

Doesn't the Old Testament Support Violence?

Peter J. Williams

Tyndale House, Cambridge

www.tyndalehouse.com

The case against the Bible

- God commands Israel to destroy nations including non-combatants and children (e.g. Numbers 31:13–17; Deuteronomy 7:1–3; Joshua 6:21; 8:25–26; 1 Samuel 15:3)
- It is always immoral to kill innocent people
- This is incompatible with God being a God of love (1 John 4:8)
- It is just like lots of religious and racial violence we condemn in the world today

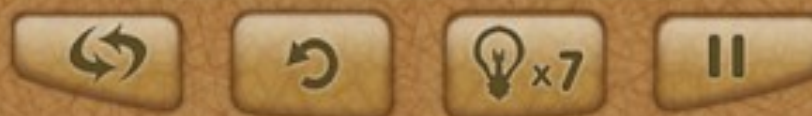
I would like to make 15
points, but I don't have time

EXPERT

LEVEL
70

MOVE
28

BEST
--



1. We sometimes accept people who plan to take innocent life as heroes

2. God is the giver of life

God is the giver of life

- You shouldn't take life just because someone tells you to
- Sometimes things change moral category when permission is granted from a due authority
- Murder could be defined as the unauthorized taking of life

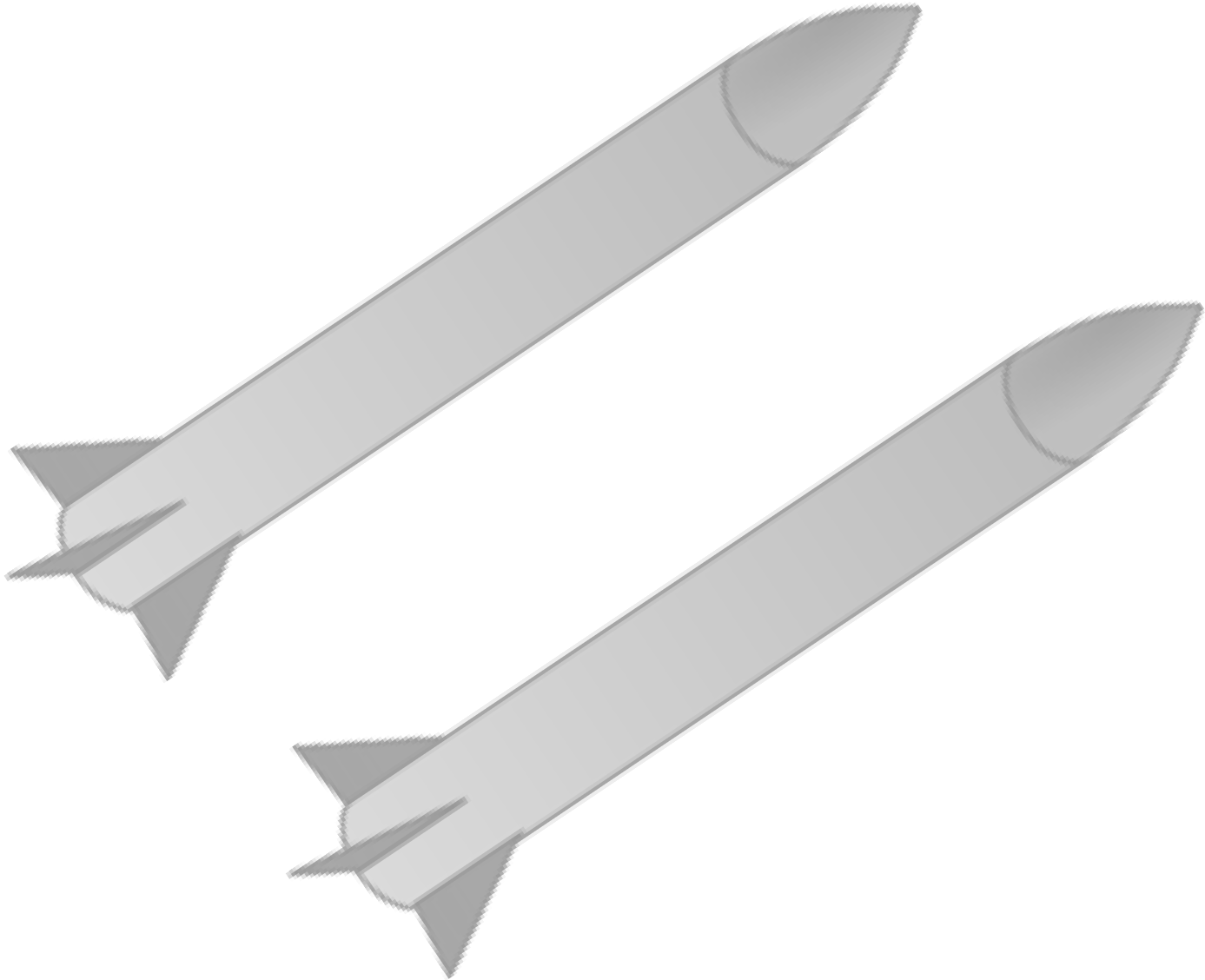
3. God has future knowledge
and that changes things

God has future knowledge

- What's bad about gambling in a casino or passing a car on a blind summit?
- Consequentialism (judging rightness by consequences) is problematic for humans
- We accept F16 pilots and Norwegian commandos as heroes despite 2 moral vulnerabilities (lack of authority and foreknowledge)
- God does not have those vulnerabilities

4. There was and is lots of
other evidence of God's
benevolence

5. Miraculous narratives
have different ethical rules









These are miraculous narratives

- Tendency to read the Exodus and Conquest without God
- God is the main character
- You can't remove him and his miracles from the narrative and then judge it

6. God did most of the
fighting

7. We do not know that
Canaanite children were
worse off dead

8. The command was given
with lots of objective
evidence

9. The Canaanites were
wicked



The Canaanites were wicked

- They sacrificed their children ...



- ‘for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.’
(Deuteronomy 12:31 ESV)

10. There may have been no reasonable alternative

11. Israel was God's judicial
representative

12. The Canaanites were warned and able to repent

Rahab in Joshua 2:9-11

- ‘I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond...

Joshua 2:9-11 (cont.)

- the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.’ (ESV)

Joshua 5:1

- ‘As soon as all the kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the people of Israel until they had crossed over, their hearts melted and there was no longer any spirit in them because of the people of Israel.’ (ESV)

The Gibeonites, Joshua 9:9-10

- ‘For we have heard a report of him, and all that he did in Egypt, and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon the king of Heshbon, and to Og king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth.’ (ESV)

What if?

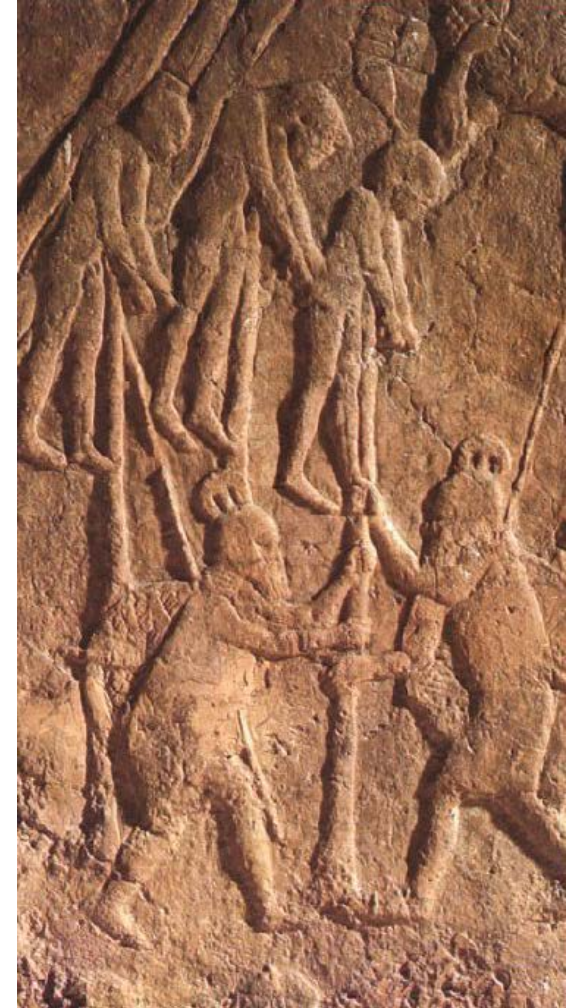
- Put an end to Canaanite child sacrifice
- Over centuries might result in killing of fewer children



13. The usual atrocities were
absent

The usual atrocities were absent

- Limited by proportionality
- Unparalleled restraint in ancient warfare



14. No one is absolutely
innocent

15. You couldn't imitate
these stories if you tried

Any objection needs to be a statement, not just a question: 'Why did God ...?'

Which objection is being made?

- It was immoral for God to command the destruction of the Canaanites
- It was immoral for the Israelites to obey such a command if it really was given in the way the Bible describes
- Reading the Bible causes people to be violent
- The writing of the stories was propagandistic and therefore immoral

Questions?