

Tough Passages

Check the following passage addressed to Saul from the prophet Samuel.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.' (1 Samuel 15:2-3 NRSV)

Is this the word of God? What sort of a God is it who orders wholesale slaughter? Aren't the Amalekites children of God like everyone else?

Context is vital to proper interpretation, and there are two aspects of context that need to be considered here. They are: 1) the cultural setting and 2) Hebrew literary conventions.

Cultural Setting

The passage is an example of ancient Middle Eastern narrative written and edited by authors who are concerned with reflecting the practices of their time. They are in no way aware of 21st century sensitivities. For tribal or national security it was normal to kill all those in the defeated enemy tribe. This being so, it is not surprising to find the authors presenting a god who requires such slaughter.

Did God actually command this wholesale killing? No! or at least probably not. But it is not hard to believe that the ancient Israelites were certain their God would issue such a command and so they wrote it into the text of their narrative. Moreover, YHWH was originally a war god and, on top of that, it was good military strategy to kill the enemy, rather than take prisoners, when you had no way of guarding or housing and feeding them.

Ancient Hebrew Literary Conventions

In the ancient world, if you are firmly convinced that God is on your side and your God would want you to follow normal military practices, then killing a defeated enemy is perfectly legitimate. Writing down a personal or national certainty or conviction does not automatically legitimise or canonise the action, even if you are uncompromising in your belief that God would order a barbaric atrocity. Just look at certain pro-lifers who believe God is calling them to destroy abortion clinics, even if it means vilifying and even murdering the surgeons who perform abortions.

So, if we bypass this passage from 1 Samuel 15 and, in effect, ignore it, are we just picking and choosing? Yes, but what we are choosing? We are choosing to avoid the modern Western Gentile mistake of reading the words without hearing the cultural background noise that informs them.

Our common sense will ask, can we worship a God who plays favourites, choosing one people or nation and neglecting all others? Is this a picture of the God of infinite love.

The process surrounding texts like the one above is not inherently complicated:

- A tribe or nation has a tribalist belief in its specialness and is convinced it is chosen.
- The corollary of this is that its traditions and conventions become transformed into certainties with assumed divine approval.
- Fundamentalist and literalist readers who have been raised and taught to see in these texts divine pronouncements submit to the moral and cultural influence of the initial authors.

The common sense of the discerning reader will also reveal that the values and rationale behind this text do not stack up with the portrait of God in other parts of Scripture. The true voice of the divine is drowned out by the cultural bias of the writers. In the passage above, that bias is simply discriminatory tribalism, but, at the same time it does not conflict with normal military practice in the ancient world. The culture of the day does not see a problem here.