

OLD TESTAMENT EVENTS AND THE GOODNESS OF GOD

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The Scriptures affirm that God is morally perfect. He is holy (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8), just and righteous (Psalm 89:14), and good (Psalm 100:6; 106:1). Being a morally perfect entity (Matthew 5:48), all that God does, commands, and approves must of necessity be good (Psalm 119:39,68). In view of this, the beginning Bible student may be troubled when he encounters certain divinely directed situations in Old Testament history, and when he reads several biblical passages that—superficially at least—appear to reflect upon the character of God. Let us consider a few of these problems.

THE EXTERMINATION OF THE CANAANITES

When the Israelites were commissioned to take the land of Canaan, the Lord instructed them to smite completely the peoples, and to show no mercy upon them (Deuteronomy 7:1-5). Accordingly, when Israel invaded Jericho, for example, we are informed: “And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, both young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword” (Joshua 6:21). How does the sincere Bible student come to grips with this seeming breech of the goodness of God? Several things must be taken into consideration. First, it must be noted that the Lord had been very patient with these grossly immoral pagan tribes for a long, long time. When Abraham first came into the land of Canaan, Jehovah promised that this country one day would belong to his seed, but it could not yet be theirs for “the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full” (Genesis 15:16). It is as though the sins of those heathen peoples gradually were filling a container and that eventually a point would be reached that God could tolerate no longer. The wicked would have to be destroyed. Thus, it was not a violation of His goodness; rather it was to **preserve it**, that He had them destroyed.

Archaeological discoveries such as those at Ugarit have revealed the corruptness of the Canaanite nations. For example, in the Canaanite religion, El was the chief god and Baal was his son. These were “gods” who had absolutely no concept of morality. In a poem known as “The Birth of the Gods,” El is said to have seduced two women, and horrible sexual perversions are associated with his name. He married three of his own sisters—who also were married to Baal. He is represented as practicing vile sex acts and influencing others to do likewise. It is little wonder that the evidence indicates that the Canaanites followed their gods in such abominations. In the Canaanite religion, homosexuals and prostitutes were employed to raise money for the support of the temples. It is not an exaggeration to say that these pagans elevated sex to the status of a god [that sounds rather modern, doesn’t it?]. Numerous scholars believe that there are hints of this sordid background in such Old Testament passages as Deuteronomy 23:18-19—where a prohibition is given against bringing the “hire of a harlot, or the wages of a dog” [a male prostitute; see Harris, et al., 1980, 1:439] into the house of Jehovah.”

The Canaanite religion was a horribly brutal system as well. For instance, the goddess Anath is pictured as killing humans by the

thousands and wading knee-deep in blood. She cut off heads and hands and wore them as ornaments. And in all of this gruesomeness, the Baal-epic says that her liver was swollen with laughter, and her joy was great. In this connection, it also must be mentioned that these morally depraved Canaanites also sacrificed their own babies to their gods.

Funerary jars have been found with the bodies of young children distorted by suffocation as they struggled for life after having been buried alive as a sacrifice to Canaanite gods. Such young children have been found in the foundation pillars of Canaanite houses, and sometimes religious ceremonies were associated with their sacrifice (Wilson, 1973, p. 85).

Professor Kenneth Kitchen was correct when he remarked that the “Canaanite religion appealed to the bestial and material in human nature” as evinced by the Ugaritic texts and Egyptian texts of Semitic origin (see Douglas, 1980, 1:234).

But it also is important to emphasize that the destruction of these wicked people was for the moral preservation of the nation of Israel. The Old Testament makes this clear. When they invaded Canaan, the Hebrews were not to allow their enemies to live “that they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods; so would ye sin against Jehovah your God” (Deuteronomy 20:18). But why was this so important? For one thing, it was through the Hebrew nation that the **Messiah** was to make His appearance! Thus, ultimately the salvation of mankind was at stake. The extermination of the wicked inhabitants of Canaan, therefore, was an example of moral surgery in order to save the life of the patient (the human race). Moreover, remember this: God, **because of Who He is**, has the right to render judgment upon evil at any time.

The question is bound to arise, however: “But why did God allow the children to be destroyed?” This query hardly could be treated thoroughly in an article of this brevity; however, some comment does need to be made. First, in a world where there is freedom of choice, one must be allowed to suffer the consequences of wrong choice-making, even when he is not a party to such choices. Making bad decisions affects not only us, but also affects those around us as well. We fall heir to the consequences of evil in others **as a part of the price that we pay for our own freedom!** So, children often are victims who suffer because of the evil in their parents. Second, however, the question raised above represents a real problem **only if it is viewed in terms of the present**. If one sees the matter in terms of **eternity**, the situation becomes altogether different. Would it not have been infinitely worse, in view of eternity, had these children grown to maturity and adopted the same pagan practices as their parents? Even this consideration, though, must be seen in the light of the principles mentioned above [i.e.: with respect to the coming of Christ and God’s temporal judgment upon sin]. We certainly do not know all of God’s mind on this important theme (cf. Romans 11:33), but if we study the Old Testament record of the Lord’s dealings with these nations, together with the archaeologi-

cal findings that illustrate the corruption of these people, surely we ought to be able to see that Jehovah's wisdom regarding those events should not be disputed. Finally, it might be noted that no one has the right to criticize the moral activity of God unless he can establish and defend some genuine moral standard apart from God—and **this no unbeliever can do!**

THE BIBLICAL IMPRECATIONS

The "imprecatory" sections of the Scriptures are those portions that contain the writers' prayers or songs for vengeance upon enemies, or that end in triumphant praise at an enemy's destruction. For example, "Destroy thou them, O God..." (Psalm 5:10), or "Break thou the arm of the wicked and evil man..." (10:15; cf. 18:40-42, 28:4, 31:17, Jeremiah 15:15, 17:18, Nehemiah 6:14, etc.). Many have wondered how such expressions could be a part of divine revelation. Though the subject is complex, perhaps the following thoughts will shed some light on this matter.

(1) These writings are not mere hot-headed bursts of personal vindictiveness characteristic of an inferior Old Testament code. We recognize, of course, that a lower level of moral responsibility was **tolerated** in an ancient, infantile human race that was being prepared gradually for the coming of the gospel age (cf. Matthew 19:8; Acts 14:16-17; 17:30-31; Romans 3:25). Nonetheless, the Old Testament in many instances (unless divine judgment was being exercised—see sections above) encouraged service to one's enemies (Exodus 23:4-5) and forbade hatred, vengeance, etc. (Leviticus 19:17-18; Proverbs 20:22; 24:17; 25:21-22). One ought not, therefore, take a low view of the biblical imprecations **that obviously were placed into the divine record for a purpose.**

(2) The biblical imprecations ultimately express a zeal for Jehovah's cause, and, significantly, express a profound willingness to leave vengeance in **His** hands. But they do acknowledge that punishment for sin is a part of the divine order (cf. Psalm 58:11; 104:35; 1 Samuel 24:21 ff.). One must remember that:

The enemies of Israel were the enemies of Israel's God; Israel's defeat was a reproach to His Name; the cause at stake was not merely the existence of a nation, but the cause of divine truth and righteousness. This aspect of the conflict is most completely expressed in Psalm 83, and prayers for vengeance such as those of 79:10, 12 and 137:8 express the national desire for the vindication of a just cause, and the punishment of cruel insults (Kirkpatrick, 1906, p. xci.).

(3) It ought to be recognized that some of the language of the imprecations, though seemingly brutal, is highly **figurative**, with metaphors and images being borrowed from an age in history characterized by much savagery. No one would argue, for example, that Christ was suggesting that certain people—who caused stumbling in others—should **literally** be weighted with a stone and thrown into the sea (Matthew 18:6), or that Paul, in rebuking those who exalted circumcision, hoped that they **literally** would mutilate themselves (Galatians 5:12—ASV footnote). One must focus, therefore, upon the idea being conveyed, and not necessarily upon the poetic imagery in which the idea is clothed. This principle needs to be applied to the Old Testament imprecations.

"UNETHICAL" ACTIONS BY GOD

Some critics have alleged that the Bible represents God as sometimes acting in ways that are clearly unethical. For example, concerning Pharaoh, God said: "I will harden his heart..." (Exodus 4:21). The book of Ezekiel quotes the Lord as saying: "I gave them also statutes that were not good" (Ezekiel 20:25). And Jeremiah said of Jehovah: "Lord God, surely thou hast greatly deceived this people" (Jeremiah 4:10). Numerous sincere Bible students have been greatly perplexed by these and similar passages.

The solution lies in an understanding of certain idiomatic traits of Hebrew expressions. Biblical scholar James MacKnight noted

that: "**Active verbs** were used by the Hebrews to express, not the **doing**, but the **permission of the thing** which the agent is said to do" (1954, p. 29, emp. added). This involves the concept of man's free will. God has allowed man to have freedom of will, and when human beings choose to do wrong, the Lord is not going to overpower them and force righteousness upon them. The truth is—Jehovah **allows** humans to act as they will (though ultimately there is a price to be paid). But sometimes the Bible, using **figurative** terminology, represents God as performing the action, though in reality He does not. With reference to the examples cited above, we may observe: (1) The Scriptures clearly teach that Pharaoh **hardened his own heart** by yielding to the enchantments of his magicians and refusing to submit to the will of God (Exodus 7:11-14, 22; 8:15, 19; 9:34). And the Lord let him go his own rebellious way that he might eventually demonstrate **Who really was in control!** (cf. Romans 9:17-18). (2) When Ezekiel affirmed that God gave statutes that were not good, he cannot be saying that the Holy God literally gave bad laws. Rather, he is suggesting that when those stubborn people determined that they did not want to submit to Heaven's law, **God permitted them to follow the wicked statutes of the pagan nations around them!** Note the words of Psalm 81:12—"So I let them go after the stubbornness of their heart, That they might walk in their own counsels." (3) And when Jeremiah suggested that God deceived the people of Israel, he really was saying that the Lord allowed them to follow their own paths of **self-deceit**, and to eat the bitter fruits thereof. Because of rampant sin, Jeremiah had foretold of a great destruction to be visited upon the people of God (4:5ff.), but the people declared that this evil would not come, "neither shall we see sword or famine" (5:12), and the prophets who declared such were considered to be just so much "wind" (5:13). Since they were determined to be deceived, God, in effect, said: "Go ahead and be deceived; I will not stop you."

CONCLUSION

Those who respect the Bible as the verbally inspired Word of God need to realize that although they may, from time to time, encounter certain passages of Scripture that seem difficult to understand initially, there are adequate explanations for these texts. By means of patient and thorough research, we can discover many of the answers that will help solve these problems. And even if we have not yet found all the answers, we ought never to foolishly charge God with error!

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