

Horrid histories?

The destruction of the Canaanites, part 2

The destruction of the Canaanites is horrific. But as I explained last month, it is not immoral. Within the framework provided by the Bible, what happened to the Canaanites was not an act of aggression but a righteous act of justice. The Bible has a coherent explanation, but is it plausible? However logical the argument, it will be hard to convince someone that the slaughter of a whole nation — men, women, children and animals can be morally right.

How do we overcome this plausibility barrier? Firstly, we need to point out that what we are ready to accept as 'obviously true' is very subjective. It is dependent on what the culture around us assumes as obviously true and what we ourselves want to hear. E.g. ten years ago that lasting growth could be built on debt seemed very plausible.

Secondly, we need to tease out the unspoken, and often unthought, assumptions that determine what people find plausible by asking the question, 'Why?' To ask the question, 'Why do you think the destruction of the Canaanites is morally wrong?' stops us being on the defensive and reminds an unbeliever that they need to justify their position just as much as a Christian.

Probing the atheist's objection

An atheist immediately has a problem, because in insisting that the destruction of the Canaanites was immoral they are making a moral judgment. But in a world without God there is no absolute moral standard to which you can appeal. The atheist's objection can only be a statement of their personal preference. But their objection has no more moral force than saying they don't happen to like strawberry ice-cream.

As we probe the objection, we discover that the moral problem is not simply the complete destruction of one nation ('genocide'), because the killing of a small proportion of people from one nation or many people from different nations would also be considered wrong. Nor is the killing of children the only difficulty; adults being killed in this context is also regarded as a moral problem.

A further question to ask is whether the killing of a group of people can ever be justified. There are plenty of examples where many people would consider such action morally justifiable — for example the killing of a detachment of SS guards about to gas thousands of Jews. In short, the moral argument is not as clear-cut as it might first appear.

In the remainder of this article I want to consider five issues that take us to the heart of the perceived moral problem.

Religious motivation

The objection here is that one nation kills another nation out of obedience to God. That is to say, a nation's religion is having real world impact. That horrifies many people today — just think of the concern expressed in the UK when we were told that President Bush prayed over his decisions. But this objection reflects a double standard, since everyone has beliefs and motivations that determine what they do. For example, a person's commitment to become as rich as possible may end up hurting many others. So, the real issue is not the motivation but the morality of what is done in the name of a particular faith commitment. Few object to religious motivation leading to feeding the hungry.

Children killed

The argument set out last month, that the Canaanites were punished for their conscious sin, works for adults, but not babies. The difficulty is not unique to the Canaanites. Achan's whole family were killed in response to his sin. The Bible assumes a framework of corporate responsibility, in which the Canaanites adults were held responsible for their children's death. Such reasoning grates with Western individualism, but it would not be so foreign to many other cultures.

However, I'm not sure that corporate responsibility is the whole answer. It implies that the real purpose of the command was to deal with the adults, but an inevitable, regrettable consequence was the killing of the children too. But the Bible doesn't present the argument in this way — the children are not separated out from the element of punishment. I'll return to this problem in the final heading below.

Even though I don't think we have a full explanation for the killing of the children, this problem is just as difficult for those with different beliefs. E.g. an atheist has to explain why the killing of children is morally wrong. In a predatory world, baby animals get violently killed all the time. Hence why is it a problem when it is baby humans that are killed, if humans are not intrinsically different to other animals? In addition, it is something of a double standard to object to the killing of the Canaanite children when our own supposedly civilised society kills 200,000 of our most vulnerable in the womb every year.

The agent of the punishment

The problem here is that Israel is the agent bringing God's punishment. Can Israel (or other nations) act in similar ways today? No. Israel was specifically, repeatedly, supernaturally and publicly commanded to do this. It was not akin to a madman claiming he had heard a voice from God. Israel's enemies were clear that God had commanded this (Joshua 9.24). Anyone claiming

similar divine prerogative today should check that their enemies agree!

However, there is a deeper question than the role of Israel as God's agent because God uses many other nations to bring about his judgment at other times (e.g. Isaiah 10.5). Hence the objection is not fundamentally about the agent of the punishment, but whether God is right to punish sin at all.

Sin being punished

If you accept that God should punish sin, then it is possible to understand why the Canaanites were killed. If you don't accept this, your problem is not with the Canaanites, it is with the gospel itself. The Bible contains many examples of God's direct punishment of sin (e.g. Numbers 16.26-33), the most graphic of which is the global devastation of the flood in which men, women, babies and animals all die.

Death as the punishment for sin

The Canaanites were punished through being killed. That should not surprise us, because 'the wages of sin is death' (Romans 6.23). The heart of the gospel message is that Jesus physically dies. Why? Because physical death is part of the punishment of sin.

Whether you accept this understanding of death will depend on what you believe about the history of the world. Evolution insists that death has always been present. Death certainly isn't a punishment — in fact it is essential for the evolution of life. If you are a Christian who accepts the evolutionary account of earth history you have the same problem. Death is part of the good world that God made. It is not a just punishment on sin. But if physical death is not a punishment on sin, then the Israelites' killing becomes an act of terrible violence, not an act of justice. In other words the moral problem remains. This is a serious apologetic liability for those taking a theistic evolution position.

In a biblical framework where physical death is the punishment on sin, what happened to the Canaanites is not fundamentally different, morally speaking, to what happens to anyone else, for all die. Death, whether through 'natural causes', accident or war is ultimately a consequence of sin. The difference in the Canaanites' case is that the death sentence comes directly, via Israel as God's agent, earlier than would be the norm.

This brings us back to the problem of the children being killed. Theologically it is essentially the same painful problem that arises from any child dying through whatever means. Why do children die who cannot be held responsible for their sin? I'm not sure the Bible gives a full answer to that question (although Romans 5.12-14 is a place to start). God is not obliged to give us an answer, but we can be confident, like Abraham, that the Judge of all the earth will do right (Genesis 18.25). And it is only in this God, who himself conquered death, that real hope can be found.

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