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R-Rated: Preaching Holy War

3 ways to help our readers understand these R-Rated passages.

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Is God a genocidal maniac? Many people fear the holy war passages of the Old Testament make him out to be. "Show no mercy." "Utterly destroy them." "Do not leave alive anything that breathes." Those are some pretty drastic marching orders. At first glance, God can look like an ancient military commander who's lost his marbles in war, suddenly unleashing rapid machine-gun fire on a conquered village of unarmed civilians.

Do these passages depict genocide? Are Jesus' grandparents carrying out vicious massacres at his Father's command? How do we reconcile these tough passages with the goodness of God and help our people understand them well? How do we preach on holy war? Here are a few angles I've found helpful.

Military cities

The cities Israel takes out are military strongholds, not civilian population centers. Say the word *city* today and most of us think of metropolitan centers flooded with civilians: houses, restaurants, businesses, hospitals, and schools. But in the ancient Middle East, things were different.

The cities in the book of Joshua were military outposts that defended the roads leading up to where the people were (think "the Great Wall of China" as a military defense against invasion). Women, children, and other civilians were in the towns and villages of the surrounding countryside, looking to the "cities" for military protection.

Jericho, for example, was the first line of defense, a fort only six acres large guarding the travel routes up to Jerusalem, Bethel, and Ophrah. Civilian populations lived in villages and towns up in the hills. For example, Jericho and Ai (the two cities given the most attention in the book of Joshua), probably only held 100 - 150 soldiers each. So when Israel "utterly destroys" a city like Jericho, we should picture a military fort being taken over—not a civilian massacre. God is pulling down the Great Wall of China, not demolishing Beijing. Israel is taking out the Pentagon, not New York City.

> **The drastic language is very rare; it only shows up a few times, and every time it does, we only have to go a little farther in the story to find the same enemies are still very much alive, still very powerful, and still causing problems.**

Add to this: the *kings* in Joshua were, for the most part, not top-dog political leaders like we think of today, but local military leaders who led their soldiers into battle and reported to a higher ruler off-site. In other words, the picture is one of Joshua's armies attacking military strongholds, knocking out generals, and putting their soldiers to flight; not invading cities, assassinating presidents, and slaughtering civilians. Israel is taking on Napoleon and his militias, not Paris and her masses.

Another tricky issue involves numbers. The Hebrew word commonly translated as "thousand" (*'elep*), in a military context often simply means "unit" or "squad." So some of the numbers might not be as high as English translations suggest. For example, when 12,000 are defeated at Ai in Joshua 8:25, Old Testament scholars note the more likely translation is actually 12 squads of combatants (probably around 100 - 150 people). This is more consistent with modern archaeological findings on the cities and other uses of *'elep* in the Old Testament.

The phrase "all men and women, young and old" shows up in a few places, but in English this phrase is misleading. Hebrew scholars note this was a stock phrase used to imply totality and did not require that women and children were *actually present* in the militarized outposts, only that the forts were totally depopulated in the aftermath of victory. So when we're told no survivors were left in a city, it is simply stating the obvious: the fort has been taken over, and all its defenders have either fled or been killed.

Ancient trash talk

The Old Testament makes use of exaggerated war rhetoric, common throughout the ancient Middle East. It was something like sports trash talk today: when a basketball team beats their opponents, you expect to hear them say things in the locker room like, "We wasted them! Wiped the floor with them! They couldn't get a thing past us!"

Eavesdropping, you might think the score was 120-0, but when you ask your friend on the team what the actual score was, he replies, "120-105." You realize it was still a decisive victory, but not anywhere near as drastic as the rhetoric alone would lead you to believe. The basketball team is not telling lies in the locker room. They simply expect you to understand trash talk is an exaggerated way of speaking. Throughout the ancient Middle East, there are loads of examples of this trash talk. It was the way they talked about war.

The Old Testament itself makes clear it is using hyperbole. The drastic language is very rare; it only shows up a few times, and every time it does, we only have to go a little farther in the story to find the same enemies (that were supposedly wiped out) are still very much alive, still very powerful, and still causing problems.

Joshua 9-12, for example, is one of the few places this language shows up. Thirty-one Canaanite kings rally their powerful military forces "as numerous as the sands on the seashore" to take out Israel's rag-tag group of homeless, wandering, ex-slaves. It is worth noting the battle is depicted as defensive for Israel, facing genocidal extinction. But God fights for Israel.

Israel celebrates the victories with exaggerated war rhetoric, saying that Joshua defeated *all* the kings of Canaan, destroyed *all* the Canaanites, and captured *all* the land of Canaan. But this is clearly not the case. We are still in the book of Joshua: most of Israel's encounters with Canaan come in the following books of Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel. David's battle with Goliath is still many generations away. When we zoom out from the specific verse to the surrounding story, it is clear the basketball team is simply bragging in the locker room. Israel is using ancient trash talk.

It is also worth noting in this passage that Joshua is described as having done this, "just as Moses the servant of the LORD commanded." (11:12, 15, 20) This indicates the Old Testament understands God's original commands through Moses, not just the way they were later carried out, to be the hyperbole of exaggerated warfare rhetoric.

Another example like this can be found in 1 Samuel 15, where it is said that Saul "totally destroyed" the Amalekites (with the sole exception of Agag, the military leader killed later in the passage, and the best of the plunder Saul kept for himself), but we don't have to read much farther before the Amalekite armies are back again in 1 Samuel 30, powerful and causing problems as ever.

So, we are expected to read this language, not literally, but as exaggerated war rhetoric. Israel is, like all her neighbors, simply trash-talking.

'Driven out' vs. 'Killed off'

Finally, the Canaanites are "driven out," not "killed off." The phrase "drive out" is the primary language used for the Canaanites, showing up more than fifty times in the Old Testament (in contrast, the drastic marching orders are rare and show up in only a few places).

"Driven out" is the language of eviction, not murder. And like a rowdy dancer bounced from a club, if you're driven out the good news is you're still alive.

God is like a gardener chasing out the hooligans who've been trashing his vineyard for far too long. God chases out "larger and stronger" nations that rag-tag Israel could never take on by herself. "The Lord will drive out these nations

before you … nations larger and stronger than you" (Deuteronomy 11:23).

This is not an overnight ejection but a gradual eviction. God evicts Canaan "little by little" over many generations. "Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land" (Exodus 23:30).

If Canaan's getting the boot, God is the foot. God is the primary one doing the evicting, not Israel. "The Lord has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you" (Joshua 23:9).

In a telling piece of imagery, we're told the Canaanites were so racked by violence and injustice that the land itself "vomited them out" (Leviticus 18:25).

When Israel does enter the picture, they are simply finishing off a battle God has already won, jumping in on a victory God has already brought to the point of completion. The "drive out" passages inspire courage for the fearful, not bloodlust for the greedy. For example, Joshua tells his units, "Though the Canaanites have iron chariots and though they are strong, you can drive them out" (Joshua 17:18).

Joshua is calling for bravery among his outgunned, outmanned, underdog slaves. Reminding them that God is the one leading the charge, and he will fight for them. Canaan's imperial powers have been trashing God's garden for way too long, so God gives it over to his weak and wandering homeless slaves.

Conclusion

Israel's encounter with Canaan was way less violent than many today believe it to be. It was not a "genocide," and did not involve the indiscriminate slaughter of defenseless civilians. When we preach on the holy war passages of the Old Testament, we can help our people reconcile these difficult passages with the goodness of God by:

1. Distinguishing ancient military cities from modern civilian population centers;
2. Demonstrating the ancient trash talk used in these passages as exaggerated war rhetoric;
3. Developing "drive out" as the primary language of eviction, not murder.

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