

“Utterly destroy them... show them no mercy” (Deuteronomy 7:1-2; 20:16-17). Can the ethical problems raised by these Biblical commands be satisfactorily resolved?

1 Introduction

The ethical problems raised by the commands in Deut. and elsewhere¹ to completely destroy whole populations (man, woman and child) arise because such destruction, we are told, is morally impermissible. I take the debate as revolving around the following inconsistent tetrad:

- (1) Scripture relates that God commanded the complete destruction of the Canaanites.
- (2) If Scripture relates that God did x, then God did x.
- (3) The complete destruction of the Canaanites was morally impermissible.
- (4) If a being is God, that being will not command the morally impermissible.

(4) is presumably supported by the following sub-argument:

- (5) If x is morally impermissible, then it is morally impermissible to *command* x.
- (6) If a being is God, then that being does nothing morally impermissible.

The response of the *atheist* and the *theological liberal* is to deny (2); the atheist will deny it because it would commit him to theism and the theological liberal will deny it because he does not hold to the inerrancy of Scripture.

Those I shall term *revisionists* reject (1). In fact, they say, what God literally commanded was not what he actually commanded. According to the conventions in place at that time regarding language of the type God used, the communicated meaning was rather different from the literal meaning. Copan (2011) and Wolterstorff (2011) defend this view.

Those I shall term *traditionalists* reject (3). They will say that the case for thinking the destruction of the Canaanites to be impermissible has not been persuasively made, or that there are good reasons for thinking the command to destroy the Canaanites is morally unproblematic.

All parties, I shall assume, agree on (4).²

2 The Revisionist Response

I intend to defend a traditionalist response to the problem, but I will first address the revisionist project, stating the reasons why I find it unsatisfactory. The revisionists propose not so much a *solution* to the problem as a *dissolution*. They say that when God or whoever was commanding the complete destruction (the type of such acts of complete destruction I shall denote using C) of their enemies, he was employing hyperbole – more precisely, a warfare exaggeration rhetoric (I shall use WER to denote such a convention). So, for example, “go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” (1 Sam. 15:3) isn’t best read as a literal injunction to completely destroy the all Amalekites and their cattle, but as merely enjoining the Israelites to rout them decisively (cf. Copan 2011, p. 171).

But what reason have we to think that there was such a convention of exaggeration? I shall engage with Copan’s arguments as presented in his (2011) book, ch. 16. His general argument is this: unless we suppose that such a convention is in place, we end up with contradictory narratives; and that would be contrary to religious orthodoxy. I deny that the suggested narratives are contradictory.

1 See Josh. 6:21 & 8:25-26 (the destruction of Jericho and Ai) and 1 Sam. 15:3 (the destruction of the Amalekites) for similar commands.

2 (5) and (6) can be challenged, but putative circumstances in which they are plausibly false aren’t going to help us resolve the ethical problems, as far as I can see.

Copan suggests Joshua 10:40-42 and 11:16-23 as literally contradictory (*Ibid.*, p. 170). But that isn't obvious. Certainly, 10:40 claims that Joshua left no survivors, but to get the conclusion that Copan wants it is necessary to read it as implying that, of all the Canaanites in that land immediately prior to the invasion, none were left alive afterwards. But that reading isn't the only one. One could interpret the claim as only implying that, of all the Canaanites that Joshua *encountered* in his invasion (or who otherwise refused to leave the land), none were left alive. This reading is compatible with many fleeing and later returning. Significantly, Joshua leaves no occupying force (10:43).

Copan also argues from the tension between Josh 11:21-22 and Caleb's later request that he take the land of the Anakites in Josh 14:12 to a WER (*Ibid.*, p. 171). My response: that Caleb feels capable of doing this all by himself is indicative of the fact that those who currently inhabit the hill country must be substantially weaker than those driven out earlier. I would rather infer that the Anakites resettled the area a few years later. We know from 11:22 that some survived in Gaza, Gath and Ashdod; and there is nothing that rules out the possibility of Anakites elsewhere, in the land yet to be taken perhaps (13:1), who reoccupied to the hill country.

He also holds that the description of the destruction of Amalekites in 1 Samuel doesn't admit of a consistent reading absent this convention (*Ibid.*, p. 174). 15:7-8 tells us that Saul destroyed the Amalekites, but later in ch. 30 they capture David's wives and children.

A few points can be made: whether or not or not this is inconsistent with 15:7-8 depends on whether or not *haram* can be justifiably rendered as "completely destroy" as, for example, the NIV renders it. The ESV, however, renders it as "devote to destruction". This is a significant difference, not least because while the former reads *haram* as a success verb, the latter does not; something can be *devoted* to destruction while not being destroyed – what is picked out is an attitude or disposition.

But even if we ignore that, v. 7 explicitly narrows the scope of Saul's campaign. Secondly, "devoted to destruction all the people" can surely be read as containing the usual suppressed clauses, such as 'of all those he encountered'. Indeed, this has been the conservative means of reconciling these verses for centuries. Here is Gill: "utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword; that is, all that came in his way, or fell into his hands; all between Havilah and Shur; all excepting those that made their escape". So again, there is nothing here to compel us posit a WER.³

But perhaps the revisionist will be content with the suggestion that the convention is nevertheless a plausible supposition, if not a compelling one, and we should endorse it as the easiest way out of the problem. Well, here is one reason to be more suspicious. There are some occasions in the OT histories where the battle reports carry a high degree of specificity, for example Josh. 10:20 and 1 Sam. 30:17. Presumably these are the sorts of scenarios that could otherwise have been described according to the WER as a *complete* destruction. So if the revisionists are right then sometimes the convention is employed and sometimes not. But how are we (and the original audiences) supposed to know when the convention is appropriated and when it is not? How can we tell a *real* complete slaughter from a mere rout rhetoricised?⁴

3 Returning to the Problem

The central problem, as I phrased it, was that God shouldn't be commanding things that are not morally permissible. So let's look at the reasons proposed for thinking acts such as C to be morally impermissible. Putting weight on the fact that C entailed the killing of all the children, Rauser

3 The examples from other military accounts from the ancient Near East also fail to persuade. Of course they are going to portray the victory as glorious and total – what monarch would want to make himself look weak in the eyes of his people?

4 Another point of *ad hominem* interest: Copan claims that Jericho and Ai would have been military fortresses containing no non-combatants (*Ibid.*, p. 175-6). In such a case the command wouldn't actually result in the killing of any women or children. But he doesn't seem to realise this is in tension with his earlier justification for the WER. Reports of wiped out cities can now be *literally* true if all the inhabitants are combatants.

proposes that it is *intuitively obvious*. The idea that bludgeoning babies is always wrong is one that, he claims, “every rational, properly functioning person cannot help but know” (2009, p. 33). He makes the surprising claim that it “is not only a basic belief, it is indubitable as any belief I have (and more indubitable than most).” (*Ibid.*, p. 34). He says more: unlike reports of less serious offences, such as defecating in the fraternity, for which we can imagine exonerating circumstances, our condemnation upon hearing reports of genocide is *unqualified*. “Can we conceive of any qualifications that would justify the butchering of thousands of innocent children, let alone the systematic decimation of an entire population?” (*Ibid.*, p. 34). He concludes: “it is not simply that I cannot see how bludgeoning a baby could be a morally praiseworthy act; rather, I can see that it cannot be.” (*Ibid.*, p. 34)

Here I have to fault Rauser for lack of imagination. There are many science-fiction scenarios in which bludgeoning a baby to death is *plausibly* morally praiseworthy. Suppose a father is trapped in a house with his family and his baby son. The son has been infected with a parasite in its brain, which, if allowed to develop to maturity, will emit poisonous gases – killing all in the house. The child needs to be killed as quickly as possible. The father bludgeons the child to death and kills the parasite.

One might still insist that the father does wrong in this circumstance, but the point is that this isn’t obvious. It can *plausibly* be maintained that he did the right thing – his obligation to his baby and the duty not to kill being outweighed by the obligation to protect his other family members. This suffices to show that Rauser’s “unqualified” and “cannot be” language is inappropriate; he can’t claim that the impermissibility of killing babies is on a par with nothing being green and red all over.

But I think we can see why Rauser thinks what he does: Rauser’s discussion is hampered by a fundamental ambiguity: when he describes child bludgeoning as evil, does he refer to the wrongness of the act, or the intrinsic evil of the state of affairs/event that is the brutal death of a child? What he explicitly says suggests the former: “*it is always wrong to bludgeon babies*” (*Ibid.*, p. 27) and talk of qualification is only appropriate when wrongness is under discussion (the intrinsic evil of a state of affairs is presumably fixed). But what makes me think he is insensitive to the distinction is that it is surely only plausible to claim that one can see the evil of killing babies when one has the *intrinsic evil* of the event before one’s mind. I quite agree that the bludgeoning of a baby is an unqualified *intrinsic evil* (of quite a high degree), but it doesn’t follow from this that it is always *wrong* to bring it about. That depends on other considerations.

4 Original Sin

But let’s forget science-fiction. Is there any *plausibly actual* model on which the killing of the children was morally permissible? (I agree with Rauser that the real problem is the killing of children; the adults (like us all) sinned and fell under God’s judgement.) All that is required to establish God’s *right* to command C is, I believe, a strong doctrine of Original Sin. A strong doctrine of Original Sin holds that all of Adam’s progeny carry the guilt of Adam’s rebellion (perhaps because they were really there (as in realist theories), or because the relationship of federal headship legitimates the transfer of guilt (as in representative theories)).⁵ It straightforwardly follows from this that even babies are guilty before God. Accordingly, even babies have fallen under God’s judgement and deserve death.⁶

Does it follow from this that we are justified in killing any baby we find? (Or anyone at all, for that matter.) No, because no new-born baby has wronged *us*, only God. So it is only God that has the right to exercise punishment. So, on this view, if God decided to kill and damn every new-born

⁵ See Murray (2004) for a good exposition.

⁶ Perhaps the representative view could block this inference: if the person-hood of the young soul requires a certain amount of development before it can stand in the federal relation. But it is harder for such a manoeuvre to work on the realist view; if the soul has already actually rebelled against God then it is arguably still sufficiently well developed to be a legitimate bearer of moral responsibility.

child, he would violate no strictures of justice. One might wonder about God's *motivation* in doing such a thing, but that is a separate issue, one I shall come to presently.

Mere incredulity at a strong doctrine of Original Sin is not a very strong ground for an objection. This for two reasons: first, because even if such a view is true then the probability of us being able to understand the principles on which it *actually* operates is not very high; second, various *possible* metaphysical models of the doctrine have been proposed. See, for example, Rea (2007) and Crisp (forthcoming). Analytic philosophical theologians have only recently begun to direct their attention at the doctrine; it would be premature to declare the doctrine untenable before they have had a serious look.⁷

But what has this to do with the *Israelites'* slaughter of the Canaanites? Well, if God has the right to punish the Canaanites, then he also has the right, we would suppose, to grant others the right to punish on his behalf. Swinburne agrees with me: after arguing that God is our supreme benefactor, and that life is a temporary gift from God, he concludes that God can take it back when he chooses. And "If A has the right to take something back from B, A has the right to allow someone else to take it back for him." (2011, p. 224).

To my mind, this establishes the *justice* of God's command. But that, as Morrision notes, is not enough: "A perfectly good and wise God would not exercise a 'right' to command genocide unless he had very good reasons for doing so." (2011b, p. 2). I agree with this, so I will go on to propose what it is I think that *motivates* God in commanding the genocide.

5 Hatred by Association

In responding to this criticism I would like to develop a line of thought that appears in Stump (2011) and Swinburne (2011). Swinburne claims that God's command to kill the Canaanites was "to bring home to the Israelites the enormous importance of worshipping and teaching their children to worship the God who had revealed himself to them, and no other god." (*Ibid.*, p. 225). This would not happen (or not as strikingly) if, for instance, God destroyed the Canaanites miraculously by himself. Stump has slightly more complex view. She says that, by using the Israelites to enforce the law, they become committed to God's laws in a way that wouldn't otherwise happen (2011, p. 189); it brought the human will in line with God's will: "God commands them to be the agents of the destruction of the Amalekite people to bring home to them in this drastic way the importance of their relationship to God and the importance of God's judgements" (*Ibid.*, p. 190). This is tied in to her more general theory of the overall message of the OT: "He is forming a people by showing what will not work to cure them of what needs to be healed in them." (*Ibid.*, p. 194).

I think that what Stump and Swinburne say is true, namely that the command to slaughter brought home to them the importance of fidelity to Yahweh, although the mechanisms by which this took place aren't really discussed. So now I wish to tell a story which will, I hope, help us see such mechanisms and also further benefits, in addition to loyalty to God, which God's command fostered.

Let us suppose that some rebels are engaged in a morally justified rebellion against a brutal tyrant. (I make no comment on the sort of conditions which are sufficient to legitimise a rebellion, but I presume, as seems plausible, that there are such conditions). The tide was in their favour, and they have deposed the tyrant. And as they continue to swarm over the palace, they notice that in the inner courtyards the tyrant has several statues of himself. But these statues are no ordinary statues: they are quickly recognised by the aesthetically sensitive amongst the rebels as first-rate pieces of art – comparable, let us say, to Michelangelo's David. But the rest of the rebels are heady and angry, and they begin to deface the statues.

The aesthetically sensitive amongst the rebels might propose something like the following argument: "Look, while I wholeheartedly agree with you that this tyrant was a nasty piece of work,

⁷ Another theory, which has the same effect as mine insofar as it removes any ground the Canaanite children might have for complaint, is Murphy (2011). He claims that God cannot wrong the Canaanites because he and they do not share a common dikaiological order.

there is no need to destroy these statues. If you destroy them, you destroy something great. We've accomplished our objective; let's all go home."

The rebels would not, if I am any judge, take such an argument seriously, and I assume that the rebels' response is rational. But how can this be? Isn't the suggestion of the aestheticists' reasonable enough? The rebels are justifiably angry, however, and I think one promising way of understanding why they reject the aestheticists' suggestion is because it threatens that anger.

I think the thought is this: if the rebels were to ignore those statues it would indicate that their devotion to their cause was not as strong as it should be. These statues remind them of the tyrant they justly hated, and they are rejoicing in his downfall. Now is the time to exult in his demise, not to dwell on aesthetics! A man whose anger was overcome by his aesthetic interests would be a man that could never have had a strong commitment to the cause.

So what do we have here? It seems we have a hatred legitimately directed toward a certain object (the *primary* object). We also have another object standing in an associative relation to the primary object (the *secondary* object). The associative relation legitimates anger to be directed at the secondary object on account of anger directed at the primary object.

I think this model can be fruitfully applied to the Canaanite genocide, with respect to the slaughter of Canaanite children. These children surely stand in a strong associative relation to their parents, whom the Israelites should hate on account of their idolatry and sin. It is clear that, *ceteris paribus*, the killing of the children would facilitate a *cleaner psychological break* with Canaanite sin than would be possible if they didn't slaughter them, on account of this associative relation.

6 *Is it worth it?*

The critic may claim, however, that while that is true *all things being equal*, all things are not equal: killing children in warfare for the sake of psychological emphasis, for the sake of a deeper hatred of Canaanite sin than would otherwise be possible, is not worth it at all. It may help a teacher to teach the children under his tutelage some respect for authority if he executed troublesome children, but that respect would come at too high a price.

But we have to realise that it isn't merely the Israelites that benefit from the slaughter of the Canaanite children: it is all those familiar with the accounts. The Israelite soldiers benefited directly, while we benefit indirectly: we realise that God's hatred of the Canaanites' sin was so great that any sympathy the Israelites had for the Canaanite children (and also any desire they had for the Canaanite women) paled into insignificance compared with the duty of matching their hatred of sin with God's. God's hatred of sin was so strong that it was transmitted across to associated objects that would typically be considered off limits.⁸

But some have claimed that things are unequal in another way: the killing of Canaanite women and children would have had a deadening spiritual effect on the Canaanite soldiers. It would have gravely desensitised them to brutality and undermined their desire to protect the vulnerable. Morrison suggests that "divinely mandated genocide would have made it more difficult for them to learn that all persons are worthy of respect and consideration." (2011a, p. 169).

But this criticism isn't really very strong. I agree with Murphy (2011, p. 151) that there is no evidence at all that the Israelite soldiers were traumatised. In any case, it is important to distinguish between what we might call *moral corruption* and *moral damage*. The former occurs when, as the result of some experience, one acquires a bent *toward* evil that one didn't have previously. Moral damage occurs when, as the result of some experience, one acquires an *insensitivity* to some evil one was previously sensitive to. Perhaps you could put the difference like this: a man that kills many people will acquire an insensitivity to death, but he wouldn't necessarily be evil. The evil man is he who, after killing many, learns to love it.

With respect to moral damage, there is no evidence the Israelites were left any worse off. With

⁸ In the case of the animals, there is a further associative relation that went beyond mere ownership: Jones (2008) argues that God commanded the destruction of all that breathed because the sexual fantasies of the Canaanites involved everything that breathed.

respect to moral corruption, none was commanded. Moreover, although placing oneself in circumstances in which one is likely to end up morally damaged (in the sense I define) should surely be avoided (all things being equal), it is frequently a help. If you are going to see a lot of evil, some desensitisation will be necessary for you to function properly.

Finally, even if some Israelites *were* sorely disturbed by the commands they carried out, there is nothing to stop God rewarding them a hundred-fold for their willingness to sacrifice their psychological well-being on the altar of obedience to God. If it is permissible to sacrifice one's physical health for a good cause (weary the flesh with much study), why not one's psychological health also?

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