

Responding to the New Atheists' attacks on the God of the Old Testament-3: God's perfect knowledge and the annihilation of some of the Canaanites

Before we move into the weeds where I will deal with each specific attack on the God of the Old Testament in great detail, I wish to provide some preliminary background information on one of the most difficult problems for the New Atheists, namely God's mandates for the utter annihilation of some of Israel's enemies.

Throughout the Old Testament God commanded Israel to go to war. Some of these wars were designed to secure Israel's borders, i.e. defensive wars or preventative strikes to push back encroachment on the part of her enemies. Other wars were designed for total annihilation to enable Israel to fully possess the land that God had promised Abraham. From a *limited human* perspective, total annihilation of the young and old just *seems* wrong.

In my Bible there is a section title on Deuteronomy 20 that reads, "Principles Governing Warfare." Let's note what God says about nations that surround Israel in contrast to the nations which Israel was dispossess and utterly destroy:

Deuteronomy 20:10 "When you approach a city to fight against it, you shall offer it terms of peace. 11 "And it shall come about, if it agrees to make peace with you and opens to you, then it shall be that all the people who are found in it shall become your forced labor and shall serve you. 12 "However, if it does not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. 13 "When the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword. 14 "Only the women and the children and the animals and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourself; and you shall use the spoil of your enemies which the LORD your God has given you. 15 "Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations nearby. 16 "Only in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. 17 "But you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the LORD your God has commanded you, 18 in order that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the LORD your God.

This is where doctrines such as divine omniscience become very relevant. If you believe in God's omniscience, then you certainly understand that God knows what would have happened in every situation. He knows that if you never believed in Jesus Christ, you would spend eternity in Hell. He knows the volition of every single person and what would have happened in all circumstances. He knows every possible permutation of every possible

contingency. Ergo, God knows exactly what would have happened if Israel did not utterly obliterate the Hittites, Perizzites, and the “mosquito bites.” He knows *exactly* what is going to happen to the Israelites if they do not kill all of these people who inhabit the land God was giving to them. He knows with a perfect knowledge that it is going to be much worse if they do not destroy them all—worse for Israel as well as the other peoples (e.g., Hell). This is why God told them to kill everything that breathes.

As finite human beings, there is no way we can make such a judgment, but the God of perfect knowledge and love can and does. God knew exactly what would happen if the Israelites did not wipe them out. Even on a human level, we know what is likely to happen to our children once they start hanging around other kids. We know this because that is what the Word of God says (1 Cor. 15:33), and perhaps from our own experience.

In the passage above God makes a demarcation between the land that Israel was to inherit (as promised to Abraham) and the land around Israel. The point here is that outer cities were offered peace while inner cities were to be destroyed. This is important because many critics *only* remember the commands for total annihilation of the Canaanites, and thus conclude that God does not have a merciful bone in His body. God has every right to execute judgment on wicked nations and to execute that judgment through the Israelites. On the flip side, the land of Israel was strategically placed as a land bridge as it were between the great nations of the world, not only for the spread of the gospel but also to keep them vulnerable so they would have every incentive to remain faithful to the Lord.

The New Atheists hate God’s judgment on wicked nations. The problem with trying to get these atheists to understand that their problem (apart from the fact that they do not even believe in God) is that they think that God is simply the biggest guy in the universe. This is what they think we Christians think too: He is just the Big Guy who does all of these things, and in response we simply call Him good and loving because He takes care of us. To the New Atheists, the God of the Old Testament is like Saddam Hussein, who gasses all of the Kurds just to have more power. Now if the New Atheists do not want to believe in Yahweh, that is their free will. However, they need to understand that we are not ascribing these actions to a Being that just happens to be the most powerful Being in the universe. We understand the Being, Esse, to not only be omnipotent but omniscient, patient, and loving to all of His creatures perfectly. If they do not want to believe that God is omniscient, OK. However, they need to understand that when we speak of God, we do not just believe in a Being who is merely powerful and can do whatever He wants (divine command theory as per the Calvinists). There is a huge difference between a powerful god who can just do anything and chooses to destroy the Canaanites and an all-powerful and all-knowing and all loving God who only does good. Who knows how many Canaanite babies we will see in heaven, who died before the age of accountability? The God of the Old Testament is not great because He is simply the strongest being in the universe. This is Dawkins’ problem. He thinks God is some capricious bloodthirsty God not much different than Saddam Hussein. You know what? I would think the same way as Dawkins if I only believed God was great because of His power: *just* because He was the strongest person in the universe—not dissimilar to Saddam who was just the strongest person in Iraq.

The New Atheists may not agree with our view of God as full of grace, mercy, and perfect knowledge (as demonstrated on the Cross) but let them not impose upon us their view of a powerful capricious God who is only great because of His power. God’s power and prerogative to exterminate the Canaanites should never be equated the Saddam’s power and prerogative to gas the Turks. The comparison is illicit because God has infinite knowledge and loves all

creatures—a love that seeks the good of each person and nearness to each person inasmuch as human volition will allow.

If the New Atheists really do not believe in God, then why do they get so worked up about God exterminating people in the Old Testament? If the New Atheists want to describe their non-existence God as bloodthirsty, they have the freedom to do so. But what they do not have the freedom to do is to tell the world that this is the kind of God that we Christians believe in. That is not the Christian position even if, sadly enough, there are many Christians who really do not have a robust understanding of Esse and just how supreme Supreme Being really is. They may know the words, but apart from metaphysics these words are mere adjectives empty of deep and blessed insights. Apart from a real grasp of Supreme Being, even the believer will likely find himself empathizing with the New Atheists even though he knows this should not be so.

Existing in, with, by, and for Esse

Pastor Don