

Dark Passages of the Old Testament

Dr. John S. Bergsma, Ph.D.

Franciscan University of Steubenville

Introduction

People are often offended or confused by the sometimes harshness of the stories of the Old Testament. We can divide the offending passages into three basic groups: (I) the easiest to explain, (II) the harder to explain, and (III) the hardest to explain.

I. The Easiest to Explain

The easiest “dark” texts to explain are those passages of the Old Testament that recount the sinful deeds of various biblical characters:

- Abraham passing off his wife as his sister and putting her in danger.
- David committing adultery and murder.
- Jacob’s sons Levi and Simeon killing the population of the town of Shechem.

In none of these or similar cases, did God instruct these individuals to do what they did; in fact, they were generally violating God’s law by their actions. In these cases, the OT is just being honest about the flaws and even evil in the characters of Israel’s history. Many people expect the Old Testament to be a Sunday School book where every story is an Aesop’s Fable with a pleasant moral. But the Bible is more honest. It doesn’t white-wash the history of the human race. The message is that God works with people who are flawed, sometimes very so: murderers, abusers, thieves, cheats, liars, etc.,—in others words, people just like us.

II. The Harder to Explain

Harder to explain are the laws found in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) that seem to allow for things that we consider wrong in contemporary society (slavery, for instance) or prescribe penalties that seem overly harsh (like capital punishment).

Some good examples of these harsh laws include the death penalty for rebellion against parents (Deut 21:18-21), for sexual promiscuity (Deut 22:23-24), for worshipping pagan gods (Deut 13:1-5). The explanation for this was that it was a kind of martial law, which is concentrated in the Book of Deuteronomy. These laws do not represent God’s highest and best. Jesus himself teaches us this in Matthew: ‘Moses permitted you to divorce because of the hardness of your heart’ (Matt 19:3-9). Although Jesus mentions only the law of divorce, in fact many of the laws of Deuteronomy are for the hardness of heart. That is, they were concessions to the weakness and wickedness of the people. Because they had shown themselves so rebellious for forty years in the wilderness, Moses implements a “zero tolerance” policy especially for the three sins that kept endangering the health and well-being of the entire Israelite community: (1) rebellion against

authority, (2) sexual immorality, and (3) worshipping false gods. The harsh regulations of Deuteronomy were not meant to be crystalized into permanent law, but were for a temporary period of rehabilitation before God “circumcised the hearts of the people,” (Deut 30:6), that is, transformed them inside to be able to obey God’s law. When speaking about divorce, Jesus points out, “From the beginning it was not so,” in other words, Jesus goes back to the pre-Fall state, before Adam and Eve fell into sin. These chapters of the Bible (Genesis 1-2) better show us the will of God than events subsequent to humanity’s fall into sin.

III. The Hardest to Explain

The hardest passages of the Old Testament to explain are those in which God commands something that seems evil, like commanding the death of the Canaanites.

God commanded the Israelites to drive out the inhabitants of the cities of Canaan, and anyone who stayed behind—man, woman, or child—was to be killed.

How can God command the death of anyone? This is the hardest question to be asked about the Old Testament.

To answer it, we have to look at the interpretive key for the whole Bible: the cross of Christ.

Christians interpret everything, from world events to the Bible itself, in light of the cross.

Let us look at the cross and see what it tells us:

The cross tells us at least four things:

- (1) God loves us so much he has died for us.
- (2) God understands death—even a painful death of innocent—because he has experienced it himself.
- (3) God understands the loss of a loved one—because God the Father experienced the death of God the Son.
- (4) Finally, the Resurrection shows that God can overcome death by restoring life, and even granting us eternal life.

Let’s apply this knowledge now to the question: How could God ever command the death of anyone?

First of all, we have to acknowledge that God controls both the timing and the circumstances of each one of our births and deaths. That’s his job description as God.

Ps 139:16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
 In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.

That's why Christians have always made it a practice to pray to God for a favorable death, as these traditional prayers for a happy death indicate (see *Handbook of Prayers* [Scepter Press]):

“We, too, O God, will descend into the grave whenever it shall please you, as it shall please you, and wheresoever it shall please you. Let your just decrees be fulfilled ...”

“O Lord, happily will I die at the moment, in the place and in the way that you want ...”

Is it better that it be left to chance? Would it be more comforting to think that our deaths are the product of chance factors rather than ordained by God? I don't think so. If God is not in control of the circumstances of our death, it leaves open the possibility that Satan or some other malevolent or indifferent person or force could end my life at the worst time and circumstances possible for my eternal happiness.

So how could God ordain the death of anyone?

(1) It can't be because he doesn't love us, because he proved his love by becoming one of us and suffering death at our hands.

(2) It can't be because he doesn't understand how painful death is for us, because he Himself died one of the worst deaths imaginable. If God causes the death of any human person, who knows exactly what he is asking of that person because he himself has experienced it.

(3) Therefore, the only possibility is that God ordains the death of any given person for our ultimate good, for our benefit in the life to come.

Now, we know that there is a life to come. The Bible testifies to it. The resurrection of Jesus proves it. And there is the testimony of countless others, especially those who have died and been resuscitated and been able to describe the next life, what we call “near death experiences.” [See, for example, the excellent New York Times bestseller by Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven*, Simon & Schuster, 2012]. To deny that there is a life to come is to deny the instincts and the experiences of most human beings who have ever lived.

And we have concluded: ***if God ordains the death of any person, it can only be because it is for their ultimate good in the life to come.***

This is equally true if the person is **innocent** or **wicked**.

(A) The innocent person who dies untimely is the least harmed by death, because for the innocent person death is a brief gateway into eternal life with God, as we see from Wisdom 4:13-17:

- 13 Being perfected in a short time, they fulfilled long years;
14 for their souls were pleasing to the Lord,
therefore he took them quickly from the midst of wickedness.
15 Yet the peoples saw and did not understand,
or take such a thing to heart,
that God's grace and mercy are with his elect,
and that he watches over his holy ones.
16 The righteous who have died will condemn the ungodly who are living,
and youth that is quickly perfected will condemn the prolonged old age of the
unrighteous.
17 For they will see the end of the wise,
and will not understand what the Lord purposed for them,
and for what he kept them safe.*

The Book of Wisdom says God sometimes takes the innocent home to himself before they are corrupted by the world, so that they can enjoy eternal life with him.

(B) At the same time, the wicked person who is cut off early is also fortunate, because God has ended his life before he merited a worse eternal condition. The Bible warns us that the pain of the life to come is worse for those who are more hardened against God and their fellow man. There are greater and lesser degrees of punishment in the life to come.

*Luke 12:46 the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will punish him, and put him with the unfaithful.
47 And that servant who knew his master's will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a severe beating. 48 But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, shall receive a light beating. Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more.*

Therefore, it is a mercy for the wicked man to be cut off early, because the longer he lives the worse his condition will be in the life to come.

Therefore, death can be a mercy both for the innocent and for the wicked.

Taking this knowledge back to question of the Canaanites, we can ask: how could God command the deaths of the Canaanites at the hand of the Israelites?

The Bible itself provides a partial answer: because of their wickedness. The Canaanites were an excessively debased culture, that offered their children as burnt offerings to their gods, who worshiped their gods by conducting orgies, and who practiced incest and every other kind of sexual perversion. Perhaps the reason why there is sympathy for the Canaanites in modern times is because we have become so much like them, we are no longer shocked or horrified by their behavior.

But we might say, Yes, we can understand how God could command the death of the wicked among the Canaanites, but what about the innocents who were caught up in the conflict, like children below the age of reason?

Yet for any innocent child or other person caught up in the divine judgment on the Canaanites, they were harmed least by death, because, as we have seen below, God sometimes takes the innocent to himself before they are corrupted by this world.

The principles that we have learned in pondering the problem of the death of the Canaanites is also applicable to disasters and catastrophes that happen today. We may look at the incident of the Twin Towers, for example, where 5000 people were killed in one day, and say: How can God allow something like this?

We can only answer by looking to the cross. The cross assures us:

God loves us so much he would die for us.

God understands what it is like to die, as well as what it is like to lose a loved one.

Therefore, if God allows the death of anyone, he knows what he is asking of us because he himself has experienced it.

And he could only be asking it out of love, because he has proved his love for us.

And furthermore, he has proved his power to be able to restore life to us and right the wrongs of this world in the next.

And that faith enables us to face the horror of the Two Towers and say, as evil as it was, God was in control, and had a plan of love for every person that met their end that day.

Some who died on 9/11 were wicked, but their death stopped their sinning and saved them from a worse fate in the life to come.

Some who died on 9/11 were righteous, and for them their death was a brief experience of pain before entering into the peace of God for eternal life.

We can trust the God who loves us so much that he died for us, to choose the right time and circumstances of each one of our deaths, for our own good.

Perhaps you are not satisfied with this explanation, and you don't like a God who can determine the time of our death for the sake of his love for us and the best interests of our life to come. **But I ask you, who else has a better explanation for human death?**

The atheist looks at 9/11 and says, "that's just the meaningless death of a lot of accidental creatures who randomly evolved from slime over millions of years. There was no purpose or meaning to their creation, and there is no purpose or meaning to their death." Is that a better worldview? Is that uplifting, comforting, or inspiring?

Other theistic religions, like Judaism or Islam, can look at 9/11 and say: "God willed that event for his own purposes, perhaps even for our best interests." But those religions can not assure us that God loves us so much that he would even die for us. Neither can those religions claim that God understands what he is asking of human beings when he ordains their deaths, because in those religions, God has never himself become a human being and shared our experiences.

Only Christianity can look at 9/11 in the face and say: God understands the suffering of all those who died that day, and he loves each one infinitely, therefore, he could only have allowed their deaths because it fit into his plan of love for each one.

Of course it takes faith to believe that, but it is worth making that act of faith, because no other explanation of 9/11 or any other human tragedy can satisfy the human heart.

So returning to the death of the Canaanites.

God did command the Israelites to put to death those Canaanites who did not vacate the cities of the land of Israel.

This was an act of divine judgment on their culture, which was excessively evil. At the same time, though, for those Canaanites who died, whether wicked or innocent, there was a mysterious mercy of God, who was unwilling to let the wicked dig themselves any deeper into hell, and unwilling to let the innocent live on and lose their innocence.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of the cross of Christ as the ultimate answer to the problem of evil in the world. Let's conclude by reflecting once more on the truths the cross and the resurrection teach us:

- (1) God loves us even to the point of his own death.
- (2) God understand what it is like to suffer death, having undergone it himself.

(3) God understands what it is like to lose a loved one to death.

(4) And at the resurrection, God proved his power over death, his ability to restore life to human beings and give us hope for the world to come.