, will in the future be blessed along with Israel in the Millennium (Isaiah 19:23-25). This is fascinating because Egypt and Assyria represent territories which are now occupied to a large extent by Arabs and/or Muslims.

- E. There is also the sharp contrast of the totalitarianism of Islam with the truly benevolent rule of the King of kings during His Millennial Reign in perfect righteousness and peace (Isaiah 2:1-5; 9:6-7; 11:1-9; Jer. 23:5-8; Luke 1:31-33; etc.).

- F. God's mercy may be found by any Gentile from any nation who will turn in faith to the true and living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Rahab and Ruth are good examples of this.

George Zeller, August 2016

Supplemental Material:

The following is from David Cloud's excellent article. *Is the God of the Old Testament Cruel?* found at http://www.wayoflife.org/reports/is_the_god_of_the_old_testament_cruel.html

First, God waited 400 years before judging these nations, which reminds us that He is very longsuffering.

“And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full” (Genesis 15:13-16).

These nations had the light of creation and conscience, and they also had prophetic light. There were prophets in the region such as Melchizedek, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and his sons. The Canaanite nations could have repented like Nineveh did, and God would have forgiven them (Jonah 3:5-10).

Far from being hot-headed, impulsive, and capricious, the Jehovah God revealed in the Bible is longsuffering.

“The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy” (Psalm 145:8).

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

The patience of God was seen in the days before the Flood.

“GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5).

Yet God waited a long time, probably 120 years, while Noah built the ark.

“Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water” (1 Peter 3:20).

In Abraham's day, God would have withheld His judgment on wicked Sodom had He found even 10 righteous souls therein, but there were not even 10 (Genesis 18:32).

God is very patient with sinners, but His patience has an end. In Noah's time, there came a day when God shut the door of the ark. The opportunity for salvation was finished and judgment fell irrevocably. The same thing happened to the Canaanites. “The time of God's patience and forbearance towards provoking sinners is sometimes long, but always limited: reprieves are not pardons; though God bear a great while, he will not bear always” (Matthew Henry).

God's judgments are warnings to others.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and other Canaanite cities are merciful warnings to those who will listen, even to these end times. This is emphasized in Scripture:

“And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrha into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly” (2 Peter 2:6).

“Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire” (Jude 1:7).

Even in judgment, God is merciful. What He loves above all is mercy and what He is above all is a Saviour, but men must repent and turn to Him. That is His requirement, and the Creator has every right to set the rules!

The Lord was merciful to individuals like Rahab who repented of their idolatry and put their faith in Jehovah God (Joshua 2).

God saved Rahab's entire family because of her faith in Him. He would have done the same for others, but they did not repent.

The whole tenor of Scripture teaches that God delights in mercy more than in punishment. He “is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). He “will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4).

The atheist has no basis for making absolute moral judgments against God.

If life is a product of accidental, meaningless, naturalistic events, it has no ultimate purpose and there can be no absolute basis for moral judgments.

If man is merely an animal, who is to say how he must live and act? Is the snake morally wrong for eating a rat or the cat for tormenting a bird?

If “God” is merely a product of man's invention, who is to say that one “God” is more righteous than another?

Further, the atheistic code of morality is relativistic. Situational ethics¹² is the sound track of this skeptical generation:

“I'm free to do what I want any old time” (Rolling Stones, 1965).

“It's my life and I'll do what I want/ It's my mind, and I'll think what I want” (The Animals, 1965).

“You got to go where you want to go/ do what you want to do” (Mamas and Papas, 1966).

“It’s your thing/ do what you want to do” (Isley Brothers, 1969).

“I’m gonna do it my way. ... I want to make my own decision ... I want to be the one in control...” (Janet Jackson, “Control,” 1986).

“Nothing’s forbidden and nothing’s taboo when two are in love” (Prince, “When Two Are in Love,” 1988).

“... the only rules you should live by [are] rules made up by you” (Pennywise, “Rules,” 1991).

“So what we get drunk/ So what we smoke weed ... Living young and wild and free” (“Young, Wild and Free,” Snoop Dog and Wiz Khalifa, 2011).

“We can do what we want; we can live as we choose” (Paul McCartney, “New,” 2013).

If man is the ultimate standard for morality and there is no higher authority, who can say it is wrong to lie, steal, commit adultery, and kill? Who is to say that homosexuality is wrong?

Under such a philosophical system, it is ridiculous for men to claim that God is unjust. Who says? On what absolute basis can such a judgment be made?

If atheism is true, moral arguments amount to a bunch of hot air.

“The extreme irony of the atheistic argument against God’s morality is that atheism is completely impotent to define the term ‘moral,’ much less use the concept against any other system. ... If atheism is true and humans evolved from non-living, primordial slime, then any sense of moral obligation must simply be a subjective outworking of the physical neurons firing in the brain. Theoretically, atheistic scientists and philosophers admit this truth. ... Dan Barker admitted this truth in his debate with Peter Payne, when he stated: ‘There are no actions in and of themselves that are always absolutely right or wrong...’ (2005). ... While the atheist may claim not to like God’s actions, if he admits that there is a legitimate standard of morality that is not based on subjective human whims, then he has forfeited his atheistic position. If actions can accurately be labeled as objectively moral or immoral, then atheism cannot be true. ... It is evident that atheism has no grounds upon which to attack God’s character” (Kyle Butt, “Is God Immoral for Killing Innocent Children?” apologeticspress.org).

For another helpful article on this issue, see
<https://www.str.org/w/why-a-good-god-commanded-the-israelites-to-destroy-the-canaanites>

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