

Why did God 'order' so much killing in the Old Testament?

As I study the Old Testament I find it hard to believe that God "ordered" so much killing and other terrible happenings. How do I defend a "loving" God?

A covenant perspective on the Bible can help us understand the seeming difference between the "violent" God of the Old Testament and the "loving" God of the New Testament. The God who made a covenant with Abraham to bless all nations (Gen. 22:14-18) in the Old Testament is the same God who fulfills that covenant in the New Testament through His divine Son, Jesus Christ, and His Catholic Church (Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:16; Mt. 28:18-20). This same Christ died for all sins past and future, including the Original Sin of Adam and Eve (Rom. 5:6-21), as promised by His eternal Father *in the Old Testament* (see also the Suffering Servant passage in Is. 52-53).

People sometimes characterize God's actions as "vengeful," because of such actions as the Flood (Gen. 6-8) and the allowance of warfare against Israel's enemies, including the annihilation of enemy women and children (Dt. 20:16-18). A close reading of the Old Testament reveals that God does not directly intend evil, but does permit it, because authentic love necessarily implies freedom. And because of human freedom gone awry, sin, suffering, and death have entered the world.

Perhaps the biggest concern about the "vengeful" God of the Old Testament is whether He directly intended the unjust killing of innocent women and children. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Catechism) teaches, "One may not do evil so that good may result from it" (no. 1756). In other words, we may not *directly* choose evil because we hope that some greater good may come from it.

If man cannot directly choose evil, how much more so for almighty God? In this regard, Deuteronomy 20 appears to provide the biggest challenge to the dogma of God's sinlessness.

In attempting to resolve this biblical dilemma, we need to recognize that there is a big difference between a person's directly intending or choosing evil vs. a lawgiver's tolerating an evil or less-than-perfect situation, in order that greater evils might not result. For example, the Church opposes fornication, but offers the confessional, not state-sanctioned criminal penalties, as a more efficacious remedy to regulate and minimize this societal ill. Trying to enforce such a criminal code might lead to worse societal upheaval.

In that light we can understand the nature of the Deuteronomic Law and why it was given. Because of their worship of the Golden Calf following the Exodus, many Israelites were killed (Ex. 32-33). In addition, the priesthood of the firstborn sons of Israel also gave way to that of the righteous Levites, whose priesthood is described in the Book of Leviticus. Later, the Israelites wandered 40 years in the desert after they doubted God's providence in helping them take the Promised Land (Num. 14:17-24) and also for their sin at Baal Peor (Num. 25; 32:13; cf. Ex. 16:35). The Israelites received the Deuteronomic Law after their idolatrous sin at Baal Peor (Num. 25).

“Deuteronomic” means secondary, as in secondary law. The Deuteronomic Law was not God’s ideal plan but rather a concessionary code because of the hardness of the Israelites’ hearts. In many respects, it seems as if the Israelites wanted to “learn the hard way,” and God obliged them, allowing them imperfect laws so that they would seek Him faithfully. St. Paul describes the Deuteronomic Law as a teacher or custodian, and that it “was added because of transgressions” (Gal. 3:19), until Christ came to fulfill the law. “You do not have, because you don’t ask,” St. James adds, in words that could be applied to the ancient Israelites (Jas. 4:3). “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble,” says St. James, quoting the Book of Proverbs. “Submit yourselves therefore to God” (Jas. 4:6-7).

In providing or allowing the Deuteronomic Law, God gave the Israelites “laws that were not good” (Ezek. 20:25), i.e., laws which often *conceded* or *tolerated* lesser evils to avoid greater evils. (Note again that God is not directly sanctioning or intending these laws.) Yet, these concessionary laws had the salutary design of teaching the Israelites to seek God increasingly, because they failed in themselves to fulfill and to restore right relationship with God. The Deuteronomic law was added so that grace may be sought, St. Augustine summarizes, and grace was given so that the new law could be fulfilled (cf. Jer. 31:31-33; Ezek. 36:23-27).

The concessionary nature of the Deuteronomic Law can be seen in Matthew 19:1-12, regarding Christ’s teaching on the indissolubility of marriage. Jesus grounds the teaching in Genesis 2:23-24, emphasizing that what “God has joined together let no man put asunder (19:4-6). The Pharisees respond that Moses allowed for a divorce and remarriage decree, alluding to Deuteronomy 24:1-4 (19:7). Jesus notes that *Moses* allowed the Israelites to divorce and remarry, but from the beginning it was not so (19:8-9).

Jesus clearly teaches that God did not directly intend the divorce decree. As many commentators have noted, Moses reluctantly made the decree because he feared that the Israelite men would otherwise kill their wives and seek a new spouse. Moses understood that, given the hardness of the Israelites’ hearts, this was making the best out of an imperfect situation. So, to prevent this greater evil, which would likely involve the mortal sin of murder, he attempted to minimize or regulate Israel’s conduct, and God bound the Israelites to this concessionary law. Moses allowed for or conceded this imperfect law in the hope that the Israelites would one day learn their lesson about faithfully following God; in the meantime, Moses also allowed the law to minimize the Israelites’ idolatrous straying. Ezekiel speaks of these Deuteronomic laws in Ezekiel 20:25: “I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not have life.” The Deuteronomic law did not directly sanction evil, but attempted to regulate with less-than-perfect laws the behavior of the hard-hearted Israelites. An analogy may be made with parents who allow their hard-hearted children the freedom to make mistakes, and who then hold them responsible for their choices so that they learn from their mistakes.

Given this background, we return to our original question. In moving beyond the wilderness, Moses provided the Israelites with two battle plans. For those cities outside of the Promised Land, the Israelites were to seek peace and then subject these nations. If a nation refused peace, its men were to be killed, but women, children, and everything else were to be spared (Dt. 20:10-15; cf. Num. 31:7-20).

For those cities inside the Promised Land, i.e., “the cities of these people that the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance,” Moses told the people that “you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall utterly destroy them . . . as the Lord your God has commanded” (Dt. 20:16-17). Included would be women and children, as well as the animals that they sacrificed to their gods, so “that they may teach not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices, and so to sin against the Lord your God” (Dt. 20:18; cf. Ex. 23:33).

This was known as *herem* (the ban) warfare, in which there was total ban on confiscating any booty and allowing anything or anyone to survive. Earlier in Dt. 9:5, Moses explains to the Israelites that they are not going in to take and possess the Promised Land because of their own righteousness. Rather, “because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out before you,” and so that He could fulfill His promise given to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Women and children in these lands who had reached the age of reason could certainly commit mortal sin. Thus their execution could be more easily understood. What is more vexing is the killing of young children, even infants. In allowing as opposed to directly intending their deaths, God seems to be making a point. The worst thing one can face is spiritual death, not mere physical death. Better for all of the Canaanites to die, for example, than for the Israelites to live side by side with them and have all or most of both groups go to hell when the Israelites embraced their false gods. As Jesus would later affirm, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28; cf. 1 Cor. 5:5). If we consider events in the Bible, or in our own lives, from an exclusively “this-worldly” perspective, we miss the greater truth of our eternal destiny.

God’s plan was to teach and save the world through Israel, ultimately with the coming of His Son, and this would not occur if the hard-hearted Israelites attempted to cohabitate with these wicked pagans. We should also know that God would not arbitrarily abandon the Canaanites or other groups who would face such execution. We can have confidence that God would provide the merciful opportunity for their repentance at death, so that they could be with Him in heaven once Jesus opened the Gates. God’s love shines through the Old Testament in His covenant promise to bless all nations through Israel and in assuring the Israelites that His steadfast love endures forever (Ps. 136).

With Christ’s coming, grace was given to fulfill God’s perfect law. There is now no excuse for us. God’s justice and mercy continues but, following the example of our Savior, we are more much likely to give witness by laying down our lives in sharing the Catholic faith than by executing judgment on a sinful people like the ancient Israelites. In both cases, God’s justice and mercy are operative, the differences stemming from our living in a superior, grace-filled time of salvation history.

Finally, in looking at the New Testament, one might argue that God is harsh and vengeful, because Jesus speaks about the hard road to salvation (Mt. 7:13-14) and, much more significant than loss of temporal life via killing, says that some people will not gain eternal life in heaven (Mt. 25:31-46). Yet, because we know that God desires that *all* men be saved (2 Pet. 3:9; 1 Tim. 2:4), we can only conclude that the ultimate punishment, life everlasting in hell, is the just

punishment for those who choose to definitively exclude themselves from God (cf. Rom. 2:6-11).

Research assistance for this question supplied by [Catholics United for the Faith](#).