

God commanded the Israelites to annihilate other nations. Doesn't that make God unjust and xenophobic?

In the pages of the Old Testament, it is not uncommon to find God commanding the destruction of certain peoples, or at least commanding the Israelites to drive out other nations from their homeland. This is particularly true when the Israelites were called to take over Canaan, which is roughly the geographic area represented by modern day Israel. The question is: don't these commands reveal God to be unjust and xenophobic? I think the answer is "no" based on four factors.

The first factor is that the people of Canaan were involved in practices that God considered detestable. These practices included the sacrificing of children, sexual activity of all forms in temple of their gods, bestiality, and the consultation of evil powers through sorcery. All of which have been confirmed by archaeological finds. Thus, the motivation behind God's command regarding the Canaanites was not that he is prejudiced towards the Jews, but because he is prejudiced against practices which are an affront to him.

Second, it is important to recognize that the detestable practices were not something that were new to the Canaanites. They had been practicing them for centuries and had no intention of stopping them even though they had clearly seen God's powerfully deal with others who refused to cede to his commands. Nearly 500 years before the Israelites conquered the promised land, Abraham was living in Canaan. God promised him that his descendants would inherit Canaan, but said they would not be able to inherit it for hundreds of years. In fact, God told Abraham that his descendent would have to leave Canaan and reside in Egypt for hundreds of years. What was the reason for the delay? God said the delay was because the "sin of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Genesis 15:16). In other words, God was not yet ready to judge the peoples of Canaan in Abraham's day. He wanted to give them plenty of time to repent. Thus, when Israel did enter Canaan as a nation it was not a rash, xenophobic move on the part of God; it was judgment after a very extended period of evil.

The third factor is that had the Canaanites repented at the time Israel came into Canaan, there is every indication God would have spared them. We see, for example, that God spared Rahab and her family from destruction, because she broke from her kinsmen in Jericho and recognized God to be the true God. That God would spare her is quite notable given that Rahab had previously made her living as a prostitute. Later in the Old Testament story, we see God spare cities like Nineveh when they repented, despite having a terrible record of atrocities. Had the peoples of Canaan wanted to avoid defeat at the hands of Israel, they simply needed to repent.

Fourth, we should recognize that God's standard of righteousness and his enactment of judgment appears to be no different for his own people than it was for the Canaanites. Even before the Israelites took over the land, God warned them not to fall into the same detestable ways (Deuteronomy 6:13-15), and when they did he judged them as well, eventually empowering the Assyrians and the Babylonians to ruthlessly destroy Israel. Even after the first battle in Canaan (the fall of Jericho), God judged the Israelites for taking booty he had commanded them not to take. In other words, even a cursory reading of the Old Testament indicates that God did not treat the Canaanites unfair relative to Israel.

I can understand how one's sensibilities might be bothered by God commanding the destruction of certain peoples. But perhaps our real struggle with this period of Israel's history is that we do not understand the gravity of charting a path apart from God's design, not that God is xenophobic or unjust.