

Canaanite Genocide

The commands from God to destroy utterly the Canaanites are recorded in Ex 23:20-33; 34:10-17; Deut 7:1-5. Many have an issue with a God who is love giving orders to Israel to completely wipe out the Canaanite population, men, women, and children, along with animals, etc. Two things to keep in mind:

- However, God's command was not a general policy toward all enemies (Deut 20:1-15,19-20)
- God was creating a place for the Messiah to come; when Israel crossed over the Jordan, He was laying a path that led to the Cross

Several points must be kept in mind concerning the Canaanites:

- They deserved to die for their sin (Deut 9:4-5)
- They persisted in their hatred of God (Deut 7:10)
- The Canaanites constituted a moral cancer (Deut 20:17-18; Num 33:55; Joshua 23:12-13)
 - Homosexuality, bestiality and other detestable sins were rampant among the Canaanites, so much so that the "land itself is vomiting out its inhabitants" (their heinous sins are detailed in Lev 18 (esp v22-29; Lev 20)
 - To understand God's command to utterly destroy the Canaanites in proper context, we first need to understand that God was patient and gave them 400 years to repent (Gen 15:13,16). We also need to understand the heinous nature of their sin (outlined in graphic detail in Lev 18; 20).
- Their religious practices:
 - Were "evil" (Judges 2:11; 1 Kings 22:52-53)
 - An "abomination" (Deut 7:25-26)
 - The reason God wanted the Israelites to be separate from the Canaanites was "that they teach you not to do after all their abomination, which they have done unto their gods" (Deut 20:18)
 - The term "go a whoring" is used in connection with their religion (Ex 34:15; Judges 2:17)
 - They were involved in child sacrifice (Deut 12:31)
 - They were involved in cutting themselves as they made supplication to their gods (1 Kings 18:28)
- Ezra has a concise summary of the morals of the Canaanites (Ezra 9:1)

- Examples of conduct of individual Canaanites, which illustrates the degeneration of the whole race:
 - Random violence - Shechem (Gen 34)
 - Wicked home life - Judah and his Canaanite wife Shuah (Gen 38)
 - Deceitful, lack of integrity - the people of Gibeon (Hivites) when they heard of the success of the Israelite's conquest (Judges 9)
 - Inhumanity - Adonibezek, a Canaanite king, was caught by the Israelites and had his thumbs and big toes cut off. He then said that he had done the same to 70 other kings.
 - Disregard for value of human life - Jezebel and the vineyard of Naboth (1 Kings 21)
- Lev 18-20 provides a comprehensive list of sins, committed by the Canaanites, from which the Israelites were to abstain

This is also a list of many of the sins that the Canaanites committed (Lev 18:27; 20:23):

- Incest (Lev 18:6-18)
- Adultery, child sacrifice, homosexuality, bestiality (Lev 18:19-23)
- Their conduct toward neighbors was corrupt (Lev 19:9-18)
- They did not recognize the sacredness of the physical and moral order of the world (Lev 19:19-32)
- They were corrupt in business (Lev 19:33-37)

The endless cycle in the book of Judges is an outline of the effects of the influence of the Canaanites upon Israel (Judges 3:5-9):

- (1) The Israelites dwelt among the Canaanites (failed to drive them out)
- (2) They practiced intermarriage
- (3) They served the gods of the Canaanites
- (4) They did evil before the Lord
- (5) They received the judgment of God
- (6) They made supplication to the Lord
- (7) They obtained deliverance by the mercy of God

The first step in the apostasy of the Israelites was their incomplete separation from the Canaanites. The recurring phrase "the children of Israel could not drive them out" and its equivalent phrases in the book of Joshua are very significant in the book of Judges.

Two mitigating factors may be mentioned. In some ways the death of a Canaanite child could have been a blessing. For if the child died before reaching the age of accountability it is likely that his or her eternal destiny would have been made secure in heaven.

From the table of nations (Gen 10:15-19), the people called Canaanites include those of (1) Sidon, (2) Heth, (3) Jebusites, (4) Amorites, (5) Girgashites, (6) Hivites, (7) Arkites, (8) Sinites, (9) Arvadites, (10) Zemarites, and (11) Hamathites. Eleven groups apparently were living in the land called Canaan at the time of the Israelite conquest.

Several facts must be noted from these three passages (Ex 23:20-33; 34:10-17; Deut 7:1-5):

- (1) The Angel of Jehovah was to lead the Israelites into their promised land
- (2) The promise to destroy the Canaanites was conditioned upon the obedience of the Israelites
- (3) The destruction of the Canaanites was to be accomplished solely by the help of God
- (4) The main reason for the destruction of the Canaanites is the evil influence which the Canaanites would have upon the children of Israel
- (5) The commands which God gave the Israelites were three-fold; make no covenants with the Canaanites; do not serve the gods of the Canaanites; and utterly destroy the Canaanites
- (6) The implied reason for the destruction of the Canaanites was the degeneracy of the Canaanites
- (7) A more positive reason for the separation of the Israelites from the Canaanites was that the Israelites were a separated and holy people unto the Lord
- (8) God made it plain that if the Israelites were to engage in the evils of the Canaanites that they themselves would come under a similar condemnation as the Canaanites

So there is no dichotomy between the God of the OT and the God of the NT. In both testaments He is revealed as a loving and righteous God. ***The command to engage in holy war is, of course, not applicable today since at the present time God is not working through one nation to set up His kingdom on the earth.*** But Christians today should learn from this command that they should be as ruthless with sin in their own lives as Israel should have been against the Canaanites.

There are two ways in which the Modernists accuse God of unjustness in His dealings with the Canaanites. Some authors prefer to state their position clearly so that all may know their stand. Other authors do not wish to make it evident that they are calling God unjust. For this reason, they hide their views in the concepts of an evolutionary development of religion and in the flexible documentary hypothesis. Either approach, when analyzed in the light of an inspired, authoritative Word of God, is anti-Scriptural and is to be denied with alacrity.

Such teaching clearly opposes doctrines taught in the OT. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25); "He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is He" (Deut 32:4); "Justice and judgment are the habitation of Thy throne: mercy and truth shall go before Thy face" (Ps 89:14). There are many more verses that could be cited in support of God's justice and righteousness. The conclusion is that if one believes that God may have been unjust in His dealings with the Canaanites, then he is refusing to believe what the rest of the Bible says about God's acts. This is serious enough, but the problem is even deeper. Not only does a person accuse God of unjust acts but he also denies that the essential nature of God is holy.

Was it cruel and unjust of God to command Israel to exterminate the nations of Canaan? No! God had been patient for centuries, withholding His judgment (Gen 15:16; 2 Peter 3:9). Their society—especially their religion—was unspeakably wicked (Rom 1:18ff). It should have been wiped out years before Israel appeared on the scene.

The Canaanite nations had also been warned by the judgments God had inflicted on others, especially on Egypt and the nations east of the Jordan (Amorite kings Sihon and Og, Joshua 2:8-13). Rahab and her family had sufficient information to be able to repent and believe and God saved them (Joshua 2; 6:22-25). We have every right to conclude that God would have saved anybody who had turned to Him. The King of Nineveh repented "on the speculation" that God might spare them from the 40-day deadline Jonah was called to declare! (Jonah 3:4-10). God did not want the filth of Canaanite society and religion to contaminate His people Israel. They were His special people, chosen to fulfill His purposes in this world. They had to be separated from all other nations to bring the world the Scriptures and the Savior.

God is perpetually at war with sin. That is the whole explanation of the extermination of the Canaanites. — G. Campbell Morgan

Joshua reveals that it is because God loves people that He hates sin. Of course, He also hates sin because it offends His holiness. However, in Joshua, I believe the emphasis is on God's concern for the Israelites more than the vindication of His holiness.

The writer of this book portrayed Yahweh as a "God of war." This side of God's character has created problems for many people. How could God be loving and yet deal so severely with the Canaanites? In view of Jesus Christ's commands to love our enemies (Matt 5:44), and to be peacemakers (Matt 5:9), how can we justify God's dealings with the Canaanites that this book records? One scholar called this the major problem in Joshua.

The righteous side of God's character is, of course, a consistent emphasis throughout Scripture. In the Pentateuch, God punished all those who oppressed the patriarchs and their descendants (Cf. Ex 15:3). In the historical books, we find curses on the disobedient. The psalmist referred to Yahweh as "mighty in battle" against the forces opposed to His will (Ps 24:8; 45:3). The prophets, especially Jeremiah, warned that God will judge sin. In the Gospels, we hear and see the wrath of God manifested in Jesus' words and works against the Pharisees for their sins. In the Book of Revelation, especially Rev 6-19, John pictured the wrath of God being poured out in judgment on the whole world. In Joshua, too, we see God commanding and leading the Israelites in violent mortal conflict with sinners.

The reason God wages war against sin and sinners is that He *loves people*, and wants to save them from the destruction resulting from sin and its consequences (Cf. Rom 6:23). If God is not a "God of war," He cannot at the same time be a "God of love." To illustrate, a loving father will oppose anyone who tries to destroy his family members.

We can see God's hatred of sin both in His dealings with the Canaanites, and in His dealings with the Israelites, in Joshua.

In the Pentateuch, we discovered many statements and warnings about the Canaanites. Their wickedness was great, even in Abraham's day. The Sodomites were Canaanites (Gen 19), but the measure of their iniquity was not yet full (Gen 15:16; Cf. Lev 18:24-28). The *Ras Shamra* Tablets have shed much light on Canaanite religion and culture. Archaeologists discovered these written records ("several hundred clay tablets and fragments") in northwest Syria at the site of an ancient city: Ugarit. They date from the 14th century BC, the time of the conquest by Joshua. The Canaanites wrote them in the Ugaritic language in cuneiform script. These records reveal that Canaanite culture was extremely immoral and inhumane. The Canaanites commonly practiced prostitution of both sexes, many kinds of sexual perversion, and human sacrifice. These were their *religious* practices.

As Israel anticipated entering the land occupied by these people, it was a case of "destroy or be destroyed." In commanding the Israelites to annihilate the Canaanites, God was performing *surgery* in order to remove a *cancer* from human society. He was not murdering an innocent primitive people, as some liberal critics of the Bible used to say. God had been extremely patient with the Canaanite tribes. They had had hundreds of years to repent after the witness of Melchizedek, Abraham, and many other God-fearing people who had lived among them. Since the Canaanites did not repent, God used Israel as a *broom* to sweep away their filth and purify the land. He did not drive the Canaanites out simply to make room for Israel. He did so also to remove this cancerous society and its malignant influence on the world's peoples. Israel exercised considerable restraint in dealing with the Canaanites, compared to the way some other ancient Near Eastern countries dealt with the peoples they defeated. The Assyrians, for example, were very brutal.

God also manifested His hatred of sin in His dealings with the Israelites. We have seen this already in the Pentateuch, as God disciplined His chosen people when they sinned. In Joshua, when Israel lusted after the things of Canaan, He dealt with His people severely. Achan's sin (Joshua 7) affected the whole nation. God judged Achan *as He did*, in order to teach the Israelites a strong lesson concerning how serious sin is. God's dealings with His own people were even more severe than His dealings with the Canaanites.

In short, Joshua reveals that God wages war against sin wherever He finds it. He patiently waits for people to repent, but if they do not judge sin themselves, He will judge it (Cf. Acts 17:30-31; 1 Cor 11:31). God deals more severely with His own people than with others, because privilege heightens responsibility (Cf. James 3:1).

Not only does Joshua reveal *that* God wages war against sin, but it also teaches us *how* He does it:

- Nature - restrained waters of a river, shook the walls of a city, sent hail from heaven, lengthened the hours of a day
- Loyalty - God uses those loyal to Him to wage war against sin