

Does God Have an Anger Problem?

Making sense of Divine Wrath



How Do Christians Reconcile God's Love with Old Testament Violence?

"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin..."

Exodus 34:6-7

When many people think of God (if they think of him at all), they picture him in one of two ways: the Zeus-like character who hurls lightning bolts at all who offend him, or the bearded grandpa who welcomes all but the worst mass murderers into heaven. The God of the Bible is neither. He is the supreme judge who holds all humans accountable for their actions and does so with perfect knowledge and justice. He is also supremely loving, so much so that he gave his divine Son – a beloved part of himself – as a sacrifice to save man from sin and death. God's character is unchangingly perfect in justice and love, and both traits are present in his every engagement with mankind.

"But what about all the violence in the Bible!," cry the skeptics. "How could a God who is just and loving permit so much bloodshed, especially in Old Testament times? How could he direct the Hebrews to wage war

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on the cities of ancient Canaan?” These are certainly legitimate questions. In Exodus through Joshua, God commanded his chosen people to completely wipe out existing people groups in the Promised Land. “For My angel will go before you and bring you into *the land of* the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will completely destroy them” (Ex. 23:23).

In the battle against the Jebusites, the Jews put the entire population of Jericho to the sword, burning the city and killing every man, woman and child, and all livestock (Josh. 10:28). Messiah College professor Eric Seibert declared that the pervasiveness of violence in the Old Testament is undeniable.¹ Critics often point to this in their attacks on Scripture and Christianity.

Perhaps the most notorious biblical reference to violence is 1 Sam. 15:3, one in which God commands King Saul to utterly destroy the Amalekites and leave nothing alive. Such an order appears an extreme act of vengeance for Amalekite treachery against Israel centuries earlier.² Today, it serves to fuel skeptics’ claims that the God of the Bible is guilty of ethnic cleansing.

Can Christians justify the Amalekite genocide in light of Christ’s command for Christians to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44)? How do Christians explain the apparent contradiction between two sides of God’s nature – one loving and one wrathful? How do we explain 1 Sam. 15:3 in light of John 3:16?

A careful look at the context of Old Testament “kill commands” will give us the answers to these questions. ***We will learn that God’s wrath and love are inseparable and work together as expressions of his perfect will.***

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Evaluating the Exodus

When God delivered the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery roughly 3,200 years ago, he established a covenant with his people during their travel to the lands promised to Abraham. This *Mosaic Covenant* established a system of righteous worship and ethics that contrasted dramatically with the region’s pagan practices. Native peoples worshipped a host of gods that included Asherah, Baal and Molech. All are mentioned in the Old Testament and associated with detestable practices such as bestiality, sexual deviancy, and child sacrifice (Ex. 23:23-33, Lev. 18, Ezek. 20:7-30).

This explains, from a biblical perspective, the necessity of a militaristic approach to populating Canaan; the indigenous peoples were so corrupted that unless they were targeted for complete destruction (*herem*), they would prove a decaying influence on God’s chosen people (Lev. 18:25).³ Thus, it appears the motivation for Israel’s violence in Canaan was God’s desire to righteously

judge and remove a great moral evil. Doing so would preserve the Hebrews' effectiveness as a signpost pointing the world to the one true God.⁴ Further, it would elevate the region's culture, emphasize human dignity and give rise to healthy, peaceful societies built on divine ethics. This was the moral foundation for God's "kill-all command" against the Amalekites in 1 Sam. 15:3.

Why the Amalekites?

The Amalekites shared Israel's Abrahamic bloodline, but descended from Isaac's son Esau, a man the Bible portrays as one who despised his family's traditions, and was considered an enemy of God (Gen. 25:32, 36:2, and Mal. 1:3). Esau's rebellious spirit apparently passed on to the Amalekites. Though the travelling Hebrews posed no threat to this group, the Amalekites welcomed God's people with an unprovoked attack at Rephidim. In the process, they came under the *herem* (kill command) reserved for the Canaanites. "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven...The LORD has sworn; the LORD will have war against Amalek from generation to generation'" (Ex. 17:8-16). In Deut. 25:17-19, God reminds his people that they are to eliminate the Amalekites because they "attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not

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Can a man judge God?

"We need to be careful not to confuse our emotions with God's. Our love, sorrow and anger are often tainted by sin and moral failure and by misunderstandings of ourselves or of others... I may be wrathful with a person when God is being patient. I may be wanting to save a person from the consequences of their actions, when God wants them to face and suffer those consequences."

- Theologian Peter Adam

God sees with the eyes of omniscience. His sight pierces the soul and psyche of a man so that he knows every thought behind every action. He knows when an individual or society is ripe for revival or destined for judgment. Thus, it is folly for fallen, shortsighted man to criticize God's acts, no matter how confusing they may seem.

- Jesse Hall

fear God." In essence, it appears the aggressors purposely scouted the Hebrews, waited until they were weakened by thirst and travel, and then cravenly attacked their weaker members, violating norms for just war.⁵

Roughly four centuries after the Hebrew exodus, the first king of Israel received God's charge to fulfill the *herem* against the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:2-3). While one could reasonably understand punishing the Amalekites involved in initial exodus encounter, the harshness of God's command centuries later begs an important question: what was so grievous about the Amalekite attack that it caused God to declare war on

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the tribe's future generations? The latter part of Deut. 25:19 offers a clue: "...and he (the Amalekites) did not fear God." Some believe the Amalekites acted with such arrogant aggression that they set themselves up as a willful opponent of the Most High. God answered their challenge to his perfect will with judgment.⁶

The importance of God's response is seen in King Saul's failure to carry out *the herem*, as recorded in 1 Samuel 15.⁷ Three hundred years after Saul's disobedience, Haman, a descendent of the Amalekite king Agag (whom Saul had refused to kill), attempted to murder every Hebrew throughout the Persian Empire (Esther 3-9).

Though Haman's plot failed, it demonstrated that God's "eternal war" declaration on the Amalekites was based on foresight, not raw malice. He knew precisely what violence they would try to visit on Israel.⁸ Thus, the kill command was ultimately a just measure because its goal was to relieve the region of a constant menace to peace.

What about Jesus?!

If we take Scripture at face value, it shows us that the God of the Old Testament is indeed loving, even against a backdrop of just violence. He destroys only in the interest of securing a greater good for humanity, a good that fallen humans often cannot or will not understand. This is important when considering the identity and ministry of Jesus Christ. Some try to separate Jesus from the Old Testament and paint him as a being of love without wrath.

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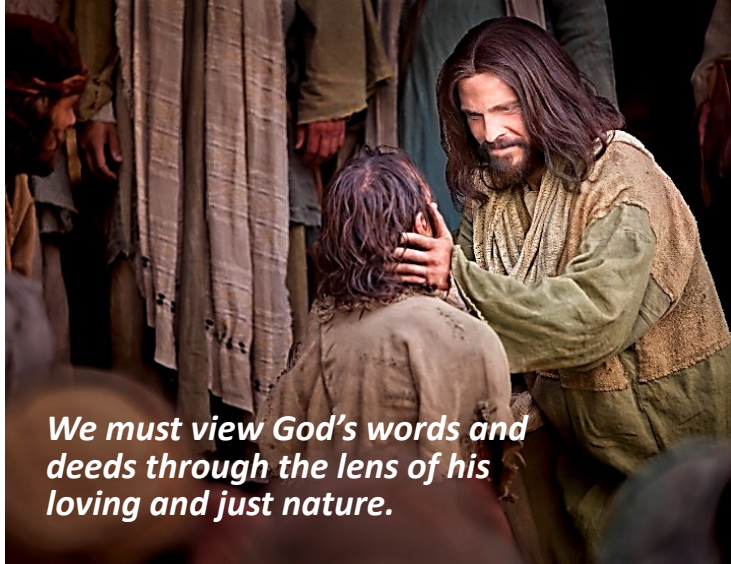
Jesus, however, articulated a theology of divine justice in the midst of his ministry of love (Matt. 24-25, Mark 13, John 15:6, Rev. 1-22). In John 3:36, Christ declared, "'The one who believes in the Son has eternal life; but the one who does not obey the Son will not see life, but *the wrath of God remains on him.*" In the book of Revelation, John presents Jesus as the great judge who will destroy the world's kingdoms that rise up against him at the end of time. Further, if Jesus is indeed the eternal Son and Word of God, then it was he who delivered all Old Testament commands – including war commands – to Hebrew leaders.

Christ, however, was also the most loving person who ever lived. He ministered to societal outcasts, such as prostitutes, tax collectors and lepers, breaking down deep-rooted ethnic, gender, and class barriers in the process. He even willingly suffered a horrible death on the cross to give his life as payment for the sins of the world so that all who place faith in him may experience eternal life.

A God who is always good

God is indeed compassionate, forgiving and patient, characteristics confirmed often by biblical figures who knew him best (Ex. 34:6, Ps. 108:3-14, Jer. 31:3, Hosea 3:1, Ez. 33:11). He also reveals himself to be righteous and just by requiring humans treat one another with dignity according to behaviors addressed in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20). Thus, it is only logical that we interpret his words and deeds through the lens of his loving and just nature.⁹ Both attributes

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were involved in his treatment of the Amalekites and other pagan groups.

The Lord inserted Israel into Canaan to establish a righteous nation, one that would tame a brutish region marked by tribal warfare, ritual child sacrifice, and the general demeaning of life. God gave the region's inhabitants more than four centuries to repent of their misdeeds, but to no avail; their corruption was so ingrained that the land itself was prepared to "vomit out its inhabitants" (Lev. 18:28).

Thus, it was an act of justice for God to order the elimination of these peoples so that those remaining could experience blessing and salvation through Abraham's seed (Israel).¹⁰ Because the Amalekites and so many of their pagan neighbors persistently opposed this end, God had to remove them. He did so in the interest of human flourishing and to ultimately work man's salvation through a son of Israel, Jesus Christ.

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Dig into the Scriptures:

- 1) Look up the words "love" and "lovingkindness" in the Bible and summarize what the verses tell us about God's character.
 - Psalm 26:1-8, 36:1-10, 48:9-14, 63:1-8
 - John 3:16-21, 15:8-13, 1 John 4:7-21
 - Romans 5:1-11, 1 Cor. 13:1-8
- 2) Evaluate how the words "righteousness" and "judgment" (or "justice") are used in Scripture and what they say about God's nature.
 - Gen. 18:18-33, Psalm 89:14
 - Prov. 1:1-5, Isaiah 9:6-7
 - John 5:21-22, 27, 16:8
- 3) Given the discussion in this pamphlet, what would you tell a friend who is troubled by violence in the Bible? A good strategy is to build an explanation using the material in 1 John 4:7-21 (God's love), Gen. 12 (God's blessing through Abraham), and Lev. 18 (evils of the pagan nations).

NOTES

¹ Eric Seibert, "When God Smites: Talking with Students about the Violence of God in Scripture." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 17, no. 4 (2014): 325.

² Avi Sagi, "The Punishment of Amalek in Jewish Tradition: Coping with the Moral Problem," *Harvard Theological Review* 87, no. 3 (1994): 329; Berel Dov Lerner, "Saul and Genocide," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (January 2014): 39.

³ Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 1986), 147.

⁴ Stephen N. Williams, "Could God Have Commanded the Slaughter of the Canaanites?," *Tyndale Bulletin* 63, no. 2 (2012): 174.

⁵ Sagi, 325; Bernard P. Robinson, "Israel and Amalek: The Context of Exodus 17:8-16," *Journal For The Study Of The Old Testament* 10, no. 32 (June 1985): 19.

⁶ Hertzberg, Hans Wilhelm., *I & II Samuel*, 2nd Ed, trans. J.S. Bowden (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 124-125.

⁷ Berel Dov Lerner, "Saul and Genocide," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (January 2014): 42.

⁸ David D. Jividen, "If God Is Love, Why Does He Command the Annihilation of Entire Peoples?" *New Oxford Review* 85, no. 5 (June 2018): 41.

⁹ Williams, 167-169.

¹⁰ Jividen, 41.

And Jesus said...

"Behold I knock at the door...if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come to him..." *Revelation 3:20.*

God has promised that he will respond to anyone who seeks him sincerely and lays claim to his Son Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Accept God's free gift of eternal life by asking him to cleanse you from sin, accept you as his child, and lead you as a follower of Jesus. Then, allow him to take you on a journey marked by purpose and love (John 3:3, John 3:16, Acts 2:38, Romans 10:9-11).

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