

## **2. THE MIGHTY GOD WHO KILLS**

A case of Old Testament obsolescence

Some cases of mass killings of people, apparently at God's behest, are recorded in the Old Testament. They include the killing of the Egyptian firstborn sons during the Great Exodus (Ex 11-12), the slaughter of the Canaanites and other tribes under Moses and Joshua (Nm 21:2-3; Dt 20:17; Jos 6:17, 21), and the annihilation of the Amalekites by Saul (1 Sam 15).

Take the case of the mass killing of the Canaanites in which the text claims that God's people, the nation of Israel, were commanded by Him to attack and kill their enemy. Did God command the massacre of the Canaanites? Those who favour the literal interpretation of the Bible say "yes". They claim that God has the authority to wipe out a people whose culture was corrupted by sinful practices. Leviticus 18 gives details of the sinful practices of the "inhabitants of the land" (v. 27), which included child sacrifice, incest, bestiality, homosexuality, and cultic prostitution. It is said that the wrath of God against sin and His righteous judgement and punishment of sinners are justifiable. However, the assertion that the entire gentile society was corrupt is obviously a biased judgment. The fact is that no culture yesterday and today is entirely righteous or completely sinful.

It is also said that the purpose of God's command is ultimately to preserve Israel from the religious contamination of the Canaanites. As expressed in Deuteronomy 20:16-18, the reason behind God's

command to the Israelites to kill everyone in the towns of their enemies is “so that they may not teach you to practise all the detestable practices they have in honour of their gods and so cause you to sin against the Lord your God”. The proponent of this view would be quick to remark that only God has the authority to make such a judgment, and not any individual or group. The problem is, any group today can give the same self-righteous claim in annihilating their opposing group, and attribute it to receiving a command from God.

The truth is God never commanded it. The Israelites in those days carried out mass killings and many other actions but ascribed them to God. As seen in other Old Testament passages, whatever they did, whether to migrate, to marry another wife, to keep slaves, to war against another tribe, etc., they always attributed those actions to God. Subjectively, they were sincere about the claim, but objectively, those were actually their own choices, not God’s commands.

Mass killings were a common practice of ancient tribes and nations, across different continents. It was not uncommon for kings, east or west, in those days to annihilate the populations of whole cities that they conquered to prevent the resurgence of enemies. Old Testament Israel was no different in adopting such a practice of ancient warfare. The only difference is that they attributed their action to God’s instruction. Old Testament people wrongly assumed that their God sanctioned this kind of practice.

A literal interpreter of the Bible would claim that if the massacre was not God’s command, He would make

Himself clearly understood. The fact is that it was not God who was unable to communicate Himself. Rather, many ancient people could not understand God. They could not and did not have the right understanding of Him. The fullest of God's self-revelation comes in the person of Jesus, and even then, many did not understand him, and some even rejected and opposed him.

God is the same God throughout history but many ancient people were clearly deficient in their understanding of who God is and what He wants of us, as shown in the Old Testament texts like that of the genocide of the Canaanites, which they claim to be commanded by God.

This case study of Old Testament genocide gives a glimpse of how Old Testament writings fail to present the true image of God. Their theological understanding must certainly be rejected by today's Christians who have the fullest of God's revelation in the person of Jesus Christ.