

Why Did God Command Israel To Go To War?

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“When the Lord your God delivers [the Canaanites] over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them.” —Deuteronomy 7:2

For many who profess to follow Christ, God’s instructions in the Old Testament seem strange and foreign. The way God interacted with ancient Israel compared to the way Jesus Christ lived and taught are so different that many have concluded that the Old and New Testaments feature two different Gods!

A question that frequently arises regards the sixth commandment: “Thou shalt not kill” in the King James Version (Exodus 20:13). Yet, a short time later, God commands Israel to kill the inhabitants of Canaan, including children. That God would both prohibit and command violence appears to be incongruous. Such an apparent contradiction provokes the conclusion that Old Testament instructions are untrustworthy and that the God of those times was unpredictable.

The truth, though, is that the God who gave these commands is the same One who died for the sins of mankind (*cf.* I Corinthians 10:1-4). The problem is not with God, but with man’s understanding of His nature and intentions.

Is there a contradiction between God’s prohibition against personal murder and His command to Israel to annihilate the people of Canaan? Since Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35), how can this alleged incongruity be resolved?

Before looking at God’s instructions to Israel, first consider that this same apparent contradiction is also found in the New Testament. On the one hand, Jesus teaches that murder begins in the heart—that harboring malice or enmity breaks the spirit of the law (Matthew 5:21-22). On the other hand, when Jesus is standing before Pontius Pilate, He says plainly that if His Kingdom were a worldly one, His servants *would* fight (John 18:36). They *would* go to war on His behalf!

Original Intent

One explanation of God’s command to Israel to go to war is that His original intent was to drive out the inhabitants Himself, but God turned the responsibility over to the nation and withdrew Himself after Israel sinned. In other words, His command to go to war was a consequence of their turning from Him. However, as we will see, God fully intended for Israel to go to war and drive out the inhabitants of the Promised Land. This can be seen in His multiple instructions to them over many years. Notice the intent of this initial command:

But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off. You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their works; but you shall utterly overthrow

them and completely break down their sacred pillars. . . . I will send My fear before you, *I will cause confusion* among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you. I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land. And I will set your bounds from the Red Sea to the sea, Philistia, and from the desert to the River. *For I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.* You shall make no covenant with them, nor with their gods. *They shall not dwell in your land,* lest they make you sin against Me. For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.” (Exodus 23:22-24, 27-33; emphasis ours throughout)

God spoke this on the heels of giving the Ten Commandments and the terms of the covenant. These instructions, then, were spoken on the same occasion that God said, “Thou shalt not kill,” or to be more precise, “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13, New King James Version).

Obedient Cooperation Required

At first glance, it may appear that God would do all of the work: “I will cut them off”; “I will send My fear before you”; “I will cause confusion”; “I will send hornets”; “I will drive them out.” However, verse 31 also shows that God fully intended that Israel play a part: “I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into *your* hand, and *you shall drive them out* before you.” God is not directing the Israelites to escort a friendly populace gently out of their territory. The literal translation says that Israel should *cast* them out. Strength of arms would be required.

God did not promise to change their nature; these carnal people would fiercely resist and defend their land and their religion. Israel would have a fight on their hands—which God fully intended. He would be leading the fight against the inhabitants, which is why Israel would prevail. However, they were still responsible for cleansing the land of the Canaanites and other peoples.

Verse 22 (“if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak”) shows that God’s promises are conditional, but it is important to understand exactly what the conditions were. If Israel were obedient, God would be an enemy to their enemies. The implication is *not* that if Israel disobeyed they would have to go to war, but rather that, if Israel disobeyed, they would have a much harder time when they *did* go to war. But whether or not they were faithful, Israel was still responsible for removing the paganism and pagans from the land.

Verse 33 stipulates that the inhabitants *shall not* dwell in the land. This was not conditional on Israel’s obedience—this was God’s edict to His people so they would understand their responsibility. But if the Israelites were faithful, they would have God on their side, blessing their efforts. It is the same way with us: God gives us responsibilities, and if we are faithful to Him, He supplies the help we need to carry them out.

It was Israel’s responsibility, then, to marshal an army to subjugate the people of the land. This is seen in Numbers 1, which takes place while Israel is still at Sinai about one year later. In between Exodus 23 and Numbers 1, the Israelites had transgressed with the Golden Calf (Exodus 32:1-35). Yet, even after their unfaithfulness, God still says twice that He would drive out the inhabitants (Exodus 33:2; 34:11).

Therefore, Israel's unfaithfulness did not nullify God's promise. Instead, Numbers 1 records God telling Moses to take a census and determine the number of men who were able to go to war. Fourteen times in that one chapter God repeats the instruction to number the men who were able to "go to war"—even though He had just recently confirmed His promise to fight on their behalf! God would be driving out the inhabitants, but He was also preparing the Israelites to engage the enemy. Clearly, it was still God's intent that Israel do its part within the fight.

Faithlessness Leads to Death

After the census, Israel, organized into armies, traveled the rest of the distance to the border of the Promised Land. Scouts spied out the land, and the majority gave a negative report. However, Caleb's response was positive: "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it" (Numbers 13:30). Both Caleb and Joshua knew that with God on their side, they would be victorious in the battle. These righteous men understood God's intent for the clearing of the land to be a cooperative effort between God and Israel. Both parties would fight, and God's side would prevail. Of course, it did not turn out that way. Israel refused to follow God's lead in going to war, and as a consequence they had to wander for 38 years.

At the end of their wandering, God says essentially the same thing that He did in Exodus 23:22-33—that the dispossession would be a cooperative effort:

Therefore understand today that the Lord your God is He who goes over before you as a consuming fire. *He will destroy them and bring them down before you; so you shall drive them out and destroy them quickly*, as the Lord has said to you. (Deuteronomy 9:3)

The Lord your God Himself crosses over before you; *He will destroy these nations from before you, and you shall dispossess them*. Joshua himself crosses over before you, just as the Lord has said. . . . The Lord will give them over to you, that *you may do to them according to every commandment which I have commanded you*. Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you." (Deuteronomy 31:3, 5-6)

Later writings show that Exodus 23:22-33 was fulfilled exactly as God had instructed, with both God and Israel participating (Psalm 44:2-3; Nehemiah 9:18-19, 22-24).

The question remains: *Why* did God command Israel to go to war against these people? In reality, "go to war" is euphemistic: Deuteronomy 7:2 has God commanding Israel to *smite* the peoples and *utterly destroy* them. Years later, God told Saul through Samuel to "go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (I Samuel 15:3). God intended that the Amalekites be wiped out and that Israel under Saul do it. Does this contradict God's sixth commandment?

Principles of Governance

We find the beginning of an answer in Romans 13:1-4:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on

themselves. *For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil.* Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. *But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.*

These verses contain a principle of governance that applies to what God had Israel do in the Promised Land. In God's view—the only view that matters—the land belonged to Israel. The Canaanites and others were essentially squatters. Because of their right of possession, Israel had the authority—and actually, the duty—to enforce God's laws within the realm that now belonged to them.

Applying Romans 13 to ancient Israel, we see that Israel was the “governing authority” of the land God gave to them. He intended that the leadership of Israel be a “terror to evil works” (including those of the inhabitants of the land), and He fully intended that Israel “bear the sword.” God requires that the civil authority “execute wrath” on those practicing evil—which certainly applied to the pagan peoples of the Promised Land.

Another facet in understanding this question is the context in which God gave the commands. In every place and circumstance where God gives Israel the duty to destroy the people of the land, He also mentions the idolatry of the peoples, along with demonism, sorcery, witchcraft, and child sacrifice. God was greatly concerned about the influence these things would have on His people, so He was particular in admonishing them to carry out the penalty of His law thoroughly.

Deuteronomy 13:6-11 is clear that, if someone tried to draw another person away from God and entice him to serve other gods, the penalty was death. Whole cities could be destroyed for this (verses 12-18). The same principle is at work with the Canaanites, just on a much larger scale. Being stronger and more numerous than Israel (Numbers 13:31; Deuteronomy 9:1; 20:1), it required an entire *army* to enforce God's law rather than just a local judge or magistrate. Every able-bodied, non-Levite above the age of 20 had to participate in carrying out God's justice in the land He had given them. This action was not at all synonymous with a man murdering another because of the evil intent of his heart. It is about God executing wrath on evildoers, commissioning Israel to be the governing authority to carry out His justice. This is not to say that Israel was above reproach—far from it. Israel was simply the tool God used to carry out His law. Notice:

Do not think in your heart, after the Lord your God has cast them out before you, saying, ‘Because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land’; but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out from before you. It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Deuteronomy 9:4-5)

God did not tell Israel to wage war on the idolaters *beyond* their borders. He did not tell them to take the army back to Egypt and “finish the job” or to march on Babylon or Assyria and wipe them out, even though those nations were great idolaters, too. Rather, He told them to carry out His law *within the borders that He had set*. Due to the size of the job, an army was required. God's command to Israel to go to war was to enforce God's law, not because there is any variableness in Him!

A God of Justice

When Christ returns and the kingdoms of the world become His (Revelation 11:15-16), this same One who said, “Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment” (Matthew 5:22), is shown carrying out the same instructions He gave to ancient Israel:

Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and *in righteousness He judges and makes war*. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And *the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses*. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should *strike the nations*. And He Himself will *rule them with a rod of iron*. *He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God*.
(Revelation 19:11-15)

When God gave Israel the Land of Promise, He required them to be avengers to execute wrath on wicked peoples. He commanded that they enforce His law within their new domain. When Christ returns as “King of kings,” He will do exactly the same thing.

The peoples of the world at His return will be doing the same things that the Canaanites were doing when God gave it to Israel (Revelation 9:20). The peoples of the land did not repent, just as the survivors of God’s plagues will not repent. Had there been repentance, there would have been no need to execute wrath on evildoers. God is a God of great mercy and compassion, but with the hardhearted and rebellious, He is a God of justice.