

Was Joshua Justified In Exterminating The Whole Population of Jericho?

Many modern day people are appalled by the bloodshed that they read about in the Old Testament. One of the greatest examples of this bloodshed is found in the story of the Israelites' conquest of Jericho. Their leader, Joshua, commands that they completely exterminate the inhabitants of the city (Joshua 6:17). The Israelite warriors do just that (Joshua 6:21). How can we explain this type of genocide of a whole population? Should we even try to?



Before Moses died he assured Israel that Yahweh would fight for her and drive out her enemies. Moses also gave the Israelites specific instructions on how they were to wage Yahweh's wars:

1. The priest initiated any war by reminding the Israelites that Yahweh fights for them. This clearly shows the war's sacred character (Deuteronomy 20:2-4) -- that is, this is God's war. He fights through His people.
2. Cities outside the land of Palestine do not need to be entirely destroyed, but attacks on cities inside the land require destruction of all life (Deuteronomy 20:10-18). This practice is known as the "ban" or "*herem*". To put a city under the ban was to devote its occupants to Yahweh for destruction. It is often translated "completely destroyed" or "devoted" (Deuteronomy 20:17, 2:34, 7:2; Joshua 6:17, 8:26).
3. They are specifically to show no pity to inhabitants of the land (Deuteronomy 7:1-2). That Moses needed to give this command shows that the Israelites were hesitant to completely destroy the people they were fighting. This is not a case of the Israelites being a bloodthirsty, violent people. God believes they will not want to fully carry out His directions, so He warns the Israelites against pity!

When Joshua comes to Jericho, Joshua is simply carrying out the commands of God given through Moses. In fact, the same account which tells of the massacre of the inhabitants of Jericho also tells of God's command to carry out that massacre (Joshua 7:12).

Why does God insist on total destruction or "*herem*"? Is it because God doesn't want His "favorites" to share the land with anyone? No. A few hundred years before, Abraham was His "favorite." Yet Abraham never possessed any of the land, nor did He tell Abraham to destroy any of the inhabitants of the land. Why? God tells Abraham the reason: "In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Genesis 15:16). The inhabitants of the land (called the Amorites or the Canaanites)

had not yet reached a level of depravity that required their removal. Four generations after Abraham, the Israelites returned to the land of the Amorites and carried out God's judgment against their immorality and wickedness.

God is not partial. When Israel reaches the same level of immorality, He will treat them in exactly the same way. Leviticus 18:24-28 says: *"God said to the Israelites, 'Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.'"*

So Joshua's war of total destruction is a final judgment of God against these nations. God has always reserved this right of judgment. Those who object to it here would object, no doubt, to the Flood (Genesis 6-7) and to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). Modern man does not believe that anything that he does is worthy of death. We are willing only to believe in a "god" who aids us in our quest for happiness - a god who never requires obedience, a god who never punishes. We will have this god or no god at all.

But the Bible has a different view. It teaches us that God is the Moral Judge of the universe. It teaches that as Creator and Ruler, God has the right to require obedience. It teaches that sin is not just a preference, but active rebellion against God. It teaches that rebellion receives a judgment in the end. The Flood and the destruction of Sodom are graphic examples of God's judgment.

Yet isn't this situation in Joshua different from the Flood and the destruction of Sodom? Human beings -- rather than the elements of nature -- are the agents of destruction. This is true. But the idea that God uses people to carry out His judgment is found throughout the Bible. King David, as God's sub-regent, promises to eliminate the wicked in his nation (Psalm 101:8). Rulers of state are required to carry out God's moral laws and punish those who do evil (Romans 13:4).

When Israel is sent into the land of Palestine to destroy the Canaanite nations, the nation is like a child sent to get his own paddle. Israel is being graphically taught its need to obey Yahweh, who indeed is the God of the whole earth. And God takes His duties seriously! Israel is warned that failure to remove this cancer of wickedness would eventually bring their own infection with sin and hence, their own judgment (Deuteronomy 7:1-6, 20:18).

The book of Joshua actually keys its notion of success to this practice of *herem*. Jericho (6:17,21), Ai (8:1-2, 26-27), the kings and cities of the southern region (10:25-40), and Hazor and its allies (11:8-14) all receive this radical judgment of extermination.

At Jericho, Israel is warned that if she does not practice *herem*, she herself will be *herem* -- under God's judgment (6:18)! This warning went unheeded, however. Achan and his family decided against practicing the ban, when it comes to some costly items found in Jericho. Because of Achan's sin, Israel fights without Yahweh's



help in their next battle. Thirty-six men perish... and Joshua is absolutely devastated (see Joshua 7:6-9). Why is Joshua so emotionally strained? Is thirty-six a high number of men to lose in battle? Apparently it is in Yahweh's wars. We search in vain in the rest of the book of Joshua for mention of other casualties.

Another violation of the ban occurs in Joshua 9. The Gibeonites deceive Israel into thinking they are from a distant country. A treaty is made, but three days later the truth is discovered. Caught by their own negligence (9:14), they have already violated the ban by making such a treaty in the Lord's name. What do they do? They do the best they can. They put the Gibeonites into service to the Levites – “devoting” them to the Lord as nearly as they now can.

Because of its “holy war,” Joshua has not been a popular book. In fact, many reject its teaching today. One recent author is very clear about his rejection of “holy war.” He writes: “Many can remember how Joshua the warrior used to figure as a hero-saint in sermons and in Bible stories for the young. The present writer recalls a picture in a Bible for children portraying the general equipped with Greek helmet and a combination Greek and Roman suit of armor, kneeling before the Prince of the Lord's host in front of a very Roman-looking Jericho. That seemed quite as it should be! Today, however, Joshua presents a problem.... The present writer holds entirely with those who reject the War-God concept. To his mind God is not, and never was, what Joshua thought Him to be. He never led an armed force into Canaan, and He leads no armed force today.”

What can we say about this? We can agree entirely with those who do not believe any nation on earth today is justified in taking territory and eliminating its inhabitants on the basis of a special call of God. God's war commandments to Israel as they entered Palestine were unique to that nation, at that time period, and were limited to the inhabitants of the Promised Land. God's people did not practice *herem* before this time and did not practice it after the settling of the land by King David. Neither is the church today called to rule any physical land. Our commission as the people of God is different.

But to reject the concept of “holy war” is to reject not only the book of Joshua, but also the New Testament. The New Testament itself predicts a time of future warfare and judgment at the return of Christ. Just as God brought judgment in the Flood, and to Sodom and Gomorrah, and in ancient Canaan, so also has He promised judgment in the future. Judgment too must have its fulfillment. The scene of Revelation 19:11-16 graphically portrays Jesus engaged in Holy War at his return:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one but he himself knows. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron



scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

In the battle that follows, all the troops of the kings of the earth “were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse” (19:21).

This is just what was requested by the martyrs who earlier called out to God: “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Revelation 6:10). Is it right for saints in God's presence to call for vengeance? Isn't this kind of revenge an Old Testament concept that Jesus rejected in teaching us to love our enemies?

Not in the least. The New Testament teaches, like the Old, that vengeance belongs to God alone (Romans 12:19, Deuteronomy 32:35), and that we must “leave room for God's wrath.” But it never rejects the concept of judgment against sin. We are not to avenge ourselves. We are to love our enemies, do good to them, and pray for them (Luke 6:27-28). We are to share with others the good news that they can avoid judgment by falling at the feet of God's Son (Psalm 2:10-12). That is our calling and our role.

But justice does not cease. Indeed the fact that there will one day be justice against sin and wickedness is one of the truths that helps Christians forego our own personal justice now. God Himself will judge wickedness in His time. And God is a just Judge, holy in His judgments (Revelation 16:5-7). He is the Avenger of wickedness:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with His powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power on the day He comes to be glorified in His holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10)

God is still a God of “holy war.” His amazing patience is often misinterpreted as indifference. But God is not indifferent to sin. The wages of sin are still death. A day is coming when the world will reel and shake with “holy war” once again. This final *herem* will make Joshua's war seem like a pea shoot compared to a scud missile demonstration!

Parts of the above taken from On the Way to Jesus by Albert H. Baylis