

Is God Genocidal?

February 17, 2012 – Tough Questions – Tim Perry

Hey, Tim Perry here, pastor of Spiritual Discovery at Christ Community Church – coming at you with Week 7 of Tough Questions.

Last week, we looked at the question of why does God punish people so severely in the Old Testament?

Well this week, we're going to look at an equally challenging question. This week, we want to ask the question – "Are there examples of what we would call genocide in the Old Testament?" We're entering a period called the conquest when Israel is going to go into the Canaanite territories and clear out the people that live there. Is it true that what God is basically doing is exterminating people groups in the Old Testament? Let's read a couple of passages here that you're going to be reading if you're going through your Daily Bible.

Last week on February 10th, we get our first glimpse of what is happening as the Israelites are moving into Canaan. It says this in Chapter 21 – *Then they (that's the Israelites) turned and went up along the road toward Bishon, and Og, the king of Bashan and his whole army marched out to meet them in battle at Edrei. But the LORD said to Moses, "Do not fear him for I have given him into your hand and all his people and his land. Do to him what you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon." So they defeated him and his sons and all his people until he had no survivor left and they possessed his land.*

Now that's how it's reported in the Book of Numbers. Now if you know from reading the Old Testament, Deuteronomy is actually a retelling of that same story and Moses is helping the Israelite people later on in his life to keep track of what God had done and to interpret these events that they had lived through.

Well, as a result when Moses retells this story in our reading yesterday, from February 14th, it sounds just a little bit different, and we get a glimpse into what it is that God is doing when he's clearing out these people groups. In Deuteronomy 3:6 – *We completely destroyed them, as we had done with Sihon king of Heshbon, destroying every city—men, women and children.* Now when you see that word "destroyed" and you read it in your Bible, you'll go down to the very bottom of that page and there will be a little footnote there and in the footnote on page 207, it will say this: The Hebrew term for destroy refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the LORD by totally destroying them. So whenever you see that – actually the word in the Hebrew is "herem" – that's the word that's being used. That's what it looks like in Hebrew if you're a Hebrew scholar. But you'll start noticing this in the footnotes and the margins of your Bibles. Whenever this particular word for "destroy" is used, it has this particular Hebrew word that corresponds to it.

So let's look at that word for a quick minute. When you look that word up in a Hebrew lexicon, it gives these three quick definitions: Ban, devote, or exterminate. Now one of those three words doesn't look like the other two. Ban and exterminate make sense, but "devote" – that's a little strange. Why is that word there? Well, that's because "herem" is a word that means not merely exterminate but "to offer something over to God through its destruction," through its death, it's being given over to God irrevocably.

Well a couple of other things about the word – in the way it's used in the Old Testament. First of all it's always used in a direct commandment from God. It's never as though someone goes out and performs "herem" on someone else just because they think it's a good idea. It's always a direct command of God. And it's never initiated by God's people for their own interest. It's always God doing this – God moving his purposes forward somehow through this act of "herem" whereby people are actually ethnically cleansed, if we're going to be honest about it.

So what's the difference then – between this and what we would call genocide? A modern definition of genocide, comes to us from the convention that took place shortly after WWII – to define genocide and to outlaw it internationally. Here's what Article II of the convention says: "Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial or religious group as such – by - a. either killing members of the group or - b. causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group or forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." All of these acts, it says, constitute an act of genocide on the part of one nation state or one people group.

Well if that's what genocide is, we ought to be able to compare genocide then – with this Biblical concept that we call "herem". Let's take a minute then to look at them when we put them side by side like this:

First of all in both cases, it does in fact refer to the total destruction of life. In the Old Testament, when God commanded someone to go in and perform "herem" and they didn't, they actually got in trouble for it. So God does indeed intend the total extermination of that people group – as hard as that is to get a grip on. How would we go further in comparing it. Well, in modern Genocide, it's always an act of human initiation that takes place. It's at the hands of people that people are treated so harshly today. Whether that's Bosnians and Serbs in Srebrenica (former Yugoslavia) or whether that's Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. It's people acting on people and it's in a situation that couldn't be considered irreconcilable because people have gotten into problems with each other – they could with skillful negotiations actually resolve their problem without resorting to that kind of violence.

Well, over here to compare that to "herem" – here's it's always God's initiative. It's never a human beings' independent initiative – or a people group saying we want to do this. It's God saying that this is the only way forward. And we have to assume that if God is right about the reasons why he does this, then it is a situation that is

irredeemable. So when you study the people groups that were in Canaan at the time, you come to find out that the kind of evil that was pervasive among them was of such horrific proportions that God would be considered justified by going in and wiping these people out.

In terms of genocide, it's always an act of human aggression – of human competition and anger and hatred, but in this idea of “herem”, it's always an act of divine judgment. It's not so much God giving military power to one people group so that they can squash another people group, it's God acting in subtle judgment on people for their sin.

And then you see patterns of genocide all throughout history. If you track with the whole history of human kind, you're going to see example after example of this kind of murderous treatment. In the Bible, the only legitimate use of “herem” that we find happens during this conquest period and shortly thereafter. There's no hint of this in the New Testament. There's no hint of God ever blessing that as a strategy for the church to propagate itself in culture after the New Testament times. So Holy Wars would be prescribed as not being legitimate – that's not God's way of moving forward.

So what are a few things then that we can conclude? Well first of all, we have to land on this reality – that only God has the right to do something like this - to perform an act of “herem” where he goes in and his divine judgment is meted out on people who are very worthy of that judgment.

Second of all, Christians have made the tragic mistake in their history in the name of propagating the Gospel - of trying to perform a “herem” kind of act in taking the Gospel and forcing it on people at knifepoint. That illegitimate – that wrong - that's clearly not what God's strategy is.

And then lastly, we know that when Christ returns, all of the nations are going to be judged – that all of the people groups on the face of the earth are going to be held accountable to God's righteous standards. And God will do what is fair – giving to each people group what they have deserved for their actions. So we can take confidence in God and in his character, but we have to be very careful to look at this concept of “herem” and think that somehow that condones violence on the part of Christians today to get their will in the political environment of our world.

Well if you have some thoughts about this and want to dialogue about it, just leave a comment or two at the end of this blog. Thanks so much for watching – we will see you next week.