

Hard to Understand

One of the most difficult episodes for us to handle as people who live on this side of the New Testament are the Old Testament records of what is called the herem. This is where God calls Israel to embark in what we could call a holy war against the Canaanites. He tells them to go in there and wipe out everyone—men, women, and children. They were forbidden to take prisoners and were to utterly destroy and put the ban, or curse, upon this land before they occupied it for themselves.

When we look at that, we shrink in horror at the degree of violence that is not only tolerated but seemingly commanded by God in that circumstance. Critical scholars in the twentieth century have pointed to that kind of story in the Old Testament as a clear example that this couldn't be the revealed Word of God. Others even push the subject further, they hold to the position that this is the case where some bloodthirsty, ancient, semi-nomadic Hebrews tried to appeal to their deity to sanction their violent acts and that we have to reject that as not being supernaturally inspired interpretations of history.

I take a different view of it. I am satisfied that the Old Testament is the inspired Word of God and that God did in fact command the Jewish nation to institute the herem against the Canaanites. God does tell us in the Old Testament why he instituted that policy against the Canaanite people. It's not as though God commanded a group of bloodthirsty marauders to come in and kill innocent people. Rather, the background was that the Canaanites were deeply entrenched in unrestrained forms of paganism that involved even such things as child sacrifice. It was a time of profound inhumanity within that nation. And God, in one sense was saying to Israel, "I am using you here in this war as an instrument of my judgment upon this nation, and I'm bringing my violence upon this unbelievably wicked people, the Canaanites – I'm going to have them destroyed" (cf. Deuteronomy 13:12-17). In effect, he said to the Jewish people, "I want you to understand something: I'm giving to the Canaanites their just deserts, but I'm not giving them into your hands because you're better than they are. I could put the same kind of judgment on your heads for your sinfulness and be perfectly justified to do it." That's basically the sense of what God communicated to the Jews.

God wanted a holy nation. And He said in effect, I'm tearing down in order to build something new, and out of what I build new, I'm going to bless all of the people in the world. Therefore, I want you to be separated, and I don't want any of the influences of this pagan heritage to be mixed into my new nation that I'm establishing." That is the reason he gives. People still choke on it, but if God is, indeed, holy—as I think he is—and we are as disobedient as I know we are, I think we ought to be able to handle that.

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