

R-Rated: Preaching the Bloody, Wrathful, and Destructive Passages of the OT

Tips to help wade through these difficult texts and preach a God who takes justice seriously.

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“You shall utterly destroy them.” “Leave alive nothing that breathes.” These violent texts of the Old Testament may seem shocking and even morally offensive to our “civilized” ears. So how can we better understand the character of God and live faithful lives before him as we probe these puzzling, troubling texts? How do pastors go about unpacking these texts for their hearers? Simply ignoring them will not do. Some scholars will claim that any texts connecting God to violence are the result of ancient writers’ own superimposed barbaric views rather than reflecting the true character of the “actual God.” But this move imposes a pacifistic grid on the Old Testament that Jesus himself and others in the New Testament do not assume. Other theologians simply allegorize these texts—although, again, the New Testament doesn’t take this view (Acts 7:45; 13:19).

Since all Scripture is profitable for our learning (2 Tim. 3:16-17), we can benefit from studying wrathful passages. Perhaps the following suggestions will give some insight.

Puzzled by God

First, we have strong encouragement that God does not condemn those puzzled by his ways and asking questions about his methods. Biblical authors frequently wonder why God is silent or seems so slow in bringing justice. They cry out in anguish, “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?” (Ps. 13:1). In his affliction, righteous Job demands an audience with God, though it may kill him: “Slay me though he might, I will wait for him; I will defend my conduct before him” (Job 13:15). The imprecatory psalmists want God to act. Yet God typically permits complaints, anger, and questions without condemnation. Consider how David is angry with God for striking down Uzzah who merely tried to steady the toppling ark on the oxcart—though the ark should have been properly carried in the first place (Ex. 25:14). God doesn’t rebuke him in response (2 Sam. 6:8-9). Likewise, as we preach and teach about a God whose wrath we often don’t understand, we ought to urge our hearers to ask questions and work through their honest doubts and intellectual questions rather than stifle them.

God of the OT revealed in NT

Second, the God of the Old Testament is the God whom Jesus fully reveals and the New Testament unapologetically proclaims. A common cultural perception is that the “Old Testament God” is cruel and severe, but the “New Testament God” is kind and commands us to love our enemies. But the New Testament writers and, yes, even Jesus the friend of sinners align themselves with Yahweh without qualification or apology. For example, Jesus affirms that Yahweh commanded capital punishments (Matt. 15:4) and punished wicked ancient cities/nations (Matt. 10:15; 11:21–24; Luke 17:26–32) as well as depraved humanity (Matt. 24:37–39). Jesus denounces stumbling blocks and false teachers and wicked cities of his day, calling for temporal judgments in the severest terms (Matt. 11:21–24; 18:6; 22:7; 24:51; Mark 12:9; Luke 12:46; 20:16; Rev. 2:16, 20–3). Stephen and Paul take for granted the driving out of the Canaanites (Acts 7:45; 13:19). The author of Hebrews mentions acts of violent judgment as well (11:7, 28–34). Paul exhorts his audience to consider the disobedient Israelites and the sobering consequences of their acts (1 Cor. 10). We see in *both* testaments the “kindness and

severity of God” (Rom. 11:22). Indeed, the New Testament actually displays an intensification of both the *love* and *wrath* of God in light of Christ’s coming: “For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (Heb. 2:2-3; 12:18-29).

God is worship-worthy

Third, God is a worship-worthy Cosmic Authority who, though good, is not safe. Unlike ancient Near Eastern deities, Yahweh cannot be manipulated through offerings or incantations, nor can he be domesticated or controlled. And we should expect this of the Cosmic Authority. Like the Jesus-figure in C.S. Lewis’ Narnia, Aslan the lion, God is good but not safe. In the New Testament, we likewise see a Jesus who is good and kind, but who is also fierce and untamable.

God is just

Fourth, God’s anger is just rather than arbitrary, and he punishes reluctantly and is willing to relent. A central Old Testament text affirms that God is “slow to anger” (Ex. 34:6). For over four hundred years, God patiently waits till the sin of the Canaanites fully ripens (Gen. 15:16). And judgment is not God’s preferred way of dealing with sinners; he prefers their repentance and relenting from punishment (Lam. 3:33; Ezek. 18:31; 33:11; see also Jer. 18:8; 27:12-14; Jonah 4:2). When God punishes, it is with a grieved heart (Gen. 6:6; Ezek. 6:9).

The evilness of the Canaanites

The Canaanites engaged in all manner of behaviors that would be considered criminal acts in any civilized society today. These included infant sacrifice, ritual sex, bestiality, and incest—the kinds of acts in which their own pantheon of deities engaged. And the land God had graciously promised Israel could only be given once the Canaanites had become sufficiently wicked—not before (Gen. 15:16). That said, the divinely-chosen Israelites couldn’t boast about their moral superiority; they were an undeserving, stubborn, rebellious lot (Deut. 9:6). In fact, they too would be vomited out of the land as well for imitating Canaanite practices (Lev. 18:28): the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians (722 BC) and the southern kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians (587/6 BC). For Israel to engage in idolatry and sexual immorality were not ethical trifles but rather undermined God’s covenant with Israel and threatened her very identity and mission to bring light and salvation to the nations. These were acts tantamount to *treason* (see also Num. 25:1, 3, where Israelites “played the harlot” and “joined themselves to Baal”).

Eradicating Canaanite religion

God was more concerned about eradicating Canaanite religion—idols, altars, shrines, idolatrous alliances—than in destroying Canaanite people (Deut. 7:3-6). There is no ethnocentrism or racial animus in driving out the Canaanites. Judging by externals of appearance, dress, and language, the Canaanites and the Israelites were indistinguishable. And good responsive Canaanites like Rahab (Josh. 2) and the Shechemites (“strangers”) participating in a covenant-renewal ceremony (Josh. 8:33-35) are incorporated into the people of God. Indeed, God has designs for the salvation of the Canaanites and peoples historically hostile to ancient Israel (Ps. 87:4-6; Zech. 9:7; Mt. 15:22; see also Gen. 12:1-3).

‘Drive out’ and ‘dispossess’

The primary command was to “drive out” or “dispossess” the Canaanites, whose gods were

connected to “the land”—an act that was to create a theological instability to show Yahweh the Creator’s supremacy. If Canaanites were “driven out,” they were obviously not killed (e.g., Gen. 3:24; Ex. 23:27-33). However, Canaanites who chose to remain behind, ignoring the clear indications of God’s presence in Israel’s midst, would thus be both vulnerable to attack and defying God himself. In light of the absence of ethnic hostility, the desired salvation of the Canaanites, and the emphasis on “driving out,” and (as noted below) the strong hyperbolic language used in ancient Near Eastern war texts, we are not talking about “genocide.” Even in human rights tribunals from the former Yugoslavia, “genocide” was taken to be destroying all or most of a people group aimed at their “physical disappearance from the earth” (e.g., the cases of *Prosecutor v. R. Krstic*, 2004, and *v. Milomir Stakic*, 2003).

Commands accompanied by signs

The commands to drive out the Canaanites were not private revelations to Moses and Joshua, but were accompanied by highly-visible, powerful signs. Unlike private “revelations” to Muhammad or Joseph Smith, the Israelites were witnesses to very public plagues in Egypt, Red Sea parting, pillar of cloud/fire, daily manna and wilderness miracles, and the parting of the Jordan. The Canaanites even recognized this (Josh. 2:8-11; 5:1; see also 1 Sam. 4:7-8) and could have fled or repented.

Unique and unrepeatable commands

As a good, wise God, he will not command what is evil (Jer. 19:5), but he may issue difficult commands that are unique and unrepeatable. Making important moral distinctions will bring clarity on the Canaanite issue. There are *absolute* duties—like “love God” or “don’t worship false deities”—that allow for no exceptions whatsoever. Then there are *general* duties like “don’t deceive” or “don’t take innocent human life”; all things being equal, these commands are morally binding, but there may be exceptions. Finally, there are *extraordinary* duties, which come in cases of supreme emergency and may override general duties. It would be morally permissible to deceive in cases of warfare (Josh. 8:2) or with Nazis seeking to harm innocent Jews. Compare here the examples of the commendable Hebrew midwives (Ex. 1:15-21), Rahab (Josh. 2; see also Heb. 11:31; Jas. 2:25); and God himself (1 Sam. 16:1:1-3). And we commonly leave house lights on at night when we’re away so as to deter would-be criminals.

When it comes to taking innocent human life, this is not absolute. In an ectopic pregnancy, in which a fertilized egg is trapped in the mother’s fallopian tubes, unless the young one’s life is taken, both the unborn and the mother will die. A president or prime minister may issue a command to shoot a terrorist-hijacked plane out of the sky to prevent extensive loss of human life, even though innocent men, women, and children are killed. Many ethical systems acknowledge that taking innocent life in supreme emergencies may be morally justifiable, though tragic. While some may insist that God couldn’t command killing Canaanites because he is necessarily good, we should think of it this way: Because God is necessarily good and wise, if innocent Canaanites were killed, he would have had a morally justifiable reason for doing so. For God to command intrinsic evils is impossible—like making a square circle.

Some will raise the objection: “What if a terrorist claims that ‘God told him’ to blow up a bus full of children?” For one thing, a person’s sincerely believing this doesn’t mean God *actually* commanded such an act; Jesus states people will attempt to do all kinds of evils in the name of

God (John 16:2-3). An act is obligatory only if God has truly commanded it—not if one *imagines* God commanded it. Also, such an act would be right and obligatory *only if* a rational, fully informed, loving, just Being commanded it. And in the absence of objective reasons to the contrary—such as very public signs and wonders, solid prophetic credentials (Deut. 34:10-12), and the virtuous character of the claimant (Matt. 7:15-20)—we have good reason to think that God didn't command blowing up the bus.

Use of hyperbolic language

Ancient Near Eastern war texts like Joshua use “utter destruction” and “leaving no survivors” hyperbolically—much like sports “trash talk” in which opponents are “totally annihilated” or “wiped out.” While we can speak of an all-out complete divine destruction of humanity in the flood of Noah or destruction of Sodom, we cannot say the same about war texts in the Old Testament. We commonly read of “utter destruction” alongside mention of plenty of survivors. We see this evident in many texts in Joshua and elsewhere. On the one hand, we'll read “not one of all their enemies stood before them” (Josh. 21:44); on the other hand then Joshua reminds the people that many other nations need to be driven out (23:7, 12). Joshua 10:20 says that “Joshua and [the Israelites] had finished slaying them with a very great slaughter until they were destroyed,” but the *same* verse continues: “and the survivors who remained of them had entered the fortified cities.” In Joshua 10:39, Debir is “utterly destroyed,” but in the next chapter the Anakites are “utterly destroyed” in Debir. In 11:21, the Anakites in Hebron are “utterly destroyed” yet later Caleb “drove out” the Anakites from Hebron (15:3-4). In Judges 1-2, we see repeatedly that the Israelites “could not drive them out,” indicating a *gradual infiltration* of the land rather than a sudden, decisive military *blitzkrieg*. As Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen argues, Israelite attacks were *disabling raids* on military citadels—not literally “utter destruction” or widespread territorial conquest—and then Israel would head back to its base camp at Gilgal. In addition, the same language used of the Canaanites is used of God's judgment on Judah; he will “utterly destroy” it (Jer. 25:9). When we get to the end of Jeremiah, we see that Judah is far from literal “utter destruction”—though it was thoroughly disabled politically, militarily, nationally, and economically.

We've spoken mostly about the Canaanites, but we could say the same about the Midianites and Amalekites, who caused plenty of trouble for Israel. The subversive Midianites deliberately led Israel into covenant-breaking idolatry and sexual immorality (Num. 25). And though “every man” was killed according to the Lord's command (31:7)—without a single Israelite fatality (31:50)—we see innumerable Midianite multitudes shortly thereafter (Judges 6:5).

As for Amalekites, they showed a long-standing hostility to Israel, starting with the time of the Red Sea crossing (Ex. 17) and extending to the Persian Empire with Haman the Agagite (Esther). Just after they had plundered Israel (1 Sam. 14:48) under their ruthless king Agag (15:20), Saul was commanded to “utterly destroy” all the Amalekites (15:3). Saul does fight in “a city of Amalek” (15:5) and then beyond. The narrator informs us that, except for king Agag, Saul had “utterly destroyed all the people” (15:8; 15:20). The rest of the passage focuses on the *animals*. Yet a literal “utter destruction” didn't take place. In the same book, David fights another Amalekite army and 400 escape (27:8-9; 30:1, 7-17). Ancient Near Eastern war texts exaggerate numbers (210,000 soldiers: 15:4)—more massive than Egypt or Assyria if taken literally.

Use of violence in emotional pleas

The violence of the imprecatory psalms will use powerful emotional language to convey pleas for God bring justice. Imprecatory psalms invoke prayers of judgment, often in the midst of white-hot anger in the face of shame and oppression: “How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock” (Ps. 137:9). Does this go against Jesus’ call to love our enemies? No. Like the ancient prophets, Jesus threatened punishment (Matt. 11:20-25). In Acts 1:20, his apostles cite two imprecatory psalms (69, 108) in light of Judas’ betrayal of Jesus: “Let his homestead be made desolate, and let no man dwell in it”; and “His office let another man take.” The psalmist asks that God will simply do what he promised—to repay them “with the recompense with which you have repaid us” (137:8). The souls of martyred saints under the altar call for this as well (Rev. 6:10). Yes, we should pray for our enemies, but for divine judgment on them (and on us) if they (or we) refuse to repent. The principle of divine justice meted out according to each person’s deeds runs throughout Scripture.

Conclusion

As we look at God’s wrath on the nations, we see a God who takes justice seriously—something we lose sight of given our ideals of “niceness” in Western culture. But we should revisit and revise these kinds of assumptions in light of Scripture—indeed, in light of Jesus’ own words (e.g., Matt. 11:20-25). In his book *Free of Charge*, Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf comments on his own erstwhile rejection of a wrathful God: “My last resistance to the idea of God’s wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. ... My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry.” Volf came to realize that he would have to rebel against a God who did not get angry at the world’s evils: “God isn’t wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love.”