

Understanding God’s Character in the Light of Warfare

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the contrast between the image of a loving and merciful God and the history of violent warfare in the Old Testament. In addition to looking at the challenges of consistently understanding God’s character in the Old and New Testament, this study addresses arguments that question God and His morality in the context of warfare in the Old Testament, such as the topics of ethnic cleansing and genocide. It also explores the issue of God’s character and its relationship with warfare that led some to reject the Old Testament and deny the existence of God. Through careful examination of the biblical text and their historical and cultural contexts, this study argues that the conquest of Canaan was God’s judgment on evil after a long opportunity for repentance rather than cruel violence. It concludes that an accurate understanding of warfare in the Old Testament is possible without compromising the view of a God who is consistently loving and merciful throughout the Bible. The discussion aims to reconcile the ethical concerns of contemporary readers with the biblical account of divine character.

Keywords: Nature of God, Judgment, Mercy, War, Joshua.

INTRODUCTION

The idea that God is love is fundamental to the Christian faith, appearing throughout the Old and New Testaments. A deeper look reveals a consistent picture of a loving God, even amid catastrophe. Despite what some readers may see as a discrepancy between the depictions of God and some texts in the Scriptures, God’s love is emphasized in both Testaments—not just for His chosen people, but also those who oppose Him. Scriptures like Leviticus 19:34, where God commands Israel to care for the stranger, and Matthew 5:44, where Jesus commands us to love our enemies, make this clear. According to Brown (2012), God’s justice and love are continuously entwined throughout the biblical story, showing that God’s nature does not change in either of the Testaments (Brown, 2012: 45).

Despite this consistency, the nature of God portrayed in the Old Testament has long been controversial, especially in passages that express bloody battles and divine orders to destroy (such as Deuteronomy 20:16–17). Some people argue that such texts contradict the loving nature of God that is made clear in the New Testament through the teachings and life of Jesus Christ. According to Copan (2011), these difficulties frequently arise from a distorted understanding of the

historical and cultural context in which these texts were written, thus deflecting one's view of God's character (Copan, 2011: 92). As a result, many have questioned whether there are any fundamental differences between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. Some Christians have taken a Marcionite stance, for example, reading the New Testament and discounting or ignoring the Old Testament's significance (Longman & Reid, 1995: 113). Nevertheless, Wright (2012) argues that it is more appropriate to understand God's acts in the Old Testament within the larger context of God's redemptive plan rather than seeing them as inconsistent with His love. Wright asserts that even in the most difficult stories in Scripture, God's justice, mercy, and love are continuously evident (Wright, 2012: 75).

Christians have serious theological issues about the Hebrew Bible's portrayal of battle, especially concerning God's love and how it reconciles with the warfare recorded in the book of Joshua. More specifically, given that God is love, how do we interpret the Old Testament's mention of divine approval of war and what is its ultimate purpose? The issue of how to reconcile God's goodness with the biblical stories of battle is discussed in this article. This study is threefold: first, it will investigate the origins of war and its rules and purposes; second, it will look at God's involvement and response to war, with a particular emphasis on the conquest of Canaan; and third, it will show that God's nature never wavers, even amid warfare. This article's methodology is based on biblical-theological analysis. The study will discuss the fundamental reasons and causes of warfare, analyze God's original intention for Israel and their involvement in the battle, and examine God's interventions in particular military scenarios. The study will conclude by looking at specific examples of God's mercy during times of war and probation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The biblical scripture disputes the widely held belief that God gave the Israelites the order to kill to propagate their beliefs or religion. There is no command for Israel to wage war to convert people to another religion or spread faith anywhere in the Old Testament (Copan, 2011: 46). Rather, God's promise to provide the Israelites a land was the reason behind the warfare recorded in the Old Testament, especially the conquest of Canaan (Genesis 12:7). Instead of spreading religion, the main objective was to establish Israel in the land that God had promised to their forefathers. Furthermore, when referring to biblical warfare, the phrase "holy war," which is frequently employed in both popular and academic discourse, is a bit misleading. According to Longman (2003), the word "holy war" is inaccurate when applied to ancient Israel because it suggests a religious crusade similar to the idea from later medieval times. As demonstrated in Deuteronomy 9:4-5, where God emphasizes that Israel's victories were not due to their righteousness but rather to the wickedness of the nations they displaced, the wars in the Old Testament were not fought to convert others but rather were specific acts of judgment against morally corrupt nations (Longman, 2003: 95).

Divine war.

The question of whether these battles were motivated by Israel's national interests or were divinely planned as God's wars is crucial to comprehending biblical warfare. The Bible depicts the complex relationship that exists in warfare between heavenly will and human initiative. According to Block (2003), the warfares—especially the one described in the book of Joshua—are seen as God's wars, in which Israel serves as a tool of divine justice (Block, 2003: 39). Throughout the conquest of Canaan, Joshua often received instructions from God to carry out specific directives (Joshua 1:2–9), indicating that these were not just political or territorial battles that Israel started, but rather were a part of a divine plan. A distinct kind of warfare, known as *herem* warfare, is described in the book of Joshua. In some of these fights, the entire city and its people are destroyed as a sacrifice to God. This kind of warfare was particularly demonstrated during the capture of Jericho when the entire city and everything within it was destroyed (Joshua 6:17). According to Hess (1996:33), the idea of *herem* is associated with the belief that these cities were subject to divine judgment and that their destruction was an act of cleansing the land of the moral decline of its people. Additionally, rather than being battles of territorial conquest, the wars in Joshua are portrayed as wars of divine judgment. It is important to fulfill God's promises to Israel while also bringing judgment onto nations whose sins have reached their zenith (Block, 2003:57). It is important to understand that victory in the battle is not due to Israel's superior military strength but God's intervention.

The Land of Canaan

Canaanite settlement history is characterized by a complex anthropological landscape, especially as shown in Genesis 10. This chapter states that eleven distinct tribes descended from Noah's grandson Canaan lived in Canaan (Genesis 10:15-19). The Sidonians, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarites, and Hamathites were among these tribes. The Canaanites are portrayed in Genesis 10 as a well-established civilization with distinct cultural and ethnic identities, indicating that these groups had a strong presence in the country long before Israel's invasion (Walton, 2006: 234). The Canaanites were not a monolithic people but rather a collection of city-states with unique customs that were frequently marked by moral decay (Dever, 2005: 110). Since these moral actions are viewed as transgressing both religious and social justice, they are central to the biblical justification for divine judgment. Although there are eleven tribes listed in Genesis 10, biblical sources often mention only seven nations as the main targets of destruction during Israel's conquest of Canaan. The Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites are among the groups listed as being destroyed in Deuteronomy 7:1 and Joshua 3:10. Because of their religious customs, which Yahweh saw as abominations, these seven countries were targeted out in particular (Copan, 2011: 75). It is crucial to understand that God did not order indiscriminate warfare; rather than aiming to wipe out every resident of the area, God chose to target these particular tribes according to their behavior. According to Block (2003), God's justice in dealing with specific nations whose sins had reached their zenith is reflected in this selective battle (Block, 2003: 42).

The land of Canaan was not only the patriarchs' and their descendants' inheritance but ultimately God's, according to the Old Testament's theology of the land. According to Wright (1990:148), God asserts in Leviticus 25:23, "The land is mine; you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers." This indicates that the land is a divine possession and that Israel's occupation of it is dependent on their fidelity to the covenant. The promise of the land was made to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; however, its fulfillment was dependent upon Israel's submission to God. Therefore, the land was a theologically meaningful gift from God, constrained by ethical and covenantal commitments, rather than just a territorial inheritance.

Archaeological discoveries have shed light on the Canaanite people's religious customs, which the Bible describes as one of the main causes of their destruction. Evidence of Canaanite religious traditions, such as the worship of deities like Baal and Asherah and rites including child sacrifice, have been unearthed during excavations at sites like Ugarit and Hazor (Dever, 2005: 82). The biblical accounts of widespread idolatry and ceremonial immorality are supported by the finding of altars, idols, and inscriptions associated with the Canaanite religion. These results are consistent with the biblical story, which blames the Canaanites for their religious customs and uses them as grounds for God's decree to exterminate them (Hess, 1996: 91). Because religion and ethics were entwined in the ancient Near East, religious apostasy and ethical corruption are linked. Canaan's moral decline is sometimes cited as the reason for their divine judgment.

War is Evil

The devastating effects of war are acknowledged in no uncertain terms throughout the Bible. War devastates both fighters and civilians, from the destruction of cities to the death toll. Biblical authors depict the horror of war on multiple occasions, especially in the Old Testament when entire nations were annihilated and cities like Ai and Jericho were utterly destroyed (Joshua 6:21; 8:28). According to Dever (2005), battle in the ancient Near East was invariably marked by immense human suffering and extensive destruction, frequently resulting in the loss of homes, farms, and population displacement (Dever, 2005: 95). This sombre reality is reflected in the biblical accounts of war, which emphasise that although God may occasionally approve of battle, it is always harmful and a representation of a world corrupted by sin. In addition, the biblical worldview frequently views war as the result of human sin, with nations that reject God's ways facing strife and disaster (Copan, 2011: 124). Israel's repeated invasions, wars, and foreign dominance are explained away as a direct consequence of their covenant violation (Judges 2:14–15).

Judges 20, which describes the civil war between the tribe of Benjamin and the rest of Israel, provides one particular instance of a warfare that broke out as a result of disobedience. The inability of Israel to maintain God's law and the country's overall moral degradation were the main causes of this battle, which nearly led to the extinction of the Benjamin tribe (Block, 2003: 137).

Although the Bible frequently presents war as a kind of divine justice, it also causes great suffering and, in many ways, goes against God's will for mercy, love, and peace. Furthermore, the Bible portrays God as merciful and slow to wrath (Psalm 103:8), which runs counter to the idea that warfare frequently results in the suffering

of the innocent. According to Block (2003), the devastation caused by warfare acts as a sobering reminder of how flawed the world is and how much mankind needs to be saved (Block, 2003: 110). Thus, the misery brought forth by war is a result of human sin and rebellion rather than an indication of God's ultimate will.

In the biblical setting, the intensity of warfare serves as a striking example of the enormous evil of sin and its effects. The purpose of Canaan's destruction was not only to punish rebellion against God's moral law but also to highlight its seriousness. God says that the Canaanites are being driven out "because of their wickedness," not because Israel is righteous, in Deuteronomy 9:5. This emphasizes how the battle was a manifestation of heavenly justice taking on powerful wickedness. According to Block (2003), the brutality of the fighting, especially the idea of *herem* (the whole annihilation of a people or city), was intended to highlight the gravity of sin and the extent that God would go to in order to purge the land of immorality (Block, 2003: 145). In this way, fighting represented the price of sin and the need for heavenly justice in real terms.

God Intervention and Israel's Obedience

When the Red Sea parted, God intervened immediately and drowned Pharaoh's army (Exodus 14:27–28). This most powerfully illustrated Moses' assurance to the Israelites in Exodus 14:14, "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." God keeps defending Israel in the desert. God gives Moses the command to keep his hands up in Exodus 17:8–16 when Israel is facing the Amalekites. This demonstrates that God is actively involved in Israel's military operations rather than just watching from a distance.

The biblical account of war emphasizes that the goal of the battle is to keep God's promises and instructions rather than just occupy land or show strength. Blessings would include military victory, while curses would include failure in battle (Wright, 1990: 148). An essential element of Israelite warfare is introduced in Deuteronomy 20:10: making a peace offer before to going to battle. The exhortation in this verse, "When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace," shows that warfare in the Bible—especially when conducted under divine guidance—was not only a violent endeavor but also presented opportunities for peacemaking and reconciliation. According to Block (2003), this principle illustrates the moral guidelines that Israel was expected to follow when conducting battle, according to which destruction was the last option to pursue peace rather than the first (Block, 2003: 152). The population would submit to the Israelites and become subjects if the peace offer was accepted, demonstrating that there were moral and practical limits to warfare.

Some of the vivid examples of God directly interfering in Israel's wars are seen in the book of Joshua. The battle of Jericho (Joshua 6) is arguably the most famous example, in which God provides the Israelites precise instructions on how to conquer the city, including marching around it for seven days and sounding trumpets. The Israelites won because they obeyed these instructions, which caused Jericho's walls to collapse. Israel's military victories are invariably traced back to their compliance with God's instructions, whereas their defeats are frequently the consequence of disobedience, according to the Bible. This is seen in the events that follow the battle of Jericho, where Israel experiences a humiliating loss at Ai despite

their early victory because of Achan's transgression of stealing forbidden goods from Jericho (Joshua 7:1–12). Israel won battles when they followed God's instructions, like in the battle of Jericho; they lost battles when they disobeyed, like in Ai.

In addition to giving them the land as promised, God decided to use Israel's conquest of Canaan to show them how dependent they were on Him and how they should act as messengers of divine justice. Israel's engagement in battle was meant to demonstrate that their victory came from following God's instructions rather than from their superior military might. According to Hess (1996), Israel's military service served to reinforce their status as God's chosen people, entrusted with building a civilization that embodied the holiness and justice of God (Hess, 1996: 72). In addition, Israel had the chance to personally observe the results of sin and disobedience to God throughout the battles in Canaan. Their participation acted as a reminder that their loyalty and obedience were prerequisites for receiving God's benefits.

Precaution

It is common to understand Canaan's destruction in light of its moral and theological corruption. The Bible regularly describes the Canaanites as participating in acts that were disgusting to God, such as extreme forms of sexual immorality, child sacrifice, and idolatry (Deuteronomy 18:9–12). These customs constituted a severe danger to Israel's spiritual integrity since they had become so ingrained in Canaanite society. Hess (1996) points out that the Canaanite religion, which was based on the worship of Baal and fertility cults, was a whole moral system that ruined the region and its inhabitants in addition to being a theological mistake (Hess, 1996: 91). Thus, God's order to exterminate the Canaanites was a divine act of justice meant to rid the land of the moral decay that had built over many generations. According to the Bible, the devastation served as a deterrent to Israel from engaging in the same corrupt practices as well as a punishment for Canaan's transgression.

Centuries of Probation

The Bible makes clear that God's judgement was not hurried or capricious, even though Canaan was ultimately destroyed. Because "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete," God warns Abraham in Genesis 15:16 that his descendants would not inherit the land for several generations. This scripture implies that God gave the Canaanites centuries to reform their ways and turn from their sin. According to Block (2003), God's prolonged withholding of judgement shows His love and patience because it gave the Canaanites plenty of time to repent of their wicked ways (Block, 2003: 175). Because of her trust and recognition of Yahweh's authority, Rahab and her family were spared from destruction in Joshua 2, providing another evidence of God's benevolence (Joshua 2:11). Rahab's redemption shows that God's kindness was still available to those who asked for it, even in the midst of judgement.

God's Mercy and Justice

In the theology of God's mercy and judgment, these two facets of God's nature must be carefully balanced, especially in light of Canaan's destruction. God is portrayed, on the one hand, as a just God who cannot stand sin forever. It is said that the Canaanites' destruction was an act of judgement that was required to address severe moral degradation. However, God's mercy is demonstrated by His unceasing patience and readiness to save people who turn from their sins, as demonstrated by the prolonged length of time prior to the conquering and the case of Rahab. Wright (1990) contends that rather than existing in contradiction, God's judgement and mercy are actually two sides of the same coin. Justice is required by God's holiness, but before judgement is rendered, opportunities for repentance are provided by His compassion and mercy (Wright, 1990: 134). God's compassion in the case of Canaan was demonstrated by the centuries of delay and the deliverance of individuals such as Rahab.

The Bible presents God as a patient and merciful god, even with regard to those who live outside of Israel, such the Canaanites. God's protracted delay in passing judgement is clear evidence of His desire for Canaan to turn from its sin. Genesis 15:16 emphasizes God's patience and His desire for the Canaanites to turn from their wicked behaviors, suggesting that God was ready to wait for centuries before enforcing judgment because the Amorites' depravity "is not yet complete." According to Wright (1990), even in countries as wicked as Canaan, God prefers moral transformation and repentance over devastation, which is why judgment is delayed (Wright, 1990: 135).

The Canaanites were shown grace over many ages, but they did not respond to God's will for them to turn from their transgressions. The protracted period of time that passed between God's promise to Abraham and Israel's final conquering of the land was evidence of God's mercy and patience. The Canaanites persisted in their wicked customs for more than 400 years, which included widespread sexual immorality, idolatry, and child sacrifice (Deuteronomy 18:9–12). According to Copan (2011), Canaan's refusal to accept God's grace highlights the extent of their disobedience and moral decline, which ultimately necessitates divine retribution (Copan, 2011: 99). God's grace was consistently turned down, therefore the only course left open was the application of justice.

War as Judgment

The story told in the Bible proves that God is not partial; just as He punished the Canaanites for their transgressions using Israel. Later on, He punished Israel for their disobedience using other nations. God permitted foreign nations like Assyria and Babylon to subjugate and banish Israel when they resorted to the same idolatry and moral decay that had marked Canaan. The Bible explains in 2 Kings 17:7–23 how Israel's continual transgression and disobedience to God's covenant caused them to be defeated and banished by the Assyrians. Likewise, Judah's captivity by Babylon resulted directly from their disobedience of God's law (Jeremiah 25:8-11). According to Dever (2005), the exile served as a theological warning about the ramifications of breaking a vow, in addition to being a political or military setback (Dever, 2005: 125). This emphasizes that God's justice is unbiased and that His people must uphold the same moral standards as the nations God once judged.

CONCLUSION

Not every war mentioned in the Bible is waged on God's orders. But there's a clear connection between His promise to the patriarchs and the battles described in the book of Joshua. It is significant to note that the land in question is God's heritage rather than the patriarchs'. Prostitution, homosexuality, incest, and human sacrifice were among the religious customs of Canaan that led to the moral decay that sparked God's wrath. As the first fruits of the country, the Battle of Jericho is representative of the conquest of Canaan and introduces the idea of divine warfare. God's approach to battle is distinct from human warfare, as seen in the case of Jericho. The planning, carrying out, and conclusion of the warfare all demonstrate this divine nature. The marching ceremony, the glory of Israel, and the existence of the ark all represent God's active involvement in battle.

Further evidence that these warfare were divinely prompted and directed—with the assumption that Israel would fully execute God's commands—comes from God's involvement in the ensuing northern campaign. As seen in the Battle of Jericho, obedience was the key to victory, whereas disobedience resulted in defeat, as demonstrated in the Battle of Ai. God's involvement in these wars demonstrates a deeper spiritual struggle between God and the forces of evil, symbolized by Satan, and presents God as the commander of Israel's armed forces.

Despite God's military persona in these stories, the Bible always portrays God as a loving and merciful being. The Old and New Testaments consistently present being as a patient, kind, and loving being who is abundant in unwavering love and slow to become enraged. God demonstrates his divine nature by showing mercy and justice even in times of war. Crucially, God does not despise sinners and He has no wish to wipe them out. Rather, He pursues their repentance and loves them without conditions. Thus, the biblical text—especially the Old Testament—does not support the idea that God ordered a genocide against the Canaanites or the idea of "holy war." Rather, the wars recorded in the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Joshua, can be seen as God's retaliation for the Canaanites' ongoing and unrepentant sin.

The Canaanites' transgression was the main cause of their demise. God has the right to punish Canaan for its moral decay since He was the Creator. In addition to taking land, the conquest of Canaan aimed to rid the region of idolatry in order to make way for God's chosen people. God's chastisement for the Canaanites' transgression is symbolised by their destruction. The Canaanites were shown generations of charity via His people, yet they refused to turn from their worship and it persisted unchecked. The Canaanites had used up all of their opportunities for repentance by the time of the conquest. God decided to destroy Israel in order to satisfy His covenant vows because He loved them and wanted to purify the land.

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