

Show Them No Mercy: **An Examination of Old Testament Holy War in Light of Islamic Jihad**

Jeff Spry, Minister of Education
Western Avenue Baptist Church
Wednesday, August 27, 2008

Moses, Joshua, and United Flight 93

There are dates in American history that need no explanation for many and only a few words of instruction to the rest: December 7, 1941; June 6, 1944; November 22, 1963; and July 20, 1969. A few short years ago, a new date entered our collective memory: September 11, 2001. On that day, nineteen terrorists hijacked four commercial jets with the intent to crash them into multiple targets on American soil. The terrorists crashed two of the airliners into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, killing everyone on board and many others working in the building. The hijackers crashed a third airliner into the Pentagon in Washington, DC. The fourth plane crashed into a field in rural Pennsylvania after passengers and members of the flight crew attempted to retake control of their plane. There are no known survivors from any of the flights and 2,974 people died in the four attacks.



Around the world, the terrorist activity was roundly criticized and denounced. Everyone instinctively knows that the planning and execution of such attacks is evil. However, the terrorists who planned and carried out this attack felt no remorse because they acted for religious reasons. These terrorists – along with others before and after them - fully believed they were acting in pious obedience to the command of Allah. Their own spiritual leaders taught them this.

On Feb. 23, 1998, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, an Arabic-language newspaper, published a statement that announced an alliance between Ayman Zawahri and Osama bin Laden that declared the founding of the “International Islamic Front for Jihad on the Jews and Crusaders.” The front, including three other militant groups, said in its founding manifesto that “We -- with God's help -- call on every Muslim ... to comply with God's order to kill Americans.” This fatwa began by quoting the Qur'an, saying, “slay the pagans wherever ye find them” and concludes that it is the “duty of every Muslim” to “kill Americans anywhere.”¹ The men who hijacked the planes truly believed they were doing the “will of God.”

¹ Andrew Higgins and Alan Cullison, “Saga of Dr. Zawahri Sheds Light on the Roots of al-Qaida Terror,” Wall Street Journal, 22 July 2002. Online at <http://cryptome.org/zawahri-wsj.htm>. Accessed August 6, 2008.

Words like these are abhorrent to us. Americans and others around the world continue to denounce such activity. However, when we who are Christians do so, *can we avoid charges of hypocrisy?* After all, individuals who reject Christianity often take glee in reminding Christians of the blood that stains history because of the followers (alleged and real) of Jesus Christ. For example, consider the following atrocities:

- Christians took up the sword against Muslims (who captured Jerusalem in A.D. 1071), Jews, and other “infidels” during the Crusades from A.D. 1095 to 1272.
- Protestants and Catholics slaughtered each other in battles that tore Europe apart during the Reformation.
- The Roman Catholic Church tortured, burned, or drowned hundreds of thousands of “heretics” between A.D. 1184 and 1860 during the time of the Inquisition.
- Germany, the most Christianized nation in Europe, systematically shot, gassed, and burned six million Jews during the Nazi Holocaust, the country’s “solution to the Jewish question.”

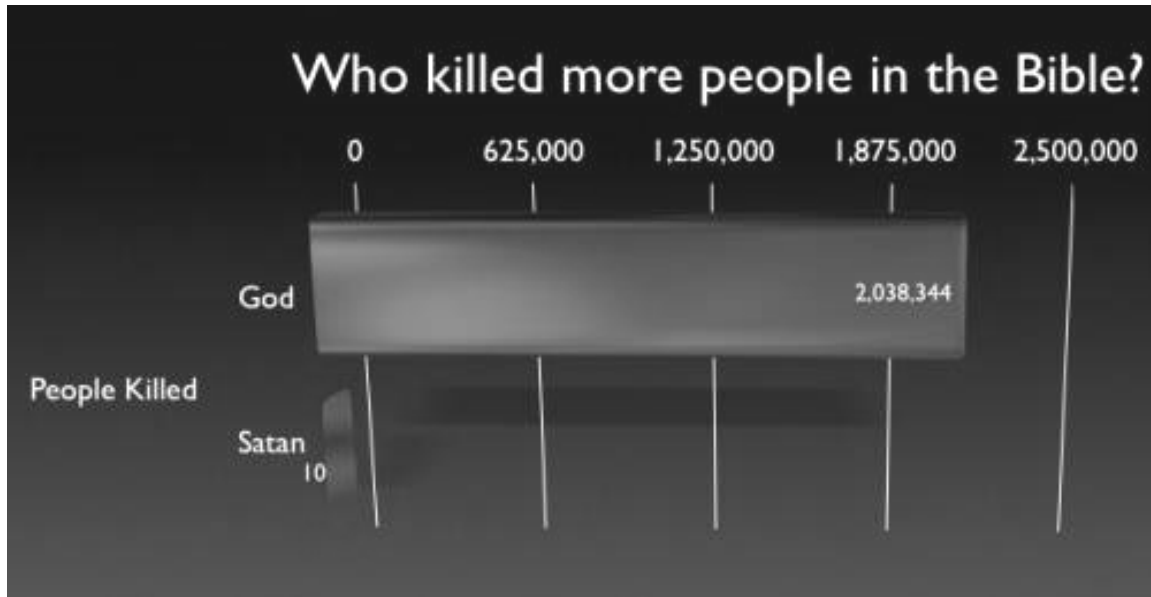
Those opposed to Christianity find it impossible to accept such barbarity on the part of God’s people. For these skeptics, the situation only gets worse when the Bible is opened. In the pages of the Old Testament, we read staggering accounts of war and destruction, often (but not always) orchestrated by God Himself. These events have led many to either bitterly oppose God or fight to prove that God does not exist. Richard Dawkins has undertaken the unenviable task of doing both at the same time. In his book *The God Delusion*, the British biologist dives headfirst into his diatribe against organized religion in general and biblical Christianity in particular with the following words:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; *a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser*; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, *genocidal*, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, *sadomasochistic*, *capriciously malevolent bully*.²

There is no misunderstanding where Dawkins stands. He believes all religion to be dangerous and harmful to society. His sights are set primarily on Christianity. He is not alone. He has many following in lockstep. There has been an incredible rise in the production of atheistic books and websites and a reoccurring argument is this problem we address in this paper. One website in particular wants to expose this issue and attempts to do so with the following graphic:³

² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 31. (emphasis mine)

³ John Brownlee, “Old Testament Murder Count: God versus Satan,” April 5, 2007, http://blog.wired.com/tableofmalcontents/2007/04/old_testament_m.html. Accessed Aug 25, 2008. You can read his commentary on this “evidence” there.



This is a very real issue that we dare not sweep under the rug and pretend never happened. People are highly offended by such events and Christians must seek to understand in order to explain what has occurred throughout history. As we shall, see, however, the issue goes back much farther into history.

Biblical Accounts of “Holy War”

As I mentioned earlier, the bloody acts of believers is not limited to medieval and modern Europe. Events similar to those above are recorded in the Bible. It troubles Christians but we have to admit that “holy war” is not a Muslim invention. Its origins are found in the pages of the Old Testament. Moses was the first leader in known history to spell out the idea of holy war.⁴ He and Joshua were the first to engage in campaigns that many would today call “ethnic cleansing.”

Yet, Moses and Joshua did not refer to their actions as “ethnic cleansing” or even “holy war.” Instead, their military campaigns were referred to as *herem* or “acts of religious devotion.” The accounts of *herem* are part of the history of the Bible. We must accept them and make sense of them unless we take the position that the Old Testament is not Scripture.⁵ However, that position is not acceptable. Therefore, we must struggle to understand the passages.

The biblical accounts are harrowing and hard to read. It takes us to a foreign culture in a strange land in a distant time. Yet, even removed by thousands of miles and years, the battles still affect us. The holy wars of the Old Testament place Christians in the difficult place of denouncing the militant followers of the Islamic Allah while accepting as righteous the actions of the militant followers of the Biblical Yahweh. With the modern examples of holy war fresh in our minds, let us read the following excerpts from Scripture.

⁴ C.S. Cowles, “The Case for Radical Discontinuity,” in *Show them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 16.

⁵ This is the unfortunate position of Cowles in the *Counterpoints* book above.

Numbers 31 – The Battle of Midian

They warred against Midian, as the LORD commanded Moses, and killed every male. . . . and Moses was angry . . . [and] said to them, "Have you let all the women live? . . . kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him. But all the young girls who have not known man by lying with him keep alive for yourselves (Numbers 31:7-18).

Deuteronomy 7 - Promise and Commands Regarding Canaan

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. . . . you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire (Deut 7:1-5).

Deuteronomy 20 – Laws Concerning Warfare

When you go out to war against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and an army larger than your own, you shall not be afraid of them, for the LORD your God is with you, . . . you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God (Deut 20:1-2, 15-18).

Joshua 6 – The Battle of Jericho

So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city. Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword (Josh 6:20-21).⁶

Joshua 8 – The Battle of Ai

Joshua and all Israel . . . turned back and struck down the men of Ai. And the others came . . . Israel struck them down, until there was left none that survived or

⁶ This latter part of the story was conspicuously absent in the *VeggieTales* rendition of this account, *Joshua and the Big Wall*.

escaped. . . . When Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and . . . all Israel returned to Ai and struck it down with the edge of the sword. And all who fell that day, both men and women, were 12,000, all the people of Ai. . . . Joshua . . . devoted all the inhabitants of Ai to destruction. Only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as their plunder, according to the word of the LORD that he commanded Joshua (Joshua 8:21-27).

Joshua 11 – The Battle of Hazor

And Joshua turned back at that time and captured Hazor and struck its king with the sword, . . . And they struck with the sword all who were in it, devoting them to destruction; there was none left that breathed. . . . Joshua captured, and struck them with the edge of the sword, devoting them to destruction, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded. . . . every man they struck with the edge of the sword until they had destroyed them, and they did not leave any who breathed. Just as the LORD had commanded Moses his servant, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did. He left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses (Joshua 11:10-15).

1 Samuel 15 – The Defeat of the Amalekites

And Samuel said to Saul, ". . . go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."

Quick! To God’s Rescue!

These accounts are disturbing and many have tried to explain these facts of history in a well-intentioned effort to “get God off the hook.”⁷ Various rationales are given:

- **God Didn’t Do That!** - Some argue that the decisions to exterminate the defeated foes were made solely by Moses and Joshua. This battle strategy reveals Israel to be a very primitive war-like tribe of nomads fighting for survival.
- **God Didn’t Say That!** - While it is true that God did not expressly give a command to exterminate all living flesh in every battle, we read several times statements similar to Joshua 10:40, which tells us that “Joshua . . . left none remaining, but devoted to destruction all that breathed, *just as the LORD God of Israel commanded.*”
- **God Didn’t Write That!** - Some simply cannot entertain the thought of God ordering such slaughter. These individuals deny that the Old Testament is fully the Word of God but is instead a human record of the events of a barbaric people later civilized by the Judeo-Christian religion. The issue of the authority and inerrancy of Scripture is a major part of this discussion. However, Jesus fully believed and held to a completely authoritative Old Testament (see Matthew 5 and John 10).

⁷ Sam Storms, “Is God Guilty of Genocide?” 6 Nov 2006. Online at <http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/is-god-guilty-of-genocide/>. Accessed August 5, 2008.

- **God Isn't Like That . . . anymore!** - Others make a distinction between the “God of the Old Testament” and the “God of the New Testament.” It is said that the Old Testament God is wrathful and vengeful, while the New Testament God is loving and compassionate. However, within the pages of the New Testament, Jesus Himself refers to God the Father as the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Furthermore, a careful reading of the New Testament reveals that the God of the New Testament *is* a God of wrath, especially in the accounts regarding the end of the age.

There is no escaping the fact that God the Father and Jesus the Son ordered and approved of the extermination of these particular Canaanite people. In these accounts, we see that God initiated the action by singling out those destined for destruction, empowering an agent (usually His chosen people Israel) to accomplish the destruction, and even guaranteeing its success once the proper conditions were met.⁸ It is one thing to understand God demanding the destruction of a Canaanite army but how do we make sense of the command to destroy women and children?

Foundational Issues

How do we explain this? If it were to happen today, the outcry against Israel would be as great as the outcry against al-Qaeda and Nazism. To make sense of these difficult issues, we must understand a few important truths about God, the Scriptures, and even ourselves. After this, we will turn our attention to the matter at hand: the differences between Jewish Holy War and Islamic jihad.

Holy War, the Bible, and You

Do You Have a Leg to Stand On?

In the book *The Science of Good and Evil*, Michael Shermer⁹ wrote of a 1966 study involving 1,066 Israeli children between the ages of eight and fourteen. Jewish psychologist Georges Tamarin told the children the story of the battle at Jericho as found in Joshua 6. These children were asked “Do you think Joshua and the Israelites acted rightly or not?” Two-thirds of the children approved. However, Tamarin then substituted the name “General Lin” for “Joshua” and “a Chinese kingdom 3,000 years ago” for “Israel.” With these changes in place, only 7 percent of the children approved.

Shermer argues that Christians and Jews accept the stories of the Bible for reasons that are not palatable to people like him. Does he have a point? Are Christians inconsistent? No. In fact, the truth of the matter is that people who object to these accounts are the inconsistent ones.

People who object to the command to exterminate the Canaanites must explain the source of their moral conflict.¹⁰ On what basis are they able to make their claims of moral revulsion? Atheists and skeptics enjoy telling Christians that believers are “wrong” to describe certain

⁸ Eugene Merrill, “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” *Show Them No Mercy*, 65.

⁹ Michael Shermer is an agnostic. He publishes *The Skeptical Inquirer* and was featured prominently in the recent documentary *Expelled!* You can visit his website at www.michaelshermer.com. Shermer will appear at the National Conference on Apologetics to debate Dinesh D'souza on the topic “Does God Exist?” on November 8, 2008. See <http://www.nationalapologeticsconference.com/> for more information.

¹⁰ Paul Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks: A Guide to Everyday Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 137.

behaviors as sin and yet they join in the act. In fact, the very existence of right and wrong presupposes the existence of a good, personal God.¹¹ If there is no external standard to which we can all appeal, then all judgments of right and wrong become individual preferences.

Ironically, the moral sensibilities used by such skeptics have been shaped by the Judeo-Christian heritage of the Bible as revealed by God.¹² This heritage teaches us, among other things, the value of human life. The command to kill the Canaanites shocks us only because it seems so at odds with the biblical portrait of God. However, without this good God, there is no such thing as right and wrong. In an atheistic world, there are only valueless, unguided material processes.

Individuals who reject God and then declare an action by God to be evil have no legitimate right to make that claim. The best a skeptic can do in an argument about the morality of an act is to base his judgments on his own personal preferences. A consistent relativist, however, would never argue that personal preferences are binding to another person. Therefore, it matters little what such a person thinks about a particular issue because everyone's position is equally valid. To adopt a relativistic standard destroys the ability to make any moral statement at all.¹³

On the other hand, only Christian theists can make absolute statements on morality. These standards come from a personal God. If a person wants to criticize God for the commands to kill as found in the Old Testament, that person must remember that God Himself is the ultimate moral standard.¹⁴ If God commanded the killing of the Canaanites, the command flowed from his moral character and his (unknown) purposes. Therefore, the command is justifiable. If there is no command given, then the murder of others is not justified.

To reject His standards is to reject Him. However, to reject God relieves an individual from the right to reject the standards. An atheist must borrow God's standards to accuse Him of anything immoral.¹⁵ According to Douglas Wilson, such a person is "like a little child who wants to slap [God] in the face but [must] sit on His lap in order to do so."¹⁶

With this in mind, the mystery in the Jericho account (or any other story of Old Testament warfare) is not that God would exterminate all the Canaanites. Instead, we would do well to ponder why God did not exterminate all of them (and the Jews) sooner! Remember the account in Luke 13 when Jesus was asked about a tower that fell and killed "innocent bystanders." Jesus did not apologize for His Father's sovereign actions. Instead, He calmly told the questioners, "Unless you repent, you too will perish." The questioners should have been more concerned about why they continued to live in the sight of a holy God.¹⁷ So should Richard Dawkins!

¹¹ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 137.

¹² William Lane Craig, "The Slaughter of the Canaanites," <http://www.reasonablefaith.org>. Accessed August 18, 2008.

¹³ Douglas Wilson, *Persuasions: A Dream of Reason Meeting Unbelief* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1989), 25-26.

¹⁴ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 137.

¹⁵ Wilson, *Persuasions*, 27.

¹⁶ Wilson, *Persuasions*, 27.

¹⁷ Sam Storms, "Is God Guilty of Genocide?" <http://www.enjoyinggod.org>. Accessed August 18, 2008.

Two Testaments, One Bible

A common way that some who profess to follow Christ use to make sense of this issue is to state that there are differences in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The picture we see of God in the Old Testament seems to be in contradiction to the picture presented by the New Testament. This contradiction is apparent but not real.

First, we must remember that we cannot elevate the New Testament above the Old Testament. The Old Testament is not “second class Scripture.” To question a part of Scripture is to question the whole. You may “take it or leave it” but you cannot “take part of it and leave part of it.” To denigrate the Old Testament as less authoritative is to denigrate the thousands of years before the New Testament and the people who regarded the Old Testament as authoritative Scripture (including Jesus).

It is true that there is a tremendous amount of violence in the Old Testament. However, it is a false dichotomy to say that love is only present in the New Testament. The New Testament commands to love are frequently just quotations, allusions, or affirmations of Old Testament commands to love. For example, in Leviticus 19:34, God commands the Jews to “treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” The entire book of Hosea reveals God’s undying love for undeserving Israel.¹⁸

In the Bible, God is presented as just and loving, wrathful and merciful. Jesus refers to the destruction of the flood and of Sodom and Gomorrah with no sense of shame or regret. In fact, the New Testament contains many references to God’s wrath, anger, and violence.¹⁹ While the Bible does tell us plainly that “God is love” (1 John 4:7-8), we must not allow that statement to carry weight it is not given. Surely God *is* love but this does not remove His holy wrath or divine justice. There is no contradiction between a loving man hating the sight of a little boy being abused and his duty as a policeman to punish that man for that act.²⁰

God Does Not Request or Need Our Help

Christians should not feel that they must “rescue” God from this embarrassing historical situation. We do not need to “get God off the hook” or “polish God up.” God chose to reveal this story to future generations in the pages of Scripture. God obviously is not embarrassed by the account. If He is not embarrassed, why should we be?

Holy War and Yahweh

We say that God is not embarrassed by the bloody accounts of the Old Testament. Why not? In trying to understand the accounts of Old Testament genocide, we must better understand the Giver of the command to make war. There are several aspects of God and His character that help to shed light on this controversial discussion.

¹⁸ See also Deuteronomy 7:7-15.

¹⁹ See especially Matthew 3:7; Luke 12:5; Luke 21:23; Romans 1:18; Romans 2:5-13; Ephesians 5:6; 1 Thessalonians 2:16; Hebrews 3:7-4:13; Revelation 2:22-23.

²⁰ Geoff Thomas, “Old Testament Genocide,” <http://reformedbaptistfellowship.wordpress.com/2007/08/02/old-testament-genocide/>. Accessed August 18, 2008.

Only God can “Play God”

Life itself is a gift from God. Without God, there is no life. As the only sovereign giver of life, God alone is justified in giving and taking life as He pleases. Job spoke the truth when he said, “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). God was under no compulsion or obligation to create. Likewise, God is not beholden to anyone to sustain that creation.²¹ God does not owe anyone a guaranteed lifespan of seventy years. In fact, we make a grave mistake when we assume that anyone has a fundamental right to life that even God must honor.²² We are wrong to think that we deserve to live or that God owes us life. Instead, it should be seen as an incredible act of mercy that God made only 15-20 sins deserving of capital punishment. God very well could have made *every* sin a capital offense.²³

God is not subject to the same moral obligations that we, His creation, are. None of us has the right to take an innocent life. However, God has no such prohibition. First of all, the aspect of “innocence” exists only in relation to other humans. No one stands innocent before the Lord. Secondly, God can take life as He pleases. We all recognize this when we accuse someone who takes a life of “playing God.”²⁴ In fact, the very statement implies that it is right for *God to play God!* God is the only rightful taker of life and He eventually takes all life – we call it “death.”²⁵ How long we and others live is entirely up to God.

Perhaps an illustration will help.²⁶ Suppose a single man with no family lives in Statesville and makes a good living. His parents are deceased; he has no siblings or family of any kind. He has no debt and is truthfully financially beholden to no one. Furthermore, he gives a large percentage of his income to good charities around the world. Now, further suppose that he takes his considerable remaining income and uses it ways that confound us. He purchases hundreds of useless items on online auctions that serve only to clutter his house. He spends a lot of time watching the televised shopping networks and buys any gadget or device that catches his attention but sometimes fails to take the newly acquired “must-have” out of the box.

Now, it would be likely that you would find this a terrible waste and would proceed to tell him so. You visit his home and ask, “Why are you spending your money in such a haphazard, wasteful way?” His response will be, “Who are you to tell me how to spend my money? It’s my money and my time and my desires – I can and will do with them as I please.” The matter is closed. That is all the argument that he needs to make. He does not need to justify his actions to you. It is his money and he can do with it as he pleases. In the same way, God is not answerable to anyone in the area of the giving and taking of life. Certain things are clearly God’s alone.

²¹ Paul Copan, *That’s Just Your Interpretation: Responding to Skeptics Who Challenge Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 165.

²² This is not referencing the “right to life” movement in opposition to abortion.

²³ Storms, “Is God Guilty of Genocide?”

²⁴ Craig, “The Slaughter of the Canaanites”

²⁵ Norm Geisler, “God isn’t Worthy of Worship if He kills Innocent Children,” in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 119.

²⁶ Adapted from Gregory Koukl, “Can God Kill the Innocent?” [_http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5271](http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5271). Accessed August 18, 2008.

There are other items to consider. The extermination of incorrigibly immoral cultures may be viewed as an act of mercy for the rest of the history of mankind.²⁷ We are all glad that the Nazis and the Soviet Union no longer have power (though other communist dictatorships remain). It just might be that some cultures are removed so that other cultures can survive.

Also, can we not say that the children killed by the Jewish armies entered into a better existence than the one they would have entered had they been allowed to mature to adulthood? It is highly likely that each of those children would have been tainted by their culture and it is an absolute certainty that each child was tainted with the sinful nature passed down from Adam through their parents. The Bible seems to say that children who die in infancy are allowed into the presence of a merciful God for all eternity.²⁸ Their time in heaven will render the few moments of terror null and void (2 Cor 4:17 and 11:22-28).²⁹

God is the Holy Judge

God is holy. Because God is holy, there will come a time when He will deal with the evil that is in this world. Beyond dealing with evil in its abstract, God will also deal justly with unrepentant individuals. This will definitely happen in the life to come and it is only God's mercy and grace that keeps this judgment from happening at this very moment.³⁰

We are so calloused by sin that we joke about it, glorify it by turning it into entertainment, and use it to promote products and lifestyles. The sins that we watch with jaded eye on television are the very sins that God judged in the Old Testament. The Old Testament presents a sovereign and just God whose acts of judgment may take human lives by fire, flood, pestilence, or the sword. He does as He pleases.

In fact, the first exterminations in the Bible originated entirely with God: the flood, Sodom, the Egyptian plagues, and the drowning of the Egyptian army. God did not use any intermediary but was the immediate cause of the death of many.³¹ Both judgments occurred because of God's abhorrence of the moral decadence of the cultures He commanded be destroyed. The Canaanite culture was especially evil with child sacrifice and ritual prostitution. Imagine God's anger at people killing defenseless infants in an attempt to please or manipulate a god that was in fact the devil.³² In Leviticus 18, God commanded the Jews to not follow in the moral evil of the Canaanites. Just how immoral were they? Read through this incredible list of sins that were commonplace:

²⁷ Copan, *That's Just Your Interpretation*, 165.

²⁸ Theologians differ in the reasons for the factuality of that position. For a review of these positions and a defense of the position taken in this paper, see Jeff Spry, "A Biblical Look at the Death of Infants," Audio file located at <http://www.mediafire.com/?8noy7a4q1ja> and PDF file located at <http://www.mediafire.com/?424edtrfbrh>. Accessed August 18, 2008.

²⁹ Some might be tempted to say that if that is the case, then the same argument could be made for abortion today. That is a false analogy. God does not command anyone to have an abortion and we do not live in a culture that is as thoroughly corrupt as the Canaanite society. Today, there is hope. See Geisler in Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 120-121.

³⁰ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 139.

³¹ Thomas, "Old Testament Genocide."

³² John Oakes, "Genocide and the Old Testament," http://www.evidenceforchristianity.org/index.php?option=com_custom_content&task=view&id=3763. Accessed August 18, 2008.

- 1 The LORD said to Moses,
- 2 “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘I am the LORD your God.
- 3 You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and **you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you.** Do not follow their practices.
- 4 You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God.
- 5 Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD.

- 6 No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. ...
- 7 Do not dishonor your father by having sexual relations with your mother. ...
- 8 Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife;
- 9 Do not have sexual relations with your sister, either your father's daughter or your mother's daughter,
- 10 Do not have sexual relations with your son's daughter or your daughter's daughter; ...
- 11 Do not have sexual relations with the daughter of your father's wife, born to your father; ...
- 12 Do not have sexual relations with your father's sister;
- 13 Do not have sexual relations with your mother's sister...
- 14 Do not dishonor your father's brother by approaching his wife to have sexual relations;
- 15 Do not have sexual relations with your daughter-in-law. ...
- 16 Do not have sexual relations with your brother's wife;
- 17 Do not have sexual relations with both a woman and her daughter. ...
- 18 Do not take your wife's sister as a rival wife and have sexual relations with her while your wife is living.
- 19 Do not approach a woman to have sexual relations during the uncleanness of her monthly period.
- 20 Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife ...
- 21 Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, ...
- 22 Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; ...
- 23 Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. ...

- 24 Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because **this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled.**
- 25 Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.
- 26 But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things,
- 27 for **all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you,** and the land became defiled.
- 28 And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you” (NIV).

As you can see, the Canaanites regularly engaged in such depraved actions as child sacrifice and sexual immorality such as homosexuality, incest, and bestiality. Further detestable actions are described in Leviticus 20. God declared that the evil was so bad that “the land vomited out its inhabitants” (Lev 18:25).³³

The question is often asked, “How could a loving God command the death of all those innocent people?” What? I would answer, “How can you justify calling anyone – especially these godless Canaanites – innocent?” When we view this evil culture through the eyes of a holy God, we see that the Canaanites received everything that they deserved. They might not have received *mercy* but no one can say that they received *injustice*.³⁴ Therefore, we can say that it was not wrong for God to bring judgment on the wicked Canaanites and their culture. God could have judged this nation in any number of ways (as He has done in history). However, He chose to exercise judgment in the form of defeat in battle and the resultant devotion of all things to Himself. Therefore, we see that it is not an absolute that the taking of a life is an evil thing.

God, the Holy Judge, is Patient

At the same time, we can never make the incomplete statement that the “God of the Old Testament” is consumed with wrath and judgment. In Exodus, God declares this about Himself:

“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation” (Ex 34:6-7).

In this passage, we see God as holy and wrathful and merciful and gracious. There is no contradiction. He does not allow evil to continue forever but judges that evil through the lens of love and mercy and holiness. In the examples provided earlier, we read of the destruction of entire nations. We must remember that the destruction came after many years of persistence in sin. God never gave the command to destroy a *good* or even *neutral* civilization. However, even with the depravity of the Canaanite culture in sight, we see examples of God's patience with sin:

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And **they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete**” (Gen 15:12-16)

³³ I encourage you to listen to the lesson taught by Brian Pestotnik on February 6, 2008 entitled “How Can You Worship a God Who Kills Innocent Children?” This lecture and others by Brian can be found at <http://www.westernavenue.org/default.aspx?pid=155>. This particular lecture can be downloaded at <http://www.mediafire.com/?z0psutsflje>.

³⁴ Storms, “Is God Guilty of Genocide?”

God waited for over 400 years until the sins of the Canaanites (synonymous with Amorites at the time of Abraham) reached its full level. God even had His chosen people live in slavery for that period of time before calling them out to be His instrument of judgment – this is truly long-suffering.³⁵ Furthermore, we read in the sixth and seventh chapter of Genesis that God gave Noah 120 years to preach repentance to an evil generation before ending the flood that destroyed the world. God told Abraham that the city of Sodom would be safe if he could find but ten righteous citizens (Gen 18). The citizens of Jericho were well aware of the power of God but only Rahab and her family responded to the opportunity to repent (Josh 2:9-13). God exhibited the same patience to the city of Nineveh, who responded in repentance to the very short sermon of Jonah. Later, that same city suffered the harsh wrath of God’s judgment (see Nahum).

The prophet Jeremiah recorded the merciful words of the Lord towards cities filled with evil people. God gives the following promise to all nations:

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it (Jeremiah 18:7-10).

Is it possible that God’s patience is being manifested around the world today - in American and Europe? The words of Christ to unrepentant populations could easily be imposed upon our very culture:

Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! . . . it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, . . . it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you” (Matt 11:20-24).

We are seeing the judgment of God all around us but we are also seeing the restraint of judgment. God’s judgment will surely come but only after a slow and lengthy trip into debauchery.³⁶ Even if God’s patience persists until the return of Christ, why do we object to God doing *during history* what we agree He will rightly do at the *end of history*?³⁷

God is an Equal-Opportunity Destroyer

Israel did not wage war from a position of moral superiority. In Deuteronomy 9, God tells the Jews clearly that it is “not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you. . . . You are a stiff-necked people” (Deut 9:5). The Jews were a sinful people themselves. In fact, the same fate was threatened against Israel if the

³⁵ Craig, “The Slaughter of the Canaanites.”

³⁶ Thomas, “Old Testament Genocide.”

³⁷ Storms, “Is God Guilty of Genocide?”

Jews ever rebelled against God. God warned the Jews that “if you forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God” (Deut 8:19-20).

God's Purpose in Destruction

God plan to save sinners, established before the foundation of the world, was to begin with and work through the establishment of the people of Israel and the land in which they were to live.³⁸ God's command to destroy the Canaanites was linked to God's promise to Abraham that the patriarch of Israel and his progeny would possess the land (Gen. 15:7) and be a channel of blessing to the entire world (Gen. 12:3).

This promise was fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ, born from the unbroken line of descent established and protected by God. That protection necessitated the removal of an evil people from the land. The temptation to compromise their allegiance to their theocratic sovereign by mimicking the immorality of the pagans was great. The Canaanites were a serious threat the nation set apart by God to be His very own (Lev 20:26). In this case, it is not hyperbole to say that the survival of both Israel and the world was at stake because of the pervasive power of sin manifested in the people groups of Canaan.³⁹

In fact, there were occasions when the Israelites failed in their mission to devote all things to God. The power of sin to pollute is seen in the child sacrifice among Judah's kings (2 Kings 16:3 and 21:6); sexual perversion among the people (2 Kings 23:7); the practice of magic and necromancy (2 Kings 21:6); and even the murder of God's prophets (Jer. 26:20-23).⁴⁰ The psalmist later laments his forefathers' failures in this important duty, saying,

They did not destroy the peoples, as the LORD commanded them, but they mixed with the nations and learned to do as they did.
They served their idols, which became a snare to them.
They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was polluted with blood.
Thus they became unclean by their acts, and played the whore in their deeds
(Psalm 106:34-39).

God declared that any assimilation with deviant pagan idolaters was intolerable. This was His way of protecting His chosen people from spiritual and moral decay. This understanding also helps explain why God would issue the command to take the lives of “innocent” children along with the warriors.⁴¹ God did not want His people to mix or intermarry with the evil Canaanites. If the Canaanites were allowed to live, they would spoil the Jewish race as well. God said as much, declaring, “You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or

³⁸ Copan, *That's Just Your Interpretation*, 165.

³⁹ Storms, “Is God Guilty of Genocide?”

⁴⁰ Storms, “Is God Guilty of Genocide?”

⁴¹ It should be noted that all men are sinful from birth due to the sin of Adam. This use of the word “innocent” is used only in relation to other human beings.

taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods” (Deut 7:3-4).

This was all done so that the eternal plan of God would be fulfilled. This incredible wrath, which was poured out only in part on these hopelessly corrupt people, would be poured out in full on the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus absorbed the entirety of God’s wrath for those He came to save. However, God’s wrath remains on others and that wrath will be poured out in full for all eternity of those whose sin is full. The message is the same now as it was then: cry out for mercy and run to Jesus for salvation.⁴²

God is a Warrior

One of the most pervasive of all biblical themes is that of God as a Divine Warrior.⁴³ God appears as a warrior who fights on behalf of His people Israel against their flesh-and-blood enemies. He then fights in judgment against Israel herself. The Bible looks to the time in the future when God will appear once again as a powerful divine warrior.

In the Exodus, the Israelites sang that “The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is His name” (Ex 15:3). This is the first occurrence of the theme but it will occur frequently throughout the rest of the Old Testament. This theme is most evident in Holy War itself. The very heart of “holy war” or *herem* is the presence of God before and in the midst of the army of Israel.⁴⁴ Where God is present, He must be worshipped. In each instance of true holy war, God was present on the battlefield. Thus, it is not too much of a stretch to say that *herem* warfare is worship. The battlefield is sacred to the Jew and to be involved in warfare was a holy activity. This is seen in the preparations for war, the battle itself, and in the aftermath.⁴⁵

Before the battle, Israel was to seek God’s will. Holy war was always initiated by God and never by Israel. God did not fight Israel’s enemies; Israel fought God’s enemies. Also, Israel had to prepare spiritually for battle. Purity laws applied on the battlefield just as they did in the temple or tabernacle. In fact, before engaging in the first battle at the conclusion of the forty years of wandering, the Jewish army practiced circumcision (a potentially disastrous military decision but a perfectly reasonable religious one). To the mind of the Jewish warrior, it was a more terrifying thing to disobey God than to go into battle days after circumcision. We also know that the Israelites offered sacrifices before battle (see 1 Sam 13). The necessity for sacrifice led to Saul’s impatience in waiting for Samuel and betrayed his confidence in God, the Warrior King. We also see the centrality of the presence of God in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant. The ark was a mobile symbol of God’s spiritual presence. The presence of the Ark represented God’s participation in the battle.⁴⁶

During the battle, the Jews camped and marched in a religious manner. While in camp, God’s “tent” was in the middle and He was surrounded by His most devoted fighters, the Levites. The rest of the army was on all sides of the Lord (Num 2). When marching into battle, the army was

⁴² Thomas, “Old Testament Genocide.”

⁴³ Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 13, 16.

⁴⁴ Tremper Longman III, “The Case for Spiritual Continuity” in *Show them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 164.

⁴⁵ Longman, “The Case for Spiritual Continuity,” 164. See also Longman, *God is a Warrior*, 32-43 for more details.

⁴⁶ Longman, “The Case for Spiritual Continuity,” 167.

led by the priests who carried the ark and instruments (2 Chron 20:18-22). Finally, we see that victory in the battle was solely in the hands of God the warrior.

After the battle, the aspect of *herem* is most clearly seen. *Herem* refers to the climactic offering of the conquered people and their possessions to God.⁴⁷ God won the victory and He deserved all the spoils of war. This was the vital step in the process of war. *Herem* had to be observed, as seen in the battles at Jericho (a mighty town) and Ai (an insignificant village). After defeating Jericho, one individual did not observe *herem* and stole some possessions for himself. Therefore, in the subsequent battle against Ai, the Jews were defeated. Once the sin was dealt with by the devotion of the stolen property and the actual destruction of the thief and his entire family, the Jews defeated Ai. Obedience in *herem* brings victory against the mightiest opponents while disobedience brings defeat against the weakest opponents.

After battle, the army went back to the sanctuary and usually sang hymns of praise to the conquering God. We see such a hymn in Psalm 24, which reads in part:

Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle!
Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory! Selah (Ps 24:7-10).

After the return to the city, the people celebrated with music and dance. All was done in praise to God for He had won the victory and He alone deserved the glory.

Primary Issues

In the pages that follow, I will attempt to present several arguments that allow us to make important distinctions between the Holy War commanded by God in the Old Testament and the terrorist attacks of our age. While it is doubtful that these arguments will be sufficient to persuade the atheist or skeptic, they will provide some level of understanding to the believer. At the same time, most Christians who read this paper and ponder this problem will remain troubled by the biblical accounts. The arguments that follow will be logical ones and our emotions will struggle to keep pace with our intellect. We must grow accustomed to our discomfort while growing in our understanding.⁴⁸

Holy War and Israel

In an attempt to understand the Jewish war accounts, we must seek to understand what life was like in the ancient biblical world.

⁴⁷ Longman, "The Case for Spiritual Continuity," 172.

⁴⁸ Oakes, "Genocide and the Old Testament."

War was a Normal part of Life

We must ask ourselves if we are guilty of judging this issue from a modern westernized (Christianized) mindset.⁴⁹ The people living in the ancient Near East led a brutal life. Violence and war were a fact of life. We know that the ancient city of Bethel was destroyed four times in a period of 200 years (1200 – 1000 B.C.)⁵⁰

We get a glimpse of this war-filled mindset in the “matter of fact” telling of these horrific stories in the Bible. It appears the writers of the Old Testament had no moral problems with what God commanded the people to do or with the individuals who carried out God’s command.

We can say that Israel behaved in a manner essentially common to the ancient Near East as a whole.⁵¹ The very existence of a nation depended on its military might, or, in the case of Israel, its ultimate military commander. Even in times of peace, the size and might of a nation’s military functioned as a deterrent to war. Military strength was paramount to a nation’s safety and Israel was no exception.

Israel Never Fought War for the Sake of Fighting a War

Unlike its neighbors, Israel fought only when certain moral duties were commanded by the God of the Bible. The Israelites were not “blood-thirsty savages.”⁵² They did not engage in warfare as the surrounding nations did – raping and pillaging and ravaging the land. There were laws given by God that governed the nation in times of war. Deuteronomy 20 even declares that “only the trees that you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down” (Deut 20:19-20).

The Bible also reveals that God prohibited Israel from conquering other nations that Israel could have conquered if they were simply interested in waging war. The various reasons given include the fact that Abraham’s nephew Lot was the forefather of Moab and Ammon (Deut. 2:9, 19) and Esau was the forefather of Edom (Deut. 2:4; 23:7). Simply put, the Jews fought only when God told them to fight and they fought in the manner God instructed.

Israel Sought Peace before Conquest

The Hebrews had no land and God promised them a land of their own. However, this land was already occupied and the Canaanite city-states were not going to simply hand over the land willingly. It was inevitable that war would be fought.⁵³ Yet, in all this, Israel’s first obligation with other nations was to offer them terms of peace. Even the city of Jericho had time to repent. They knew of the power of Israel’s God for a span of forty years (Josh 2:8-14) and had at least seven days to repent as Israel marched around the city.

In the section of the Law pertaining to war, God issued a specific command to His chosen nation:

When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in

⁴⁹ Craig, “The Slaughter of the Canaanites.”

⁵⁰ William Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1940), 219, as quoted in Copan, *That’s Just Your Interpretation*, 162.

⁵¹ Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 69.

⁵² Copan, *That’s Just Your Interpretation*, 165.

⁵³ Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament*, 67.

it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it (Deut 20:10-12).

Furthermore, we see on many occasions that Israel acted in retaliation and not in aggression:⁵⁴

- 1) The Amalekites attacked Israel in the wilderness and Israel defended itself (Ex. 17:8 and 1 Samuel 15:1-6). The Jews fended off the Amalekites for generations because of their refusal to obliterate the kingdom.
- 2) The Canaanite king of Arad initiated an assault on Israel and took some Hebrews captive (Numbers 21:1).
- 3) Moses sent messengers to Sihon, the king of the Amorites, and asked permission to pass peacefully through the land. Even with the promise to touch nothing of the Amorites, Sihon rejected the request and mustered his troops to fight against Israel. Because of this, Israel took Sihon's land (Numbers 21:21-32).
- 4) The king of Bashan came out to meet Israel in battle (Deut. 3:1). The Israelites defended themselves and took Og's land.
- 5) Five Amorite kings attacked the land of Gibeon because of the peace pact made between Gibeon and by Israel (Josh 10:4). Joshua and the Israelites defended Gibeon and defeated the kings. More died from large hailstones than from the sword (10:11). This is the famous account of the sun "standing still" (10:12-14).
- 6) Midian deliberately attempted to lead Israel into idolatry and immorality. This could not be left unpunished (Numbers 31:2-3; 31:16).

This is in direct contradiction to the history of Islam which has been aggressive and militant from its beginnings. This mindset was put in place by the lust for war of its founder, Muhammad. We will examine this difference more fully in the next section.

The Language of the Old Testament Contains Warfare Rhetoric

The writer of the books of the Bible utilized language common in the Ancient Near East. Knowing this, we can say that the conquest of Canaan was far less widespread and violent than many people assume.⁵⁵ For instance, read the harsh language of the following passage from Deuteronomy:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them (Deut. 7:1-2).

This language is very strong and lists numerous nations that Israel was to destroy completely (devotion). However, in the *very next verse*, we read the following:

⁵⁴ Examples provided by Copan, *That's Just Your Interpretation*, 167-168.

⁵⁵ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 140-141.

You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them: you shall break down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and chop down their Asherim and burn their carved images with fire.

The question must be asked: If the Canaanites were to be utterly destroyed, why would God enter into a discussion about intermarrying with these allegedly doomed people? The answer seems to be in the final verse: the destruction of the Canaanite religion.⁵⁶

The Command to Wage War is Unique and Unrepeatable

Through the centuries, people have misused the Old Testament as an excuse to wage war or incite violence. However, these commands given by God to the Jews were limited to the establishment and preservation of the new nation of Israel as the world's only true theocracy.⁵⁷ The commands to wage war cannot be used to justify the Crusades or any act of aggression today. In fact, Israel herself cannot use these passages to justify its modern military actions. One commentator correctly notes that “the idea of the people of God engaging in warfare against other allegedly ‘pagan’ nations is no longer an option because the original basis of national distinctiveness (as expressed in Deut. 7:6) does not apply to the multi-national community of the followers of Jesus.”⁵⁸

Holy War and Islamic Jihad

We live in a world all too familiar with “holy war.” Most Americans are familiar with the Arabic term “jihad” and think they have a full understanding of the term. Are the two - the killing of the Canaanites and Islamic jihad – equivalent? There are several items to consider before passing judgment.

What is Jihad?

The Arabic word *jihad* can mean different things to different people. At its root is a sense of “struggling” or “striving” for Allah.⁵⁹ In fact, there are at least four meanings:⁶⁰

- 1) Jihad of the heart (spiritual striving)
- 2) Jihad of the hand (physical striving, work, labor)
- 3) Jihad of the tongue (striving in preaching or debating)
- 4) Jihad of the sword (striving in war; a “holy war”)

⁵⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 137, as quoted in Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 141.

⁵⁷ Copan, *That's Just Your Interpretation*, 169.

⁵⁸ Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy, New International Bible Commentary*, vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 114, as quoted in Copan, *That's Just Your Interpretation*, 169.

⁵⁹ John L. Esposito, “Jihad” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:369-373, as quoted in Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 145.

⁶⁰ Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament*, 22.

These first three uses of jihad are often called the “greater jihad.” However, this is not the most commonly understood meaning. Jihad has traditionally had militaristic connotations and this “holy war” is known as the “lesser jihad.”

This militarism has existed within Islam from its outset. *The Encyclopedia of Islam* tells us that “In law, according to general doctrine and its historical tradition, the jihad consists of military action with the object of the expansion of Islam and, if need be, its defense.”⁶¹ In fact, there is little support in the Qur’an to view jihad as an internal struggle. Instead, we read in the Qur’an of physical fighting (*qital*) and a strong militaristic impulse that includes terror: “We shall cast terror into their hearts of those who disbelieve” (3:151); and “strike terror into the enemy” (98:60). The Qur’an promotes *dawah* (inviting others to accept Islam through persuasion or defense of Islam) in 16:125 and 28:87).

Furthermore, the Hadith (early Muslim tradition) connects this *dawah* with violence with the invitation is rejected. On two occasions, we read:

- 1) [Muhammad] . . . invite[d] them to Islam for three days before he was to attack them. . . . If they declined, he was to fight them. . . . so they accepted Islam.
- 2) When you meet polytheists, summon them to Islam. . . . if they accept, refrain from further hostilities. . . . If they refuse to pay the tax, seek Allah’s help and fight them.”⁶²

Bat Ye’or, a Jewish Egyptian scholar, writes that jihad is a religious conception that divides the world into two parts: the Muslim lands and the non-Muslims. Between the two exists a situation of perpetual conflict. This situation of war can be replaced by a temporary situation of semi-peace whereby non-Muslim countries pay a tribute to the Islamic countries. But if they stop paying the tribute, the jihad resumes because jihad is the normal state of relationship between the non-Muslim and the Muslim. Jihad is often compared to the Crusades, but it actually preceded the Crusades by five centuries. It was within the context of jihad that the Christian populations and Jewish communities became subject to the Islamic law.⁶³

The Evolution of Jihad in Islam

Muhammad was born in Mecca in A.D. 570. In his early days of preaching the new revelation he had received, the prophet aroused strong opposition. In 622, Muhammad left Mecca for Medina (about 200 miles north). While in Medina, the followers of Muhammad began to use force in a religious context. While the use of force was restricted to self-defense at the onset, it gradually became more aggressive. In 624, the tide turned completely in the Battle of Badr. The men from Mecca outnumbered Muhammad’s men but the men from Medina were victorious. They interpreted this victory as a sign from God to increase their territory and spread their beliefs.

⁶¹ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “Djihad,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1960-2003), as quoted in Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 145.

⁶² *Tabari* 9:82; *Sahih Muslim* 19:4294.

⁶³ Bat Ye’or in an interview with Michael Cromartie, “The Myth of Islamic Tolerance,” in *Books and Culture* 4, no. 5 (September-October 1998): 38, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/8b5/8b5038.html>.

In the Qur'an, there are very close parallels with Old Testament passages. Surah 8:55 mentions God's victory over "the people of pharaoh." The Muslims attribute the victory to God (Allah) just as the Hebrews did in Exodus 15:1-18. Allah is called the "protector" of the Muslims (8:40) just as YHWH is called the "protection and refuge" of the Israelites (Ex 15:2). Muhammad obviously borrowed heavily from the Bible and saw the Battle of Badr as his own "exodus" from oppression.⁶⁴

Islam Originated and Remains a Militaristic Religion

The Qur'an famously states "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:256). However, compulsion has been and continues to be part of the Muslim mindset.⁶⁵ Bat Ye'or has thoroughly documented the history of Christians and Jews and other non-Muslims living in areas controlled by Muslims. Muslims have indeed shown tolerance to non-Muslims but that tolerance depended entirely on the non-Muslims willingness to pay tribute (*jizya*). There was the constant threat of jihad if the tribute was not paid. The scholar documents the oppression and "open extermination" of Christian populations and Christian culture. Non-Muslims were not allowed to practice their religion openly. They could not repair churches or synagogues.⁶⁶ Tolerance was given to Jews and Christians only on the condition that they would accept and submit to a system of persecution and total inferiority. The governing context for such tolerance was the jihad. The two are linked and cannot be separated.⁶⁷ In contrast, to live as an outsider in Jewish territory during the days of the Old Testament was to live in human circumstances.

Ye'or goes on to write that the "myth of Muslim toleration" did not exist until the twentieth century. As England and France occupied North Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon, India, Egypt, Sudan, Iraq, and Palestine after World War I, they wanted to co-exist peacefully with their new "subjects." England and France offered no protection for the Christian minority in order to benefit economically from the new pro-Arab, pro-Islamic policy.

This policy has enabled Muslims to remain entrenched in these areas and offered no reason for them to seek compromise or to simply get along with the people of other religions in their land. Sadly, this attitude has not changed within Islam. There are still only two peoples: Muslims and people who should be Muslims. The people living in the world are living on two types of land: Muslim territory and territory that should be Muslim. Muslim territory is called *dar al-Islam* ("the abode of peace"). The lands not controlled by Islam are called *dar al-harb* ("the abode of war"). This leads to a further distinction.

⁶⁴ Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament*, 22-26.

⁶⁵ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 147.

⁶⁶ Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997).

⁶⁷ Bat Ye'or in an interview with Michael Cromartie, "The Myth of Islamic Tolerance," in *Books and Culture* 4, no. 5 (September-October 1998): 38, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/8b5/8b5038.html>. Accessed August 24, 2008.

The Battle Plans of YHWH and Allah

Another major difference between Israeli Holy War and Islamic jihad rests in their objective and means to reach that objective. Israel fought for a small parcel of land to occupy. Islam's goal is the world. In the Bible, we see that God's command regarding the Canaanites was limited to a fairly small and specific geographical location. Islam does not recognize any limits on geographical expansion.⁶⁸ The land conquered by Israel in the Old Testament is about the size of New Jersey. This scope of warfare is very small when compared to the militant spread of Islam. Islam is a totalizing religion – all must come under *submission* to Allah (which is what *Islam* means).⁶⁹ With this in mind, we can see that any territory beyond Islam's control is “fair game” for invasion and conquest.

Also, God's command was limited to a fairly narrow window of time – a single generation at the time of Joshua during which the nation existed as a true theocracy. The command to fight was unique and unrepeatable – it was not to be considered an ongoing and normative way of life. God did not give Israel a “blank check” to go around killing whoever they wanted.⁷⁰ The command to kill was directed toward specific wicked people and limitations were even placed on the interaction with them. Through the Bible, God demands different things from Israel at different times – only of those times included “Yahweh Wars.”⁷¹ The Old Testament does not celebrate war but looks forward to Yahweh's establishment of peace for all the nations. Consider that David was refused the privilege of building the Temple precisely because he was a “man of war” (1 Chron 22:8). Solomon, whose name means “peace,” was allowed to build it (1 Chron 22:8-9). The Bible hardly justifies “holy war” as an enduring standard.⁷²

In comparison, Islamic aggression will continue indefinitely. Jihad is a standing obligation to all Muslims.

The Character of YHWH and Allah

In the Bible, God's moral character provides the context for God's decrees and laws. In the Qur'an, only the unrestrained will of Allah is seen as ultimate.⁷³ For the Muslim, Allah is pure will and that will is more basic than considerations of morality and justice. Allah is depicted as capricious. Yahweh, on the other hand, is governed by His characteristics. He will always act in perfect consistency with His attributes. It is only our short-sighted understanding of the completeness of God's attributes that causes us to recoil in reading the Old Testament stories. We have come to expect God to act lovingly and compassionately and mercifully in all accounts. These acts seem to go against all we know of God.

⁶⁸ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 148.

⁶⁹ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 150.

⁷⁰ Oakes, “Genocide and the Old Testament God.”

⁷¹ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 153.

⁷² Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 156.

⁷³ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 153.

However, could it be that we simply do not fully understand or accept all the facets of God's being? To be sure, God is love. However, do we concentrate on God's love at the expense of His holy wrath and justice. This oversight probably explains why we seldom hear sermons on Jesus' righteous indignation, such as when He refers to the Pharisees as a brood of vipers, liars, and children of the devil.

The climax is seen in Revelation 19 with its unfamiliar picture of Jesus – mounted on a white horse with His eyes blazing with fire and His robes dipped in blood. The armies of heaven follow their King into battle. Jesus has a sharp sword protruding from His mouth and an iron rod in His hand as He prepares to tread the winepress of God's wrath. After the beast and false prophet are captured and cast into the lake of fire, Jesus kills the kings and their armies with the sword of His mouth, which is followed by a feast of dead flesh for unclean scavenger birds.

The Goal of YHWH and Allah

Unlike Old Testament Israel, Islam under Muhammad and beyond promotes fighting against all who disagree theologically. Islam often pursues compulsory conversion. Yet Israel did not fight to convert non-Israelites at the point of the sword or to convert anyone to embrace Israel's beliefs and way of life.⁷⁴ In fact, until the time of Constantine, the Christian religion had grown by proclamation of the gospel mixed with deeds of love in Jesus' name – a marked contrast to Islam. To be sure, there have been times when Christians have deviated from the method of growth as prescribed in the New Testament. These are aberrations and no rationale can be deduced from the Scriptures to buttress such actions.

The Differences between the Crusades and Jihad

No one denies the fact that a large number of appalling acts of violence have been perpetrated in the name of the Christian faith. The Old Testament has often been influential in the commission of those acts. There is no better example than in that most terrible of all events: the Crusades. The first Crusade resulted in the capture of Jerusalem and the defeat of its Muslim inhabitants on July 15, 1099. It is recorded with great joy by Christian writers that more than 10,000 Muslims were beheaded in the great Mosque. The Crusades were underway and the Old Testament was marshaled to provide the necessary ideology to continue. A favorite text of the Crusades was "A curse on him who keeps his sword from bloodshed!" (Jer 48:10).⁷⁵

The Old Testament did not launch the Crusades but, as in the American Civil War, the Old Testament was used to rationalize the actions. The Crusades were fought in the name of Jesus Christ but were inconsistent with His teachings and spirit. While the Crusaders may have fought with the cross on their shields, they did not – and could not – cite words from Jesus to justify their actions.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 158.

⁷⁵ Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament*, 28.

⁷⁶ Kenneth Woodward, "In the Beginning There Were the Holy Books" *Newsweek*, February 11, 2002, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/63773?tid=relatedcl>. Accessed Aug 25, 2008.

The Crusades were a radical departure from basic Christian values. They were, in essence, a response to Muslim aggression from the seventh century forward. Islam came to dominate four out of five chief centers of Christianity: (Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople).⁷⁷ There are basic differences that must be understood (as seen in the following table):⁷⁸

The Crusades	Islamic Jihad
The Crusades lasted about 200 years.	Jihad has been ongoing for more than 1,300 years.
The Crusades have been criticized as the beginning of “imperialism.”	Mohammad’s “imperialistic” jihad began more than 500 years prior to the Crusades.
The Crusades began as an effort to recapture land from Muslims once occupied by Christians.	Jihad began with intent to take land never occupied by Muslims in order to establish Islamic rule.
Jesus, in whose name the Crusades were fought, did not teach or exemplify violence against those who refused His message.	Muhammad not only preached violence against nonbelievers, he engaged in it himself.

We once again find the foundation for our actions in the person and work of Christ. Jesus, the fulfillment of the Old Testament, engages Satan, the real enemy (Eph 6:10-18). Jesus and His disciples did not view Rome, Israel’s oppressors, as the enemy and He clearly rejected the violent movement of Zionist zealotry. He expressly declares that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36) but is instead a spiritual kingdom. As such, Jesus’ weapons were prayer, holy living, the proclamation of the gospel, and acts of love and service. There is no place in Christianity for the Molotov cocktail or the suicide bomber. Instead, believers bear the sword of the Spirit and wear the breastplate of righteousness. For Muhammad (and the Crusaders) to engage in military action in the name of God is a reversal and regression to the old order of things that had already been fulfilled in Christ.⁷⁹

The Differences between the Old Testament Holy War and Islamic Jihad

The problem with Islam in general and jihad in particular, then, is that it has the wrong God! The Muslim (and atheist/agnostic/skeptic) would say that our moral duties are constituted by God’s commands. They are correct. However, those individuals and Christians differ greatly over God’s nature. In Islam, Allah’s omnipotence and will trumps all things, even Allah’s nature (which is inherently unknowable). This means that Allah can be – and admittedly is – utterly arbitrary in his dealing with mankind. However, in Christian theology, God acts only according to His nature. Yahweh, the God of the Bible, is not the same as Allah, the god of the Qur’an.

⁷⁷ Rome avoided Muslim occupation.
⁷⁸ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 147.
⁷⁹ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 153.

So, we can see numerous differences between the “YHWH wars” of the Old Testament and Islamic jihad. Those differences are:⁸⁰

	Old Testament Yahweh War	Islamic Jihad
Geography:	War is limited to the Promised Land.	There are no geographical limitations. The entire non-Muslim world is the “abode of war.”
Duration:	War is limited to one primary generation around the time of Joshua.	There are no historical limitations.
Objective:	War is to punish a hopelessly corrupt nation.	War is directed towards non-Muslims with the goal of conversion or death.
Standard of Morality:	God’s holy nature is the source of God’s commands.	Allah’s will commands whatever He wishes, whether that be good or bad.
Fulfillment:	Old Testament war is fulfilled in Christ and His kingdom’s battle against the true enemy – Satan.	Islam’s military aggression is legitimate and will not be fulfilled until the entire world lies under Islamic rule.
Normativity:	Warring against Canaanites was not to be normative but a unique circumstance.	Islamic military aggression is normative according to its founder, its holy book, its history, and its present political realities.

Conclusion

The Old Testament prophets spoke of a time in the far future when weapons of war would be changed into tools of peace. The Old Testament pictures of violence and peace must be nuanced and balanced in our modern minds. As citizens of a heavenly kingdom, we must transform our vision to this vision of hope which will enable us to live in our world with all its violence while clinging to the hope of the consummation of the Kingdom of God – when war shall be no more.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks*, 160.

⁸¹ Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament*, 111-112.

Table of Contents

Moses, Joshua, and United Flight 93	1
Biblical Accounts of “Holy War”	3
Numbers 31 – The Battle of Midian	4
Deuteronomy 7 - Promise and Commands Regarding Canaan	4
Deuteronomy 20 – Laws Concerning Warfare	4
Joshua 6 – The Battle of Jericho	4
Joshua 8 – The Battle of Ai.....	4
Joshua 11 – The Battle of Hazor.....	5
1 Samuel 15 – The Defeat of the Amalekites	5
Quick! To God’s Rescue!	5
Foundational Issues.....	6
Holy War, the Bible, and You	6
Do You Have a Leg to Stand On?	6
Two Testaments, One Bible.....	8
God Does Not Request or Need Our Help.....	8
Holy War and Yahweh.....	8
Only God can “Play God”.....	9
God is the Holy Judge.....	10
God, the Holy Judge, is Patient.....	12
God is an Equal-Opportunity Destroyer	13
God’s Purpose in Destruction	14
God is a Warrior.....	15
Primary Issues.....	16
Holy War and Israel	16
War was a Normal part of Life	17
Israel Never Fought War for the Sake of Fighting a War.....	17
Israel Sought Peace before Conquest.....	17
The Language of the Old Testament Contains Warfare Rhetoric.....	18
The Command to Wage War is Unique and Unrepeatable.....	19

Holy War and Islamic Jihad.....	19
What is Jihad?.....	19
The Evolution of Jihad in Islam.....	20
Islam Originated and Remains a Militaristic Religion	21
The Battle Plans of YHWH and Allah.....	22
The Character of YHWH and Allah	22
The Goal of YHWH and Allah	23
The Differences between the Crusades and Jihad.....	23
The Differences between the Old Testament Holy War and Islamic Jihad.....	24
Conclusion	25