

Hard Parts of Scripture: Holy War

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[0 : 00] Alright, so we're finishing tonight our series on Trusting Scripture in the Modern World.

And Hunter very helpfully talked through the issue of slavery in the Bible last time. And tonight we're going to carry on with a similar issue and that's I want to talk about Holy War.

So we'll end our time thinking about this very difficult issue of Holy War across the Old Testament especially. Now we've so far said we made really three or four big affirmations about the Bible. One, the Bible is inspired. And that means it's God breathed and we said that that means it's triune discourse. Remember that first week the father, the father speaks the word, the son is the word, the content and the spirit interprets the word.

Remember that in every act of encountering the word of God and it's living in active form the trinity, the trine God is at work in us. That's what we said week one. After that we said the Bible is also true.

[1 : 07] So it's inspired therefore it's true meaning it's infallible but we also added inerrant as an even stronger suggestion. And then the third time we talked about the Bible being an earthly text.

So it's not a text that was written in heaven and then dropped down onto earth but a text that was written on earth by human authors. So it's infallible in anerrant because it's got a divine author but it's also an earthly text full of numerous human authors.

And that means that you have to read it contextually. You have to read it in the space of when it was written and where it was written according to the language of the time and the culture of the time.

Now because of that two major issues come up quite often asking the question is the Bible is the contents of the Bible and therefore is the Christian religion that follows the Bible morally regressive. And those two issues very commonly are slavery and the assumption of slavery as Hunter pointed out last time but then also maybe even more significantly holy war this concept of holy war that we see across the Bible.

[2 : 13] So here's how one scholar asked the question how do we harmonize the warrior God of Israel with the God of love incarnate in Jesus Christ. And it's not a mere academic matter at all.

It's a really significant question because this was what the crusades were built on. We even see language being used from the Joshua conquest of fighting in the name of the Lord in a holy war in things like the Rwandan conflict as recently as that.

And so this language of holy war has been adopted from the Bible and used in all sorts of situations throughout human history and including the 20th and 21st century. And the question is what do we do with it?

What do we say about it? And so tonight I want to focus in on a specific aspect of it which is the main thing which is what the Bible calls harem warfare.

Okay, our friend out there. We should invite him in maybe. Yeah, talk about holy war.

[3 : 17] I'll be in a war I think with him the rest of the if he continues to stand there. Harem warfare. This is the Hebrew word for holy war. H R M in Hebrew harem warfare.

You'll see it sometimes used as that language. And there are four explicit moments in the Old Testament of the command to harem warfare.

Joshua six. Jericho. Joshua eight. Al. Joshua 10 to 12. And that's the war on the southern Amorites. Okay, and then one more time for Samuel 15. So these are the times where you see harem the language of holy war being used really explicitly. Now, let me begin by reading a passage, just a couple of verses from Deuteronomy 20.

So if you have a Bible, you can turn there to Deuteronomy 20. All right, let me just read two verses to you Deuteronomy 20 verse 10.

[4 : 18] First, when you draw near to a city to fight against it. First offer terms of peace to it. So there are two different types of war being presented in God's law.

One, normally when you come to a land, if they will not let you in or let you pass through offer terms of peace. If they don't, if they want to fight you, then you can engage in just war.

Okay, that's one. Now jump down to verse 17, I believe it is 16. But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, you shall devote them to complete destruction the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Parasites, Hibites, Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded.

I said, on the one hand, you've got one type of war when you encounter a nation in general, all for peace. But when you encounter one of these six nations, which are all members of the Canaanite people groups, then you shall devote them to destruction.

That's the language of harem. Harem means a ban, a complete giving over to destruction, something like that. It can be translated in lots of different ways.

[5 : 29] All right. First thing I want to do is give you some reflections on what this is exactly. What is harem warfare exactly in the Bible? I'm just going to rattle these off and try to get through way too much material in a short amount of time.

Okay. All right. Trimper Longman is helpful here. He's an Old Testament scholar. He says this, first, harem war. In harem war, God always presents himself as present and active in the fight for Israel.

Okay. So that's a key thing that we're going to see. So at Jericho, for example, the angel of the Lord shows up. You remember this? And Joshua says, who are you? Are you for us or against us?

And he says, yes and no, no and yes. I just am. And he leads the battle. He's the angel of the Lord. He's the son of God himself.

God always in the harem war fights the battle. He leads. He takes over for Israel. Secondly, that means then that there are often unique and absurd ways that the battles are won.

[6 : 31] Right? It's an absurd thing to do to fight the mighty people of Jericho by walking around the fortress seven times. That's an absurdity. They don't use weapons. That's not the way you fight a battle, right?

Which is exactly the point. The Lord has to win, not the people. That's the idea in the harem warfare. Third, what you also see is that the Israelites always consecrate themselves for these battles.

So they wash ritually. They prepare as if they're doing something that's holy, that's consecrated, that's sanctified. Why?

And here's where we start to get to the big theological idea that's happening. What's happening in these moments is that God is presenting these moments as types or symbols in real history of the recovery of Eden.

That's the big idea that's happening all throughout these harem conquests. And we'll come back to that in just a minute. Fourth, Trimper says, there's always more going on in these conflicts than you can see.

[7 : 37] And the thing that you realize when you read the text very closely is that they're meant to be read as cosmic conflicts, not just human conflicts. That the Lord is coming to battle with the gods.

And that's the language the Bible uses, the gods, lowercase g. It's a very generic term and it's referring to evil spirits. It's referring to fallen angels. It's referring to Satan and his hordes and minions that have come down.

And the idea is that Satan has actually gripped the heart of these nations entirely. And the idea that you see when you read it very carefully is that it's meant to be read as the Lord battling the gods, the evil that is in the midst of these nations.

The idols that they worship are no mere idols. They actually stand and represent something that's real. And that's evil itself, Babylon that's infected these places in these nations. Now that's not only true in the harem wars, but one of the first harem wars that the words not used is God's war against Egypt and Pharaoh in the story of the Exodus.

So this is very present, the tin plagues. How do you read what's going on in the strangeness of the tin plagues, the locust and the frogs and the river turning to blood and all these crazy things as modern readers that we think about what's happening here?

[8 : 56] Well every single one of those plugs is the Lord saying the Nile River is not the true God as it was worshiped to be the true God. The sun and when he blacks out the sun is not the true God.

The sun was the principal deity and ultimately Pharaoh is not a God. The 10th plug. That's the idea and Moses actually makes this very explicit in Exodus 15 when they come out and Moses sings his song about the Exodus.

He says in verse 11, Oh Lord God, you have defeated the gods, the evil spirits that have controlled Egypt. You've shown who the true God is. So that's the big idea throughout.

All right, fifth and finally for this first part, I think, yeah. After the battle, oftentimes we'll see a ceremony, something that looks almost like a covenant take place and in it the true King enters the city.

So this is what Psalm 24 is about. Psalm 24 is a song that remembers God the King entering into his land. And so the whole thing breathes out, expresses this idea of the recovery of sacred space, the recovery of Eden, the space, the land that has been lost because of human sin.

[10 : 11] And so Trimmer Longman helps us, I think, thinking about that. Nevertheless, the problems remain. How do we read this well, especially as modern people?

And I want to give you some qualifications because you still come to the language of the text. They devoted all to destruction. And you say what we asked if you were around Sunday night, how can we talk about a good God in the midst of these types of texts?

And so I want to say the same thing I said Sunday night if you were there for that, that you've got to read this in light of the whole Bible, but you've also got to read very carefully and in the light of the entirety of the book.

So it's never very helpful to isolate a single little sentence and fail to read it in the light of the story of the whole book. Because sometimes you realize down the road of the book that a different message is being told than the one that you thought when you just read the sentence by itself.

And that's exactly what we get in these conquest narratives. Actually, there's a different story being told. All right, so a few qualifications here, two of three tonight, point two.

[11 : 19] How can we read this well? All right, the first thing to say is these wars are not carried out on the basis of race. The wars are never carried out on the basis of race.

So in the very first encounter we see Rahab, for example, is brought into the people of God. When God makes his purposes very clear, he says it's to break down the idols, to defeat the evil spirits that have rebelled against him.

Judges two verse two, which is reflecting back on the Canaanite conquest, that eviction notices were being given by God, the ban on pagan religion.

That was the primary idea. It's never based on race. The goal actually was always to bring in the nations to the land. It was always about that, and that's very clear.

That means also then it's not about imperialistic expansion. So sometimes modern people will come to these texts and say, well, look, look at the colonialism. Look at Israel just making their way through this space and taking away from people that had been there prior.

[12 : 21] What colonialism is at place? What imperialistic expansion? Well, a few things. One, Israel is told you are not allowed to plunder. You cannot take any of the goods. You cannot be wealthy because of the conquest.

But more importantly, and this is the big point, it's important to understand that we have the picture completely backwards if we think of these texts in the imperialistic or colonial way.

Because what's actually happening is Israel is not the strong fighting the weak, which is exactly the case in colonialism or an imperialistic move. Israel is not the strong fighting the weak.

Israel is exactly the reverse. The point is that Israel is the weakest trying to enter into the land and fighting the strong. So David and Goliath becomes the paradigm of the whole concept of this across the Old Testament.

If you want to fight Goliath, the representative Cain and I down the line, how do you fight him? Well, God says, throw away your sword. David, you can't carry a big shield.

[13 : 25] He doesn't put armor on. He's the smallest guy in the war. It's exactly the idea of what happened in the conquest. The whole point is that this doesn't make sense. These people cannot win.

They're the weakest. They're not the most powerful. They've got the worst weapons. They have the worst army. They're going up against fortresses that are well established and built up like Jericho.

And what's the identity of these people? They are slaves. Remember that they've come out of Egypt. They've been in slave for 400 years. Their population is low. They are incredibly weak. They're hungry. The entire idea is that none of this makes sense. It's not imperialistic expansion, not at all. It's David fighting Goliath. That's the whole point. These people are giants. It would be more like, imagine historical reality that the Spanish enter into the early Americas as they did through the Gulf and they start to take over the lands of the Native Americans.

[14 : 27] Let's not pick on the Spanish. Many, many people groups did this. The story that's being told is more like the Native Americans taking back their land after the Spanish forts were built. That's the actual story we're reading about, not the other way around. That's the images that were being given. Now, it's important then also to note that Israel was not going to leave Egypt and go find a territory of land to live in and not be fought against. There was no chance of that. It wasn't as if a people group that had been enslaved for 400 years could march through the desert and finally find fertile ground. The people that lived there just say, come and take this plot. Not at all. The plots were occupied. Even in the spaces that were available, the Canaanites wanted to kill Israel. It wasn't as if Israel was merely going on conquest. It was that they weren't going to be given a space. There was no place for them to live. They had no territory and no one was going to give it.

[15 : 34] A few more of these qualifications. Another one is, and this is very important, cities in, let's say, the Joshua stories are not what we think of as cities today. We read about Israel, the troops marching on to Ai or Jericho. It's important to say that when we read about the city of Jericho, that is idiomatic of a military fortress. It's talking about marching on to a military fortress, not into the city center of Edinburgh. This isn't Israel going to the Royal Mile. This is Israel fighting the Pentagon. This is military fortresses that they're marching on. Never cities full of all these civilians. The archaeology plays this out really helpfully for us. Ancient Jericho, we've learned, was about a six acre plot of land. That's not big at all. I can't remember if we think in acres in the UK.

[16 : 31] Do we? Yeah. I can't think in square meters. I cannot do it. I don't know if people can. I have to convert. Acres. It's not big. It's very small, which is why in one day you could march around it seven times. How is that possible? It was six acres. It's not big at all. I had a two acre plot of land that I lived on in Mississippi before moving here. It was easy. It was small. Why? Because it's a military fortress. In other words, the roads and the highways that had been built would pass through military fortresses, cities. The civilians did not live there. The civilians lived in the mountains and the valleys. They farmed. They lived in the hills. They lived all around. They're not going and attacking civilian villages. This is a military fortress. It's soldiers. Who's the one civilian that we know about that lived in Jericho? Rahab. What happened to Rahab? She became an Israelite. She was allowed to live with her family.

[17 : 28] She was running some type of space, place for the soldiers in the midst of this city, this fortress. That's why she was there. It wasn't a city in the way we think about cities today. Now two more before we move on to the last thing. It's also important to note that what we have in the book of Joshua, the scholars, evangelical scholars included, very much agree that it's what we call ancient trash talk. When you come to something like Ai, the battle of Ai, and Israel finally wins, and Joshua, who's likely the writer there, says something like, we defeated all the kings of Canaan, and we destroyed everyone. The point of the text is to realize something, which is flip the page, and what do you find out? They didn't do that. In other words, it was a form of ancient trash talk. The whole point of the book of Joshua was that when you get to the end, you realize tons of Canaanites are living with the Israelites, that most of the kings, they did not defeat, that they failed in this mission.

[18 : 40] That's exactly the idea, is that they went to these military fortresses, they conquered some of them, but they did not devote everybody to destruction. This is a complicated issue

because it raises other problems, but the Hebrew text that's being translated there is idiomatic.

We see it outside the Bible as well, that when a person wins a victory, they often speak in hyperbolic fashion, and that was normative for the ancient Near Eastern world.

It wasn't seen as an issue, it was seen as normative. That comes out very clearly in Joshua, but then Joshua makes the point that they didn't actually do that.

The text, the book itself, makes that clear that some of those same people groups are still living with the Israelites, and that's the big idea that's coming out through Joshua.

It's the same thing. It's a similar way that we might try to think of an example here. In the contemporary world, a football club comes into the locker room after beating, hearts beats somebody, and it's 5-0.

[19 : 46] Hibs, let's say, beat somebody, and it's 5-0. You come to the locker room afterwards, and what did they say? We devastated them.

We showed them no mercy. We use idiomatic language to describe the types of victories that we've won. That's often what's happening in war talk, and even in the Bible.

Joshua goes out of its way to make the point that actually there were plenty of Canaanites still around. Lastly, and we'll move on to the final thing, what we see in the Canaanite conquest is the language of driving out.

That's what harem refers to, is a driving out. That's the big idea. God is saying, I am choosing to reestablish what ought to be good, eaten, in this particular place.

In order to do that, I have to push out, drive out evil. Remember if you were around Sunday night, we talked about the fact that these are no idyllic societies, that the Canaanite societies are being represented and chosen because they have completely given themselves over to absolute evil.

[20 : 59] Leviticus 18 and 21 are both places you can go read about this, that these societies had given themselves to the deity, the concept of molek or molok in the Hebrew Bible, which is a deity that was worshiped by human sacrifice.

God makes it very clear that this is the situation that's happening in Canaan, and that this is the land that God has chosen to reestablish, eat and to work out salvation.

The language of being driven out is used. Where is this language of being driven out first found? This exilic concept, it's found in Genesis 3. The first time we see this verb, it's used for Adam and Eve.

God drove them out. He drove them out so that he might save them. He pushed them away so that they could not eat of the tree of life and eternalize their sinful condition.

This is the verb that gets used in this conquest, that he's doing this, he's pushing out injustice in order to save. The ultimate idea here is redemptive for all the nations.

[22 : 02] That's the big idea. Let me finally, thirdly try to, in five or six minutes, just give them back away from that a bit and give a few broader theological principles in the Bible that might help us think about this, especially maybe as we're talking to someone that brings up an issue like this.

It might not be the easiest thing to rattle off the most detailed prose about this issue. I think the thing always to remember when we're talking to non-Christians that want to talk about this issue is step one, always bring them back to what's most important first.

What's most important is what I've called Jesus simplicity and other pastors have referred to that in the past. Jesus simplicity. Did Jesus Christ, is Jesus Christ real? Did God become man?

Did he rise from the dead on the third day? That's the most important question. What to do with the Canaanite conquest is secondary. It's something that needs to be talked about with a person if they're interested in honest discussion, but it needs to come down the road.

Step one is always to get to the basics, get to what's most important. Sometimes people do want to have honest discussion about this. These are the types of things you can talk about.

[23 : 23] Here's some broad theological principles that I think can help us in an honest discussion with people and with our own selves, our own hearts as Bible readers on this. Step one, I'm just going to rattle these off for time's sake.

One, remember from Genesis two to three forward, no one deserves to live. Anytime we're alive, anytime T one that we are living, we do not deserve it.

No human being deserves it. Every single moment that the world continues to operate after human rebellion is a moment of grace and we call this common grace.

God gifts us life despite ourselves. It's always important to remember that according to the Bible, we never have gotten the justice we deserved. That no matter what comes to us in life, true justice would be non-existence.

That's exactly the promise of Genesis two. If you eat of it, you shall surely die. Yet out of any live nine times as longer as the rest, than any of us will live.

[24 : 30] Grace is operative from the very beginning and grace is the fundamental ground that we're walking on at all times. We call this common because it's not salvific. There's a difference.

Salvific grace, special grace comes on the cross of Christ alone, but everybody stands on the ground of common grace. All of us do. So common grace is drawing breath. It's living it all. Whether you're a Christian or not a Christian, no matter what you believe in, not only do you get food to eat, but that food also tastes good. That's common grace. That's a gift that God gives to the world. So that's a really important idea.

So Trimmer Longman says, God's holiness shines bright against the opposition of Satan and the knowledge of evil in the Old Testament. Everything and everyone that stands against that holiness, both individually and corporately, deserves death, though rarely gets it.

Though rarely gets it. I remember, again, a reference to Sunday night is patient with the Canaanites. Why does God keep Israel in Egypt for 400 years, his children?

[25 : 34] Do you know what he says to Moses? What he says to the patriarchs before Moses? My people will be enslaved for 400 years because the iniquity of the Amorites, the Canaanites, is not complete.

Meaning, I am giving the Canaanites my patience and a chance for repentance. And so my people remain enslaved for 400 years while I let them live.

That's the logic that God gives. All right. Secondly, God gives humanity life after the fall so he can save it.

We've got to remember at all times across the Old Testament that everything is serving the purpose of special redemption, of the work of Jesus Christ that's going to come. I mentioned that already. But God is seeking to restore his holy city in this conquest and that's the big idea. Third, of five, we're almost there.

[26 : 32] Remember that God has chosen historically to do this work of salvation through choosing a lineage, through which to save the whole world.

So all of this comes from Genesis 2 and 3, right? And in Genesis 3, immediately when humanity sins, what happens? God chooses a people. He says, I'm going to save people who don't deserve to be saved, but I'm going to do it through one family line, the weakest among all the nations. And that family line begins at the moment that God says to Eve, through you, your son, the serpent's head will be crushed. And so there's a principle that runs throughout the whole Old Testament.

You've got to have this principle to read the Old Testament well. And that's that there's what we call a seed theology, the theology of the son of Eve and the theology, the seed of the serpent, two different family lineages.

And you see that represented. You flip the page, Genesis 4, and you've got the separation between Cain and Abel, the seed of the woman, the seed of the serpent. And that plays out throughout the whole of the Old Testament.

[27 : 37] Who is the seed of the woman? How are we going to get to the one that will crush the head of the serpent? And the Canaanites ultimately are the seed of the serpent. And they embrace that holistically.

They follow the serpent. They do horrific things that in God's patience with them. And nevertheless, they embrace that role.

And so that's a theology that carries us throughout the whole Old Testament, all the way to the birth of Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman. That's why the New Testament begins in a genealogy.

That's why the last book of the Hebrew Bible Chronicles is a series of genealogies. That's why the structure of Genesis is 10 genealogies. If you map out the structure of Genesis, you'll see that it follows 10 genealogies, every section there's 10 sections, and they all begin with a new genealogy. Why? It's following the seed of the woman. Where's the Messiah going to come from? It begins all the way back in Genesis 3, and this conquest is a part of that. All right, two more.

[28 : 42] That means that Harim War, this conquest, is birthed through God's covenant promises. He says, I'm going to take a people that doesn't deserve to be my people, and I'm going to put them in a place, a new Eden, that they don't deserve.

And I'm going to give them my presence that they don't deserve. And I'm going to give them a program of blessing that they don't deserve, the coming of the Messiah. That's what God is doing in the conquest.

That's the big idea. That's the big picture. All right, lastly, theological principle number five. I think that it's helpful to think of what's going on in Joshua and this idea of holy war in the Old Testament as not only historically true, but also a type, a symbol, something that points forward, something that we find ultimate fulfillment of later in history.

And in two ways, we call this an intrusion ethic that what's coming in the future intrudes actually into the past.

God's judgment on these nations for their evil is an image and a picture of the fact that one day he's going to do this, he's going to purge evil from all the world. This is all about the book of Revelation, but in the middle of history, it's about something else.

[30 : 05] And that's that when you get to the end of the book of Joshua, you realize something that Joshua and the Israelites are never going to make Eden happen. That they're complete failures, that they become just like the Canaanites, and that God is patient with them for 400 years and 200 more years and hundreds more years.

And eventually Jerusalem is going to be destroyed because they embrace the same things. Babylon runs through their heart just like it did through the original Babylonians, the Canaanites. And that's why this military leader, Joshua, the ultimate failure has his name repurposed in the New Testament.

It's no coincidence that the one that was born in the middle of history, Jesus Christ, bears the exact same name as the one who led this conquest. Jesus name is Joshua in Hebrew.

Yeshua, God saves, Yahweh saves. That is who Jesus Christ is. He brings the conquest into true history, right? And that conquest ultimately is one that's brought upon his own body and his own soul.

[31 : 12] And so he's the ultimate fulfillment of everything that the conquest of Canaan was about. All right, we must stop.

We must stop. This is a big issue. It's an important thing. And so let me say that if you ever have somebody in your life that is really wrestling with us and really, really struggling with us, or you are, right, which happens to all of us as Christians, we read, you know, you're going through your Bible reading plan and you come across these passages and you say, oh boy, I don't know.

Remember that there's resources. There's people to come and talk to. There's books and people that have thought about this for a long time and really carefully.

So don't doubt by yourself. Seek out help and reflection on this from multiple sources and multiple ways because it really is out there and God really is good.