

Biblical Inerrancy

1. The Canaanite Genocides: There are several passages in the Bible that indicate that God commanded genocides on a large scale. The Israelites were told by God to go in and completely obliterate seven entire nations. This involved killing EVERY living thing in those countries; every man, woman, and child, and every animal as well. AND THEY DID. The Israelites obeyed these commands and did in fact obliterate several nations. The question is, would a morally perfect God command such a thing?

Here are some of our options:

2. Reason Why God Could Permissibly Command Genocide: If a Christian or Jew wants to maintain the view of biblical inerrancy, she must find some explanation for God's commands that would not conflict with the idea that God is morally perfect. Here are some popular proposed solutions:

1. The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away: God is the one who gave everyone life in the first place. Some Christians claim that this makes it morally okay for God to take it away from us whenever he wants, without fault. This way, God's command to commit genocide IS compatible with his goodness.

Reply: Is this a satisfying response? If you give a gift to someone, does this give you the right to take it away in the future without fault? Or, worse still, if you give birth to a child—thus, giving it life—does this give you the right to kill that child later without having done anything wrong? It doesn't seem so. What is it about God, then, that would make him an exception to this intuition?

2. The people that the Israelites killed were evil and deserved death: Many cite the fact that the people that the Israelites were commanded to obliterate were in fact evil. They regularly practiced temple prostitution (basically, sex with church employees in order to please their gods) and child sacrifice (killing children—again, to please their gods). Therefore, they deserved death.

Reply: First, it is questionable that even such horrific acts as child sacrifice deserve capital punishment. That issue aside, did EVERYONE in those countries deserve such a punishment? What about the infants and small children? Surely THEY did not deserve to be slaughtered just because their parents did terrible things.

3. Their evil ways were infectious: At this point, defenders of these holy texts typically point out that the countries that were destroyed were SO evil that their evil ways threatened to infect the ways of God's chosen people, the Israelites. In order to preserve Israel from embracing false gods, the nations that worshipped those false gods had to be destroyed—even the children, since they might somehow revive their biological parent's religion if left alive. Removing them was like removing a tumor.

Reply: First, note that there are many atheists TODAY whose presence threatens to infect the Christian religion. Should we kill them? What if someone came out and claimed that God had told them that, say, Christians were supposed to kill all of the non-Christians? Wouldn't we think that they were clearly insane?

Second, this does not really seem to be a good reason to kill the infants. Couldn't Israelite families have adopted them, and perhaps not even tell them who their true parents were? Surely such babies were no threat to God's plan.

Third, these genocides did NOT in fact save Israel from being infected by neighboring religions. Later portions of the Old Testament texts document Israel's slow decline into depravity and false religions, and its eventual invasion by foreign countries, at which point they were all killed or carried off into captivity. Surely, if God is omniscient, he would not have commanded genocide in order to keep Israel pure unless it would WORK.

4. The Lord works in mysterious ways: As a last ditch effort, the theist commonly appeals to the idea that, since God is so much greater than us, it is simply foolish to wonder what good reasons he could have for certain things (e.g., allowing evil, remaining hidden, commanding genocide). Therefore, we should not take these things to be conclusive evidence of God's non-existence.

Reply: This is, of course, an unsatisfying response. Furthermore, it seems to conflict with another popular tenet of theism: The idea that God gave us our moral sensibility. Most theists think that, when we have the intuition that some action is morally repugnant, this is evidence that it IS morally repugnant. This is because God has placed the ability to discern what is morally right and wrong within each one of us. Clearly, the Canaanite genocides seem repugnant. But, the question then is, why did God place a moral sensibility inside of us that would deliver the WRONG moral intuitions when it comes to God's actions? Why didn't God instead give us the ability to discern what the "REAL" morality is?

3. A Further Worry: Why use the Israelites?: Even if God DID have a good reason for destroying certain nations, why did he use PEOPLE to get the job done? Think about this: Citizens of Israel had to physically go in and stab every man woman and child with a sword. How horrific! Surely this had terrible and long-lasting traumatic effects on the Israelites who did the killing. Couldn't God have just obliterated the offending people himself? He DOES do this in other biblical stories.¹ Why not do the same to the Canaanites?

4. Give Up Biblical Inerrancy?: Many Christians have just given up the doctrine of biblical inerrancy in light of difficult passages such as the those referenced here. Biblical inerrancy is the view that the Bible is the true, error-free word of God. If one gives up this view, they can just say that the accounts of God commanding genocide are actually mistaken. When one gives up the doctrine of inerrancy, they are free to claim that the Bible contains many errors, and God did not in fact command such things as genocide.

Reply: The problem with giving up inerrancy is that, while avoiding ONE problem of evil, it just raises ANOTHER. True, now we do not have to explain why a good God would command genocide, but we DO have to explain why a good God would allow our one and only guidebook to his word to be riddled with errors. This is even worse than the problem of divine hiddenness. For, not only is God hidden, but the one bit of access he DID give us to himself is full of mistakes and falsehoods. It seems like it would be better for there to be no holy book at all, rather than one full of errors—especially ones so great as to skew our idea of what the true nature of morality is. As such, this does not seem like a very desirable position for the theist to take.

¹ See, for instance, Genesis 19:24 where "The Lord rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah."