

## **The Issue of “Holy War” – Tim Keller**

### **The Problem**

One of the biggest problems the modern reader has with Joshua and Judges in particular, and the Old Testament in general, is God’s order to Israel that they “drive out” and evict the inhabitants of Canaan from their homeland. Here we have a nation doing what today would be condemned by world opinion. What is done seems identical to modern “ethnic cleansings,” as when one ethnic group seeks to violently force out or wipe out another group. While we would consider it legitimate for people to engage in warfare in order to defend their homeland, most people today would not see it as legitimate to go to war to confiscate someone else’s homeland.

And in addition, Judges seems to give a warrant for “holy war.” If we allow the conquest of Canaan in God’s name to be a righteous action, then why cannot others claim that they are going to war in God’s name against “wicked infidels” and so treat them with violence.

What do we say to all this?

### **A False Solution**

It is far too easy to respond that the Old Testament was a more primitive stage in religion, and that it contains many barbaric statements and directives that we cannot accept any more. There is a severe problem with such a view.

Why can’t we accept them now? The main reason that we consider the conquest of Canaan problematic is because it breaks the sixth commandment (“You shall not murder,” Exodus 20:13) and the eighth commandment (“You shall not steal,” Exodus 20:15). But the Ten Commandments are in the Old Testament! So if we reject the Old Testament as God’s true revelation, then on what basis do we object to the “immorality” of the conquest? It is arbitrary to say I like Exodus 20 if we then also say I don’t like Judges 1. If the Old Testament is not God’s word, then who’s to say that one chapter is better than the other? To deny the authority of the Old Testament in order to “solve” this issue is like burning down your whole house in order to kill a rat that lives in it. If the Old Testament is not God’s word, then “we must find a totally different basis for what is right and wrong (which is impossible, see pages 124-125). But we can’t quote the Ten Commandments anymore; so what is wrong with a little imperialism anyway?!

The real problem (and it is a real problem!) is that God allows the Israelites to do in Joshua and Judges what he forbids anyone else to do all through the rest of the Bible. The moral law, as it is laid down in both the Old Testament and the New Testament for all time, is completely against conquest. When we kill people who have not attacked us and take their land, that is always considered theft and murder. So why does God allow this exception here? And why can’t this part of the Bible be used as a warrant for “holy wars” today?

### **A Way Through the Problem**

There are several all-important differences which distinguish the mission of Israel to occupy Canaan from any other military action, either before or since.

1. The war is not carried out on the basis of race. God’s order to evict the Canaanites is not a directive to remove or kill people of a different race. When the invasion of Canaan began, Israel’s spies were helped by Rahab, a resident of Jericho (see Joshua 2; 6:20-25). Rahab was not only a Canaanite, but a prostitute—she could have been seen as both a racial and a moral “outsider.” Yet because she trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel, she became part of the people of Israel and stayed in Canaan. The purpose of the mission was to “break down [the] altars” of the idols (Judges 2:2) and evict pagan worship (and therefore pagan worshippers), not necessarily the people of any particular race. So this campaign is not a warrant for the warfare of one ethnic group against another.
2. The war is not carried out on the basis of imperialistic expansion. Even within this special mandate, God does not allow the Israelites to plunder or enslave any of the people with whom they do battle. They are to be defeated and driven out—period. For example, in Joshua 7, Achan is judged for keeping plunder from a Canaanite town. What was normal for all military actions and invasions at that time was completely forbidden to the Israelites. Why? Because the purpose of the mission was not to become prosperous and powerful, but rather, to create a country in which the Israelites could serve and honor God.  
The need to evict the Canaanites was probably due to the Israelites’ weakness in the face of temptation. In other words, the eviction was not a testimony to how virtuous the people were, but to how spiritually weak they were. This campaign cannot be a warrant for the imperialistic colonization by one country of another country.

3. The war is carried out as God's judgment, and through direct revelation. To Joshua (Joshua 1:1-9) and through Joshua (in Joshua 23:1-16), and again through the priest's ephod (Judges 1:1), God gives specific, verbal revelation to the Israelites to evict the Canaanites. Nothing less direct and unmistakable could be the basis for such action. It would not be enough to say:"

*"We've thought about it and prayed about it and talked about it, and we think the Lord is leading us to break the sixth and eighth commandments (or any of the other ones).*

But why would God command such a thing? One theologian, Meredith D. Kline, has called this "the intrusion ethic." God, of course, knows the end from the beginning. He alone has the right and the knowledge to see persons who will be condemned on Judgment Day when his Son returns, and to bring a judgment down on those people "early." Thus God, the Judge of all, can determine to begin to mete out justice on them now, rather than waiting for the Last Day. Therefore, the future judgment "intrudes" on the present. This is not totally unusual, because the blessings of the gospel are also intrusions of the future grace into the present.

Therefore, this is not a mandate for believers in general to move coercively against unbelievers, nor any warrant for a "holy war" by one faith against another. The way we know the Lord's will is to read the Ten Commandments and the other directives of the Bible to us—not to try to imitate everything described in all the histories of the Bible. Many people run into the same problem when they say: We are running our church just as God commands us to in the book of Acts. In Ephesians and 1 Timothy, Paul clearly lays down principles for church order, which we don't always see in Acts. That's because at some points, the book of Acts only describes what the church did, not what God told it (and tells us, through his word) to do. We must be much more cautious in drawing hard-and-fast conclusions from historical passages.

### **What is the Bible?**

This issue highlights the importance of the orthodox Christian view of God's revelation. All branches of the institutional church—Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant—historically agree that the Bible is entirely the revelation of God's will. There are two opposite views, however, that could be very dangerous and lead us into "holy war." On the one hand, some people believe that they are getting direct revelation from God—on an equal level with that which Moses or Joshua or the apostles received. If you believe in that sort of "continuing revelation," then there is no control or check against "holy war." You could always say "that God is calling you to attack in his name and wipe out some group which is "of the devil."

On the other hand, many, many people do not believe the Bible is a divine and inerrant revelation at all. But if you don't believe in the authoritative word of God, then there is also no control or check against "holy war." You could always say that your conscience and conviction or culture is calling you to attack and wipe out some group of people.

But if I believe the orthodox view of the Bible, then there is a very real control and check on how I use political power. I know that God has spoken without error, in the Scriptures, and I seek to live in obedience to them; I neither add to his word, nor subtract from it.

### **Read With Humility**

It is extremely easy for contemporary people to feel condescending toward, or offended by, the actions of many of those whose stories are related in the book of Judges. God's command to conquer Canaan is difficult enough to understand. But in addition, Judges recounts supposed "good guys" treating women, children and people of other races in evil ways.

But let's not assume that, if we had been born in this ancient era, we would have been so much more enlightened than everyone else. We should realize that we have the advantage of living in a society deeply influenced by the Ten Commandments and other biblical influences on our civilization.

So, when we read of these ancient men and women, we do need humbly to remember that our own inner natures and hearts are not fundamentally better than theirs were. Their flaws may be different, and their effects at times writ larger than ours, but they flow from the same rebellious hearts as ours. We must be willing to look for the ways in which we are like the people in the narrative, and not pander to our pride by focusing on the ways in which we are unlike, and "better than," them.

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