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IS THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT A PROPONENT OF TOTAL WAR AGAINST COMBATANTS?

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On 9/11, Islamic terrorists flew two planes into the World Trade Center, killing thousands of innocent people. Ostensibly they did this because they believed God commanded them to do so. This event has invigorated a fear latent in the Western psyche since so-called wars of religion tore Europe apart in the seventeenth century — the fear of religious fanaticism, of people willing to murder hundreds in the name of God. The subsequent rise of groups such as ISIS and the resurgence of religiously motivated terrorism has done nothing to abate these fears.

Some skeptics, exploiting the fears whipped up by such events, have argued that killing innocent people in this way is simply a logical outworking of faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Consider the following two infamous passages from the Old Testament:

And when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. (Deut. 7:2–3, all Scripture references NIV)

However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them. (Deut. 20:16)

Don't these passages mean that God endorses activities such as 9/11? Philosopher Raymond Bradley, for example, has argued they do. "God apparently has no compunction about commanding the slaughter of persons who, in any ordinary sense of the words, are innocent of serious wrong-doing." These passages mean that "God commands *us* to perform acts" that violate the principle of noncombatant immunity (emphasis added).¹ Either one rejects the God revealed in Scripture or one "allies oneself with moral monsters such as Genghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot."²

Much could be said about this argument,³ but here I will focus on one point. Bradley's premise is that God commanded Israel in the time of Joshua to kill innocent human beings. The conclusion he draws is that God therefore commands *us today* to do these things and condones atrocities similar to those committed by Stalin, Pol Pot, and Ghenghis Khan. Consequently, his argument contains a suppressed premise, namely that whatever God is recorded as commanding someone to do in Scripture He commands us to do today.

This assumption is false. God commanded Abram to leave Ur of the Chaldees and Jonah to preach in Nineveh; it would be ridiculous to suppose that it is part of every Christian's duty to obey these commands!⁴ God is not in these passages commanding us to leave Ur or to preach to Nineveh.

Similarly, in several places, God commands ancient Israel to perform actions that He does not command other nations to do. In Genesis 9, for example, God permitted the descendants of Noah and hence the Gentiles to eat any animal "that lives and moves." Yet in Deuteronomy 14, He tells Israel that because He has chosen them "to be his treasured possession...out of all the peoples on the face of the earth," they are to refrain from eating certain meats. They can, however, give it "to an alien living in any of [their] towns, and he may eat it."

These examples raise an important point. The mere fact that God commands someone to do something in Scripture does not mean He commands *us* to do it. *Some* commands recorded in Scripture are applications of universal commands to a particular context: Paul's commands to the church of Corinth regarding divorce is an example. Other commands, however, are not like this; rather, they may be occasional commands for particular people at particular times or commands given to Israel by virtue of their special status and vocation.

An examination of the commands God gave to Joshua suggests that they fall into the latter category, which is to say that they are not an application of a universal command for a particular context. Two features of the text suggest this.

Command to Israel. First, the text presents the command to “totally destroy the Canaanites” as a command given to Israel in virtue of Israel’s special covenant status. Consider the context of Deuteronomy 7:3:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (vv. 6–8)

Here the command is linked to Israel’s status as a nation chosen by God as “his treasured possession” —and based on specific historical covenants God made with the patriarchs. God did not choose other nations in this way or make this sort of covenant with other nations. In fact, as was the case in Genesis 9 regarding the food laws, Scripture affirms that God does not permit Gentiles to attack and kill innocent people. In the book of Amos, for example, God condemns Edom for engaging in aggressive warfare and condemns Ammon for killing women and children in war.

So the command to kill the Canaanites is not presented as a command that is binding on all human beings. It is given to Israel by virtue of their particular covenant status and is simply inapplicable to modern nations.

Occasional Command. Second, not only is the command given to Israel but it is presented in the text as a unique exception to the normal rules governing how Israel should engage in warfare. Consider the context of Deuteronomy 20:12–17:

If they [cities Israel is at war with] refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. When the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the Lord your God gives you from your enemies. This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby. However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them —the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the Lord your God has commanded you.

Verses 13 and 14 lay down rules governing warfare with nations that are “at a distance,” which are defined as cities that are not within the seven Canaanite nations occupying the Promised Land. These rules contain the principle of noncombatant immunity: only the men, which is to say that those who engage in the fighting, can be killed. Women and children are to be spared. Of course, once Israel had driven out the Canaanites, all nations would by definition be far away. Verses 13 and 14 therefore “governed war outside the land of promise” and “were meant to govern all war once Israel occupied the land.”⁵

The command to “totally destroy” the Canaanites in verses 16 and 17 is explicitly stated to be an exception to this normal rule. The Hebrew particle *raq* (“however”) suggests an exception to what has gone before. Some translations, such as the NASB, in fact render it with the word “only.” This exception is limited to the “cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance” (Deut. 20:16). Earlier in the Torah, God had prohibited Israel from conquering other neighboring nations such as Moab, Ammon, and Edom (Deut. 2:4, 9, 19; 23:7), precisely because these nations did not live in the land God had given Israel. So the command is clearly phrased as an exception to the normal rules governing warfare that uphold noncombatant immunity.

It is therefore patently false to claim that these texts command us to perform acts that violate the principle of noncombatant immunity. Nor are believers in Scripture required to “ally” themselves with “Ghenghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot.” Scripture affirms it is wrong to kill noncombatants in war. Joshua was permitted to do so only because God granted a special exemption to the normal rules. Christians believe he was so exempted because they have compelling scriptural evidence that he was. Nothing in Scripture provides them with any comparable reason, however, for thinking Pol Pot, Stalin, or Ghenghis Khan were commanded by God to do what they did. In fact, a believer in Scripture has theological reasons for thinking that such commands would not occur outside of the extremely unusual events recorded in salvation history. Therefore, they could accept that killing the innocent is, for practical purposes, absolutely wrong.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as revealed in Scripture therefore does not command or endorse contemporary terrorism or aggressive war. —*Matthew Flannagan*

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NOTES

- 1 Raymond Bradley, "A Moral Argument for Atheism," accessed July 16, 2015, http://infidels.org/library/modern/raymond_bradley/moral.html.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Much more is said in my book, coauthored with Paul Copan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014).
- 4 Richard Mouw, "Biblical Revelation and Medical Decisions," *On Moral Medicine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 56.
- 5 Joe M. Sprinkle, *Biblical Law and Its Relevance: A Christian Understanding and Ethical Application for Today of the Mosaic Regulations* (Lanham, MD: University of America, 2006), 176.