

The Ethics of Israel's Conquest of Canaan¹

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Few issues in Old Testament interpretation are as difficult or as troubling as the Lord's command to the Israelites to remove the Canaanites and take over their land (Deuteronomy 7). How could a good God command the elimination of these people, including men, women and children? Is this not genocide of the worst sort? Many refuse to take the Old Testament seriously because of this single issue, and many refuse the gospel of the New Testament because of its guilt by association: the New Testament is part of the Bible which includes divinely sanctioned elimination of these groups of people. How should we answer the questions regarding this problem, and how do we incorporate these stories into our understanding of the God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth?

While none of the points below is completely satisfying in and of itself, the following are factors that need to be considered in coming to grips with the issue:

1. The ancient Israelite conquest of Canaan describes a very limited event (only Numbers 21, 31, Joshua 6–11, Judges 1). Many of the other wars recounted in the OT have no divine sanction, and some were clearly condemned as the actions of proud and greedy kings, or military rivals. Sometimes people perceive the whole OT as being filled with violence and think that *all* the wars recounted within it are commanded by the God of the Bible. But this is a false caricature. The events that happened in Joshua took place largely in one generation: the conquest of Canaan was limited in time, locale, and scope.

The type of warfare described in Joshua involved what was called "*herem*" – placing an object, or in this case persons, in a status of being "devoted" to Yahweh. In this type of battle, YHWH is the chief protagonist and the defeated enemies are renounced or devoted to him. This was, however, a very limited policy, and was only to be used by Israel when battling the seven Canaanite people groups listed in Deuteronomy 7:1–2. When we get to Deuteronomy 20, we find that the Israelites were to have two distinct approaches to war. The *herem* policy governed only the treatment of these seven nations. With enemies outside the Promised Land, however – those who are "far off" – Israel was to have a different policy. For the "far off" nations, they were to *begin* by making overtures of peace. However offensive we may find the "devotion to destruction" policy, it was a very limited one. It was not intended to be Israel's general military stance.

2. The conquest should not be portrayed as random genocide or ethnic cleansing. These actions are consistently portrayed as God's moral punishment on a degraded society, similar to the historical judgments on Sodom and Gomorrah, and eventually Israel itself in the Babylonian exile. The wickedness of Canaanite society is more explicitly described in moral and social terms in Leviticus 18:24-25; 20:22-24; Deut. 9:5; 12:29-31. It includes sexual promiscuity and perversion particularly associated with

¹ In constructing this paper we borrowed heavily from two sources: 1) The unpublished notes of Daniel Block, a professor at Wheaton College; and 2) Christopher Wright *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (InterVarsity Press, 2006).

fertility cult-religions, and also the wide-spread of child sacrifice and bodily mutilation in worship. What they were doing was morally offensive and destructive. There is a huge difference between arbitrary violence towards civilians and violence inflicted within the moral framework of punishment. This is true in human society as much as in divine perspective. The conquest of Canaan constituted an act of God's punishment on a wicked society, using Israel as the human agent. This pattern was repeated later on in Israel's history as God used Babylon as an agent of judgment against apostate Israel.

3. God is consistent. He threatened to exact the same justice on Israel if they broke the covenant and adopted the culture and religion of the Canaanites. It was clearly stated in the covenant agreement that if they behaved in the same way as the Canaanites, Yahweh would treat them as his enemy and inflict upon them the same punishment (Deut. 28.25-68). If anything, the OT argues that Israel's status as God's elect people exposed them to God's justice *more* than any of the surrounding nations; including those they conquered (cf. Amos 3.2). Far more generations of Israelites experienced God's punishment at the hands of their enemies than the single generation of Canaanites. It is simply a distortion of teaching to say that God is always for Israel and is against all other nations. God really does not play favorites. Yes, he chose Abraham and his descendants to be his covenant people, but Deuteronomy warns them over and over that if they ever forget God and live like Canaanites they will experience the same fate.

4. Is this fair? Were these Canaanites more wicked than any of the other societies that Israel lived around and yet were not called upon to destroy? Probably not. Then why destroy the Canaanites and not others? Also, the Israelites were not much better. Is it fair that a nation that was no more righteous than the Canaanites should be asked to do such a thing? These are real and important questions. But in reality, God's historical judgment had to fall at sometime on someone if his people were to have a chance to inherit this land. It was inevitable that when the time came for Israel to enter the land, some people group would be living there. If this is not "fair" then it seems unavoidable – unless God were to suspend all demonstrations of his justice within history.

This is one of the reasons why the Bible increasingly points towards a final reckoning when God will act to put all things right in all places regardless of who lives where so that universal justice prevails in a way that will be fair for all people (something that cannot be achieved within history, given the ambiguities of all historical events). In the meantime, that is before God can be ultimately fair across the board, God harnesses this ambiguous destruction of the Canaanites within the accomplishment of his wider, longer-term purpose of salvation for the entire world.

If God was going to claim this land bridge for his purposes with Israel, someone who was living there had to leave. There is no way around that. It was these people at this time. Why does God want this land bridge? So that his greater purposes might be accomplished; the redemption of the world. People who walk into this area from around the world will see Israel and be persuaded to worship this God. That is his plan in calling Israel into being; that is, until they botched it up.

5. In biblical times people had a sense of corporate identity that is difficult for us modern westerners to understand. To us each individual is a separate entity and

individual liberty and fulfillment is the highest ideal. According to the ancient Near Eastern ideal, one found one's significance and identity in relation to the community. When one member hurt, they all hurt; when one prospered they all prospered (cf. also 1 Corinthians 12-14). For this reason few of the original readers would have objected to the fact that children would share the fate of their parents.

6. Although the Canaanites as nations were subject to the judgment of God, they had at least 40 years of advance warning (see Rahab's confession in Joshua 2:8-11). Not only did the conquest of Canaan *not* catch them by surprise; any individual who declared faith in Yahweh would be spared. Rahab is a perfect example. Although she was a prostitute (the lowest of the low), her life and the lives of her family were spared because they believed in Yahweh. In fact, so complete was Rahab's incorporation into the community of faith that in the providence of God she became the ancestor of Jesus! (Matthew 1). God can and is willing to save anyone. We are also told that the entire tribe of the Gibeonites did escaped judgment in the same way. These narrative thus lead us to believe that many Canaanites escaped the judgment brought on their people by repentance and faith in Yahweh.

No one of these answers will satisfy everyone, and they of them should be taken in isolation. But it is important to see that this is a complex moral issue, and that simple answers are misleading and unhelpful. Ultimately, when dealing with matters of God's justice, we are called to trust in Abraham's compelling words: "Will not the judge of all the earth will do what is right?" (Genesis 18:25) We must trust that God's justice and mercy was worked out in the lives of those Canaanites, and that it is being worked out today as well.

The challenge for us is to treasure God's grace in our own lives, and pray for others around us to realize and accept that grace. Our vocation as Christ followers, to tell and show what God has done for us in Christ, and pray that others, like Rahab, will come to the find the Creator's life and grace revealed in Christ. This is ultimately what God wants, since he takes no pleasure in anyone's death (Ezekiel 18:32), and desires salvation and new life for all of his creation (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

Further Resources:

- *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide*, by C.S. Cowles, Eugene H. Merrill, Daniel L. Gard, and Tremper Longman III. Zondervan, 2003.
- *The Skeletons in God's Closet: The Mercy of Hell, the Surprise of Judgment, and the Hope of Holy War*, by Josh R. Butler. Thomas Nelson, 2014.
- *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*, by Paul Copan. Baker Books, 2011.