

*“God, Genocide, Other Atrocities and Etc.”*

## GOD, GENOCIDE, OTHER ATROCITIES AND ETC.

by Drew Leonard

This is a fact: the Old Testament includes a command for the Israelites to destroy the Canaanite and Amalekite people, including women and children. Regarding the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, the Pentateuch includes the command to “utterly destroy them” (Deut. 7:1,2). And, the Bible later includes the remark that the Israelites “utterly destroyed everything in the city [Jericho], both man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword” (Jos. 6:21). And, in one other place, regarding the Amalekites, the author of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel includes that God had commanded through Samuel to Saul that they “strike Amalek and 'utterly destroy' all that he has” including the putting to death “both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” (1 Sam. 15:1-3). The problem before us is apparent: how can an (allegedly?) “loving” God give such a command to kill infants or commit genocide? how can God maintain the idea of being “loving” while simultaneously giving the command to kill entire people, including the infants?

### **Establishing Two Worlds**

First, it is imperative to understand that there are only two possible worldviews: naturalism or supernaturalism. These two worldviews bring with them a host of other ideas. So, in a naturalistic paradigm, notions of “miracle,” “afterlife,” “resurrection” and the like are simply discredited. But, in a “supernatural” paradigm, each of those elements are treated as plausible. Now, why is this important?

Well, this distinction or differentiation completely changes the way that we approach the question. Imagine, hypothetically, that there is a supernatural Being that can involve Himself in our human affairs (which “naturalism” assumed was a “closed system”), who can function “above” the “natural laws” that He set into motion (not being restricted by His own laws) and who can directly speak to human beings. If there were such a character, then approaching the “command” (as in Deut. 7 or 1 Sam. 15) finds itself in an entirely different context. A naturalistic paradigm would isolate the command into a meaningless, purposeless atmosphere, whereas a “supernaturalistic” paradigm would force us to think about the command in light of a supernatural worldview and Being. How might this force us to reassess the command?

### **The Context of the Biblical Canon**

The context of the Bible places God into a specific atmosphere and insists that He is of a certain character. This is imperative to grasp. The Bible insists that God's character is “compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and truth” (Exo. 34:6,7). It's true that there are other passages that ascribe other qualities (such as being

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“jealous” and etc.) to God, but again, these fall into a perfect and harmonious tension with His being a God of love, mercy, grace, etc., etc.

Now, how does this impact our discussion of God's command to “utterly destroy” the Canaanites and Amalekites, including the women and children/infants? Well, it assumes that – whatever the reason for such a command might be – the command falls within the character of God. In a naturalistic paradigm, we could isolate the command and insist that such comes off as an “atrocious,” but within the context of the biblical text, God's loving character is assumed. So, God's character is 1) loving, 2) purposeful and 3) ethical, according to the Bible. And, this means that such a command – somehow – is to be read “in line” with all of that. McGuiggan consistently reminds us that we should commit to the context in which God is placed and commit to the idea that He is intent on doing what He can to redeem a fallen world.<sup>1</sup>

Now, here's an interesting observation that should be made: it is the Bible that informs us of the “command” in the first place. Let me rephrase . . . We can't separate the context of the biblical narrative and God's place as a character within that narrative from the command that comes from Him. To read God as a genocidal maniac betrays the very text that tells us about Him; the same text that informs us of His “command” is the same text that insists that He is loving, merciful, holy, etc. Everything that the Bible attributes to God is, of necessity, to be assumed to be “in line” with his character.

Interestingly enough, the atheistic/naturalistic objection to the Old Testament and to the God of the Old Testament is two-pronged, though it is often misunderstood as being one. Let me explain . . . One objection is against the historicity of the Old Testament narrative; the second objection is against the ethics of God within the Old Testament. It is extremely important to make a distinction between these two objections. Some attack the historicity of the Old Testament, but to discredit the historical narrative of the Old Testament (on naturalistic principles) and then to attribute “atrocities” to God, while dismissing the entire context in which God makes the commands is highly irresponsible. (I'll say more about context of ethics later.) Again, the “historicity” of the Old Testament is no debate that I care to engage in here, but I am saying that one can't simply dismiss integral parts of the biblical narrative and then assess God's actions/commands in an entirely different context. In order to give a fair assessment of God's actions, one must keep such actions within their certain context.

### **God's Command as Punishment**

But, there's another dynamic to all of this that really bears examination. We must recognize that God's command against the Canaanites and Amalekites was (again) in the context that these nations had “filled up” their sins (Gen. 15:16; Lev. 18:25; Deut. 9:4,5; cf. Heb. 11:31). In other words, the Old Testament insists that there is a “judgment” or “punishment” element to the invasion of the land of Canaan, but this raises a question

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<sup>1</sup> McGuiggan, Jim, *Joshua 6:21, Killing Babies (1-3)*, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20160424082444/http://jimmcguiggan.com/reflections2.asp?status=Bible%20Difficulties>> Article. Online.

about God's view towards the women and children/infants. Did God “punish” the infants also? Were the infants guilty of “filling up” the sins of the land of Canaan?

Here, it is necessary to make a distinction between “punishment” and “suffering.” In a number of fantastic articles/places, McGuiggan insists that we must see a difference between the two. When a criminal parent is jailed, the child suffers, but the child is not being punished. Hundreds of examples like this could be duplicated. The point is this: passages (such as Deuteronomy 24:16 or Ezekiel 18) insist that God won't “punish” the innocent or righteous. So, whatever else we make of God's “invasion” of Canaan, we can't conclude that the Old Testament endorses a view of God that has Him “punishing” the innocent (such as babies).

My conclusion, here, is this: God's “invasion” of Canaan is a “punishment” upon the wicked, who had “filled up” the sins of the land, but some of the innocent “suffer” the fallout.

### **A Brief Assessment of Ethics**

In light of what has already been stated, let's visit the idea of “ethics” and context. First, the notion of “ethics” isn't a “one-size-fits-all” matter, so some distinction might need to be made between actions that might appear to be similar or the same. For instance, cutting off a fellow's arm could be viewed as an “atrocious” in one context but as an act of love in the case of a surgery that could save the body from further infection. A psychopathic serial killing might be viewed quite differently from a normally calm, warm, friendly man's defense of his family in an invasion of his own home in the middle of the night. Suicide is different from heroism (cf. Jdg. 16:28-31; Heb. 11:32). The list goes on-and-on . . .

Second, it should be noted that this is not “situational ethics” where our ethics morph with what suits us. The “act” in each case is a different act entirely. Sure, above, a bald statement of “he killed the man” could be said, or “he cut off his arm” could be said, but “ethics” involves multiple variables and can't be reduced to something as sterile and simple as to whether or not an arm was cut off or a person was killed. I mean to say that there are variables, such as purpose, motive, pressures, attitudes (pre- and post-), ethical beliefs, etc. that all affect the “rightness” or “wrongness” of a particular action.<sup>2</sup> So, while a death (killing) may have occurred in two cases, the death (killing) in one case could be “wrong” (so, murder) but “right” (for some reason) in another. The variables are real and thus impact the “rightness” or “wrongness” of an action.

Third, some ethical scenarios are simply exceptional. Williams raises the instance of the scrambling of jets on 9/11, where one of the planes had been hijacked and the two options were 1) to leave the terrorists alone and let them use the jet at their own wishes to wreak further terror or 2) to deal with the terrorists, stopping their plot, by shooting down the jet, including the innocent civilian life on-board.<sup>3</sup> He insists that this ethical scenario

<sup>2</sup> McGuiggan, *Joshua 6:21, Killing Babies (3)*

<sup>3</sup> Williams, Peter, *The New Atheists and the Old Testament*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?>

is “exceptional.”<sup>4</sup> He further insists that God, in the face of the dilemma with the sins of the Canaanites and Amalekites, finds Himself in an “exceptional” circumstance.

Fourth, it's worth noting that God is “bound” ethically by His own character. His nature compels Him to stay true to His own nature. It's not that there is an ethical system that governs over Him (thus making Him inferior) or that He arbitrarily sets forth what is ethically “right” or “wrong” (thus allowing Him to call ethical shots arbitrarily, which would allow Him to make crimes “right” and good deeds “wrong”); no, God must remain true to His character. So, the New Testament even remarks that there are things (such as “lying,” cf. Heb. 6:18,19) that God cannot do. (As a brief note, when we speak of the “omnipotence” of God, we should understand what we precisely mean by that; God's “all-powerful” nature is still in perfect harmony with His other attributes, so He's to remain perfect in His “just,” “logical” and etc. qualities also. He must remain true to His collective character/nature. He can't pardon the impenitent; He can't create rocks too big for Himself to lift; etc., etc.) I'll make a point upon this in the next section.

How do these observations help us? Well, I think that it's generally accepted that there is a real ethical difference between a man's shooting himself in the head with a pistol and a man's diving on top of a grenade in order to save his friends in the blast radius. I think that most recognize that there is a real ethical difference between a terrorist act of shooting down a plane and the (possible) shooting down a plane with innocent life on-board to prevent further terror. The reason for this is that certain variables place these “actions” into contexts where the action itself takes on a different ethical value. It'd be nearly insane to conclude that all four of these options (just listed) are paralleled to the actions of psychopath or a genocidal maniac. And, I'm suggesting that to charge God, in the Old Testament, with such an accusation is also equally unfounded and naively irresponsible in its assessment of the Old Testament context and narrative, which actually insists that God must remain true to His nature/character and thus can't find Himself in the category of being so criminal. A better assessment must be given. This brings me to another point, which I'll use Genesis 22 to demonstrate.

### **God's Manner as Demonstrated by Genesis 22**

I don't think that God command things like “take your only son, Isaac, whom you love and offer him as a burnt offering” (Gen. 22:2) without establishing some kind of basis upon which He, as a loving and faithful God, should be trusted. In other words, I don't think that God could command such things, unless He had also delivered some kind of exceptional basis to establish Himself as reliable, trustworthy, loving and faithful. I don't think that God could have approached Abraham “cold turkey” with such a requirement.

Instead, in Genesis 22, what we find is that God had actually so established His character and nature to Abraham and that Abraham's faith in God had been “so

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v=ulCbh\_1SlwE&t=2232s> 18:30-20:45. ReasonableFaithTour. Video. Online.

4 *ibid.*

developed” that the command (in Genesis 22:2) was nothing more than “the cherry on top” of Abraham's climactic faith. In fact, the narrative of Genesis 12-25 develops this point carefully and lets the reader know that Genesis 22 was the climactic act of Abraham's faith – something that God had prepared Abraham for over several years – and not something required of him “right out of the gate.”

Instead, we find example-after-example where God had established Himself to Abraham as a reliable, faithful, trustworthy, loving God. First, God sent Abraham from his father's country to a new land, and God took care of Abraham for several years, until the “binding of Isaac” in Genesis 22 (cf. Gen. 12:1-3). Copan is probably right to point out that the command to “go” in Genesis 22:2 would have reminded Abraham of the former/prior command to “go” in Genesis 12:1; in the earlier instance, God had been faithful, so what would Abraham have thought of God in this new instance of the same command?<sup>5</sup>

Second, God promised Abraham a son. In fact, the entire Abrahamic promise “hinged” on the birth of the son, Isaac (Gen. 15:1-6). God had promised Abraham to be the “father of many nations.” Later, when Isaac was born – after the stunt of Abraham and Sarah to “help” God bring forth a child, Ishmael – Abraham must have known that God was “faithful” and “reliable” and “trustworthy” and didn't need Abraham's help or adjustment to make His plan work. It was “in the face of the odds” (old age; barrenness) that God was still able to bring forth Isaac. God's character, again, with Abraham, was being vindicated, publicly manifested, exhibited.

Third, even before Isaac had been born by promise, God had made preparations to take care of Hagar and Ishmael (cf. Gen. 16:10; 17:20; 21:12,13). Copan notes that, without God's promise, Abraham would've been expelling both of them to almost-certain death, but with God's promise, Abraham could trust God to take care of them.<sup>6</sup> It is no accident that God had made promises to Abraham pertaining to the care of Hagar and Ishmael; God was developing Abraham's ability to place his faith in God, in spite of the odds and in spite of what appeared to be overwhelming.

So, by the time the reader reaches Genesis 22, Abraham and God have developed quite the relationship with each other over the past several years. Abraham has found reasons to trust God, the God who has been faithful in 1) the command to leave his father's country, 2) the supernatural birth of Isaac and 3) the protection and care for Hagar and Ishmael. When Genesis 22 comes into the narrative, Abraham and God are in a very unique place, where God is overwhelmingly faithful to Abraham and His promises to Abraham, but it remains to be seen as to whether or not Abraham is overwhelmingly faithful to God. The command to “offer Isaac” would expose exactly how “strong” Abraham's faith was. Both things are demonstrated in Genesis 22 itself.

It might have been surprising to us to find Abraham's faithfulness to be unwavering, but with the kind of “foreground” that we've just observed in the Genesis 12-25 narrative, it's not at all surprising. God has prepared Abraham for this “test” (Gen. 22:1) of faith.

<sup>5</sup> Copan, Paul, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, pg. 45, BakerBooks. Grand Rapids, MI. 2011. Print.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, pg. 47

And, in the very fabric of the narrative, we find both God's loyal, trustworthy, loving character and Abraham's quality of faith on full display. God's character is seen in the very command to Abraham, where God's tenderness comes through (“take your son, your only son, whom you love”); God is fully aware of the seriousness of the command and how difficult it must be for a father to sacrifice his son. But, Abraham's faith is attested to in the narrative also, when he uses the plural to say to the young men, “We will worship; we will return to you” (Gen. 22:5).

So, let me conclude what I'm saying about Abraham and Genesis 22 and then use that point to move forward and back to our assessment of the Canaanite problem . . . I think that God absolutely had to establish His character with Abraham before He could ever give the command that is listed in Genesis 22:2. I'm suggesting that God's nature wouldn't allow Him to give such an expectation of Abraham without some “frontloading” that provides Abraham with a reason to place faith in Him. At what other point has God demanded “faith” from a human being without any supporting evidence or reason?! I'm suggesting that God would thus be demanding “blind faith” of a human being in such a scenario, and I'm also suggesting that this violates God's character as we have Him presented in both Old and New Testaments.

So, back to the question of God's character in light of His command to invade the land of Canaan . . . I'm suggesting that God's command (in Deuteronomy 7 and 1 Samuel 15) is “frontloaded” by His character. I'm suggesting that to paint God as a “genocidal maniac” doesn't come close to doing justice to the situation/scenario in which the Old Testament finds itself. I'm also suggesting that this “invasion” is a unique or exceptional ethical situation, quite like the 9/11 scenario, raised by Williams (above). To put all of this back into its proper context is a necessity for making sense out of the whole thing.

### **Another Look at the Contextual Worlds**

In light of all that we've read thus far, I'd like to make a quick assessment of “naturalism” vs. “supernaturalism.” In a “naturalistic” paradigm, we have 1) no personal God, 2) no direct statements from any “god,” 3) no miracles and 4) no afterlife. In a “supernaturalistic” paradigm, we have 1) a personal God, 2) direct statements and involvement from this personal God, 3) miracles and 4) an afterlife. Obviously, then, we find two radically different contexts in which to drop this scenario of the command to invade Canaan.

In a “naturalistic” paradigm, the command to “utterly destroy” the Canaanites becomes senseless in two major ways: 1) the command was never given by God because this kind of “God” doesn't exist, so the command is ahistorical/fictitious, probably written in later as an insertion from an Israeli scribe that wished to give propaganda for Israel's legitimacy as a nation, as the other ancient Near Eastern cultures did with their pagan gods and 2) the command, even if it were historically given by an alleged “god,” would be a moral atrocity. So, first, naturalism attempts to debunk the possibility of historicity and then, second, attacks the ethic of the command.

But, as pointed out earlier, these are two different attacks . . . If the “naturalist” were to concede the first point, then the second becomes a question of explaining how the command can “fit” with the notion of a loving, faithful, etc., etc. kind of “God.” On the other hand, the “ethical quality” of the command (to destroy the Canaanites) goes “hand-in-hand” with the narrative into which God, the character, is placed, so attacking the “ethical quality” of the command, while divorcing it (the command) from the narrative into which is placed (with integral notions of a personal God, who has an high ethical character, who can work miraculously and does provide an “afterlife”) is to attack an “ethical quality” of a command apart from the narrative that necessarily reshapes how we view the command. Once more then . . . It is the very context of the “command” (with all of those integral elements) that makes me commit to the notion that the command is not an ethical violation. As one would not charge either the surgeon or the man who fell on the grenade out of heroism with a “moral atrocity” because of the context into which these actions were located, neither should one charge the “command” of Deuteronomy 7 or 1 Samuel 15 as a “moral atrocity” until the full context is assessed and respected.

### **Two Different “Supernatural” Worlds?**

Now, let's assume, for the moment, that you accept the “context” presented by the Old Testament. Let's assume that you reject “naturalism” and accept the worldview of “supernaturalism.” Is that enough? Or, should we be even more precise and define more clearly what we mean?

I think, even within the “supernatural” worldview, we need to make a strong distinction between the Old and New Testament “world” or “context” and the 21<sup>st</sup> century context. Just as there are differences between “naturalism” and “supernaturalism,” there are differences between the “supernaturalist” worldview in the times of the biblical narrative and characters and the worldview today. For instance, now, God no longer 1) works “miracles” – if appropriately articulated – and 2) no longer speaks directly to human beings. (I'm not interested, here, in proving these two points. I'm merely asserting them.) Now, how does this change things also?

Well, I think this is a critical observation because it makes the commands to Abraham and the Israelites “exceptional.” I mean to say that God was more directly involved in the times of the biblical narrative than He is today. God's direct command to Abraham will not be replicated to us today. God's direct command to the Israelites will not be replicated to us today. We read the text, understanding the “exceptional” nature of those commands and also understanding that those commands are not to be made “transferable” to our own context.

Again, the “context” out of which these “commands” were given is of the utmost importance, here. To read these texts as God's modern warrant for “child sacrifice” or as God's modern call for “genocide” is to misread the texts; actually, we ought to recognize the exceptional nature of the commands – and I think that the Bible expects us to see these commands as “exceptional.” This would certainly be a poor starting point to

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convince a non-believer about the character of God – but in these circumstances, that's hardly what we have, a “starting point on God's character,” that is.

No, in these cases, we have “commands” that stem from a much deeper tradition about God's character, a tradition that has already established His commitment to loving, faithful, reliable purposes to humanity and to the attempt to redeem a fallen world. Again, I think most serious Bible readers would admit that this is a place within the biblical text that we don't quite feel comfortable, and that is because it's an “exceptional” case of ethics with the God that the text presents as loving, faithful, etc., etc., etc. The Jew/Christian hardly approaches Genesis 22 or Deuteronomy 7 with the notion of, “Now, these are the acts to follow if you want to be a Jew/Christian.” No, most serious readers know that these exceptional cases aren't the standard for Jews/Christians to practice; there's simply “something about them” that makes us feel that they aren't to be transferred over into our own practices, and, all of the other other commands and qualities laid out within the Bible seemingly speak against such practices. Again, we must recognize God's character, commit to that and recognize that these “exceptions” fall under or are assumed to be “in line” with such, even if we suffer at articulating it the best.

### **God, Israel and Ethics**

Briefly, there are a few questions that I think deserve some attention. These are the following . . . Should intervention happen against criminals? Should wicked nations be permitted to continue their crimes? Now, yet again, “naturalism” may even take an “higher ethical road” than the philosophy permits. It may be that some “naturalists” argue that intervention should happen and that the crimes should be stopped. (It's not the major point of this paper, but it is worth noting in passing that “naturalism” has no basis upon which to pronounce “ought” or “should” upon others. There is no basis for “morality” and thus “moral responsibility” within such a philosophy. So, charging an alleged “God” of the Old Testament with committing “moral atrocities” is absurd in light of the fact that “naturalism” has no basis by which it can measure “moral value.”)

But, here's the point . . . If the “naturalists” agree that intervention should happen and that crimes of nations should be stopped, then why is it wrong for “God” to intervene if that is what is morally “right.” (Technically, “naturalism” provides no basis for any answer here. They shouldn't say that intervention “should” or “shouldn't” happen. The philosophy demands that the consistent “naturalist” remains neutral. Neither option has any more moral value than the other.) I'm simply noting that God's intervention is “in line” if He is “punishing” wicked nations.

So, why would it be a problem for God (who, per “naturalism,” allegedly exists) to use a nation, like Israel, to be His political/military representative in “dishing out” what is precisely due to the criminals that had “filled up” the measure of “sins”? If there is such a thing as “sin” (or “moral wrongs”), then why is it a problem that God 1) is directly involved in judging such, 2) uses Israel as a tool to judge such or 3) judges even Israel for their own, personal atrocities – which, at times, mirrored the Canaanites or 4)



providentially sees to it that wicked nations meet their demise because of sin's expense? I'm suggesting that there is a context here. I'm suggesting that the “moral context” might require God to intervene, in spite of the “fallout” or “mess” that comes with the intervention. I'm suggesting that God (an omniscient Being, according to the context of the Old and New Testaments) might know the best moral approach – at least, that's what the Bible says of Him – and that the command finds itself in the character of One who is committed to good and noble purposes. This is hardly the command of a loveless, tyrannical, genocidal maniac.

### **Observations About the Command Itself**

Regarding the “command(s),” Paul Copan makes some interesting observations. Here, we do not want to commit to the suggestions but rather want to document them for further thought . . .

First, it is possible that the command itself is heightened rhetoric; in other words, the historical texts of Joshua and Judges might reflect that the “utter destruction” was simply hyperbole, as reflected in ancient Near Eastern texts of the day (cf. Jos. 10:40-42; 11:16-23; 14:12-15; 15:13-19; Jdg. 1:21,27,28; 2:3).<sup>7</sup> It is possible that the texts, themselves, demonstrate this “rhetorical tension” since commands like “utterly destroy” (Deut. 7:2) are placed alongside “don't marry or covenant with them” (Deut. 7:2,3), raising the question of, “Why would the command of 'don't marry' need to be given if the people were going to be 'utterly destroyed' literally?”<sup>8</sup> Further, it's worth recognizing that the Amalekites did continue to exist, even after the events of 1 Samuel 15 (cf. 1 Sam. 27:8; 30:1,17,18; 1 Chron. 4:43; Est. 3:1 w/1 Sam. 15:8).<sup>9</sup> So, maybe, it is simply hyperbole in some of these cases? But, there are some difficulties that this observation also doesn't handle.

This suggestion doesn't handle the “ethic” of the command from God in the first place; even if the “command” wasn't actually carried out with pure literalism, it still raises the question about the “ethic” of God's command (e.g. “how can God even command such a thing if it's unethical?”). Second, the command of “don't marry” could be given by God's foreknowledge because He knew that the people would fail to observe the extermination law; in several Old Testament cases, God gives commands, apparently knowing that the people would fail, but the law serves to “stem the tide” against what would have been a further apostasy from Him; it is possible that this is what is happening in Deuteronomy 7:2,3. Finally, the continued existence of the Amalekites/Canaanites could be easily explained; if portions of the people were out of the land or if the nations had later sojourners that moved in, a later existence of the people wouldn't necessarily mean that the command to “utterly destroy” hadn't been followed.

Second, specifically, in relation to the command pertaining to Amalek, it is possible

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7 *ibid*, pg. 170,171

8 *ibid*, pg. 172,173

9 *ibid*, pg. 174

that “the city of Amalek” was a military encampment (1 Sam. 15:5).<sup>10</sup> So, the suggestion raises the possibility that the events of 1 Samuel 15 were not against civilians or innocents but against combatants. (Deuteronomy 20:16-18 is suggested be against combatants, political/military leaders.<sup>11</sup>) And, it's worth noting that we don't have an explicit mention in the text of the slaying of Amalekite non-combatants.<sup>12</sup> But, even if this is all true, it still doesn't account for the command to slay the woman and children. If the command is not literally carried out against the Amalekite women and children, that still wouldn't explain ethically how God was able even to give the command.

Third, it is possible that the phrases “men and women” and “young and old” reflect an expression that means “all.”<sup>13</sup> So, the parallelism/linguistics would simply be an idiom or expression for the whole. Similarly, we complete our dual metaphors in cases like, “That's my 'bread and butter' . . .” or “He's under 'lock and key' . . .” In these instances, literal interpretations aren't intended by the expressions, but the dualism of the metaphor would be incomplete if we didn't mention “butter” or a “key.” However, I'd simply question if this does justice to the idea in the commands. Is God merely completing a metaphor/idiom? While we don't have explicit mention of the killing of women or children in the Old Testament historical narrative, it'd be absurd to think that they were all spared. So, this point merely postpones the discussion and moves it to another question. And, didn't women and children die in the Noahic flood?! So, the “ethic” of the action is simply moved to another instance. This suggestion simply doesn't handle the “ethics” behind the thing.

Fourth, a simple, passing observation is that the people of Israel were commanded to exterminate the people. Noticeably, they were not to torture them, as the surrounding nations customarily did.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, it's possible that the invasion would “drive out” people (like women and children) rather than “annihilate” them (cf. Exo. 34:24; Num. 32:21; Deut. 4:38).<sup>15</sup> So, in cases like Jeremiah 38:2,17, people might have been able to cooperate and be spared. However, in order to allow this to serve as the explanation for the “ethics” of the command, we'd need it never to be stated that “utter destruction” was the task laid at Israel's feet by God, but it is stated that way and a mere “driving out” is not the only way God gives the command to invade. It is sharper than that at times.

It's suggested by several historians and archaeologists that Israel's invasion of Canaan was not a massive invasion and conquering (as reflected in the book of Joshua), and so, the usual suggestion is that Israel simply “assimilated” and that the book of Joshua is overly-dramatized by the Israeli “propagandists,” who wanted to give a positive record for their people's history. I'm not sure how this helps serious Bible readers. Even

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 175

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 174-177

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 176

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 178,179

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 181

with such a liberal-critical view, I'd not think that such a suggestion strengthens our faith at all. Some feel that such a suggestion “waters down” the violent wars in the book of Joshua, as that whole book gets reduced to “hyperbole,” but, even if Joshua's text contains some amount of “hyperbole” or something similar, this doesn't account for the “ethics” of the very command that is found in Deuteronomy 7 or 1 Samuel 15 from God. No, this is not an acceptable or sufficient route to take in explaining the command from God to “utterly destroy” the Canaanites and/or the Amalekites.

### **Conclusions**

Here, I'd like to summarize what I've said, draw my conclusion(s) and then attempt to handle just a few objections . . . Let me first attempt to bring all of this to a nice and tidy close . . .

- 1) We need to accept the right context – the context that Old Testament sets forth – with all of its necessary elements in order to read the “command” appropriately; denying God's existence, miracles, afterlife and personal involvement does radically change the context and make the isolated command (read from a “naturalist” angle) appear genocidal or maniacal.
- 2) We need to accept God's character as “foundational” within that context; God's mercy, love, grace, faithfulness, reliability, commitment to attempting to redeem the world, commitment to humanity, etc. are all involved in the God of the Old Testament; the commands noted are assumed to “fall-in-line” with God's overarching character.
- 3) We need to accept that God's character drives His punishment/involvement with the wicked nations; we also need to draw a distinction between “suffering” and “punishment;” God's character pushes Him to do what He (an omniscient Being) finds to be the “best route” in handling the situation; “fallout” is suffered by innocents as God brings appropriate punishment on those that are deserving.
- 4) We need to accept that “ethical response” is driven by variables/contexts that resituates/reshapes an otherwise “isolated” act; like surgeons or heroes, God (as far as the Old Testament narrative presents Him) finds Himself doing “messy work” in the context of what is “right” and/or “necessary” as part of His overall, driving commitment to His character and purpose to attempt to redeem a fallen world.

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5) We need to accept that some actions are “ethically exceptional,” like the possibilities posed to the jets on 9/11; one can hardly say that such a “shooting down” of the plane would have been the actions of some genocidal maniac; similarly, it's apparently the case that God works in an “exceptional” case, but His character assures us that – even in the exceptional cases – He is committed to His character and purpose to attempt to redeem a fallen world.

6) We need to accept that God's character forces Him to establish Himself with humanity as a reliable, trustworthy, loving, faithful, redemptive God before He can give difficult commands like such; both testaments demonstrate reasons that humanity should have committed to God and His character so that the “difficult commands” become acceptable rather than “commands to obey a blind faith.”

7) We need to accept that there is a difference between the “exceptional” command(s) in the ancient context in the biblical narrative and our modern world; God has stopped speaking to human beings directly and has stopped working miracles, so our “faith” and responsibility is far more generalized/universalized (as demonstrated within the Bible) than the “exceptional” (and specific) nature of the commands to Abraham and Israel.

No, I'm not suggesting that this assessment handles all of our difficulties with the matter, but I am suggesting that we should go ahead and commit to the portrait of God that we get from the biblical context. It is only in that context – the one (ironically?) that informs us of the command – that we'll be able to make sense of the “ethics” behind the command.

It's true that we, like Job, may not fully comprehend the “why” or “the happenings,” but in God, we find a character that – so says the same text that attributes to Him the “command” to “kill” – a Being that is committed to attempting to redeem a fallen world. If we allow the text to present its own case, then God is trying His best to do that very thing and his “exceptional command” (in these instances) falls into line with that very initiative.

**God and Hitler are Indistinguishable**

Again, this allegation stems from a misunderstanding of context and character. Read through a “naturalistic” lens and without context, this is true. But, when we assess the character of both God and Hitler and we assess the context/variables surrounding the acts of both God and Hitler, we find that the situations are remarkably different. Williams notes that God is concerned with sin, is not indiscriminate, has concern for children, has a

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400 year delay before enacting his invasion, provides a warning that gets ignored, has a warrant/reason for the invasion and involves His personal (high ethical) character in the affair.<sup>16</sup> There is a difference. An assessment of character and context needs to be seriously performed before this charge can be taken seriously. Also, one needs to recognize the biblical context in which God finds Himself, which radically shifts how one assesses such.

### **Religion Causes Violence**

This is true. But, so does a host of other fine and noble things. Politics, leadership, money, mind, etc. all cause violence. In fact, “naturalistic atheism” causes violence. The charge against “religion” is well-founded; however, it doesn't dismiss the propositions or claims that are espoused by a particular religion. But, in the same way that atheists might insist that they are “not that kind of atheist” if charged with being violent or immoral, Christians can easily claim, “I'm not that kind of religionist” and make a logical distinction between their individual/personal beliefs and others.

### **The History of the Old Testament is Fictitious**

Elsewhere, I attempt to argue this point. This is not the care or concern of this particular essay. I'm suggesting that on this whole matter, the historicity of the Old Testament is no concern of mine. I'm suggesting that the “command” under discussion can only become sensible when taken in the scope of the context in which it finds itself. To divorce the “command” from its Old Testament context is to address/assess a different “command” entirely. The “command” that I'm interested in analyzing is one that (whether historical or fictitious) comes in the form of a God that has a certain character, is committed to redeeming the world, can work miraculously, speaks directly to people in the narrative, works personally with humanity, etc., etc.

To discredit the context as “ahistorical” and then to assess the “command” (which is also allegedly “ahistorical”) is to move an allegedly “ahistorical” command into an “historical” context. I'm saying that this is inconsistent. They need to decide if they want to assess the whole situation as either “historical” or “ahistorical” and treat the “command” appropriately; the problem is that treating both as “historical” leads the naturalist to problems and treating both as “ahistorical” accomplishes nothing for them. Only by moving the whole situation into “fiction” and then assessing the “command” within a naturalistic paradigm does the skeptic feel confident and comfortable, but this is poor reasoning. I'll give one example and be done . . .

It's foolish to discuss the world of “the Lord of the Rings” in this way. One doesn't discredit the whole “Lord of the Rings” canon and then start discrediting things within the canon on terms of our modern, realistic world. The historicity or fiction isn't a

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<sup>16</sup> Williams, 33:00-34:00

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concern here; if we step into the world of “the Lord of the Rings,” then we commit to the “world” that is presented. In that world, Sauron does exist and there are rings of power. But, understanding those realities are only sensible in the “world” that is presented there. Similarly, God and His commands are only “sensible” in the context/world that is presented in the Bible. The question of the historicity of the Old Testament is another matter, but I'm suggesting that we have to take the Old Testament (with the commands to “utterly destroy”) as a whole and attempt to understand the commands within that whole, which is the context for them.

**What About the Babies?**

This is catastrophic, that babies should die. But, just a few things . . . First, God is the author/giver of life; technically, if a “supernatural” context is right, then He (the Creator) has the right to “terminate” life also. Second, I think that “wartime” or “punishment” from God creates a “variable” whereby infants suffer “fallout” from such catastrophe; sin has caused the “fallen-ness” of our world, and “suffering” becomes a part for all – including the Christ – who come here. Third, “heaven” is undoubtedly the end for these infants, so the final result is appropriate for the innocent. Again, our driving consideration needs to be that God is of a certain character and that He is committed to His purpose within His character.

Why the command to kill the infants? I can't quite say. Maybe, God's omniscience allowed Him to know that “assimilation” in Israel wouldn't have worked if the Amalekites were “adopted”? Maybe (or apparently?), God saw “termination” of life (being the author of life) as a better alternative to any other route to take with the Canaanite/Amalekite youth? Maybe, God saw this “exceptional” situation in the same way that He saw the global flood and that this “invasion” of Canaan, while purposeful, brought “suffering” to the innocent and “punishment” to the wicked? Maybe – of this I'm sure – the “reason” is hardly that of a genocidal maniac but rather the action of a Being that is working within the mess to arrange things to bring redemption into a fallen world?

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