
BIG QUESTIONS: WHAT SHOULD WE SAY ABOUT 'GENOCIDE' IN THE BIBLE?

BY DR CHRISTIAN HOFREITER

The Challenge:

“The God you claim is a God of love ordered the Israelites to exterminate entire towns and populations. How is that genocide different from jihadists who kill infidels because “their God told them so”? How is that love?” >

There was pin-drop silence in the lecture hall as all eyes turned to me and waited for my answer. I've spent four years writing a doctorate about what Christian theologians and philosophers have said about these questions over the course of the past two thousand years – and still I don't have a simple answer. What I can offer you are some pointers as to how we can think more clearly about the problem, which proposed 'solutions' are really dead ends, and which approaches are more promising.

GENOCIDE IN THE BIBLE

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glance, the UN definition of the word seems to fit what God commanded in Deuteronomy (7:1; 20:16), and what is described in various places in the book of Joshua. Take, for instance, what happened when Jericho was conquered: *'every man charged straight in, and they took the city. They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it – men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.'* (Jos 6:20).

These texts are challenging for all people. As Christians, we tend to find them particularly difficult because they create a tension between certain convictions we hold dear. To clarify this tension, I have found it helpful to think about it in terms of four statements (premises) which cannot all be true at the same time.¹

1. God is good.
2. The Bible is true.
3. Genocide is evil.
4. According to the Bible, God commanded genocide.

On the assumption that a good being would never command something that is truly evil, at least one of the

four premises above must be wrong. As the following section will show, the historical and contemporary responses to the challenge of these texts can be grouped together, according to which of the four premises they call into question.

1. PERHAPS GOD ISN'T ENTIRELY GOOD?

Sometimes one hears Christians talking about 'the God of the Old Testament' being quite different from the 'God of the New Testament.' The first person to suggest this approach as a solution to violence in the Old Testament was the second century teacher Marcion. According to him, the creator god of the Jewish Bible

was cruel and so radically different from the loving Father of Jesus Christ, he was in fact an entirely separate deity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the early Church was not convinced by Marcion's proposed two gods 'solution' and declared him a heretic.

In fact, the conviction that there is only one God and that he is good is so foundational to both the Jewish and the Christian faith that to deny it would be to invent an entirely different religion. We should, therefore, avoid distinguishing between the God of the Old Testament and that of the New, which doesn't really solve the problem anyway.

2. PERHAPS THE BIBLE ISN'T COMPLETELY TRUE?

For most of our contemporaries it seems blindingly obvious that if you need to choose between the conviction that genocide is evil and the belief that an ancient holy book dating back several millennia is true in all respects, you should give up the belief that the old book is true. This seems an absolute 'no-brainer',

and it's helpful for us believers to remember this when discussing the question.

Very early on, some who sought to follow Jesus, such as the second century Gnostic teacher Ptolemy, taught that the Old Testament is a 'mixed bag', i.e. it contains truly inspired sections, but also elements that must be rejected as false. While few evangelicals today would openly advocate this position, in practice this view often seems to govern the way we treat the Old Testament.

However, this approach is deeply problematic, too. It is radically different from the way Jesus and his

apostles treated the Jewish Bible, it is at variance with what the Bible says about itself, and it is fundamentally at odds with the way Christians throughout the centuries have regarded the Old Testament. Contrary to what some may suggest, the belief in the full truth of the entire Bible is not an invention by 'fundamentalists', but is shared by historic Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches.

3. PERHAPS GENOCIDE ISN'T ALWAYS EVIL?

Over the centuries, a fair number of Christians have concluded that there must be (extremely rare) circumstances in which the killing of an entire population is not evil. They reached this conclusion by accepting the goodness of God, the truth of Scripture and the observation that, according to the Bible, God commanded and commended instances of what we today might call genocide.

Based on these premises, the conclusion follows logically, even if Christians have no idea, or only a very incomplete idea, of the reasons for



which a good God might command such horrifying actions. However, most Christians who took that view have not left it at that general deduction, but have attempted to give specific reasons why the biblical commands of total destruction might not be evil after all.

Mitigating circumstances

First, it is often pointed out that God was not applying a double standard, by giving Israel *carte blanche* to blot out its enemies, while letting it (literally) get away with murder. On the contrary, Israel is not given the land of Canaan because of any alleged moral superiority to the Canaanites (e.g. Deut 9:4-6) and its possession of the land is provisional and contingent on living according to God's commandments (e.g. Deut 28:62). In addition, non-Israelite peoples at times bring judgment on Israel and others (e.g. Deut 2:19-23, 28:49), and God providentially assigns places in which all nations live, not just Israel (e.g. Acts 17:26). So the Bible isn't ethnocentric.

Second, it is added, Canaanite society was unimaginably depraved, marred by practices such as bestiality and the sacrificing of little children as burnt offerings (e.g. Lev 18, Deut 12:31). In addition, God's judgment did not come as a sudden outbreak of anger, but after hundreds of years of patient forbearance (Gen 15:16).

Third, it has been pointed out that in the case of infants, who are free from personal responsibility and moral guilt and are nevertheless drawn into the judgment on their parents' culture, God, in his almighty goodness, has the power, as well as the merciful disposition, to more than make it up to them in eternity. Earthly punishment does not necessarily entail eternal damnation.

Fourth, it is added, establishing Israel in the land and drastically demonstrating the death-bearing nature of idolatrous worship and practice served an immeasurably high end: to prepare the incarnation of the eternal Son of God, who would come

as a Saviour for all people, including the Canaanites.

Fifth, it is said, exceedingly brutal war customs were widespread in the Ancient Near East, and God condescended to using them for his higher purposes without thereby sanctioning them in general.

Sixth, it is pointed out that, unlike modern-day religious terrorists, the Israelites of that generation had incomparably strong reasons to think that it was in fact God who had commanded them to carry out his judgment, as they witnessed his miracles and saw him at Sinai, etc.

Seventh, it is added, God as the ultimate giver of life has the unique right also to take it, whether directly or indirectly. He has the right to judge.

Finally, while the commandments in Deuteronomy do not spell out the possibility of conversion, the salvation of Rahab and her family (Jos 2, 6) show that it was in fact a live option. In fact, the Canaanite prostitute became an ancestor of Jesus himself (Mt 1: 5)!

Weaknesses

This view appears to be logically coherent and is well-attested among some of Christianity's foremost thinkers (e.g. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin). However, it is not without serious problems.

For one, it does make it rather difficult to differentiate the practice of the Israelites under Joshua from the ISIS militants in our day, who offer their opponents the choice: convert or die. The argument that God had truly spoken to the Israelites of old, but that ISIS are deluded, will strike many contemporaries as special pleading.

In fact, the entire line of argument is absolutely unpalatable to our neighbours who do not already share the conviction that there is a God, that he is good and that the Bible is his infallible revelation. Take for instance Richard Dawkins, who, in an article for *The Guardian* newspaper, calls an eminent contemporary >



Christian philosopher a 'deplorable apologist for genocide', because of what the latter had written concerning the destruction of the Canaanites. While the article overall is a mean-spirited hatchet job, Dawkins' point has an undeniable rhetorical force. Why?

Because the moral intuition that genocide is evil, that it is wrong, always and everywhere, to 'bludgeon babies to death', as philosopher Randal Rauser put it, is extremely strong. I share this intuition. So do most of the people I know.

Now, we might ask, where does this intuition come from? Humans have not always felt that way. And in the heat of battle, terrible atrocities almost always take place, even today. Historically, the most important reason why we in the West feel so strongly about the killing of innocents is in fact the success of the teachings of Jesus Christ, the civilizing influence of Christianity on the war-loving tribes of Europe. This should give us pause to think.

While Dawkins' atheism is sawing off the moral branch from which he pontificates, we Christians face another dilemma: if our intuitions about genocide are primarily shaped not by the zeitgeist, but by the teachings and practice of Jesus Christ, how do we deal with this conflict between Christian moral intuitions and biblical texts?

4. PERHAPS WE HAVE MISUNDERSTOOD THE BIBLE?

From the times of the early Church, Christians have considered the possibility that we might have misunderstood the texts, i.e. that genocide is not at all what they are about.

A third century sermon series on Joshua illustrates this well, in which the preacher explains that we Christians 'do not reject the Law of Moses, but we accept it if Jesus reads it to us, so that when he reads we may grasp his mind and understanding.' In his view 'the Canaanites to be destroyed are the diabolical races of powerful adversaries against whom we battle, they are within us. Not leaving anything that draws breath behind means that not even an impulse of wrath retains a place within you.' And so he reaches the remarkable conclusion that 'Christ teaches us peace from these readings of wars.'

To our modern ears, this interpretation sounds far-fetched. However, upon closer inspection the interpretation turns out not at all to be unfettered allegory, but to be decisively shaped by the teachings of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament. Whatever we may make of spiritual readings today, it is a remarkable historical fact that by the Middle Ages interpreting the annihilation of the Canaanites non-violently in terms of the eradication of the vices from a believer's heart

had become the standard view, championed by the likes of Gregory the Great, John Cassian and Isidor of Seville.

Now, we might agree that *for us* they speak of the spiritual battle against sin, of the need to strive to grow in love, humility, purity, mercy, kindness, generosity. But what about history? What happened to the Canaanites back then? What should we say about that?

A more nuanced historical picture

On this, the ancient spiritual interpreters did not have much to say. But more recently, believing Old Testament scholars have put forward reasons for rethinking our assessment of what these texts mean in terms of history.

One, the genre of Joshua appears to be that of an Ancient Near Eastern conquest narrative, which was following literary conventions that were well-understood at the time. Among them were hyperbolic expressions, such as that of 'completely destroying' a population and 'not leaving any survivors,' which people at the time would have known not to take literally, in much the same way as we interpret similar language when used in sports reporting today.

Two, within the Old Testament itself the inhabitants of certain towns are said to be completely annihilated in one place, only to appear again later

on (e.g. Jos 10:36-37, 15:13-14, Jdg 1:10).

Three, some cities like Jericho might not have been what we are prone to think of when we read the English term 'city', but might have been rather more like small military forts, which would have had few if any non-combatants in them (except, perhaps, a prostitute and her family).

Four, within Deuteronomy 7, the idea of 'total destruction' can be understood as a metaphor for religious fidelity that does not involve the taking of human lives, but only the destruction of religious objects and the avoidance of intermarriage with pagans.

All of these points are compatible with understanding Joshua in terms of belonging to the genre of historical writing, i.e. as being primarily concerned with narrating past events, as well as interpreting their significance. They simply show that what seemed straight-forward and easy to understand is perhaps somewhat more complicated than we first suspected.

True Parables

A more radical suggestion has recently been put forward by Old Testament scholar Douglas Earl, namely that we are mistaken to think that the book of Joshua was intended to teach the people of God about past events, even at the time when it was written and included in the biblical canon. If one followed this approach, one could at the same time affirm the truth of Scripture, while also remaining agnostic as to what happened to the Canaanites historically speaking (because, on that view, the biblical text never intended to give us information about that). Joshua would then be true in a similar sense in which the parables of Jesus are true.

Of course, this approach opens up an entirely new set of questions about the reliability and interpretation of the Bible. We might feel that by solving one problem, it creates worse problems of its own. We may think that if Joshua looks like history and

talks like history, we should probably conclude that it is history. (Though others might retort that what looks like history *to us*, might not have looked like history to the ancients, and that their very understanding of 'history' was significantly different from ours.) There certainly also is the serious worry concerning who decides what in the Old Testament should be understood as history, and what should not. And on what basis this distinction is to be made.

So clearly, this is not a 'silver bullet' that will easily solve the challenge of these texts for all time. However, if it could be shown that at the time of writing and inclusion in the biblical canon these texts were indeed intended to function more like a parable than like an historical account, this would suggest that the intuition of many early church fathers to read these texts in a spiritual, symbolic way was perhaps closer to the original intention of the author than more literal interpretations.


A BIGGER THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

A more complete Christian approach to this question would need to include the well-established theological concepts of 'progressive revelation' (i.e. that God increasingly clarifies his self-revelation over time) and of what John Calvin called 'accommodation' (i.e. the view that in order to be able to communicate with us, God stoops down to our level – both intellectually and morally), as well as about the relationship between revelation and history.

While I haven't space here even to sketch out the main contours of such an approach, I hope that you will find some of the thoughts above to be helpful, as you think about this difficult question. In summation, let me say clearly that Christians should firmly reject the first two approaches I discussed, i.e. any 'solution' that calls into question the goodness of God or the truth of the Bible. The third approach certainly has a considerable logical force, as well as a remarkable Christian pedigree, but, as I suggested, it is also deeply

problematic. The fourth approach, too, has a number of aspects commending it, but also leaves really big questions.

Perhaps the most important thing we should say, as Christians, about these texts is that they must never, ever be used to justify genocidal violence (as they tragically have been in the past). In my view, we should also read them as graphic warnings against the terrible consequences of a life lived apart from the all-sustaining love of God. And as all Scripture, they should inspire us to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength – and to love our neighbour as ourselves, be she Canaanite, Samaritan or Christian.

What did I tell that student in the lecture hall? I explained to him, in so many words, that I see so many excellent reasons to believe in a good God and a true Bible, that even if I don't have a simple, neat solution to the difficult and important question he posed, it does not undermine my trust in God and his revelation. I then sketched out the beginnings of a longer, more complicated answer, much like I did in the article you just finished reading. 

Dr Christian Hofreiter

DIRECTOR, RZIM GERMANY,
AUSTRIA AND SWITZERLAND
RESEARCH FELLOW OF THE OCCA

FURTHER READING

For a number of more conservative ways of approaching the issue, see Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Baker, 2011).

For a more radical approach, see Douglas Earl, *The Joshua Delusion* (Cascade, 2010), which includes a critique by a more conservative Old Testament scholar and a reply.

For contributions of leading philosophers of religion, see (the very expensive) *Divine Evil* (OUP, 2010), edited by Bergman et al.

For more on interpretations in the early church, see my chapter in *Interpreting Deuteronomy* (IVP, 2012), edited by Firth and Johnston.

Oxford University Press has kindly offered to publish my dissertation on this topic, but there is no date for publication yet.