

WRESTLING WITH GOD'S VIOLENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Three categories of texts that are morally problematic:

1. "Crimes" for which God prescribes the death penalty.
2. God's anger and wrath in punishing people.
3. God's command to the Israelites to commit genocide.

DEATH PENALTY—for murder, rape, kidnapping

1. Exodus 22:20—sacrificing to a god other than Yahweh.
2. Exodus 21:15 and 17—a child who hits or curses his/her parents.
3. Exodus 35:2—working on the Sabbath.
4. Deuteronomy 21:18-21—persistent rebelliousness on the part of a child.
5. Deuteronomy 13:6-10—a family member tries to get you to worship other gods.
6. Leviticus 20:10—premarital sex.
7. Leviticus 20:13—male homosexual intimacy.

GOD'S ANGER AND WRATH

1. God's anger repeatedly burns against the Israelites for their disobedience.
2. Exodus 32.
3. 2 Samuel 24.

GENOCIDE

1. Conquest of Canaan—Deuteronomy 20:16-18—annihilate everyone in the towns given by God.
2. Joshua 6:20b-21—utterly destroyed the entire population of 31 city-states.

How do we resolve the moral and theological dilemmas when we encounter these texts?

1. Verbal, plenary inspiration

- a. Accept that these commands and stories accurately describe what God said and did and what God commanded the people to do.
- b. God has the authority to give and take life at will.
- c. The Canaanites' wickedness that deserved extermination (same argument Hitler made concerning the Jews).

2. Alternatives

- a. Recognize the complexity of the Bible—that it was written by human beings whose experience of God was shaped by their culture, their theological assumptions, and the time in which they lived.
- b. The biblical authors represented what they believed about God rather than what God inspired them to say.
- c. The impulse to kill and destroy the enemy is very much a part of our world, even today.
- d. Moses, Joshua, and David were warriors living in times when violence was seen as part of God's way of accomplishing his purposes.
- e. Old Testament verses about violence and war tell us more about the people who wrote them and the times they were living in than about the God whose name they claimed as their authority to do these things.

f. “Christian” nations have often gone to war invoking God’s name and authority. Troops march off to war singing “God Bless America.”

MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION

Is a particular passage of scripture portraying God in a way that is inconsistent with Jesus’ life and message?

If yes, then we may need to consider that the passage may reflect the culture, the worldview, or the perspectives of the human authors rather than the heart, will, and character of God.