

Is God a moral monster?

(Reading Deuteronomy 7:2-6)

In the Old Testament does God advocate things like genocide and ethnic cleansing?
If not, how do we understand passages that seem to support this view?

Using our 4R framework...

Recognise

The Ancient Near East culture was very different to ours. It was brutal, cruel and violent.
Two current worldviews that influence our thinking are...

1. **The new atheists** – They will point to the Old Testament as proof that God is dangerous and cannot be tolerated in today's world. They say religion is dangerous and should be eradicated.
2. **Redundancy** – If it's not 'new', it's not useful or relevant!

Reveal

1. **The good** - very limited, but at least they've considered the Old Testament!
2. **The bad** - taking a superficial and simplistic approach that misses the underlying meaning!

Reason

Can we understand the Old Testament in a way that does justice to a loving God?
Further reading... "**Is God a moral monster?**" by Paul Copan.

The progression of laws in the Old Testament

At the beginning of the OT we see the world as it was meant to be, but sin entered our world and God has been rebuilding it ever since. This will not be fully completed until the new heavens and new earth appear.

God in his grace and forbearance accommodates and works with human sinfulness giving the option for us to choose to follow him, or not.

Many of the laws given in the Old Testament aren't the ideal, but a response to what was happening at the time. Divorce is an example – Moses allowed for divorce, but, as Jesus said, it's not the ideal.

There is progression through scripture (i.e. the role of women and slavery)

Many laws in the Old Testament reflected what was happening at the time, and were a dramatic moral improvement on the norm of the day, reflecting the ancient near eastern social context.

(See Deuteronomy 25:1-3)

What about all the killing!

There were two periods in the Old Testament where God seems to command mass extermination

- 1) Against the Canaanites and others when Israel enters the Promised Land
- 2) Against the Amalekites later in 1 Samuel

The Canaanites (see Deuteronomy 20:16-17)

- Wickedness - They were ripe for destruction... Genesis 15:16

- Near Eastern exaggeration rhetoric - Joshua used the language of the conventional warfare rhetoric of the day. (See Joshua 10:40). Not everyone was killed! The aim was to purge Canaanite idolatry but not necessarily the Canaanites themselves.

The Amalekites (See 1 Samuel 15:2-3)

- Figure of speech – The mention of the death of *'men, women and children'* in that culture meant that all the inhabitants of a city had been killed, rather than who was actually killed.

This can also be seen in the case of Jericho. We read that they destroyed everything in it – men, women, young and old cattle sheep and donkeys!

Archaeological evidence points to Jericho being a military fort or garrison. It probably guarded travel routes up to populations in the hill country. Rahab the innkeeper (per footnotes in the Bible) was probably in charge of the fort's hostel for visitors the natural place for the spies to visit.

The general population would have lived outside of the cities, and weren't attacked.

God's instruction to 'Drive out' the occupants

People had 3 choices...

1. Leave as refugees and go elsewhere
2. Join God's faith community – like Rahab & the Gibeonites
3. Stay & fight – and risk death (their choice)

The overarching plan in the invasion of the Promised Land was not to eliminate people but to destroy the idolatry and false religion found there.

Even though the Jewish nation was constantly unfaithful God eventually worked his purpose out through them. By 1000BC (The time of King David) the Canaanites were no longer an identifiable entity in Israel, all their shrines had been abandoned.

The bigger picture

God's overarching goal was to bring blessing and salvation to all the nations, including the Canaanites, through Abraham.

The covenant God made with Abraham was unique in its sweeping outsider-oriented and universally directed nature. Yet for a specific, relatively short, and strategic period of time God sought to establish Israel in the land with the view of fulfilling his long term global plan of redemption, ultimately worked out through Jesus. Echoes of Jesus can be found throughout the Old Testament pointing to a New Covenant to come

Reinforce

You may like to read 'Is God a moral monster?' – Paul Copan, and follow up on the suggested Bible passages. Discuss over coffee with a friend or in your Life Group.

If you want to know what God is like – look at Jesus!

Take the Old Testament seriously, it's God's written word to us, but don't take it literally. It's not meant to be read that way – it's a collection of writings written over a long period in different genres.