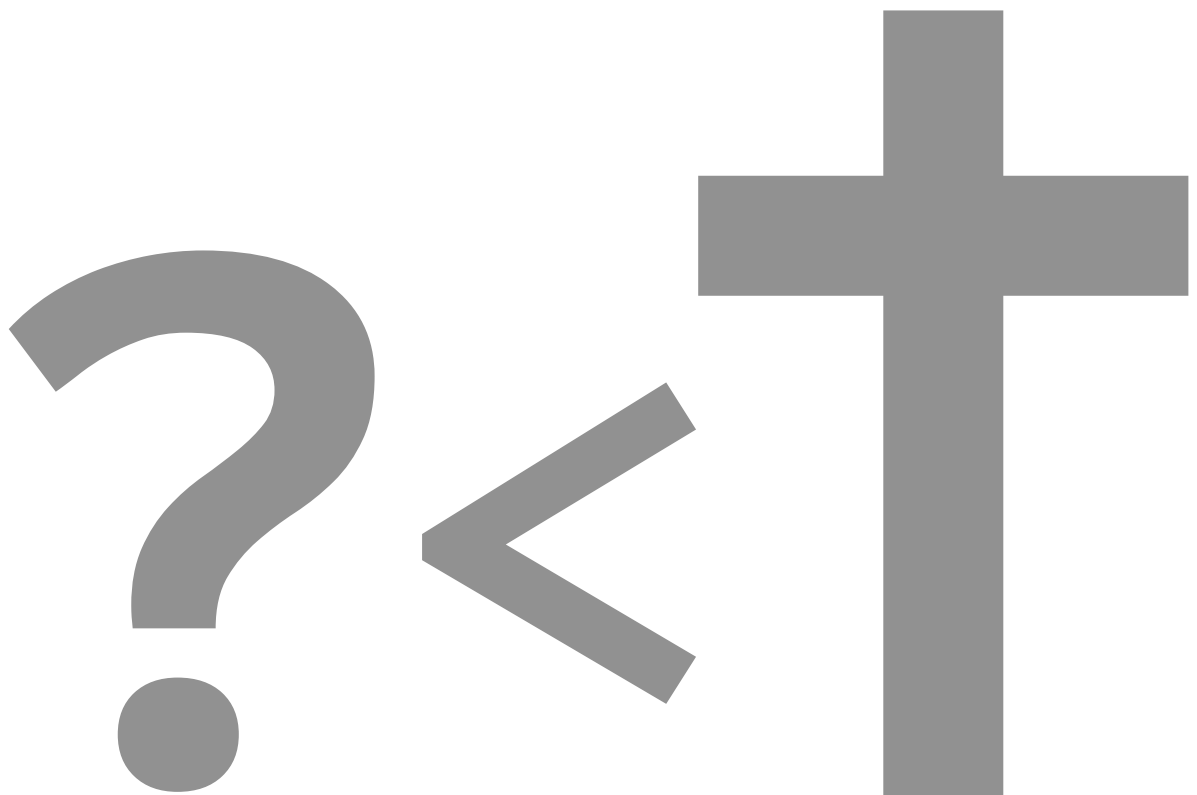


ANSWER KEY

what's up with all the
VIOLENCE in the
OLD TESTAMENT?





This material was first prepared and presented by Tim Wiebe, March 2016.

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What's Up with All the Violence in the Old Testament?

I. Introduction

A. Focusing our time together:

When most people hear about the topic of “Violence in the Old Testament,” the place their minds go first is God’s command for His people to take over the land He’d promised them way back in Genesis (12:1-6; 13:14-17; 15:7, 13-16, 18-21). And if you’re familiar with the Old Testament (even if only vaguely), you know there’s violence involved in this command.

Because this is where our minds tend to go first when we think about violence in the OT - and because this is such a vivid example of the violence we read about in the OT - this is where I’m going to focus our attention in this seminar:

“What’s up with this extreme violence we see commanded by God for His people to take over the land of Canaan at the expense of the Canaanites?”

B. Some of the vivid passages where this issue becomes a really big issue:

1. Deuteronomy 7:1-6
2. Deuteronomy 7:22-26
3. Deuteronomy 20:16-18
4. Joshua 6:21
5. Joshua 8:24-29
6. Joshua 10:28-43
7. Joshua 11:1-23

“Probably the most difficult Old Testament ethical issue is the divine command to kill the Canaanites.”

- Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* p. 158

C. Three approaches to the “Canaanite Conquest” passages

1. The antagonistic approach

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully" (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232).

2. The avoidance approach

Two reasons I don't recommend this approach:

- a. More and more people are asking the question, "Does religion cause violence?" We can't ignore this as we seek to represent Christ today!

- b. Let's not get in the habit of skipping over parts of Scripture, and only going to those passages that "sit well" with us!

1. The “at-the-same-time” approach

III. Three “Lamp Posts” that Can Shed Some Light on this Difficult Issue

A. Factoring in WHY these commands are given

1. The stubborn, bold sinfulness of the Canaanite peoples
 - a. The reality of the wickedness: Genesis 15:16; Deuteronomy 9:4
 - b. The manifestations of the wickedness:
 - ▶ Idolatry
 - ▶ Sexual sin: e.g. Leviticus 18 (note especially Leviticus 18:24-28)
 - ▶ Disregard for human life: Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:29-31; also 2 Kings 16:3

“I have wrestled with this problem [i.e., the conquest of Canaan] for many years as a teacher of the Old Testament, and I am coming to the view that no [completely satisfactory] ‘solution’ will be forthcoming. There is something about this part of the Bible that I have to include in my basket of things I don’t understand about God and his ways. I find myself thinking, ‘God, I wish you had found some other way to work out your plans.’ There are days I wish this narrative were not in the Bible at all (usually after I’ve faced another barrage of questions about it), though I know it’s wrong to wish that in relation to the Scriptures. God knew what he was doing - in the events themselves and in the record of them he has given to us. But it is still hard.”
- Christopher J.H. Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand*, p. 86

The Bible shows that the Canaanites are aware of Yahweh's identity and His works (see Joshua 2:8-11). Rahab responds to this correctly - by showing faith in the Lord (cf. Hebrews 11:31). The picture we get as we continue to the story is that even though other Canaanites aware aware of Yahweh, they won't acknowledge Him. There's a stubborn refusal to "bend the knee" to the Lord.

c. The "stubbornness" of the wickedness:

d. This "stubborn, bold sinfulness" eventually invites (and warrants) God to act in strong ways.

"I used to think that wrath [or judgment] was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. 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. According to some estimates, 200,000 people killed and over 300,000 were displaced. 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. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in grandfatherly fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love" (Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge* pp. 138-39).

2. God's concern for purity in worship.

See Deuteronomy 12:29-31; Deuteronomy 20:16-18

3. **The bottom line?** God is holy. And God cares how He is worshipped. Our view of God needs to factor in these truths about Him. (Along with everything else we learn about who He is in Scripture.)

4. One final pastoral comment:

Understanding these reasons WHY God commanded what He did isn't only so we can make sense of what happened to them, then (i.e., the Canaanites). This also has implications for us, now. Throughout these first five books of the Bible, we repeatedly see God warning His people, that if they follow in the footsteps of the Canaanites - stubborn sin and careless worship - these same judgments will fall on them. (Cf. esp. Lev 18:28 and Deut 28:25-68; also Numbers 33:55-56).

Listen to what Christopher Wright says: "God warned the Israelites that if they behaved in the same way as the Canaanites, *God would treat Israel as his enemy* in the same terms as the Canaanites and inflict the same punishment on them using other nations (Lev. 18:28; Deut. 28:25-68)...The same God who acted in moral judgment on Israel's enemies would act in precisely the same way on Israel. The Israelites needed to know (as do we) that the conquest was not some charade of cosy favoritism. Israel stood under the same threat of judgment from the same God for the same sins, if they chose to commit them" (*The God I Don't Understand*, p. 95).

B. Taking a closer look at HOW events actually occurred, and how the “Canaanite Conquest” passages should be understood

1. Remember all the exceptions.

a. Rahab

b. The people of Gibeon

c. Uriah the Hittite

2. Allow for some hyperbole (“warfare rhetoric”) in the literary accounts.

a. Compare Joshua 11:21-22 with 14:12-15

b. Compare Joshua 21:43-45 with Judges 1:1, 27-36; 2:20-23

Even in the Old Testament itself, then, rhetorical generalization is recognized for what it is. So when we are reading some of the more graphic descriptions, either of what was commanded to be done or of what was recorded as accomplished, we need to allow for this rhetorical content. This is not to accuse the biblical writers of falsehood, but to recognize the literary conventions of writing about warfare.”
- Christopher J.H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, p. 88

3. Notice the commands to “drive out.”

See, for e.g., Numbers 33:50-56; Deuteronomy 11:23;
Deuteronomy 19:1

4. Appreciate the limits of the ban.

“In the very way the Old Testament talks about these things [i.e., *herem* laws], it suggests that the conquest of Canaan is a limited, time-bound phenomenon never to be repeated.”

- Brent Strawn quoted in Matthew Richard Schlimm’s *This Strange and Sacred Scripture*, p. 81

5. Were many of the places mentioned in Joshua military forts?

C. Remembering WHO the One who's giving these commands is, and what else we know about Him

1. God is sovereign.

2. God is good.

See Exodus 34:5-8; also truths about God from Deuteronomy 4-10

3. God has a plan for the world that includes all the nations.

See, for e.g. Genesis 12:1-3; Psalm 22:27-28; Psalm 67; Isaiah 2:1-5; Isaiah 45:14; Zechariah 2:10-12; Matthew 28:19-20; Revelation 5:9; Revelation 7:9

Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

4. Look at Jesus.

John 1:18 (NIV)

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

IV. Conclusion and Q&A

Reflection Questions

What's Up with All the Violence in the Old Testament?

- ▶ What prompted your interest in this seminar in the first place? Are there ways this issue of "Violence in the Old Testament" has become a really important question for you to grapple with?

- ▶ Review the material on WHY God gave these strong commands (pp. 5-7). Why are these things important to keep in mind? What practical implications does this material have for our lives today?

- ▶ What was most helpful from the section on HOW we should reading the "Canaanite Conquest" passages (pp. 8-9)? Explain. Do you have any lingering questions about this section?

- ▶ What truths about WHO God is stood out to you the most? Explain why keeping everything the Bible says about God's identity is so important when dealing with tough issues like this one.

- ▶ This session made it clear that there will also be some "mystery" and "messiness" about this part of the Bible - even with everything else we want to keep in mind that we saw in this session. How do we respond rightly as Christians to passages that contain some "messiness" and some "mystery"?

- ▶ From this material that was covered what are 1-2 things that are sticking out to you in a big way? Any lingering questions or other things you want to talk about related to this material?

For Further Study

What's Up with All the Violence in the Old Testament?

Paul Copan, *What's Up with all the Violence in the Old Testament? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*. Baker Books, 2011.

See especially chapters 15-18, where Copan addresses the killing of the Canaanites most directly, and concludes with a chapter addressing the question, "The Root of All Evil? Does Religion Cause Violence?"

Matthew Richard Schlimm, "Killing All that Breathes: Violence in the Old Testament" in *This Strange and Sacred Scripture: Wrestling with the Old Testament and its Oddities*. Baker Academic, 2015.

While I wouldn't necessarily agree with all of Schlimm's conclusions, I appreciate his tone and his desire to carefully interpret the Bible in a way that maintains Scripture's authority.

Christopher J.H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of the Faith*. Zondervan, 2008.

See especially Wright's section, "What About the Canaanites?" where he devotes two chapters (chs 4 and 5) to the Canaanite conquest.