

When God kills the Innocent

by [Aron Wall](#) Posted on [March 8, 2014](#)

A Christian reader named Paul writes to me from New Zealand with the following common question. With permission, I am posting his question and my answer on my blog.

St. Paul writes:

A few months ago I discovered your blog via the [Biologos](#) website. It has been a real encouragement for me to read your articles and I can honestly say that I enjoyed everything that I've read.

Anyway, a Church friend and I have been meeting up every few weeks to have discussions about tricky issues in Christianity and something that has come up (and was always bound to...) is the depictions of God in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God is often depicted as acting violently and sometimes in ways that can seem barbaric. For example, God gives instructions for the Israelites to kill people. Likewise, an atheist friend of mine was shocked when I referred to God as "just" because he had just read about the exodus and the plagues.

The issue for me is not that God doesn't have a right to judge/ punish guilty people (for example the Canaanites), but the fact that innocent people are also involved in some of these situations. For example children and babies. In some verses they seem to be explicitly mentioned (i.e. 1 Samuel 15:3). I realise this is only a single example, but there are one or two other examples that are quite easy to find.

The most common response of Christians seems to be that God created all of us and therefore He can do whatever He wants. I agree that God is sovereign, but these actions seem inconsistent with the nature of God revealed clearly in Jesus.

I have some ideas about what to make of it all, but I thought that I would ask you what you make of these sorts of verses? I realise that you must be very busy (and you don't know me!) so please don't feel obligated to reply! However, if you have the time and the inclination I would really appreciate it.

My reply was as follows (some slight editing):

This is a tricky problem in theology, isn't it! But it isn't just an Old Testament vs. New Testament thing. The following verses are *all* God speaking in the Old Testament:

1. "I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments." ([Ex. 20:5-6](#))
2. "My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out." [including the children, as other parts of Scripture make clear] ([Ex. 23:23](#))
3. "Fathers are not to be put to death for their children or children for their fathers; each person will be put to death for his own sin. Do not deny justice to a foreigner or fatherless child, and do not take a widow's garment as security. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. Therefore I am commanding you to do this." ([Deut. 24:16-18](#))
4. "Yet you ask, 'Why does the son not share the guilt of his father?' Since the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to keep all my decrees, he will surely live. The one who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them." ([Ezekiel 18:19-20](#))

The tension lies within the pages of Hebrew Scripture itself. We have to understand in what sense all of these Scriptures can be true.

Let me start by demolishing the idea that "God created all of us and therefore He can do whatever He wants." If this were true, there would be no meaning in saying that God is just and righteous in how he treats us. It wouldn't allow us to predict anything whatsoever about what he would do. Yet St. Abraham—our father in faith—pleads for Sodom and Gommorah by asking: "Far be it from you to do such a thing--to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you!

Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" ([Gen. 18:25](#)). God does not respond by saying "Whatever I do is just by definition". Rather, he grants Abraham's requests, and goes beyond them to ensure that, in this case, the innocent are not punished alongside the guilty. The fact that God is just implies that there are some things which he won't do, because they are unfair.

On the other hand, God IS the ruler of the universe. This gives him authority to make decisions which ordinary human beings are not allowed to make. Just like an earthly Governor or Judge has authority to do some things which ordinary citizens don't have the right to do, God has the authority to do anything, i.e. any type of act. For example, everything belongs to God, so when he takes things from us it is not stealing, but doing what he likes with his own property. Similarly, if God kills people it is not murder, because our lives belong to him ([Deut. 32:39](#)).

(This does not, I think contradict the point of the previous paragraph. The *scope* of authority is different from how one *uses* that authority. God has the authority to do anything, precisely because, since he is perfectly good, he never abuses this authority, but only does what is just and right.)

Note that, as the ruler of the universe God actually kills *everyone*. All people are mortal, some of them die young, and God is responsible for this state of affairs. Sometimes he does it miraculously in order to make a special point, but more often it he causes it to happen naturally. Before I ask whether I can trust a God who killed the Caananite children, I first need to ask whether I can trust a God who will kill ME. As Christians, we trust that God is using death as a tool in order to turn us into the people he wants us to become. Partly, we trust him because he came to Earth and died for us, so he isn't asking us to suffer anything which he hasn't gone through himself.

God's motivations for killing people are not the same as that of a human murderer. Most of the time, people kill other people out of hatred, because they want something bad to happen to them, or because they don't care about them. But God swears to us that this is not why he does it. "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live" ([Ezekiel 33:11](#))

Also God is unchangeable. If you or I killed somebody, we would become more violent and hateful people who would be more likely to kill someone else. Whereas God's character, being eternal, cannot be corrupted. Paradoxically, this means that a perfectly good being is more likely than a good human to do bad things in order to produce good consequences.

And God is omniscient, so he knows when a group of people have become so wicked that it would be bad for them, and for their children, and for the rest of the world, if they remain alive to keep sinning. For example, the Canaanites sacrificed their children as part of their religion, and if God hadn't put an end to them, we might still be doing that today. It may seem ironic that God also ordered that their innocent children be killed, but remember that they would not have remained innocent if they had been able to come to maturity. Instead they went to Heaven, which might not have been possible if they had been corrupted by the religion of their parents.

This brings us back to the group justice vs. individual justice question. Ultimately, I believe God is committed to bring justice and vindication to every innocent person, including those who were victims of bad circumstances. On the other hand, God has also set up the world in such a way that our good or bad actions can have an effect on other people: if we sin against others, they are harmed, and can be tempted either to hate or to imitate us. This is especially true in the case of our parents, who bring us into being and choose what environment we will come to maturity in. Because of this strong moral influence, it is inevitable that to some extent our moral and cultural condition is inherited from others. Alcoholic parents often have alcoholic children. We may resist this influence and become different people than our parents, but there is a correlation which cannot be entirely removed.

As a result, in his role as Judge of the Earth, Guardian of Human Culture and Supervisor of the Gene Pool, God must necessarily engage in some amount of group justice as well as individual justice, because that is the nature of how humans propagate ourselves (and our ideas). He does not, however, delegate this authority to us. The Israelite judicial system was based strictly on individual desert (although even there, indirect punishment of others is inevitable: see the story in [2 Samuel 14:6-7](#) for an example). The Israelites were also commanded to exterminate certain people groups, but had no authority to decide which ones—God provided them with a specific and limited list.

In the end, God will provide us all with individual justice. But I think that once everything is revealed, our moral interdependence will prove to have been a means of grace. If no innocent people ever suffered punishment for guilty people, then Christ could not have saved us, and we would be dead in our sins. If we ourselves struggle, if sins have been transmitted to us by others, or if the punishment of others has ruined our lives as well, then what? I think that by forgiving our forbears, and by seeking God's help for our problems, we become imitators of Jesus, as St. Peter says:

*For you were called to this,
because Christ also suffered for you,
leaving you an example,
so that you should follow in His steps.
He did not commit sin,
and no deceit was found in His mouth;
when He was reviled,
He did not revile in return;
when He was suffering,
He did not threaten
but entrusted Himself to the One who judges justly.
He Himself bore our sins
in His body on the tree,
so that, having died to sins,
we might live for righteousness;
you have been healed by His wounds.
For you were like sheep going astray,
but you have now returned
to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. ([1 Peter 2:21-25](#))*

If Christ—the Innocent One—suffered for the sins of others and brought about the redemption of the world, then all of us who in lighter measure bear the sin of others, will also receive through Christ this redemption. From the the infants killed by St. Joshua for the sins of the guilty Canaanites, to the infants killed by wicked Herod in place of the innocent Christ-child, everyone who has a share in the sufferings of Christ will also rise with him in eternal glory. This is both a justice and a mercy beyond our comprehension.

About Aron Wall

I am a Lecturer in Theoretical Physics at the University of Cambridge. Before that, I read Great Books at St. John's College (Santa Fe), got my physics Ph.D. from U Maryland, and did my postdocs at UC Santa Barbara, the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and Stanford. The views expressed on this blog are my own, and should not be attributed to any of these fine institutions.

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