

Appendix

How can God be righteous if He commanded Israel to kill women and children when they conquered the Promised Land?

The above question was submitted by Josh, a twentysomething millennial who read the manuscript. The following information is a response to the sixth discussion question in chapter 5.

At first, I thought the question might be too difficult since the book has been addressed to the average layperson rather than to the seminarian or pastor. After more thought, I realized the question is ground zero to the discussion. If I can't respond to this question about God's fairness, then everything in the book has been rendered null and void. If God is not good and righteous or if He does what is wrong and unfair, then why should I love Him or serve Him? If God is malevolent and cruel, He is no better than the idols men and women have created in their own image.

I have tried to resolve the quandary created by God's command for Israelite soldiers to kill women and children when they conquered the land from the Canaanites. For your consideration, I offer five principles gleaned primarily from Genesis and Deuteronomy.

To better appreciate the book of Deuteronomy, try to imagine a marriage ceremony between God and Israel taking place in Moab prior to crossing the Jordan River to claim their promised inheritance.

Imagine an old patriarch having counted 120 summers and

winters. There he stands, weathered physically by the elements and emotionally from the stress of leading a bunch of rebels who have resisted his leadership at almost every point along the journey. Every person twenty and older, minus two men and their families, has perished in the Sinai Desert. The new generation is being instructed about the blessings and curses in the covenant. Moses is the marriage counselor or pastor preparing the new generation who will enter into a covenant with Yahweh. Since this is the second time Israel would enter into the covenant, it was more like a renewal of marriage vows after adultery.

So, let's consider the five principles:

Principle #1: The issue is more about God's nature than about an apparent atrocity being carried out against "innocent" persons.

God is absolutely sovereign. He is the One True King who rules over every earthly king! He raises up and removes whomever He pleases.

David ruled over Israel, but he always knew the only truly sovereign ruler was Yahweh. Consider David's words from Psalm 22:28: "For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations."

Sometimes God specifically claims His sovereign right to rule simply because this is His world. As Creator, He owns the title deed to the universe. In the words of an old hymn, "This is my Father's world." Since this is His world, He is the absolute Supreme Judge, and the universe is His jurisdiction and heaven His courtroom. He determines what is right or wrong—just or unjust.

I have a friend, who wishes to remain anonymous, that

describes it this way: God is the Alpha and Omega, and He doesn't change like shifting shadows. He loves the world in 2019 as much as ever, but He doesn't have to tip His hat to political correctness, and it isn't our job to try to adapt His standards to fit the mindset of our times.

Let me illustrate from my experience growing up on a wheat farm. When my father and mother were married, Dad bought the farm that had belonged to my mother's family. As a result of several adverse situations, including the death of my grandfather, the farm was up for sale. After my father purchased the farm, the title deed changed from John Kahrs, my grandfather, to Gerald Brestel. It was now Dad's farm to do with as he chose.

I grew up on the farm loving the land, exploring the fields, and playing in the barn. But when my father became a pastor, we moved to town. My father rented the land to be farmed by someone else. It remained my dad's farm, but the new tenants were managing it. They could pretty much do as they wished with the farm. But my father had one absolute rule: "Do not farm my land on Sundays." Whether anybody agreed with that rule or not is irrelevant. It was Dad's land, and he could set the rules controlling the use of it.

I understand why most farmers harvest on Sundays. One hailstorm can destroy the entire crop. In less than a half hour, a year's income can be pounded into the soil. So when the wheat is ripe, everything else takes second place to gathering in the harvest. Even on Sundays.

During harvest one hot July Sunday afternoon, a combine caught fire, resulting in the loss of a significant portion of the wheat crop. Obviously, my father found out. Since the order not to farm his land on Sundays had been violated, my father took the right to farm the land away from the tenants.

Was Dad fair? Yes, because it was his land! Farming on Sunday may not have broken some irrevocable law, nor did it make the tenants evil or wicked. They simply ignored the rule Dad had set down for managing his land.

I share that crude illustration as a reminder that God has the right (and the wisdom) to determine what is right or righteous. This is His world, so He sets the rules and determines right from wrong. Just from unjust. It is not mine to question Him or to challenge His rules. It is mine to trust Him to always do what is right because of His character. I may not understand or feel comfortable with everything God commands, but I trust Him to know and do what is right in every situation.

Several Old Testament passages support the claim that God raises up and removes empires to accomplish His will and to carry out His sentence against them. Consider Micah 4:11–13 and Ezekiel 25:12–14. The text that nails it down for me is Habakkuk 1:5, where God shocks the prophet with these words, “For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.” God was raising up cruel, vicious Babylon to discipline His own people, Judah.

Jeremiah prophesied during a perilous time. His messages brought persistent warnings Babylon would invade Judah. Many would be slaughtered while others would be carried away into exile. One day, God told Jeremiah to visit the potter’s house where God would give the prophet a sermon illustration. You can read about it in Jeremiah 18:1–11.

Watching the potter forming a utensil out of the clay only to abandon it and begin to shape something different, Jeremiah caught the message from the Lord. “Then the word of the LORD came to me: ‘O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand.’”

Paul, reflecting on Jeremiah's message, wrote in Romans 9:20–21, “Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the Potter no right over the clay . . . ?”

So when it comes to God's command to annihilate an entire civilization of Canaanites, including women and children, I assume God must have had valid reasons that you and I may not understand.

Principle #2: The command to kill every occupant in the Promised Land was rooted in God's covenant with Abraham.

God appeared to Abraham several times in the book of Genesis. I believe we will discover evidence relevant to our discussion as we consider a couple of these.

Genesis 12:1–9 is the first time God appeared to Abram, while he was still a worshiper of idols. God eventually changed Abram's name to Abraham. After revealing Himself as the one true God He told Abram to leave his family, his country, and everything familiar and go to a land that God would show him. God also promised to make Abram into a great nation and to “bless those who bless you and to curse those who curse you.”

The second time God appeared to Abram, who was now getting well along in age and still had no son to claim the promises God had made, is recorded in Genesis 15. Abram offered his trusted servant to be the legal heir, but God promised that a son, not a servant, would be the heir through whom many descendants would come.

God also revealed that Abraham's descendants would live in bondage four hundred years in a foreign country, where they would become a great nation before actually inheriting the

Promised Land. The long delay was not only to provide time for Abraham's descendants to grow into a sizeable nation, but the four-hundred-year delay was primarily because the "iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen. 15:13–16). Those were God's words. That final statement about the sin of the Amorites is a key to understanding God's command to kill every person living in the Promised Land. The people living in the land had chosen to pursue a path that would eventually (four centuries after Abraham) result in their complete destruction.

This account in Genesis 15, reaffirming the covenant that had been made in Genesis 12, is unusual—even mysterious. Several animals were slaughtered and the carcasses split in half. Usually, in this type of ancient covenant, both parties entering into the covenant walked together between the carcasses. It was like a visual threat and a promise. Each person swore to keep the covenant or they would become "dead meat" like the carcasses.

However, in this case, God put Abram into a deep sleep while He, God, the primary party in this covenant, walked alone between the carcasses, demonstrating that He alone was responsible to fulfill the conditions of the covenant. It was unilateral and irrevocable! Using contemporary slang, Abram could "take it to the bank" because God had sworn to keep His promise.

The last words recorded in Genesis 15:17–21 were part of God's promise to give the land of Canaan and all its inhabitants to Abraham's descendants.

I want to emphasize the previous statement. God, the Creator and owner of the world and all its land mass, was turning the title deed of Canaan over to Abraham's descendants, because the current tenants had become so wicked—so abominable—that God had already planned to eradicate them from the face of the earth. The Judge had already pronounced sentence against them.

Fair? Righteous? That is for God to determine, not me.

So we ask, what had the Amorites done to deserve such severe response from God?

Principle #3: The justification for the total annihilation of the Amorites is rooted in the sin of idolatry.

I believe the severe consequences of idolatry are addressed more thoroughly in Deuteronomy than any other place in the Bible. Idolatry, left unchecked, is a deadly cancer cell that will eventually destroy an entire civilization.

Moses frequently warned against idolatry in the early chapters of Deuteronomy. The lengthy dialogue between Moses and the new generation included frequent instructions. It was a three-way conversation. In my study of these chapters, so that I could more readily identify when God was speaking or when Moses or the people were speaking, I highlighted God's words in red. It may be the first "Red Letter Edition of the Old Testament."

I discovered God's reason for removing, even annihilating, the Amorites and Canaanites and all the other "ites" was based upon the promise that God had made to Abram in Genesis 15. Four hundred years had passed—sufficient time for the Amorites to repent and worship the one true God. Instead, as God had predicted, they had continued to spiral deeper into depravity. If God rules the world and all its inhabitants, can He not declare who is guilty and worthy of death? Can we trust Him to exercise capital punishment judiciously?

In Deuteronomy 1–11, Moses repeatedly reminded the Israelites that God had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give the land and its inhabitants to Israel.

God not only promised to give the land to Israel; He also

warned Israel to never turn to idols lest they lose the privilege of living in the land (Deut. 4:14–40). Moses reminded Israel, in Deuteronomy 6:10–11, they would inherit cities they did not build and orchards they did not plant. But in the same breath, Moses warned Israel to never forget the Lord who had delivered them from bondage. Forgetting the Lord clearly included serving other gods. “You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the people who are around you—for the Lord your God is a jealous God—lest the anger of the Lord your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth” (Deut. 6:14–15).

Did you catch that warning? If Israel, God’s chosen people, ever turned away from Him to serve (love) idols, the Lord their God would remove them from the face of the earth! God threatened to carry out the same discipline against Israel that He was preparing to mete out against the Amorites. This is not the only time this warning was leveled against Israel.

The history of Israel is replete with evidence God will not share His glory with a lesser being and would remove Israel from the land if they pursued other gods. Consider two examples.

First, because of rampant idolatry, the ten northern tribes were conquered by the Assyrians. It was a blood bath. Those who survived the invasion were either dispersed throughout the empire to lose their national identity or left in the land to intermarry with imported foreigners and become the hated Samaritans.

Later, Babylon laid siege against Jerusalem. To appreciate this tragedy, read the book of Lamentations through the eyes and the heart of a mother watching her infant being ripped away from her bosom, swung by the feet, and its little skull being crushed against the pavement. And we ask, “Why did

God permit this to happen to His chosen people, Judah?” It was because *God hates idolatry*. In this case, it involved His own redeemed people who, as a nation, stood by the Jordan River in Moab and publicly and corporately recited their vows to their true Lover—to Yahweh—while heaven and earth stood by as witnesses. There, by the Jordan, Israel swore total allegiance to Yahweh, promising to forsake all other gods and to love only Yahweh with *all* their heart, with *all* their soul, and with *all* their might. This is another way of saying they promised to forsake all other potential lovers, to love nobody else, and to obey the Lord God forever.

The judgment upon Achan’s family that we considered back in chapter 6 is relevant here. In Deuteronomy 7:22–26, God had promised to “clear away these nations.” But Moses also warned Israel,

And he [God] will give their kings into your hand, and you shall make their name perish from under heaven. No one shall be able to stand against you until you have destroyed them. *The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to the Lord your God. And you shall not bring an abominable thing into your house and become devoted to destruction like it. You shall utterly detest and abhor it, for it is devoted to destruction.* (vv. 24–26, emphasis mine)

Whenever we read about Achan’s sin and the sentence pronounced against him and his family, it is imperative to remember the above warning against taking a Canaanite idol that had been destined for destruction by fire. Achan and his family and possessions were burned along with the stolen treasures from

Jericho. The basis for determining the sentence against Achan had already been made back in Deuteronomy.

God plays no favorites. He always does what He has determined to be right or righteous.

Principle # 4: The offense of the sin of idolatry is rooted in its attack against the very nature of God.

Why, we may ask, is idolatry so offensive that God would destroy an entire civilization?

First, idolatry exchanges something that is eternal, the glory of God, for something temporary and trivial. A cheap replica. No other sin is such a direct insult and frontal assault against God's nature and character.

Remember the illustration from chapter 4, "Is God Unfair?" of looking at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and saying, "Look, some kids scribbled on the ceiling!" This would insult the great artist, Michelangelo. How much greater the insult of calling a snake or a cow or the moon, God!

If God is the Creator of the entire universe, then all praise belongs to Him. This is what Paul declared in Romans 1:18–32. The pagans were guilty because they had been surrounded by evidence of the Creator. Yet they were not grateful but began worshipping images of created things. Therefore, God gave them over to pursue foolishness, resulting in their ultimate condemnation. In other words, they condemned themselves by their choices and actions.

Several older testament prophets ridiculed the practice of bowing down before a lifeless statue instead of the living God. Try to imagine the contrast between those two images. A lifeless statue or the living God.

"With whom can we compare God?" That was Isaiah's

question in 40:18–23. How can we compare the God who has created everything with an idol that can't move or see or hear? Isaiah described Yahweh as the sovereign, transcendent God existing beyond our galaxy. In contrast with Him, we appear as grasshoppers. How can an insect even be compared to the majestic Creator?

We grow tired and weary; He gives power to finish strong. He sets up political leaders and removes them. All the nations are but a tiny drop in a large bucket compared with God.

I love the scene in the movie *The Chariots of Fire*, as Eric Liddell reads the above passage from Isaiah to a congregation in Paris on a Sunday morning while Olympic athletes are stumbling and failing to finish their races. Liddell's convictions did not permit him to run on Sunday even though his heat had been scheduled for a Sunday morning. Liddell's calm voice reading words like not fainting or growing weary are contrasted with scenes of competitors straining and coming up short.

God twice throws down the gauntlet in Isaiah 41 when He declares that He alone is the first and the last—the eternal One: “Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am He” (v. 4).

I am drawn by those words, “I am He,” back to the burning bush where God introduced Himself to Moses.

Once again, “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and sit before me’” (Isa. 44:6–8).

Imagine some puny man carrying his stone idol and accepting that challenge!

Isaiah also heaps ridicule by pointing out how ludicrous to compare something human hands have made, and that will

someday be tossed into the city dump, with the eternal, sovereign Creator. How ridiculous to clap hands or strike a large cymbal to awaken a god who can't hear.

There are no imitations of God. To worship anyone or anything else is an insult to Him. God simply will not share His glory with another. He is jealous in the proper sense of the word. Idolatry is spiritual adultery, and God, a loyal husband, will not tolerate it.

It is easy to ridicule idol worship. However, idolatry is not a laughing matter because of what it does to those who worship them.

This is illustrated in Psalm 106. The psalm begins with a call to praise God “for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever.” Praise dramatically transitions to confession in verse 6. The psalmist is confessing the corporate sins of Israel. Note the charge of idolatry—the gold calf—and its consequence in verses 19–23. Only Moses’s bold intercession on behalf of Israel spared the nation from total destruction on the spot.

The consequence of Israel’s infatuation with idols continues in verse 34 through verse 39.

They did not destroy the peoples,
 as the LORD commanded them,
 but they mixed with the nations
 and learned to do as they did.
 They served their idols,
 which became a snare to them.
They sacrificed their sons
 and their daughters to the demons;
they poured out innocent blood,
 the blood of their sons and daughters,

*whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan,
and the land was polluted with blood.*

Thus they became unclean by their acts,
and played the whore in their deeds. (emphasis mine)

Idolatry will defile an entire civilization. These non-gods always display the capricious and malevolent nature of their worshipers. We become like that which we worship. Israel was no exception.

Moses concluded his speech in Deuteronomy 32:15–43 by predicting Israel would pay a severe price if they failed to carry out the command to destroy all the people living in the land. Both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah became infected with idolatry after being exposed to the Canaanites they had failed to destroy as per God’s command.

Idolatry is not limited to the older testament. It would be profitable to consider warnings against idolatry in Colossians 3:5–8. Clearly there are other ways, besides literally bowing down to a statue, to serve idols.

Principle #5: Such violent warfare was not Israel’s standard operating procedure.

Total annihilation of every being was not the standard operating procedure for Israel’s army. Instead, Moses’s instructions in Deuteronomy 20 clearly stated that the army was to approach a city and offer peace terms before laying siege against it. If peace terms were rejected, then Israel was to attack with full force but spare the women, children, and livestock. This was how Israel was to treat cities outside the borders of the Promised Land. The army of Israel was also forbidden to destroy

natural resources such as forests during a siege because God cares about His land.

So, in conclusion, the command to “annihilate” all the inhabitants, including women and children, was limited specifically to the Amorites and Canaanites that had polluted the land with idolatry, creating a culture so perverted God had sentenced them to destruction. Israel was His tool to execute the sentence. God assumed full responsibility for the total defeat of the Amorites.

When I don't understand everything God does or commands, I choose to trust Him because I know His character. Consider again the words of Jeremiah 9:23–24:

Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”

Notes

Preface

1. Dean William Ralph Inge, *More Lay Thoughts of Dean* (London and New York: Putnam, 1931), 201. The full quote reads: “There are two kinds of fools. One says, ‘This is old, therefore it is good.’ The other says, ‘This is new, therefore it is better.’”
2. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (1948; repr., Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 13.
3. Ibid.

Chapter 1: What Is God Like?

1. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God, Belief in an Age of Reason* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 71.
2. Richard Rodgers, “Something Good,” in *The Sound of Music* (film), 1965.
3. Bob Smietana, “Most Churchgoers Say God Wants Them to Prosper Financially,” LifeWay Research, July 31, 2018, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2018/07/31/most-churchgoers-say-god-wants-them-to-prosper-financially/>.
4. Paul Marcerelli was the character for this television commercial for Verizon Wireless until 2001.

Chapter 2: First Impressions

1. Zondervan Music Publishers, “O Be Careful Little Eyes,” public domain.
2. Nabeel Qureshi, *No God But One: Allah or Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 61.
3. Ibid., 62.
4. Heinrich Hein, 1797–1856, German essayist, poet and author who was influenced by the writings of Hegel and was a distant relative of Karl Marx. He lived an irreligious and immoral lifestyle but claimed to return to “religion” on his “Mattress-Grave,” the name he gave the bed where he would spend the last eight years of his life.
5. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 16–22.
6. Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 20.
7. Ibid., 149.
8. Ibid., 150, Hitchens is quoting Thomas Nagel, professor at New York University, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
9. Lyrics by Annie Johnson Flint, 1866–1932; music by Alfred B. Smith, 1916–2001, “God Hath Not Promised,” public domain.

GOD IN HIS OWN IMAGE

Chapter 3: From Prince of Egypt to Friend of God

1. Read Exodus 2:11–22 and Acts 7:20–29.
2. God's self-disclosure appears in total or part in the following passages: Ex. 34:5–7; Num. 14:18; Deut. 5:9–10; 2 Chron. 30:9; Neh. 9:17; Pss. 86:15; 103:17; 111:1–4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8; Jer. 32:18–19; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah. 1:3.
3. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2008), 185.

Chapter 4: Kindness and Severity: Where They Meet

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 79–80.
2. John Newton, "Amazing Grace," public domain.
3. John Wesley, "Amazing Love," public domain.
4. James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1930), 71.

Chapter 5: Lion and Lamb

1. Lela Long, "Jesus Is the Sweetest Name I Know," public domain.
2. G. Campbell Morgan, *Great Chapters of the Bible* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972), 25.
3. John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2008), 185.
4. Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 134–35.

Chapter 6: Is God Unfair?

1. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God, Belief in an Age of Reason* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 73.
2. Record of the Week: RCA's Disk by Ames Spins Poignant Message of Today (Billboard, December 2, 1967), 3.
3. Ed Ames, "Who Will Answer?," RCA Victor.
4. Examples of O.T. passages condemning idolatry include Ex. 34:17; Deut. 5:9; 32:16, 21; and Josh. 24:19–20.
5. The origin of this quote is unknown. It has been attributed to Becky Pipert, *Hope Has Its Reasons*, but is not found in either edition of that book.
6. J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016), 226.

Chapter 7: Taste and See

1. “The Origin of ‘Proof Is in the Pudding,’” NPR, August 24, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/08/24/159975466/corrections-and-comments-to-stories>.
2. Derek Rishmawy, “Life Is Complex. God Is Not,” *Christianity Today*, July/August 2017, 24.
3. Ibid.
4. G. Campbell Morgan, *Great Chapters of the Bible* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), 25.
5. *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Westminster Assembly, 1647–1648.
6. A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (1948; repr., Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 22.
7. Ibid., 21.
8. William J. Gaither, “The Longer I Serve Him,” 1965.
9. *The Oregonian*, Portland, OR.
10. Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*; public domain, first published in 1711. (Pope, an English poet, lived 1688–1744.)
11. Mark Altrogge, “I Stand in Awe of You” (Sovereign Grace Praise, BMI, 1986).
12. Thomas Chalmers, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, public domain (Chalmers, 1787–1847, Scottish preacher and professor at the University of Edinburgh, preached this sermon based on 1 John 2:15. The sermon has been reprinted and is available on Kindle).
13. Nabeel Qureshi, “Jesus Called Me Off the Minaret,” *Christianity Today*, January/February 2014, 96.