

**DEFENDING DISPENSATIONAL DISCONTINUITY: CLEANSING CANAANLAND**

**Relative Discontinuity – Four Types/Four Views – G. K. Beale’s Short Study**

*By David L. Burris*



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“THEOLOGY SYSTEMS OFTEN CAN BE PLACED ON A CONTINUITY-DISCONTINUITY SPECTRUM OR SCALE. “CONTINUITY,” IN THIS CONTEXT, REFERS TO A CONNECTION OR CARRYOVER OF AN OLD TESTAMENT (OT) IDEA OR CONCEPT INTO THE NEW TESTAMENT (NT). DISCONTINUITY REFERS TO A CHANGE OR DISCONNECT BETWEEN OT & NT.”

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**DEUTERONOMY 20: 12–18**

**Verse 16: “But of the cities of these peoples which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes to remain alive.”**

**HERE ARE THE BIBLE PASSAGES THAT DESCRIBE JOSHUA'S ANNIHILATION OF PARTICULAR CITIES IN CANAAN:**

- OF JERICHO, "THEY DEVOTED ALL IN THE CITY TO DESTRUCTION, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, YOUNG AND OLD, OXEN, SHEEP, AND DONKEYS, WITH THE EDGE OF THE SWORD" (6:21).
- OF AI, "ISRAEL HAD FINISHED KILLING ALL THE INHABITANTS OF AI...ALL WHO FELL THAT DAY, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, WERE 12,000, ALL THE PEOPLE OF AI...HE HAD DEVOTED ALL THE INHABITANTS OF AI TO DESTRUCTION" (8:24-26).
- OF MAKKEDAH, "HE DEVOTED TO DESTRUCTION EVERY PERSON IN IT; HE LEFT NONE REMAINING" (10:28)
- OF HAZOR, "THEY STRUCK WITH THE SWORD ALL WHO WERE IN IT, DEVOTING THEM TO DESTRUCTION; THERE WAS NONE LEFT THAT BREATHED" (11:11).
- OF MADON, SHIMRON, ACHSHAPH, AND OTHER CITIES, "EVERY MAN THEY STRUCK WITH THE EDGE OF THE SWORD UNTIL THEY HAD DESTROYED THEM, AND THEY DID NOT LEAVE ANY WHO BREATHED" (11:14).

**JOSHUA'S BACKGROUND**

He warred	Ex 16.8-16
He waited	Ex 24.13
He worshipped	Ex 33.11
He watched	Num 11.28
He witnessed	Num 14.7-9
He wholly followed	Num 32.12

# JOSHUA

## THE BOOK OF VICTORY – AFTER THE DEATH OF MOSES POSSESSING THE LAND

Time covered: 1451BC - 1427BC

Purpose: To record the victorious possession of Canaan.  
Vital Characters: Joshua, Caleb, Rahab, Achan, The Gibeonites

**JOSHUA (SAVIOUR)**

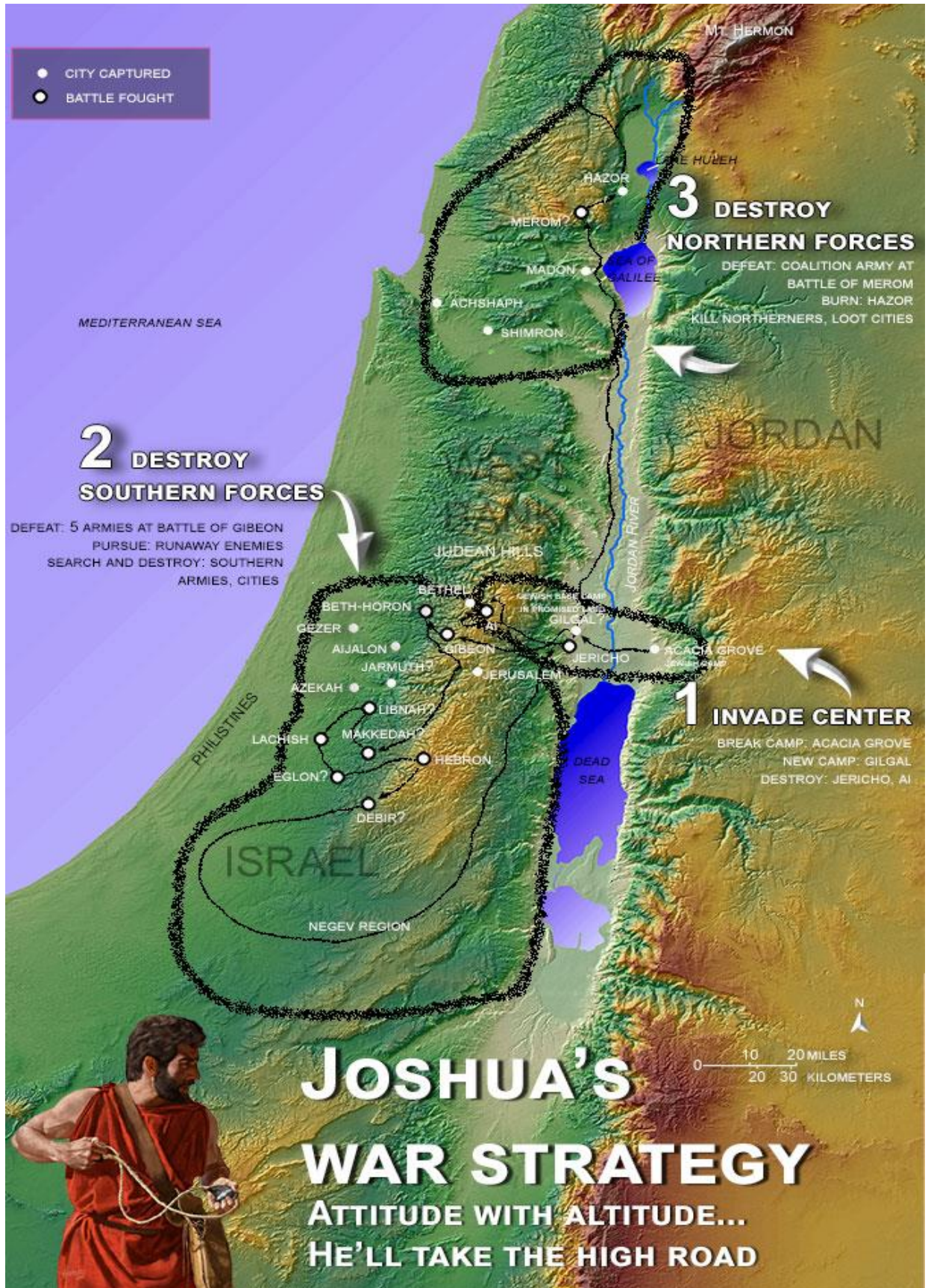
As the "Saviour" Joshua could take the Children of Israel into the Land. Moses, representing the Law, was unable to do so.

CH 1-5 THE PEOPLE SEPARATED 1451 BC	CH 6-12 THE ENEMY SUBDUED 1451 - 1450 BC	CH 13-22 THE LAND SETTLED 1445 - 1427 BC
CONDITION	CONFLICT	CONSOLIDATION
<p><b>The Commission to Joshua</b> Ch.1 <i>Be strong 1.6; 1.7; 1.9</i></p> <p><b>The Confession of Rahab</b> Ch.2 <i>I know 2.9</i> <i>We have heard 2.10</i></p> <p><b>The Crossing of Jordan</b> Chs.3-4 <i>Follow the ark that:</i> <i>Ye may know the way 3.4</i> <i>They may know...I will be with thee 3.7</i> <i>Ye shall know that the living God is among you 3.10</i></p> <p><b>The Circumcision of the People</b> Ch.5 <i>The reproach of Egypt is rolled away 5.9</i></p>	<p><b>The Power of God displayed</b> Ch.6 <i>Obstruction destroyed</i> <i>Jericho falls</i></p> <p><b>The Problems of Sin encountered</b> Chs.7-9 <i>Corruption exposed</i> <i>Achan's covetousness</i> <i>Deception encountered</i> <i>The Gibeonites accepted</i></p> <p><b>The Progress of Israel detailed</b> Chs.10-12 <i>Confederation overcome</i> <i>The Southern League Ch.10</i> <i>The Northern League Ch.11</i></p>	<p><b>The Division of the land</b> Chs.13-19 <i>Divide this land for an inheritance 13.7</i> <i>The allotments to each tribe</i></p> <p><b>The Designation of the Cities</b> Chs.20-21 <i>Appoint...cities of refuge 20.1</i> <i>Refuge for the slayer who kills unawares</i></p> <p><b>The Departure of the 2½ Tribes</b> Ch.22 <i>Get you unto your tents 22.4</i> <i>Back to the east bank of the Jordan</i></p> <p><b>The Death of Joshua</b> Chs.23-24 <i>We will serve the Lord 24.21</i> <i>The Covenant renewed 24.24-25</i></p>
PREPARATION	CONFRONTATION	OCCUPATION
The Promise of Power from the Lord 1.9	NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING	
The Promise of Faithfulness by the People 24.21-25		

The "Land" in the New Testament			Crossing the Jordan in the New Testament		Rahab the Harlot in the New Testament	
The description	The heavens	Eph 1.3	<i>Stones left on the river bed:</i>		<i>She was justified by faith</i>	Heb 11.31
Those fitted to enter	All believers	Eph 2	<i>If ye be dead with Christ</i>	Col 2.20	<i>She had heard and believed before the spies came</i>	
The conduct expected	Walk worthy	Eph 4.1	<i>Stones on the bank of the river</i>		<i>She was justified by works</i>	Jas 2.25
The enemy to face	Spiritual wickedness	Eph 6.12	<i>If ye then be risen with Christ</i>	Col 3.1	<i>Her works proved the reality of her faith</i>	
The weapons to use	Whole armour of God	Eph 6.11	<i>Circumcision</i>		<i>She is in the genealogy of the Messiah</i>	Mt 1.5
			<i>Mortify therefore your members</i>	Col 3.5	<i>An evidence of the grace of God to Gentiles</i>	

JOSHUA AT A GLANCE						
Focus	Conquest Of Canaan		Settlement In Canaan			
Reference	1:1	6:1	13:8	14:1	20:1	22:1 — 24:33
Division	Preparation Of Israel	Conquest Of Canaan	Settlement Of East Jordan	Settlement Of West Jordan	Settlement Of Religious Community	Conditions For Continued Settlement
Topic	Entering Canaan	Conquering Canaan	Dividing Canaan			
	Preparation	Subjection	Possession			
Location	Jordan River	Canaan	Two And A Half Tribes--East Jordan Nine And A Half Tribes--West Jordan			
Time	c. 1 Month	c. 7 Years	c. 8 Years			





# Joshua's Conquest of Canaan

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- Joshua's Conquest of Canaan
- X Major Battle
- River
- - - Trade Routes



## Early Journeys/Campaigns of Joshua

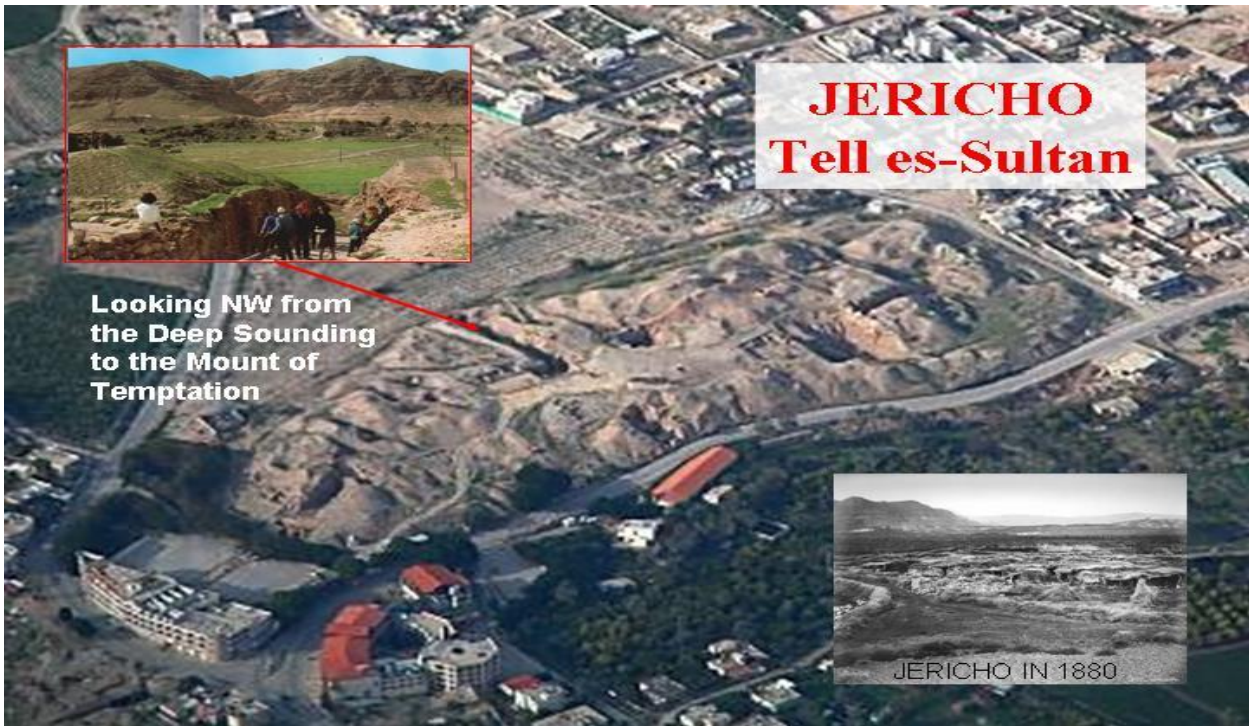
- 1 From Edom to Moab
- 2 Moses Appoints Joshua as Leader (Num 27:18-23)
- 3 From Plains of Moab to Mt. Nebo
- 4 Joshua Ordained as Successor to Moses (Deut 31:7-8,14)
- 5 To Shittim-God encourages Joshua (Jos 1:1-9)
- 6 Spies sent out (Jos 2:1)
- 7 To the Fords of Jordan-Orders Given About the Crossing (Jos 1:10-18)
- 8 Crossing the Jordan (Jos 3:14-17)
- 9 12 Men Bring Stones from the Riverbed (Jos 4:1-8)
- 10 To Gilgal (Jos 4:19-24)
- 11 Joshua Builds Memorial w/Stones
- 12 To Jericho-Joshua Met by the Lord Who Promises the Conquest of the Land (Jos 5:13-15 6:1-5)
- 13 Jericho Captured & Destroyed (6:6-27)
- 14 Jericho to Ai-Israel Defeated (Jos 7)
- 15 To Jericho-The Valley of Achor
- 16 Achan & Family Stoned for Disobedience (Jos 7:24-25)
- 17 To Ai-A Victorious Assault (Jos 8:1-29)
- 18 To Mt Ebal -Alter Erected
- 19 Law Written on Stone Alter (Jos 8:30-35)
- 20 To Gilgal
- 21 Gibeonites Sue for Peace (Jos 9:3-15)
- 22 To Gibeon -Treaty Made (Jos 9:16-27)
- 23 Return to Gilgal (Jos 10:6)
- 24 To Gibeon -protect them from the Amorites (Jos 10:6-10)
- 25 Joshua's Army drive Amorites to Makkedah-Lord Sends Hailstones (Jos 10:11)
- 26 To Gilgal-Valley of Aijalon
- 27 Joshua Commands Sun and Moon to Stand Still (Jos 10:12-14)
- 28 To Makkedah-Final Attack
- 29 Five Kings are Slain (Jos 10:18-28)

## The Southern Campaign

- 30 To Libnah
- 31 To Lachish
- 32 To Gezer
- 33 To Eglon
- 34 To Hebron (Jos 10:31-42)
- 35 To Debir
- 36 To Kadesh
- 37 To Beera
- 38 To Goshen
- 39 To Gaza and surrounding country
- 40 Return to Gilgal (Jos 10:43)

## The Northern Campaign

- 41 From Gilgal to the Waters of Meron
- 42 Sidon, Hazor conquered (Jos 11:6-14)
- 43 Return to Gilgal (Jos 14:6)
- 44 To Shiloh- Tabernacle Erected and Allotments to Tribes (Jos 18:1-10)
- 45 Joshua's Men Map out Land
- 46 To Shechem-Joshua Farwell Address and Stone of Witness (Jos 23-24)
- 47 Death and Burial of Joshua near Shechem (Jos 24:29-30)



# THE DEAD SEA WAR SCROLL



“...for guilt with the congregation of His people, for it has wallowed in the sin of the sons of men; (and it was appointed) for great judgments and evil diseases in the flesh according to the mighty deeds of God and in accordance with their wickedness - each man according to his lot which he has cast for...eternal life. For they are a wicked congregation, all their deeds are in darkness; it is their desire. They have established all their refuge in a lie, their strength is as smoke that vanishes, and all their vast assembly is as chaff which blows away... desolation, and shall not be found. Every creature of greed shall wither quickly away like a flower.”



## HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

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Before looking at the context of the Canaanite conquest, one must first establish a basic hermeneutical principle when reading OT narrative: *just because something is described in Scripture it doesn't mean that it was something God commanded.* Many who read the Bible often, tragically, neglect this principle. Scripture has many genres contained within it: law, poetry, parable, epistle, apocalyptic, biography, and narrative. Each genre must be interpreted and read according to its particular genre—thus to interpret narrative (*descriptive* genre) like law (a *prescriptive* genre) leads to some serious dilemmas. For example, in Genesis we are told that Lot offers up his two virgin daughters to be sexually exploited by the men of Sodom and Gomorrah in exchange for leaving the two angels alone (19:8). Does this mean that the Bible is endorsing offering up our daughters to be raped by violent gangs? Of course not. Not anymore than it is endorsing Lot getting drunk and committing incest with those same two daughters a few verses later (19:30-38). How do we know this? Because it *clearly* violates what God has prescribed in his Law (Deut 22:23-29; Lev 18:6). So too, when, for example, Gideon goes to war with Midian, he has received explicit divine mandate to do so (Judges 6-7). However, when Succoth and Penueh do not offer him aid in his pursuit and he returns and tortures the men of Succoth and kills the men of Penueh, we have no reason for thinking this was divinely ordained (Judges 8:4-17), particularly in light of the idolatry that Gideon commits immediately afterwards (8:22-35). The Bible is utterly realistic in its understanding of human sin and all of the “heroes” (except Christ alone) are a mixed bag of good and bad. Often the narratives of Scripture will portray these “heroes” with a brutal honesty without pedantically offering commentary on the goodness or badness of their deeds—the authors of Scripture expect the reader, most of the times, to be able to discern that on their own. Therefore, one needs to be able to determine when an act being carried out in the Bible is something that has clear divine permission, or when something is actually violating God’s commands *especially* when studying the Canaanite conquest.

## NOT BASED ON ETHNICITY

But how is one to deal with the texts that are explicit commands from God like the command to exterminate the Amalekites, “Thus says the Lord of hosts...Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey,” (1 Sam 15:2-3)? Surely, when a command comes straight from the mouth of God, one can be confident that this is something that God has divinely mandated. To begin to understand this we need to understand who the Canaanites were, and who Israel was.

First, it is important to distinguish who the Canaanites were. Scripture does not paint the Canaanites as a group of innocent victims who are taken advantage of, but rather as a wicked nation that had spurned God, turned to idols, and were entrenched in abominable practices. **In Genesis 15 when God promises the land of Canaan to Abraham we are told that this will not happen until the “iniquity of the Amorites” reaches a certain level of severity (15:16). As an aside, it is significant to note that even though the Jews then had a divine right to the land, they were not permitted to forcibly expel the Canaanites on that basis alone, but had to wait until the Canaanite’s sin became so heinous that God could permit the nation of Israel to judge them.** We are told in Deuteronomy that one particular practice that was predominant in the Canaanite culture was child sacrifice to their deity (Deuteronomy 12:29-31). Leviticus 18 explains that incest, adultery, bestiality, ritual prostitution, homosexuality, and child sacrifices were common practices in the Canaanite culture. Deuteronomy 9:4-5 explains it plainly,

“Do not say in your heart, after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, ‘It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,’ whereas it is because of the *wickedness of these nations* that the Lord is driving them out before you. Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the *wickedness of these nations* the Lord your God is driving them out from before you.” [emphasis added].

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Second, it is important to understand who Israel is. Israel is the special covenant people of God who play a central role in the redemptive history of the OT. God calls Israel into creation through the call of Abraham. When God calls Abraham he tells him that a nation will come from him through whom all of the nations of the world will be blessed (Gen 12:1-3), and that blessing will be connected through the possession of the land of Canaan (12:1; 17:8). This means that Israel’s conquest of the land of Canaan is a unique event in redemptive history that is peculiar to the OT nation of Israel alone. It in no way serves as a blueprint for a nation or group (not even the Church) to justify any form of ethnically or religiously motivated violence or conquest today. Also, it is important to remember that despite Israel being the special covenant people of God, Scripture also demonstrates that they are in no way ontologically superior or less sinful than the Canaanites. Deuteronomy 9:6 explains, “Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of righteousness, for you are a stubborn people,” and then for the rest of the chapter Moses explains how Israel turned their back on God, sinned against God, and

worshipped the golden calf. The entire narrative of the Canaanite conquest, from Exodus all the way through 1-2 Kings, demonstrates the perpetual folly, sinfulness, and idolatry of the Israelites. In fact, just as the Canaanites are thrust from the land because of their sinfulness, God warns that he will do the same to Israel if they turn from Him (Deut 8:19-20; Lev 18:26-28). A warning that sadly comes to pass. The book of Judges ends with the Israelites behaving exactly like the men of Sodom and Gomorrah, only worse(!) (Judges 19-21).

So, the text of Scripture itself sweeps away many simplistic caricatures. Were the Israelites the special people of God? Yes. Were the Canaanites a particularly wicked people who deserved judgment? Yes. However, the Bible is not portraying the Israelites as the knights in shining armor slaying monsters called "Canaanites." It is much more nuanced than that. Take, as an excellent summary of all that has been said above, the story of Rahab and Jericho. The first battle of the Canaanite conquest begins with Joshua meeting an angel of the Lord and asking him if he is on their side or their enemy's side. The angel simply responds, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come," (Josh 5:14)—essentially, "I'm not on either of your sides; I'm on God's side. It's up to you to choose whether you're on His side." Earlier on, spies infiltrate Jericho and meet Rahab, a local prostitute who harbors them and hides them from the searching authorities. Though she is a Canaanite, she exhibits the faith of one who truly believes in God, and thus after the attack she and her whole family are spared when the city falls (Josh 2; 6:22-23; cf. Heb 11:31). After the battle, despite all of the Israelites being told that everything in the city of Jericho must be totally devoted to the Lord, an Israelite named Achan steals some of the treasure for himself, violating God's command, and is therefore sentenced to death (Josh 7). Notice the structure of the story: the angel of the Lord explains that it is not about who is on the Israelite team or the Canaanite team, but who is on *God's* team, then there is a Canaanite who displays the faith of an Israelite, and then an Israelite who displays the behavior of a Canaanite. The structure of the story is intentional. This is not merely an issue of one ethnic group against another, let alone one ethnic group being superior to another, but is about individuals who exhibit faithfulness to God. – *Marc Sims*

# **UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT.**

- @ The Territorial Land of Canaan

1<sup>st</sup> – All the land belongs to the Lord (Leviticus 25:23).

2<sup>nd</sup> - The land had been promised to the patriarchs (Genesis 12:7; 15:18-21; 17:8; 26:2-3; 28:13-15; 46:1-4; Exodus 3:8; 13:5; 23:31-33; 34:11-16).

3<sup>rd</sup> - The patriarchs had once occupied the land (Genesis 13:12; 16:3; 23:20; 25:10-11; 26:6; 33:18-19; 37:1) and had purchased some of the land (Genesis 23:16-18; 25:10; 33:19; 50:13). **Therefore, the Israelites were *repossessing* the land.**

4<sup>th</sup> - The Israelites were not to take land from Edomites, Moabites, or Ammonites (Deuteronomy Chapter 2).

5<sup>th</sup> - The Israelites were later driven out of the land because of their own wickedness.

# **HERMENEUTICAL** **ANALYSIS @THREE** **THEOLOGICAL** **THREADLINES**

- Lasor, Hubbard, and Bush in Old Testament Survey

(1996) found three major theological themes in Joshua:

- 1) **The Promise-Keeping God** - God had promised through the covenant to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, out of the wilderness, and into the land of Canaan. He was faithful to His Promise. Concept of Promise/Fulfillment.
- 2) **The Covenantal Idea** - God's covenant worked out primarily through the conquest of Canaan. The concepts of Land and Herem ("The Ban") viewed within the context of Israel's "prophetic outlook" (p. 152)
- 3) **The Achievement of Rest** - Joshua focused on rest from slavery, wilderness, and war. Israel broke the covenant to enter into God's rest as seen in the prophets.

Part\_Two

# Four Types & Four Views

## *Continuity and the Fatherhood of God*

Biblical interpretation considers God's Fatherhood over all creation. His Fatherhood may be constructed along the analogy of "covenant." But God's commitment to creation is also an expression of "grace." This view entirely replaces the medieval, Aristotelian-philosophical conception of the sacramental universe.<sup>119</sup> God enters into the universe of man, in creation and in history, and relates to it covenantally. The covenant is a gracious invitation to enter into fellowship and responsible relation with Himself.... Thus, the Covenant establishes, confirms, and preserves the dialogical nature of theology, and is indeed the form within which conversation between God and His people takes place.

The extent of the covenant involves the whole of God's creation:

The Covenant embraces not only man but the whole of creation, so that the whole universe of creaturely existence, visible and invisible, is brought into relation with God.

Interpretation maintains the tension between creation and redemption. Since, then, God's concern is with his creation, the promises, gospel, and reality of God's presence have a cosmic significance.

The Covenant embraces not only man but the whole creation, for God has made the whole world as the sphere within which He may fellowship with man and man may share in His grace and reflect His glory.

This position reinstates the *corollary* revelation of God in creation and in Scripture: natural and special revelation. All of God's revelation in creation and redemption expresses the one will and purpose of the one God. He is the God who freely and graciously initiates and maintains communion.

The unity of creation and redemption has its focus in the doctrine of God. As we shall see below, the focus of Scripture is also Jesus Christ. However, the focal interest in God's Fatherhood and in Jesus Christ is without tension, because Jesus is the mediator by whom we are brought to the Father.

## *Continuity and Christology*

The significant place of Jesus Christ in redemptive history does not come to its due prominence in the scholastic formulations on the covenant, divine sovereignty, and the decrees of God. The abstraction of the covenant as a principle in Federal Theology has furthered theological hair-splitting over the number and definition of the covenants. Torrance observes with regard to Federal Theology:

Our concern with it here is simply to note that in it the *federal idea* came to be deployed as a masterful systematic principle in the wrong way, for it provided the fixed scheme by means of which Christian teaching in the Church came to be categorized and systematized for more than two centuries....

On the one hand, interpretation of the Bible must be truly conversational with the acts and perfections of God and need not impose a christological reading on any given text. This contributes to the historical-redemptive perspective or what Torrance calls *Heilsgeschichte*.

... it also gave theology its great historical perspective, as that which is concerned with the history of the people of God in Covenant relation and conversation with Him throughout all ages from the very beginning of the world to the present day, reaching out to the *Parousia*.

An exclusive emphasis on covenant takes away from the revelation of God in Christ. The use of *covenant* as a principle or as a method for categorizing Christian doctrine or as the basis for inductive theological developments produced a theology which was less concerned with the historical dimensions of Scripture, and less with Jesus Christ.

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## *Continuity and the Spirit of Christ*

The Lord did reveal his word, giving his oracles to Israel and to the church through the prophets and the apostles. The word is his word. But it is also a “power-word,” because the Holy Spirit gives life to the word of God and brings forth life in the regeneration of people through the word. Through the word and the operation of the Spirit, the Lord builds his kingdom on earth. The Spirit moves, regenerates, sanctifies, and builds the kingdom of God through the word. The isolation of the Spirit from the word leads either to bibliolatry or to pneumatic excesses.<sup>134</sup>

The unity of the Bible reflects the work of the one Spirit of God, who is consistent with himself. The same Spirit who inspired the human authors and superintended the whole process of inscripturation of the word of God witnesses within the heart of believers to the veracity and applicability<sup>136</sup> of God’s word (“the internal testimony of the Spirit”).

## *Continuity and Eschatology*

Covenant Theology is by its very definition concerned with eschatology. Far too often the covenant motif is associated with the *locus* of soteriology or ecclesiology, but as we have already seen, its focus is *christology* and there is no christology without an *eschatology*.

This concern is what Torrance calls *meditatio vitae futurae* (“meditation on the future life”). Longing for the glorious future gives perspective on the present and past. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to renew the regenerate into the image of Christ, and in the very process of renewal he elevates the mind of the godly to what God has prepared for his own in Jesus Christ. The Christian life is eschatological because of the work of the Holy Spirit and because of our union with Christ.<sup>143</sup> The very essence of faith is eschatological.

The Bible unfolds the *development* of God’s kingdom from creation to the new creation. It invites us to behold the wondrous works of God to inspire awe for the Triune God. Redemptive history unfolds the plan of God, and the student of Scripture gains a sense of movement to the extent that he experiences afresh the power of the word of God, witnessing to the promise that the one who began creation and redemption will accomplish everything in accordance with his purpose.

The historical conditionedness of the Bible opens up a historical perspective on the progression of redemption. This “history of redemption” concerns itself with the study of the “pattern of divine activity subsequent to the fall until the coming of Christ by which God is exercising his lordship over the whole of history in the interest of accomplishing his eternal purposes for the entire creation.” This approach to the Bible involves the interpreter’s ability to synthesize the part into the whole. As Gaffin writes:

... the redemptive-historical structure or framework established by Scripture itself is the contextual factor having the broadest bearing on a given text.

The Bible unfolds the development of the plan of salvation through time in diverse *stages*. The progression of redemptive history in distinct epochs (*dispensations*) testifies to the variety of God’s works and to the continuity of his love and fidelity to man. These epochs are organically related to each other, corroborating the fact of the single plan of God, confirmed in the one mediator, Jesus Christ.

The appreciation of unity amidst variety arises from a profound recognition of the *variety*, magnificence, and mystery of divine revelation. The revelation of God witnesses to the acts of God (creation, the history of redemption, in Christ), and the



*acts* of God witness to his *promises, kingship, covenants, commitment* to Israel and to the nations, *communion with his people, grace and fidelity*, and to the fullness of *redemption of heaven and earth*. These are a few of the many motifs of Scripture, and in their variety they find their *focus* in Jesus Christ.

The task of biblical theology concerns both the study and appreciation of the many themes of Scripture and their inner *relationships*. The task of biblical theology further involves a deepening sense of the *unity* and *continuity* of God's plan in the history of redemption, while maintaining the tensions of:

- material and spiritual
- time and eternity
- law and gospel
- token and reality
- promise and fulfillment
- old and new
- Israel and the church
- this world and the world to come.

Each of these areas reveals an inner dynamism, requiring careful attention to all the biblical data and motifs. Harmony may be enhanced through continuous dialogue with the Bible, the history of the church, and our contemporaries in covenant community. Theology does not have the key to unlock eternity, but provides a way of *dialogue* with God.

Theology must engage in historical studies just because it is historical dialogue with God.... It is only in this combination of historical theology and exegesis that the Church can be delivered from preaching its own private conceptions and carry through the disciplined self-criticism which frank and obedient conversation with God requires.

[Biblical] Theology wholeheartedly embraces the *covenantal structure* of our relationship with God. God is in covenant with mankind as he is with all of creation. The covenantal structure is one of the structures, but not the only one. As a theological structure, *covenant* relates to each person of the Trinity and gives a perspective.

As a theological perspective, the covenantal structure also helps us to uncover our relatedness to Israel in the past, to understand man's place in God's creation, to enjoy the Father's presence and guidance in the history of redemption, the oneness of salvation in the mediator Jesus Christ with both Israel under the Old Covenant and the church in the New Covenant, the ministry of the Spirit of God in transforming our lives. The covenantal structure encourages openness to God and

his world and encourages the Christian community to look toward the closure of this age and the renewal of heaven and earth. The two Testaments together bear witness to God in Christ, and this message is the focus of Scripture.<sup>152</sup>

Eschatological perspectives have at times resolved the tension between time and eternity, this world and the world to come, Israel and the nations.<sup>158</sup> If we were to permit the witness of the old to have a bearing on the new and to leave “problematic” texts as witnesses to our humanness, the biblical structures of thought would continually cultivate a sense of awe and wonder at the wisdom of God.

Openness or a sense of ambiguity toward the future is not an exegetical weakness, but a humble recognition that we too, like Mary, John the Baptist, Zacharias, and Simeon, await the salvation to come. To this salvation Moses, the prophets, our Lord, and the apostles witness and call for perseverance in the light of the climactic, glorious fulfillment or consummation of all things. Our hearts join together with the world of creation, groaning for that glorious moment.

Eschatology is immensely practical. It is the revelation of God for Christian living. God has revealed the future in metaphors, visions, and in the language of accommodation. In response to the revelation given *in human forms*, he expects *transformation* and not *speculation*: (1) *faith* in looking to our Lord as having the key to the future; (2) *humility* in depending on our Father in heaven to work out his glorious plan at his appointed time; (3) *persevering hope* in keeping our eyes focused on the glorious transformation of heaven and earth in fulfillment of God’s promise word; and (4) the practice of *love* toward those who disagree with us.

## SURVEY OF SYSTEMS

Eugene Roop explains that throughout church history the relationship between the Testaments has been understood in three main ways, the allegorical and typological, the doctrinal, and the historical. The first two emphasize continuity and the third discontinuity. The first followed the lead of the early church and assumed the internal consistency of Scripture. Apparent discrepancies were handled by searching for the “deeper” spiritual meaning which, when found, demonstrated anew the basic consistency of Scripture. When turning to evangelicals, one also finds great diversity on this issue. Some stress continuity more and others discontinuity more, but even within the respective camps there is diversity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Feinberg, J. S. (1988). [Systems of Discontinuity](#). In J. S. Feinberg (Ed.), *Continuity and discontinuity: perspectives on the relationship between the Old and New Testaments : essays in honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.* (pp. 64–71). Westchester, IL: Crossway Books.

# CANAAN COLLATERAL DAMAGE: FOUR POSITION DEBATE @INTRO REMARKS

## THE CASE FOR RADICAL DISCONTINUITY

C. S. Cowles

When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations ... then you must destroy them totally ... and show them no mercy.

Do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them ... as the LORD your God has commanded you.

(Deut. 7:1–2; 20:16–17; see Deut. 7:3–5; 20:16–18; 32:39; Josh. 6:21; 8:24–26; 10:28, 40; 11:11, 14, 20–21)

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

(Matt. 5:43–44; see Matt. 5:45–48; Luke 6:27–36; 9:51–56)

**Amid the hopes, dreams, and lives shattered when the twin spires of America’s cathedral of capitalism crashed to the ground on September 11, 2001, was evangelicalism’s easy accommodation with Old Testament genocidal “texts of terror.” This was played out on full camera when Jerry Falwell, making an appearance on *The 700 Club*, reflexively attributed the deadliest terrorist attack on Americans in history to God’s judgment.**

**In the wake of the media furor that followed, including a White House official who made it clear that “the president does not share those views,” Falwell issued an apology in which he totally reversed himself. “Neither I, nor anyone else, has any reason to believe that the terrorist-inflicted atrocities of September 11 have anything to do with the judgment of God,” he averred, “and I should not have stated otherwise. Our Lord is a God of love. He proved it ultimately and forever when He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for all sinners, including me.”<sup>4</sup> Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network released its own statement, calling Falwell’s on-air remarks “severe and harsh in tone” and explaining that the show’s host, Pat Robertson, who had initially agreed with Falwell, had not “fully understood” what Falwell had said.**

**Falwell and Robertson unwittingly found themselves impaled on the horns of a dilemma that has vexed biblical interpreters since the formation of the canon of Christian Scripture: How do we harmonize the warrior God of Israel with the God of love incarnate in Jesus? How can we reconcile God’s instructions to “utterly destroy” the Canaanites in the Old Testament with Jesus’ command to “love your enemies” in the New Testament? The short answer is: with great difficulty.**

## TENSION BETWEEN TEXTS

Commitment to the inerrancy and infallibility of *all* Scripture leaves evangelical biblical scholars and theologians little choice but to maintain the “tension between the texts” cited above, by asserting that both statements are to be regarded as equally true. They argue that the indiscriminate annihilation of the Canaanites was indeed willed by God even though, as John Bright points out, “it tells a bloody tale of battle, violence, and wholesale slaughter, a slaughter in which God assists with his mighty acts; the smoke of burning towns and the stench of rotting flesh hangs over its pages.” He adds, “It is a story of fanaticism, of holy war and wholesale sacrificial destruction (the *herem*).” To attribute such atrocities to the actual intention and will of God, however, poses insuperable difficulties for Christian theology, ethics, and praxis.

That the issue of divinely initiated and sanctioned violence is no mere academic matter was tragically demonstrated in the self-destructive insanity that decimated Rwanda, the most Christianized nation in Africa, when the dominant Hutus set out to exterminate the minority Tutsis. In one hundred days, Hutus brutally slaughtered nearly 800,000 Tutsis and Tutsi sympathizers. Peter Gourevitch recounts the horrific scene that unfolded at the Seventh-day Adventist Mission Hospital complex in Mungonero, where two thousand beleaguered Tutsis took refuge in the early days of the massacres.

Dr. Gerard, a United States—trained physician and the hospital administrator, welcomed them and then sealed the perimeter. On April 15, 1994, he announced: “Saturday, the sixteenth, at exactly nine o’clock in the morning, you will be attacked.” Scarcely able to believe their ears, seven Tutsi Seventh-day Adventist pastors wrote a hasty letter to their district president, Pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, who happened to be Dr. Gerard’s father. They pleaded for him to intervene “the same way as the Jews were saved by Esther.” He sent back a curt reply: “You must be eliminated. God no longer wants you.”

At 9:00 A.M. on Saturday, Dr. Gerard drove up to the hospital complex with a carload of armed Hutu militia. Nearby Hutu villagers brought their machetes and joined in the attack. They slowly and methodically killed all those who had crowded into the chapel, then the school, and finally the hospital. The seven Tutsi pastors prayed with their people until they too were cut down. Early the next morning, Dr. Gerard led the militia to the nearby village of Murambi, where other Tutsi survivors had taken refuge in the Seventh-day Adventist church. They killed them all.

The mind reels. The stomach retches. How can any human being, much less those who declare their allegiance to the Prince of Peace, engage in such atrocities? Yet the sad fact is that the history of the church is as blighted by such bloodshed as that of Israel and Islam. Christians took up the sword against Muslims, Jews, and other “infidels” during the Crusades. Protestants and Catholics slaughtered each other in the “holy wars” that tore Europe apart following the Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church tortured, burned, drowned, and flayed hundreds of thousands of supposed heretics and witches across more than five centuries of the Inquisition. Christian Europeans not only forcibly seized aboriginal lands but destroyed 80 percent of North and South America’s native populations by genocide, disease, and drunkenness during the bloody era of colonial aggression and aggrandizement. And it was ostensibly the most Christianized nation in Europe that systematically shot, gassed, and burned six million Jews in the Nazi Holocaust.

We hang our heads to admit it, but *jihad* (“holy war”) is not a Muslim invention. Its origins and justification are to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses was the first in known history to spell out an ideology of “holy war” that dictated—unlike Muhammad’s reformulation—the

genocidal destruction of enemies. Moses and Joshua were the first to engage in campaigns of “ethnic cleansing” as *herem* (“acts of religious devotion”). It is to these texts that Christians have appealed, from St. Augustine in the fourth century to Orthodox Serbs in the twentieth, in justifying the mass destruction of human beings. Paul knew from his own pre-Christian experience how easily the Word of God can be perverted to justify unspeakably violent acts when he wrote, “The letter kills” (2 Cor. 3:6).

Even that pales, however, next to the spiritual and emotional damage caused by grotesquely distorted concepts of God engendered by genocidal passages. Most evangelical commentators, following Moses, justify the “ethnic cleansing” of the Canaanites “on account of the wickedness of these nations” (Deut. 9:4). Such “radical surgery” was necessary in order to purify the land of “all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods” (Deut. 20:18). In his commentary on Joshua, John Calvin states that God “was pleased to purge the land of Canaan of the foul and loathsome defilements by which it had long been polluted.”<sup>11</sup> He admits that the

indiscriminate and promiscuous slaughter [of the Canaanites], making no distinction of age or sex, but including alike women and children, the aged and decrepit, might seem an inhuman massacre, had it not been executed by the command of God. But as he, in whose hands are life and death, had *justly doomed* those nations to destruction, this puts an end to all discussion. [emphasis added]

Justly doomed? What could possibly be “just” about the wanton and indiscriminate slaughter of “women and children, the aged and decrepit”? Insofar as Calvin’s theological presuppositions would allow no other conclusion but that God had willed it from before the foundation of the world, he caught himself and acknowledged that “*the decree is dreadful indeed, I confess*” (emphasis added).

**“Dreadful” is a gross understatement. John Wesley declared that to attribute such atrocities to God is an outrage against his character and makes him “more false, more cruel, and more unjust than the devil.... God hath taken [Satan’s] work out of [his] hands.... God is the destroyer of souls.” Theologian Walter Wink protests, “Against such an image of God the revolt of atheism is an act of pure religion.”<sup>15</sup>**

Regarding people such as Wesley and Wink, who contend that Moses’ genocidal commands make a mockery of God’s justice, not to mention his holiness and love, Peter Craigie responds in *The Problem of War in the Old Testament*: “The participation of God in human history and through human lives does not primarily afford us a glimpse of his moral *being*; it demonstrates rather his will and *activity*.” To which one might ask: How else is God’s “moral *being*” demonstrated apart from “his will and *activity*”? Is not the one who steals a thief? The one who commits adultery an adulterer? The one who kills a killer? To attribute genocidal violence to God poisons the well of all his other attributes. Wesley points out that “it directly tends to destroy that holiness which is the end of all the ordinances of God. It overturns ... his justice, mercy, and truth.”

Given the way distorted concepts of God are being acted out in the religiously incited violence of our time, brought shockingly home on Black Tuesday, September 11, 2001, evangelicals no longer have the luxury of defending genocidal “texts of terror” as reflective of either God’s “moral being” or his “will and activity.” Nor is there any need to do so. John Bright reminds us that the Old Testament “is a document of the faith of old Israel, and only secondarily a document of the church. Its message is not of and by itself a Christian message.” Walter Brueggemann cautions that “Old Testament theological articulation does not conform to

established church faith... There is much that is wild and untamed about the theological witness of the Old Testament that church theology does not face.”

**There is a better way of dealing with the conflicting divine commands regarding the treatment of enemies. It is to acknowledge what is everywhere assumed in the New Testament, namely, that while there are vast and vitally important areas of continuity between Israel’s faith and that of the church, there are significant instances of radical discontinuity as well, none more so than in reference to divinely initiated and sanctioned violence. There were good reasons why the church fathers, in settling upon the canon of sacred Scripture, separated the Hebrew Scriptures from the Christian and gave to the former the designation “old” and the latter “new.”**

In so doing, they were following the precedent set within the New Testament itself. Paul drew a sharp distinction between the “old covenant” embodied in the Torah and the “new covenant” personified in Christ. The former “was fading away,” while the latter is endowed with “ever-increasing glory” (2 Cor. 3:7–18). The author of Hebrews goes even further in his assertion that “by calling this covenant ‘new,’ [God] has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear” (Heb. 8:13).

Over against the testimony of many Old Testament texts that reflect what Martin Luther called “the dark side of God” is the clear and unambiguous testimony of John, who exults, “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). He goes even further to state categorically that “God is love [*agapē*]” (4:8). James’s exuberant witness is that God is “the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (James 1:17). Paul exults that we no longer see “a poor reflection [of God] as in a mirror” (1 Cor. 13:12), but “with unveiled faces” we behold the full “glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6).

## NEW WINE, OLD WINESKINS

The equilibrium of the physical world is periodically interrupted by what physicist James Clerk Maxwell called “singular points.” A tiny seed-crystal dropped into a saturate solution will turn the whole mass into a similar crystalline form. A drop in temperature of one degree can cause the waters of a mighty ocean to freeze over. Splitting one atom may precipitate an explosive chain reaction of unimaginable force. Likewise, says Maxwell, in human affairs “there are unpredictable moments when a small force may produce, not a commensurate small result, but one of far greater magnitude, the little spark which kindles the great forest, the little word which sets the whole world a-fighting.”

Human history moves along lines of relative continuities until a singular point emerges, after which a sea change in thinking and behavior occurs. It may be triggered by an event as seemingly insignificant as taming fire, fashioning a wheel, or reducing language to writing. It may be focused in a person such as Abraham, Plato, or Copernicus. When that event occurs or person emerges, no matter how unremarkable at the time, everything changes. Nothing will ever again be the same.

The birth of Jesus is more than just one more singular point among many. It is so uniquely singular that it has become the axial point of human history. It signals that moment when divinity intersected humanity in a way analogous to what physicists describe as the point of absolute singularity from which the universe emerged. This is the truth that the evangelist John proclaims when he begins his Gospel by linking these two points of singularity: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made” (John 1:1–3). He who was present and active at the event-moment of the so-called “Big Bang” and who directed all subsequent stages of creation is incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14–18). This is the astonishing faith claim that lies at the heart of Christianity.

Jesus was not one prophet of Israel among many. He was not just another voice crying in the wilderness. In his person, message, and mission, Jesus embodied and proclaimed an exhilarating and yet disturbing new revelation. Claims were made by him and of him that radically set him apart from all who came before. After acknowledging that “in the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways” (Heb. 1:1), the author of Hebrews goes on to say that “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (1:2–3). Never before had any “forefather” or “prophet” been called “the Son” of God. Never before had it been claimed that a human being exhibited “the radiance of God’s glory,” much less that he embodied an “exact representation of [God’s] being.” Clearly, Jesus represents a whole new order of divine disclosure. Between him and all who came before, there is an infinite qualitative difference.

In his Pentecost sermon, Peter drew a sharp contrast between “the patriarch David [who] died and was buried” and Jesus, whom “God ... raised” (Acts 2:29, 32). The resurrection decisively set Jesus apart from all who came before. It was God’s definitive “Yes,” reaffirming his word spoken to Jesus at his baptism, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). Though there was no one of antiquity venerated more highly by the Jews than Moses, the author of Hebrews asserts that “Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses.... Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house.... But Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house” (Heb. 3:3–6).

No word of Scripture ever claimed that Moses or Joshua was “taken ... into heaven” or “exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 1:11; 2:33). Jesus outranks Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and even the angels: “So he became as much *superior* to the angels as the name he has inherited is *superior* to theirs” (Heb. 1:4, emphasis added; see 1:5–14; 3:1; 4:8–10; 5:4–6). John likewise attests to the radical discontinuity between the old and the new covenants: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

The uniqueness of Jesus as the divine Son of God is dramatically portrayed in the Transfiguration account. Appearing with him were the two greatest figures in Israel’s religious history: Moses, the primal mediator of God’s law, and Elijah, the prototypical prophetic spokesman for God. Yet only Jesus was transfigured. It was not to these two seminal figures of the old covenant that the heavenly voice was directed but to Jesus: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” After that, the three disciples whom Jesus had taken along with him “looked around [and], they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus” (Mark 9:2–8). This is one of the clearest texts showing that the revelation of God in and through Christ at once fulfilled and superseded “the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 7:12).

Paul made the distinction between the old and the new covenants even more pronounced. “Now if the ministry that brought death ... came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?” There is a pronounced difference between “the letter [that] kills,” “engraved in letters on stone,” and “the Spirit [that] gives life,” a “glory of that which lasts.” The “veil” that had for so long shrouded the old covenant, obscuring the radiant beauty of God’s glory, “in Christ is ... taken away.” The happy result is that “we, who with unveiled faces

all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" (2 Cor. 3:6–18). And what is that glory? "The glory of *Christ, who is the image of God*," "the glory of *God in the face of Christ*" (2 Cor. 4:4, 6, emphasis added). All that the "fathers" and the "prophets" under the old covenant had seen dimly and understood partially is now fully and finally disclosed without distortion in Jesus.

**Jesus presents us with an accurate "image [reflection, refraction] of the invisible God," because in him "all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 1:15; 2:9). When Philip asked Jesus to "show us the Father," Jesus responded, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:8–9). In the New Testament, Jesus is not defined by God; rather, God is defined by Jesus. Jesus is the lens through whom a full, balanced, and undistorted view of God's loving heart and gracious purposes may be seen. What is *new* about the new covenant is that *God is like Christ*. "To see what God is like," says Philip Yancey, "simply look at Jesus."**

In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus literally and figuratively ripped the temple's great veil in two, "destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14). He let us see with astonishing clarity that the essential attribute of God's heart, the fundamental character trait from which all divine activity proceeds, is what John Wesley called "holy love." No longer should Christians define God as the "God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6), as important as they were in salvation history, but as the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3). Hans Küng speaks of God as having a "human face," the face of the human being, Jesus of Nazareth. He goes on to say that the God of Jesus is "unequivocally good and not evil.... God is not indifferent, but friendly to man. Jesus calls him good, alone good, merciful."

Wesleyan theologian Thomas A. Noble rightly suggests that the starting point in forming a truly Christian theology is not what the Bible teaches about God in general but what Jesus reveals about God in particular.

Theology is ... only truly *theocentric* if it is *Christocentric*. It is not, as Donald Baillie reminded us, theism with Christology tacked on. There is no knowledge of God except "through the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the Image of God," no knowledge of the Father except through the Son, so that our theology then must be *Christonormative*.

If this is the case, then God is not like the first Joshua, a warrior, but like the second, the Prince of Peace. As the anonymous Christian writing to Diognetus put it, "violence is no attribute of God."<sup>26</sup>

When someone preaches a sermon after which the listeners seek to kill him, one can safely assume that the preacher has touched a sensitive nerve. That is precisely what occurred when Jesus delivered his inaugural sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30). What was it about his reading of Isaiah's prophetic song that so infuriated the people? For openers, he stopped his reading before getting to the prophetic punch line, which represented the hopes and dreams of an aggrieved and oppressed people, namely, the long anticipated "day of vengeance of our God" (Luke 4:18–19; see Isa. 61:1–2).

The entire sweep of Jesus' life and death makes it abundantly clear that his editing of this Scripture passage was not accidental but intentional and that it represented an entirely new way of thinking about God. What Jesus was introducing was nothing short of an entirely new rewrite



of Jewish theology. It would not be “off the wall” but drawn from the deep artesian springs of the Law and Prophets. It would constitute a sweeping recasting of God’s gracious purposes, not only for Jews but for all humankind. It would be the fulfillment of the ancient covenant that in Abraham “all peoples on earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). It would introduce the shocking, unprecedented, and utterly incomprehensible news that God is nonviolent and that he wills the well-being of all humans, beginning with the poor, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised.

To reinforce the fact that he intentionally amended the Isaianic text, Jesus focused attention on two obscure people mentioned almost in passing in the Hebrew Scriptures. Both were foreigners and idol worshipers (Luke 4:25–27). It did not sit well with Jesus’ listeners to be reminded that it was a Baal-worshiping Sidonian widow, descended from Sidon, Canaan’s eldest son—and thus under Noah’s curse—who became a recipient of God’s gracious miracle of continuing sustenance. Even less did they want to be reminded that, even though “there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time” who had undoubtedly lost sons, it was not to these but rather to this despised foreign woman that God displayed his boundless compassion by raising her dead son to life in response to Elijah’s earnest entreaty (1 Kings 17:22).

The God disclosed in Jesus and testified to in the Hebrew Scriptures is no respecter of gender, religion, or nationality. He is especially attentive to widows and children. Though the Sidonians were despised by the Israelites, who would have annihilated them if the tribe of Asher had carried out its assignment, they were precious in God’s sight and worthy of his favor, and one of them received of his miracle-working power. Noah may have placed a curse upon the Sidonians through Canaan, but God did not.

This was too much for the solid citizens of Nazareth to accept. They were not ready to hear about a God who has no interest in balancing the scales of justice by an avalanche of destructive wrath, who bears no grudge toward their historic enemies. They could not comprehend a God whose love is boundless, whose care extends to a woman and her child living in an idolatrous culture and whose healing mercy embraces untouchables such as Naaman. Luke records that “all the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.” Obviously, something had to be done about this rebel son, this blasphemer, this one who dared to take such interpretive liberties with their sacred Scriptures. “They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff” (Luke 4:28–29).

Something new was going on that would be dangerous to the old. From their ancient sacred texts Jesus mined truths about God that the Jews were unwilling to face. He drew out of the old scriptural wineskins a new kind of revelational wine. He lifted the veil that had blinded his generation from comprehending the magnanimous scope of God’s love. He pulled aside the curtain that had hidden the *shalom*, the peace of God, that would embrace not only the Jews but all nations, until the whole earth would be filled with the glory of the Lord (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14–18).

The most incisive critique of God as destroyer occurs in the context of Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–56). Jesus and his traveling party were not permitted to lodge in Samaritan territory because he was heading toward Jerusalem. The historic and bitter animosity between Jews and Samaritans cut both ways. James and John, to whom Jesus had previously given the name “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17), responded typically by asking, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?”

Undoubtedly, they were thinking about Sodom and Gomorrah. They were ready to consign all of Samaria to destruction because of the inhospitality of a few. Apparently, it never crossed their minds that not only would the recalcitrant males perish but women, children, and the infirm, the very people whom Jesus had come to redeem. They would have thereby annihilated the

woman at the well, who became the gospel's first evangelist, as well as the very people who would be the first beyond Judea to receive and welcome the good news of Christ's resurrection and the first to experience an outpouring of the Holy Spirit after Pentecost.

Jesus not only rebuked his disciples for entertaining such a thought but replied, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them" (Luke 9:55). Jesus made it crystal clear that the "kind of spirit" that would exterminate people was totally alien to his heavenly Father's character. The vengeful spirit that dehumanizes, depersonalizes, and demonizes a whole town or city or nation is not of God. The God revealed in Jesus never has been and never will be party to genocide of any sort, for "God is love" (1 John 4:8). "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world," John reminds us, "but to save the world through him" (John 3:17).

God does not have to judge sinners proactively because "whoever does not believe stands condemned already.... This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:18–19). Those who do not believe in the Son are allowed to exercise their moral freedom and are left in their natural state of spiritual darkness and death (cf. 3:36).

This accords with Paul's analysis of how "the wrath of God is ... revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Rom. 1:18). The key phrase that appears three times in his exposition of humankind's downward spiral into depravity is "God gave them over" (1:24, 26, 28). God stepped back and allowed sin to run its self-destructive course. God's love was experienced as wrath when humans "exchanged the truth of God for a lie" (1:25; see v. 23) and thus bound themselves to that which God hates. Thus, they slipped ever deeper into the black hole of idolatry, sensuality, perversion, debauchery, and finally "death" (Rom. 6:23). Their fate was a self-chosen destiny.

The "destroyer" is not God but sin. Death came into the world through sin, which is inherently self-destructive (Gen. 2:16–17; Rom. 5:12–21). Aristotle offered a useful analogy. He pointed out that truth is linear; no matter how far you press it or when and where you touch it, it always remains consistent with itself. Falsehood, on the other hand, is circular; give it enough rope, and it will hang itself. If sin is "self-curved in upon itself," as Luther maintained, then sin contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. God's wrath "is not retaliatory" nor "vindictive," according to Mennonite theologian C. Norman Kraus, but "points to the objective, intrinsic consequences of sin in the created order as God's judgment. The very concept of a rational creation implies an order of existence in which consequences are inherent in the actions themselves."

God has committed final judgment into the hands of Jesus (John 5:22, 27; Acts 10:42; 17:30–31). Jesus is the one, as Michael Lodahl points out, who "has walked in our shoes and shared in our human lot.... Jesus, the divine Son who shares fully in our humanity, and who fully exemplifies what it is to be truly human, is thereby fully qualified to be the Standard or Judge by whom all people are measured." God's attitude toward sinners is best seen in how Jesus treated Judas. Even though Jesus knew what was in his heart and what he was about to do, he loved him to the end. His love was expressed through gentle warnings, by making him the guest of honor at the Last Supper, in offering him first of all the cup of forgiveness, and by greeting him in the garden of betrayal as "friend" (Matt. 26:50). Judas died violently, not by God's hand, but by his own.

It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that Jesus never used his supernatural miracle-working power to hurt, maim, coerce, conquer, or destroy. He was the embodiment of God's

servant, who “will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Isa. 42:2–3). The God revealed in and through Jesus is not one who summons his “warriors to carry out [his] wrath” (13:3); much less does he will the indiscriminate genocidal annihilation of any peoples or nations. He is, rather, “the God of peace” (Rom. 15:33; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Thess. 3:16; Heb. 13:20). It is not “holy warriors” who will be called “sons of God” but “peacemakers” (Matt. 5:9).

The God portrayed in the Old Testament was full of fury against sinners, but the God incarnate in Jesus is not. “For God so loved the [ungodly, wicked sinners],” exults John in the golden text of Christian devotion and theology, “that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). God is “not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

When Peter, in his abortive attempt to defend Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, cut off the ear of the high priest’s slave, Jesus rebuked him: “No more of this!” (Luke 22:51). Then he restored the slave’s severed ear in a gracious act of healing. Jesus directly countermanded Moses in forbidding the use of violence of any sort when he said, “Put your sword back into its place . . . for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). Peter must have taken Jesus’ rebuke to heart, for decades later he wrote, “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. . . . When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:21–23).

The earliest Christians were so sure of the nonviolent nature of God as revealed in Christ that they renounced all forms of violence, including military service, for the first three centuries of the church’s existence. To be a disciple of Christ meant a commitment to “overcom[ing] evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). Tertullian held that love of enemies is the “principal precept” of Christianity and that “Christians would, like their Master, rather be killed than kill.” Their mission was not to conquer but to convert, not to destroy but to heal, not to recriminate but to reconcile—the polar opposite of Israel’s Great Commission to annihilate all the peoples in the land of Canaan. For the sake of their convictions and because they would not fight back, uncounted multitudes of believers were led like lambs to the slaughter in wave after wave of persecution. Yet, armed with no rhetoric other than the gospel of peace and no weapons but love, these followers of the Prince of Peace eventually conquered Rome, their most vicious adversary, without drawing a sword.

When comparing the activities of the Israelites throughout their long history with that of early Christians, it is clear that theology matters and that people’s concept of God makes a vast difference in terms of how they relate to one another and their world. It is the difference between ideologies of coercive and destructive violence embodied in the Islamic doctrine of *jihad* (“holy war”) and the noncoercive, life-ennobling, self-giving love of God exhibited in Jesus on the cross.

Jesus not only renounced the use of violence but went to the unprecedented extreme of commanding love for enemies. Under the old covenant the rule and practice was, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy” (Matt. 5:43). While “love your neighbor” is a scriptural command (Lev. 19:18), “hate your enemy” is not. Yet Israel’s xenophobic and violent history bears sad witness to the fact that those beyond their religious and racial boundaries were regarded as other, as alien, as ungodly, as moral polluters, as the enemy, and thus as objects of boundless hate.

Over against a bloody history saturated with violence, believed to be divinely initiated and sanctioned, Jesus issued a new commandment that was as astonishing as it was radical: “But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). In this unprecedented pronouncement, Jesus said something that no prophet or priest ever uttered. His love ethic directly countermanded Moses’ genocidal commands, predicated as they were on loathing the enemy.

On what basis did Jesus make such a nonscriptural, impractical, and impossible command? His startling answer was “that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.... Be perfect [in love for enemies], therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect [in love for enemies]” (Matt. 5:45–48). What Jesus introduced was an entirely new way of looking at God. God does not hate sinners or despise foreigners; much less does he desire their annihilation. He loves them with boundless and unconditional, self-giving love. He bestows his gracious “sun” of life and “rain” of favor on the just and the unjust, on those who love him and those who hate him. His love is “perfect”: that is, it is all-encompassing, whole, complete, life-giving, life-sustaining, life-enhancing, and life-affirming for all humankind. Reflecting the creative and redemptive heart of God, Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

If ours is a Christlike God, then we can categorically affirm that God is not a destroyer. Death was not a part of God’s original creation, neither will there be any more “death or mourning or crying or pain” in the new (Rev. 21:4). God does not engage in punitive, redemptive, or sacred violence. Violence and death are the intrinsic consequences of violating God’s creative order; they are the work of Satan, for he was a “murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). God does not proactively use death as an instrument of judgment in that death is an enemy, the “last enemy” to be destroyed by Christ (1 Cor. 15:20–28). And God does not deal with the enemy.

**The sharpest point of discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments is evident in their starkly differing attitudes toward children. Moses made no exception for women and children in his command to “destroy [the Canaanites] totally” (Deut. 7:2; see v. 16). The narrator of the Conquest dispassionately reports that the Israelites “devoted [Jericho] to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old” (Josh. 6:21). Typical of the subsequent accounts of Joshua’s systematic extermination of the citizen populations of conquered cities is this summation: “He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded” (10:40). Samuel’s genocidal command to King Saul to “totally destroy” the Amalekites specifically spelled out “women, children and infants” (1 Sam. 15:3).**

Not so Jesus! “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” asked his disciples. Jesus answered that question by calling “a little child and had him stand among them.” A child, for Jesus, is the epitome of the kind of person who will “enter the kingdom of heaven.” How one treats children is how one treats Jesus, for “whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.” Jesus directed his strongest invective against the one who would in any way harm a little child: “It would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (Matt. 18:1–6). While Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and Herod the Great destroyed children, Jesus blessed them and said, “The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (19:14).

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize—winning author and Holocaust survivor, gives us a haunting first-person account of what the genocidal destruction of Canaanite children may well have looked

like. He describes his soul-searing experience of what he saw at sixteen years of age after being unloaded from a railway cattle car and marched into the camp at Auschwitz.

Not far from us, flames were leaping up from a ditch, gigantic flames. They were burning something. A lorry drew up at the pit and delivered its load—little children. Babies! Yes, I saw it—saw it with my own eyes ... those children in the flames. (Is it surprising that I could not sleep after that? Sleep had fled from my eyes.)

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Can we imagine Jesus at the wheel of that truck, backing it up and pulling the lever that dumps living children and babies into the flames? Can we image the God revealed fully and finally in Jesus ordering the killing of children and infants? At any time? In any place? For any reason?

## BEYOND DISCONTINUITY

Few theologians have operated from the presupposition of the inerrancy of “*all Scripture*” as rigorously as Dutch Reformed theologian A. van de Beek. In *Why? On Suffering, Guilt, and God*, he takes the received text of both Old and New Testaments as representing the literal words of God. Thus, all distinctions between the Testaments are erased, and the differing historical locations, perspectives, and personalities of the human mediators of God’s self-disclosure mean nothing. In that all parts of the Bible have equal weight of revelatory value, he must of necessity portray God as not only good and faithful but changeable, unpredictable, irrational, and even evil. “The way of God does not answer to our norms of good and evil.... God is a rough God, grim, and in our eyes even cruel.... God is not one you can figure out. Majestically he goes his own way.... Good and evil both come forth from his will.” One must learn to live with the fact, van de Beek argues, that “the more one wants to let all of Scripture speak for itself ... the more unclear the Bible becomes. The more we believe that the whole Word is revelation, the less we know who God is.”<sup>33</sup>

If van de Beek’s description of God is taken as normative—and it is faithful to a literal reading of the text—then how can we speak of Jesus as the embodiment of deity when he not only fails to incarnate Israel’s image of a warrior God, from whom “good and evil both come forth,” but discloses its exact opposite? In what sense can it still be claimed that the Father and the Son share the same essential nature? Does not such a view drive a wedge between God the Father and God the Son? Does it not undermine the deity of Jesus and shatter the historic doctrine of the Trinity? Sensing that the reader may well be frustrated by what appears to be a hermeneutic of “theological nihilism,” van de Beek admits, “we could perhaps restrict revelation to certain events in the world. We could restrict it to certain texts in Scripture. But then what is the criterion for our selection?”

John Wesley would answer in a flash: Jesus! As the full and final revelation of God, Jesus is “the criterion” for evaluating Scripture, the prism through which the Hebrew Scriptures must be read. Mildred Bangs Wynkoop succinctly capsules Wesley’s Christological hermeneutic when she says: “Love *is* the gospel message. Christian love, *revealed by God in Christ* ... stands against any human ... theory of God’s nature and His way with man ... love as it is revealed in

Christ” (emphasis added). “It is well that you should be thoroughly sensible of this,” said Wesley. “The heaven of heavens is love. There is nothing higher in religion: there is, in effect, nothing else.”<sup>36</sup>

If we take love as it is revealed by God in Christ as our criterion for interpreting Scripture, then the “tension between texts” can be transcended. The “furious opposites,” to use G. K. Chesterton’s colorful phrase, reflective in so many areas of discontinuity between the Testaments, find their resolution and unity in Jesus, the very one who seems to shatter them apart. This becomes clear in Jesus’ own use of the Hebrew Scriptures, which he interpreted in light of his own self-understanding. He infuriated his Jewish opponents by declaring that the Scriptures existed primarily to bear witness to him. To the Pharisees he said, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me” (John 5:39, 46). When the risen Christ joined the two grieving disciples on the road to Emmaus, he asked, “‘Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:26–27).

While Jesus affirmed the Hebrew Scriptures as the authentic Word of God, he did not endorse every word in them as God’s. He rejected some Torah texts as representing the original intention and will of God, such as Moses’ divorce laws (Mark 10:4–9). He displaced Moses’ laws governing vengeance with his new ethic of active nonviolent resistance, of “overcom[ing] evil with good” (Matt. 5:38–42; Rom. 12:21). His command to “love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44) represents a total repudiation of Moses’ genocidal commands and stands in judgment on Joshua’s campaign of ethnic cleansing. In his word of absolution to the woman taken in adultery, Jesus contravened the clear injunctions of the Torah calling for adulterers to be put to death (John 8:1–11; cf. Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22). It is clear that Jesus exercised an audacious prophetic authority over the Torah and on how it was to be interpreted.

Though Jesus did not “come to abolish the Law or the Prophets” (Matt. 5:17), it is apparent in the series of six antitheses that immediately follows—“You have heard it said.... But I tell you ...” (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43)—that his way of fulfilling them was to recast them according to the law of love (Matt. 22:34–40). The pronouncement “I tell you” appears thirty-two times in Matthew. It was, notes William Greathouse, “a unique aspect of Jesus’ own authoritative speech, affirming but relativizing the Law.”

A sea change occurred, quite spontaneously and without any formal deliberation, in the earliest church’s presuppositions regarding the grounds of divine revelation and scriptural authority. Although they continued to read, preach, and cite the Hebrew Scriptures as the Word of God, they did so primarily to prove that Jesus was indeed the long-anticipated Messiah of God. In that the Word had become flesh in Jesus, they now read and interpreted the Scriptures through the lens of Jesus illumined by the “Spirit of truth” (John 15:17). The bench mark of divine revelation in the era of the new covenant was no longer the Word of God mediated by Moses but by Jesus.

This hermeneutical change was so radical and offensive to unbelieving Jews that they hounded Jesus to the cross, stoned Stephen while accusing him of speaking “words of blasphemy against Moses and against God” (Acts 6:11), and harassed Paul to the end of his days. Ironically, the apostles never saw themselves as speaking “words of blasphemy against Moses.” To the contrary, they grounded the good news of Jesus in “Moses and all the Prophets,” even as the risen Christ had done when conversing with the two disciples on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:27).

Yet the Jews could clearly see that by reading the Torah and Prophets through the prism of the person and work of Christ, they were changing the center of gravity of revelatory authority in fundamental ways.

First-century Jews, as well as orthodox Jews today, were triply insulted: Christians co-opted their sacred Scriptures in what has been called the biggest corporate takeover in history; then they labeled them as “old”; and finally they set aside major parts of it as no longer relevant for their faith and life. It was precisely this shift that forced the Jews to expel the nascent Christian community from Judaism, a rupture that persists to this day.

The priority and finality of Jesus as the embodiment of God’s love—and thus the one through whom the Scriptures are to be read—is evident in Wesley’s exposition of the Sermon on the Mount:

With what authority does he teach! *Not* as Moses, the servant of God; *not* as Abraham, his friend; *not* as any of the Prophets; nor as any of the sons of men. It is something more than human; more than can agree to any created being. It speaks the Creator of All! A God, a God appears! Yea, “I AM,” the Being of beings, the self-existent, the Supreme, the God who is over all, blessed for ever!

Wesley’s Christological hermeneutics come into sharp focus in his exposition of the proof text often cited to show that Jesus accepted the authority of every part of the Hebrew Scriptures: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). Wesley pointed out that when it came to “the ritual or ceremonial law . . . containing all the injunctions and ordinances which related to the old sacrifices and service of the Temple, our Lord indeed did *come to destroy, to dissolve, and utterly abolish*. To this bear all the Apostles witness” (emphasis added). He adds, however, that “the moral law, contained in the Ten Commandments, and enforced by the Prophets, he did not take away”.

That Jesus came “to destroy, to dissolve, and utterly abolish” large sections of the Torah is indeed a strong statement. Yet Wesley held that this was precisely what the New Testament witnesses believed Jesus had done. In his comment on the next verse, “not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18), Wesley transposed the “letter of the law” into the word of Jesus: “His is a word of authority, expressing the sovereign will and power of Him that spake; of Him whose word is the law of heaven and earth, and stands fast for ever and ever.” Jesus’ lordship extends over the entire cosmos from creation to consummation—and over the Hebrew Scriptures as well. As the preexistent Son of God and now resurrected and glorified living Word, Jesus is *the* Word for those who bind themselves to him.

Evangelicals of all theological persuasions acknowledge that in spite of the pervasiveness of divinely initiated and sanctioned violence in the Old Testament, there is no support in the New for imaging God as one who wills the indiscriminate slaughter of human beings, much less is he pleased when conquered peoples are offered up to him as *herem*, that is, as human sacrifices. In his discussion of “Holy War” in *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible*, Colin Chapman observes that “New Testament writers never think of military conquest as a way of furthering the cause of God. They think instead of the peaceful spread of the good news about Jesus Christ.” If we believe that Jesus is truly “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), then we must resist all efforts to defend Old Testament genocidal commands as reflective of the will and character of

God. Since Jesus has come, we are under no obligation to justify that which cannot be justified, but can only be described as pre-Christ, sub-Christ, and anti-Christ.

Yet as offensive and as problematic as these texts are, they are part of the church's received canon of sacred Scripture and cannot simply be dismissed, although in practice that is precisely what the church has done. It has given genocidal texts a wide berth in liturgy, preaching, and Bible reading. Yet when such texts must be dealt with, many expositors from Origen in the third century to Duane L. Christensen today cut through the literal-historical outer husks of the narrative to uncover the hidden kernel of spiritual truth contained therein.

Origen, who was the first to produce a Christian commentary on the entire Hebrew Scriptures, was convinced, according to Joseph T. Lienhard, "that the whole Old Testament is a prophecy of Christ and of all that Christ signifies, and that Christ is the key to understanding the Old Testament.... Thanks to spiritual interpretation, the church freed itself from Judaism without having to reject the Old Testament." By the use of allegory, analogy, and typology, Origen was able to find testimony to Christ—and thus spiritual edification—in virtually every chapter and verse of the Old Testament, even in texts that not only violate the teachings of Jesus but all human sensibilities, such as the genocidal commands.

Though such "spiritual interpretation" has often been widely criticized for its subjectivism and wild flights of fancy, exegetes still utilize it when trying to draw something of spiritual value out of patently non-Christian texts. In his exposition of Deuteronomy 7:1–2, for instance, Duane Christensen admits that "the concept of 'Holy War' is offensive to the modern reader because it suggests the barbarism of the Crusades of medieval times, or the *jihad* of Islamic fundamentalists." After categorically declaring war to be "inherently evil," he transitions immediately from Moses' clear-cut command to "destroy [the Canaanites] totally" to "the theological and psychological principles implied in this text." He sees the battle scenes recounted in Joshua as a metaphor of spiritual warfare. "It is this spiritual battle to which this text speaks. To enter the promised land one must trust God to defeat the forces of evil.... As we engage the foe in spiritual battle, we must constantly be aware of the fact that it is God who fights in our behalf."<sup>45</sup>

Another way of dealing with the discontinuity between the Testaments is by utilizing the rubric of "progressive revelation" or "dispensationalism." We see this unfolding movement within the Hebrew Scriptures themselves in reference to sacrifices. While large sections of the Torah are devoted to divine commands regarding the detailed performance of sacrifices, Isaiah in speaking for God protests, " 'The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?' says the LORD. 'I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats' " (Isa. 1:11).

This approach acknowledges that God accommodated his self-disclosure to the narrow limits of human understanding and historical context. Calvin asks:

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to lisp in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity.

"What we witness in the pages of the Bible," says Colin Chapman, "is the gradual process by which God works in the history of a particular people for whom war is an essential part of the religion and culture. By doing so he transforms these ideas to enable all humankind to understand more clearly the nature of the world we live in."



It would be more accurate to describe this movement as the progressive *understanding* of God's self-disclosure. The problem of partial and even distorted concepts of God in the Old Testament has never been on God's side but on the side of the human mediators of that revelation. It was their "slight capacity," as Calvin pointed out, that limited their ability to comprehend the fullness of God's character and nature, which would come to light only in Jesus. As they received more light, their view of God correspondingly changed.

In 2 Samuel 24:1, for instance, we read that "the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, 'Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.'" Curiously, when David obeyed the word of the Lord, he was "conscience-stricken ... and he said to the LORD, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done'" (24:10). God's command becomes even more inexplicable when we read that "the LORD sent a plague on Israel," in which "seventy thousand of the people ... died" (24:15).

The postexilic Chronicler, however, resolved this glaring discrepancy by a small but significant emendation of the text: "*Satan* rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel" (1 Chron. 21:1, emphasis added). That a significant development in the understanding of God's role in the abortive census had occurred is obvious. The Jews had begun to project some of the darker attributes of Yahweh onto a contradivine being, Satan. We see this development most clearly in the book of Job. It was not God who caused the disasters that befell righteous Job, as both he and his comforters believed, but Satan.

In 1990, shortly after the Hubble Space telescope was launched, it was judged to be a five-billion-dollar boondoggle. Instead of sharp and clear pictures of the heavens, the images beamed back to earth were blurred, distorted, and virtually useless. The telescope simply would not focus properly. The problem was found to be in its principal light-gathering mirror. It had been ground with exquisite precision but in the wrong shape. A lengthy investigation traced the disaster to a simple, dumb mistake. A technician had assembled a device that guided the mirror-grinding process with one bolt put on backward. The resulting defect was so slight as to be calculated in thousandths of an inch. Yet it was sufficient to virtually ruin the telescope's revelational mission. It cost three critical years of viewing time and seven hundred million dollars for a complex array of corrective mirrors to be designed, manufactured, flown into orbit, and installed in the most complex space maneuvers by astronauts up to that time.

There was nothing wrong with the revelatory light that has filled the heavens and the earth with the glory of God from the beginning, but there was something terribly wrong with fallen humankind's light-gathering capacity. Because of darkened minds and hardened hearts as a result of the curse of sin, the glory of God mediated under the old covenant had in some respects become so diminished as to be corrupted into what Paul calls "the ministry that condemns," even "the ministry that brought death" (2 Cor. 3:7-9).

Jesus came to pull back the curtain and let us see the beautiful face of God, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Before he could reconcile us to God, he had to show us a loving heavenly Father to whom we would want to be reconciled: a God who is *for* us rather than *against* us, a God of love and grace who can be loved in return. Jesus came to remove the cataracts from our eyes because of sin, pierce the night of our dark distortions, and let us see "the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

We must hasten to add that the mediators of God's self-disclosure under the old covenant were telling the truth as they understood it. That their understanding of the "truth" may have been flawed is evident in the way the genocidal command was limited and in how it kept changing. The divine order to "completely destroy" applied only to the peoples inhabiting the

land of Canaan, not “cities that are at a distance” (Deut. 20:10–17). The criteria for annihilating the one and not the other had nothing to do with moral or religious issues but only that the former occupied the land the Israelites believed to be theirs.

The original command to “not leave alive anything that breathes” (Deut. 20:16), including animals, was scrupulously carried out in the sack of Jericho. Israel’s subsequent rout before the Ai defenders and the severity with which they dealt with Achan’s sin underscores how seriously they took that command. Yet from the conquest of Ai forward, only the conquered peoples were destroyed, not animals and personal effects: “Israel did carry off for themselves the livestock and plunder of this city, as the LORD had instructed Joshua” (Josh. 8:24–27). In that “livestock and plunder” were of value to them, the scope of God’s annihilating command was conveniently moderated. Tragically, that shift revealed the inversion of moral values exhibited by the Israelites at that time: Animals were more highly valued than humans.

Even more curiously, in his rash treaty with the Gibeonites, Joshua was not reprimanded for having directly contravened God’s clear command to “wipe out all [Canaanite] inhabitants” (Josh. 9:24), nor did Israel suffer battlefield defeats because of his disobedience. Achan perished for his sin and disobedience, but Joshua did not. It could be that God kept changing his mind about his genocidal will. More likely, Joshua’s perception of what God was telling him to do kept changing according to the exigencies of the moment.

Attributing the command to annihilate Canaanites to God can be partly explained by the fact that the Israelites had no concept of Satan prior to the Babylonian exile. Thus all things—life and death, sickness and health, blessing and cursing—were seen as coming directly from the hand of the Sovereign Lord (see Deut. 28; 32:39–42; Ps. 44:1–19; Isa. 13:9–16). In addition, the Israelites believed the Canaanites to be under an ancient curse originating with Noah (see Gen. 9:24–27). Given the fact that the Canaanites were an idolatrous and morally degenerate people and were squatters on land long before promised to the patriarchs, it is understandable how the Israelites could have interpreted God’s command to occupy the land in violent and even genocidal ways. Thus, in good faith they acted on what they believed to be God’s will. The record clearly reports that God honored their obedience. What God required under the old covenant is the same that he requires today: not perfect understanding but a perfect heart of obedience.

That a radical shift in the understanding of God’s character and the sanctity of all human life occurred between the days of the first Joshua and the second Joshua (i.e., Jesus) is beyond dispute. It was nothing less than moving from the assumption that God hates enemies and wills their annihilation to the conviction that God “so loved [enemies] that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). As Wesleyan expositors Jack Ford and A. R. G. Deasley point out in their commentary on Deuteronomy 7:1–2:

To apply these [genocidal] commands to warfare today would be a gross misapplication of scripture. There can be no doubt that, armed with the Christian gospel and endued with the Holy Spirit, Paul would have entered Canaan as he entered Corinth to show God’s triumph over evil in transformed lives.

This raises a critical question regarding the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament: If Moses and Joshua misunderstood the will and purposes of God in reference to the Conquest, then what parts of God’s self-disclosure in the Old Testament can we trust? The question is moot if we ask the same of all who feel under no obligation to abide by Old Testament laws governing Sabbath worship, ritual circumcision, animal sacrifices, eating pork, charging interest, and

capital punishment for adulterers and those who pick up sticks on the Sabbath. If Bible-believing Christians are asked how they can justify setting aside great blocks of divine commands in the Old Testament as “truth for today,” even the most avowed scriptural literalists among them respond: because we are no longer living under the old covenant but the new. Exactly!

What we are suggesting is that we extend this functional Christological principle of biblical interpretation, employed by virtually all evangelicals, to cover texts of violence that are incompatible with the nature and character of God as disclosed in Jesus. What makes a Christian a Christian as opposed to a Jew, at least in part, is precisely this Christocentric orientation toward the Hebrew Scriptures. In opposition to Marcion, who sought to dispense with the Old Testament altogether, believers from apostolic times to the present take its testimony and countertestimony with all seriousness, especially since “these are the Scriptures that testify about [Jesus]” (John 5:39). Yet at the same time, they affirm that the full and final self-disclosure of God’s true nature and character is to be found “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor. 3:3). The central and ultimate purpose of “the holy Scriptures,” claims Paul in another context, is “to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

Our final authority, not only in matters of faith and salvation but in determining the true nature and character of God, is Jesus, to whom the Scriptures give faithful and true witness. Calvin taught: “It is Christ alone on whom . . . faith ought to look. . . . This . . . is the proper look of faith, to be fixed on Christ.” John Stott reminds us that “our Christian conviction is that the Bible has both authority and relevance . . . and that the secret of both is Jesus Christ.”<sup>51</sup> Rather than sinners being exterminated, children being dashed to pieces, and wives being raped in the day of the Lord’s “coming, cruel, with fury and burning anger,” as envisioned by Isaiah (Isa. 13:9–16, NASB), God in Christ was violently seized, beaten, and crucified. Instead of destroying sinners, God allowed himself in his Son to be slain *by* sinners and *for* sinners on the cross. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

For Wesley, the sum and center of God’s character, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, is the kind of generative *agape* love that is the total antithesis of genocidal violence of any sort. It is a love that sees every person as a chosen being, fashioned in God’s own image and imbued with his life-giving Spirit. It is a love that sees people as worthy of the supreme act of divine self-giving, even God’s “one and only Son” (John 3:16). The sanctity of human life, established in creation, reaffirmed after the Flood, and codified in the sixth commandment, reaches its highest expression and ultimate affirmation in the Incarnation. Alice McDermott rightly points out that “the incredible notion of God made flesh . . . changing forever the fate of humankind . . . cannot logically be sustained, if any single life [is] expendable. . . . If any one life can be dismissed as meaningless, so too can the life of Christ.”

Elie Wiesel records a poignant scene that occurred when he and hundreds of other Jews were barracked for three days at Gleiwitz, Poland. They were pressed into a room so tightly that many were smothered by the sheer mass of human bodies cutting off sources of air. Twisted among the bodies was an emaciated young Warsaw Jew named Juliek. Somehow, incredibly, Juliek had clutched his violin during the forced march through snowstorms to Gleiwitz. That night, crammed among the hundreds of dead and nearly suffocating humans, Juliek struggled free and began to play a fragment from Beethoven’s concerto. The sounds were pure, eerie, out of place in such a setting. Wiesel recalls:

It was pitch dark. I could hear only the violin, and it was as though Juliek's soul were the bow. He was playing his life. The whole of his life was gliding on the strings—his lost hopes, his charred past, his extinguished future. He played as he would never play again.

I shall never forget Juliek. How could I forget that concert, given to an audience of dying and dead men! To this day, whenever I hear Beethoven played my eyes close and out of the dark rises the sad, pale face of my Polish friend, as he said farewell on his violin to an audience of dying men.

I do not know for how long he played. I was overcome by sleep. When I awoke, in the daylight, I could see Juliek, opposite me, slumped over, dead. Near him lay his violin, smashed, trampled, a strange overwhelming little corpse.

Where was God in Israel's genocidal conquest of Canaan? In the "lost hopes," the "charred past," the "extinguished future" of the babies, the infants, the little children—all the "Julieks" of Canaan. It was in those like Melchizedek, "priest of God Most High" (Gen. 14:18), and Rahab, who might have glorified God had they been given the chance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cowles, C. S. (2003). [The Case for Radical Discontinuity](#). In S. N. Gundry (Ed.), *Show them no mercy* (pp. 11–45). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

## THE CASE FOR MODERATE DISCONTINUITY

Eugene H. Merrill

**One of the most disturbing indices of the human condition is the fact that historians commonly recount the past in terms of conflict. The historical record is periodized by this war or that, times of intervening peace appearing almost to be incidental to the metanarrative. This is true not only because war has such horrendous consequences but because by its very nature it holds a certain gruesome fascination to the human psyche. People are at once attracted and repelled by the fact of war, as the popular media can well attest. Among the best-sellers in print and the blockbusters of Hollywood are graphic recreations of the bloody and destructive carnage of hostility, whether on the personal or international level.**

**The destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, raised the level of the consciousness of the American people about the reality of war and its aftermath perhaps more than anything since Pearl Harbor, Normandy, and Hiroshima. The images of hijacked airliners plowing into those lofty towers, people leaping to their deaths to escape incineration, and the shuddering collapse of a million tons of wood, stone, and steel have been indelibly ingrained into the very fiber of the American people. Beyond this are the questions: How could this have happened? Who was responsible? How can they be found and punished? And most perplexing and poignant of all, where was God, and why did he allow this to happen?**

**Those inclined to think theistically found themselves wondering how a God of love could permit or perhaps even sanction such a cruel and devastating turn of events. These were, after all, innocent men, women, and children—both the living and the dead—who did nothing more than show up for work that day or bid good-bye to those who did. Was it random, was it arbitrary, or was it perhaps part of some grand but inscrutable plan of an all-knowing and all-powerful God who in this act displayed facets of his character and person other than those more commonly associated with him: grace, mercy, and compassion?**

Readers of the Old Testament who think long and hard about God's dealings with individuals and nations in ancient times have already raised these questions and more, for the narrative from Adam to the Chronicler is blood-soaked with murder and war. Indeed, these issues are addressed in the sacred annals themselves, particularly in the poetic and wisdom texts. Over and over Israel's thinkers ponder the ways of God and strive without success to accommodate their understanding of a beneficent God to the reality of everyday life with its experiences of disease, pain, war, and death. Theodicy, a major theological motif in these writings, addresses head-on the apparently irreconcilable polarities of God's tender love and terrible wrath. Put popularly the question is: Why do the righteous suffer? Put more theologically it is: How can the ways of God be explained to human understanding and satisfaction, if at all?<sup>3</sup>

Nowhere in the modern reading of Old Testament texts is the theodic problem more acute than in coming to grips with so-called "holy war," more commonly and correctly described now as "Yahweh war." Common in this concept was genocide, the wholesale slaughter of men, women, and children. Usually carried out against the Canaanites and other indigenous Palestinian peoples, on rare occasions Israelites themselves could be targeted.

God initiated the process by singling out those destined to destruction, empowering an agent (usually his chosen people Israel) to accomplish it, and guaranteeing its successful conclusion once the proper conditions were met. The purpose of this study is to identify Yahweh war as distinct from war in general, to determine its characteristic features, to attempt to justify it in light of the character of God as a whole, and to determine to what extent such a notion is continuous or discontinuous with the New Testament and applicable to modern life.

## RELEVANT OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES

A proper investigation of the issues just raised requires attention to the biblical texts that specifically speak to them. These are both prescriptive (primarily in Torah, i.e., legal texts) and descriptive (primarily in the historical narratives). That is, they regulate the practice of Yahweh war and then provide accounts of how such war was actually carried out. The approach to be followed will be (1) to provide a brief overview of battle accounts in general, especially those that appear to have overtones of Yahweh war; (2) to isolate those that incorporate undeniable traits of genocide, including the use of technical terms such as *hrm/herem*; and (3) to reexamine these latter accounts from a theological and ethical point of view in an attempt to understand their contribution to an overall biblical theodicy.

### The Legislation of Yahweh War

Though hints of the rationale for Yahweh war and its prosecution occur prior to the revelation of the covenant at Sinai (cf. Ex. 3:8–12, 17–20; 4:22–23; 6:6–8; 7:3–5, 17–18; 9:13–17; 11:4–8; 12:12, 29–33; 13:14–16; 14:10–25; 15:1–18, 21; 17:8–16), it was only after Israel had been constituted as a nation following that revelation that Yahweh war became not just a display of God’s redemptive power and grace on behalf of his people but a constituent part of the covenant relationship itself. Israel from then on would not just witness God’s mighty deeds as heavenly warrior but would be engaged in bringing them to pass.

The first articulation of Yahweh war appears at the end of the so-called “Book of the Covenant” (Ex. 23:20–33), a section that, with 20:22–23, forms an *inclusio* bracketing the whole covenant text. The common theme of the two passages is the need to recognize that only Yahweh is God and only he is to be worshiped. In addition to this declaration, 23:20–33 spells out the need to destroy the nations of Canaan for they are the enemies of Yahweh as well as of Israel (23:22–23, 27–30); the reason they are enemies is because they worship and serve other gods. They must be destroyed, then, lest Israel follow after these gods, thus violating the first two commandments of the Decalogue (23:24–25; cf. 20:3–5).

Other glimpses of Yahweh war may be found in Leviticus 26:3–45; Numbers 14:39–45; 21:1–3; and 31:1–20, but not in complete and sustained form. It is in connection with covenant renewal in Moab that Yahweh war reaches its definitive expression, particularly in Deuteronomy 20:1–20. In this manual of war, principles are established for the conduct of war in general (20:1–15) and Yahweh war in particular (20:16–20). In each case Yahweh is present, and there are elements common to both to suggest that the conflicts in view are not in any way secular. This chapter will come in for detailed treatment at a later point.

The vantage point of Deuteronomy is the impending conquest of Canaan in fulfillment of the promises to the patriarchs. It is clear that the land was considered Israel’s by divine right and that the nations who occupied it were little better than squatters. Yahweh, as owner of the land,

would therefore undertake measures to destroy and/or expel the illegitimate inhabitants, and he would do so largely through his people Israel and by means of Yahweh war. A number of passages either mandate this approach (Deut. 7:1–5, 17–26; 9:1–5; 12:1–3; 13:12–18; 20:16–20) or present it as already having taken place in the Transjordan (2:30–37; 3:1–3).

### The Narratives of Yahweh War

While for the most part described in the post-Mosaic era, there are narrative descriptions of Yahweh war in the Torah. The earliest is the Exodus account, where Yahweh led the hosts of Israel (Ex. 13:21–22), fought for them (14:14), divided the sea (14:21–22), drowned the Egyptian army (14:26–28), and proved by all this that he is Lord (14:31). In the poetic account he is called a “warrior” (15:3; lit., “man of war”), the incomparable One among all the gods (15:11). His conquest of Egypt betokens his everlasting sovereignty (15:18).

The ill-fated attempt by Israel to enter Canaan prematurely (Num. 14:39–45) was followed up later by a defensive conflict in which Yahweh led his armies in triumph over the Canaanites of Arad (21:1–3). Shortly thereafter the Amorites under King Sihon fell to Israel (21:21–30), a campaign described in Deuteronomy 2:26–37 as Yahweh war. The same is true of the defeat of King Og of Bashan (Num. 21:31–35; cf. Deut. 3:1–17). The retaliatory battle against Midian (Num. 31:1–24) is also clearly Yahweh war, though the technical language is largely missing.

The conquest of Canaan obviously involved Yahweh war since that was in line with the Deuteronomic mandate. Jericho was taken and destroyed in this manner (Josh. 6), as was the fortified city of Ai (8:24–29). There are overtones of Yahweh war in the defeat of the Amorite coalition (10:5–14) and in the summary of Joshua’s entire southern campaign, in which Yahweh took the initiative in the defeat of Hazor and its allies (11:1–15). In fact, the entire conquest is attributed to divine initiative and intervention (11:16–20).

The book of Judges attests to the fact of Yahweh war, sometimes with only brief allusion to technical terms (1:17, 18–19, 22–26; 3:7–11, 12–30, 31) and sometimes with more overt and lengthy descriptions. Note, for example, that the Song of Deborah declares that Yahweh marched forth from Edom (5:4), came down to join Deborah in battle (5:13), and marshaled the very hosts of heaven against Sisera and the Canaanites (5:19–21). The narrator also makes clear that Gideon’s success in destroying the Midianites was attributable to the aid of Yahweh (cf. 6:11–12; 7:9, 14).

Under Samuel, Yahweh achieved great victory over the Philistines (1 Sam. 7:5–14). After fasting and confession the people called on Yahweh for salvation (7:6, 9), a prayer God answered with decisiveness (7:10). The place then received the name Ebenezer (“stone of help”) to commemorate Yahweh’s leadership in delivering the nation (7:12). King Saul also knew something of Yahweh’s presence and power in battle (11:6–7), and he misguidedly attempted to appropriate the protocols of Yahweh war by appealing to the ark or ephod with their priestly associations (14:18–19). His battle against the Amalekites is clearly one of Yahweh war despite his disobedience in carrying out fully the prophetic commission of God (15:3, 8, 15, 20). David’s reign also provides a number of instances of Yahweh war, or at least war in which elements of Yahweh’s intervention may be seen. The catalog of victories compiled in 2 Samuel 8 makes clear that success lay in divine initiative and intervention (8:6, 14).

The last example of Yahweh war is the marvelous deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib of Assyria in the days of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:13–19:37). After taunts and threats from the Assyrian spokesmen, Hezekiah repented, entered the temple, summoned Isaiah

the prophet to intercede with Yahweh on his behalf, and confessed that Yahweh was sovereign and that his reputation was at stake. Isaiah responded that Yahweh would save the city and would do so for his own sake and for the sake of David, with whom he had made a solemn covenant. Following that was the elimination of the Assyrian army by the angel of Yahweh.

## YAHWEH-WAR FORMULAS AND TEXTS

As with any institution or practice governed by conventional patterns, Yahweh-war passages have their own set of technical terms and unique form-critical characteristics. Most scholars agree that no one passage contains them all; in fact, few have even a majority of them. In his seminal study of 1951, Gerhard von Rad isolated the following elements as indicative of the presence of Yahweh-war ideology, an analysis that continues to enjoy much favor:

- (1) mustering by a trumpet call
- (2) consecration of the men (Josh. 3:5)
- (3) offering of sacrifices
- (4) an oracle of God
- (5) “Yahweh has given”
- (6) Yahweh leads the way
- (7) designated as “Yahweh war” (1 Sam. 18:17; 25:28)
- (8) “fear not” formula
- (9) enemy’s loss of courage
- (10) war cry (*teru ‘ah*)
- (11) divine terror
- (12) *herem* (“the high point”)
- (13) “to your tents” (1 Sam. 4:10)

It is obvious that the occurrence of *hrm/herem* is a striking feature of Yahweh war, a criterion accepted by nearly all scholars. However, 2 Chronicles 20:1–30, one of the most famous examples of such a conflict, contains none of these terms though it does refer to Levites in place of priests. Moreover, certain passages lacking in most of the terms are nonetheless recognized as providing paradigmatic insight into the nature and purpose of Yahweh war. These include especially Deuteronomy 7:1–5 and 13:12–18, both of which will be addressed at a later point. Our intent to limit Yahweh war to genocide precludes consideration of instances where other, less-drastring forms of Yahweh war might occur.

Of all the terms to be considered, only *hrm/herem* needs any extensive study because of its indispensability in Yahweh-war and genocide contexts. The root *hrm* in Hebrew has the idea of both destruction and separation or devotion, both nuances occurring together in some passages. Its usage also depends on its collocation with other terms and the synonyms and/or antonyms with which it is associated.

The best approach to understanding the nature of Old Testament genocide, the ethics of its implementation, and its implications vis-à-vis the character of God is to look inductively at the major texts that authorize and/or describe it and to draw appropriate conclusions. This will begin with consideration of the lexical and literary features of these passages, to be followed in subsequent sections with the historical, cultural, and theological occasions for this kind of Yahweh war and the Old Testament justification for it.



## Deuteronomy 20:1–20

Sometimes described as Israel’s “Manual of War,” this text prescribes Israel’s behavior with regard to the conquest of Canaan that lay in the immediate future. It is divided into two parts: (1) instructions about “ordinary” war (Deut. 20:1–15) and (2) instructions about Yahweh war (20:16–20). The focus here will be on the latter, but there are clearly overtones of Yahweh war in the whole passage. Among these are (1) the injunction not to fear because of God’s presence (20:1, 3–4); (2) the involvement of cultic personnel (20:2); (3) the assurance that Yahweh is the warrior (20:4); (4) the certainty of the outcome (20:13); (5) the slaughter of all the men (in the case of ordinary war, 20:13) or of all others as well (in the case of Yahweh war, 20:16–17); (6) the taking of plunder (in ordinary war, 20:14); and (7) the reason for the total destruction (in Yahweh war, 20:18), that is, to preclude Israel’s adoption of pagan ways. Technical terms found here include *ḥrm* (utter destruction, 20:17), *miḥamah* (war, 20:1), *kohen* (priest, 20:2), and *nkh* (smiting, 20:13), the first two of which occurs in the Yahweh-war section.

## Deuteronomy 13:12–18

Deuteronomy 13:12–18 contains some of the common terms for Yahweh war, such as the utter destruction (*ḥrm*), smiting (*nkh*), and burning (*šrp*), but it is radically different in that this time Yahweh war is directed against persons and places in Israel itself. The context is the possibility of apostasy within the covenant community and what is to be done to those who take the lead in it, especially false prophets (13:1–11), and the cities that harbor them. Such places are as guilty before God as any Canaanite city; thus, the judgment must be precisely the same—the application of Yahweh war. The punishment is smiting (*nkh*) with the sword, utter destruction (*ḥrm*) of goods and properties, and devotion of the city and its spoil to Yahweh by fire (*šrp*) (13:15–16a). The site must forever remain abandoned (13:16b), and nothing devoted (*ḥerem*) can be appropriated for personal use (cf. Josh. 6:17; 7:10–11).

At the heart of this matter is the recognition that if Israel goes off into idolatry, she has effectively become paganized. Yahweh war, then, is essentially war against the imaginary gods of the world who challenge the sovereignty of Yahweh. In this sense, Yahweh war can perhaps more properly be termed deicide rather than homicide. Only by Yahweh’s swift and complete defeat of false gods can his sovereignty be guarded and celebrated. It follows, then, that those who promote and practice the worship of other gods—Israelites included—must expect the fate of those gods, that is, total eradication. As the narrative here points out, the lesson to be learned from such harsh and uncompromising measures is that “Israel will hear and be afraid, and no one among you will do such an evil thing again” (Deut. 13:11).

## Joshua 6:1–27

The first application of Yahweh war occurs at Jericho at the very beginning of the Conquest. Its cultic nature is seen in the presence of the priests with the ark of the covenant who lead the way on the seventh day (6:4) and sound the signal for the walls to collapse (6:20). Yahweh presents himself as the instigator of the campaign (6:2) and the one who makes it successful (6:16). The result is the utter destruction (*ḥrm*) of man and beast (6:21) and the burning (*šrp*) of the city itself (6:24). However, the things destroyed are here called *ḥerem*, that is, things (and

people) devoted to Yahweh for his exclusive use. Thus, the meanings “destroy” and “devote” both occur in the narrative.

### Joshua 8:1–29

The next place to suffer Yahweh war is Ai, a strong military outpost northwest of Jericho. The narrative begins with the command not to fear, followed by Yahweh’s assurance to be with Joshua and the people (8:1). This time, however, only the people of Ai are to be annihilated (*h̄rm*)—goods and livestock can be taken by Israel (8:2). Employing a strategy of ruses and ambushes, Joshua is able to set upon and capture all the men of Ai, whom he then slaughters to the last man (8:22), along with women and children (8:24–26). The structures of the city are then burned to the ground (8:28). The goods are spared, this time allocated to the Israelite people (8:27). The use of the verbs smiting (*nkh*, 8:22) and burning (*šrp*, 8:28), along with the use of *h̄rm*, is enough to show that Yahweh war is in view.

### Joshua 10–11

Joshua’s southern and northern campaigns consist of the application of Yahweh war. The alliance of Amorite kings against Israel comes about precisely because of the news about Ai’s annihilation by *h̄rm* (10:1). One by one Joshua smites (*nkh* 10:10, 26, 28, 30, 32, 33, 35, 37, 39, 40, 41) the southern kings and their cities. Yahweh is said to fight (*lhm*) for Israel (10:14, 42), a clear indicator of the nature of these campaigns.

The northern campaign shares much in common with that of the south largely because of its nature as Yahweh war. There is the appeal not to fear (11:6; cf. 10:8), the promise that Yahweh will deliver (11:6) and its fulfillment (11:8), the smiting (11:8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 17), the burning (11:6, 9, 11, 13), and the total annihilation of human beings (*h̄rm*, 11:11, 12, 20, 21). In summarizing the conquest as a whole, the narrator makes the remarkable observation that all of Israel’s victories come about because Yahweh has hardened the heart of their enemies, inducing them to attack his people so that he will thereby have occasion to annihilate them (11:20). Israel must show them no favor, for God intends these nations to be eliminated from the land.

### 1 Samuel 15:1–23

One of Saul’s first assignments after assuming the kingship of Israel is to take vengeance against the Amalekites, who had made cowardly raids against the weak and infirm of Israel in the Sinai desert (Ex. 17:8–16). At that time, Yahweh commanded Moses to write a memorandum that he would someday completely blot out Amalek’s memory (17:14). Four centuries later the time has come. The Lord’s command to Saul (1 Sam. 15:2) is to go and smite (*nkh*, 15:3; cf. 15:7) Amalek and utterly decimate (*h̄rm*, 15:3) it. The *herem* is to be total (15:3), but Saul spares the king of Amalek and the best of the animals and goods (15:9, 15, 21). This blatant disregard for the seriousness of Yahweh war costs Saul his throne, for to obey its requirements is far more important than to worship Yahweh with sacrifices (15:22–23).

## Eschatological Texts

It is somewhat striking that though God's dealings with the nations in eschatological times are decidedly militaristic in flavor (Isa. 2:12–17; 9:1–7; 13:6–16; 24:1–13; 34:1–7; Jer. 25:32–38; Ezek. 25:1–7; Zech. 14:9–15; etc.), the technical terms and formulae associated with Yahweh war are few and far between. Isaiah 11:11–16, describing the return of Israel as a reenactment of the Exodus deliverance, speaks of the difficulties to be encountered as though they were the Red Sea, an enemy to be placed under *hrm* (11:15). This, of course, is reminiscent of the role of Yahweh as warrior as celebrated in the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:3–4, 6). It is he who, in the last days, will initiate the return of Israel and Judah to the land (Isa. 11:11), who will reconcile these two and restore them as one people (11:13), who will give them dominion over the nations (11:14), and who will pave the way of return to the Promised Land (11:16; cf. 19:23; 35:8; 40:3; 62:10).

Jeremiah also speaks of eschatological judgment in Yahweh-war terms. Addressing Babylon, he foresees a day when Babylon will suffer total destruction (*hrm*) in a battle led by Yahweh (Jer. 50:21–22). He will set a trap for this erstwhile scourge of the earth precisely because Babylon, as the symbol par excellence of anti-God rebellion, will dare to strive against his sovereignty (50:24). As warrior, Yahweh will deploy his weapons and marshal his heavenly hosts in order to accomplish his mission (50:25). The objective and result will be utter annihilation (*hrm*, 50:26). These texts point to a time more fully clarified and elaborated in the New Testament, where, as we will see, Yahweh-war sentiments continue to be important.

## THE HISTORICAL, CULTURAL, AND THEOLOGICAL OCCASION FOR YAHWEH WAR

Having reviewed briefly the most important Yahweh-war texts with their technical terms and leading themes, it is important now to determine the circumstances that gave rise to such a phenomenon. Even a cursory survey of the data shows that Yahweh war as defined by the application of genocide originated in connection with the Exodus event and the subsequent occupation of the land promised to Israel's patriarchal ancestors. But why were such extreme measures necessary, and what role did the devotion of places, persons, and things play in the overall concept of Yahweh war? The best way to approach the matter is to try to come to grips with the nature of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, the nation on whose behalf such war was carried out, and to understand what issued from that relationship that could account for genocide as a remedy for guaranteeing stability in the relationship.

### The Patriarchal Covenant and Promises

The remedy for the Fall and for human sinfulness included the calling out of a people through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed. This originated with Abraham, whom God sovereignly selected to found this nation (Gen. 12:1–3), with whom he entered into a covenant of grant (17:1–14), and to whom he gave the specific promise of a land (13:14–18; 15:7, 18–21; 17:8). Most important, Abraham's descendants would be God's people in a unique and special way, a relationship spelled out explicitly later on (17:7; Ex. 3:7, 10; 5:1; 6:7; etc.). It would be as their God that he would permit them to become slaves in a foreign land (Gen.

15:13), but it would also be as their God that he would rescue them and with great power bring them back to Canaan, the land of promise (15:14, 16).

Throughout the period of the patriarchs, the promises of blessing and land continued, but always with the ominous sense that the return to the land and its possession would be fraught with difficulty. If it were to happen, it would be because Yahweh would provide the leadership and resources (Gen. 22:16–17; 26:3; 28:1–4; 35:12; 46:2–4).

## The Sonship of Israel and the Need for Deliverance

One of the most remarkable epithets to describe Israel in the Old Testament is that of Yahweh's son (Ex. 4:22–23; cf. Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Hos. 11:1). Already identified as God's people, they found refuge, then bondage, in Egypt—a situation that went from oppression (Ex. 1:11, 13–14) to infanticide (1:15–16). Into this intolerable turn of events steps Israel's God. He hears the groans of his people, remembers the covenant he made with their fathers, and undertakes measures to effect their redemption (2:23–24; 3:7–8). He will now assume the role of warrior, first of all demonstrating his glory and power to Pharaoh (3:10), and when that fails by itself to achieve the desired ends, he will implement by force the deliverance of his beleaguered people (3:17, 20; 6:1, 6–8; 7:4; 12:17, 37–42).

The warlike nature of Yahweh's redemption of Israel finds special meaning in the intimacy of his covenant relationship with them as Father to son. Moses is commissioned to inform Pharaoh, the personification of the whole nation of Egypt, that Israel is Yahweh's firstborn son, his heir, as it were, and that as such Israel must be free to fulfill its task of serving as Yahweh's means of blessing all the earth (Ex. 4:22). The penalty for refusing to let Israel go will be the death of Pharaoh's own firstborn son (4:23). Despite the devastating plagues against Egypt that nearly ruin the country, Pharaoh refuses to comply. Thus, Yahweh's edict goes forth—all of Egypt's firstborn sons must die (11:5), a judgment that falls on every family that fails to avail itself of the protective blood of the Passover lamb (12:29–30). From that time on every firstborn male of Israel must be devoted to Yahweh as a token of his redeeming grace in preserving his firstborn son Israel (13:2, 11–16; 22:29; 34:20; Num. 3:12–13, 40–51; 8:14–19).

Also not to be overlooked is the fundamental fact that the conflict in Egypt is not really between Yahweh and Pharaoh or even Yahweh and Egypt, but between Yahweh and the gods of Egypt (Ex. 12:12; Num. 33:4). Yahweh war is at its base a war against spiritual darkness and wickedness in realms that transcend the human and earthly (Gen. 3:15; Job 1:6–12; 2:2–6). The Song of the Sea ought to be understood in these terms, for it not only celebrates Yahweh's triumph over Pharaoh and his armies (Ex. 15:1, 4–5) but also has clear overtones of an even more profound and significant victory, one over every competing notion of deity real or imaginary. “Who among the gods is like you, O LORD,” asks the poet. “Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (15:11). Yahweh has prevailed over Egypt, it is true, but he also has proven his sovereignty over all aspirants to sovereignty, whether human or divine.

## The Conquest: War in Fulfillment of Promise

Yahweh war was necessary to Israel's escape from Egypt, and it will be necessary to her conquest and settlement of Canaan. Whereas the former is more inferential, the latter is spelled out in unmistakable terms. The issue is the same, however, in both cases: God has promised the

patriarchs that their national descendants will be delivered from onerous bondage to a hostile power and brought to a land that they will own and occupy. All this will be initiated and carried to successful conclusion by their warrior God, the Lord of Hosts, who will wage battle against overwhelming odds on their behalf.

**The prescription for Yahweh war.** Like anything else in the purpose and plan of God, there must be a protocol to be followed in carrying out Yahweh war. No one passage in the Old Testament presents a comprehensive and systematic outline of how this was to be undertaken, though we have examined a number of texts that, taken together, provide a reasonably good understanding. In addition to these, we must here examine Deuteronomy 7:1–5.

The setting of this passage is the plains of Moab on the eve of the conquest of Canaan under Joshua. Israel has already enjoyed success in conquering Transjordanian kingdoms and is beginning to occupy their territories (Deut. 3:12–17). Now Moses turns his attention to the west. He reminds the people that Yahweh has already given them the land—at least in promise—and that he will do to the kings in Canaan what he did to Sihon of Heshbon and Og of Bashan. Yahweh “your God himself will fight for you” (3:22; cf. 1:30). That is, Yahweh is the warrior who, according to his own strategy and by his own power, will bring success.

The enemy consists of seven nations, seven no doubt reflecting the fullness of opposition. Their description as being more populous and powerful than Israel heightens the idea of their invincibility (7:1). If Israel is to prevail, it will be only by divine assistance. This notion of vast enemy superiority is, in fact, one of the hallmarks of Yahweh war.

The order of events is of significance. It is after Yahweh delivers over (*nkh*) them. And the smiting must result in *herem*, utter destruction (7:2). The option of making covenant with such people or undertaking marriage with them or even of showing mercy and sparing them for some other reason can never be entertained. They will induce Israel to follow their gods and embrace their abominable forms of worship (7:4). Instead, they and their worship apparatus must be exterminated (7:5).

The introduction of Yahweh-war legislation so early in Deuteronomy can be explained by its near juxtaposition to the commandments to have no other gods and to desist from making and worshiping pagan idols (Deut. 5:7–10). These commandments are adumbrated by the Shema formula (“The LORD our God, the LORD is one”) and the command that he is to be worshiped exclusively and fully (6:4–5). Hard against these claims is the injunction to destroy utterly those who subvert Yahweh’s sovereign lordship. Yahweh war is war in defense of his unique demands on his people. To worship other gods is an act of high treason, one deserving of death (13:15). By extension, those who induce God’s people to such disloyalty are also worthy of death.

The passage following these prescriptions in Deuteronomy 7 is also important to the case being made here. Here Israel is called a “holy” people, that is, one set apart for God’s special purpose (7:6). They have been divinely elected and delivered from bondage in fulfillment of the promises to the fathers. Their success depends on their obedience to the covenant (7:12), especially the exclusive worship of their God (7:16) and the destruction of the nations intent on leading them astray (7:24–25). So important is this to Yahweh that he himself will lead in their defeat and utter destruction (7:19–23).

**The implementation of Yahweh war.** The first application of Yahweh war following its Deuteronomic prescription is the conquest of Jericho. After careful planning of strategy in which spies are sent to reconnoiter the area (Josh. 2:1–24), Joshua proceeds to take Jericho in line with divine direction. The preparation already shows signs of the character of the impending conflict. The Canaanite Rahab discloses that she is aware that Yahweh has determined to give Israel the

land (2:9) and that he will do so in terms reminiscent of the Exodus deliverance and the annihilation of the Transjordanian cities (2:10). She, at least, has learned from this that Yahweh is God (cf. Deut. 4:32–35).

Preparation for the conquest of Jericho involves the role of the priests with the ark of the covenant (Josh. 3:1–17). The ark represents God's tangible presence (Ex. 25:22; 30:6) and therefore symbolizes his leadership in the struggle that lies ahead. When the priestly procession moves forward into the Jordan, the waters cease flowing and the riverbed becomes dry, just as the Red Sea did when Yahweh led his people out of Egypt (Josh. 3:14–17; cf. Ex. 14:15–22). Once across the river, the priests bearing the ark circumvent the city of Jericho once a day for six days and then seven times on the seventh day (Josh. 6:4). The importance of the ark in identifying the presence of God and thus of Yahweh war is clear from the fact that it is mentioned ten times in the narrative (6:1–16).

At a signal, the trumpets sound, and the city walls collapse, enabling the hosts of Israel to enter and to annihilate (*h̄rm*) the population and all animal life (Josh. 6:20–21). Only the precious metals are spared, everything else being consigned to the flames (6:24). These goods become *herem*, but not in the sense of being destroyed. Rather, they are devoted to Yahweh by being placed in the sacred treasury. The juxtaposition of *h̄rm* in the sense of dedication to Yahweh (6:17–18) and in the sense of destruction (6:21) is instructive. Both are elements of Yahweh war, but in the one case the result is annihilation and in the other preservation. However, the preservation is for the benefit not of human beings but of Yahweh, for the practical maintenance of the cultus.

Disregard of this aspect of Yahweh war brings most serious consequences, as is seen in the appropriation by Achan of the goods of Jericho that were to have been devoted to Yahweh alone (7:1). It is viewed as a violation of God's covenant (7:11; cf. Lev. 27:28); in fact, it is theft, and until it is dealt with, Israel can no longer expect successful prosecution of Yahweh war (Josh. 7:12). The remedy is harsh, indeed. The person guilty of the deed must suffer *herem*; that is, he must be devoted to Yahweh by death (7:15), a fate that befalls not only Achan but his entire family (7:25–26).

The purpose of Yahweh war in the case of Jericho is not so much to eliminate the gods and cultus of its inhabitants as to elevate Yahweh in the view of his own people. He wants them to know that he is their God as he, the God of all the earth (Josh. 2:11), is present with them to accomplish the work of conquest (2:10). It follows, moreover, that all the peoples of the earth will recognize that Israel's God is God indeed (4:24).

## THE JUSTIFICATION OF OLD TESTAMENT YAHWEH WAR

It is one thing to provide a sketch of the nature and history of Yahweh war in the Old Testament. It is quite another to understand it in terms of the character of God and to justify it in light of the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament, to say nothing of modern notions of ethics and morality. In a day when genocide and ethnic cleansing rightly stand condemned by all morally sensitive people, how can anyone—and the Christian in particular—defend its practice at any time, even in the ancient Old Testament past? The answer to these troubling questions must lie in a proper appreciation of the true nature of God, the opposition to his eternal purposes, and the means by which this opposition can and must be overcome.

## God the Protagonist

A study this brief cannot possibly do justice to the subject of theology proper, so attention must be focused on those facets of God's nature, character, and purposes most pertinent to the issue at hand, namely, his role as protagonist in the prosecution of Yahweh war. If anything is clear in the foregoing review of this phenomenon, it is that such war was conceived by God, commanded by him, executed by him, and brought by him alone to successful conclusion. Among the attributes associated with his participation in Yahweh war are God's omnipotence, his infinite wisdom, and, above all, his holiness. In fact, it is this last-mentioned characteristic that gave rise to earlier descriptions of this kind of conflict as "holy war."

All this is not to negate such divine virtues as love, grace, mercy, and forbearance; indeed, these and other elements of the wholeness of God as articulated in classic Christian theology are also found in his work of Yahweh war, albeit in more hidden and implicit ways. But holiness looms largest as the prism through which to view the harsh reality of genocide at the hands of a wrathful and powerful God. Biblical texts are replete with references to God's holiness (Lev. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; Josh. 24:19; 1 Sam. 2:2; 6:20; Ps. 22:3; 99:3, 5, 9; Isa. 5:16; 6:3; 57:15).

At the same time, none of the passages prescribing or narrating Yahweh war explicitly refers to God's holiness. Instead, the focus is on the holiness of Israel, the people set apart to reflect the character of Yahweh and to carry out his salvific design (Ex. 19:6; Deut. 7:6; 14:2, 21; 26:19; 28:9). A comprehensive theological overview yields the conclusion that Israel must be holy because Yahweh is holy and that one of the major purposes of Yahweh war was to protect that holiness.

## The Enemy

God's holiness does not exist in a vacuum, as only an abstract quality. He is holy because he stands apart from that which is not; in fact, his holiness opposes everything and everyone that falls short of his perfection. All that God created was declared to be "good," that is, without flaw or any hint of hostility toward the Creator (Gen. 1:31). But the Fall and the mystery of sin put an end to that, and at both the heavenly and earthly levels a rupture occurred between God and creation, a division perpetuated by rebellious antagonism toward God and his purposes. The warning to the serpent that there would be enmity between it and the human race, culminating ultimately in the serpent's defeat (Gen. 3:15), suggests a conflict of a higher order, a contest of wills between God and the spiritual forces that strive against him for dominion.

Another word for this conflict is war, a *leitmotif* coursing through the narrative of sacred history from beginning to end. Yahweh war is, in one sense then, a struggle against the realms of evil on a massive, transcendent level, an engagement that commences with the first creaturely hubris and that will end only when Satan and his minions are fully eradicated from God's kingdom. At another and more limited level, it is war connected historically to the struggle for Israel's emancipation from Egypt and their conquest and settlement of the land of Canaan. Careful reading of this more limited account will, however, reveal its inextricable linkage to the larger, more cosmic conflict.<sup>29</sup> Pharaoh and Egypt become ciphers for Satan and his kingdom, and the Canaanite nations symbolize the kingdoms of evil yet to be defeated and dispossessed. Such foes cannot be pacified, nor can one reach accommodation with them. They are hopelessly in rebellion and must be held to account firmly and with finality.

This interpretation of sacred history accounts for a number of things relative to Yahweh war.

(1) It explains why the eradication of idolatry is almost a sine qua non of its successful prosecution. Idolatry is in its essence the proclamation of the existence of supernatural powers that coexist with the God of creation and that demand that worship should be tendered also to them. As we have noted repeatedly, idolatry is defiance of the first two commandments that assert that only Yahweh is to be Israel's God and that no images are to be made of any creature with the intent of bowing down to worship them.

(2) Once it is recognized that the battle ultimately is cosmic and that what is at stake is God's reputation and sovereignty, it is easier to see why radical destruction of those who oppose him is an absolute necessity. The matter cannot be left only on the spiritual plane. Human agents in the employ of supernatural handlers must also suffer the same fate if they remain unrepentant.

(3) This leads to further consideration of the peoples particularly singled out in the Old Testament as those condemned to the judgment of Yahweh war. Though all nations are in rebellion against God, in the outworking of God's purposes in history those that most directly confront his chosen people Israel are especially subject to his judgment. In God's providence he led Israel to Egypt and then delivered them in a powerful display of military might. Yahweh war in this phase was limited in that Egypt, though punished, was allowed to survive, for idolatry was not fundamentally at issue. The Canaanite nations, by contrast, were in illegal occupation of the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. Moreover, they were irretrievably lost to anti-God idolatry and were certain to proselytize Israel to do the same. Yahweh war for them had to result in their utter annihilation lest these fatal consequences for Israel come to pass.

That Yahweh war was to be employed against the Canaanites was not an ad hoc decision that arose on the eve of the Conquest. One must reach far back into the history of God's involvement with these people in order more fully to appreciate why they were singled out. Apart from their appearance in the genealogies, the Canaanites are first mentioned in Noah's curse of Canaan, Ham's youngest son (Gen. 9:25–27). There it is said that Canaan would be the lowliest of servants to his brothers, especially of Shem. The ominous significance of this threat runs as a thread through Israel's early history. When Abraham reached the land of Canaan, he found that "the Canaanites were in the land" (Gen. 12:6; cf. 13:7). This, of course, was from the standpoint of Moses, who was reflecting on the fact that the Canaanites were in the land in his own day but not in the hill country as in patriarchal times (Num. 13:29). Even more ominous is the notation spoken to Abraham that Israel's return to the land of Canaan following the Egyptian sojourn would be delayed for more than four hundred years or until the iniquity of the Amorites was complete (Gen. 15:16). Its being complete suggests that it was beyond remedy and could therefore be dealt with only by destruction.

Long before Moses prohibited marriage with the Canaanites, Abraham had forbidden his son Isaac from doing so (Gen. 24:3). His great-grandson Judah was not above breaking this taboo, however, and took for himself a Canaanite bride, much to his grief (38:2, 26). Much later, Israel encountered Canaanites (Num. 21:1–3) and Amorites (21:10–35) en route to the land of promise. They were able to defeat them and even to occupy Amorite territory in the Transjordan. In pursuit of the lands to the west, Joshua declared that the expulsion of the Canaanites there would testify that the living God was among his people (Josh. 3:10). Then, in fulfillment of the Noachic curse, the Canaanites of Ephraim became menial slaves of Israel, the offspring of Shem (Josh. 16:10; cf. 9:22–27; 17:13). Ever after, it became proverbial to speak of Israel's stubborn rebellion against God as akin to the wickedness of the Amorites, the standard by which to measure godlessness (2 Kings 21:11; Ezra 9:1).



## Israel: The Divine Instrument

Israel's role in the implementation of Yahweh war needs careful attention because *only Israel was authorized to carry it out in Old Testament times*. The reason for this dubious privilege is clear: Israel was the elect people of God, chosen not just to mediate the message of salvation to the world but also to serve as his agent in bringing to pass his will on the earth. At times, notably in the years of the Conquest, this divinely ordained task would require the taking up of arms as the army of God. It is not as though he could not achieve his objectives on his own, for, in fact, more often than not the undertaking and success in Yahweh war is attributed to God himself and not to Israel or any other human agency. But the fact remains that Israel was involved—and only Israel out of all the nations of the earth.

Thus, it follows that Israel would be a special target of opposition by those who were alienated from Israel's God. But since Yahweh wars were mainly, if not exclusively, wars of aggression, Israel would be perceived as aggressors, with all the onus that entails. Quite likely, then, when Israel undertook war against an enemy, there was no inkling that Yahweh was really the protagonist and Israel only a bit player. Only when it was apparent that the outcome could be explained in no other way would Israel's foes realize that they had done battle against Israel's God himself (Ex. 15:14–15; Deut. 2:15; Josh. 2:9, 11, 24; Hab. 3:7). The reaction, then, would be either to fear and submit or to become more stiff and resistant to God's judgment.

The fact that Israel alone was the elect nation charged with such astounding privilege and responsibility means that Israel alone could prosecute Yahweh war as a righteous act. And even Israel could do so only when God gave special mandate and instruction in each case. The mere performance of ritual or use of artifacts, such as the ark of the covenant, could not guarantee success or even qualify the engagement as Yahweh war (see, e.g., Num. 14:39–45; 1 Sam. 4:1–11). If God was not in it, no amount of human strength and strategy could achieve God's objectives. The ramifications of this for the issue of war in general and war conducted under the guise of divine direction in particular are immense. If no case could be made for Yahweh war without Israel's participation in Old Testament times, surely none can be made today whether done in the name of Christ, Allah, or any other authority.

## Yahweh War: The Divine Means

As the omnipotent One, God can accomplish his purposes in any way that pleases him. Usually he uses human instruments, however, a principle much in line with the creation mandate of Genesis 1:26–28. This is the case with the prosecution of Yahweh war, for though God himself initiated, led, and brought success to the effort, Israel was very much a partner. The result brought glory to God but also a recognition among the nations that Israel was a highly favored people (Deut. 4:32–40; 11:24–26; Josh. 2:8–14; 9:9–10, 24). In a more practical sense, the extreme measure of Yahweh war was necessary for at least four reasons: (1) the irremediable hardness of the hearts of its victims; (2) the need to protect Israel against spiritual corruption; (3) the destruction of idolatry; and (4) the education of Israel and the nations as to the character and intentions of the one true God.

**Hardness of heart.** A number of terms are used in the Old Testament to speak of the condition of stubborn resistance to God's will, a state described figuratively as a hardening of the heart. The general result is the inability of individuals in this condition to respond favorably to the overtures of God's grace, leaving them open to nothing but God's awesome judgment. The process begins with one's hardening of oneself and ends with the confirmation of that hardening

by the Lord, who then brings about the only avenue available to him—the destruction of the irredeemable rebel. Only God knows when that kind of hardening has occurred; therefore, only God could decree the imposition of Yahweh war or other retributive measures.

A classic case of such hardening is that of Pharaoh, who, when commanded to release Israel from bondage, refused to do so. God told Moses ahead of time that he would harden Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 4:21; 7:3), a threat that came to pass time after a time (9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8). However, Pharaoh himself invited this hardening by his own willful rejection of God's pleas and warnings to let Israel go (7:13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34). The alternation between Pharaoh's self-hardening and that brought on him by the Lord is not easy to disentangle, but the overall process is clear: Pharaoh, by his own free will, withstood the demands of Israel's God and thereby invoked on himself a spirit of unrepentance that could lead only to judgment.

The Conquest narratives also make plain that a rationale for Yahweh war was a hardening of heart and spirit on the part of God's enemies. King Sihon of Heshbon, for example, refused to let Israel pass through his land, for Yahweh had hardened his heart and made him stubborn in spirit so that he could fall into Israel's hands (Deut. 2:30). That this was not an isolated case is clear from the summary statement of Joshua 11:20, where it is said of the Conquest as a whole that "it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally [*hrm*], exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses." The moral and theological implications of this are profound, but it is most apparent that those subject to Yahweh war were deserving of it, for their condition of rebellion—no matter how it came about—left no alternative.

**Protection of Israel.** An important justification for Yahweh war was the need for God's chosen people to be preserved from the inroads of paganism that would surely insinuate themselves, were Israel to coexist with the Canaanite nations in the land of promise. The prescriptive text (Deut. 7:1–5) underscores the fact that alliance of any kind with the inhabitants of Canaan would result in Israel's falling away from Yahweh into idolatry and thus under his judgment (7:4; cf. 7:25–26; 8:11–20; 28:15–19; 30:15–20). The same point is made in Deuteronomy 20:16–18, where Yahweh enjoins the eradication of the Canaanites lest they teach Israel to emulate their abominable religious practices. This would be "sin against the LORD your God" (20:18). Just as Israel had descended into Egypt to be isolated from Canaanite corruption (Gen. 45:5–8; 50:20), so the Canaanites were to be dispossessed in order for Israel to carry out its responsibility as God's covenant nation.

**Eradication of idolatry.** In line with the preceding purpose for Yahweh war is the removal not only of pagan nations that practiced idolatry but the extermination of idolatry itself. While theoretically heathenism can exist in the abstract, that is, apart from its proponents, in Israel's experience idolatry was linked to peoples and nations with whom she came in contact. This is why its removal was contingent on the destruction of those nations. The Decalogue, in both its renditions, places the prohibition of idolatry immediately after the declaration that only Yahweh is God (Ex. 20:4–6; Deut. 5:8–10). This juxtaposition emphatically underscores the stark distinction between the one and only true God and human representations of false gods. For Israel to acknowledge and worship these imaginary deities would be corrupting (Deut. 4:15–16) and would result in Israel's demise (4:23–28). Therefore, idolatry must be uprooted along with the nations that embrace it and induce Israel to do likewise (7:5, 16, 25; 12:2–3).

**Education of Israel and the nations.** The pedagogical value of Yahweh war is that its display of God's power and wrath on the one hand, and of his grace and glory on the other, would lead both Israel and the nations of the earth to recognize his sovereignty, especially in

connection with and on behalf of his chosen people. God had told Moses that the Exodus would convince Israel that Yahweh is God (Ex. 6:6–7; cf. 7:17; 16:12). Likewise, Pharaoh and the Egyptians would acknowledge this truth in the plagues and in Israel’s subsequent departure (7:5; 14:4, 18). The conquest of Canaan would achieve the same results. Rahab knew that Israel’s God was God of all peoples even before her city, Jericho, fell, for she had heard of his exploits in Egypt and the Transjordan (Josh. 2:9–11). Joshua declared that the Jordan had dried up so that Israel might fear God and the nations might confess his power and preeminence (Josh. 4:23–24).

## YAHWEH WAR AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Space constraints prohibit any discussion of the concept of Yahweh war in postbiblical Jewish literature, though clearly it was a matter of interest. A major Dead Sea scroll text is dedicated to such a theme, the so-called *War Scroll* (1QM), and the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings also address the matter in various places (Jdt. 5:13; Wisd. 10:18; 19:7; Sir. 10:13; 48:21; 1 Macc. 4:9–11; 2 Macc. 5:1–4; 10:24–31; 11:6; 12:15–16; *1 Enoch* 1:9; 56:5–8). The major contribution of such writings is the advancement they make on Old Testament apocalyptic themes and imagery relative to end-time events, most especially the climactic battles that result in God’s ultimate victory over the forces of darkness and evil (see Dan. 2:36–45; 7:23–28; 12:1–4; Zech. 14:1–21).

The New Testament draws from this conceptual and literary environment as well, particularly in its apocalyptic teachings. Discussion here will be limited to Jesus’ Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:3–31; Mark 13:3–27; Luke 21:5–28) and the Apocalypse (Rev. 6:1–8; 12:7–17; 16:12–16; 19:11–21; 20:7–10). In line with the theme of this chapter, the focus will be on Yahweh-war elements, if any, that find roots in the Old Testament. If such exist, to what extent can it be said that Yahweh war has ongoing relevance to eschatological times and, perhaps, even to the present age of the church?

When the disciples asked Jesus about the destruction of Herod’s temple, the sign of his coming, and the consummation of the present age (Matt. 24:3), he launched into a discourse concerning events that must occur before the “end” could come. The fall of the temple in A.D. 70 would be only typical of the traumatic and utter ruin the world could expect at the end of the age. Among the indicators of the end or its nearness are famines and earthquakes (Matt. 24:7; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11), the rise of false prophets (Matt. 24:11; Mark 13:22), signs and wonders such as the darkening of the sun (Matt. 24:24, 29; Mark 13:24; Luke 21:25), the appearance of angels blowing trumpets (Matt. 24:31; Mark 13:27), a tribulation unprecedented in world history (Matt. 24:21; Mark 13:19; Luke 21:23), the abomination that brings desolation (Matt. 24:15; Mark 13:14), and the sign of the “Son of Man” (Matt. 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27).

It is significant that Jesus makes no reference in this lengthy discourse to anything resembling Old Testament Yahweh war, though clearly he describes an age of incredible persecution and distress. Even Luke’s account, which speaks of military conflict, hardly paints it in Yahweh-war terms. One can only conclude from Jesus’ teaching that such war, though common in the Old Testament, has no place in the age of the church—at least, no legitimate place. The same is true of the New Testament letters. There is abundant military imagery, but nearly always the conflict is in the realm of the spiritual (1 Cor. 9:26; 2 Cor. 7:5; 10:3; 1 Tim. 1:18; 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:4; 4:7).

The Apocalypse, however, describes a number of scenes in which Yahweh war reminiscent of that of the Old Testament will be waged - riders go forth on horses symbolic of conquest,

slaughter, famine, and death, and they wreak havoc on the earth (Rev. 6:1–8). These are clearly agents of the Almighty, for it is the Lamb who opens the seals of judgment, allowing this awesome destruction to take place (6:1). The imagery is drawn from the apocalyptic visions of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, who foresaw Yahweh’s dominion over the earth in highly militaristic terms (Zech. 1:7–11; 6:1–8).

The battle scene of Revelation 12:7–17 is even more precise in identifying the combatants. An “enormous red dragon” (12:3), identified later as “the devil, or Satan” (12:9), is intent on destroying the child of a woman about to give birth, but before he can do so, the child is caught up into heaven (12:5). Meanwhile, the woman is sustained in the desert for three and a half years (12:6), following which the archangel Michael and the armies of heaven go to war with Satan. Satan is defeated and cast down to the earth, but he is not yet destroyed, for he begins, unsuccessfully, to persecute the woman and her offspring. This account makes clear that war between the righteous and the wicked on earth—whether on the physical (Old Testament) or spiritual (New Testament) level—is a historical, mundane working out of the cosmic struggle between God and Satan on the cosmic level.

## THE CHRISTIAN AND YAHWEH WAR

The case presented here has been that of moderate discontinuity—that is, the view that Yahweh war as articulated in the Old Testament has no justification in the age of the church except in terms of spiritual conflict. The eschatological texts of the New Testament, however, as well as those of the Old, provide clear evidence for a resumption of Yahweh war in the end times, war to be understood in physical as well as spiritual terms. Yahweh war, then, is descriptive of the ages-old struggle between the sovereign God of Israel and the church on the one hand, and the devil and his demonic and human hosts on the other. Sometimes it is expressed in overt, physical, historical ways and sometimes (in the present age) in figurative and symbolic ways. It is the abuse of or confusion between these dispensational distinctions that has raised many issues in regard to the whole question of the Christian and war. Only some of these issues can receive treatment here, and only briefly.

### War and the New Testament

An overwhelming impression from a careful reading of the Gospels is the advocacy of pacifism. Jesus did not counsel violence, promote it in any way, or condone it when his followers were inclined otherwise. Nevertheless, he never condemned war in any systematic way; in fact, he recognized its inevitability in both human experience and as a means of achieving God’s eschatological purposes (Matt. 22:7; Luke 11:21–22; 14:31–32; 19:27). The same can be said of the apostles, though with a little more ambivalence (1 Cor. 9:7; 14:8; 2 Tim. 2:4; Heb. 7:1). Paul especially recognized the importance of human government in establishing and maintaining public tranquility, and he acknowledged that war sometimes is necessary to the accomplishment of this end (Rom. 13:1–7). He even went so far as to urge submission to government, a submission that surely involved the duty to bear arms and otherwise contribute to the well-being of society (Titus 3:1). Neither Jesus nor the apostles, however, sanctioned or otherwise endorsed what we have called Yahweh war. They clearly understood that in the “age of the Gentiles,” such a resort was inappropriate and uncalled for.

## The Christian and Pacifism

The stance toward war in the history of Christendom has run the gamut from an absolute refusal to bear arms under any circumstances to such militaristic enterprises as the Crusades with their overt claims to divine sanction in the spirit of biblical holy war. Most Christians resist both extremes and find themselves comfortable with the notion of “just war,” or at least war in defense of one’s own country.<sup>45</sup> It is the contention of this paper that the Christian must, in this instance, be guided not by the Old Testament principles and practices of Yahweh war, for they were relevant to the Israelite theocracy only and pertinent primarily to the dispossession and/or annihilation of the Canaanite peoples, who illegally occupied the land of promise. Nor can the believer appeal to eschatological texts, which again, in our view, relate to a regathered Israel—at least initially—and then to the millennial age.

Having said this, we prefer to come down on the side of those who understand the Christian to be a citizen of two realms—the earthly and the heavenly—with their respective privileges and responsibilities. In a fallen world this sometimes means that the believer must take sword in hand in defense of home and country in recognition of the fact that the “[human] authorities that exist have been established by God” (Rom. 13:1). The presumption in all cases must be, of course, that the cause is right and just, for there is for the Christian a higher authority and moral claim: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

## The Christian and Genocide

The term *genocide* (lit., “killing of a people”) has become part of the popular lexicon of the past half-century, primarily because of its application to the systematic slaughter of the Jewish people by German Nazism. Other, less well-known examples include the massacre of millions of Armenians by the Turks, the slaughter by the Russians and Chinese of multitudes of their own people, and the “ethnic cleansing” that has been carried out in the Balkans, central Africa, and other regions of the world. What is seldom acknowledged (or even understood) is that Yahweh war and its use of *herem* was also genocide, by both design and practice.

The issue, then, cannot be whether or not genocide is intrinsically good or evil—its sanction by a holy God settles that question. Rather, the issue has to do with the purpose of genocide, its initiator, and the particular circumstances of its application. We argued here that biblical genocide was part of a Yahweh-war policy enacted for a unique situation, directed against a certain people, and in line with the character of God himself, a policy whose design is beyond human comprehension but one that is not, for that reason, unjust or immoral. Those very limitations preclude any possible justification for modern genocide for any reason.

## THE CHRISTIAN AND JIHAD

The term *holy war* has found fresh currency with the rise of militant Islam and its claims in some quarters that terrorist activities in its name fall under the rubric *jihad*. Though some argue that the Arabic word means nothing more than inner spiritual struggle or the like, scholarly consensus holds that it has also to do with aggressive, militant action in defense of and for the propagation of the Muslim faith. The evidence of the Qur’an itself is conflicting. Some passages advocate a pacifist position in the face of controversy (Sura 15:94–95); others permit defensive war, especially against the citizens of Medina who threatened Muhammad and his Meccan

followers (Sura 22:39–40); still others sanction wars of preemption or aggression (Sura 2:191, 217). Eventually—and in line with the Muslim conquest of the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe—full-scale *jihad* was enjoined as a means of propagating the faith (Sura 2:16; 9:5, 29). These various points of view reflect different periods in the history and development of the Islamic movement.

In light of full biblical teaching, one thing is clear: Whether Christian or Muslim, “holy war” has no justification and for that reason must be condemned. Only a flawed theology that fails to distinguish Yahweh war in its unique setting from any other kind of conflict can possibly defend its continuing, devastating consequences.

Basic to the problem of Yahweh war in the Old Testament, with its corollary application of *herem* or genocide, is the nature of God, for it is he, according to the sacred text, who conceived, instigated, implemented, and benefited from it. But ultimate penetration of that nature is impossible, so one must rest content with the theological construct that God is holy, righteous, and just, but also gracious, merciful, and forgiving. These apparently mutually exclusive traits coexist in the record without resolution. Thus, the moral and ethical dilemma of Yahweh war must also remain without satisfying rational explanation. At the risk of cliché, all that can be said is that if God is all the Bible says he is, all that he does must be good—and that includes his authorization of genocide. One must quickly reaffirm, however, that the genocide sanctioned by scripture was unique to its time, place and circumstances. It is not to be carried over to the age of the church.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Merrill, E. H. (2003). [The Case for Moderate Discontinuity](#). In S. N. Gundry (Ed.), *Show them no mercy* (pp. 61–94). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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## **THEOLOGICAL CONTINUITY**

The Bible teaches that all people have fallen short of God's standards for holiness (Romans 3: 23) and therefore deserve the strictest judgment (Romans 6: 23). Thus, when viewed through this perspective, the Canaanites received only what all peoples deserve. That the entire world has not received this judgment is not a testament to the goodness or civilization of people today, but to the grace of God.

Daniel Grad observes in light of the depravity of man universally, the question then is not, "Why did god destroy the Canaanites?" but "Why hasn't God destroyed the entire human race as He did in the time of Noah? The answer is found in the person of Jesus Christ. His coming to planet earth shows that God's wrath and justice do not exist separately from God's grace and mercy. Christ himself is the bridge between the two Testaments and illuminates the invasion of Canaan in light of the God who is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3: 9 KJV).

However, in response to the criticism that the invasion of Canaan creates a schism between the Old and New Testaments, what God did to the Canaanites in the Old Testament is predicted to occur on a cosmic scale by the New Testament. Daniel 7 illustrates that the idea of God coming to earth as warrior was deeply embedded in the Israelite worldview. When God did come to the earth in the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, He waged war, but it was against spiritual powers and strongholds (Col. 2:13-15). In fact, when his followers did try to fight with physical weapons, Christ told them to put their swords away (Matthew 26:52-54). So often, critics of the Old Testament contrast this picture of a peaceful Jesus who implores His followers to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44) with the "wrathful" God of the Old Testament. However, Jesus during His first coming is only half the picture! When Christ returns to the planet on which He was murdered, He will come as a divine warrior and "the eschatological judgment of *herem* will be spoken." Christ Himself cites the Daniel 7 account in description of His return (Mark 13:26; Rev. 1:7). Revelation 19:11-21 shows the depiction of Christ's final military victory over all his enemies.

In light of this, Tremper Longman comments:

*“The Battle against the Canaanites was simply an earlier phase of the battle that comes to its climax on the cross and its competition at the final judgment. The object of warfare moves from the Canaanites, who are the objects of God’s wrath because of their sin to spiritual powers and principalities, and finally to the utter destruction of all evil, human and spiritual.”*

This battle will end in eternal, unbridled, uninterrupted peace, during which the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6-7) will rule, and kingdom shall be the reign of peace (Isaiah 2:3-4). – *John Smart*

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## THE CASE FOR ESCHATOLOGICAL CONTINUITY

Daniel L. Gard

**Genocide. The systematic slaughter of a group or race of people—or a nation. In 1945, the world reacted with horror as the evidence of Nazi atrocities against Jews, Gypsies, and others mounted. In more recent years, the world watched in real time on network news channels as the horrors of genocide in Rwanda and the Balkans became known. As these slipped from the collective memory of the public, four airplanes were hijacked on September 11, 2001, and three of them successfully crashed into buildings, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives. The hatred within the terrorists and their particular understanding of the Islamic teaching on *jihad* (known to most English-speaking people as “holy war”) again brings genocide to the foreground. In the name of religion, a blow was struck announcing the intention to kill a people (Americans) wherever they might be.**

Against this contemporary background, readers of the Old Testament are confronted with the startling account of genocide by Israel at the command of Yahweh their God. The violence of these scenes is (for the Christian reader) in stark contrast to the image of Jesus as the kind, good, and gentle Shepherd. Instead of these pastoral images, God appears in many Old Testament texts as the divine warrior at whose command nations are destroyed.

This presents a moral dilemma for Christian readers of the Old Testament. How should we read and apply the Old Testament? How could a God of love, known in the pages of the New Testament as the meek and gentle Lamb of God, command such brutal practices? Should a wedge be placed between the Old and New Testaments in order to preserve the integrity of both? Can there be a connection between these ancient accounts of God’s people (Israel) and the image of God as Savior so prevalent in the Gospels?

Few would react as did the second-century theologian Marcion, whose dualism construed the God of the Old Testament to be an inferior God to that of the New Testament. Nevertheless, can the genocide of the Old Testament serve as warrant for the modern genocide of those deemed to be enemies of God?

Some scholars answer these questions by reading the Old Testament accounts of warfare and genocide and rejecting them out of hand as having any valid history. To them, these writings are little more than theological writings of (much) later generations recording the legends and myths of their people. Thus, they are of more use in analyzing the time in which the books were written down than in establishing either history or theology. Evangelical scholars like myself, however, have to deal with these questions because we maintain that these accounts reflect historical events and are not merely the later reflections of Israel. Revelation takes place not only through the written Scripture but also through the acts of God in history. Thus, even in the brutality of ancient warfare, God reveals himself.

As time went on, however, the warfare narratives of the earliest books of the Old Testament did receive a transformation in their theological function. One stage in this development is apparent in 1 and 2 Chronicles, which come so late in the Old Testament canon that they provide a gateway to the intertestamental period and to the New Testament. A trajectory can be developed that leads from the earliest narratives of the Old Testament, to the warfare narratives of Chronicles, to the intertestamental apocalypses, and to the images of the victorious Christ in John’s Revelation. It is this trajectory that enables us to deal with the questions posed above.

My approach is based on several assumptions. (1) For many reasons (including my a priori creedal assertion) I maintain that the Scripture is reliable as a historical text. (2) Old Testament texts, including the genocide texts, must be read in their canonical context of both Old and New Testaments. (3) The events of the Old Testament may serve as types of that which is to come in the New Testament or, at a minimum, provide the imagery used by New Testament authors. (4) The Scriptures speak of things yet to be, including the eschatological hope of Christ's return and the founding of a new heaven and new earth.

It is through an eschatological reading of warfare narratives—including their accounts of divinely mandated genocide—that the images of Old Testament genocide can be seen as types of an eschatological event. I will take several steps to demonstrate this. (1) I will examine the “ban,” or *herem*, as a part of “holy war” during which biblical incidents of genocide occurred. (2) I will then examine five elements illustrating the consistent holy-war tradition in both early and late Old Testament texts as the baseline from which later texts diverge. (3) Next, I will describe a trajectory from the end of the Old Testament through the intertestamental period to the New Testament. (4) Finally, I will describe the continuity between the Old and New Testaments in light of the genocide texts as an eschatological continuity.

## THE CONTEXT OF GENOCIDE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

The twentieth-century German scholar Gerhard von Rad observed a series of thirteen characteristics of “holy war” in various Old Testament texts. Of these characteristics, perhaps the most shocking to modern readers is the twelfth, the practice of the ban or *herem*. This practice amounts to genocide committed by Israel at the command of their God. Further, it was a part of Israel's warfare as literally as any other characteristic.

In its purest form, the *herem* in warfare refers to the devotion of all spoils to Yahweh and the destruction of all life (Josh. 6:17–21; 7:11–15). Inflammable objects were to be burned (Deut. 7:25–26), but noncombustible precious metals were to be taken to the sanctuary treasury (Josh. 6:24). It was forbidden to spare any person alive who was under the *herem*. In some cases, the *herem* was partially eased by the exemption of women and children (Num. 31:7–12, 17–18; Deut. 20:13–14; 21:10–14) and, in particular, the young virgin women (Judg. 21:11–21). A point of tension exists on the issue of cattle; according to Deuteronomy 2:34–35, they could be saved, but 1 Samuel 15:9, 21 demanded their destruction. In the matter of the people of the land, however, there was no equivocation: The Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites were to be utterly destroyed so that nothing that breathed should live (Deut. 20:16–18).

In understanding this practice, it is important to realize that the nation of Israel was not unique here in the ancient Near East. They were following the practices of other nations, which practiced their own equivalent of *herem*. The term itself is used by at least one other nation, Moab, as found in the Moabite Mesha Stela:

Chemosh spoke to me: Go, take Nebo from Israel! Then (15) I went by night and fought ... against it [Nebo] from day-break to noon. And (16) I took it ... and totally destroyed it ...: 7,000 citizens and aliens, male and female (17) together with female slaves; for I had consecrated it to Ashtar-Chemosh for destruction [... *hhrmth*]. Then I took ... thence the (18) vessels of Yahweh and brought them before Chemosh.

A second text from Mesha's campaign has also been seen as an imposition of *herem* against the Israelite population of Ataroth:

I killed all the people from (?) (12) the city as a *ryt* (delight, satisfaction, propitiatory sacrifice?) for Chemosh and for Moab.

The term *ryt*, likely a sacrificial term, implies a consecration to deity; thus, "consecration to destruction during a war of conquest was thought of in ninth-century Moab as a sacrifice to the deity." Terminology such as "a man devotes to Yahweh [*yhrm 'yš lyhwh*]" (Lev. 27:28; cf. Mic. 4:13) and "shall be devoted ... to Yahweh [*hrm ... lyhwh*]" (Josh. 6:17) bear a close resemblance to the usage at Moab.

Still another term, *asakkum*, appears in the cuneiform texts of Mari from the eighteenth century B.C. In these texts the phrase "to eat the *asakkum*" of gods or the king indicates a violation of a decree regarding the spoils of war. At Mari, unlike Israel or Moab, *asakkum* was only temporary, so that booty could be distributed later. Further, *asakkum* did not involve the total destruction of the population of conquered cities. Although the range of meaning of Israel's term *herem* clearly exceeded the semantic range of *asakkum* at Mari, a close connection can be seen between the fate of captured cities/populations and their consecration to deity.

By postexilic times, the verb *hrm* was used with different connotations in the biblical texts. In Ezra 10:8, those who refused to participate in the Jerusalem assembly were subject to *herem*. Here the term refers not to destruction of person or property but to the confiscation of the nonparticipant's property for the temple treasury. However, in the context of warfare narratives in the postexilic era, *hrm* continued to mean the destruction of things devoted to Yahweh.

It is important to remember that the ban or *herem* is only one aspect of ancient "holy war" and must be placed in the context of how Israel understood its warfare in general. Though popularized by Gerhard von Rad, the expression "holy war" is not found in the text of Scripture itself, although the concept is certainly deeply rooted in the biblical tradition. While the specific term has not found universal scholarly acceptance,<sup>12</sup> it remains useful as a technical term for the phenomenon described by von Rad.

Von Rad's work has profoundly affected the way in which many read the Old Testament warfare narratives. He drew a sharp distinction between holy war as a literary theological concept and whatever factual history that might lie behind the relevant narratives. In his thinking, holy war was essentially a political and military institution—part of a sacral-cultic institution in Israel and thus primarily defensive in character. It is this aspect of von Rad's work that formed the primary point of departure for subsequent scholarship.

Two separate schools of thought emerged among those scholars who, since von Rad, have reflected on Israel's warfare. Some scholars, like von Rad, understand holy war as the product of late theological history writing.<sup>15</sup> Other scholars believe that there are older historical events that are reflected in the text. My own study of warfare would certainly place me in the latter camp, although I do not believe that most modern scholarship adequately recognizes the theological, canonical, and historical context of Israel's warfare.

In summary, the biblical text reflects the historical practice of warfare and genocide in the ancient Near East. *Herem* was not uniquely an Israelite practice insofar as others also engaged in the destruction and consecration of their enemies to their gods.

## THE BASELINE: COMMONALITY IN THE EARLY AND LATER OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS

The simplest way to develop the trajectory from the earliest warfare narratives through to the end of the Old Testament, through the intertestamental period, and on into the New Testament is to trace particular themes in which there is a large degree of consistency. Thus, I will draw here a baseline of five themes of the warfare context of genocide from the early Old Testament period to the late Old Testament period: (1) the meaning of defeat; (2) the application of the law of war; (3) holy war as synergism or monergism; (4) the spoils of war; and (5) the holiness of the camp.

### The Meaning of Defeat

What happens when Yahweh wars against his own people? The Hebrew Bible's record of God's activity in war is not limited to those instances where Yahweh fought for or alongside of Israel. Warfare was a mark of divine retribution. When Judah was defeated, images of a "reverse holy war" can be seen.

Biblical literature reflects on the meaning of defeat. Not only did the later prophets speak of its meaning both for Israel and for other nations, but the earlier texts addressed this problem as well. Numbers 14:41–45, for example, explains the defeat at Kadesh Barnea as the result of Yahweh's desertion of Israel:

But Moses said, "Why are you disobeying the LORD's command? This will not succeed! Do not go up, because the LORD is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies, for the Amalekites and Canaanites will face you there. Because you have turned away from the LORD, he will not be with you and you will fall by the sword."

Nevertheless, in their presumption they went up toward the high hill country, though neither Moses nor the ark of the LORD's covenant moved from the camp. Then the Amalekites and Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Hormah.

Likewise, Joshua 7 explains Israel's defeat at Ai as the result of Yahweh's giving Israel into the hands of their enemy, because they did not destroy (*hrm*) the devoted things. And 1 Samuel 4:2–3a explains Israel's defeat by Philistia as the result of Yahweh bringing that defeat:

The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of them on the battlefield. When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines?"

Israel was defeated because their God had decreed and brought about that defeat.

The idea of a god fighting against his own people is also found in nonbiblical texts. Millard Lind cites, as the most comprehensive example, a Sumerian text that seeks to explain why the Guti could defeat the kingdom of Akkad. According to this document, the fourth ruler of Akkad, Naram-Sin, had sacked Nippur, the city of Enlil, and desecrated his temple, Ekur. In revenge for Naram-Sin's actions, Enlil brought the Guti, a barbarous people, upon Akkad. Other gods, eight altogether, forsook Akkad in solidarity with Enlil:

She who had lived there, left the city, Like a maiden forsaking her chamber, Holy Inanna forsook the shrine Agade, Like a warrior hastening to (his) weapon, She went forth against the city in battle (and) combat, She attacked as if it were a foe.

The Chronicler too cites various incidents as divine retribution against Israel, in line with the early biblical accounts and the Sumerian text. Deity is offended at a cultic impropriety, the god fights against his or her people, and a foreign people become the instruments of destruction at the god's command.

But there are also important differences in Chronicles. In the Chronicler's narratives of defeat, the defeat is not postponed to later generations. Rather, it falls on the generation that has offended Yahweh. Most importantly, there remained for Judah a hope for the future; Akkad, by contrast, was destroyed without such hope. Even though Judah was destroyed finally by the Babylonians, that hope for the future was never destroyed.

The Chronicler takes narratives of Yahweh's war against his own people and explicates their theological meaning. Human armies do not determine the result of war. Only the God of Israel does that. History is always in his hands. Time after time, a superior Judah was defeated by an inferior army. Joash, who successfully bought off the Syrian invaders in 2 Kings 12:17–18, was defeated and killed by divine intervention in 2 Chronicles 24:24:

Although the Aramean army had come with only a few men, the LORD delivered into their hands a much larger army. Because Judah had forsaken the LORD, the God of their fathers, judgment was executed on Joash.

The Chronicler's explanation of the defeat of Ahaz by Syria (Aram) and Ahaz's defeat by Assyria, the Edomites, and the Philistines is similar:

Therefore the LORD his God handed him over to the king of Aram. The Arameans defeated him and took many of his people as prisoners and brought them to Damascus. He was also given into the hands of the king of Israel, who inflicted heavy casualties on him. (2 Chron. 28:5)

The LORD had humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had promoted wickedness in Judah and had been most unfaithful to the LORD. (2 Chron. 28:19)

Defeat in warfare is often explained as the result of Yahweh's judgment on the faithlessness of the king and people. Yahweh either sides with his faithful king and people, or he fights against his unfaithful king and people. Saul died in battle, according to the Chronicler, because he was unfaithful to Yahweh:

Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of the LORD. So the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse. (1 Chron. 10:13–14)

Unfaithful Ahaziah, through his alliance with Joram of Israel, was defeated and killed because "God brought about Ahaziah's downfall" (2 Chron. 22:7). The same explanation is given for Manasseh's defeat and captivity at the hands of the king of Assyria:

So the LORD brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. (2 Chron. 33:11)

The Exile itself is explained as occurring because Yahweh directed it: “He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians” (2 Chron. 36:17). This too occurred because the people had been unfaithful.

In each case, the Chronicler explains the defeat of Judah as occurring through the will of Yahweh. Whereas Yahweh elsewhere obtained victory on behalf of his faithful king and people, here Yahweh brought defeat. Enemy armies, regardless of their size compared to Judahite armies, could not win if Yahweh fought for his people. Nor could they lose if Yahweh fought against his people. The kings of the nations and the military machines they commanded were but instruments in the hands of Judah’s God.

But let us note that the people of Israel were never totally destroyed. They were not subject to the complete annihilation of genocide. There always remained a remnant. For Israel, the warfare of Yahweh against his own people was never to destroy utterly, but to chasten and restore. Yahweh never imposed the “ban” or *herem* against Israel in its fullest sense.

### Application of the Law of War

From its founding as a nation, Israel engaged in warfare with its neighbors. The book of Deuteronomy provides a basic starting point from which the wars of Israel can be understood. Deuteronomy 20 (along with 21; 23; 24; and 25) forms the basis for all later interpretation of warfare because these passages contain a series of six topics related to how Israel was to conduct its warfare. Several specific examples of the laws of warfare can illustrate their ongoing significance for Israel into the later Old Testament period of the Chronicler. In Deuteronomy 20:2, for example, a prebattle speech had to be given by a priest. In 2 Chronicles 20:5–7, Jehoshaphat, in his role as a Davidic king, assumed the speech-making role designated for a priest. But the point of the speech was the same: God was with the army and would give victory.

The laws of war in Deuteronomy also anticipate an enemy force much larger than that of Israel. Deuteronomy 20:1 states: “When you go to war against your enemies and see horses and chariots and an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them, because the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you.” Second Chronicles 13:3 describes precisely this situation. Jeroboam’s army of 800,000 marched against Abijah’s comparatively small army of 400,000. The war laws of Deuteronomy 20:4 assured Judah that Yahweh would fight for them against their enemies: “For the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory.” This is echoed in Abijah’s battle with Jeroboam. God defeated the northern kingdom (2 Chron. 13:15); all that was left for the army of Judah to do was pursue the enemy and slaughter them.

Another element of war in Deuteronomy 20:10 makes provision for offering peace terms to a besieged city: “When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace.” Two possible responses are anticipated. The city may accept the peace terms and its inhabitants would then be conscripted as forced labor (20:11). Alternatively, they may refuse the peace offer, in which case Yahweh would give them into Israel’s hand. All the men would be killed, but the women, children, and cattle would be spared and the inanimate booty taken by the Israelites for themselves. In the case of the people of the land, every living thing was to be destroyed (20:12–18). In Abijah’s battle in 2 Chronicles 13, the long speech by Abijah offered peace terms to the northern kingdom: “Men of Israel, do not fight against the LORD, the God of your fathers, for you will not succeed” (2 Chron. 13:12). When the offer of peace was rejected, Abijah and his army killed 500,000 Israelite troops, taking cities and territory from Israel (13:17–19).

This point of comparison is the most significant for our purposes. The imposition of *herem* was not made against Israel. Even in defeat, the rebellious northern tribes were not treated in the same way that foreign enemies were treated. Although 500,000 of the 800,000 northern troops were killed, there yet remained a remnant of 300,000. Yahweh would not forget his covenant with the descendants of Abraham, even if Israel forgot it.

### Holy War As Synergism or Monergism

A third theme of the trajectory focuses on the question of whether Yahweh fights *for* or *with* his people. In other words, is Yahweh's war monergistic or synergistic?

In some cases, Yahweh fought unaided by Israel. In two of the earliest poems of the Hebrew Bible, the victory of Yahweh as sole warrior is celebrated. Both the Song of Miriam (15:21) and the Song of the Sea (15:1–18) exult in Yahweh's victory:

I will sing to the LORD,  
for he is highly exalted.  
The horse and its rider  
he has hurled into the sea.  
The LORD is my strength and my song;  
he has become my salvation.  
He is my God, and I will praise him,  
my father's God, and I will exalt him.  
The LORD is a warrior;  
the LORD is his name. (Ex. 15:1–3)

Throughout the song, there is no hint of human participation in the battle. Yahweh alone did battle. As the poem relates the events of Yahweh's victory, it was the victory of Yahweh the king: "The LORD will reign for ever and ever" (Ex. 15:18). Similarly, in 2 Chronicles 32, Yahweh alone did battle during the invasion of Hezekiah's Judah by Sennacherib. No action was performed in battle by the people; rather, the angel of Yahweh "annihilated all the fighting men and the leaders and officers in the camp of the Assyrian king" (32:21).

Battles in which Yahweh was the sole actor on behalf of his people stand in contrast to other biblical and nonbiblical ancient Near Eastern warfare narratives. In some cases, the god fought unaided, as in the Baal epic and Baal's defeat of Yam. Normally, however, there was a degree of cooperation between human and deity. Illustrative of this are the ninth-century Mesopotamian reliefs of Ashurnasirpal II,<sup>24</sup> shown in battle with the image of Ashur above him and with both king and god drawing bows. In a second relief, both Ashurnasirpal II and the god Ashur are shown in a victory parade with slung bow.

The image of Yahweh fighting in cooperation with his people is a common motif in the Hebrew Bible as well. A poem of about the same age as the Song of the Sea is the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5:1–31). This song, unlike Exodus 15, speaks of a cooperation on the part of the people, who joined Yahweh in battle against the northern Canaanite cities: "When the princes in Israel take the lead, when the people willingly offer themselves—praise the LORD!" (Judg. 5:2). Both Yahweh (5:3–5, 19–21, 28, 31) and the people fought (5:2, 6–18, 22–27, 29–30).

The two motifs of Yahweh fighting alone and Yahweh fighting in conjunction with the people are interwoven in the biblical warfare narratives. In some texts from the postexilic Chronicles, the primary actors are the human actors. Some of these wars were fought against

people without divine assistance, especially wars of aggression by Judah (Azariah, 2 Chron. 22). But in other, more synergistic wars, Yahweh fought for his people while allowing them to participate in the victory (13:16–17).

Closely related to the idea of Yahweh's fighting for his people is the idea of the "fear of the LORD" afflicting the real or potential enemies of Judah. This supernatural element is exemplified in 2 Chronicles 14:14 with the "terror of the LORD" coming upon the cities around Gerar. The Chronicler draws from the old holy-war tradition, in which the "terror of the LORD" came upon the enemy. Normally, this is associated in holy-war ideology with "panic" (*hmm*, *hwm*, or *hrd*<sup>29</sup>) in the enemy camp. While the Chronicler does not use any of these terms in 2 Chronicles 14, he does do so in the historical retrospect on the events in 15:6.

### The Spoils of War

Regarding the spoils of war, Deuteronomy 2:34–35 records the capture of Sihon:

At that time we took all his [Sihon, king of Heshbon] towns and completely destroyed them—men, women and children. We left no survivors. But the livestock and the plunder from the towns we had captured we carried off for ourselves.

Cities and people were destroyed; Israel kept only the animals and the inanimate booty of the cities.

Other ancient Near Eastern people practiced the same. For example, Ashurbanipal took booty from his defeated enemies and presented them to his god: "The people and spoil of Elam, which at the command of Assur, Sin, Shamash, Adad ... I had carried off, the choicest I presented unto my god." The dedication of the spoils of war to the gods represents one strand of warfare tradition in the ancient Near East.

Another strand of warfare tradition is represented in an inscription from the sixth campaign of Sennacherib:

From the booty of the lands which (I had conquered), 30,500 bows, 30,500 arrows, I selected from among them, and added to my royal equipment. From the great spoil of enemy-(captives), I apportioned (men) like sheep to all of my camp, to my governors, and to the people of my (large) cities.

Here, Sennacherib retained the booty of his military victory.

In Chronicles, the taking of booty by the victorious Judahite army is described both in Asa's war in 2 Chronicles 14:13–14 and in Jehoshaphat's war in 20:25. Asa and his army appear to have dedicated part of the booty to Yahweh in response to the postbattle prophecy of Azariah: "At that time they sacrificed to the LORD seven hundred head of cattle and seven thousand sheep and goats from the plunder they had brought back" (15:11). After the battle of Asa, in other words, a part of the spoils was sacrificed to Yahweh. Conversely, the plundering of Judah also occurred when Judah met defeat (e.g., at the hands of Shishak in 12:9–11). The spoils of war were expected to belong to the victor. In other words, the Chronicler describes the spoils of victory in a manner wholly consistent with the traditions of the ancient Near East and earlier biblical material.



## The Holiness of the Camp

Finally, the Chronicler is highly consistent in his adaptation of ancient warfare themes to his postexilic, theological agenda. He transfers the ancient laws of holiness in the camp to the institution of the temple in Jerusalem. In the older traditions, the army was consecrated to Yahweh (Josh. 3:5). Laws of sexual purity were enforced (1 Sam. 21:5; 2 Sam. 11:11–12), vows were made (Num. 21:2; Judg. 11:36; 1 Sam. 14:24), and the camp had to be kept ritually pure (Deut. 23:9–14). In Chronicles, none of these are included in the warfare narratives. Holiness is still required of the people, but it is a cultic purity transferred from the camp to the nation in its relationship to the temple. The outcome of the battle was decided by the ritual condition not of the camp and its members but of the king and nation as they engaged or failed to engage the divinely mandated cult.

We have traced several elements of ancient warfare from the oldest texts to the later texts of Chronicles. In each case the later work of the Chronicler is thoroughly cognizant of and dependent on the earlier texts. The Chronicler continues the ancient themes of the meaning of defeat, the application of the law of war, holy war as either synergistic and monergistic, the spoils of war, and the holiness of the camp. The idea of holy war, including the practice of *herem*, is still understood as taking place on earth in historical battles.

## THE TRAJECTORY: THE ESCHATOLOGY IN CHRONICLES AND BEYOND

Although 1–2 Chronicles continue to develop the theme of warfare, they also advance its concepts in different ways. This two-volume work forms a bridge to what becomes more evident in intertestamental literature and the New Testament, namely, the eschatological. While maintaining a commonality with the past, the Chronicler also finds cosmic significance in the holy-war tradition and introduces a new level of meaning to these accounts. What takes place on earth is, for the Chronicler, directly connected to and reflective of the cosmic and spiritual. It is to this development in and beyond Chronicles that we now turn our attention.

We must first pose an important preliminary question: Does Chronicles have an eschatology? Three basic answers have been given. Some scholars deny that the Chronicler has any eschatological purpose. A mediating position holds that the Chronicler has a genuinely messianic hope, but a hope based on the preexilic dynastic form rather than an eschatological form. On the other end of the spectrum is a reading of Chronicles that finds the work to be eschatologically oriented in its essence.<sup>34</sup>

A variation of this last category is perhaps the most helpful. In this reading of Chronicles, Saul, David, and Solomon respectively represent judgment, restoration, and final redemption. The successors to Solomon then repeat the cycle of the Saul and David epochs. The Chronicler's age and the intertestamental period that followed were a time of anticipation. God, who once slew Saul and then raised up David, had slain the old Judah at the hand of the Babylonians (the Exile). The future now awaits a new Davidic and Solomonic era.

This eschatological reading of Chronicles is further supported by supernatural elements that come to fuller expression in some intertestamental literature. In the war of Asa (2 Chron. 14), for example, the closing of the war narrative introduces a supernatural element not found in the Abijah narrative (2 Chron. 13). One particular phrase is of interest in this regard: "They were crushed before the LORD and his army [*mḥnh*]" (14:13). There is some question as to whether this applies to a heavenly army or to Asa's troops. Elsewhere in Chronicles, the term *mḥnh* refers to a camp (1 Chron. 9:19) or the temple (2 Chron. 31:2), not to an army. In light of 1 Chronicles

12:22, these are probably Asa's troops: "Day after day men came to help David, until he had a great army, like the army [*mḥnh*] of God."

In the case of Asa's warfare, Yahweh had already won the battle without human participation (2 Chron. 14:12). The "mopping-up" action of the army of Asa, designated in 14:13 as the army of Yahweh, follows the battle proper. Just as the Chronicler had identified the kingdom of Judah in the hands of the sons of David as being, in fact, the kingdom of Yahweh (cf. Abijah's speech, 13:8), so he identifies the army of Judah as the army of Yahweh.

During the intertestamental period, the concept of Yahweh's heavenly army continued to develop beyond the image found in 2 Chronicles 14. The book of *1 Enoch*, concerned with angelology and the Day of Judgment, foresees God as coming on Sinai with the mountains shaking and the hills melting like wax. Present with him are his angels: "Behold, he will arrive with ten million of the holy ones in order to execute judgment upon all" (*1 En.* 1:9). The victory of Yahweh in *1 Enoch* resembles that of the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15 in that Yahweh wins the battle without human armies. God fights with his angelic army, a phenomenon already seen in the Chronicler's account of the war of Hezekiah when the angel of Yahweh destroyed the enemy (2 Chron. 32:21). Note that in some nonbiblical texts, however, the war of Yahweh is a synergistic battle of Yahweh and his heavenly army with his human army.

The New Testament apocalypses often portray events similar to that in *1 Enoch*. It is with his angels that the Son of Man will return, coming in the clouds and gathering his elect (Mark 8:38; 13:26; cf. 2 Thess. 1:6–10; Rev. 1:7; 19:11–16). This language is certainly dependent on the images of the heavenly army in the Old Testament and in intertestamental literature. At the very least, the New Testament images of the heavenly army are cognizant of the earlier imagery and ultimately of its roots in early holy-war texts.

Whereas Moses, Joshua, and even the judges led Israel into battle in the older narratives, only the legitimate Davidic king does so in Chronicles. The leader of the final, eschatological war is also a Davidic king; in fact, he is the great and final Son of David. The Chronicler looks back at Saul and David and Solomon and sees a paradigm for the present and future—a paradigm he proclaims in order to instill hope among his suffering countrymen. There is much to be learned from the past. In his history, the Chronicler presents the history of the world, and Israel within that world, not only by citing facts and events but also by identifying the narrative of God in the midst of the world's narrative.

The Chronicler foresaw a new David coming (though that would take over four more centuries). In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the new and final David did come to Israel. Everything was present in him, just as all things were present in the first David. And yet it was hidden within his assumed humanity. All the future of the eschatological kingdom was there—no evil, no pain, no illness, not even death itself could stand in his presence. Yet the new David, like the first, could be and was in fact subjected to vicious attack. David of old fought war after war and yet always emerged victorious. The new David too was attacked—in fact, crucified. Yet like the David of old, the new David could not be defeated. Easter morning brought final victory to the house of David, the house of Judah, the house of Israel—and the house of Adam.

It is within that Davidic epoch that the church lives out its existence. He is declared to be king by his followers despite what his enemies might say of him. The church follows by faith, living in time and space the eschatological reality of the final Son of David:

I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in

unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen. (1 Tim. 6:13–16)

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9–11)

This is the defining reality for the Christian, one that is shared by the supporters of the “first David” as they saw him at Ziklag and, later, by the Chronicler as he looked beyond the humiliation of Persian rule toward a future brightened by the second David.

This present Davidic age is to be succeeded in history by a new Solomonian era. This is the future of the universe, the age of the new temple, fully present in the incarnate Christ and victoriously displayed in the eschaton. The shift from the present Davidic epoch to a future Solomonian epoch is the shift from a lived theology of the cross to a manifested theology of glory. This signals the great and final coronation feast. The feasts that were shared by those who celebrated David’s coronation at Hebron (1 Chron. 12:38–40) and Solomon’s in Jerusalem (29:20–22), for all their joy, are insignificant when compared to the feast that awaits all believers. That eschatological feast brings together all the scattered children of God—not only those of Israel but those separated children of Adam as well (cf. 1 Chron. 1:1). That anticipated eternal feast even now sustains the church on earth.

Both the Chronicler and the intertestamental literature utilize the ancient law of *herem*. In the unique warfare narrative of 2 Chronicles 20, Jehoshaphat faced a “vast army” (20:2) whose size alarmed Jehoshaphat despite his own army of 1,160,000 troops (17:14–18). But before the battle began, “the LORD set ambushes,” and the coalition of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir rose up against each other and annihilated each other (20:22–23). All that was left was for the Judahites to gather the booty in keeping with the law of Deuteronomy 20:13–14. Significantly, it was not the army of Jehoshaphat but God himself who destroyed the enemy.

The imposition of the *herem* ban itself is identifiable in the New Testament’s eschatological texts. Note, for example, the familiar text from 2 Peter 3:7, 10, 13:

By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men....

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare....

But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

Although neither 2 Peter nor any other New Testament text speaks specifically of the *herem* of the Old Testament, the image of the total destruction of the entire earth is a prevalent theme in the eschatology of the New Testament.

The preaching of Jesus himself often pointed toward a kingdom of God that would involve a violent and radical alteration of all creation. In the parable of the weeds, Matthew records these words:

As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matt. 13:40–43)

Jesus further spoke of a separation of the sheep from the goats when the Son of Man comes in his glory. To the goats on his left, he speaks words of ultimate destruction: “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41).

How, then, does the New Testament pick up on these images of God as warrior? The center of the New Testament is the story of Jesus. The reader is introduced to him in the infancy narratives—what could be further from the story of a warrior God? He is seen preaching and teaching, healing, feeding the multitudes, and even dying at the hands of humanity. And yet permeating the New Testament is an entirely different vision of Jesus. In the eschatology of the New Testament, he is seen not as a meek and gentle Savior but as the conquering King.

## CONTINUITY BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS: THE ESCHATOLOGICAL CONNECTION

How, then, does the trajectory I have developed help us to understand the *herem* ban and the continuity of the Testaments? Let me summarize by suggesting that the connection between the earliest holy-war texts with their law of *herem* and the New Testament is an eschatological connection. The God who commanded and, at times, personally executed *herem* against the enemies of Israel is the same God who will execute judgment and destruction at the end of time.

The picture of Jesus as conqueror is not unexpected, given the development of the biblical images of warfare and the destruction of all who oppose the God of Israel. When Israel entered Canaan, other nations occupied the land. They stood in opposition not only to the nation but also to the God who had given the land to Israel. The imposition of the ban or *herem* on these nations was a real and bloody series of events, acted out in space and time. In this regard, Israel exercised the same violent tactics in victory as other nations.

In time, the genocidal destruction of the opposing nations took on new and more cosmic proportions. By the end of the Old Testament period, the Chronicler made tremendous theological use of the old holy-war tradition. Battles involving huge numbers of troops are settled by divine action on the battlefield. The supernatural permeates this theological history. God acts in time and history with and for Israel. Even his angels fight for his people. To oppose the people of God is to oppose God himself and inevitably results in the utter destruction of his enemies.

The apocalyptic literature of the intertestamental period elevates this warfare and *herem* to even greater proportions. Divinely executed genocide is no longer exercised in real time but at the end of time, ushering in a new and glorious era for the people of God. Yahweh, his angels, and his people are the victors; the enemies of God are the vanquished.

The powerful images of intertestamental eschatology form a matrix in which the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the ministry of the apostles took place. According to the New Testament, Jesus the judge will destroy the earth and its rebellious inhabitants and, in so doing, inaugurate his glorious kingdom. Like the ancient holy-war imposition of *herem*, the eschatological

imposition is one of justice and righteousness. Like the later texts, it occurs with cosmic force at the end of time and ushers in a new era.

Such images are not to be understood as paradigms for implementation by any modern nation, however. Uniquely, ancient Israel was at once both “church” and “state.” That is to say, they had a theological identity as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation as well as that of a political entity. The refrain “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (Ex. 6:7; cf. Lev. 26:12; Ps. 95:7; Jer. 11:4) reflects a complex but essential relationship between the Lord and his people.

Israel was a chosen people, called from the nations of the world to bear a unique and special relationship to God. Deuteronomy provides a clear explication of that identity granted in the calling of the patriarch Abraham in Genesis 12: “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Deut. 7:6). From this flowed the salvific work of God in redeeming Israel from Egyptian bondage:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex. 19:4–6a)

This people, though not numerous or powerful, nevertheless bore a unique identity with the Lord who rules all the earth.

Israel had no other identity in the world other than that of the people of God. This was not external to their identity; it constituted their identity. Of no other people does God say, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:2). The Lord was always “your God,” and Israel was always “his people.” The prophet Isaiah, in comforting his people, reminds them that they are the servants of Yahweh, chosen in Jacob, descendants of Abraham (Isa. 41:8).

Israel, along with its theological identity, also had a political identity. King Abijah, facing the rebellious northern tribes of Israel in battle, identified the very throne of Judah as “the kingdom of the LORD, which is in the hands of David’s descendants” (2 Chron. 13:8). Even before the establishment of the Davidic kingship, Israel was a nation with its own political identity, whether in Egypt or in the Promised Land. It is for this reason that the ancient law of war was given before they entered the land that would be their home. Israel would interact with the nations of the world not only in trade but in warfare as well. It would be in constant danger from surrounding peoples, especially the people of the land: the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. These nations were to be utterly destroyed (Deut. 20:16–18), for by doing so the life of the nation in the land would be assured. Israel was not to fear because Yahweh their God would fight for them. To attempt to withstand Israel was to attempt to withstand Yahweh himself.

Such is not the case of the New Testament church, however. She has no identity except as the people of God. The church has no territorial or political boundaries. She does not raise armies or fight battles with weapons ancient or modern. Violence between nations still does occur, of course, and individual members of the church are found in the governments and militaries of many earthly nations. But as to the church herself, her identity is only as a theological entity, whose warfare is spiritual, not fleshly.

Until the eschaton, the church will suffer in this world, especially at the hands of God’s enemies. Yet those who attack the church attack her Lord and, in the end, will meet the same fate

as the ancient enemies of Israel. The great and final *herem* will be imposed not by the church but by the Lord of the church. Thus, vengeance belongs to the Lord.

How does this, then, speak to the ethics of modern warfare and the recurring problem of genocide? No political, geography-bound nation on earth today can claim to be the people of God as ancient Israel once claimed. That distinction of “people of God” belongs only to the church, and the church does not bear arms. No human can impose *herem* on other humans. When Israel imposed the ban, they did so by divine command. In such cases, Israel acted in synergy with their God. In later literature, it is God himself who not only imposed but executed *herem*. In the same way God will impose it again at the end of time not against a particular nation but against all who stand opposed to him and his kingdom.

Only the Lord who gives life can take life. This is not to argue a pacifist position, since God can and does grant to human rulers the sword of justice. But he does not grant a sword of aggression even to kings and princes. With St. Augustine, a long tradition of the Western church has maintained that a Christian can participate in war, but only if it is a just war.

To engage in genocide (apart from divine command of *herem* given to Israel) is simply to commit mass murder. For this reason, modern nations have sought to outlaw such actions. For example, the Geneva Convention attempts to protect the life of noncombatants and civilian populations even in times of intense combat. In an age of nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare (the so-called “weapons of mass destruction”) and devastating “conventional” weapons, such protections have little practical value. In the face of all this, such conventions seem futile. As desperately as some seek to prevent genocide, just as desperately others seek to impose it on their enemies.

These resolutions continue to fail to accomplish their good and lofty goals ultimately not for political and military reasons, but for theological reasons. The world is still in rebellion against God, assuming for itself the prerogatives that belong only to him. Declaring a nation or a people to be worthy of extinction is the right of the Creator alone, not of the creature. To do so is to blaspheme the Divine by the deification of the human. Even if one nation declares itself to be so morally righteous that it may sit in judgment on another nation, in the end God will himself judge that nation in his perfect justice.

At the beginning of this essay I asked: How could a God of love, known in the pages of the New Testament as the meek and gentle Lamb of God, command such brutal practices? Should a wedge be placed between the Old and New Testaments in order to preserve the integrity of both? Can there be a connection between these ancient accounts of God’s people Israel and the image of God as Savior so prevalent in the Gospels?

A first answer to these questions has to do with the very character of God. He is holy, demanding the response of Isaiah: “ ‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty’ ” (Isa. 6:5). God is not merely a reflection of human culture or what the imaginations of the human heart may conjecture he should be like. His holiness is far beyond that of human comprehension, involving not only his ethical purity but also his supreme majesty and absolute transcendence. Before him nothing sinful may stand.

Not only is God holy; he is also just. His justice cannot be analogized by any human system of justice. Moses declared, “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he” (Deut. 32:4). If there is a problem in understanding God’s commands and actions, the problem resides not in him but in human

limitations. His justice is pure and righteous, even when it imposes the destruction of his enemies either in time and history or beyond time and history, that is to say, eschatologically.

A more pertinent question than why God commanded such brutal practices as the extermination of the Canaanites is why he did not command the destruction of the entire human race in time and history. He once did so at the time of Noah, but even then he preserved a remnant in the ark. He used human armies against his own people in “reverse holy war” but always preserved a remnant. The question is truly not one about God’s love but about his justice, once acted out in history as it will be on the last day. He preserved then and will always preserve his people.

The ultimate answer to those questions, however, is found only in the person of Jesus Christ, whom we see in the New Testament to be both Lamb and Judge. The command of God to exterminate an enemy reflects his holiness and justice, but that holiness and justice cannot be understood apart from the same God’s mercy, grace, and long-suffering. Central to the teaching of the New Testament is that collision of holiness and justice with mercy and grace found in the holy, innocent suffering and death of Jesus. In his death he bore the full wrath of God’s justice in the place of the entire human race. Here is the Lamb, the sacrifice for all who are at enmity with God. The world stands condemned under God’s perfect holiness and justice. It was into that mass of condemned humanity that God sent his Son to bring rescue, life, and salvation to all who believe. Thus, the justice of God is transformed by his mercy.

In the eschatological Jesus is found the unity of time and eternity and the unity of both Testaments. It is he who once said, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). He who is the Lamb will be seen again as Judge. All nations will stand before him and receive his righteous judgment. His remnant is preserved for eternity. His enemies are destroyed in his great and final and just *herem*.

In history, as ancient Israel fought her wars, the ultimate victory of God was lived out. It is to that victory that God invites the world through the Lamb. At the end of time the eschatological judgment of *herem* will be spoken. Until then, God’s people will continue to be drawn from every nation, every people, and every tongue. They will not fear, for Yahweh, their God, will fight for them.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gard, D. L. (2003). [The Case for Eschatological Discontinuity](#). In S. N. Gundry (Ed.), *Show them no mercy* (pp. 111–141). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

## THE CASE FOR SPIRITUAL CONTINUITY

Tremper Longman III

**Modern Americans have a difficult time understanding the mindset of an Islamic *mujahaddin* (holy warrior) like Osama bin Laden. His ideas and rhetoric seem so foreign from those of a modern Western democracy that prides itself on its cultural tolerance. However, Christians who know their Bible should understand exactly what motivates his beliefs and actions. Two Old Testament ideas are analogous to the ideology that fuels bin Laden's passionate ideology: sacred space and *herem* warfare.**

**Bin Laden's anger toward the West is triggered at least in part by the presence of Westerners in Saudi Arabia. To most Muslims the sacred precincts are limited to areas connected to the holy places at Mecca and Medina. Bin Laden has expanded this idea of sacred space to include the entirety of the peninsula and thus wants all infidels expelled from Saudi Arabia. The analogy with the Old Testament may be found in the sacred precincts surrounding the tabernacle/temple in the Old Testament. The sanctuary was surrounded by circles of holiness that permitted only certain types of people to be admitted into God's presence. This sentiment continued as long as the Second Temple remained in existence; note how riots were set off when some suspected Paul had brought a Gentile into the court of the temple (Acts 21:27–29).**

The second Old Testament idea reflected in bin Laden's ideology is *herem* warfare. *Herem* may be compared to Islamic *jihad*, both of which have been roughly understood as "holy war." America was shocked when innocent civilians were killed in the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001. However, if we are honest readers of the Old Testament, is this so different from the slaughter of Canaanite men, women, and children prisoners of war that we read about in the book of Joshua?

The comparison raises a number of important issues with which we will deal in this essay. (1) How does *herem* function within the Old Testament? (2) How does the God who ordered *herem* relate to the God of the New Testament who sent his Son, Jesus Christ, not to kill people but rather to die for them? (3) In the light of our answers to the first two questions, how does this relate to the question that is perhaps the most important of all to the Christian: How are we to read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament?

These questions are not simply theoretical; they are of the utmost importance for the practice of the church today. The church often finds itself at odds in terms of values and practice with the broader society. This tension has sometimes been described as a culture war.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, some of evangelical Christianity's leading lights have used martial terminology to describe how the church should engage the world. Some on the radical fringe of Christianity have even taken the next step and lifted up physical arms in order to defend the faith against encroachment.<sup>5</sup> As just one example, we can cite the 1993 shooting of an abortion doctor and his escort by Paul Hill, a defrocked Presbyterian minister. By his own testimony Mr. Hill believed he was doing the Lord's will in this shooting; in this he was supported by a small but vocal number of Christians. It is only too easy to dismiss these people as Christianity's lunatic fringe, but can they legitimately appeal to the *herem* warfare of the Old Testament to justify their beliefs and practices?

On the other side, many Christians have disowned the Old Testament in order to avoid embracing the bloody acts of God that may be found in its pages. They note the tremendous



difference between the God of Joshua on the one hand, and Jesus Christ on the other, who instructed us to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek. However, disregard for the Old Testament is only too convenient, and those who do so ignore the fact that the New Testament builds on the revelation of the Old Testament, both implicitly and explicitly affirming its message. **Furthermore, as we will observe below, the New Testament in the final analysis is equally bloody as the Old Testament. It will not do simply to divorce the Old Testament from the canon and shape the God that we worship in the image of what we think is acceptable.**

## WHAT IS OLD TESTAMENT *HEREM* WARFARE?

The term *herem* is notoriously hard to translate. It may be translated “banned” or “devoted things.” It refers to plundered items and people captured during the course of holy war. *Herem* involves consecration, the giving over of the captives of war to God. Consecration is a word that suggests worship, and once we understand *herem* warfare in its whole context, we can see just how appropriate that understanding is. Thus, we will begin our exploration with a description of *herem* warfare in terms of three phases: what happens before, during, and after warfare. The following synthesis is the result of studying the two holy-war law passages of Deuteronomy (chs. 7 and 20) as well as the many records of battles throughout the Old Testament.

### Overarching Principle: God Is Present with the Army in Battle

As we will see, at the heart of *herem* warfare is the presence of God with the army. Of course, where God is present, he must be worshiped, and thus we will not be surprised to see that *herem* is shaped largely by that fact. Indeed, it is not too strong to say that *herem* warfare is worship. The battlefield is sacred space. To be involved in warfare is a holy activity analogous to going to the temple.

### Before Warfare

**Seeking the will of God.** God did not tell Israel that its enemies were his enemies. Quite the opposite is true, actually. Israel was to be an enemy to God’s enemies. On a practical level, this meant that Israel had to know whether it was God’s will that they go to war against a particular people. As we read the biblical battle accounts, we see that he made his will known to his people in one of two ways.

(1) The first way is illustrated by the battle of Jericho. As Joshua surveyed the future battlefield, he was confronted by a mysterious figure with “a drawn sword in his hand” (Josh. 5:13). This figure, who described himself as the “commander of the army of the LORD,” is clearly Yahweh himself. After all, before what other person would Joshua fall “facedown to the ground in reverence” (Josh. 5:14)? It is at this time that God delivered the battle strategy to Joshua.

(2) The second way of discerning God’s will was to actively seek it in the light of a tense circumstance. In 1 Samuel 23:1–6, David learned that the Philistines threatened the Judahite town of Keilah. Instead of rashly rushing to that city’s defense, he rather “inquired of the LORD” (23:2). Though this story is set in the period when David was not yet king, he did have a priest in

attendance (23:6), who would have used oracular means to find out what God wanted in this situation.

The importance of discovering God's will in the face of a potential enemy is underlined by the story in Joshua 9. Here a group of Gibeonites deceived Joshua into thinking they had come from a far country, though in reality they were from just down the road. As we will explain later, Deuteronomy 20 makes a distinction between how nations in the Promised Land were to be treated compared to those outside. Joshua made a rash decision that would come back to haunt Israel because "they did not inquire of the LORD" (Josh. 9:14).

**Spiritual preparedness.** When Israelites entered the sanctuary, they had to be spiritually prepared. In other words, they had to observe the purity laws of the Pentateuch. The same was true of the battlefield. Two stories illustrate the necessity of spiritual preparedness before engaging in *herem* warfare.

When the Israelites emerged from their forty years of desert wandering, the second generation, born during the journey, had not, for unstated reasons, practiced circumcision. Thus, before engaging in *herem* warfare in Canaan, the Israelite males were mass circumcised and, afterward, celebrated Passover (Josh. 5:2–12). This ceremony took place on the Jericho side of the Jordan within easy range of their enemies. Needless to say, it was dangerous to perform this operation on Israel's fighting men at this time. One need only remember what happened during Jacob's lifetime in the city of Shechem (Gen. 34). The implicit assumption of the passage in Joshua is that whatever the dangers from the nearby human enemies, it was far more horrific to imagine going into battle uncircumcised.

The other passage that illustrates our point comes from the time of David (2 Sam. 11). The passage begins with a not-so-subtle critique of David's staying home in Jerusalem in the spring "when kings go off to war" (2 Sam. 11:1). Soon, David got himself in trouble as a result of his apparent lack of activity. After a nap, he was strolling on the roof of his palace when he looked down and saw the naked Bathsheba taking a bath. Though fully aware that she was the wife of another man, he took her into his bed, and she became pregnant. Wishing to cover up his sin, David called her husband, Uriah the Hittite, back from the front lines on a pretense with the hope that he would sleep with her and believe the future birth was his child. David's scheme was frustrated by the fact that Uriah refused to sleep with his wife but chose to bed down that night "at the entrance to the palace with all his master's servants" (11:9).

What is of interest to us in our pursuit of an understanding of *herem* warfare is the response he gave the next day to David's bafflement at his actions: "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open fields. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!" (11:11). In spite of David's continued efforts, Uriah resolutely refused to sleep with his wife.

The reason for this refusal is much deeper than typical warrior's bravado. "How can I enjoy myself when my comrades are miserable on the field?" If there was some of this in his refusal, that was not the underlying reason. Uriah's motivation may be found in Leviticus 15:11–18, which states that an emission of semen rendered a man unclean. If Uriah had had intercourse, he would have been temporarily unclean and thus not "battle ready." The striking contrast in 2 Samuel 11 pits David, the king after God's own heart, who here committed adultery and conspired to murder, against Uriah, a non-Israelite (Hittite) mercenary, who observed the fine points of the cultic code.

**Sacrifice.** The accounts of the ancient wars of Israel are selective. Not every action is recorded for every battle. We read about sacrifices before warfare on that occasion when it proved to be controversial. The following story, then, illustrates the practice of offering sacrifices before *herem* warfare, but elsewhere it was not reported because it happened without special incident.

In this case, Saul was the war leader, and his battle was against Israel's perennial enemy of the time, the Philistines (1 Sam. 13). In Saul's estimation, time was slipping away. The present was the optimal moment for the battle, and the issue was compounded by the desertion of troops who were waiting for the battle to commence. However, Saul well knew that sacrifices had to be offered before the conflict could begin, and the unstated assumption of the chapter is that only a priest like Samuel could legitimately offer sacrifices. But where was Samuel? He was supposed to be there already, but he was nowhere to be found. As a result, Saul finally gave in to his concerns and offered the sacrifices himself. When Samuel finally did arrive, he reviled Saul for his presumptuous act that demonstrated his lack of confidence in God the warrior, announcing that Saul's kingdom would "not endure" (13:14).

These prebattle sacrifices were motivated by the fact that the army would fight in the presence of God. Our next topic will make this fact more concrete.

**The presence of the ark.** Typical of early battle narratives is the role of the ark in the battle of Jericho (Josh. 6). God gave Joshua the instructions for how to wage the battle (5:2–5); central to the plan was the march around the city. For six days, the Israelites were to march around the city, and on the climactic seventh day they were to march around the city seven times. At the head of the army was the ark.

The ark was the mobile symbol of God's spiritual presence. The tabernacle, of course, was associated with God's presence, and its importance was due in large measure to the fact that it was the repository for the stationary ark. The most usual reason for the ark to depart the sanctuary was to accompany the army into battle and to serve as a sign of God's presence on the battlefield.

Described in Exodus 25:10–22, the ark was constructed from a rather simple design. It was a relatively small box, three and three-quarters feet long, two and a quarter feet wide, and two and a quarter feet high. It also had rings attached to the sides, through which poles were slid for carrying it. The importance of the ark in the battles of Israel may already be seen during the desert wanderings soon after its construction. These wanderings were, in essence, a long march into battle. We recognize this when we remember the language Moses used at the onset of a day's march. He would announce:

Rise up, O LORD!  
May your enemies be scattered;  
may your foes flee before you. (Num. 10:35)

The presence of the ark represented God's participation in the battle. The only proper response when one is with God is worship. The Israelite soldier had to be spiritually prepared and offer sacrifices to God before the battle could begin.

May the praise of God be in their mouths  
and a double-edged sword in their hands,  
to inflict vengeance on the nations  
and punishment on the peoples. (Ps. 149:6–7)

## During the Battle

**The march.** With the presence of the ark we can see how the march into battle is a religious procession. Above we commented on how the ark led the Israelites through the desert and began the daily journey with a call for the divine warrior to rise up and scatter the enemies. A close reading of Numbers 2 indicates that when Israel camped during the march, the arrangement of the tribes resembled an ancient Near Eastern war camp. God, the warring king, had his tent in the middle, surrounded by his most devoted warriors, the Levites. The rest of the tribes (army) were situated on all sides of the tent but beyond the Levites.

The religious nature of the march may also be observed in the role that the priests played. The priests, of course, carried the ark and thus were in the vanguard of the seven-day march around the city of Jericho. Later in Israelite history, in the context of Jehoshaphat's battles against the Moabites and Ammonites, we read a moving description of the final preparations and the march, which involved the Levites:

Jehoshaphat bowed with his face to the ground, and all the people of Judah and Jerusalem fell down in worship before the LORD. Then some Levites from the Kohathites and Korahites stood up and praised the LORD, the God of Israel, with very loud voice.

Early in the morning they left for the Desert of Tekoa. As they set out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Listen to me, Judah and people of Jerusalem! Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful." After consulting the people, Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying:

"Give thanks to the LORD,  
for his love endures forever."

As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes.... (2 Chron. 20:18–22)

Prayer, religious song, and celebration all accompanied the waging of war in ancient Israel. Why? Because *herem* warfare was worship.

**Warfare strategy.** Perhaps the most interesting part of *herem* warfare has to do with warfare strategy. There is no simple formula to describe the war, and each battle recorded in the Old Testament has its unique characteristics. However, one common denominator runs through each successful battle: The victory is clearly the consequence of God's involvement in the battle. Human participation matters but is never determinative of the outcome. The people of God must fight, but great care is taken not to enter a battle with a superior force or with sophisticated weapons. Examples will help make this point.

During the period of the judges, God commissioned Gideon to rid the land of the Midianites, who had come to oppress at least a part of the land of Israel (Judg. 6–8). As Gideon prepared to meet the Midianites in battle from their camp near the spring of Harod, the Lord confronted him with a problem. He had too many warriors! Gideon then issued a command to relieve from duty those who were afraid. Twenty-two thousand went home, but still ten thousand remained. God then instructed Gideon to take those who remained down to the water to drink. Those who lapped with their hands to their mouths, three hundred men, were told to stay and fight the Midianites. Thus, the army was whittled down from thirty-two thousand to three hundred. Why go to such efforts not to enter a battle with too many soldiers? God himself provided the

motivation: “in order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her” (7:2).

The same may be seen in what may be called an individual *herem* war in the conflict between David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17). The context of the battle is Israel’s conflict with the Philistines during the reign of King Saul. At this time, David was young, not even in the army, and was present at the battlefield only to bring provisions to his older brothers. The emphasis in the narrative is on David’s youth and inexperience. While he was visiting the camp, the Philistines issued a challenge to Israel. They had a champion of unusual abilities and dimensions as well as great war experience in Goliath. Goliath kept challenging Israel to provide a champion of its own, but no one in the army had the courage to volunteer.

Finally, David passionately stepped forward to take on the arrogant infidel who defied “the armies of the living God” (1 Sam. 17:26). He entered the battle with no armor and only a simple slingshot. The contrast could not be more dramatic: a vulnerable and inexperienced youth versus a well-armored, experienced mercenary. David, however, was the easy victor in this well-known confrontation, and in his challenge to Goliath he expressed the heart of *herem* warfare:

David said to the Philistine, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.” (1 Sam. 17:45–47)

David fully understood that his victory was really God’s victory. Nonetheless, we should take careful note of the fact that David had to act. He had to face Goliath and throw the stone that stunned him. He then had to take the sword and cut off the giant’s head. Certainly God did not need him to do this since he was perfectly capable of destroying Goliath without David’s involvement at all.

### After the Battle

**The march back.** Of course, once the battle was completed, the army with the ark made the journey back to the sanctuary. This is likely the situation that is behind the liturgy in Psalm 24. After an assertion of God’s sovereignty over his creation (24:1–2), verses 3–6 describe the type of person who may enter the sacred precincts. This may imply that someone or some group is seeking access to the sanctuary, and from verses 7–10 we suggest that it is the army that is in mind as they return to Jerusalem to place the ark back in the Most Holy Place.

Thus, we understand the conversation that takes place in 24:7–10 to be that between a Levitical gatekeeper and the priests who carry the ark at the head of the army. The first to speak are the latter, who demand access through the city gates:

Lift up your heads, O you gates;  
be lifted up, you ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in. (Ps. 24:7)

The only possible way of understanding how God can be envisioned entering the gate of the city would be as represented by the ark. In any case, this request is followed by a response from the gatekeeper:

Who is this King of glory? (Ps. 24:8a)

Now, of course, the priests knew full well who the King of glory was. But the question allowed for the descriptive praise of God the warrior. Again, the priests leading the army speak:

The LORD strong and mighty,  
the LORD mighty in battle.  
Lift up your heads, O you gates;  
lift them up, you ancient doors,  
that the King of glory may come in. (Ps. 24:8b–9)

This allows for an emphatic restatement of the question and answer:

Who is he, this King of glory?  
The LORD Almighty—  
he is the King of glory. (Ps. 24:10)

**The celebration.** Music played a key role in connection with *herem* warfare. We have seen how Jehoshaphat's army marched into battle singing hymns and how Psalm 24 was sung upon the return to the sacred precincts. Indeed, elsewhere I have shown how many psalms find their original setting before (Ps. 7), during (Ps. 91), and after (Ps. 24; 98) the waging of *herem* warfare.

In terms of the last category, it is clearly the norm that hymns were sung in celebration of victory. After all, God had won the battle, so he deserved the praise. Many of the great early poems of Israel were victory hymns for specific battles. Perhaps most remarkable is the Song of the Sea, sung on the occasion of the defeat of Egypt at the Re(e)d Sea. This is likely the earliest explicit mention of God as warrior:

I will sing to the LORD,  
for he is highly exalted.  
The horse and its rider  
he has hurled into the sea.  
The LORD is my strength and my song;  
he has become my salvation.  
He is my God, and I will praise him,  
my father's God, and I will exalt him.  
The LORD is a warrior;  
the LORD is his name.  
Pharaoh's chariots and his army  
he has hurled into the sea. (Ex. 15:1–4b)

Another memorable occasion when music broke out as a result of victorious holy war was after Jephthah's victory against the Ammonites. In this case, however, the story comes to a sad end. It was Jephthah's daughter who first came out of the house "dancing to the sound of

tambourines” (Judg. 11:34); in fulfillment of a vow, her father had to reluctantly dedicate her as a “whole-burnt sacrifice” (Heb. *olah*) to the Lord.

**The *herem*.** We have been using *herem* as a term to describe the waging of war in Israel, in essence as a synonym for holy war or Yahweh war. In actuality, *herem* refers to the climactic aspect of divine warfare: the offering of the conquered people and their possessions to the Lord.

(1) We must point out once again that *herem* indicates that warfare is worship in the Old Testament. God won the victory, so he was due the spoils. The biblical account is not strictly consistent on this account, but what this typically meant for the plunder is that it was turned over to the priestly establishment for their use or distribution. In terms of the prisoners of war and the captured citizens of an enemy town, it meant only one thing: death. The principle behind the latter practice appears to be that because they were unclean, these ungodly people brought into the presence of God had to be destroyed.

(2) Deuteronomy 20:10–18 makes a clear distinction between battles fought outside the Promised Land and those waged “in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.” The full text describing the fate of the latter group is instructive. After saying that the cities outside of the Promised Land could be given the opportunity to surrender and thus be subject to servitude, God commanded that Israel

not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God. (Deut. 20:16–18)

The two opening battle accounts of the Conquest illustrate the importance of keeping *herem*. After the battle of Jericho and after separating Rahab from the group, “they devoted [*hrm*] the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys” (Josh. 6:21). Thus ended the most powerful city within Palestine at the time.

The next battle was against puny Ai, whose very name means “ruin.” Even so, as a force of Israelites moved against Ai, they were repulsed. Joshua was shaken to the core by this turn of events. Inquiring of the Lord, he discovered that someone had not observed *herem* after Jericho. Through divine guidance, they discovered that Achan had stolen some of the plunder and did not turn it over to the Lord. Once the sin was dealt with, the Israelites returned to Ai, and this time the conflict came to a successful conclusion.

Jericho and Ai thus serve as a didactic statement and warning about the importance of keeping *herem*. Obedience brings victory against the toughest opponents, while disobedience means defeat even against the weakest.

In conclusion, we must point out that the Bible does not understand the destruction of the men, women, and children of these cities as a slaughter of innocents. Not even the children are considered innocent. They are all part of an inherently wicked culture that, if allowed to live, would morally and theologically pollute the people of Israel. The passage in Joshua 6 quoted above was prefaced by the motivation to avoid their own destruction. Indeed, from the perspective of the Bible, God had practiced great patience with the people who lived in Palestine. The reason why the descendants of Abraham had to wait so long before entering the Promised Land was because “the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen. 15:16).

## HOW DOES THE GOD WHO ORDERED *HEREM* RELATE TO THE GOD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT?

Many people would pit the above picture of a violent God who destroys his enemies against the New Testament understanding of God as a God of love who sends his Son to the cross to die for evil people. To be sure, Jesus even tells his disciples (and through them the church) to “put your sword back in its place” (Matt. 26:52). However, quoting from the book of Revelation immediately belies such a simplistic view of the Bible. No more fearful picture of a vengeful, violent God may be found than that described in Revelation 20:11–15:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

**How does the Old Testament relate to the New Testament? We find it helpful to answer this question by describing what might be called five phases of holy war in the Bible.**

### Phase 1: God Fights the Flesh-and-Blood Enemies of Israel

We do not have to dwell long on this phase, because this is the type of *herem* warfare that we have been describing in the earlier part of this chapter. The list of battles is long, and we have already cited parts of a number of them, but here we would include Jericho, the wars against the southern coalition of Canaanite kings, and the wars against the northern coalition. God fought on behalf of many of the judges as well as faithful kings such as David and Jehoshaphat. Indeed, at times God even used foreign nations to fight against Israel’s enemies in a way that helped his people. In the latter instance, we think of the prophet Nahum, who announced the appearance of the divine warrior who would fight (in this case through the Babylonians) against Israel’s long-time oppressor, Assyria.

### Phase 2: God Fights Israel

It would be wrong to say that “God was on Israel’s side” pure and simple. Israel’s election was not a *carte blanche* to wage war against anyone at any time. It should be clear by now that God used Israel as an instrument of his judgment against evil, oppressive nations. This raises the question of what would happen when the nation of Israel itself turned against God and committed evil acts.

The answer to this question may be found in the form of the covenant itself, and here we see the connection between covenant theology and *herem* warfare. As has been well established, the covenant is a legal-political metaphor of God’s relationship with his people. The great king Yahweh makes a treaty with his vassal people, Israel. In this arrangement, Yahweh promises to be their God and protect them, and Israel promises to be his people and obey the law he has



given them. In the covenant treaty, the law is backed up by sanctions: Blessings flow from obedience and curses for disobedience. The book of Deuteronomy, a covenant renewal of the relationship established at Sinai, is particularly expansive with its blessings and curses. Many of them have to do with military success and failure. Illustrative is the following pair, the first contingent on obedience and the second the result of disobedience:

The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven. (Deut. 28:7)

The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will come at them from one direction but flee from them in seven, and you will become a thing of horror to all the kingdoms on earth. (Deut. 28:25)

The history of Israel has many examples of the outworking of these covenant curses. We have already observed one in the discussion of postbattle *herem*, namely, Ai. A second example surrounds the defeat of the Israelites at the hands of the Philistines at the end of the reign of Eli (1 Sam. 4–6). The text describes Eli as good-hearted but incompetent. He was particularly incompetent as a father, and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were evil men, who were also in charge of Israel's army.

In an initial encounter with the Philistines, the Israelites were soundly defeated, losing about four thousand men. Hophni and Phinehas then realized that their mistake was in forgetting to bring the ark onto the battlefield. From their actions as well as the consequences, it appears that this realization came about not because of any deeply held faith in God but rather from the misconception that the ark was like a magical box by which God's presence and power could be manipulated.

The two brothers then sent for the ark, which arrived in the war camp before the second confrontation with the Philistines. God's reputation as a warrior apparently preceded this act, because the Philistines were visibly shaken by the news that the ark was now in the possession of the Israelite army. Nonetheless, they gathered their courage and engaged the Israelites. The Israelites were soundly defeated, Hophni and Phinehas were killed, and perhaps most terrible of all, the ark was captured and taken by the Philistines.

That God was able but unwilling to save the Israelites on that day becomes clear in the aftermath of the battle. The Philistines followed typical ancient Near Eastern custom and moved the captured ark into the temple of their chief god, Dagon. This act demonstrated their acknowledgment that Yahweh was a god, but one who was inferior to their god. The next day, however, events belied this belief when they discovered the statue of Dagon flat on its face before the ark, as if in worship. After they hoisted the statue to an upright position, the same thing happened the next day. Finally, they got the message. The Israelites were defeated not because of God's inability but because he had determined to defeat the Israelites as judgment for their sin.

Our next example is a climactic moment in the history of Israel, namely, the Babylonian defeat of Jerusalem followed by the Exile. Though only a small portion of the Old Testament actually narrates the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile, close analysis reveals that a number of books offer a theological rationale for it. Many scholars, for instance, are convinced that the final redaction of Samuel—Kings, if not also Joshua and Judges, took place during the Exile and provided a rationale for these horrific events. These books helped answer the question why the people of God were defeated and sent into exile. It was not because Babylon was a stronger

nation but because God used this pagan nation, unwitting to be sure, as an instrument of his judgment.

The first few verses of Daniel are a case in point (Dan. 1:1–3). The events of these verses purport to have taken place in 605 B.C. and thus would be the first time that Nebuchadnezzar exerted pressure against Judah. He was successful in reducing them to a form of vassal status, indicated by taking hostage sacred objects from the temple and a token of the youth of the noble class. However, these verses give a deeper meaning to the events than would have been recognizable on the surface. It is not that Nebuchadnezzar was so powerful but rather because God gave Jehoiakim into his hand.

The one book that reflects on the destruction of Jerusalem from a theological and emotional perspective is the book of Lamentations. This book is filled with talk of the divine warrior, but in this case the warrior was not protecting his people—he appeared as their enemy:

The Lord is like an enemy;  
he has swallowed up Israel.  
He has swallowed up all her palaces  
and destroyed her strongholds.  
He has multiplied mourning and lamentation  
for the Daughter of Judah. (Lam. 2:5)

Thus, from these accounts it is clear that God was not for Israel without question but would come as a warrior against his people when they disobeyed. The Exile was a dramatic expression of this second phase. However, it was not definitive. Indeed, it is not even the last statement of *herem* warfare in the Old Testament.

### Phase 3: God Will Come in the Future As Warrior

God did not allow his people to come to an end in the Exile. Though probably connected to the exile of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C., the following oracle of Hosea expresses God's unwillingness to completely give up on his people:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, Israel?  
How can I treat you like Admah?  
How can I make you like Zeboiim?  
My heart is changed within me;  
all my compassion is aroused.  
I will not carry out my fierce anger,  
nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim.  
For I am God, and not man—  
the Holy One among you.  
I will not come in wrath. (Hos. 11:8–9)

In the light of this we may not be surprised to discover that one of the dominant themes of the postexilic prophets was the future appearance of the divine warrior, who would free his people from their present oppressors.

Daniel 7 is a good example. This chapter may be divided into two parts: Daniel's vision (7:1–14) and the angelic interpretation of that vision (7:15–28). In this retelling of the vision, we

will combine the two. The vision itself may be divided into two parts by virtue of the setting. The first part is set on the earth, specifically at the coastline of a turbulent sea. By the time of Daniel, the sea was a well-established symbol for those forces ranged against God and his created order. This symbolic value for the sea goes back to ancient Near Eastern myths, such as the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* and the Ugaritic Baal myth. In other words, the very setting of the vision elicits horror.

Out of this chaotic sea come four beasts. The first is a hybrid animal: part eagle, part lion, part human. The very fact that this is an animal of mixed essence would also have made the Israelite reader uneasy; it was an offense to creation order. The following beasts are of similar threatening appearance. The fourth is beyond description, with only its metallic teeth and destroying claws being described. From this fourth beast come ten horns, and Daniel's description ultimately focuses on one boastful horn. This part of the vision describes those evil human kingdoms that oppress God's people.

In verses 9–14, the scene shifts. We are now in the divine throne room, and God is the Ancient of Days, who sits to render judgment on these beasts. Into his presence comes a humanlike figure riding a cloud. Like the sea, cloud-riding is also a well-established symbol, in this case for the warrior God. We can only speculate how Daniel's original audience understood how God could appear before God (see below for the use of this passage in the New Testament). In any case, this figure, along with the saints of the Most High, destroys the beasts' grip on God's people.

This is the note on which the Old Testament closes. It is a hopeful message: One day God will come again and free them from their oppression.

#### Phase 4: Jesus Christ Fights the Spiritual Powers and Authorities

The first voice we hear in the New Testament is that of John the Baptist, sounding remarkably like the Old Testament prophets of phase 3:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matt. 3:7–10; see also vv. 11–12)

John expects that the one coming after him will fill the role of the violent warrior who will rid the land of its oppressors. Imagine his shock later when the one he does recognize through baptism preaches the good news, heals the sick, and exorcises demons. As a matter of fact, we have a record of his reaction in Matthew 11:1–19. John is now in prison and hears reports about Jesus' ministry. His doubts lead him to send two of his disciples to Jesus to ask the skeptical question: "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (11:2).

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Matt. 11:4–6)

Through his actions, Jesus informs John that he has in fact chosen the right person. However, Jesus is also subtly changing—indeed, enriching—John's understanding of his mission. In a

nutshell, Jesus is the divine warrior, but he has intensified and heightened the battle. No longer is the battle a physical battle against flesh-and-blood enemies, but rather it is directed toward the spiritual powers and authorities. Furthermore, this battle is fought with nonphysical weapons.

The exorcisms of the New Testament are a case in point. Here we see the violent nature of the conflict. Matthew 8:28–34 (see also Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–39) narrates the story of Jesus’ ordering the demons in two demon-possessed men to enter into pigs, which then throw themselves into a lake and are destroyed.

The climax of phase 4 is violent but in an ironic way. Paul looks back on the crucifixion and pronounces it a military victory over the demonic realm:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Col. 2:13–15)

Jesus’ ascension into heaven is also described in military language, indeed by the citation of a holy-war hymn from the Old Testament, Psalm 68:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high,  
he led captives in his train  
and gave gifts to men.” (Eph. 4:8)

Jesus defeated the powers and authorities, not by killing but by dying!

Indeed, the transition from the old way of physical warfare to the new era of spiritual warfare was dramatically illustrated by the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane. As Jesus was being arrested, Peter, always impetuous, grabbed a sword and chopped off the ear of the high priest’s servant (Matt. 26:47–56; Mark 14:43–52; Luke 22:47–53; John 18:1–11). Jesus then declared:

Put your sword back in its place ... for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way? (Matt. 26:52–54)

When Jesus told Peter to put away the sword, he was telling the church that would follow that physical violence could not be used to further his cause. The object of Christ’s warfare is spiritual, not physical, and the weapons used are spiritual, not physical (see comments below on Eph. 6).

## Phase 5: The Final Battle

Does this mean that John the Baptist was wrong? As it turns out, he was not, but like a typical prophet, he did not have a clear sense of how his prophecy would work out (1 Peter 1:10–12). According to the fuller revelation of the New Testament, Jesus’ first coming was not the end of the story. He will come again, as warrior. Jesus himself cites Daniel 7:13 (Mark 13:26; Rev. 1:7) and describes his future return riding on the clouds. In our examination of Daniel 7 above,

we indicated that the cloud is the divine war-chariot. When Jesus returns again, he will complete the victory assured by his death on the cross. Of the many passages in the apocalyptic portions of the New Testament that could be chosen as an example, Revelation 19:11–21 is among the most graphic:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

#### KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS

And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, “Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.”

Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

We quote this passage at length to communicate the violence associated with the Second Coming. In essence, we are reading a highly symbolic description of the final judgment. This terrifying conclusion to history is, in actuality, good news to the oppressed people of God to whom the book of Revelation is addressed.

The passage is clear in terms of showing the violent nature of the return of Jesus, the warrior. However, we would like to make two additional points. (1) This description of Jesus is built in large out of passages from Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Isaiah, passages that describe Yahweh as the divine warrior. (2) The description of Jesus here contrasts with the enemy, the unholy warrior known as the beast in Revelation 13:1–10.

### FROM THE CANAANITES TO SATAN HIMSELF: CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN *HEREM* WARFARE

With a background on Old Testament *herem* warfare and a survey of its practice from the Old Testament into the New, we are well prepared to explore the question of the relationship between the Testaments. First, however, we must make some *general* comments about the relationship between the Testaments.

It appears obvious that there is continuity between Old and New Testaments. Jesus twice gives what is essentially a lesson in hermeneutics when, after his resurrection, he appears to two

different groups of disciples. (1) He speaks to two disciples who have yet to recognize their resurrected Lord:

“How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

“All the Scriptures,” “Moses and all the Prophets”—by which is meant the entire Old Testament—anticipate the coming suffering and glorification of Christ.

(2) This same theme is underlined when Jesus soon speaks to a broader group of disciples and declares: “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” (Luke 24:44)

No wonder so much of the New Testament looks back and cites the Old Testament. Augustine was surely correct when he famously said: “The New is in the Old Testament concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.”

As we go back to the Old Testament, we must admit that the way Jesus fulfills the Old Testament is not always obvious. Of course, there is enough that was clear that people like John the Baptist had messianic expectations, but as we have already seen in reference to John, he was surprised by the form that the fulfillment took.

I have found helpful an analogy with a detective novel. A detective novel is filled with hints and clues pointing to the one who committed the crime. In a well-written example of this genre, however, readers will not be sure who the culprit is until it is revealed by the expert sleuth at the end. However, if one were to go back to read the beginning again, it would be with a fuller understanding. All the clues and hints would make more sense in the light of the knowledge of the end. One could never read the beginning of the story quite the same, and this holds true for the Christian reader of the Old Testament, who now knows the surprising end of the story.

The surprise element of the fulfillment also imparts a sense of discontinuity as well as continuity. In some cases, the fulfillment radically changes the practice of God’s people. When Jesus offered himself as a once-and-for-all sacrifice on the cross, it does not mean that sacrifice is no longer a crucial theological category, but it does mean that Christians no longer offer animal sacrifices.

I argue that there is both continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments on the issue of *herem* warfare. The God of the Old Testament is not a different God from the God we encounter in the New Testament. Nor did God change his mind. The war against the Canaanites was simply an earlier phase of the battle that comes to its climax on the cross and its completion at the final judgment. The object of warfare moves from the Canaanites, who are the object of God’s wrath for their sin, to the spiritual powers and principalities, and then finally to the utter destruction of all evil, human and spiritual.

Indeed, it must be said that those who have moral difficulties with the genocide in the conquest of Canaan should have even more serious difficulties with the final judgment. In the latter, all those who do not follow Christ—men, women, and children—will be thrown into the lake of fire. The alternatives to embracing this picture are either rejecting the biblical God or perhaps treating the final judgment as a metaphor for total annihilation. However, even the latter is not a pleasant thought and still raises issues about how a loving God can exercise any kind of penalty toward the wicked.

A number of years ago Meredith Kline, a brilliant Old Testament theologian whose writings have unfortunately been neglected, introduced the concept of intrusion ethics into the discussion of *herem* warfare. Kline reminds us that the punishment for sin is death. The lesson that rebellion—and all sin is rebellion—leads to death is made clear in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:17). It is only because of God's extraordinary grace that Adam and Eve were not killed on the spot when they ate the fruit of the tree. Indeed, it is because of that grace that *any of us* breathe. The period of God's extraordinary grace, often called common grace, is a special circumstance. In this light, we should not be amazed that God ordered the death of the Canaanites, but rather we should stand in amazement that he lets anyone live. The Conquest, according to Kline, involves the intrusion of the ethics of the end times, the consummation, into the period of common grace. In a sense, the destruction of the Canaanites is a preview of the final judgment.

Of course, we are left with disturbing questions. Why the Canaanites? Why not some other people? Are the Canaanites really extraordinarily evil? While perhaps the case can be made from their own texts that the Canaanites were evil, I do not think it can be shown that they were more evil than the Assyrians or the Israelites themselves. Here, like Job, we are left unanswered as to why suffering comes to one and not another.

Even so, the Bible makes it clear that we are still involved in *herem* warfare; but rather than being directed toward physical enemies, it is a spiritual battle. Ephesians 6:10–18 is a programmatic statement in this regard:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

Here we see that the church is commanded to join in the struggle against the spiritual enemies of God. We also can see that the weapons employed in such a battle are spiritual, not physical (i.e., truth, righteousness, and so on).

Though this is a programmatic statement, attention to this theme reveals that there are many passages that use military language to describe the Christian's spiritual battle in the world. Interestingly, war language is associated with the spiritual struggle that goes on within our own hearts and minds:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Cor. 10:3–5)

In conclusion, we can see discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments in regard to the topic of *herem* warfare. While in the Old Testament the Israelites were often used by God as an instrument of his judgment, it is now a betrayal of the gospel to take up arms to defend or promote the interests of Christ.

**However, this discontinuity is not absolute. There is also continuity, especially as we look to the New Testament's picture of the final judgment. In addition, though it is not a main theme, the Old Testament prophets sometimes draw the curtains back and allow the reader to see the spiritual battle that has been waged throughout history. Indeed, all *herem* warfare, spiritual and physical, derives from the conflict anticipated in the curse against the serpent at the time of the Fall:**

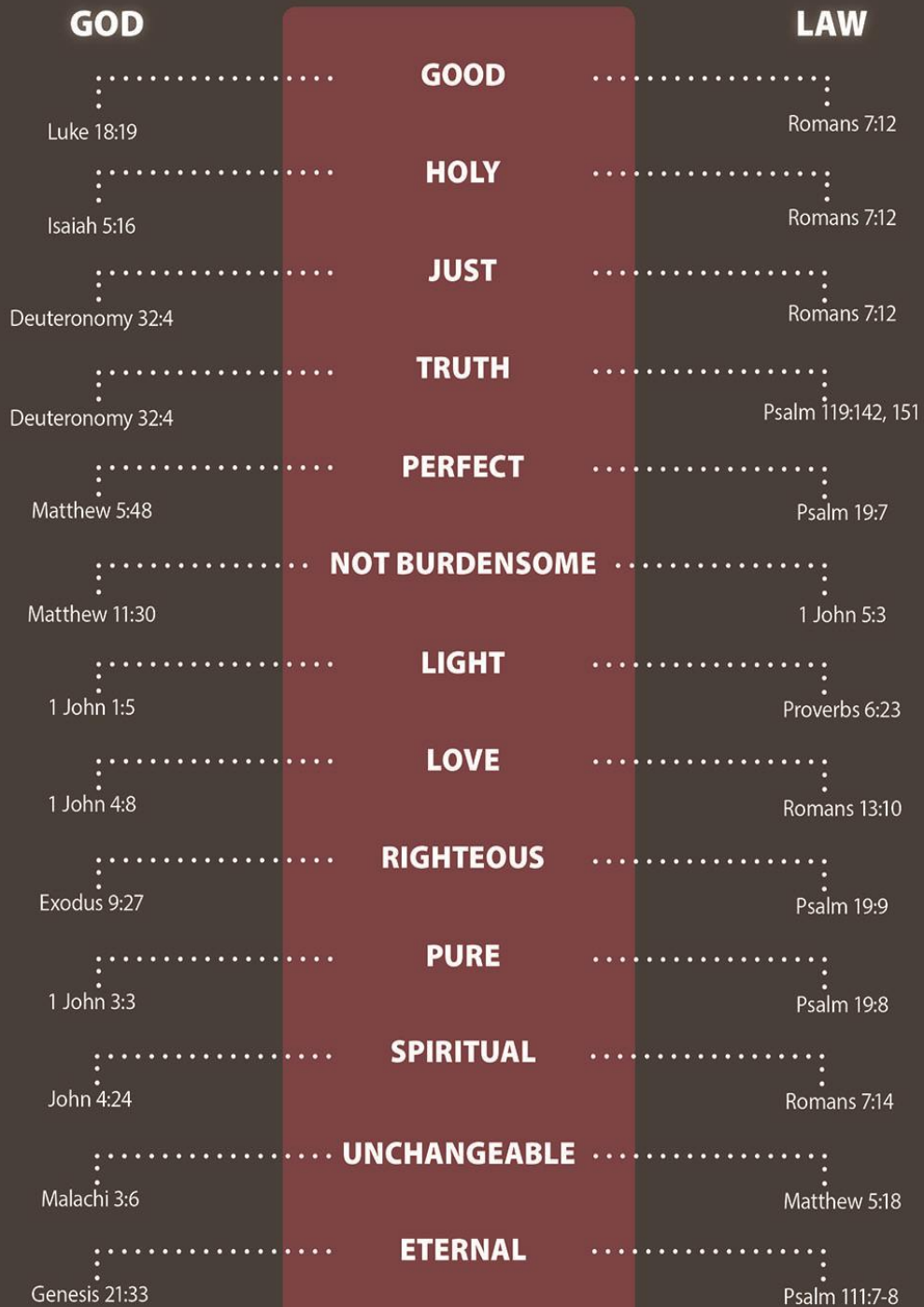
*I will put enmity  
between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
he will crush your head,  
and you will strike his heel. (Gen. 3:15)<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Longman III, T. (2003). [The Case for Spiritual Discontinuity](#). In S. N. Gundry (Ed.), *Show them no mercy* (pp. 159–187). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.



# How God's Law Is a Mirror of God's Character



# The Consistent Characteristics of God From Old to New Testament

## OLD TESTAMENT

Deuteronomy 32:35; Psalm 145:20; Isaiah 59:18; Ezekiel 18:20

Numbers 6:26; Psalm 91:1-2; 119:165; Proverbs 16:7; Isaiah 26:3; 32:17

Exodus 34:7; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 89:14; 119:132; 145:9; Isaiah 54:8; Micah 6:8

Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5; 7:7-9; 10:12-15; 33:3; Psalm 92:2; Proverbs 3:12; 15:9; Isaiah 43:4; Ezekiel 16:8

Deuteronomy 10:18; 1 Chronicles 16:34; Psalm 86:5; 117:2; 146:7-9; Isaiah 40:11

Genesis 18:25; Psalm 9:4, 16; 37:28; 98:9; Isaiah 61:8; Jeremiah 9:24

Numbers 23:19-20; Psalm 33:11; 90:2; 102:27; 103:17; 119:90; Isaiah 40:8; Malachi 3:6

Exodus 15:26; Leviticus 22:31; Deuteronomy 4:40; 1 Kings 8:58; Nehemiah 1:9; Psalm 119:60

**JUST IN PUNISHING SINS**

**PEACE-LOVING**

**MERCIFUL AND FORGIVING**

**LOVING**

**KIND AND GENTLE**

**JUST**

**ETERNAL AND UNCHANGEABLE**

**ZEALOUS IN COMMANDING LAW KEEPING**

## NEW TESTAMENT

Romans 2:5-6; 6:23; 12:19; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Revelation 21:8

Luke 24:36; John 14:27; Romans 15:13; Philippians 4:7; 2 Corinthians 13:11

Matthew 6:14; John 8:11; Romans 2:4; 5:8; Ephesians 1:7; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 1:9

Matthew 5:43-44; 19:19; 22:37-39; John 3:16; 11:5; 13:1, 34; 15:9, 17; Romans 5:8; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8; 2 Thessalonians 2:16; 2 Timothy 1:7; 1 John 2:5; 4:8, 10

Mark 1:40-42; 10:13-16; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4; Ephesians 2:7; Titus 3:4; James 3:17

John 16:8; Acts 17:31; Romans 2:2-3; 1 Peter 1:17; Revelation 19:2, 11

2 Timothy 2:13; Hebrews 6:18; 13:8; James 1:17; 1 John 1:5; Revelation 22:13

Matthew 5:17-19; 7:23; 19:17; John 14:15, 21; 15:10; Romans 3:31; 1 John 2:3-4; 5:2-3

# The Harshness of the Old Testament Era

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

•

There are circumstances in the Old Testament that many find difficult to understand. Hostile critics impulsively adopt the “attack” mode, never taking the time to seriously analyze “problem” episodes. Christian people frequently puzzle silently over such matters, not wishing to appear irreverent, but nonetheless troubled inwardly. What shall be said of those cases of “brutality” that seem to be woven into the fabric of the Mosaic system.

(1) Many people object to the fact that the Old Testament seems to condone moral atrocities—the slaughter of the Canaanites, for example (see Joshua 6:21). But consider the following facts. First, when one objects to “moral” problems, he is obligated to defend the **moral standard** by which his judgment is made. No atheist can do this successfully, for “if there is no God, nothing is wrong” (Jean Paul Sartre), and man fashions his own moral rules.

Second, God has always been patient, even with the vilest of people (cf. Genesis 6:3; 15:16); but justice eventually demands a day of reckoning.

Third, the seeming harshness of national judgments actually was an example of “moral surgery” in view of the coming Messiah and the implementation of a plan of human redemption, hence, ultimately constituted an act of divine mercy.

(2) Consider the strictness and severity of capital punishment, as administered under the Mosaic code. The death penalty was attached to: striking/reviling a parent (Exodus 21:15, 17), blasphemy (Leviticus 24:14ff), Sabbath-breaking (Exodus 31:14), murder (Exodus 21:14), causing a miscarriage (Exodus 21:22-23), witchcraft and pretension to prophecy (Exodus 22:18; Deuteronomy 18:20), adultery (Leviticus 20:10), incest, homosexuality, and bestiality (Exodus 22:19; Leviticus 20:11-16), kidnapping (Exodus 21:16), idolatry (Leviticus 20:2), perjury in capital

cases (Deuteronomy 19:16, 19), etc. Actually, a number of other offences could fall under this indictment as well.

In addition, it should be noted that capital punishment was to be implemented publicly, and in some cases the “congregation” was to be actively involved in carrying out the sentence (Numbers 15:32-36). Moreover, the judgment was to be initiated as quickly as justice would allow. “Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (Ecclesiastes 8:11). Contrast this with the current practice in America where it generally takes more than a decade for a capital case ever to reach the enactment stage in the most serious and well-established cases.

Again, to many in our modern society of “toleration” and “compassion,” the Hebrew system appears extremely “cruel and unusual.” However, two important observations need to be made to put this issue in balance.

First, a number of scholars have shown that the Hebrew system was much “more elevated [in] character” than its heathen counterparts (Horn 1955, 40). Treatment of slaves, for example, was decidedly more merciful under Hebrew law, and provisions for the poor by far eclipsed that of paganism. One scholar has noted that ancient Babylon “felt no such social sympathy” (Barton 1937, 385). Numerous examples could be cited. Moreover, one cannot judge a system that was operative fifteen centuries before the influence of Christian principles, with justice twenty centuries this side of Jesus.

Second, the following statement from Thomas H. Horne on this matter is most insightful:

The moral government of Jehovah was to be exhibited on the earth by the theocracy which he established. Its very nature required temporal sanctions, and their immediate enforcement; its object could not be attained by waiting till the invisible realities of a future state should be unveiled. The previous exhibition of such a moral government was the best preparation for the full revelation of man’s future destiny, and the means provided for his welfare in it, by a merciful and redeeming God (1841, 145).

# ETIOLOGY FACTUALLY CORRECT

## The Captivating History Series/ The Book: “The Ancient Canaanites”/ The Chapter: Canaan Religion & Worship

The Canaanites were polytheistic, which means they worshipped more than one deity. Some sections of the civilization additionally practiced monolatry. Monolatry is the practice where a culture believes in the existence of many gods but chooses to worship only one. In most city-states and settlements, the deities were categorized into a system of four tiers as seen here: The highest level which consisted of El and Asherah Active deities and patron gods like Ba'al Artisan gods responsible for crafts and artistry Messenger gods who did the bidding of other deities Many of the deities possessed palaces throughout the cosmos, usually near the natural phenomena that matched their powers or area of control. For example, the god of death lives under the sea in a yawning chasm, while Hadad, the god of storms, lives high in the clouds. During the early years of Canaan, there were no official temples or palaces of worship, but this changed around the Middle Bronze Age.

Contemporary scholars have noted that many of the Canaanite gods have counterparts within the pantheon who control the opposite end of the spectrum—such as a goddess of dawn mirrored by a goddess of dusk. El In the language of the Canaanites, “El” was used both as a generic term for any god out of the pantheon and also one specific deity who was viewed as the god above all others. He was the head of

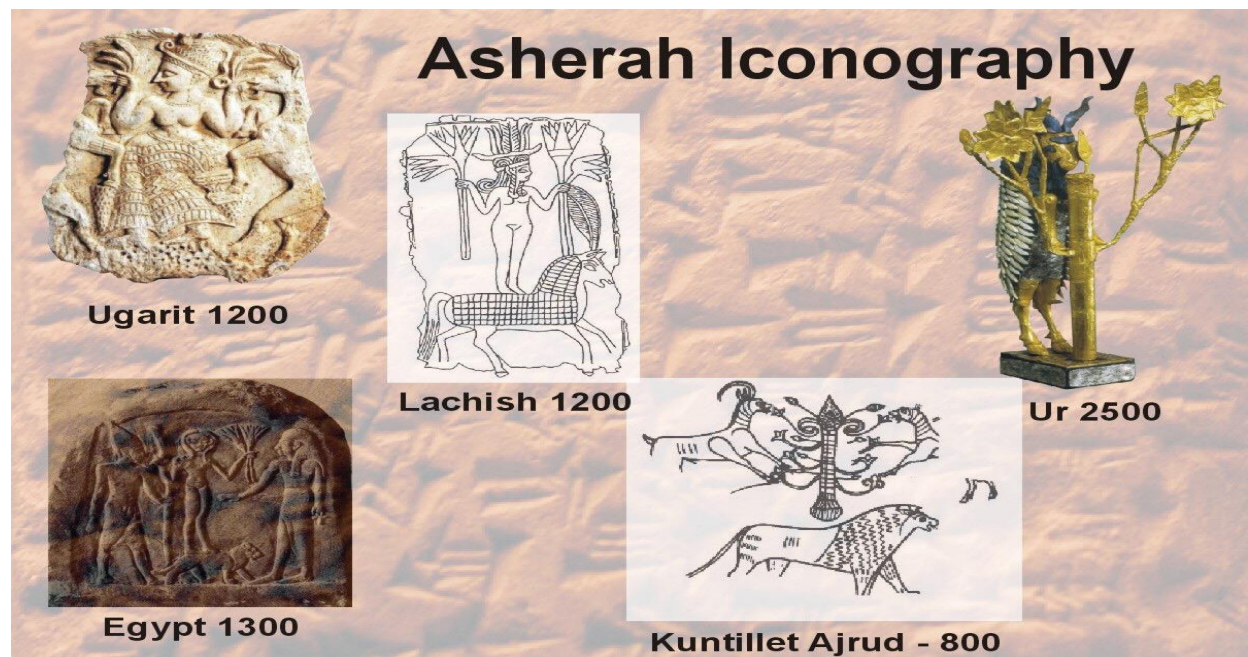
all of the pantheons and usually seen as a father figure to the others. The Canaanites considered him the creator of humans and all of the creatures in the universe. He additionally fathered many of the other gods, including the powerful Hadad, Yam, and Mot. Mythology decreed that he dwelled in a tent on the mountain of night, possibly explaining why he did not typically have temples to worship him.

Like many other deities in ancient civilizations, El was associated with the sacred bull. He and his eldest son both wore headdresses with bullhorns. The bull symbolized strength and fertility, demonstrating two of the qualities with which El was associated. It's not surprising that the sacred bull appeared in Canaanite religion because it was a common symbol throughout ancient civilizations and even appeared in prehistory, before written records existed. Around the 9th and 8th centuries BCE, El additionally became associated with Yahweh, who would become the chief deity of the Israelites. These words were found at tablets discovered in Ugarit, an ancient port city in modern Syria. Some additional descriptors include grey-bearded, full of wisdom, and the ancient one.

Numerous myths about him discuss how the other gods came to be and which demonstrate some of the areas that he was believed to have control over. In one, El built a desert sanctuary for himself, his wives, and his children. Another famous story is a text found in Ugarit called Shachar and Shalim. El visited the sea and saw two women in the water and became aroused. He asked both women to come with him, killed a bird using a spear, and then set about cooking it. El requested that the women tell him it was done and then address him as either their father or their husband, and he would act as such to them. They decided to call him their husband, after which they slept together. Each woman became pregnant and had a child. These two babies would become Shachar and Shalim, who would become the

dawn and dusk. After more encounters, these two wives would additionally birth numerous other gods. Their names are unknown, but many scholars believe at least one was El's chief bride, Asherah. Asherah was the mother goddess in ancient Semitic religions and the consort of El, though sources also indicate that she was married to Yahweh, who commanded the destruction of her temples to focus solely on his worship. Depending on the source, Yahweh is believed to be another form of El since the two often appear as a single unit in texts.

Like El, Asherah possessed many titles which showed her power in the cosmos. Her sites of worship were frequently marked with Asherah poles. These poles were sacred trees or long poles which stood near the goddess's religious sites in Canaan and indicated a temple was meant for her. According to multiple Ugarit texts, she was the mother of over 70 gods and was associated with the heavens and fertility. The Hebrew Bible mentions her several times as well, once in accordance in a cult which supposedly practiced her worship with idols. Several statuettes of Asherah exist, as well as pictographs.



**Mot was one of the oldest and most powerful sons of El. He served as the god of death and the underworld and frequently seemed to be at odds with his brothers. What is interesting about his position in Canaanite mythology is that he was the living personification of death, not just the ruler of the underworld. Numerous peoples besides the Canaanites worshipped him, including the people of Ugarit, the Phoenicians, some of the Hebrews in the Biblical Old Testament, and potentially the Hurrians and Hittites. According to discovered texts, Mot supposedly lived in the city of Hmry (Mirey). His throne was a massive, yawning pit, and filth was his heritage.**

**He butted heads with numerous other deities, threatening to devour them whole with his monstrous appetite. This can be seen in a few translated stories, including one where Ba'al, who of the messenger class, gave instructions to the minions below him: that you not come near to divine Death, lest he made you like a lamb in his mouth, (and) you both be carried away like a kid in the breach of his windpipe. Mot's appetite got him into trouble on numerous occasions. When the deity Ba'al (also called Hadad) invited him to dinner, Mot instead threatened to devour Ba'al and attempted to make good on this promise. The other gods tricked him into thinking he succeeded, but then one of Ba'al's sisters snuck behind Mot and cut him with a blade, shoved the remains through a sieve, grinded him under a millstone, and threw the remains into a field. Mot took seven years to recover and threatened Ba'al again, demanding they feed him their brothers. They refused, and Mot threatened war until he was informed his father, El, would kick him out of his throne for his behavior. Mot conceded defeat and returned to the underworld.**

**After his father, Ba'al was one of the most significant gods in the Canaanite religion. He was the main storm and rain god and often appeared bearded, with a club and bull headdress like his father, El.**



**One of his most important myths pitted him against his brother, Mot, who wanted his position in the sky. Ba'al pretended to be dead and had one of his sisters—who would have been Mot's sister as well—incapacitate Mot for seven years.**

**Ba'al appears to have had numerous equivalents in other ancient civilizations, including the Greek Zeus and the Hittite Tarhunt or Tasheb. There are a couple of different myths where he features prominently, including one where he fought against his father, El. El nominated one of his sons, Yamm, and made him ruler over all of the other gods. He demanded that he secure his power by driving Ba'al away from his position. The two fight, and Ba'al appears to be losing until the divine craftsman, Kothar-wa-Khasis, struck Yamm in the back with two clubs. Ba'al then finished the fight. Yamm dies and Ba'al scatters his remains to the wind, sealing his position as the "rider on the clouds." Another infamous tale tells of how Ba'al defeated Lotan, a many-headed sea dragon, with the help of his sister. Finally, there was Ba'al's conflict with Mot, partially explained above. When Ba'al's palace was built, he invited many of the other deities to a lavish banquet. Mot was offended at being asked to eat bread & wine when he had such a voracious appetite and commenced war with Ba'al. It only ended when El stepped in and told his sons that they were in the proper positions and no conflict would continue.**

**Ba'al's storm & rain motifs were naturally associated with agriculture & fertility. Without him, the Canaanites would not have germinating crops and would be unable to grow food or attain rainwater. This is seen in the myth where he fights with Mot, as his supposed death results in a long drought that plagues the land of the mortals. As the Bronze Age progressed, the myths started to incorporate the idea that Ba'al was also a fearsome, warlike deity who used his control over the storms as a weapon against his enemies.**

Prince Yamm was the Canaanite God of the Sea, responsible for the water and its living creatures. He was one of the original sons of El and is frequently compared to Poseidon in contemporary times. He dwelled down underneath the ocean in the abyss, where he built his palace. Many myths considered him to be the god over the primordial power of the sea, constantly raging. He additionally controlled the storms which brought sailors to their deaths. Very few myths remain about Yamm except for one about his battle with Ba'al. Here is a translated excerpt from a recovered document about the struggle:

*And the weapon springs from the hand of Baal, Like a raptor from between his fingers. It strikes the skull of Prince Yam, between the eyes of Judge Nahar. Yahm collapses, he falls to the earth; His joints quiver, and his spine shakes. Thereupon Baal drags out Yam and would rend him to pieces; he would make an end of Judge Nahar.*

After his defeat, it seemed like the Canaanites viewed him as dead in the mythology while still worshipping him, an odd contradiction. Documents associated him with a leviathan and one of his nicknames was "the serpent" as well as "Judge Nahar." Some scholars speculate that his battle against Ba'al was a classic example of a Chaoskampf mytheme, which is essentially a legend where a god defeats the primordial being of chaos.

One final deity who needs to be mentioned is Anat, the virgin goddess of war. She was the sister of Hadad, Mot, and Yamm and played a crucial part in numerous myths. In the Ugaritic Ba'al Cycle, she is mentioned mainly as the sister and potential lover of Ba'al (Hadad) and was the goddess who cut and ground up Mot before spreading him across a field in revenge. She was an interesting figure in ancient civilizations because she was a female war deity at a time when most warrior gods were male. Some historians compare her to Athena, the

Greek goddess of wisdom and war. A few fragments from the Ugarit documents present her as an intimidating, imposing figure. One passage describes her wading through knee-deep pools of blood on a battlefield, wild, vengeful, and ferocious. She chopped off her enemies' hands and heads and then had them suspended from her belt and sash as trophies. She also attacked non-combatants and kicked the elders and townspeople out of their settlements by barraging them with arrows from her bow. Anat claims to have been the destroyer of many other deities, including the seven-headed serpent, Zabib, Atik, Yamm, and Ishat. One other story which heavily features Anat, but is incomplete in the Ugaritic texts, is her quest for a bow that she believed to be rightfully hers. It was made by the deity of craftsman and was intended for Anat but then was given to a mortal as a future present for his son. Furious, Anat demanded that El allow her to take her revenge, and she sent a hawk to beat the man's son and retrieve the bow and accompanying arrows. Instead, the hawk accidentally kills him and is chased into the sea by the wrathful Anat, and the bow is lost. The story ends when the sister of the murdered son begins to seek vengeance for her brother's murder.

**Religious Practices.** Many Canaanite deities were worshipped and represented by figurines placed on hilltops. High places surrounded by trees were additionally considered sacred and were specifically banned and targeted by the Bible and Old Testament. It was in these types of locations that the special Asherah poles would be placed. Archaeologists have found little information related to how the Canaanites worshipped their deities beyond building temples. Around these structures, scholars discovered the bones of many animals, including donkeys. Many professionals believe that the Canaanites sacrificed animals as a way of paying tribute to the gods and ensuring bountiful harvests and a prosperous people.

The Hebrew Bible paints the Canaanites as sacrificing hundreds, if not thousands, of month-old babies to the deity Mot, but there is little physical evidence. While many of the surrounding civilizations in the Levant did resort to this practice, documents do not include any references to the Canaanites being involved. Sexual fertility rites also occurred but were rare and not a part of daily worship. The fertility rites typically related to agricultural fertility rather than that of humans or animals; Since rain was so scarce in Canaan, people focused on trying to summon storms or please Ba'al so crops would germinate and grow. The religious practices of the Canaanites heavily emphasized funerals. Children were responsible for the care and treatment of their parents' bodies and were expected to handle the burial. The oldest sons usually chose the preparations, and it was not uncommon for people to be buried with one of their possessions. Wealthy individuals typically had something to show their riches.

In the end, what happened to the Canaanites? New archaeological evidence sheds some light on where the Canaanites might have gone. DNA taken from skeletons found around the Levant indicates that the people of Canaan seemed to integrate themselves in other existing societies and civilizations and managed to pass down their genetic material. In particular, a study conducted by Marc Haber, a geneticist, found that the DNA taken from a sample population of 99 Lebanese individuals was a 90 percent match with the samples removed from ancient Canaanite skeletons. Based on the data, it's possible for historians and scientists to infer that the Canaanites did not leave the region and instead mingled with other peoples. This use of DNA had an additional benefit—Haber and his team were able to determine just where the people of Canaan originated from in the first place. Again based on the samples, Haber and others determined that the population of Canaan were half farmers who were in the region for

**10,000 years while the other half matches DNA taken from peoples who originated in Iran. This data suggests that there was a mass eastern migration over 5,000 years ago from Iran to the Levant.**

**When it comes to ancient peoples, discovering what happened is partly historical document examination and partly science. As with any source taken from history, ancient records need to be taken with a grain of salt because there are often inherent biases on the part of the writers. For example, the Egyptians might portray Canaan as weak since they were enemies at different points in time. Records are also frequently destroyed by time, so researchers usually have to fill in gaps as well as possible. Science can help fill these blank areas, as is the case with what happened to the Canaanites. Based on evidence, it looks like the Canaanite civilization simply became dominated by a different culture in the region, in this case, the Israelites.**

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## GOT QUESTIONS? - What does it mean that “the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen. 15:16)?

**Question:** "What does it mean that ‘the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure’ (Genesis 15:16)?"

**Answer:** In [Genesis 15](#), God confirms His unconditional covenant with Abram. God promises Abram a multitude of descendants who will inherit the land in which Abram sojourns. God then gives Abram a brief timeline of future events: “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there” ([Genesis 15:13](#)). And then, “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the [Amorites](#) has not yet reached its full measure” (verse 16).

The prophecies of [Genesis 15](#) deal with these basic events: Abram would have many descendants. Those descendants would one day be taken captive and treated harshly. After four hundred years, Abram’s descendants would return to Canaan. Their return would coincide with God’s judgment on the Amorites in Canaan. These prophecies were fulfilled when, after Joseph’s death, Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites (who were living in Egypt at the time), and then, four hundred years after Joseph, Moses brought the children of Israel out of Egypt to the borders of Canaan; Joshua then led the people into Canaan and conquered the land. Joshua’s conquest took place only after the sin of the Canaanites had “reached its full measure” ([Genesis 15:16](#)).

One thing [Genesis 15:16](#) shows is the certainty of God’s judgment on the wicked. The Amorites and other Canaanites were exceedingly wicked (for a list of some of their sins, see [Leviticus 18](#)). During the time of Moses, God gave the reason for the Canaanites’ downfall: “The land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants” ([Leviticus 18:25](#)). God had predicted this all the way back in Abraham’s time. The Amorites were wicked, and Judgment Day was coming.

At the same time, [Genesis 15:16](#) demonstrates God’s love, mercy, and above all His longsuffering and patience with sinful man. Rather than immediately wipe out the Amorites, God chose to wait for *over four hundred years* to bring judgment upon them. The enemies of God would be displaced as God settled His chosen people in the land He had promised them. Yet God’s enemies did not need to remain enemies. They were given ample time to turn from their wickedness, turn to God, and be forgiven.

The Amorites had a chance to repent and be saved, just as the Assyrians in Nineveh did during in the time of Jonah.

The Amorites' sin had not escaped God's notice. He was keeping track of the measure of their sins, and, during Abraham's time, it was not yet "full." So the Amorites were warned that judgment was coming. It is sad that they did not take advantage of their time of grace. They wasted their four hundred years and continued to fill up the measure of their sin. Like most other pagan nations that Israel later encountered, the Amorites stubbornly continued in their sin until judgment finally befell them in God's own time.

Because the Amorites finally filled up the measure of their sin, God brought Joshua and the children of Israel against them. God's command was for the Israelites to "completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the Lord your God has commanded you" ([Deuteronomy 20:17](#)). The Amorites fought back, but God destroyed them before Israel and gave them the Amorites' land ([Joshua 24:8](#)). The conquest of Canaan served the dual purpose of punishing the Amorites for their sin and giving the Israelites a land of their own.

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## **40 YEARS ADVANCE WARNING**

**The fact that the Canaanites also hardened their hearts is clear from the words of Rahab of Joshua 2. In this passage, two Israelite spies come to Jericho and are hidden by Rahab. After deceiving the officials of Jericho, Rahab explains the following to the spies:**

**“I know that the LORD has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed.”**

**When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below (Joshua 2: 9 - 11). The Gibeonites tell a similar story in Joshua 9. The Gibeonites had successfully deceived Israel into thinking they came from a far-off land. When the Israelites confront the Gibeonites with their big lie, they answer in the following manner:**

**“Because it was certainly told your servants that the LORD your God had commanded His servant Moses to give you all the land, and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land before you; therefore we feared greatly for our lives because of you, and have done this thing (Joshua 9: 24).”**



**If the Canaanites knew, like Rahab and the Gibeonites, that God dried up the Red Sea and destroyed Sihon and Og for Israel and that He was leading them to conquer Canaan, why were they still in the land? The logical solution is that they were resisting what they knew to be the will of God by staying in Canaan. This fact is strengthened when once we realize that God had dried up the Red Sea more than forty years prior to Israel entering Canaan. The Canaanites saw Israel slowly but steadily advancing. God gave them decades to leave the Promised Land, but they refused to go.**

**It is also important to note that Scripture states God used natural disasters in order to drive the Canaanites out of the Promised Land. In three places references are made to God sending hornets before the Israelites in order to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan (Exodus 23: 29; Deuteronomy 7: 20; Joshua 24: 21). Further, God promised to send His angel into Canaan ahead of the Israelites (Exodus 23:20,23) as well as a spirit of terror (Exodus 23:20) and confusion (Deuteronomy 7: 23). God's plan in driving out the Canaanites was to do so little by little. If He were to drive all of the Canaanites out at once, Canaan would become a desolate land full of wild beasts (Exodus 23: 29 - 30; Deuteronomy 7: 22). These passages indicate that Canaan was a very unpleasant place to live during the time of Israel's invasion. Those who remained in the land did so in stubborn resistant to God's will.**

***In summary***, the purpose of this section has been to show the great wickedness of the Canaanite people and deplorableness of their sin. It has also served to describe how God dealt with the Canaanites, giving them four-hundred years to repent and then an additional forty years to get out of the land. God sent hornets, terror, confusion, and even His angel into Canaan to drive the inhabitants out. Thus, it seems more than fair that God should judge the Canaanites after so much mercy. J. Smart

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➤ *What early church father thought the church should kill all religious heretics?*

- Justin Martyr
- Tertullian
- Athanasius
- Augustine

## **From Steve Halbrook Book: “God Is Just!” From Chapter: *Questioning God’s Justice***

Ever since Satan’s temptation in the Garden of Eden, man considered God’s justice suspect. Falling for Satan’s ploy that they would not die, Adam and Eve attempted to circumvent the capital sanction for eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From the Fall onward all men, including rulers, have played gods by attempting to circumvent God’s justice and by inventing their own standards of justice. The antithesis between God’s justice and man’s is exemplified in Ezekiel 33: 17: “Yet your people say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just,’ when it is their own way that is not just.”

Since God is the source of justice, there is no basis for questioning God’s justice. Elniff writes, *“There is no neutral standard behind God, as it were, whereby we may judge both God and the creation.”* To question God’s justice on the basis of a standard of justice other than God is to assume there is a god higher than God Himself. This rejection of the one true God – the source of justice – is a rejection of justice entirely.

In addressing allegations that God was unjust to order Israel to wipe out the Canaanites, Joe Morecraft observes:

“Does it seem to you that God is being unjust, and unloving?... If it does seem so to you, it says more about you than it does God. What you’re doing is you’re having certain standards, ‘Here’s what I think a loving God should do; God doesn’t meet those standards that I’m judging Him by; therefore, the Old Testament God is not as just and compassionate as the God of the New Testament.’ Whenever we read anything in the Bible that seems to picture God in a bad light, ask forgiveness... The God who is a God of love is a God of justice.”

While wiping out the Canaanites was not an aspect of standing O.T. civil law, this admonishment nevertheless applies to objections against any O.T. civil law. Vern S. Poythress rightly explains today’s aversion to God’s civil justice: “Modern culture is averse to punishment because it does not understand God nor does it understand the seriousness of sin.” He also states, “We have swallowed so much of the modern humanistic thinking that our own judgments and emotional reactions are corrupted. We confuse mercy with vague good will, justice with tolerance, love with sentimentality. Like all sinners we have something in us that would like to be free from God’s standards altogether.”

Perhaps one of the greatest reasons humanists question and oppose God’s justice is that it reminds them of the eternal damnation that their wicked deeds deserve. Ed Donnelly writes:

“The punishment that today’s world will not tolerate is that which is retributive – punishment inflicted simply as recompense for evil done because it is just that wrongdoers should suffer; punishment that marks abhorrence of wrong and commitment to right. Such punishment is regarded as barbaric and immoral. This is not because people have become more humane or civilized, but because they are frightened by a dark specter. The shadow of hell haunts them. Disturbing whispers of *judgment to come* echo on the fringes of their consciousness. These intimations of God’s wrath so terrify them that they will do all in their power to airbrush any idea of retributive punishment from our society... For punishment in hell is retributive. It is not remedial. It does not make anyone better. Purgatory, the idea that humans will be cleansed and improved through their sufferings after death, is myth. The pains of hell are of absolutely no benefit to those who are being punished. Nor is such punishment preventative, except insofar as hearing of it now may turn some people from sin to Christ. When God opens the judgment books and proclaims the final destiny of all, the punishment pronounced will be what people hate and fear above all:

**retributive punishment, imposed because  
wrong is wrong and God is against it...”**

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## **Old Testament Events & the Goodness of God**

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

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The Scriptures affirm that God is morally perfect. He is holy (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8), just and righteous (Psalm 89:14), and good (Psalm 100:5; 106:1). Being a morally perfect entity (Matthew 5:48), all that God does, commands, and approves must of necessity be good (Psalm 119:39,68).

In view of this, the beginning Bible student may be troubled when he encounters certain divinely directed situations in Old Testament history, and when he reads several biblical passages that — superficially at least — appear to reflect upon the character of God. Let us consider a few of these problems.

### **The Extermination of the Canaanites**

When the Israelites were commissioned to take the land of Canaan, the Lord instructed them to smite completely the peoples, and to show no mercy upon them (Deuteronomy 7:1-5). Accordingly, when Israel invaded Jericho, for example, we are informed:

“And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, both young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword” (Joshua 6:21).

How does the sincere Bible student come to grips with this seeming breach of the goodness of God? Several things must be taken into consideration.

## **Rampant Immorality**

It must be noted that the Lord had been very patient with these grossly immoral pagan tribes for a long, long time. When Abraham first came into the land of Canaan, Jehovah promised that this country would someday belong to his seed, but it could not yet be theirs for “the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full,” declared God (Genesis 15:16). It is as though the sins of those heathen peoples gradually were filling a container; eventually, a point would be reached that God could tolerate it no longer. The wicked would have to be destroyed. Thus, it was not a violation of His goodness; rather it was to preserve it, that He had them destroyed.

Archaeological discoveries, such as those at Ugarit, have revealed the corruptness of the Canaanite nations. For example, in the Canaanite religion El was the chief god and Baal was his son. These were “gods” who had absolutely no concept of morality.

In a poem known as “The Birth of the Gods,” El is said to have seduced two women, and horrible sexual perversions are associated with his name. He married three of his own sisters — who also were married to Baal. He is represented as practicing vile sex acts and influencing others to do likewise. It is little wonder that the evidence indicates that the Canaanites followed their gods in such abominations.

In the Canaanite religion, homosexuals and prostitutes were employed to raise money for the support of the temples. It is not an exaggeration to say that these pagans elevated sex to the status of a god [that sounds rather modern, doesn't it?]. Many scholars believe that there are hints of this sordid background in such Old Testament passages as Deuteronomy 23:18-19 — where a prohibition is given against bringing the “hire of a harlot, or the wages of a dog (a male prostitute; see Harris, et al., 1980, 1:439) into the house of Jehovah.”

## **Brutality**

The Canaanite religion was a horribly brutal system as well. For instance, the goddess Anath is pictured as killing humans by the thousands and wading knee-deep in blood. She cut off heads and hands and wore them as ornaments. And in all of this gruesomeness, the Baal-epic says that her liver

was swollen with laughter and her joy was great. In this connection it also must be mentioned that the morally depraved Canaanites also sacrificed their own babies to their gods.

Funerary jars have been found with the bodies of young children distorted by suffocation as they struggled for life after having been buried alive as a sacrifice to Canaanite gods. Such young children have been found in the foundation pillars of Canaanite houses, and sometimes religious ceremonies were associated with their sacrifice (Wilson, 1973, p. 85).

Professor Kenneth Kitchen was correct when he remarked that the “Canaanite religion appealed to the bestial and material in human nature” as evinced by the Ugaritic texts and Egyptian texts of Semitic origin (see Douglas, 1980, 1:234.).

### **Preservation of Good**

But it also is important to emphasize that the destruction of these wicked people was for the moral preservation of the nation of Israel. The Old Testament makes this clear. When they invaded Canaan, the Hebrews were not to allow their enemies to live “that they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods; so would ye sin against Jehovah your God” (Deuteronomy 20:18).

But why was this so important? Among other reasons, it was through the Hebrew nation that the Messiah was to make His appearance! Thus, the salvation of mankind ultimately was at stake. The extermination of the wicked inhabitants of Canaan, therefore, was an example of moral surgery in order to save the life of the patient (the human race).

Moreover, remember this: God, because of Who He is, has the right to render judgment upon evil at any time.

### **What about the Children?**

The question is bound to arise, however: “But why did God allow the children to be destroyed?” This query hardly could be treated thoroughly in an article of this brevity; however, some comment does need to be made.



First, in a world where there is to be freedom of choice, one must be allowed to suffer the consequences of wrong-choice making, even when he is not a party to such choices. Making bad decisions not only affects us, but affects those around us as well. We fall heir to the consequences of evil in others as a part of the price that we pay for our own freedom! So, children often are victims who suffer because of the evil in their parents.

Second, however, the question raised above represents a real problem only if it is viewed in terms of the present. If one sees the matter in terms of eternity, the situation becomes altogether different. Would it not have been infinitely worse, in view of eternity, had these children grown to maturity and adopted the same pagan practices as their parents? Even this consideration, though, must be seen in the light of the principles mentioned above, i.e., with respect to the coming of Christ and God's temporal judgment upon sin.

We certainly do not know all of God's mind on this important theme (cf. Romans 11:33), but if we study the Old Testament record of the Lord's dealings with these nations, together with the archaeological findings that illustrate the corruption of these people, surely we ought to be able to see that Jehovah's wisdom regarding those events should not be disputed.

Finally, it might be noted that no one has the right to criticize the moral activity of God unless he can establish and defend some genuine moral standard apart from God — and this no unbeliever can do!

## **The Biblical Imprecations**

The "imprecatory" sections of the Scriptures are those portions that contain the writers' prayers or songs for vengeance upon enemies, or which end in triumphant praise at their destruction. For example, "Destroy thou them, O God" (Psalm 5:10), or "Break thou the arm of the wicked and evil man" (10:15; cf. 18:40-42; 28:4; 31:17; Jeremiah 15:15; 17:18; Nehemiah 6:14; etc.).

Many have wondered how such expressions could be a part of divine revelation. Though the subject is complex, perhaps the following thoughts will shed some light on this matter.

These writings are not mere hot-headed bursts of personal vindictiveness characteristic of an inferior Old Testament code. We recognize, of course, that a lower level of moral responsibility was tolerated in an ancient, infantile human race that gradually was being prepared for the coming of the gospel age (cf. Matthew 19:8; Acts 14:16-17; 17:30-31; Romans 3:25).

Nonetheless, the Old Testament in many instances (unless divine judgment was being exercised — see sections above) encouraged service to one's enemies (Exodus 23:4-5) and forbade hatred, vengeance, etc. (Leviticus 19:17-18; Proverbs 20:22; 24:17; 25:21-22). One ought not, therefore, take a low view of the biblical imprecations that obviously were placed into the divine record for a purpose.

The biblical imprecations ultimately express a zeal for Jehovah's cause, and, significantly, express a willingness to leave vengeance in His hands. But they do acknowledge that punishment for sin is a part of the divine order (cf. Psalms 58:11; 104:35; 1 Samuel 24:21ff.). One must remember that:

- The enemies of Israel were the enemies of Israel's God.
- Israel's defeat was a reproach to His Name.
- The cause at stake was not merely the existence of a nation, but the cause of divine truth and righteousness.

This aspect of the conflict is most completely expressed in Psalm 83, and prayers for vengeance such as those of 79:10,12 and 137:8 express the national desire for the vindication of a just cause, and the punishment of cruel insults (Kirkpatrick, 1906, p. xci.).

It ought to be recognized that some of the language of the imprecations, though seemingly brutal, is highly figurative, with metaphors and images being borrowed from an age in history characterized by much savagery. No one would argue, for example, that Christ was suggesting that certain people — who caused stumbling in others — should literally be weighted with a stone and thrown into the sea (Matthew 18:6), or that Paul, in rebuking those who exalted circumcision, hoped that they literally would mutilate themselves (Galatians 5:12 — ASV footnote).

One must focus, therefore, upon the idea being conveyed, and not necessarily the poetic imagery in which the idea is clothed. This principle needs to be applied to the Old Testament imprecations.

## “Unethical” Actions by God

Some critics have alleged that the Bible represents God as sometimes acting in ways that are clearly unethical. For example, concerning Pharaoh, God said: “I will harden his heart” (Exodus 4:21). The book of Ezekiel quotes the Lord as saying: “I gave them also statutes that were not good” (Ezekiel 20:25). And Jeremiah said of Jehovah: “Lord God, surely thou hast greatly deceived this people” (Jeremiah 4:10). Numerous sincere Bible students have been greatly perplexed by these and similar passages.

The solution lies in an understanding of certain idiomatic traits of Hebrew expressions. The great scholar, James MacKnight noted that: “Active verbs were used by the Hebrews to express, not the **doing**, but the **permission** of the thing which the agent is said to do” (1954, p. 29, emp. added).

This involves the concept of man’s free will. God has allowed man to have freedom of will, and when human beings choose to do wrong, the Lord is not going to overpower them and force righteousness upon them. The truth is — Jehovah allows humans to act as they will (though ultimately there is a price to be paid). But sometimes the Bible, using figurative terminology, represents God as performing the action, though in reality He does not.

With reference to the examples cited above, we may observe that the Scriptures clearly teach that Pharaoh hardened his own heart by yielding to the enchantments of his magicians and refusing to submit to the will of God (Exodus 7:11-14,22; 8:15,19; 9:34). And the Lord let him go his own rebellious way that he might eventually demonstrate Who really was in control! (cf. Romans 9:17-18).

Additionally, when Ezekiel affirmed that God gave statutes that were not good, he cannot be saying that the Holy God literally gave bad laws. Rather, he is suggesting that when those stubborn people determined that they did not want to submit to Heaven’s law, God permitted them to follow the wicked statutes of the pagan nations around them!

Note the words of Psalm 81:12 — “So I let them go after the stubbornness of their heart, That they might walk in their own counsels.”

And when Jeremiah suggested that God deceived the people of Israel, he really was saying that the Lord allowed them to follow their own paths of self-deceit, and to eat the bitter fruits thereof.

Because of rampant sin, Jeremiah had foretold of a great destruction to be visited upon the people of God (4:5ff), but the people declared that this evil would not come, “neither shall we see sword or famine” (5:12), and the prophets who declared such were considered to be just so much “wind” (5:13). Since they were determined to be deceived, God, in effect, said: “Go ahead and be deceived; I will not stop you.”

## **Conclusion**

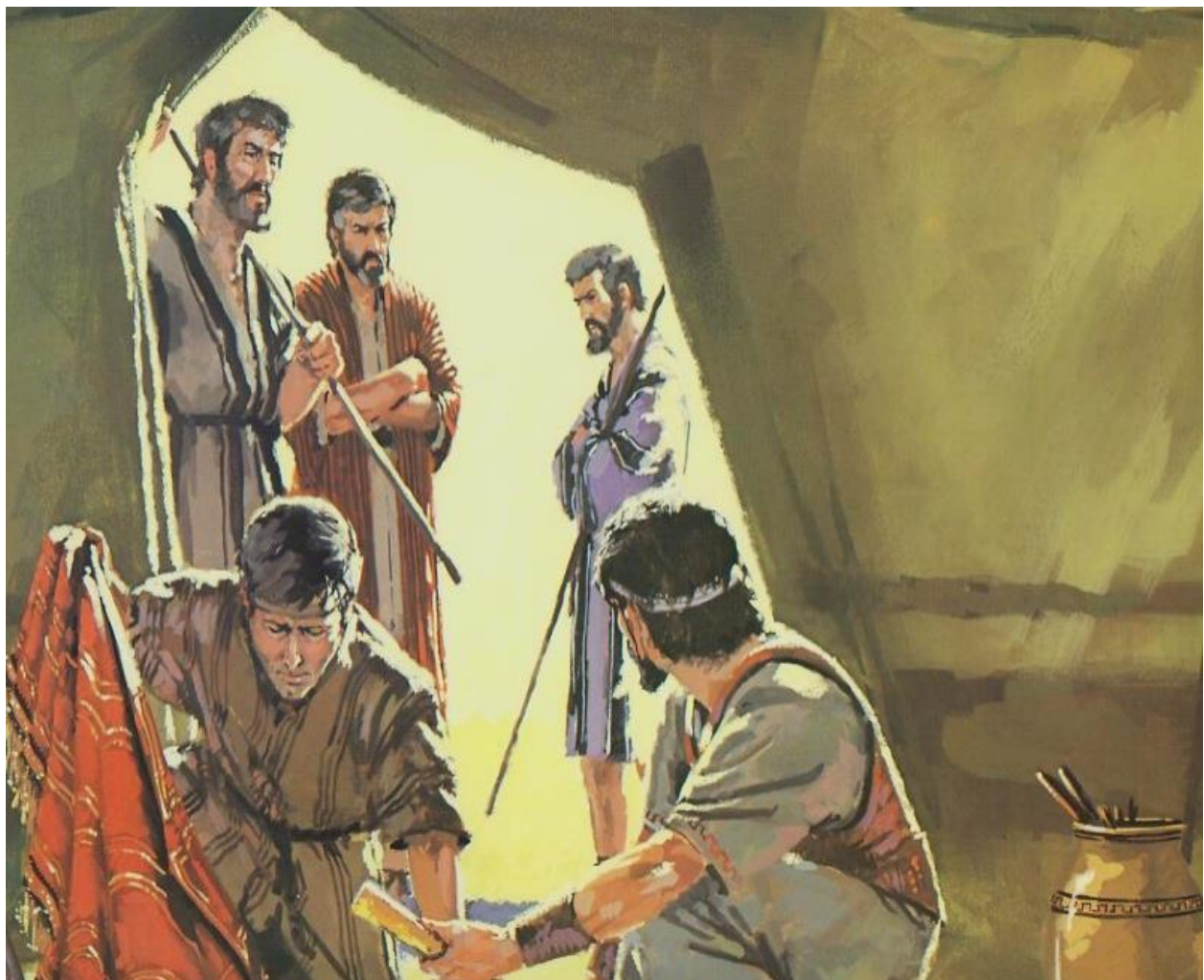
Those who respect the Bible as the verbally inspired Word of God need to realize that though they may, from time to time, encounter certain passages of Scripture that seem difficult to understand initially, there are adequate explanations for these texts. By means of patient and thorough research, we can discover many of the answers that will help solve these problems.

And even if we have not yet found all the answers, we ought never to foolishly charge God with error.

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# Yahweh War: Ignoring God in the Smallest Specified Detail of Immediate Consequence

## Failure at Ai



- **A man named Achan disobeyed God's instructions.**
- **The small force sent to attack Ai was routed. Thirty-six men died (7:1-5).**
- **God tells Joshua there is sin in the camp. He is to find the guilty (7:6-15).**
- **Achan is found guilty; he and his family are put to death (7:16-26).**
- **5000 men attack from the west, and the rest from the north.**
- **Ai saw Israel and went out to attack them, abandoning the city—ambushers attacked and burned the city! (8:16-20)**
- **Ai's army saw the smoke, and they had no power to flee. Israel easily defeated them. (8:21-25)**
- **Spoils of the city were divided among the people (8:27).**

# Yahweh War: Ignoring God in the Smallest Specified Detail Consequential Over Centuries



<https://youtu.be/nhLEgzaEXY8>

## Yahweh War

To understand what God was doing in Canaan, in addition to having a correct understanding of God's existence and authority and of the consequences of sin, one must see it within the larger context of redemptive history.

One of the categories scholars use for such events as the battles in the conquest of Canaan is *Yahweh war*. Yahweh wars are battles recorded in Scripture that are prompted by God for His purposes and won by His power.<sup>{8}</sup> Old Testament scholar Eugene Merrill describes Yahweh war this way: "God initiated the process by singling out those destined to destruction, empowering an agent (usually his chosen people Israel) to accomplish it, and guaranteeing its successful conclusion once the proper conditions were met."<sup>{9}</sup> These wars were "a constituent part of the covenant relationship" between Yahweh and Israel. "Israel . . . would not just witness God's mighty deeds as heavenly warrior but would be engaged in bringing them to pass."<sup>{10}</sup>

There are numerous examples of Yahweh war in Scripture. In some of them, God fights the battle alone. Think of the Israelites caught between the Egyptian army behind them and the sea in front. God told them, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. . . . The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent" ([Ex. 14:13-14](#)). They walked through the parted waters and watched them close down around the Egyptians behind them.

Another example is found in [2 Kings 18](#) and 19. When the Assyrians were about to attack Judah, King Sennacherib's representative threw down a challenge to Judah's God:

*Do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, The LORD will deliver us. Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand ([2 Kings 18:32-35](#))?*

Unfortunately for the Assyrians, Yahweh decided to take them up on that challenge. Hezekiah prayed, and God answered through Isaiah:

*"I will defend this city to save it," He said, "for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David." And that night the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies ([2 Kings 19:34, 35](#)).*

Most of the time God had the Israelites help in the battle. So at Jericho, for example, God made the wall fall, and then the Israelites moved in and took the city. Numerous examples are given in Joshua and Numbers of the Israelites fighting the battle with God making them victorious.



The involvement of God is a key point in the whole matter of the conquest of Canaan. It wasn't just the Israelites moving in to take over like any other tribal people. It was commanded by God and accomplished by God. Merrill says this:

*It is clear that the land was considered Israel's by divine right and that the nations who occupied it were little better than squatters. Yahweh, as owner of the land, would therefore undertake measures to destroy and/or expel the illegitimate inhabitants, and he would do so largely through his people Israel and by means of Yahweh war.*[{11}](#)

The Israelites were not at heart a warrior tribe. There was no way they could have conquered the land of Canaan if they didn't have divine help. They escaped the Egyptians and moved into their new land by the power of Yahweh ([Judg. 6:9](#); [Josh. 24:13](#)).

Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman sees five phases of Yahweh war in the Bible. In phase one, God fought the flesh-and-blood enemies of Israel. In phase two, God fought against Israel when it broke its side of its covenant with God (cf. Dt. 28:7, 25). In phase three, when Israel and Judah were in exile, God promised to come in the future as a warrior to rescue them from their oppressors (cf. Dan. 7).

In phase four there was a major change. When Jesus came, he shifted the battle to the *spiritual* realm; he fought spiritual powers and authorities, not earthly ones.

Christians today are engaged in warfare on this level. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against . . . the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (6:12). We do not (or ought not!) advance the kingdom by the sword. Phase five of Yahweh war will be the final battle of history when Jesus returns and will once again be military in nature. In [Mark 13:26](#) and [Rev. 1:7](#) we're presented with the imagery of Christ coming on a cloud, an imagery seen in the prophecy of Daniel: "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him" ([Dan. 7:13](#)). The cloud represents a war chariot.[{12}](#)

**Summing up, Longman writes, "The war against the Canaanites was simply an earlier phase of the battle that comes to its climax on the cross and its completion at the final judgment."**[{13}](#)

There are several aspects of Yahweh war, not all of which are seen in every battle narrative. Merrill names, among other aspects, the mustering of the people, the consecration of the soldiers, an oracle of God, and, at the end, the return to their homes or tents.[{14}](#)

The part that concerns us here—the real culmination of Yahweh war—is called *herem*. *Herem* literally means "ban" or "banned." It means to ban from human use and to give over completely to God. The ESV and NIV give a fuller understanding of the term by translating it "devote to

destruction” (the NASB renders it “set apart”). [Exodus 22:20](#) reads, “Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction.” [Deuteronomy 7:2](#), speaking of the conquest of the land, says, “and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them.” Tremper Longman writes that “*herem* refers to the climactic aspect of divine warfare: the offering of the conquered people and their possessions to the Lord.”<sup>{15}</sup>

## The Conquest of Canaan

Let’s turn now to look at the goals of the conquest of Canaan by Israel.

In this conquest, three things were being accomplished: the fulfillment of the promise of land, the judgment of the Canaanites, and the protection of the Israelites.

### *Possession of the Land*

First, the movement of the Israelites into Canaan was the fruition of God’s promises to Abram. We read in [Genesis 12](#) where God promised Abram that He would produce a great nation through him (vv. 1, 2). When Abraham and his family reached Canaan, Yahweh appeared to him and said, “To your offspring I will give this land” (v.7). This promise was repeated to the people of Israel in the years following (cf. [Ex. 33:1](#); [Num. 32:1](#)). When Joshua led the people across the Jordan River into Canaan, he was fulfilling the promise. Since the land wasn’t empty, they could only take possession of it by driving the Canaanites out.

### *Judgment of the Canaanites*

The second goal of the conquest was the judgment of the Canaanites. Driving them out wasn’t simply a way of making room for Israel. The Canaanites were an evil, depraved people who had to be judged to fulfill the demands of justice. What about these people prompted such a harsh judgment?

For one thing, the Canaanites worshiped other gods. In our pluralistic age, it’s easy to forget what an offense that is to the true God. This sounds almost trivial today. As noted previously, Richard Dawkins mocks this “jealous” God. But since Yahweh is the true God who created us, He is the one who ought to be worshiped.

In the worship of their gods, the Canaanites committed other evils. They engaged in temple prostitution which was thought to be a re-enactment of the sexual unions of the gods and goddesses. Writes Bernhard Anderson:

*The cooperation with the powers of fertility involved the dramatization in the temples of the story of Baal's loves and wars. Besides the rehearsal of this mythology, a prominent feature of the Canaanite cult was sacred prostitution (see [Deut. 23:18](#)). In the act of temple prostitution the man identified himself with Baal, the woman with Ashtart [or Ashtoreth, the mother goddess]. It was believed that human pairs, by imitating the action of Baal and his partner, could bring the divine pair together in fertilizing union.[\[18\]](#)*

Although the worship of other gods and temple prostitution might not be sufficient grounds for the overthrow of the Canaanites in the eyes of contemporary atheists, another of their practices should be. In their worship of their gods, Canaanites engaged in the detestable practice of child sacrifice.

In addition to the Old Testament claims about child sacrifice by the Canaanites, there is extra-biblical evidence found by archaeologists as well.

Under the sanctuary in the ancient city of Gezer, urns containing the burnt bones of children have been found that are dated to somewhere between 2000 and 1500 BC, between the time of Abraham and the Exodus.[\[21\]](#) The practice continued among the Canaanites (and sometimes even among the Israelites) even up to the time Israel was deported to Assyria in the late eighth century BC. Jon D. Levenson, professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard, reports that thousands of urns containing human and animal bones were found in Carthage. "These human bones are invariably of children, and almost all of them contain the remains of not one but two children, usually from the same family, one often a newborn and the other 2-4 years of age." It is highly doubtful the urns represent a funerary custom, he says. "The frequency with which the urns were deposited makes it unlikely that natural death could account for all such double deaths in families in a city of such size."[\[22\]](#)

The Canaanites were so evil that God wanted their very name to perish from the earth. Moses said, "But the LORD your God will give them over to you and throw them into great confusion, until they are destroyed. And he will give their kings into your hand, and you shall make their name perish from under heaven. No one shall be able to stand against you until you have destroyed them" ([Deut. 7:23-24](#); see also 9:3).

It was typical in ancient times for nations to see the power of gods in military victories. Recall the Rabshakeh's taunt in [2 Kings 18](#) that the gods of the other peoples they'd conquered hadn't done them any good. There is evidence of this understanding outside Scripture as well. For example, an ancient document with the title "Hymn of Victory of Mer-ne-Ptah" is from a thirteenth-century BC

Egyptian ruler who gives praise to Ba-en-Re Meri-Amon, son of the god Re, for victory over Ashkelon, Gezer, and other lands.[{23}](#) In the ninth century BC, Mesha, a king of Moab, built a high place for the god Chemosh, “because he saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries.”[{24}](#)

When the Israelites were about to attack Jericho, the prostitute Rahab helped the Israelite spies and offered this explanation for her help:

*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 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” ([Josh. 2:9-11](#)).*

### *The Protection of Israel*

The third goal of removing the Canaanites was the protection of Israel. God said that the Canaanites had grown so evil that “the land vomited out its inhabitants” ([Lev. 18:25](#)). And He was concerned that, if they remained in the land, they would draw the Israelites into their evil practices and they, too, would be vomited out (v. 28).

How could the Canaanites have that much influence over the Israelites?

It might be thought that simply being the dominant power in the land would be sufficient to prevent a strong influence by inferior powers. However, the shift from the life of the nomad to the life of the farmer marked a major change in the life of the Israelites. The people of Israel hadn’t been settled in one place for over forty years. The generation that entered the promised land knew only a nomadic life. They might easily have become enamored with the established cultural practices of the Canaanites. This happened with other nations in history. Anderson points out that the Akkadians who overcame the Sumerians were strongly influenced by Sumerian culture. Centuries later, Rome conquered the Greeks, but was greatly influenced by Greek culture.[{25}](#)

God knew that, unless they kept the boundaries drawn very clearly, the Israelites would intermarry with the Canaanites who would bring their gods into the marriage and set the stage for compromise.

In [Exodus 34](#), we see this connection:

*Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and*

*sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whose after their gods and make your sons whose after their gods (vv. 12-16).*

In addition, the Israelites would be tempted to imitate Canaanite religious rituals because of their close connection to Canaanite agricultural rhythms. Whether or not each year's crop was successful was of major importance to the Israelites. It would have been very tempting to act out Canaanite religious rituals as a way of insuring a good harvest. To do this didn't necessarily mean abandoning Yahweh. They tried to merge the two religions by adopting Canaanite methods in their worship of Yahweh. God had warned them not to do that ([Deut. 12:4, 30, 31](#)). They couldn't straddle the fence for long.

The Israelites had much earlier shown how quickly they would look for a substitute for the true God when Moses went up on the mountain to hear from God, recorded in [Ex. 20-31](#). Moses took too long to come down for the people, so they demanded that Aaron make them some new gods to go before them. Aaron made a golden calf that the people could see and worship ([Ex. 32:1-4](#)). Worshiping gods that were visible in the form of statues was a central part of the religions of their day. It was what everyone did, so the Israelites fell into that way of thinking, too.

The book of Judges is witness to what happened by being in such close proximity to people who worshiped other gods. Repeatedly the Israelites turned away from Yahweh to other gods and were given over by God to their enemies.

*And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress ([Jdg. 2:11-15](#)).*

Thus, God's judgment wasn't reserved just for the Canaanites. This was the second phase of Yahweh war. The Israelites had been warned ([Deut. 4:26; 7:4](#)). By disobeying God, the Israelites experienced the same judgment meted out through them on the Canaanites.

- Rick Wade, *Probe Ministries*

# ***NEXT: G. K. BEALE'S*** **EDITED SHORT STUDY** **"THE CANAAN CLEANSE"**

G. K. Beale's contribution to the Westminster Seminary Press Series on "Christian Answers to Hard Questions" is his name book *The Morality of God in the Old Testament*. In this book Beale explores challenges to God's character.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS FOR UPHOLDING GOD'S MORAL GOODNESS DESPITE HIS COMMAND FOR ANNIHILATION:

- 1) Wartime Ethic Legitimately Different from Peacetime.
- 2) The Divine Command to Kill All Women and Children .....Is Not Meant to Be Taken Literally.

## OUR PLAUSIBLE FIVEFOLD APPROACH

### ***1<sup>st</sup> – God’s Command to Annihilate All the Canaanites because of Immorality and Idolatry Was Part of a Unique Redemptive-Historical Circumstance That Demonstrated Divine Justice.***

One possible solution to the moral problem is that God’s command was part of unique and unrepeatable historical circumstances. The inhabitants of the land of Canaan had participated in idolatry and immorality for so long that God planned to judge them for their sin. And Israel was to be God’s instrument in punishing the Canaanites for their sin (Genesis 15: 16) and was to replace them in the land, which God had reserved for his people to possess and rule over in preparation ultimately for the coming of the Messiah. Accordingly, God’s command to Israel to wipe out the people of Canaan was a unique command not to be repeated. This vantage point helps to explain that Israel was not involved in ethnic cleansing but the basis for the command lay in God’s standard of righteousness that demanded judgment for violating this standard & doing great wickedness (Deuteronomy 9: 5,6). This goes a good distance toward a better understanding

of why God issued command to wipe out the Canaanites, since it was virtually equivalent to a command to execute guilty people for their wickedness.

Nevertheless, while it is theologically understandable that Israel was executing justice on the Canaanites, this concept would have been hard to prove in a human court. A similar kind of justice was later executed against Israel for her immorality and idolatry, when she was cast out of her land, which involved the killing of innocent people. Yet, one can ask, how does killing defenseless Canaanite women & infant children demonstrate God's justice? Infants do not even understand the difference between right & wrong. It is especially difficult to justify the command to kill the elderly, women, and children.

***2<sup>nd</sup> – God's Command to Annihilate All the Canaanites because of Moral Uncleanness Was Part of a Unique Redemptive-Historical Commission to Purify the Promised Land as a Sanctuary.***

Israel was then given the commission to be a "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19: 6) and to enter the Promised Land and make it into another garden temple by completely cleansing it from the uncleanness of the Canaanites. Just as Adam was to keep the Eden sanctuary clean and then



later Israel's individual priests were to keep the temple completely clean from defilement, so the Israelite warriors were to wipe out the Canaanites and purify the land, since it was to be pure like the sanctuary of Eden and Israel's temple. In fact, the Promised Land is referred to at points throughout Scripture as being "like the garden of Eden" (or "like the garden of the Lord") (see Genesis 13: 10; Isaiah 51: 3; Ezekiel 36: 35; Joel 2: 3).

Against this background, God's command to Israel to exterminate Canaanite uncleanness was a commission to wipe out every aspect of impurity. Just as Israel's priests in the Jerusalem temple were to keep out every bit of uncleanness, so was Israel as a nation of priests to purge every bit of defilement from the land as a temple. This is why every idolater, whether old or young or male or female, ideally had to be killed or driven out from the land. Again, this was a unique unrepeatable commission, which in no way applies after the epoch of Israel's theocracy.

### ***3<sup>rd</sup> – God's Sovereignty Justifies His Command to Annihilate All the Canaanites.***

The glory and happiness that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost experienced through their fellowship would have

been sufficient for all eternity, since it was sufficient for eternity past (John 17: 5).

The goal of God in eternity past before creation and in creation was and is to glorify himself and enjoy that glory forever (see Romans 11: 36; Ephesians 1: 3 – 14).

But how does God's self-sufficiency & self-determination and self-glory relate to our present question about the morality of God? Let us focus for a moment only on God's glorifying of himself and his desire for all to glorify him. An objection to God's goal of glorifying himself and enjoying that glory forever is that it seems awfully selfish. For God to stand at the center of his own affections means that he is egocentric. And the Bible universally condemns self-glorification (e.g., 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13: 5, "[love] does not seek its own"). Therefore, how can God be loving and be concerned for others, and be able at the same time to seek only his own glory?

The answer: The rules of humility that belong to a creature cannot apply in the same way to its Creator. In fact, God is not bound by or subject to any of the Ten Commandments. How can God break the first commandment to "have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20: 3)? He cannot, because it would mean

denying himself. God cannot break the command to “honor your father and mother” (20:12), since he has no father or mother. How could he break the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder” (20:13)? The Scripture says that “the Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up” (1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 2: 6). It is impossible for him to commit adultery {cf. Exodus 20: 14), nor can he steal (cf. 20: 15) or covet (cf. 20: 17), since he owns all things.

The scriptural command for people not to be selfish or not to take human life in a premeditated way or any other of the Ten Commandments cannot apply to God. This is especially so, for example, since the reason that it is wrong for humans to be egocentric is that only God has this right. The rules that God establishes to guide human relationships do not apply in the same way with him. Indeed, if God did not make himself the center of all his desires and affections, it would mean that something in the universe would be more important than himself and that he would stop being God. Likewise, to think in general that God is subject to the same commandments that he gives to regulate human behavior is to assume that a moral umpire sitting above him could hold him accountable & accuse him of wrongdoing. (Daniel 4: 35)

This concept indicates that there is no judge above God to proclaim that God has done wrong. God decides what he will do, and whatever he does is considered right for him because he is the ultimate Judge. In this light, God's command to exterminate the Canaanites of all ages and both genders is a just and righteous command. No one can slap God's hand and say that he is wrong in issuing that command. God is the ruler of the cosmic room, and no one can say "No" in response to what he does, even though it may be wrong for humans to do the same.

***4<sup>th</sup> – God's Command to Annihilate All the Canaanites Is an Anticipation of the End-Time Judgment of All People and Thus a Suspension of the Expression of His Common Grace to Unbelievers during the Epoch of Israel.***

The full expression of the end-time principle is not manifested as it will be on the last day, but the seed form of the principle itself is found. In the case of the Canaanites, part of the end-time principle of judgment was expressed in the command to put to physical death all the unbelieving males and females, elderly and young, since the same groups of people will suffer judgment at the very end of time. But the full expression of the principle was not to be manifested when Israel was to carry out her sober task. The execution of a temporal

physical death on a fraction of all classes of humanity living in a small part of the world at a particular historical time (the Canaanites) was to point forward to the final, eternal, spiritual, and physical death to be executed universally on all the ungodly inhabitants of the entire earth who had lived throughout history.

*Evidence from the Use of the Old Testament in the New That Judgments in the Old Testament Point to the End-Time Judgment of All People.*

Some references from the accounts of the Canaanite destruction are also taken by the New Testament to prefigure the final judgment. Parts of the narratives about the destruction of the Canaanites are taken by the book of Revelation and applied to the judgment of God's earthly enemies, when Christ returns. (Revelation 20: 8ff)

That the "number" of the nations assembled are "like the sand of the seashore" underscores their innumerability and the overwhelming odds in their favor against the saints. Joshua 11: 4, Judges 7: 12, and 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 13: 5 use the same metaphor for the multitudinous forces of the Canaanite nations arrayed to fight against Israel at various times. In each case, Israel destroys these enemy hordes. The accounts of these attacks at the early point

of Israel's history may have helped to shape the account of the attack at the latter end of the history of God's people, when the enemy ends up being destroyed. Revelation 20: 8 – 9 likely alludes to these three Old Testament accounts, which certainly do function analogically and probably typologically. (Revelation 1: 16 & Judges 5: 31 are also analogically/typologically linked.)

The Exodus 9: 22 – 35 narrative where God repeatedly hardens Pharaoh's heart, causing Pharaoh to disobey the very command to let Israel go that God had addressed to the Egyptian monarch is similarly related. Again, not only is this explainable on the basis that God is not bound by ethical standards regulating human conduct, but it is likely beyond coincidence that this hardening action of God occurs in the midst of plagues that are typological. This idea fits in with the flow of our argument so far that **suspension of ethical laws happens when events are part of prefigurations of end-time scenarios.**

This explanation of the Canaanite and Babylonian situation fits with the unique role that Israel had in redemptive history. Persons, events, and institutions during Israel's history were seen by the New Testament to be types of end-time realities. Though the Canaanite episode is a negative foreshadowing, such anticipations

often occurred in a positive sense... The sacrifice of an animal for the physical salvation of one generation of an ancient nation (Israel) that to its escape from physical bondage found its principle more fully expressed in Christ's sacrifice for the spiritual and ultimate physical salvation of people throughout the world, which delivered them from spiritual bondage to sin. Israel's priests who died and had to be replaced by other priests were anticipations of the resurrected Christ, who became the once-for-all eternal Priest who would never die. An example of a positive typology that explains a suspension in one of the Ten Commandments is the occasion of God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. The law against premeditated killing was temporarily suspended from Abraham's perspective because the last-minute sparing of Isaac was an event that was also a prefigurement of a future provision by which God would raise the dead: Abraham "considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him [Isaac] back as a *type*" (Hebrews 11: 19).

That is, the sparing of Isaac's life was an event that typologically foreshadowed the coming resurrection of all people at the very end of the age. This suspension of

one of the moral laws occurred uniquely, since this historical event was part of a unique redemptive-historical foreshadowing of greater events in the Old Testament.

***5<sup>th</sup> – God’s Command to Annihilate All the Canaanites and the Psalms’ Imprecations Anticipate the End-Time Judgment When Love of the Unbelieving Neighbor Ceases.***

Earlier, we saw that God is not subject to any of the Ten Commandments but that he operates by a standard that is above standards that regulate human behavior. God’s faithful people are sometimes also not subject to the last six of these commandments, which deal with human relationships (the first four concern the relationship to God). Christ summarizes laws 5 – 10 as “the second great commandment” (after the commandment to love God) and defines this commandment as “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (cf. Matthew 22: 36 – 40). This law of love of neighbor was valid in Old Testament times (Lev.19:18, 33,34; Deut.10:18-19) & binding throughout the present age – indeed, God’s people are to love even their enemies in both the Old Testament age and the present age (Exodus 23: 4 – 5; Matthew 5: 43 – 44). The reason for loving enemies is that “you may be sons of



your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5: 45).

At the end of time, however, God will no longer shed physical blessings upon the unrighteous but will judge them. Likewise, at that time believers will no longer be obliged to love their unbelieving neighbor or their ungodly enemy, but will identify with God’s attitude of rejecting them in judgment.

Thus, the unbeliever is the believer’s neighbor in this age but not at the time of final judgment, since God fixes a great gulf between them and they no longer live in the same realm (the believer resides in the new creation, whereas the unbeliever resides in another dimension called “hell,” “the lake of fire,” etc.). Therefore, the paths of the righteous and the ungodly will not pass each other in the final, eternal state. So in the world to come, it is impossible to have the ungodly living near the godly as neighbors. The ethic of loving one’s neighbor continues only for believers’ loving one another in the new world, but love of the ungodly as a neighbor stops, partly since the ungodly are no longer in close proximity to love. God hates evil. At the end of time, when he no longer restrains the evil of the unbeliever, God will show his

holy hate for them by cursing them with eternal judgment. This hate is ultimately rejection of fellowship and separation of them into a completely separate dimension where judgment occurs. Likewise, believers identify with God's holy hatred and join in God's stance of rejecting the ungodly in judgment.

In the light of final judgment, when neighbor love ceases, that the psalmist's cursing and expression of hate toward his enemy are to be understood. Such an attitude is a suspension of the law to love one's enemy in this world because it is the end-time inbreaking into the present of the abrogation of loving even one's enemy. In such expressions, the psalmist's relationship to his own enemies (Psalm 69: 22 – 23) becomes an anticipation of Christ and his people's attitude toward all of God's enemies at the time of the final judgment.

#### SOME POSSIBLE OBJECTION TO THE IDEA THAT ETHICAL LAWS ARE SUSPENDED DURING TYPOLOGICAL EPISODES:

Among possible objections to this explanation is that it would lead to *moral relativity*. That is, if these are examples for God's people today to follow, then the implication might seem to be that if a person thinks a situation is unique, then that person does not need to

follow the ethical standards of God's commandments that regulate behavior among humans. But we have argued that the ethical suspensions occur only during the era of Israel in the Old Testament epoch and therefore unrepeatable. The reason for temporary interruptions is that certain episodes in Israel's history were uniquely designed to be prefigurements of later end-time events in redemptive history, whether events concerning Christ's first coming or his final coming & last judgment. Therefore, such brief behavioral suspensions do not occur during the era of the church age because God has designed no events during this time as foreshadowing of the future. The age of Israel was the age for which types were designed, not the age of the church. Therefore, the temporary moral interruptions are unique and not repeatable after the age of Israel, so that they are not examples for Christians to follow today.

*One might compare these suspensions of moral law in the Old Testament epoch to the suspension of miracles that occurred uniquely in the same period.* God has created the world to operate by natural laws. But God himself can suspend natural laws by intervening supernaturally. Interestingly, most of the miracles occur as part of typologies in the Old Testament or through Christ in the

New Testament (Christ being the fulfillment of the typologies). Thus, we have suspensions of both ethical and natural laws in the Old Testament because of God’s unique design of events as prefigurement of later events in the new covenant age.

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**SCHOLARS QUESTION KILL**  
**COMMAND LITERALNESS**

### Genocide and an Argument for “Hagiographic Hyperbole”

If those who edited the final version of these writings into one sequence were not using the text to affirm that genocide occurred at God’s command, what then *is* going on? This brings us to Wolterstorff’s second line of argument. He uses the term *hagiography* (“holy writing”)—which refers to certain idealized, sometimes exaggerated accounts of events. In the United States, for example, we have a hagiography of the Pilgrims interacting with noble savages, Washington chopping down a cherry tree, and Washington crossing the Delaware—events that may reflect historical realities but are “sanitized” or “air-brushed” to remove any defect, messiness, or nuance. These might have the benefit of teaching a moral lesson, and the storytelling is not intended to tell us exactly what occurred historically. Some literary liberties are being taken.

Nicholas Wolterstorff suggests that *hagiography*—though properly clarified and qualified—serves as a helpful way of looking at Joshua’s exploits:

The book of Joshua has to be read as a theologically oriented narration, stylized and hyperbolic at important points, of Israel’s early skirmishes in the promised land, with the story of these battles being framed by descriptions of two great ritualized events. The story as a whole celebrates Joshua as the great leader of his people, faithful to Yahweh, worthy successor of Moses. If we strip the word “hagiography” of its negative connotations, we can call it a hagiographic account of Joshua’s exploits. The book is not to be read as claiming that Joshua conquered the entire promised land, nor is it to be read as claiming that Joshua exterminated with the edge of the sword the entire

population of all the cities on the command of Yahweh to do so. The candor of the opening chapter of Judges, and of Yahweh's declaration to Joshua in his old age that "very much of the land still remains to be possessed," are closer to a literal statement of how things actually went.

Wolterstorff alludes to several features and literary figures of speech in the text to support this view. He notes that the early chapters of Judges, by and large, read like "down-to-earth history." However, he continues, anyone carefully reading the book of Joshua will recognize in it certain stylistic renderings—"formulaic phrasings" and "formulaic convention[s]"—and stylized language like "utterly destroy," "put to the edge of the sword," "leave alive nothing that breathes," and "man and woman, young and old," as well as "the highly ritualized character of some of the major events described."<sup>3</sup> "The book is framed by its opening narration of the ritualized crossing of the Jordan and by its closing narration of the equally ritualized ceremony of blessing and cursing that took place at Shechem; and the conquest narrative begins with the ritualized destruction of Jericho." A related ritualistic feature is "the mysterious sacral category of *being devoted to destruction*." However, the most significant is the use of formulaic language:

Anyone who reads the book of Joshua in one sitting cannot fail to be struck by the prominent employment of formulaic phrasings.... Far more important is the formulaic clause, "struck down all the inhabitants with the edge of the sword."

The first time one reads that Joshua struck down all the inhabitants of a city with the edge of the sword, namely, in the story of the conquest of Jericho (6:21), one makes nothing of it. But the phrasing—or close variants thereon—gets repeated, seven times in close succession in chapter 10, two more times in chapter 11, and several times in other chapters. The repetition makes it unmistakable that we are dealing here with a formulaic literary convention.

So while the accounts in Judges appear as "down-to-earth history," the passages in Joshua referring to "leaving alive none that breathes" and "putting all inhabitants to the sword" appear in contexts full of ritualistic, stylized, formulaic language. It therefore looks like something other than a mere literal description of what occurred. In light of these facts, Wolterstorff argues that Judges should be taken literally whereas Joshua is hagiographic history, a highly stylized, exaggerated account of the events designed to teach theological and moral points rather than to describe in detail what *literally* happened.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Copan, P., & Flannagan, M. (2014). [\*Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God\*](#) (pp. 94–95). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

## Arbitrary Divine Commands?

### THE EUTHYPHRO DILEMMA

As we have seen, key objections to divine command theory actually attack a straw man (the semantic and epistemological), and Morrision's attempt to salvage the epistemological objection fails. Though prevalent in the literature, these objections are not normally those considered decisive. The reason critics typically see a divine command theory as coming to ruin is due to a more substantive family of objections clustered around an argument known as the Euthyphro dilemma.

So what is this dilemma? In Plato's *Euthyphro* dialogue, Socrates is conversing with Euthyphro, who is on his way to prosecute his elderly father for murdering one of the household servants. Socrates wonders whether such legal action is fitting for a son; instead, it seems an "unholy" breach of loyalty. Eventually the topic of discussion comes around to defining what "piety" or "holiness" actually is. Then Socrates poses the most famous question of the entire dialogue: "Is what is holy holy because the gods approve it, or do they approve it because it is holy?" Initially, Euthyphro claims it is what the gods approve or find pleasing that determines piety or holiness. Socrates, however, shows this to be an arbitrary criterion—the will of the gods determines what is good, and they could just as easily will the opposite. Euthyphro comes to see that the gods are pleased with holiness or justice because these qualities are virtuous in themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Most contemporary discussions of the Euthyphro dilemma don't focus on Plato's original argument, which was applied to polytheistic religions and which exposed the contradictions bound up with such a view. Rather, they involve an adaptation of the argument for a monotheistic context, and they are rhetorically cast as a dilemma: "Are actions wrong because God prohibits them, or does God prohibit them because they are wrong?" Many a questioner assumes that *no matter which* option is taken, the result will be theological trouble.

Philosopher James Rachels gives a useful summary of the landscape. "Suppose God commands us to do what is right. Then *either* (a) the right actions are right because he commands them *or* (b) he commands them because they are right." Rachels goes on to note that either option yields problems for the believer in divine commands:

If we take option (a), then God's commands are, from a moral point of view, arbitrary; moreover, the doctrine of the goodness of God is rendered meaningless.... If we take option (b), then we have admitted there is a standard of right and wrong that is independent of God's will.

Rachels concludes: "Therefore, we must *either* regard God's commands as arbitrary, and give up the doctrine of the goodness of God, *or* admit there is a standard of right and wrong that is independent of God's will and give up the theological definitions of right and wrong."

Obviously, a divine command theorist can't accept the second option (b). To take that option—that God commands actions *because* they are right—entails that rightness and wrongness exist independently of and prior to God's commands. For his position to be defensible, the argument proceeds, the believer in divine commands must adopt a version of option (a). But that option, too, is said to be problematic.

Rachels offers two fairly standard criticisms of divine command theory. The first is that a divine command theory makes God's commands *arbitrary*. It's like an episode of the television

series *M\* A\* S\* H* in which chaplain Father Mulcahy is shocked to read a misprint in the Bibles he's received for the troops. Exodus 20:14 reads: "Thou *shalt* commit adultery." A critic like Rachels would ask something approximating this: Why can't God command the opposite of what he does if morality is the creation of God's will? So why can't God command murder and adultery just as he prohibits them? This we'll call *the arbitrariness objection*.

The second objection Rachels highlights is that divine command theory renders *empty* or *meaningless* the doctrine that God is good. That is, if what is good is what God commands, then when we say an action is good, we are saying, "That action is what God commands." And what sense does it make to say, "God is good," which means nothing more than, "God is what God commands"? This we label *the emptiness objection*.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Copan, P., & Flannagan, M. (2014). [\*Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God\*](#) (pp. 159–161). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

# WHAT GOD AND THE ISRAELITES ARE DOING IS OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD BECAUSE THE HEBREW WORD *HEREM* IS COMMONLY MISTRANSLATED

## *Proposition 15*

### *Herem* Does Not Mean “Utterly Destroy”

As discussed in proposition fourteen, the land is thematically represented variously as a temple or a city. What the land literally is, however, is neither of these things: literally, the land is a geopolitical domain. Likewise, Joshua’s wars are recounted in terms of the typology of macrocosmic order and ongoing creation, but because of the literal nature of the land their actual actions take the form of military conquest. Yahweh’s broader objective is revelation through identification (see proposition eleven), but his immediate purpose is to “place his name” in the land. Symbolism, metaphor, imagery, and typology are all important for properly interpreting the motives behind the actions, but in order to truly understand what is going on we need to also consider the literal significance of the literal actions themselves. Specifically, we need to understand what is the meaning of placing a name in a geopolitical domain and also what is the purpose of *herem*.

### **THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF *HEREM***

The common English translations of the Hebrew word *herem* (ASV “utterly destroy”; NIV “destroy totally”; CEB “place under the ban”; NET “utterly annihilate”; ESV “devote to destruction”) are misleading because they imply that the word specifies something that happens to the object (that is, it is destroyed). Alternatively, we suggest that the word actually refers to the *removal of something from human use*. The emphasis is not on the object but on everyone around the object; “no one shall make use of this.”<sup>2</sup> When *herem* objects are destroyed, the purpose of the destruction is to make sure that nobody can use it, but not all *herem* objects are destroyed. Most notably, Joshua 11:12–13 reports that all of the northern cities were *herem*, yet Joshua destroys only one of them (Hazor). Likewise, a field that is *herem* is not destroyed but becomes the property of the priests (Lev 27:21). Destruction, when it occurs, is a means to an end.

A Hittite document describes the devotion of a city in terms comparable to the Hebrew *herem*, complete with imprecations against rebuilders reminiscent of Joshua 6:26:

Tešub [a storm god] my lord ... handed it over to me and I have desolated it and [made it sacred]. As long as heaven and earth and mankind will be, in future no son of man may inhabit it! [I have offered] it to Tešub my lord, together with fields, farmyards, vineyards.... [Let] your bulls Šeri and Hurri [make it] their own grazing-land.... He who nevertheless will inhabit it and will take the grazing-land away from the bulls of Tešub ... let him be averse party to Tešub my lord.



*Herem* may often involve destruction, but “destruction” is not the essential *meaning* of *herem* because not everything that is *herem* is destroyed. *Herem* occurs first, and *because* the thing is *herem*, *therefore* the thing must be [blank], where [blank] is typically (but not always) some variant of “destroyed.” The comparison with the Hittite document here demonstrates what *herem* signifies (removal from human use) and why therefore the destruction is necessary. The Hittite king Mursili levels a rebellious city and offers the site to the god Tešub as a pasture for his bulls. Because the god is using the site as a pasture, nobody else can use it for anything; this is the thrust of the imprecation directed at “[whoever] ... will take the grazing-land away from the bulls”:

An area is granted in absolute ownership to the God but in it no temple was permitted to be build [*sic*], no economic activity was allowed to be carried on; on the contrary, the exploitation of the banned area was deemed as an “abomination” (*natta ara*) to the deity, the perpetrator of such an abomination was handed over to the divine judgment and put to death.

Compare this judgment with the accusation in Joshua 7:15, where violating the ban is “an outrageous thing in Israel,” and also Joshua 7:25, where Yahweh brings trouble on Achan.

The imprecation of the Hittite document is aimed at anyone who makes use of the site that has been set aside for the use of the deity. It is not aimed at the citizens of the town. Thus we see the following sequence of events:

1. The necessity of the town’s military defeat is determined. In the Hittite document, the reason is rebellion; in the case of Israel it is so the residents will not “become barbs in [Israel’s] eyes and thorns in [Israel’s] side” (Num 33:55).
2. The town is attacked by the army, and the defenders are defeated. The battle is not a consequence of the *herem*; *herem* happens after the battle is over.
3. The site is declared *herem* (forbidden from human use).
4. Violators of the ban (actual or hypothetical) are punished.

Of course, *herem* in the Old Testament is not limited to cities. There are four distinct categories of things that can be *herem*: inanimate objects, including plots of land; living individuals (people or animals); abstractions representing communities of people; and cities. What specifically happens to these varies depending on how they might be used and therefore on how that use might be prevented.

## ***HEREM* OF INANIMATE OBJECTS**

In Joshua the objects that are *herem* refer to the plunder taken from certain cities, most notably Jericho. In Joshua 6:17 everything in the city (except Rahab and her family) is *herem*. The metal objects in Joshua 6:19, 24, cannot be destroyed by burning (they could be melted, but the technology to destroy metal does not exist in the Bronze Age, and the metal itself is *herem*), so they are removed from use by consigning them to the divine realm through donation to the sanctuary. Likewise, the field in Leviticus 27:21 is assigned to the divine realm, beyond the ability of humans to make use of it. The metal objects taken by Achan are burned along with him (Josh 7:24–26), but the metal cannot be destroyed by fire, and there is no mention of giving it to the sanctuary; presumably it is buried under rocks with the rest (Josh 7:26). The end result is the same; the objects have been removed from human use.

## ***HEREM* OF LIVING INDIVIDUALS**

This is the rarest category. It is implied in Joshua 6:17 regarding the citizens of Jericho, since if the ban excluded people there would be no reason to specify the exemption of Rahab. It is also implied in Joshua 8:25; although the people of Ai are not explicitly *herem*, Joshua 8:2 says that Israel is to “do to Ai as [they] did to Jericho,” with only the “plunder and livestock” exempted. “Plunder” (*šālāl*) is nonspecific and can include people, as in Numbers 31:11 (“They took all the plunder and spoils, including the people and animals”), but since Joshua 8:2 adds “livestock” (which are included in the generic in Numbers), the plunder probably refers to material objects and food, not captives. However, since the *herem* takes place after the battle, the people have already been captured. “Putting them to the sword” is an alternative to their normal expected fate, which was slavery. They are being killed not for the purpose of making them dead but to remove them from use as slaves.

This is consistent with the *herem* of persons in Leviticus 27:28, which discusses the treatment of things “a person owns and devotes to the lord”—whether human or animal. A human that a person owns is a slave. The (slave) who is *herem* in Leviticus 27:29 is subsequently put to death, both so that they cannot be redeemed and so that they can no longer be used as a slave. It is worth remembering, however, that Leviticus is not a list of instructions that people are expected to follow but a circumscription of the logic of general principles (see proposition nine). The purpose of Leviticus 27:28–29 is not, therefore, to give instructions on how to do certain things with one’s slaves, or even what is permissible to do to one’s slaves (that is, you can *herem* them if you want). Leviticus 27 as a whole is describing the internal logic of redeeming various things that have been dedicated to the Lord in various ways. Leviticus 27:28 explains the conceptual difference between dedication and devotion (*herem*): “nothing *herem* ... may be sold or redeemed; everything so devoted is most holy to the LORD.” *Herem* things cannot be redeemed because they are off-limits for human use, and this is not a status that can ever be revoked.

The clarification in Leviticus 27:29, therefore, is not intended to give instructions on how to properly carry out the *herem*; note that no specification is given about what to do with devoted objects or animals. The purpose of Leviticus 27:28–29 is to explain the logic of what *herem* is, relative to what “dedication” is. Exodus 13:12–13 describes how the firstborn males of humans and both clean and unclean animals belong to Yahweh, a status that is invoked in Leviticus 27:27 at the beginning of the argument that continues through Leviticus 27:29. Both Exodus 13:13 and Leviticus 27:27 describe the redemption of unclean animals (in Exodus the price is a lamb, and unredeemed animals are killed, in Leviticus the price is 120 percent of the market value, and unredeemed animals are sold; since the point of both statements is illustrating internal logic rather than instructing, the difference is irrelevant). Leviticus 27:27 says nothing about clean animals or humans, but Numbers 18:15–17 describes the price for redeeming a human (five shekels) and also unclean animals (this time also five shekels, with no option not to redeem them), and also specifies that the clean animals cannot be redeemed but must be sacrificed.

Taken together, these three passages—Leviticus 27:27; Exodus 13:12–13; Numbers 18:15–17—describe the logic of dealing with things that belong to Yahweh. Clean animals cannot be redeemed; humans must be redeemed; unclean animals have some options. Both Numbers 18 and Leviticus 27 also note that there is some similarity between the firstborn claimed by Yahweh and things that are *herem*; they both belong to Yahweh. In Numbers 18, Yahweh gives those things that belong to him to the priests, both what is *herem* (Num 18:14) and the firstborn (Num 18:15). But the issue addressed in Leviticus 27 concerns a different aspect of the logic: the dedication of the firstborn works a certain way; does the *herem* work the same way? Must a *herem* human be

redeemed, as a firstborn human must? *Can a herem human even be redeemed?* Leviticus 27:29 specifically answers both of those questions: no, they must not, and no, they cannot. *Herem* works differently from other forms of dedication. The differing treatments of the unclean animals in the three passages indicate that the actual *handling* of the object is not really the point; it is possible that a *herem* human (slave) could be given to the sanctuary in the same manner as a field or other indestructible object. It is worth noting that this is exactly what they do to the Gibeonites in Joshua 9:27, whom they are supposed to *herem* but whom they are not allowed to kill (Josh 9:26). It is also likely that this is what happens to Samuel in 1 Samuel 1:28 (where the unique word *hiš'iltihû* [hiphil stem of *š'l*] is used; *herem* would not be appropriate since Hebrew children are not owned and cannot be said to be used). See proposition eighteen for a further discussion of the Gibeonites.

### ***HEREM* OF COMMUNAL ABSTRACTIONS**

In proposition eleven we argued that the nation of Israel refers to the abstract identity of the community, not to each and every individual Israelite. The same is true of the nations who inhabit the land. Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, and so on, does not refer to each and every person of those particular ethnicities individually; it refers to the community in which they participate and from which they draw their identity. So what does it mean to *herem* an identity?

If *herem* means “remove from use,” then removing an identity from use depends on what identity is used for. We suggest that the action is comparable to what we might try to accomplish by disbanding an organization. Doing so does not typically entail disposing of all the members, but it means that nobody is able to say “I am a member of X” anymore. After World War II, when the Allies destroyed the Third Reich, they did not kill every individual German soldier and citizen; they killed the leaders specifically and deliberately (compare to the litany of kings put to the sword in Josh 10–13) and also burned the flags, toppled the monuments, dismantled the government and chain of command, disarmed the military, occupied the cities, banned the symbols, vilified the ideology, and persecuted any attempt to resurrect it—but most of the people were left alone, and most of those who weren’t were casualties of war. This is what it means to *herem* an identity. We will discuss this in more detail in proposition sixteen.

### ***HEREM* OF CITIES**

The *herem* of cities is the most direct parallel to the Hittite text and refers to the practice of prohibiting all human activity at the site. It is also, however, the clearest indication that *herem* does not mean “destroy,” because apart from Jericho, Ai, and Hazor, no *herem* city is destroyed. This has led many interpreters to assume that references to “the city” actually refer to “all of the people in the city,” despite the distinction normally made between “the city” and “all who are in it” (Josh 6:17; 8:25); note that in Joshua 11:12 the royal cities are *herem* but not destroyed, while in Joshua 11:14 the people are *šmd* (NIV “completely destroyed”) but not *herem*. The difference comes from the fact that *herem* does not mean “destroy”; it means “remove from use.” The *city* needs to be “removed from use” (*herem*), which in turn means that everyone currently using it needs to go away.

The most common word throughout Genesis–Joshua for what God intends to do to the Canaanites is *grš*, NIV “drive out.” Like *herem*, the emphasis of this word concerns everyone around the object, not the object itself. It doesn’t matter where they go or what happens to them as long as they are gone. Killing them is one way to make them go away, of course, but it is not the

only way and probably not the preferred way (especially if they are fighting back). The terror that goes before the Israelite army (e.g., Ex 23:27; also Deut 2:25; 11:25) is probably intended to encourage them to flee rather than fight, or at least run away earlier than they otherwise might. Nowhere in the conquest account does the army systematically hunt down fleeing refugees; nowhere are urban citizens trapped in protracted sieges. Words like *šmd* (“annihilated”) are rhetorical; this kind of language is ubiquitous in ancient conquest accounts and serves to indicate decisive victory (compare to modern sports, where one team is said to annihilate their opponents even though nobody actually dies), but regardless of the exact method, the emptying of the city is literal. The combination of the hyperbolic rhetoric with the successful *herem* of the city does not mean “they didn’t really kill all of them, but they left some of them in the city.” Rather, it means “they decisively cleared them all out of the city, one way or another.” The *herem* is on the city, and so it is the city that must be removed from use, as was done in the event described in the Hittite document.

The most important parallel to the Hittite document, however, is what happens to the city as a result of the *herem*. Mursili gives the site of the city to his god Tešub to be used as a pasture for his bulls. Joshua likewise gives the cities to Yahweh for Yahweh to use, but Yahweh has a different use in mind. Mursili destroyed his city, but Joshua leaves most of them intact, because Yahweh’s intended use of them requires them intact: Yahweh is going to lease the land back to Israel. Because the land is *herem*, Israel cannot make use of it for itself, but it belongs to Yahweh, and so Yahweh can do whatever he wants with it. What Yahweh chooses to do with his land is to allow Israel to use it, provisionally on Israel’s fidelity to the covenant.

### **EXCURSUS: Hyperbole in Conquest Accounts**

If we want to understand the message that the conquest account is supposed to convey, it is useful to understand how the genre of conquest account operates and what it is used for. Ancient narratives are not what we would call historiography; they do not attempt to provide the audience with information to reconstruct what a video camera observing the event would have recorded. This understanding of the genre, in turn, allows for some fluidity in the documentation in regard to such things as the circumstances of the battle (including the date) and even the identity of the participants, but most notably these accounts tend to exaggerate the magnitude of the victory and the scale of the slaughter inflicted on the enemies. This does not mean that the accounts are lies in the sense that we mean when we call them propaganda; both author and audience understand the genre, so there is no intention to deceive. But the accounts are primarily interested in *interpreting* the event and only secondarily interested in documenting the phenomena that accompanied it.

Normally, in order to serve whatever purpose the interpretation is employed for (typically in the ancient Near East, the legitimation of the ruler who commissioned it) the event had to actually occur more or less as described; a king would not defend his right to rule based on a battle that never took place. The same is true of Israelite literature, including the conquest in Joshua. We should assume that a military campaign of some kind occurred, and since the record is inspired we should assume that the writer’s interpretation of the event is accurate, at least insofar as it claims to represent the purposes of God. But the actual details of the totality of the destruction or the quantity of victims is likely couched in rhetorical hyperbole, in accordance with the expectations of the genre.

## *Proposition 16*

### *Herem* Against Communities Focuses on Destroying Identity, Not Killing People of Certain Ethnicities

The idea that the conquest is an act of genocide is based on the assumption that the *herem* of the Canaanite nations is a command to kill people of a particular ethnicity (derived from Deut 7:2). The idea that the *herem* is divine punishment for offenses against God is based on the assumption that the *herem* of Israelite idolaters in Deuteronomy 13:15 (also Ex 22:20) is a command to carry out a death sentence in consequence for a particular crime. Both of these assumptions are false. *Herem* does not mean “destroy”; it means “remove from use.” Individual people who are not slaves (as enemies and idolaters are not) cannot be removed from use because they are not used. What is being removed from use (via subsequent destruction) is not people but rather the identity that those people use to define themselves. This is true in the case of the larger Canaanite national identities and also of smaller subcommunities within Israel.

#### ***HEREM* OF CANAANITE NATIONAL IDENTITIES**

The Israelite community had an ethnic identity marker, but the community of the people of the covenant order was nonetheless not an ethnocracy. Foreigners were permitted to live among the people of Israel, and Israel was not commanded to annihilate them. In fact, they are told exactly the opposite: “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt” (Lev 19:33–34). Further, “foreigner ... in your land” does not merely refer to slaves (as in Ex 12:44) or those inducted into the community (circumcised); otherwise the prohibition in Exodus 12:48 (“A foreigner residing among you who wants to celebrate the Lord’s Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised”) would be redundant. Thus we can see that simply being a non-Israelite living in the land did not make one subject to *herem*. This is because, once again, the purpose of the *herem* is to remove a community identity from use, not to kill individual people.

As discussed in proposition eight, the text does not depict anything wrong with non-Israelite people using non-Israelite identities in principle. The people living outside the land are allowed to keep using their identities, along with any cultic prostitution, child sacrifice, or idol worship that participation in those communities might entail. Even those within the land are allowed (by God) to keep their identities in order to test Israel in Judges 2:22. There is nothing inherently wrong with using a non-Israelite identity, just as there is nothing inherently wrong with using a city; the reason for a city being removed from use is not because cities ought not to be used in principle. Unlike a city, however, the Canaanite identities are not given to Yahweh for Yahweh to use; the phrase “*herem* to/for Yahweh” is never used of abstractions, only individuals or objects, and it is hard to imagine what Yahweh would do with a human community identity in any case. The idea of “changed in status as preparation for divine use” (see proposition eleven) does not therefore seem to apply to the Canaanite community identities. Further, the purpose cannot be to preserve the integrity of a larger community, because the Canaanites have no participation whatsoever in the Israelite community. Therefore we should assume that the *herem* entails its most basic definition: the identity is removed from use *so that it cannot be used*.

In one sense, the identity needs to be removed so that the Canaanite nations cannot make use of it. This is not because it is *inherently* wrong (in a moral sense) for them to do so, but it would nonetheless have negative consequences for the Israelite occupiers. When Assyria or Babylon conquered a territory, they would destroy the national identity of the conquered nation by killing or deporting the king and planting a puppet regent on the throne, deporting the cultic and community leaders, destroying cities and temples, carrying away or destroying the images of the gods, and levying a heavy tribute to depress the economy. The purpose of this was to strip away anything the conquered people could rally around in order to stage a rebellion. In 2 Kings 19:11 Sennacherib brags to Hezekiah that he has *h̄rm* all of the previous enemies of Assyria (NIV “destroying them completely”). The Canaanite armies are annihilated (or at least soundly defeated) during the conquest, but if the national identity that deployed the army is not destroyed, they will eventually raise another one (as Midian does in Judg 6:1–6, despite being defeated in Num 31:7–11). Removing the identity of a conquered people is therefore a pragmatic activity that was a standard procedure of ancient warfare (see proposition seventeen).

More importantly, however, the identity needs to be removed so that *Israel* cannot make use of it. This is the essence of the threat that “they will become snares and traps for you” (Josh 23:13; Judg 2:3). With non-Israelite identities coexisting alongside the Israelite identity, syncretism, appropriating foreign religious customs and beliefs, becomes a distinct possibility, bordering on inevitable. With a non-Israelite community identity nearby, it is possible that Israelites will marry outside their community and thus lose the Israelite identity marker and vanish. More seriously, microcommunities within Israel might compromise their Israelite identity (either through exogamy or syncretism) and therefore either subject themselves to *herem* or, if left alone, subject the entire community to the covenant curses.

Communities of foreigners are allowed to remain among Israel (see, for example, the [Philistine] Kerethites and Pelethites that form David’s personal guards), but even if they are not inducted into the Israelite community they are still required to observe the covenant order (Ex 20:10; Lev 17:8; 18:26; and especially Lev 24:22). They are not permitted to eat the Passover and, with the exception of Caleb and his family, are not given an inheritance in the land (that is, they cannot own property), but they are allowed to exist as microcommunities just as Israelite microcommunities do. Still, even if they do not themselves identify with the people of the covenant order they are not allowed to do anything that those who are under the identity of the covenant order would not be allowed to do. What is forbidden in the land of Israel is *tô ‘ēbâ* (to Yahweh), that which is outside the covenant order. If foreigners observe the covenant order, they will not be *tô ‘ēbâ* and will not be a snare for the Israelites, and therefore there is no reason to *herem* them.

The issue at stake does not concern morality versus immorality, purity versus impurity, or innocence versus crime. The dichotomy is between *within* the covenant order and *outside* the covenant order. We might possibly imagine Israel as being a patient undergoing surgery. The procedure carries benefits for them (covenant blessing and relationship with deity in this case), but meanwhile it also carries certain vulnerabilities. The conquest is equivalent to sterilizing the operating room. We don’t have anything in particular against ordinary hospital staff, visitors, pets, food, or even common bacteria, but when the time comes for surgery we clear them all out of the operating room, not because we are angered or offended by anything they are or do but because it is necessary for the patient that the environment be sterile. Contaminants are *tô ‘ēbâ* to the operating room; visitors may be allowed inside, but if they are, they must be as sterile as the rest of the environment.

### EXCURSUS: What Is Happening in Deuteronomy 7

As discussed in proposition thirteen, the word commonly used to designate something outside the covenant order is *tô 'ēbâ* (specifically “*tô 'ēbâ* to Yahweh,” e.g., Deut 7:25). The Canaanite nations are *tô 'ēbâ* by default, since the covenant was not made with them, and everything in the land that is *tô 'ēbâ* is to be *herem* (“removed from use”). This is expressed most clearly in Deuteronomy 7. The (infamous) command to “*herem* them ... show them no mercy” in Deuteronomy 7:2 refers, as we have demonstrated, to destroying identities, not people, as is indicated by the destruction of identity markers (that is, cult objects) in Deuteronomy 7:5. The list of things Israelites are to do to them consists of breaking down their altars, smashing their sacred stones, cutting down their Asherah poles, and burning their idols in the fire; it does not include killing every last one of them. Indeed, if every last one of them were killed, the prohibition in Deuteronomy 7:3 against intermarriage would be unnecessary. The references to nations (Deut 7:2, 17, 22), peoples (Deut 7:16, 19), and even survivors (Deut 7:20) all refer to community identities, not individuals (compare to Judg 1:25–26, where the survivor preserves the identity of his community by building a city). This is especially the case with the kings (Deut 7:24), who are the embodiment of the identity of the community they lead (which is why they are specifically killed throughout Joshua’s campaigns) and whose names (identity) are “wipe[d] out ... from under heaven” (Deut 7:24). We should also note that God’s threat in Deuteronomy 7:4 is not against the Canaanites (that is, it does not say “My anger burns against them and I wish for them to be destroyed”) but rather against Israel: “The LORD’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.”

Deuteronomy 7:25 repeats the command to destroy the cult objects, this time specifying that they are *tô 'ēbâ*, that is, contrary to covenant order. Deuteronomy 7:26 warns not to “bring a *tô 'ēbâ* thing into your house,” which generally refers to a household (that is, a family microidentity) rather than a building, in which case “bring into” does not mean “carry into a space” but rather more idiomatically “adopt as your own.” The penalty for doing so is “you, like it, will be *herem*” (Deut 7:26). Note that the *you* refers to the entire community, not only the building where the idol was brought or even the household that adopted it. The opposite of “bring in” that they are told to do instead is *t 'b* (NIV “detest”). This is the verbal form of the same root from which *tô 'ēbâ* is derived, and it means “isolate apart from the identity of the community.” In Deuteronomy 23:7 the same word (translated “despise” in the NIV) is contrasted with integrating into the community. Thus Deuteronomy 7 is about preserving the integrity of the Israelite community by making sure that *tô 'ēbâ* things stay outside it, where “stay outside” means “are not made use of,” which is designated by *herem*. If Israel associates with *tô 'ēbâ*, Israel itself will become *tô 'ēbâ*, at which point Israel will be destroyed by the covenant curses. But, as discussed in proposition eleven, this is not a penalty for *tô 'ēbâ* in principle; only in Israel is *tô 'ēbâ* a punishable offense, because only Israel is accountable to the covenant. The crime of Israel is not uncouth behavior but covenant infidelity. The people of Canaan cannot be punished for covenant infidelity because they had no covenant to break.

### *Proposition 17*

## The Wars of Israelite Conquest Were Fought in the Same Manner as All Ancient Wars

Because we are not citizens of the ancient Near East, many of the actions that Joshua and his army are either commanded to perform or depicted as carrying out seem bizarre and nonsensical to us. Consequently, many interpreters assume that they would have seemed equally bizarre and nonsensical to Joshua's enemies. This results in the idea that the Bible is describing a new and innovative process for waging war. Sometimes this innovation is seen as a brutal and barbaric development from the more civilized warfare of Israel's neighbors; other times it is seen as a step toward making war more humane, as if God's commands through Moses were a prototype of the Geneva Convention. However, both of these interpretations are misguided, because Joshua's wars are conducted more or less in the same way that all war was conducted in the ancient Near East.

Old Testament interpreters (such as Gerhard von Rad) dubbed the ideology found in the conquest "holy war" (or sometimes "YHWH war") and considered it a combination of ritual and war that embodied the purest essence of Israelite orthodoxy. Depending on personal biases, interpreters either contrast this (hypothetical) barbarism with a more humane and cosmopolitan (by modern standards) religious ideal supposedly dredged out of the New Testament, or they argue that the same (hypothetical) barbarism forms the essence of the orthodoxy of the New Testament as well and therefore of Christianity. Both of these approaches are misguided because the premises are false. Israelite warfare, at least in regard to the integration of war and religion, operates almost exactly like warfare ideology everywhere else in the ancient Near East. Specifically, we will examine the ritual/cultic elements most commonly invoked to symbolize a Yahweh war: oracles to determine divine favor; the consecration of soldiers and weapons; the presence of the battle palladium; the divine vanguard, which is the belief that the deity accompanies the army; and the *herem*. All of these are comparable to the standard practices of ancient Near Eastern warfare. We will also discuss some significant differences between Israelite and other ideologies of war.

### *Proposition 18*

## Rahab and the Gibeonites Are Not Exceptions to the *Herem*, and the Use of *Herem* Against the Amalekites Does Not Indicate That *Herem* Is Punishment

As discussed in proposition sixteen, the *herem* of communities is based on problems posed by identity, not genetics, although there is some overlap insofar as genetics are sometimes used as a grounding for identity. The Gibeonites as *individuals* are *herem* in the sense that the individuals are not being used as slaves; they serve the sanctuary as woodcutters and water carriers (Josh 9:21).



However, their community *identity* as the people of Gibeon remains intact: “The Gibeonites were *not a part of Israel* but were *survivors of the Amorites*” (2 Sam 21:2 NIV). In 2 Samuel 21, we learn that King Saul tried to annihilate the Gibeonites “in his zeal for Israel and Judah” (2 Sam 21:2), presumably in a self-motivated effort to complete the conquest. What he should have done, which would also have respected their treaty with Joshua, was destroy their identity as the people of Gibeon and make them a part of Israel. Instead, he kills individuals, which serves no purpose since the individuals are already removed from use, and also violates the treaty, which in turn brings only the wrath of Yahweh (2 Sam 21:1).

The purpose of the military action that expels the Canaanites is so that they will not “become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides” (Num 33:55). Similar injunctions in Exodus 34:12–15 and Deuteronomy 7:2–4 indicate that the reason Israel is not to make treaties (as they do with the Gibeonites) is ultimately for Israel’s sake, and the decision to obey (or not) constitutes part of their choice between “life and prosperity” or “death and destruction” (Deut 30:15). William Ford notes that, if Yahweh’s objective were the death of the Gibeonites, he could easily rain down rocks on them, treaty or no treaty; instead, he rains down rocks on their enemies (Josh 10:1–11). Although Joshua 9 does not use the word, the assignment of the Gibeonites to the sanctuary indicates that they are indeed *herem*; nobody in Israel is using them (as slaves). However, because they are *also* not a part of Israel they give Israel trouble (immediately in Josh 10:6–7, but continuing all the way to 2 Sam 21).

Rahab stands in contrast to the Gibeonites, whose persons are *herem* but whose identity is not. Rahab “lives among the Israelites” (Josh 6:25), and that she marries into an Israelite family (Mt 1:5) indicates that her person is not proscribed from use. Because Rahab abandons her Canaanite identity and becomes an Israelite, the identity she represented is gone, and therefore to *herem* her personally would serve no purpose. It is worth noting that the negative foil of Rahab in Judges 1:25 does not assimilate but goes and builds a city, which of course cancels out the accomplishment of the *herem* of the original occupants of Bethel, since their identity survives. Rahab is not an exception to the *herem*; she is the embodiment of it.

Of course, converting everyone is not the actual objective of the *herem* any more than killing everyone is; conversion would have accomplished it, but it is not expected (see Josh 11:20). As discussed in proposition sixteen, the objective is to remove the various Canaanite identities from the use of every individual who remains in the land, by one way or another.

## THE AMALEKITES IN 1 SAMUEL 15

*Herem* against communities is intended to destroy identity, not to kill people. We see this further in the case of the Amalekites, whose destruction is promised in the Pentateuch and carried out in 1 Samuel 15. That the target is the identity is specified in Exodus 17:14 and Deuteronomy 25:19 by the idiom “blot out [the name],” which is the same fate that awaits the tribe of Benjamin in Judges 17 (even after Israelite wives are found for some of the survivors). Therefore, as discussed in proposition sixteen, being blotted out cannot possibly mean having one’s genetic legacy die out. The same applies to a microidentity within Israel in Deuteronomy 25:5–6: “If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted

out from Israel.” Here it is the family *identity*, not genetics, that is preserved, since of course levirate marriage does nothing to pass on the genes of the deceased. We should also note that Samuel in 1 Samuel 15 makes no attempt to kill the animals but only kills the king (1 Sam 15:32). This is because the king is the embodiment and personification of the community identity, as also demonstrated by the promise in Deuteronomy 7:24, where the names of the kings will be wiped out, and by the (talionic) proclamation of Samuel in 1 Samuel 15:33 that “[Agag’s] mother [will] be childless” (that is, Agag’s family line will end). Samuel thus carries out the intent of the *herem*, not by killing every last ethnic Amalekite and all of their animals (which he does not do) but by terminating the final marker of Amalekite community identity. Thus the *herem* in 1 Samuel 15 has nothing to do with offering the Amalekites as sacrifices to Yahweh, as some interpreters are inclined to propose; as with all *herem* against communities, it has to do with destroying the identity (or failing to do so).

As discussed in proposition five, the punishment against Amalek is carried out in retribution for offenses against the Israelite community (1 Sam 15:2), not for moral or cultic offenses that have invoked the wrath of deity and must be propitiated. The *herem* against community identity is ultimately for the sake of Israel, not for the sake of Yahweh (see proposition sixteen), and in Judges 2:3 Yahweh denies this benefit to Israel (see also Judg 2:22–23; 3:1). Thus, when David fights the Philistines and Jebusites, there is no command to *herem* them. The Amalekites in Saul’s day are an exception to the new “allow the nations to remain and test Israel” policy because of “what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt” (1 Sam 15:2 NIV). Blotting out an identity *can* be a punishment (as in Ps 9:5; 34:16; 106:13–15), but that does not mean that it is a punishment every time it happens (the dead brother in Deut 25:6 was not punished) or that *herem* is the only way to carry it out (Yahweh intends to do it himself in Deut 9:14, and none of David’s enemies in the Psalms are ever *herem*). But even when it is a punishment, there is no indication that it occurs specifically for offense against deity; offense against humans is far more common. Thus there is no basis for understanding the *herem* of the Amalekites as propitiation for offense against deity.

### EXCURSUS: *Herem* and the Removal of Impurity

In Leviticus 18:24, the land is impure; thereafter, the land is *herem* and thereby inducted into Yahweh’s constellation (“holy”). However, it does not appear that *herem* is thereby a mechanism for the removal of impurity. As discussed in proposition ten, making something holy is not the same as making something clean (*thr*, removing its impurity). In Leviticus 27:28 the things that are *herem* are most holy, but causing a thing to become holy is something that God does, not something that humans do. Additionally, “holy” means “co-identified with deity,” not “free of impurity [and thereby suitable for ritual use].” Unclean animals that are devoted are both holy and unclean, and *herem* sites do not become temples suitable for ritual. Indeed, as we discussed in proposition fifteen, *herem* means “remove from use,” so the idea of a thing being removed from use (*herem*) in order to make it suitable for ritual use (clean) is somewhat oxymoronic.

In addition to the misguided conception that *herem* represents the process by which a thing can become most holy, some interpreters believe that *herem* removes impurity as a kind of propitiation for the wrath of deity against the object. This interpretation is normally supported by citing Deuteronomy 13:15–16: “You must *hrm* it, both its people and its livestock. You are to gather all the plunder of the town into the middle of the public square and completely burn [*šrp*] the town and all its plunder as a whole burnt offering [*kālîl*] to the LORD your God.”

Interpreters often combine this verse with Leviticus 27:28 (“every *herem* is most holy to the LORD”) to freely intersperse the concepts of holiness, sacrifice, and *herem* whenever any one of the three is mentioned: “Joshua’s *herem* on Jericho implies that not only have its people and property been consigned to God, but also their very land—all are ‘most holy.’” Likewise, “in Biblical Hebrew it [*herem*] bears a one-sided relationship to the verb *qadaš*, expressing solely the negative aspect of sanctification.” A closer examination of the text, however, indicates that the free exchange of concepts is not entirely warranted.

The word for “burnt offering” when it refers to a sacrifice is *’ōlâ*, not *kālîl*. *Kālîl* is an adverb (or adjective) that means “entirely.” The two words (*kālîl*, *’ōlâ*) are used together in 1 Samuel 7:9 (also translated “whole burnt offering”), but in Deuteronomy 13 the word for “offering” is not used, so the phrase means “burn all of it.” More importantly, the word here for “burn” (*šrp*) never refers to sacrifice; the word for a burnt sacrifice is *qtr*, as in Exodus 29:13, “take all the fat . . . and burn [*qtr*] them on the altar.” Significantly, this burning is immediately *contrasted* with the disposal by fire of that which is *unsuitable* for sacrifice: “burn [*šrp*] the bull’s flesh . . . outside the camp” (Ex 29:14). The purpose of *herem* is not to kill or destroy things, either to make them clean or to please Yahweh as a form of sacrifice. The purpose of *herem* is to remove that thing from use.

This is consistent with the examples of *herem* elsewhere in the ancient Near East. In the Hittite document described in proposition fifteen, the land is offered and made sacred—generic terms that also describe rituals—but the purpose of the action is different from that of the sacred offerings presented in temples. In the ancient Near East, ritual offerings were intended to meet the needs of the gods (usually by feeding them) so that the gods would in turn bestow their favor. However, while ritual offerings are presented to the gods because the gods need food, Mursili does not present his conquered site to the storm god because the storm god needs a pasture. Rather, the offering is a gesture of royal piety signifying the king’s gratitude to the god for aiding him in the victory. In Israel offerings serve different purposes than they do in Mesopotamia. Their purpose is to represent Yahweh favorably because proper cultic behavior is an indication of order and thereby of divine competence (see proposition eleven). Likewise, Joshua’s *herem* of the Canaanite cities is not to demonstrate piety but to carry out the obligation to surrender the right to administer territory in the context of a vassal treaty (see proposition nineteen). However, the point still stands that ritual offerings serve a different purpose from *herem* in both the ancient Near East and Israel, and therefore the two concepts cannot be freely exchanged.

There are several secondary objectives of the *herem* documented in various places throughout the text. In Judges 20 it serves as a means to an end to procure wives for the Benjaminites. It is used to intimidate enemies in 2 Kings 19:11, and it is used as punishment for aggressive actions toward Israel in 1 Samuel 15 and Isaiah 34, and for Israel’s covenant infidelity in Zechariah 14:11. These secondary objectives are not all interchangeable in any given circumstance, but none of them involves purifying the object for ritual use. However, as we discussed in proposition fourteen, though the land is figuratively described as a temple to identify it as a locus of order, it is not literally a temple where literal rituals are performed. Consequently, the removal of impurity is likewise figurative, signifying the change in status from a place of nonorder to a place that embodies order. The impurity itself is real, but the removal of the impurity is mechanically accomplished by the *kpr* of the sanctuary on the Day of Atonement, which “is among them in the midst of their uncleanness” (Lev 16:16), not by the *herem* of the territory during the conquest.

### *Proposition 19*

## The Logic of the *Herem* in the Event of the Conquest Operates in the Context of Israel's Vassal Treaty

The Israelite covenant functions as a vassal treaty, and in the event of the conquest Yahweh assumes the role of an ancient Near Eastern emperor. The word *herem* refers to removing something from human use. In the case of territory or cities, it normally implies giving that thing to a deity for the deity to use. In ordinary circumstances a conqueror would only ban a single city as a gesture of pious devotion (see excursus in proposition eighteen), but Joshua, in accordance with Yahweh's command, effectively bans all of the land he acquires. This deviation from normal practice is because of what Yahweh intends to do with the land, which is described in Deuteronomy as "the place I have chosen to set my name."

### ***HEREM* IN THE CONTEXT OF ISRAEL'S VASSAL TREATY**

A treaty concerns the actions and obligations of the vassal, while a grant concerns the actions and obligations of the suzerain. Joshua 1–11 is the record of Israel carrying out the terms of the treaty; this is the thrust of the repeated phrase "[he did] ... as the LORD commanded Moses." Joshua 12–24 then describes the land grant awarded by the suzerain in return. The exile, when it occurs, represents the emperor removing rebellious vassals from his land and putting its nation to *herem* (that is, destroying their national identity), as emperors would commonly do (see 2 Kings 19:11; Zech 14:11; and discussion in proposition sixteen). However, as discussed in proposition eight, this motive cannot be extrapolated to Yahweh's treatment of the Canaanites. Since the treaty (represented by the covenant) is made with Israel and not with Canaan, it is not possible to imagine the Canaanites as rebellious vassals being disciplined for insurrection, as was also the case in the Hittite example of the *herem* (see proposition fifteen). The purpose of the conquest is to carve out new territory, not to repatriate rightful territory. This is part of the effect achieved by the portrayal of the Canaanites as invincible barbarians (see proposition twelve); they owe no allegiance to the overlord and are simply enemies.

Israel accepts the covenant of its own volition (Ex 24:7; Josh 8:30–35). While vassals in the ancient Near East were often subjugated through conquest (or as an alternative to conquest; see 2 Kings 12:18; 15:19–20), there are examples of vassals submitting themselves voluntarily. Gyges patriated himself to Assurbanipal in order to defeat the Cimmerians (likewise depicted as invincible barbarians), and a Hittite treaty describes a king named Mashuiluwa voluntarily submitting to Hatti in order to gain military assistance against usurpers in his homeland.<sup>13</sup> Whether voluntary or not, vassal treaties normally impose obligations or restrictions as part of their terms. These obligations, however, are not random and arbitrary metrics to determine the vassal's degree of loyalty. Sovereigns do not test their vassals with unseemly demands in order to discover whether the vassal is loyal enough to carry them out. Rather, the demands placed on vassals are eminently pragmatic. As discussed in proposition eight, this probably extends to Israel's cultic obligations as well; a stipulation in the aforementioned Hittite treaty—"you shall not desire any other power over you"—is reminiscent of the Israelite prohibition on worshiping other gods or idolatry. But for our present purposes, this means we should assume that the command to *herem* the territory of Canaan also served some pragmatic purpose in the context of the suzerain-vassal relationship between

Yahweh and Israel. An examination of such relationships in the ancient Near East suggests that this purpose was a symbolic divestiture of Israel's right to administer its own territory, instead acknowledging the supreme authority of the sovereign.

## THE SURRENDER OF THE RIGHT TO ADMINISTER TERRITORY

One common obligation placed on vassals was the acknowledgment of their submissive status through symbolic actions. Emissaries from subjugated territories are known to have presented model cities, representing their countries, to the suzerain. Some scholars suggest that this ceremony was specifically part of the establishment of a new capital city.<sup>17</sup> As discussed in proposition fourteen, Israel's counterpart to the thematic imagery of "capital city" is the land under the covenant, so it seems reasonable that the inauguration of the covenant as a functioning center of order would recapitulate that ceremony in some way. Thus Israel as a vassal is expected to present its territory to their sovereign as recognition of its vassal status.

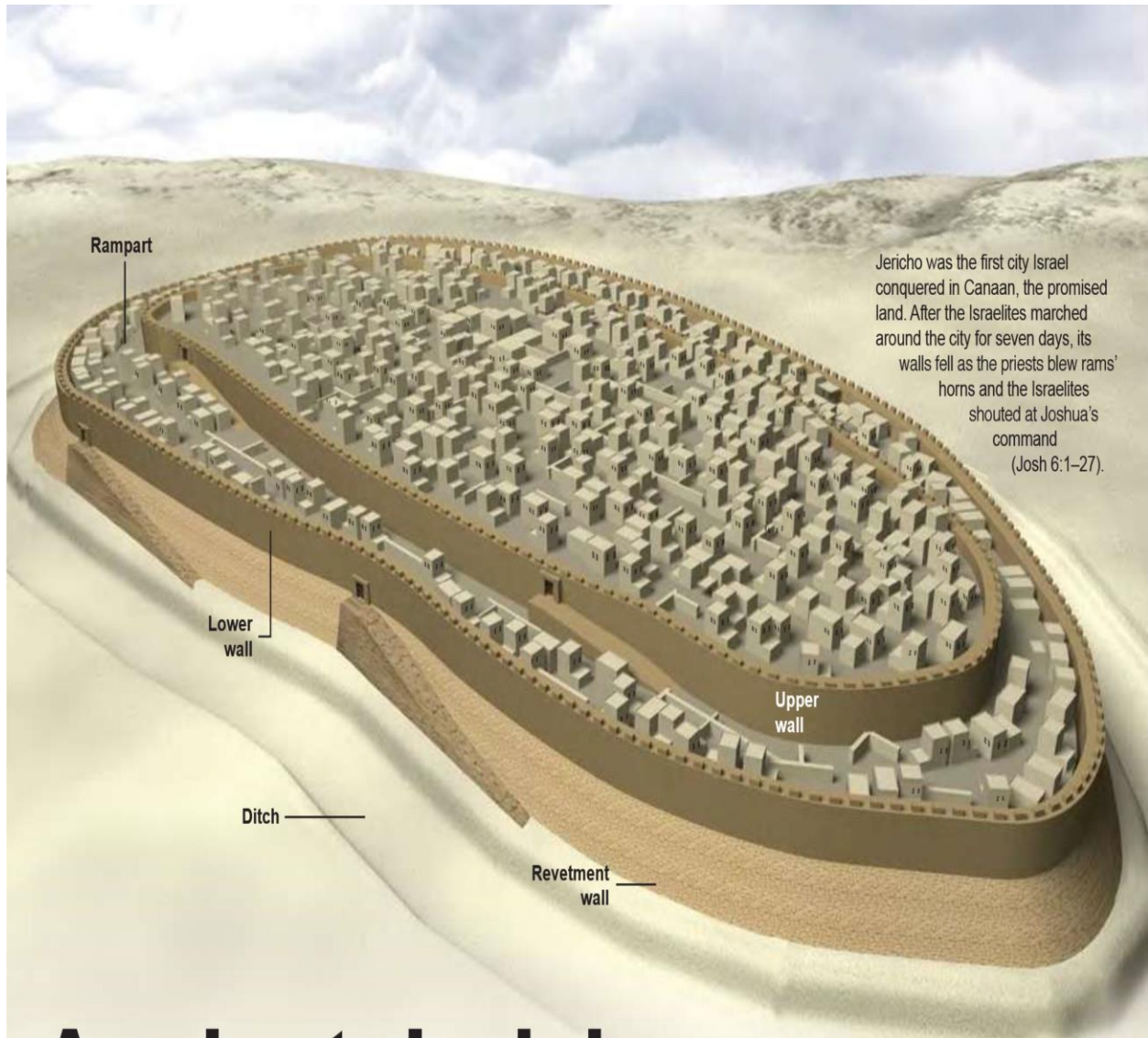
One of the conditions of being a vassal was the admission that the ownership and distribution of the territory belonged to the sovereign, not the regent. This is probably what the symbolic presentation of territory was supposed to affirm; the region belonged to the emperor, and the regent was given authority over it at the king's discretion, not by their own inherent right. The Hittite treaty emphasizes repeatedly that the king could have made *anybody* regent instead: "I could have made someone else lord in the land ... [but] I have given ... your land back to you, and I have installed you in lordship for the land." Israel, as Yahweh's vassal, is likewise reminded of its subordinate status (e.g., Lev 25:23, "the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers") and required to symbolically divest its own right to administer its territory. It does not present model cities because its sovereign is a deity, not a human; instead, the symbolic yielding of the right to control territory takes the form of the action used to turn control of a territory over to a deity. That action, as described in proposition fifteen, is the *herem*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Walton, J. H., & Walton, J. H. (2017). [\*The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanites\*](#) (pp. 167–229). Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press.

## **MIDDLE MEDITATING PRAGMATIC POSITION**

**“None of the standard "models" does full justice to the biblical evidence, but each may capture an aspect of the biblical portrayal. Military conquest certainly played a major part in Israel's entry into Canaan & archaeology provides at least some interesting correlations. Further, archaeological surface surveys indicate proliferation of small settlements in the central hill country, beginning in the late thirteenth century B.C., whose inhabitants appear to have avoided eating pork. It is tempting to associate these new villages with the settling down of Israelites, perhaps after a longer or shorter period of existence as nomadic herdsman in Canaan. Peaceful infiltration may have played some part in the central settlement; Gibeon area came under Israelite control without a fight (chapter 9), as did perhaps Shechem and other sites. Revolt and realignment by disaffected Canaanites such as Rahab almost certainly contributed to Israel's "mixed multitude" (Exodus 12:38), so some degree of "endogenous" origin need not be ruled out.”**



# Ancient Jericho

## Toward the end of the Bronze Age

Archaeological excavations reveal that Jericho was violently destroyed sometime toward the end of the Bronze Age. The walls seem to have been thrown down by sudden force, as if by an earthquake. Charred wood shows that what was left of the city was burned. Excavators have also found food supplies buried in the destroyed city, which shows it was not captured by siege.



# DIG VIEW: THE JERICHO WALLS







**Apologist Assertion: Astronomers Have Back-calculated The Long Day**



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## G. K. Beale Addresses These Arguments:

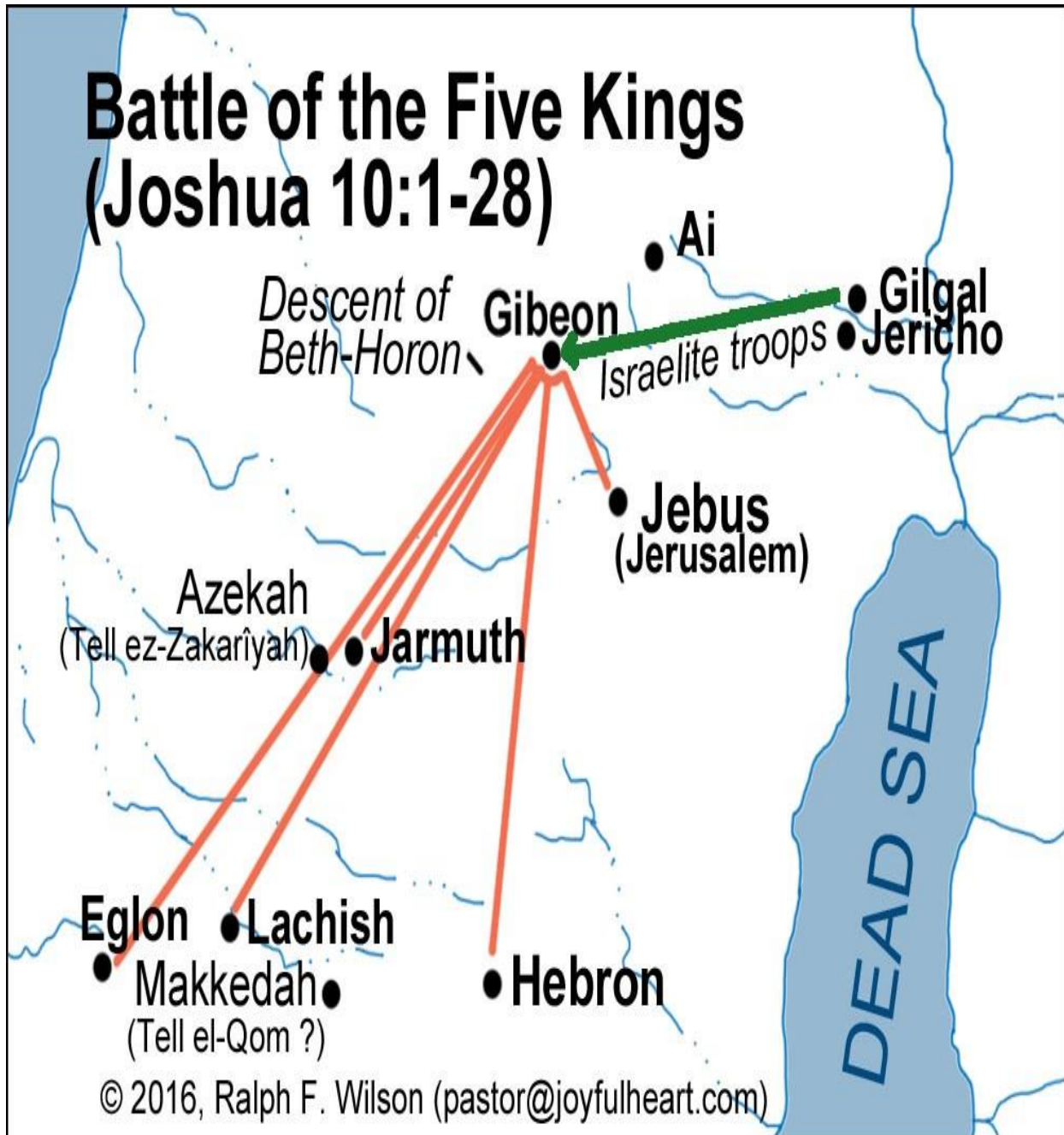
### EXCURSUS: IS THE DIVINE COMMAND TO KILL ALL THE CANAANITE WOMEN AND CHILDREN NOT MEANT TO BE TAKEN THAT LITERALLY?

As was mentioned at the beginning, one solution to the problem of God's command to annihilate all Canaanites is that it is mainly figurative and merely refers to wiping out only all the armies of the Canaanites, rather than non-combatants. This is such an important perspective that it deserves some summary and evaluation, since, if true, the moral problem begins to dissolve significantly. This is a very possible approach, but not in the end ultimately probable. In particular, this perspective argues that the expressions to destroy all the Canaanites constitute heightened exaggeration (hyperbole) to make the point not that every man, woman, and child is to be wiped out but that there is to be a total and decisive victory over only the fighting forces of the enemy Canaanites, though even some of those forces are considered to have not been wiped out.

Such exaggerated language in describing defeats was commonplace in the ancient Near East, and it is claimed that the expressions in Joshua and Judges likewise reflect this rhetorical device.

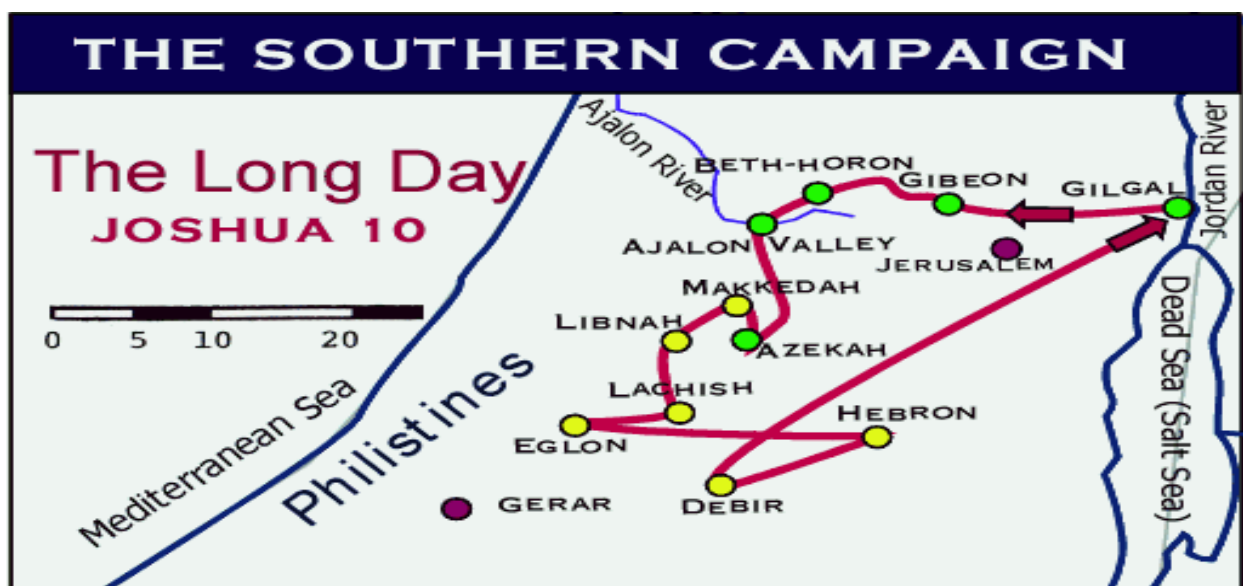
While this perspective is plausible, the evidence adduced to prove it is not clear. In support, sometimes appeal is made to the observation that Joshua 10: 40 – 42 says that Joshua completely wiped out all the Canaanites: “Thus Joshua struck all the land, the hill country and the Negev and the lowland and the slopes and all their kings. He left no survivor, but he utterly destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded” (v. 40). It is clear, however, that in the directly following context there are still plenty of Canaanite enemies around to defeat (Joshua 11: 1 – 5). But this reason for exaggeration, while possible, does not best explain the textual evidence in Joshua. A more persuasive is not so much that Joshua 10 uses highly exaggerated language but that the universal-sounding language is meant to indicate that in all those parts of Canaan that Joshua attacked, he killed *the majority of living beings*. Thus, the language is neither highly figurative or pedantically literal. Then Joshua 11: 1 – 5 reveals other areas not mentioned in 10: 40 – 42 that

Joshua had not yet engaged in battle. Since 11: 1 – 5 follows right on the heels of 10: 40 – 42, it is likely that the language of the latter is to be understood in a more limited manner than referring to every single part of the Promised Land.



But then Joshua 11: 6 – 15 shows that Israel defeated all these northern enemies mentioned in 11: 1 – 5. Next Joshua 11: 16 – 20 summarizes the particular areas in the south and north that Israel defeated. Joshua 11: 21 – 22 adds that Israel then won victory over the Anakim, a people not mentioned in chapters 10 – 11. Chapter 11 concludes by saying, “So Joshua took the whole land.... Thus the land had rest from war” (v. 23). The following chapters in Joshua & in Judges record that Canaanites & other peoples under Israel’s ban to destroy were still around. But significantly, not one city or area cited as defeated in Joshua 10 – 11 is mentioned in these following chapters. Again, it seems probable that the language of complete defeats is to be understood in a more limited manner than referring to every single part of the Promised Land. Rather than viewing this as extreme rhetoric in which the defeats of these areas and cities were not really complete, it seems better to understand the language as describing complete and decisive defeats of the particular areas cited but that such defeats did not include other areas and cities cited later in Joshua and Judges. But what can account for the complete descriptions that the Canaanites were defeated and yet still around later, as is sometimes found? It is

best to understand these descriptions as indicating either that in some of the cities definitely destroyed, some of the population nevertheless escaped (as Joshua 10: 20 says), or that the particular Canaanite cities named in Joshua 12 and following that were not specifically mentioned earlier in chapters 11 – 12 were not yet defeated and thus still existed. It is true that while chapters 10 and 11 record that Israel defeated the Canaanites in the southern and northern “hill country” (Joshua 10: 40; 11: 16), Joshua 17: 18 says that some Canaanites in the “hill country[’s] ... farthest borders” still remain. This appears to indicate that these “farthest borders” had not yet been taken by Israel, whereas most of the hill country had been completely captured and its people definitely wiped out (again, except for perhaps a remnant who were able to escape).



The upshot of this is Joshua keeps making qualifications about what specific areas were completely conquered. The expressions of complete defeat do not appear to be lofty exaggerations but seem to refer to certain defined areas & cities that are decisively taken (the vast majority in each region is wiped out), and then the narrative goes on to note that other particular areas had not been defeated and that Israel still needed to do battle with them.

The similar conclusion can be reached about the extermination of the Amalekites in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 15:3, 20, where not all the Amalekites were to be destroyed but only those in “the city of Amalek” (15: 5). So it is not surprising to discover that a group of Amalekites still exist in David’s time and oppose Israel (30: 1 – 15), and that later in the reign of Hezekiah a “remnant of the Amalekites” were living at Mount Seir and were destroyed by Israel (1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles 4: 43).

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## **Has The Land Promise Been Fulfilled?**

Earl E. Robertson  
Tompkinsville, Kentucky

To answer this question seems superogatory. If the word of God can be believed, while having to totally reject the doctrines of men, this question can easily and quickly be answered. To answer the question poses no difficulty to any Bible student; getting one to accept what God says about the matter does present problems. Nearly every religious denomination is saturated with the premillennial web, which position has as a cardinal doctrine the contention that the land promise has not been kept.

### **The Promise**

Here is the original promise that God made, "Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him . . . and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came . . . And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land . . ." (Gen. 12:1-7). While Abram "dwelled in the land of Canaan" the Lord said unto him, "Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever" (Gen. 13:12, 14-15). "In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates" (Gen. 15:18). "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession" (Gen. 17:7-8).

Furthermore, Jehovah said, "And I have also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, wherein they were strangers . . . And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it



to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it you for an heritage: I am the Lord" (Ex. 6:4, 8). Moses, a man of faith in God, and "educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds" (Acts 7:22), some three centuries after the promise was made to Abraham he evidenced his confidence that soon the land promise would be fulfilled, saying, "And Moses said unto Hobab, the son of Raguel the Midianite, ,Moses' father in law, We are journeying unto the place of which the Lord said, I will give it you: come thou with us, and we will do thee good: for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel" (Num. 10:29).

### **God Kept His Word The Land Received, (Joshua 21;43-45)**

Joshua, the aged leader of God's people, preparing to die, intensely told the Israelites, "The Lord gave unto Israel all the land which he sware to give unto their fathers; and they possessed it, and dwelt therein . . . There failed not ought of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass" (Josh. 21:4.3, 45).

When God called Abram from the Ur of the Chaldees, Abram "departed as the Lord had spoken unto him." This started the long and eventful trek which ultimately led to the seed "after him" receiving and dwelling in the land of Canaan. The apostle said, "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Heb. 11:8). Abram knew neither the "where" nor "when;" God knew, however. Stephen said, "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia... Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee. Then came he out of the land of the Chaldeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell" (Acts 7:2-4). Abraham personally had no inheritance in the land, "no, not so much as to set his foot on" (Acts 7:5). Stephen's speech carries Israel through the Egyptian bondage, embracing more than four hundred years, and then says, "And the nation to whom they shall be in bondage will I judge, said God: and after that shall they come forth, and serve me in this place" (Acts 7:7). "In this place" is the "land wherein ye now dwell" (vs. 4), being the very land that God had said "I will give." So, the inheritance would be received after the bondage. But, further, Stephen says, "But when the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to

Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt" (Acts 7:17). The time drew nigh!

Abraham could not personally inherit the land, but his seed "after him" would, following the serfdom, inherit the land and dwell in it. This is exactly what Joshua said about it. He said, "The Lord gave unto Israel all the land which he sware to give unto their fathers; and they possessed it, and dwelt therein" (Josh. 21). All the land promised the fathers was given and possessed by Israel - the seed after the fathers. This is what the word of God says about it! Stephen said God made this promise to Abraham "when as yet he had no child" (Acts 7:5). Emphasized in the promise is the seed of Abraham, not Abraham himself. Of this promised land of Canaan, Nehemiah testifies: "Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham; And foundest his heart faithful before thee, and madest a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Jebusites, and the Girgashites, to give it, I say, to his seed, and hast performed thy words; for thou art righteous" (Neh. 9:7, 8).

#### **Possession Of Land Conditional**

The possession of this land was conditioned on the Jews keeping the word of God. When Israel went into the land of Canaan and possessed it there were remaining in the land heathen peoples with their false gods and idolatrous worship. Joshua spoke unto Israel of "these that remain among you" (Josh. 23:7/, and warned the people of God "That ye come not among these nations;" "neither make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause to swear by them, neither serve them nor bow yourselves unto them." Further, he said, "Know for a certainty that the Lord your God will no more drive out any of these nations from before you; but they shall be snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until ye perish from off this good land which the Lord your God hath given you" (Josh. 23:13/. The watchword was, then, "keep the words of God" or perish. Cf. Deut. 8:19, 20; Deut. 30:18. Often the sins of Israel caused them to lose the land; to be driven out and become slaves to the nations used by the Lord. As captives they lamented unto the Lord, and He, with pity, would bring them back into their land. A case in point to illustrate is David "recovering" the land. The record says, "David smote also Hadadezer, the son of Rehob, king of Zobah, as he went to recover his border at the river Euphrates"

(2 Sam. 8:3). Also, "He restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel" (2 Kgs. 14:25).

The "recovering" of the land was not a fulfillment of the promise; Israel had already inherited and possessed the land. Conditions causing the "recovering" was sin disobedience to God. All the later Israeli encounters have absolutely nothing to do with the promise God made to Abraham about the land. The Israeli war with the Arab Nations of June 5-10, 1967 has no connection whatsoever with the Abrahamic promise for Israel to inherit and possess the land. Our point of contention is: God kept his promise to Abraham. The rebellion and sins of the Jews afterward is the cause of their losing the land. The Assyrian captivity in the days of Tiglath-Pileser and Shalmaneser; with the great Sennacherib leading the capture of Samaria by Sargon; the Babylonian captivity under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, have nothing to do with God giving Abraham's seed the land as He promised in Genesis 12. These captivities were the results of Israel sinning against God; their return to the land came about because of repentance of sin and their faith in God. When they returned to their land they did so by observing the law of tribal estates (Lev. 25:13-28). When these Jews returned from Babylon under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra told them to obey God, thus, tribally, they dwelt in their cities (Ez. 2:70). Their awareness and ability to do this depended on their knowledge of genealogy. Contrary to the concepts now held by modern millennialists, these records of the Jews are unknown. The Holy Spirit moved Paul to write: "But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain" (Tit. 3:9). Where would the premillennial put these Jews now scattered to every part of the world? Paul said, don't try! The efforts are "unprofitable and vain".

**by Franklin T. Puckett**  
**in *The Preceptor*, Vol. 1, No. 10, August 1952.**

Premillennialists tell us that God's promise to give the land of Canaan to Abraham and his seed has never been fulfilled. Since His promises do not fail, there must be a future fulfillment.

There are many insuperable difficulties which premillennialists must face in trying to prove their doctrine, but if it can be shown that the land promise has already been fulfilled, the basis for their whole visionary scheme will be removed, and the theory will collapse for lack of foundation on which to rest. I propose to prove that God has fulfilled that promise.

### **Preceding Events**

The Lord had promised to make of Abraham a great nation through multiplying his "*seed as the stars of heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore.*" Since it was impossible to reach such marvelous numerical proportions during Abraham's lifetime, this promise could only be fulfilled in his posterity. Consequently it passed to Isaac and Jacob ([Genesis 26:2-4](#); [28:3,4](#)). When in a time of famine Jacob and his sons went down into Egypt, God said: "*Fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation*" ([Genesis 46:3](#)). In that land "*the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them*" ([Exodus 1:7](#)). Stephen declared that "*when the time of the promise drew nigh, which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt*" ([Acts 7:17](#)). This rapid increase was because "the time of the promise drew nigh."

When "*there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph*" ([Exodus 1:8](#)), Israel was subjected to great affliction. God heard their cry "*and with an high arm brought He them out of it*" ([Acts 13:17](#)). By faith they crossed the Red Sea and came to old shaking Sinai. There God made a covenant with them, saying, "*Ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation*" ([Exodus 19:6](#)). They were at this time as the stars of heaven for multitude ([Deuteronomy 1:10](#)). It is evident that

God's promise to Abraham regarding the development of a great nation was fulfilled in these events.

God now spoke unto Israel, saying: "*Ye have dwelt long enough in this mount: turn you, and go to the mount of the Amorites, and unto all the places nigh thereunto, in the plain, in the hills, and in the vale, and in the south, and by the sea side, to the land of the Canaanites, and unto Lebanon, unto the great river, the river Euphrates. Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land which the Lord sware unto your father, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give unto them and to their seed after them*" ([Deuteronomy 1:6-8](#)).

Coming to the border of Canaan twelve spies were sent to search out the promised land. They all reported that it was a good land, but ten said that the strength of the cities and the size of the giants made it impossible for them to take it. This so discouraged the children of Israel that they plotted to make them another captain and return to Egypt. Their lack of faith provoked God to swear that none of that generation above twenty years of age save Caleb and Joshua should enter into the land.

### **The Promise Fulfilled**

After wandering forty years in the wilderness, Moses died and was buried in Moab. Those who had provoked God at Kadesh-Barnea now lie sleeping in the wilderness. Under the direction of God, Joshua led their children into the "*land flowing with milk and honey.*" So successful were they in driving out the enemy and possessing the land, that it was said: "*And the Lord gave unto Israel all the land which He sware to give unto their fathers: and they possessed it, and dwelt therein. And the Lord gave them rest round about, according to all that He sware unto their fathers: and there stood not a man of all their enemies before them: The Lord delivered all their enemies into their hand. There failed not ought of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass*" ([Joshua 21:43-45](#)).

## Notice:

1. God gave unto Israel **all the land** which He swore to give unto their fathers;
2. Israel possessed **all the land** which God swore to give unto their fathers;
3. they dwelt in **all the land** which God had sworn unto their fathers.

Now, if there is any part of the promised land which Israel did not receive, possess, and dwell in, this Scripture is not true. But, if the passage be true, they received every foot of ground which God had promised. If they received it, the promise was fulfilled; and if the promise was fulfilled, premillennial claims regarding it are false. One cannot believe the Bible and premillennialism at the same time.

## The Cities Of Refuge

God ordained that there should be six cities of refuge; three east of Jordan, and three in the land of Canaan. *"The Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come over Jordan into the land of Canaan: Then ye shall appoint you cities to be cities of refuge for you... And of these cities which ye shall give six cities shall be for refuge. Ye shall give three cities on this side of Jordan, and three cities shall ye give in the land of Canaan, which shall be cities of refuge"* ([Numbers 35:9-14](#)).

When the children of Israel were encamped on the plains of Moab, Moses said unto them, *"When the Lord thy God hath cut off the nations, whose land the Lord thy God giveth thee, and thou succeedest them, and dwellest in their cities, and in their houses; thou shalt separate three cities for thee in the midst of thy land, which the Lord thy God giveth thee to possess it"* ([Deuteronomy 19:1,2](#)). The succeeding verses show that these were cities of refuge. Then we read: *"Wherefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt separate three cities for thee. And if the Lord thy God enlarge thy coast, as He hath sworn unto thy*

*fathers, and give thee all the land which He hath promised to give unto thy fathers; if thou shalt keep all these commandments to do them, which I command thee this day, to love the Lord thy God, and to walk ever in His ways; then shalt thou add three cities more for thee, beside these three" ([Deuteronomy 19:7-9](#)).*

They were to have three cities of refuge from the time God cut off the heathen before them until the day when He enlarged their coast and gave them all the land which He had promised to give unto their fathers; but when the promise is fulfilled and they have all the land, three cities more were to be added to these three. As long as the promise is only partially fulfilled, there were to be three cities of refuge; when the promise is completely fulfilled , they were to add three cities more making a total of six. If, therefore, we can find six cities of refuge appointed, it will be proof positive that God had fulfilled His promise in its completeness.

Now turn to [Joshua 20:1-8](#) and take time to read these verses. Six cities of refuge are here appointed; three east of Jordan and three in the land of Canaan. Furthermore, they were appointed by direct command of Jehovah. Since this was to be done when God enlarged their coast and gave them all the land He had promised to give, it follows that He thought He had fulfilled His promise. Since Joshua and the children of Israel thought they had received it all; but now more than thirty centuries this side of that day a premillennialist jumps up to say, "God did not give them all the land, therefore, the Jews must be regathered to the land of Palestine and receive the promise." I am reminded of the old Jew who listened to an atheist sneeringly deny that God had any part in creation, and then silenced him with the question: "Vas you der, Charley?" I am confident that God and the children of Israel know more about what took place than these wild speculators today. They were there and are competent witnesses. The appointment of the six cities of refuge stands as irrefutable proof that the land promise was fulfilled. Having been fulfilled it belongs to the past and has no part in God's program for the future.

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**EXCURSUS: IS THE DIVINE COMMAND TO KILL  
ALL THE CANAANITE WOMEN AND CHILDREN  
NOT MEANT TO BE TAKEN THAT LITERALLY?**

**G. K. Beale continues...**

It is further argued, however, that heightened exaggeration is apparent from recognizing that the word pairs “young and old” and “man and woman” are purely figurative expressions communicating totality, so that even if women and children were not present, the idea is that of a decisive defeat. But this excessively figurative view is not supported by parallel passages. For example. Deuteronomy 20: 10 – 18.

It is clear that in cities farther out from the Palestinian area, the latter to be given as an inheritance to Israel, “the women and the children and the animals and all that is in the city” could be spared and taken as spoil by Israel. But in the nearby land of the Canaanites, Israel was “not [to] leave alive anything that breathes.” Therefore, when Deuteronomy 2: 34 and 3: 6 say that not only the “men” but also the “women and children”



in every city, who were ‘breathing’ beings, were to be ‘utterly destroyed,’ the reference to the women and children should be taken literally, not figuratively. This indicates that both literal men, elderly people, women, children, and animals were to be destroyed in these close-lying cities. Thus, “women and children” is not figurative in these expressions for extermination but is literally meant. One should, of course, make a distinction between God’s ideal command to “destroy” in these texts and the reality that, even when Israel was obedient, she was not able to kill everyone, since significant numbers of people might have escaped and some might have repented & joined Israel & in Israel’s disobedience, she might have let more people live than she should have.

Yet further arguments are offered in support of the view of extreme exaggeration. It is contended that Jericho, Ai, and other Canaanite cities were military forts, containing mainly fighting forces, and not having many women and children. If that is so, then the description that women and children were annihilated in these cities is most likely a stereotypical expression for the extermination of all human life in the cities, and is not to be meant as basically literal, including many women and young

people. But this view also runs aground on Deuteronomy 20: 10 – 18, which as we saw above includes as ideally literal reference to the killing of women and children. Likewise, Deuteronomy 3: 3 – 7 indicates essentially the same thing (although again there may have been escapees and remnant who repented).

Even if one were to contend that all sixty cities were only military outposts with not many women and children (which is unlikely), this could not be said about the “unwalled towns.” Furthermore, the mention that “all the animals” were spared is a detail that points further to everything else living not being spared, including women and young people.

Some also try to support the view of exaggeration by showing that the book of Joshua clearly says that the Canaanites remained in the land indefinitely and, indeed, were not driven out (which is similar to the argument for hyperbole addressed earlier). Consequently, God requires Israel not to intermarry with them or worship their gods (Deuteronomy 7: 3; Joshua 23: 7, 12 – 13). Thus, as we saw above, the claim that Joshua annihilated every single in the Promised Land must be an intended exaggeration, since we see so many Canaanites continue to live in the land during and long after Joshua’s time

(see, e.g., Joshua 2: 10 – 14; 15: 63; 16: 10; 17: 13), so that the Israelites did not “drive them out” completely (Judges 1: 21 – 36). But this appeal fails to acknowledge that over a certain period Canaanites would remain in the land, since God had said that they would not be driven out in one sudden, climactic thrust but a process spanning an extended time: “The Lord your God will clear away these nations before you little by little; you will not be able to put an end to them quickly, for the wild beasts would grow too numerous for you” (Deuteronomy 7: 22; so also Exodus 23: 27 – 30). Accordingly, over this period, Israel was not to intermarry with the Canaanites, lest she worship their idols. Thus, God’s command to Israel to “utterly destroy” in Deuteronomy 7: 2 would involve a process over time.

It is also true that a remnant of Canaanites from the beginning were to be spared because of their repentance (cf. Deuteronomy 4: 6 – 7 and Joshua 2: 10 – 13), so that the command to destroy would not refer to converts such as Rahab but would apply to the vast majority of the idolatrous people. Joshua 11: 19 says, “There was not a city [in Canaan] which made peace with the sons of Israel” (except the dishonest Gibeonites), which implies that there was always the opportunity for repentance,

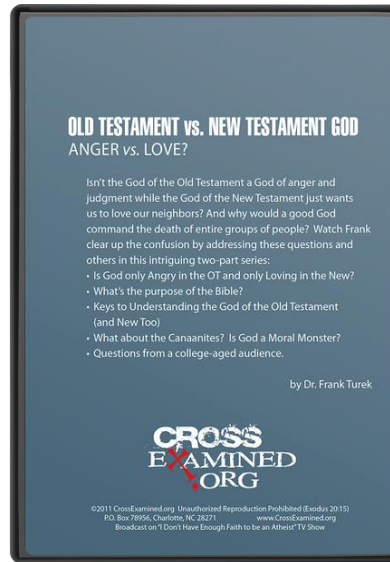
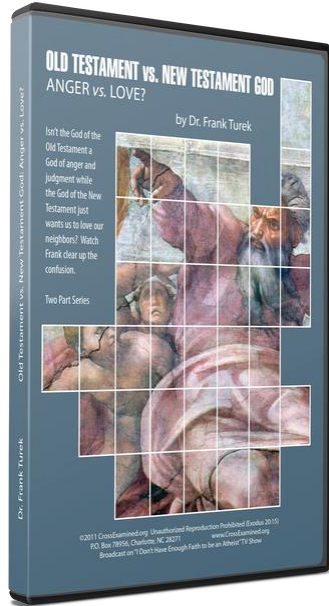
even of whole cities. Yet it is clear that from the beginning such opportunities would not typically be taken (except for a small remnant of people like Rahab), in the light of Genesis 15: 13 – 16 & the many statements in Deuteronomy and Joshua that God had planned for Israel to take over the land of the Canaanites and that they must be punished for their sin.

In addition, this appeal to highly exaggerated claims of defeat fails to take into consideration that the ongoing presence of the Canaanites in the land was due to Israel's unfaithfulness in the carrying out of God's command to exterminate them all. This is apparent from the narrative flow in Joshua and Judges, and is made explicit in Judges. After Judges 1: 21 – 36 repeatedly says that Israel did not drive out the Canaanites, Judges 2: 2 – 3 portrays God as saying to Israel that "you have not obeyed Me; ... therefore... I will not drive them out before you; but they will become as thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you" (so cf. also - Judges 2: 10 – 13, 20 – 23; Joshua 18: 3; 23: 12 – 13). Consequently, neither can one say the command to "utterly destroy" the inhabitants of the land in Deuteronomy 7: 2 was, in reality, a command to destroy not the people but only Canaanite religion.

Finally, some do not believe that the references to “destroying” (e.g., Joshua 10: 28 – 39; 11: 11, 14) and “wiping out” are meant literally because there are even more references to Israel’s “casting out” and “driving out” (Leviticus 18: 24; Numbers 33: 52; Deuteronomy 6: 19; 7: 1; 18: 12; etc.) or “dispossessing” (Numbers 21: 32; Deuteronomy 9: 1, 4; 11: 23; 18: 14; 19: 1; etc.). Whether this is the case would need further substantiation, but even if so, the conclusion from the same set passages could just as easily, and more probably, be reached that the way Israel was to “drive out” and “dispossess” the Canaanites was by annihilating them. It is certainly possible that some of the population of Canaanite cities fled directly before (cf. possibly Jeremiah 4: 29) or during the Israelite attacks (the latter to which Joshua 10: 20 attests), and thus some escaped. This, however, does not appear to be the norm in the Canaanite cities and regions (a view supported by Deuteronomy 20: 10 – 18), though it might have happened more times than the text of Joshua reveals. Israel is to offer terms of peace to the cities outside Canaan, but there is no mention of such an offer to the cities within Canaan. This does not mean, however, that these cities themselves could not initiate offers of peace. The majority of the Canaanites who

escaped would perhaps have gone into exile in other lands outside Israel – or, if they remained in Israel, it was because of Israel’s disobedience in not destroying them when they were found.

As we briefly concluded in the body of this [class book], in light of the discussion of this excursus, it is unlikely that God’s command to Israel to annihilate all the men, women, and children of the Canaanite cities and towns is purely figurative. Most probably God’s command is *ideally literal*, though certainly some Canaanites who repented were spared and others escaped. Furthermore, when describing Israel’s carrying out God’s commission, the expressions of the enemy’s defeat are basically literal but not *pedantically literal*: it is not a reference to 100 percent of all humans who were killed but a reference to a decisive victory in which the majority were killed. But even if the expressions are taken to be highly figurative, it is unlikely that the references to the annihilation of the women and children can be understood as not included at all. It would seem that to some significant degree it was included. How can such a God be morally good? We believe that the arguments in the main body of this [class book] represent a better approach to understanding this problem than does the highly figurative perspective.



<https://youtu.be/GxSZXBrxOEY>

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## Indiscriminate Massacre and Ethnic Cleansing?

### *The Killing of the Canaanites (I)*

Probably the most difficult Old Testament ethical issue is the divine command to kill the Canaanites. Theologian-turned-atheist Gerd Lüdemann wrote that “the command to exterminate is extremely offensive”—a far cry from the merciful God frequently proclaimed in Scripture.<sup>2</sup> Consider just one of these passages:

Only in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. But you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the LORD your God. (Deut. 20:16–18)

### Were the Canaanites *That* Wicked?

According to the biblical text, Yahweh was willing to wait about 430 years because “the sin of the Amorite [a Canaanite people group] has not yet reached its limit” (Gen. 15:16 NET). In other words, in Abraham’s day, the time wasn’t ripe for judgment on the Canaanites; the moment wasn’t right for them to be driven out and for the land to “vomit them out” (Lev. 18:25 NET). Sodom and Gomorrah, on the other hand, *were* ready; not even ten righteous people could be found there (Gen. 18–19). Even earlier, at the time of Noah, humans had similarly hit moral rock bottom (Gen. 6:11–13). Despite 120 years of Noah’s preaching (Gen. 6:3; cf. 5:32; 7:6; 2 Peter 2:5), no one outside his family listened; his contemporaries were also ripe for judgment. But it was only after Israel’s lengthy enslavement in Egypt that the time was finally ripe for the Israelites to enter Canaan—“because of the wickedness of these nations” (Deut. 9:4–5). Sometimes God simply gives up on nations, cities, or individuals when they’ve gone past a point of no return. Judgment—whether directly or indirectly—is the last resort.

Humans are “imaging” beings, designed to reflect the likeness and glory of their Creator. If we worship the creaturely rather than the Creator, we’ll come to resemble or image the idols of our own devising and that in which we place our security. Let’s add to this the bloodlust and violence of the Canaanite deities. Anath, the patroness of both sex and war, reminds us of the bloodthirsty goddess Kali of Hinduism, who drank her victims’ blood and sat surrounded by corpses; she is commonly depicted with a garland of skulls around her neck. The late archaeologist William Albright describes the Canaanite deity Anath’s massacre in the following gory scene:

The blood was so deep that she waded in it up to her knees—nay, up to her neck. Under her feet were human heads, above her human hands flew like locusts. In her sensuous delight she decorated herself with suspended heads while she attached hands to her girdle. Her joy at the butchery is described in even more sadistic language: “Her liver swelled with laughter, her heart was full of joy, the liver of Anath (was full of) exultation (?)” Afterwards Anath “was satisfied” and washed her hands in human gore before proceeding to other occupations.



Canaanite idolatry wasn't simply an abstract theology or personal interest carried out in the privacy of one's home. It was a worldview that profoundly influenced Canaanite society. Given this setting, it's no wonder God didn't want the Israelites to associate with the Canaanites and be led astray from obedience to the one true God. He wanted to have Israel morally and theologically separate from the peoples around them.

In other words, the land of Canaan was no paradise before the Israelites got there. Israel had no inherent right to inhabit the land (as an undeserved gift from God), and neither did the Canaanites have a right to remain in it. In fact, both the Canaanites and the Israelites would experience (partial) removal from the land because of their wickedness.

I'm not arguing that the Canaanites were the *worst* specimens of humanity that ever existed, nor am I arguing that the Canaanites won the immorality contest for worst-behaved peoples in all the ancient Near East. That said, the evidence for profound moral corruption was abundant. God considered them ripe for divine judgment, which would be carried out in keeping with God's saving purposes in history.

Some argue that God is intolerant, commanding people to have "no other gods before Me" (Exod. 20:3). They state that Israel's laws illustrate the denial of religious freedom at the heart of Israelite religion. And didn't other ancient Near Eastern religions value religious diversity? Couldn't non-Israelites worship whatever god they wanted? Israel had committed itself to be faithful to Yahweh; as in any good marriage, spouses shouldn't play the field in the name of marital freedom. As for the Canaanites, God judged them not only because they happened to worship idols but also because of the corrupting moral practices and influences bound up with this idolatry. Notice that God judges the nations listed in Amos 1–2 not because they don't worship Yahweh but because of outrageous moral acts. I've already addressed the topic of divine jealousy, but I'll come back to some of these themes later.

So was God just picking on the Canaanites but not other peoples? No, Yahweh frequently threatened many nations with judgment when they crossed a certain moral threshold. For example, in Amos 1–2, God promised to "send fire" on nations surrounding Israel for their treacheries and barbarities. And he promised the same to Israel and Judah. Later, Jesus himself pronounced final judgment on nationalistic Israel, which would face its doom in AD 70 at the hands of the Romans (Matt. 24).

## Who Determines the Point of No Return?

Israeli psychologist Georges Tamarin undertook a study in 1966 involving 1,066 schoolchildren ages eight to fourteen. Presented with the story of Jericho's destruction, they were asked, "Do you think Joshua and the Israelites acted rightly or not?" Two-thirds of the children approved. However, when Tamarin substituted General Lin for Joshua and a Chinese kingdom three thousand years ago for Israel, only 7 percent approved while 75 percent disapproved. The critic is baffled at this: "We rightly condemn the killing of an ethnic group when carried out by Nazis or Hutus. But Israel seems to get a pass—indeed, a divine *order*—when doing the same thing to the Canaanites!"

What guidelines do we have to determine when a culture is irredeemable, beyond the point of no moral and spiritual return? Don't we need something more than mere mortals to assess a culture's ripeness for judgment? Aren't these considerations too weighty for humans to judge? Yes, they are! Any such determinations should be left up to God—namely, through special revelation. The Israelites, when they went into battle against the Philistines *with* the ark of the covenant but *without* divine approval, were roundly defeated (1 Sam. 4). The requirement of

special revelation before any such undertaking is precisely what we have in Scripture. The one true God told his prophet Moses or Samuel when the time was right. Likewise, without such clear divine guidance, Israel *wouldn't* have been justified in attacking the Canaanite strongholds.

Some TV stunt shows warn children, “Kids, don’t try this at home!” Likewise, we could say about Israel’s “holy war” situation: “Don’t try this without special revelation!” These matters aren’t up to humans to decide. Yahweh-initiated battles were never intended for non-prophet organizations! Think of the disastrous results when Israel attempted to go into other battles without divine approval (e.g., Num. 14:41–45; Josh. 7). As we’ve seen already, God’s call to battle was unique to Israel’s situation. Such a call, though, isn’t an enduring, universally binding standard for all time and all cultures.

## Did the Canaanites Know Better?

Some scholars have questioned whether we can hold the Canaanites morally accountable. After all, weren’t they just practicing *their* religion, which they received from *their* parents, who received it from *their* parents? Shouldn’t God have enlightened them about himself and his requirements for humans?

As we look at history, we see that nations and civilizations have been capable of moral reforms and improvements. We shouldn’t be surprised at this. After all, God reveals himself to humans through conscience, reason, human experience, and creation. This revelation opens the door for moral improvements from one generation to the next. People without the Scriptures can still have access to what is good and right.

For a little support, let me quote a notable theist and a notable atheist. The notable theist is the apostle Paul, who affirms that special revelation isn’t necessary for people to know about God or to recognize right and wrong:

That which is known about God is evident within them [human beings]; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:19–20)

The notable atheist is philosopher Kai Nielsen:

It is more reasonable to believe such elemental things [as wife beating and child abuse] to be evil than to believe any skeptical theory that tells us we cannot know or reasonably believe any of these things to be evil.... I firmly believe that this is bedrock and right and that anyone who does not believe it cannot have probed deeply enough into the grounds of his moral beliefs.

We’ve seen how Amos 1–2 illustrates these two quotations nicely. God had warned the morally accountable Gentile nations surrounding Israel. Although they knew their moral duties, they disregarded them. Knowing better, they stifled compassion, suppressed their conscience, and carried out terrible atrocities, such as ripping open pregnant women or betraying vulnerable, displaced populations into the hands of their enemies. The author of Hebrews called the Canaanites “disobedient” (11:31)—that is, having a moral awareness but disregarding it. In C. S. Lewis’s *Abolition of Man*, he lists moral codes of many cultures across the ages. They are strikingly similar at key points: honoring parents, being faithful in marriage, not stealing, not murdering, not lying, and so on. In other words, doing the right thing isn’t as elusive as some may think.

Consider Rahab and her family (Josh. 2). Though immersed in Canaanite culture, they prove to be a clear sign that other Canaanites could potentially have been rescued as well. Israel's God had convincingly delivered his people from Egypt. He had supplied signs and wonders, revealing his reality and surpassing greatness, and the Canaanites were fully aware of this (Josh. 2:9–11; 9:9–10). Some charge that Rahab was selling out her people to save her own neck. But is that fair? For one thing, Rahab risked a lot by taking in the foreign spies and hiding them. And surely loyalty to one's race or ethnic group isn't the ultimate virtue, particularly when it goes against what's right and true.

## Was It Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing?

According to Richard Dawkins, the killing of the Canaanites was an act of ethnic cleansing in which “bloodthirsty massacres” were carried out with “xenophobic relish.” Were the Israelites truly xenophobic—fearful of strangers (non-Israelites)?

Terms like *genocide* and *ethnic cleansing* evoke negative emotions in all of us. Dawkins isn't exactly interested in accuracy; so he resorts to misleading rhetoric to sway the jury. Ethnic cleansing is fueled by racial hatred. The alleged in-group pronounces a pox on the out-group and then proceeds to destroy them. Does this scenario really mesh with the facts about the Israelites, though? As it turns out, xenophobic attitudes didn't prompt the Israelites to kill Canaanites.

From the beginning, God told Abraham “all the families of the earth” would be blessed through his offspring (Gen. 12:3). We're not off to a very xenophobic start. Then we read many positive things about foreigners in the chapters that follow. Abraham met and honored Melchizedek (Gen. 14). He encountered just and fair-minded foreign leaders among the Egyptians (Gen. 12) and the Philistines (Gen. 20) who proved to be more honorable than Abraham. A “mixed multitude” left with Israel from Egypt (Exod. 12:38). Moses married a dark-skinned Cushite/Ethiopian (Num. 12:1). The Gentile Rahab and her family joined Israel's ranks (Josh. 6:23), in ironic contrast to the Israelite Achan, who stole goods from Jericho and was put to death for his disobedience (Josh. 7). Also, the very language of “dedication to destruction/the ban [*herem*]” could be applied equally to Israel as well as to a Canaanite city (Deut. 13:16). Later on, Israel's prophets would readily condemn Israel's wickedness, as they would that of the surrounding nations. In general, God's judgments fall on those practicing evil and wickedness—whether Jew or Gentile, as Paul makes clear in Romans 1–3.

Furthermore, God also repeatedly commanded Israel to show concern for (non-Israelite) aliens or sojourners in their midst (e.g., Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:18–19). Why? Because the Israelites had been strangers in Egypt. God frequently reminded his people to learn the lessons of their history so that they wouldn't be doomed to repeat it with Gentiles in their midst.

Negative concerns regarding the foreigner (*nokri*) had to do with theological compromise and idolatry; such negativity wasn't assumed when a non-Israelite like Rahab or Ruth or Uriah embraced Yahweh, the God of Israel. We could add that God exhorted Israelites to show concern even for their personal enemies: “If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it” (Exod. 23:4–5).

What about God allowing Israelites to take interest from foreigners but not from fellow citizens (Deut. 23:20)? We've seen that interest was charged to foreigners, who were temporary residents and not members of society. They typically borrowed money to invest in profit-making pursuits and trading ventures; these weren't loans given to help foreigners escape poverty. This regulation

had a built-in incentive: the outsider (who didn't *have* to live in Israel) could choose to become a part of Israel and embrace the one true God; if so, he could benefit from divinely commanded economic perks and displays of Israelite concern. Instead of hostility, God commanded the Israelites to love and show concern for the resident aliens in their midst. The command to love the resident alien and to treat her the same way as a citizen (Lev. 19:33–34) is remarkable and unique in the ancient Near East's religious thoughts and practices.

Critics will point to Deuteronomy 23:3: “No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the LORD.” *That* doesn't seem very kind. However, earlier (in Deut. 2) three nations were favorably mentioned: Edom, related to Israel through Esau, Jacob's brother; and Moab and Ammon, nations from the sons of Abraham's nephew Lot. Notice that Israel is prohibited from fighting against them (vv. 4–6, 9, 19). That said, God took treachery against Israel very seriously. Genesis 12:3 implies judgment on those who would mistreat Israel. And Deuteronomy 23:4 reveals the reason for the Ammonites' and Moabites' exclusion from the assembly: “because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you” (see Num. 22–25). Even so, remember that generations later Ruth the *Moabitess* was readily received into the midst of Israel. A lot depended on whether the alien from Moab (or Ammon) fully embraced Israel's covenant, which meant his acceptance into the assembly as a genuine worshiper of Yahweh. As John Goldingay writes:

Being of non-Israelite origin is not a disqualification for membership of the [Israelite] community in any period. The question is, what God do you serve? The reason for not marrying a Canaanite is that this will turn you away from following Yhwh and lead to your serving other deities (Deut 7:3–4). A Canaanite who has made a commitment to Yhwh is a different matter.

So we should put to rest this idea of divinely inspired racism or ethnocentrism. In fact, God regularly reminded his people not to get so high and mighty. He frankly told Israel that possessing the land wasn't due to their righteousness and uprightness of heart. It was because of the wickedness of the Canaanites. What's more, God considered the Israelites “a stubborn people” (Deut. 9:4–6). The most-favored-nation status was given with the goal of inviting others to experience God's gracious favor—and God could revoke that status. Likewise, just as he would give the land to a group of wandering, landless Israelites as an inheritance (Exod. 12:25; Num. 34:2), he could revoke it as well (Deut. 4:26). Those in the land—whether Canaanites or Israelites—were only tenants, not owners (Pss. 24:1; 50:12).

We'll explore the phrase “utterly destroy” (*haram*) below. Suffice it to say here that God's charge to Israel to “utterly destroy” the cities of the morally bankrupt Canaanites was turned on Israel when groups of Israelites were seduced into following false gods (Deut. 13:15; cf. 7:4; 28:63). God was concerned with *sin*, not *ethnicity*. In fact, as we read the Old Testament prophets, they (with God) were angered about Israel's disobedience, and they threatened divine judgment on Israel/Judah more often than they did on the pagan nations. If we read carefully, it's obvious God was opposed to *Israel's* sin just as much as he was to that of their oppressors.

## Inefficient Means?

Why then didn't God make sure that *no* Canaanite was left in the land just to make sure that Israel wouldn't be lured by the lifestyle encouraged by Canaan's idolatry? The Scriptures reveal a God who works through messy, seemingly inefficient processes—including human choices and failures (Gen. 50:20)—to accomplish his redemptive purposes in history. The route God chose didn't require the death of every last Canaanite. Not only were the Canaanites *sufficiently* driven out so as not to decisively undermine Israel's spiritual and moral integrity in the long run, but, as we'll see below, Canaanites participate in God's redemptive plan in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Zech. 9; Matt. 15:22; cf. Ps. 87:4–6; Isa. 19:23–25).

Despite occasional spiritual revivals and moral successes in Israel's history, her failure to eradicate idolatry led to many troubles. She paid for her compromises with an Assyrian captivity of the Northern Kingdom (722 BC) and then a Babylonian captivity of the Southern Kingdom (587/6 BC; cf. 2 Kings 17:7–41; 2 Chron. 36:15–21). The theological and moral threat of foreign religion, however, didn't so damage Israel that its monotheism and covenantal awareness were totally eclipsed. By the first century AD, the theological stage had been sufficiently set: Israel's Scriptures were preserved, her national identity forged, her temple worship restored, her messianic expectations rekindled, and her monotheistic dedication secured. Despite Israel's compromises and rebellions over the centuries, Jesus's arrival on the scene came “in the fullness of time” (see Gal. 4:4). Was this efficient? Not in an obvious way. Was it sufficient? Very much so.

## Cosmic Warfare

The worship of idols wasn't innocent or harmless. The Old Testament connects idolatry with the demonic—that is, with the cosmic enemies of God who rebelled against him: “goat demons” (Lev. 17:7); “strange gods ... demons ... gods” (Deut. 32:16–21); “demons ... idols” (Ps. 106:37–38); “demons” (Isa. 65:3, Greek Septuagint). Even Pharaoh—the earthly representation of Egypt's gods—was a picture of this cosmic opposition. So in the exodus, Yahweh is the cosmic warrior who engages the evil powers of Egypt and the forces that inspire them. The New Testament picks up on this theme (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:19–22; 2 Cor. 6:14–16; Eph. 6:12–18). God's act of engaging in battle is not for the sake of violence or even victory as such but to establish peace and justice.

God's commands to Israel to wipe out Canaan's idols and false, immoral worship illustrate the cosmic warfare between Yahweh and the dark powers opposed to his rule. This theme of spiritual warfare is certainly much more pronounced in the New Testament, which clearly exposes Satan and his hosts as the ultimate enemies of God and of his kingdom's advance. Yahweh—“the LORD of hosts” (cf. Ps. 24:7–10)—is a “warrior” (Exod. 15:3) who opposes all that mars the divine image in humans, all that threatens human flourishing, and all that sets itself in opposition to God's righteous reign. “Yahweh wars” aren't simply a clash between this and that deity; they represent a clash of two world orders: one rooted in reality and justice, the other in reality-denial and brute power; one representing creational order, the other anticeation.

Just as the plagues in Egypt were a demonstration of Yahweh's judgment on her gods, so Israel's wars revealed God's sovereign rule over the presumed gods of the nations. In Old Testament Israel's physical battles, God wanted to show forth his greatness, not a display of sheer human power. And though the true Israel—the church—doesn't wage war against “flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12) today, our warfare against Satan and his hosts has its roots in Yahweh wars in the Old Testament.

## Indiscriminate Massacre and Ethnic Cleansing?

### *The Killing of the Canaanites (II)*

As we've said, the Old Testament's "holy wars"—or, more accurately, "Yahweh wars"—are the most emotionally charged biblical problem raised by the New Atheists and by critics generally. Like it or not, war is a common feature of our fallen world. Indeed, we know that warfare was a way of life—and often a matter of survival—in the ancient Near East. However, the problematic wars take place primarily during and shortly after Israel's second historical stage under Joshua, the theocratic stage of Israel's existence. As we've mentioned, this Yahweh warfare wasn't the standard for the other stages in Israel's history. It wasn't intended as a permanent fixture in Israel's story. It was unique to Israel at a particular point in time and was not to be repeated in later history by Israel or by other nations. Without God's explicit command (and thus his morally sufficient reasons), attacking the Canaanites would *not* have been justified.

### **Infiltration, Internal Struggle, and Conquest**

How did the Promised Land come to be inhabited by the Israelites? Biblical scholars and archaeologists continue the effort to uncover the nature of Israel's relationship to the Canaanites, and they are finding something more complex than the traditional Sunday school version of the conquest model. The bigger picture includes not just conquest but rather a combination of other factors. Besides military engagement, some type of infiltration took place (e.g., Judg. 1:1–2:5). Internal struggle was another feature—that is, Israel often did a poor job staving off idolatry and distinguishing itself from surrounding pagan lifestyles. Scripture's realistic acknowledgment that the Canaanites continued to live in the land suggests that something more than a military campaign took place.

The books of Joshua and Judges suggest that taking the land included less than-dramatic processes of infiltration and internal struggle. Israel's entrance into Canaan included more than the military motif. Old Testament scholar Gordon McConville comments on Joshua: we don't have "a simple conquest model, but rather a mixed picture of success and failure, sudden victory and slow, compromised progress." Likewise, Old Testament scholar David Howard firmly states that the conquest model needs modification. Why? Because "the stereotypical model of an all-consuming Israelite army descending upon Canaan and destroying everything in its wake cannot be accepted. The biblical data will not allow for this." He adds that the Israelites entered Canaan and did engage militarily "but without causing extensive material destruction."<sup>3</sup> We'll come back to this significant point.

### **The Amalekites**

In 1 Samuel 15 we encounter the remaining set of "destruction" references—reserved for an enemy hell-bent on Israel's annihilation. Here, God tells Saul to "utterly destroy [*haram*]" and "not spare" the Amalekites: "put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (v. 3). By the end of the chapter, Saul has apparently killed all the Amalekites—except king Agag—and he has spared lots of livestock. Saul didn't obey God fully, and the prophet Samuel had to step in and finish off Agag himself. Because Saul didn't carry out God's command completely, God rejected him as king.

As with the stories in Joshua, the surface reading here is that Saul wiped out all the Amalekites. We'll come back to this point, but first let's ask: Who were the Amalekites? These nomadic people were Israel's enemies from day one after the Red Sea crossing (Exod. 17). Weary and unprepared to fight, Israel faced a fierce people who showed no concern for the vulnerable Israelite population. The Amalekites were relentless in their aim to destroy Israel, and they continued to be a thorn in Israel's side for generations (e.g., Judg. 3:13; 6:3–5, 33; 7:12; 10:12; etc.).

Again, the 1 Samuel 15 story appears to be a clear-cut case of complete obliteration. No Amalekites remaining, right? Wrong! In 1 Samuel 27:8, "David and his men went up and raided the Geshurites and the Girzites"—and the "utterly destroyed" Amalekites! But was that the end of them? No, they appear again in 1 Samuel 30: the Amalekites made one of their infamous raids (v. 1); David pursued them to get back the Israelites and the booty the Amalekites had taken (v. 18); and four hundred of them escaped (v. 17). So contrary to the common impression, Saul *didn't* wipe out all the Amalekites, something 1 Samuel itself makes clear. And even David didn't complete the job. The Amalekites were still around during King Hezekiah's time 250 years later (1 Chron. 4:43).

Then we get to the time of Esther, when the Jews were under the rule of the Persian king Ahasuerus/Xerxes (486–465 BC). Here we encounter "Haman ... the Agagite" (Esther 3:1). Remember King Agag the Amalekite from 1 Samuel 15:8? Yes, Haman was an Amalekite who continued the Amalekite tradition of aggression against God's people. An "enemy of the Jews" (Esther 3:10), Haman mounted a campaign to destroy the Jews as a people (3:13).

Knowing that callous Amalekite hostility would continue for nearly a millennium of Israel's history, God reminded his people not to let up in their opposition to the Amalekites (Deut. 25:15–17). Otherwise, the hardened Amalekites would seek to destroy Israel. If the Amalekites had their way, Israel would have been wiped off the map. Unlike other Canaanites, the Amalekites just couldn't be assimilated into Israel.

The moral of the story? Don't simply adopt the surface reading about Saul "utterly destroying" the Amalekites. When we read phrases like the destruction of "everything that breathes," we should be more guarded. In fact, for all we know and based on what we've seen in Joshua (and what we'll see below), Saul could well have been engaging combatants in battle rather than noncombatants. The "city of Amalek" (1 Sam. 15:5) was probably a fortified (perhaps semipermanent) military encampment. Yes, decisive defeat is certainly in view, but something more is going on here. We'll continue to explore this below.

One more related point, however: the *herem* ("ban" or "consecration to destruction") language connected to Israel's warring against other nations first focuses on the Canaanites (*herem* used thirty-seven times); the second cluster of *herem* warfare (*herem* used ten times) focuses on the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15. The use of *herem* for the conquest period—with its additional application to Israel's longstanding Amalekite enemies—indicates that the language is *restricted*. The language is not applied to Israel's warfare with other nations, nor do Israel's "holy wars" with other nations go beyond this limited time period.

## Rahab the Tavern Keeper

Why did the two Israelite spies hang out at a harlot's place? Doesn't this sound just a little fishy? On closer inspection, we can safely conclude that Rahab was in charge of what was likely the fortress's tavern or hostel; she didn't run a brothel, though these taverns were sometimes run by prostitutes. Traveling caravans and royal messengers would commonly stay overnight at such places during this period.<sup>21</sup> The Code of Hammurabi parallels what we see in Joshua 2, complete with a female innkeeper: "If conspirators meet in the house of a [*female*] tavern-keeper, and these conspirators are not captured and delivered to the court, the tavern-keeper shall be put to death."

Furthermore, such reconnaissance missions were common in the East. An innkeeper's home would have been an ideal meeting place for spies and conspirators. Such places notoriously posed a threat to security; because of this, the Hittites (in Turkey and northern Syria) prohibited the building of an inn or tavern near fortress walls.

What about the idea of a sexual liaison? The book of Joshua goes out of its way to state that no such activity took place. The text says the spies "stayed there" not that they "stayed *with her*" (2:1 NIV). And it says they "came *into the house of ... Rahab*" (2:1) not that they "went *in to Rahab*," which *would* imply a sexual relationship. Consider Samson, by contrast, who "saw a harlot ... and went in to her" (Judg. 16:1). The Old Testament doesn't recoil from using such language; we just don't have any sexual reference here. Instead, the book of Joshua depicts Rahab as a true God-fearer. Yes, such taverns in the ancient Near East would draw people seeking sexual pleasure, but this doesn't apply to the Israelite spies, who visited there because it was a public place where they could learn about the practical and military dispositions of the area and could solicit possible support.

## The Canaanites' Refusal to Acknowledge the One True God

Unlike Rahab and her family, her fellow Jerichoites (and most of the Canaanites) refused to acknowledge the one true God. The example of Rahab and her family (and to some extent Gibeon) reveals that consecration to the ban (*herem*) wasn't absolute and irreversible. God was, as we've seen, more concerned about the destruction of Canaanite religion and idols than Canaanite peoples. God repeatedly expresses a willingness to relent from punishment and preserve those who acknowledge his evident rule over the nations (cf. Jer. 18:8).

For those demanding, "If God exists, let him show himself," it doesn't get much more dramatic than the Red Sea parting. The Creator and the God of Israel had made the headlines in Canaan! In the words of Rahab, "We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt.... When we heard of it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath" (Josh. 2:10–11). In the words of the Gibeonites, "Your servants have come from a very far country because of the fame of the LORD your God; for we have heard the report of Him and all that He did in Egypt" (9:9; cf. Exod. 15:14–17; Deut. 2:25). Just as a pagan Nineveh repented at the sight and message of the beached (and bleached!) prophet Jonah, the Canaanites also could have repented—unless, of course, they were too far gone morally and spiritually.

In the New Testament, Jesus asserts that without a willing heart, a person won't turn to God even if someone rises from the dead (Luke 16:31). The repeated, visible pounding of Egypt's gods could have prompted the Canaanites to turn to the one true God, given they had a "heart condition" like Rahab's. Even Israel's sevenfold march around Jericho exhibited a formal opportunity for its king, soldiers, and priests to relent. The Hebrew word *naqap* ("circle, march around" in Josh. 6:3)



involves various ceremonial aspects, including rams' horns, sacred procession, and shouting (cf. 2 Sam. 6:15–16). The word is found in Psalm 48: “Walk about Zion and *go around* her; count her towers; consider her ramparts” (vv. 12–13; also 2 Kings 6:14). The word suggests the idea of conducting an inspection. In the case of Jericho, the inspection was conducted to see if the city would open its gates. The city, however, refused to do so. Each time the Israelites circled the city meant an opportunity for Jericho to evade the ban; sadly, each opportunity was met with Jericho's refusal to relent and acknowledge Yahweh's rule.

## **The Midianites (Numbers 31)**

As with Israel's lifelong enemies, the Amalekites (cf. Deut. 25:17–19), the Midianites also posed a serious threat to Israel. Whereas Amalek endangered Israel's very existence, Midian profoundly threatened Israel's spiritual and moral integrity as the people of God. With the help of the devious pagan prophet Balaam, the Midianites devised a plan to lead Israel into pagan worship. This involved ritual sex, feasting before their Baal, and bowing and sacrificing to him (Num. 25:1–2; 31:16). When he couldn't bring a curse down on Israel (Num. 22–24), he sought another way.

This is why Moses gives the command, “Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man” (Num. 31:17–18 NIV). This command must be understood in the context of Numbers 25. At Peor, the Midianite women deliberately seduced the Israelite men into orgiastic adultery as well as Baal worship.

The death sentence for *all* males is unusual. However, males were the potential enemy army to rise up against Israel. (Keep in mind that *the Israelite males* who participated in the seduction were also put to death.) Midian's brazen, evil intent to lead Israel astray called for a severe judgment. The intent of Moses's command was to undermine any future Midianite threat to Israel's identity and integrity.

What about the taking of young virgins? Some critics have crassly suggested that Israelite men were free simply to grab and rape young virgins. Not so. They were saved precisely because they *hadn't* degraded themselves by seducing Israelite men. As a backdrop, have a look again at Deuteronomy 21:10–14. There, a Gentile female POW couldn't be used as a sex object. An Israelite male had to carefully follow proper procedures before she could be taken *as a wife*. In light of the highly sensitive nature of sexual purity in Israel and for Israel's soldiers, specific protocols had to be followed. Rape was most certainly excluded as an extracurricular activity in warfare.

## **Making Offers of Peace First**

In light of Deuteronomy 20's warfare procedures, many scholars argue that Israel was to offer terms of peace to non-Canaanite cities but *not* to Canaanite cities. This is the majority view, to be sure. However, others (including traditional Jewish commentators) have argued that the destruction of Canaanite cities wasn't unconditional and that treaties could have been made under certain conditions. As with Gibeon (despite being sneaky treaty makers), a straightforward peace pact could have been available to any Canaanite city. As we saw with Jericho, a sevenfold opportunity was given for Jericho to make peace with Israel, which it refused to do. Consider Joshua 11:19: “There was not a city which made peace with the sons of Israel except the Hivites living in Gibeon; they took them all in battle.” Like Pharaoh, who opposed Moses, these Canaanite

cities were so far gone that God simply gave them up to their own hardened, resistant hearts (v. 20).

Again, the primary focus in passages like Deuteronomy 7 and 20 is on Israel's ridding the land of idols and false, destructive religious practices. The ultimate goal isn't eliminating persons, as the inspection march around Jericho also suggests.

## **Joshua Utterly Destroyed Them Just as Moses Commanded**

In the following texts, Joshua's utter destruction of the Canaanites is exactly what "Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded":

- "Joshua captured all the cities of these kings, and all their kings, and he struck them with the edge of the sword, and utterly destroyed them; just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded" (Josh. 11:12).
- "All the spoil of these cities and the cattle, the sons of Israel took as their plunder; but they struck every man with the edge of the sword, until they had destroyed them. They left no one who breathed. Just as the LORD had commanded Moses his servant, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses" (Josh. 11:14–15).
- "that he might destroy them, just as the LORD had commanded Moses" (Josh. 11:20).

Remember Moses's sweeping commands to "consume" and "utterly destroy" the Canaanites, not to "leave alive anything that breathes"? Joshua's comprehensive language echoes that of Moses; Scripture clearly indicates that Joshua fulfilled Moses's charge to him.

## **Scripture and Archaeology**

However, archaeologists have discovered that by 1000 BC (during the Iron Age), Canaanites were no longer an identifiable entity in Israel. (I'm assuming that the exodus from Egypt took place sometime in the thirteenth century BC.) Around this time also, Israelites were worshipping a national God, whose dominant personal name was Yahweh ("the Lord"). An additional significant change from the Late Bronze to Iron Age was that town shrines in Canaan had been abandoned but not relocated elsewhere—say, to the hill villages. This suggests that a new people with a distinct theological bent had migrated here, had gradually occupied the territory, and had eventually become dominant.

We could point to a well-supported parallel scenario in the ancient Near East. The same kind of gradual infiltration took place by the Amorites, who had moved into Babylonia decades before 2000 BC. (Hammurabi himself was an Amorite who ruled Babylon.) They eventually occupied and controlled key cities and exerted political influence, which is attested by changes in many personal names in the literature and inscriptions. Babylonia's culture didn't change in its buildings, clothing, and ceramics, but a significant social shift took place. Likewise, we see the same gradual transition taking place in Canaan based on the same kinds of evidence archaeologists typically utilize. We're reminded once again to avoid simplistic Sunday school versions of how Canaan came to be occupied by Israel.

## Summary

Let's summarize some of the key ideas in this chapter.

- The ban language allows and hopes for exceptions (e.g., Rahab); it isn't absolute.
- The preservation of Rahab and her family indicates that consecration to the ban wasn't absolute and irreversible. God had given ample indications of his power and greatness, and the Canaanites could have submitted to the one true God who trumped Egypt's and Canaan's gods, sparing their own lives.
- The biblical text, according to some scholars, suggests that peace treaties could be made with Canaanite cities if they chose to, but none (except Gibeon) did so (Josh. 11:19). The offer of peace was implicitly made to Jericho.
- The biblical text contains many references to "driving out" the Canaanites. To clear away the land for habitation didn't require killing; civilians fled when their military strongholds were destroyed and soldiers were no longer capable of protecting them.
- From the start, certain (more cooperative) Canaanites were subjected to forced labor, not annihilation (Judg. 1:27–36; 1 Kings 9:20–21; Josh. 15:63; 16:10; 17:12–13; cf. Ps. 106:34–35). This was another indication that the ban wasn't absolute.
- The archaeological evidence nicely supports the biblical text; both of these point to minimal observable material destruction in Canaan as well as Israel's gradual infiltration, and eventual dominance there.

## Indiscriminate Massacre and Ethnic Cleansing?

### *The Killing of the Canaanites (III)*

Critics argue that the killing of the Canaanites set a negative, brutal precedent for national Israel. Curiously, professing Christians (during the Crusades, for instance) who were inspired by the Canaanite-killing texts to justify their actions completely ignored Jesus's own kingdom teaching. Jesus had informed Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting" (John 18:36). Again, "all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52).

On the other hand, we can confidently say that, precisely because of their commitment to Christ's kingdom *not* being of this world, Amish and Mennonite communities would most certainly not appeal to Joshua to justify engaging in atrocities. The difference is that some professing Christians are far more consistent in applying Jesus's teaching than others. It's one thing to say that holy war is at the very heart of a religion and its theology and another to misuse a religion's texts to justify warfare.

Furthermore, national Israel itself didn't utilize these Joshua texts to justify attacking non-Canaanite peoples. They may have defended themselves against other enemies, but that's a different story. Israelites throughout their history have not sought to commit non-Canaanite peoples to destruction. To quote John Goldingay once more: "Saul does not seek to devote the Philistines and David does not seek to devote [to destruction] the surrounding peoples whom he did conquer. Neither Ephraim nor Judah took on Assyria, Babylon, Persia, or the local equivalents of the Canaanites in the Second Temple period." He adds that Deuteronomy and Joshua do not set a pattern that "invites later Israel to follow, or that later Israel does follow."

### **The Canaanites as the Redeemed People of God**

Another factor to include in our discussion is God's promise to bless all the nations through Israel, including the Canaanites! Israel's prophets after Solomon came to view the nations once singled out for judgment as the ultimate objects of Yahweh's salvation. Peoples who historically had been Israel's fiercest, most brutal enemies would partake in a new covenant as God's multiethnic people. For instance, in Zechariah 9, God begins with a promise to humble and judge the Philistines (vv. 1–6). And "then they also will be a remnant for our God, and be like a clan in Judah, and Ekron [a city in Philistia] like a Jebusite" (v. 7). In other words, the Philistines—Israel's longstanding enemies—will become a redeemed remnant and will be incorporated into God's people, like one of the tribes of Israel. They will be "like a Jebusite." The Jebusites were a *Canaanite* people (Deut. 7:1) that were eventually absorbed into the fold of Israel (1 Chron. 21:15, 18, 28). But beyond this, God's salvation extends to all peoples, even the Canaanites, some of whom ultimately become part of God's redeemed remnant.

This theme is reinforced in Psalm 87, which lists (among others) Israel's chief oppressors: Egypt, Babylon, and Philistia. These nations in Israel's Hall of Infamy will one day be incorporated into the people of God.

I will record Rahab [Egypt] and Babylon among those who acknowledge me—Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush [Ethiopia]—and will say, "This one was born in Zion." Indeed, of Zion it

will be said, “This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.” The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: “This one was born in Zion.” (vv. 4–6 NIV)

Isaiah prophesied that the Gentile nations of Egypt and Assyria would become incorporated into the people of God. These nearly topped the list of Israel’s oppressors:

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance.” (19:23–25)

In the New Testament, we begin to see this prophecy fulfilled, as Gentiles become incorporated into the new Israel, the church (Eph. 3:1–11; cf. Acts 15:16–17). In fact, in Jesus’s own ministry, he extended concern to a *Canaanite* woman in the region of Tyre and Sidon (Matt. 15:22). God’s ultimate concern to save even his own (people’s) enemies comes full circle with the redemption of the Canaanites.

## **The Canaanite Question and Noncombatants**

We’ve given abundant evidence for claiming that approved Yahweh wars in the Old Testament were limited to a certain window of time in Israel’s history, to a certain smallish geographical location, and to a specific grouping of people. (Indeed, these specific divinely given parameters and controls were in marked contrast to other ancient Near Eastern nations, which had no such limits.) This act of judgment was a corporate capital punishment that could be carried out only with the guidance of special, divine revelation.

For anyone who takes the Bible seriously, these Yahweh-war texts will certainly prove troubling. This issue is certainly the most weighty of all Old Testament ethical considerations. We shouldn’t glibly dismiss or ignore such questions. On the other hand, we hope that critics won’t do a surface reading of these Old Testament texts.

If our scenario doesn’t cover *all* the bases, it still goes a long way in providing perspective on what happened and didn’t happen in Canaan. Simply put, the damage to and death of noncombatants would have been far less serious and extensive than what critics and believers alike have maintained based on a traditional surface reading of the text.

Second, let’s assume that women weren’t combatants, like Joan of Arc against the English (1412–31) or Budicca (d. AD 60) against the Romans. Even so, Canaanite women would have participated in immoral, degrading activities (which we’ve reviewed). Deviant morality wasn’t just the domain of men. We’ve seen how temple prostitution was religiously justified adultery, and how Canaanite gods themselves modeled adultery, bestiality, incest, and a host of other activities that their devotees practiced. Even before we get to Canaan, notice how readily the Midianite women sought to seduce Israelite men (Num. 25). Women may not have been combatants, but they were hardly innocent. And we could add that elderly Canaanites clearly shared blame in the moral corruption of their culture.

Third, if the evidence doesn’t offer a complete answer, the lingering crucial question is, Why kill Canaanite infants and children? Surely they were innocent. From a theological side, we can say a couple of things.

1. God is the author of life and has a rightful claim on it as Creator. Therefore, humans can make no demands on how long a person ought to live on earth (Job 1:21). If God is God and we aren't, then our rights will necessarily be limited to some degree.
2. If any infants and children were killed, they would have entered the presence of God. Though deprived of earthly life, these young ones wouldn't have been deprived of the greatest good—enjoying everlasting friendship with God.

### ***Psychologically Damaging?***

On March 16, 1968, American troops brutally slaughtered over three hundred Vietnamese civilians in a cluster of hamlets, now infamously known as My Lai. They disregarded all Geneva Convention protocols, which regard harming noncombatants or the sick and wounded as a crime. Wasn't the killing of the Canaanites a brutal task comparable to the My Lai massacre? How could God command such an undertaking? The theologian John Stott admits, "It was a ghastly business; one shrinks from it in horror."<sup>6</sup> In the context of another war, Confederate general Robert E. Lee affirmed, "It is well that war is so terrible; otherwise we should grow too fond of it."

In the ancient Near East, however, warfare was a way of life and a means of survival. Fighting was a much less grim reality back then. In the ancient Near East, combatants and noncombatants weren't always easily distinguished. We've also observed that the hardness of human hearts (Matt. 19:8), in conjunction with the existence of fallen, morally blunted social structures in the ancient Near East, likely means that such actions would have been considerably less psychologically damaging for the ancient Israelite than for a citizen of Western culture. There is no evidence that Israelite soldiers were internally damaged by killing the Canaanites.

We may not understand the tasks God assigns to us (whether we are thinking of Abraham with Isaac or the killing of Canaanites), and a certain task or calling may bring its share of traumas and sorrows. Theologian Vernon Grounds's wise words are insightful and widely applicable:

An individual, quite completely free from tension, anxiety, and conflict may be only a well-adjusted sinner who is dangerously maladjusted to God; and it is infinitely better to be a neurotic saint than a healthy-minded sinner.... Healthymindedness may be a spiritual hazard that keeps an individual from turning to God precisely because he has no acute sense of God.... Tension, conflict, and anxiety, even to the point of mental illness, may be a cross voluntarily carried in God's service.

A grander context should also be considered, something that couldn't be fully understood by Joshua's generation. If the Israelites hadn't done serious damage to the Canaanite religious infrastructure, the result would have been incalculable damage to Israel's integrity and thus to God's entire plan to redeem humanity. Much was at stake in creating the necessary context—including a set-apart people in a set-apart land—in order to bring about redemption and an eventually restored creation. Just as Frodo's success was precarious from start to finish, so was the journey from God's promise to Abram (Gen. 12) to the coming of the Messiah. God's plan involved a certain mysterious messiness, but this shouldn't deter us from seeing God's ultimate purposes at work.

### ***The Broader Picture***

God's overarching goal was to bring blessing and salvation to all the nations, including the Canaanites, through Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 22:17–18; cf. 28:13–14). The covenant God made with Abraham is unique in its sweeping, outsider-oriented, universally directed nature. It is unlike any other ancient religious movement. Yet, for a specific, relatively short, and strategic period, God

sought to establish Israel in the land with a view to fulfilling this long-term, global (indeed, cosmic) plan of redemption. God would simultaneously punish a wicked people ripe for judgment. Not doing so would have erased humankind's only hope for redemption.

God's difficult command regarding the Canaanites is also a limited, unique, salvation-historical situation. We could compare it to God's difficult command to Abraham in Genesis 22. John Goldingay says it well: "the fate of the Canaanites is about as illuminating a starting point for understanding First Testament ethics as Gen 22 [Abraham's binding of Isaac] would be for an understanding of the family." Behind both of these harsh commands is the clear context of God's loving intentions and faithful promises.

The first harsh command involved Abraham and the miracle child Isaac. God had promised Abraham that through Isaac he would become the father of many. Previously, Abraham had seen God's provision for Ishmael and Hagar when he reluctantly let them go into the wilderness. God had reassured Abraham that Ishmael would become a great nation. In light of Abraham's previous experience, he was confident that God would somehow fulfill his covenant promises through Isaac even as they headed toward Mount Moriah. He was convinced that God would keep his promises even if it meant that God would raise Isaac from the dead. Thus, Abraham informed his servants, "We will worship, and then *we* will come back to you" (Gen. 22:5 NRSV; cf. Heb. 11:19). Abraham knew that God's purposes wouldn't be thwarted, despite this difficult command.

With the second harsh command regarding the Canaanites, we can't ignore the context of God's universal blessing to all nations, including national Israel's ancient enemies. The troubling, exceptional commands regarding both Isaac and the Canaanites must be set against their historical and theological context—namely, the background of Yahweh's enemy-loving character and worldwide saving purposes.

This is illustrated in the book of Jonah. God didn't punish the Ninevites—to the great disappointment of Jonah, who knew that this is the sort of thing Yahweh does: he loves his (and Israel's) enemies. "I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (Jonah 4:2; cf. Exod. 34:6).

## **An Untamable God**

We sensitized Westerners wonder why God gets so angry with Israel. Why all the judgment and wrath? Why does the Old Testament seem so undemocratic? We live in a time when we're very alert to racial discrimination and intolerance, but we aren't as sensitized to sexual sin as past generations were. We live in a time that sees death as the ultimate evil. Perhaps we need to be more open to the fact that some of our moral intuitions aren't as finely tuned as they ought to be. The same may apply to our thoughts about what God should or shouldn't have done in Canaan.

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf was born in Croatia and lived through the nightmare years of ethnic strife in the former Yugoslavia that included the destruction of churches, the raping of women, and the murdering of innocents. He once thought that wrath and anger were beneath God, but he came to realize that his view of God had been too low. Here Volf puts the New Atheists' complaints about divine wrath into proper perspective:

I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my

people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. Or think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? By doting on the perpetrators in a grandfatherly fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love.

The apostle Paul brings these features together: "Behold then the kindness and severity of God" (Rom. 11:22).

Maybe the ideal "God" in the Westerner's mind is just too nice. We've lost sight of good and just while focusing on nice, tame, and manageable. We've ignored sternness and severity (which make us squirm), latching on to our own ideals of comfort and convenience. We've gotten rid of the God who presents a cosmic authority problem and substituted controllable gods of our own devising. We've focused on divine love at the expense of God's anger at what ultimately destroys us or undermines our fundamental well-being.

Philosopher Paul Moser observes:

It would be a strange, defective God who didn't pose a serious cosmic authority problem for humans. Part of the status of being *God*, after all, is that God has a unique authority, or lordship, over humans. Since we humans aren't God, the true God would have authority over us and would seek to correct our profoundly selfish ways.

Unlike ancient Near Eastern deities, the Savior of Scripture is not safe. As a fellow church member, Ellie, recently put it, he is "a butt-kicking God." Today's version of spirituality is tame and makes no demands on us. A mere impersonal force behind it all doesn't call us on the carpet for our actions. We can play games with a pantheon of these kinds of deities. By contrast, the living God—a "hunter, king, husband," C. S. Lewis says—is trying to get our attention by pulling from the other end at the cord of our lives. Because life isn't about us as the center of reality, God becomes the "transcendental Interferer"<sup>16</sup> and the hound of heaven to help our restless souls ultimately find their rest in him.

## The God Who Commands

Some critics argue that because God commands the killing of the Canaanites (a specific action in a specific historical context for a specific theological purpose), then we can generalize: "action X is always permissible." And, of course, if you allow this, then terrorism becomes permissible in the name of whatever authority: "Allah said it; I believe it; that settles it!" This isn't very good reasoning, of course, but it's all too common when it comes to the Canaanite question.

If infants are killed by God's command, they aren't wronged, for they will be compensated by God in the next life. So why not support infanticide? Why not kill *all* infants to make sure they are with God in the hereafter? This question commonly raised by critics doesn't follow, of course, for at least four reasons:



1. In the context of God's ongoing special revelation to Israel, God gave an unrepeatable command for a specific purpose, which the Scriptures themselves make clear; this command is not to be universalized.
2. Since life belongs to God, any harm caused due to specific purposes in a specific context would be overshadowed by divine benefits in the afterlife.
3. While the infant would go to God's presence, the killer has not only taken another's life but also sinned (primarily) against God (cf. Ps. 51:4).
4. The killer is responsible for the consequences of his own actions—namely, taking innocent life. He is not responsible for granting heavenly life. The giver of heavenly benefit cannot be the human agent but only God himself (another agent).

So when the killer takes matters into his own hands, he is acting presumptuously. The killer is not benefiting the infant; he is only harming the infant. The killer brings only death, not benefits; it is *God* who bestows the benefit of heavenly life. The killer isn't "responsible" for getting an infant to heaven; he isn't the one bestowing the highly valued benefit. The killer neither *causes* these benefits nor is *responsible for* them.

By contrast, in this worst-case scenario, God commands the Israelite soldiers to take the lives of some civilians, including children. In this special circumstance, the soldiers *would be* instruments of bringing heavenly life to these young ones. Given God's specific purposes, this scenario would differ from the infanticide committed by, say, Susan Smith, who strapped her children into her car and let it roll into a lake. No, Smith *didn't* "give" her children a better life in heaven by drowning them. She defied God's purposes and sinned against God and her children.

## Humans and the Worm's-Eye View

The book of Job sheds helpful light, reminding us that the full picture is not always available to us. We aren't necessarily in the best position to decipher God's purposes. Like Job, we may find ourselves left with a puzzling gap between what we clearly know of God and what seems to be a harsh exception. (Job's friends certainly thought they had the correct perspective regarding "when bad things happen to good people.") Though blameless yet severely afflicted, Job received no answers to his questions. And while he did eventually receive his audience with God, he still received no answer to his "why" question. Though baffled as ever, Job did obtain assurances of God's wisdom, which far surpasses ours. He learned that God's character is trustworthy and his presence sufficient, even when we remain stumped in the face of unanswered questions.

No doubt, children may draw all sorts of faulty conclusions about their "immoral" parents simply because they don't understand what their parents are doing. Parents, in order to train their children, may seem overly strict when they insist that kids apologize even when they don't feel like it. Parents may appear tyrannical when they override the freedom of a child who happens to be making all the wrong decisions about friendships or dubious activities. Parents may do things that strike their young children as utterly out of character or even immoral, yet the problem will be resolved with further information or the maturity of years and experience. Couldn't the Canaanite question fit into this category?

Likewise, we may not be in the best position to understand the nature of God's commands regarding the Canaanites in light of his overarching purposes. Perhaps we have more of a worm's-eye view than we would like to think. As Isaiah 55:8–9 affirms: " 'For My thoughts are not your

thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' declares the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.' ”

Several stanzas in William Cowper’s hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” express quite well the gap that exists between God and us—and how we may misperceive what God is doing:

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,  
Unfolding every hour;  
The bud may have a bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err  
And scan His work in vain;  
God is His own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.

## Jesus and the Bigger Picture

As we grapple with difficult Old Testament questions, we can go beyond Job’s limited perspective to glimpse God more clearly, as revealed in Jesus. In Christ’s incarnation and atoning death, we see how the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob brings his unfolding purposes to fulfillment. As the Israelites had hoped, God showed up on the scene, though not in the way they had anticipated. He stooped to share our lot, enduring life’s temptations, injustices, sufferings, and cruelties. However we view the Canaanite question, God’s heart is concerned with redemption. This becomes especially evident in how low God was willing to go for our salvation, dying naked on a cross, enduring scorn and shame, and suffering the fate of a criminal or slave. Michael Card’s song “This Must Be the Lamb” depicts this powerfully. He writes that the religious leaders mocked Christ’s true calling, laughing at his fate, “blind to the fact that it was God limping by.”

Since God was willing to go through all of this for our salvation, the Christian can reply to the critic, “While I can’t tidily solve the problem of the Canaanites, I can trust a God who has proven his willingness to go to such excruciating lengths—and depths—to offer rebellious humans reconciliation and friendship.” However we’re to interpret and respond to some of the baffling questions raised by the Old Testament, we shouldn’t stop with the Old Testament if we want a clearer revelation of the heart and character of God.

In the New Testament, God redeems his enemies through Christ’s substitutionary, self-sacrificial, shame-bearing act of love (Rom. 5:10). Though a Canaanite-punishing God strikes us as incompatible with graciousness and compassion, we cannot escape a redeeming God who loves his enemies, not simply his friends (Matt. 5:43–48). Indeed, he allows himself to be crucified by his enemies in hopes of redeeming them: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Copan, P. (2011). [\*Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God\*](#) (pp. 158–197). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

# MODERN ETHICS & CULTURAL MORES

## JUST WAR THEORY



Augustine 354-430 AD



Visigoths invade Rome, c. 410 AD

## Augustine's Qualifications for Just War



### JUST CAUSE

(to avenge or to avert evil; to protect the innocent and restore moral social order)

### JUST INTENT

(to restore moral order, not expand power; not for pride or revenge)

## Christian Just War Theory



- **New Testament Examples**
  - Luke 3:14 - **John the Baptist** doesn't tell the Roman soldiers to leave the army before being baptized
  - Luke 7:10 - Jesus uses the **Roman centurion** as a positive illustration of faith
  - Acts 10:2, 22, 35 Paul interacts with **Cornelius, a Roman army officer** – known as “devout and God fearing”

## What We Teach Our Own Soldiers

### **Principle VI - The crimes hereinafter set out are punishable as crimes under international law:**

#### ***(a) Crimes against peace:***

- (i) Planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression or a war in violation of international treaties, agreements or assurances;
- (ii) Participation in a common plan or conspiracy for the accomplishment of any of the acts mentioned under (i).

#### ***(b) War crimes:***

Violations of the laws or customs of war include, but are not limited to, murder, ill-treatment or deportation to slave-labor or for any other purpose of civilian population of or in occupied territory, murder or ill-treatment of prisoners of war, of persons on the seas, killing of hostages, plunder of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns, or villages, or devastation not justified by military necessity.

#### ***(c) Crimes against humanity:***

Murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation and other inhuman acts done against any civilian population, or persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds, when such acts are done or such persecutions are carried on in execution of or in connection with any crime against peace or any war crime.

Principle VII - Complicity in the commission of a crime against peace, a war crime, or a crime against humanity as set forth in Principle VI is a crime under international law.

## Ethical Question of War in the Conquest of Canaan

For many Bible readers, one of the most troubling themes in the history books of the OT is the role of warfare. The conquest of the Promised Land of Canaan by Israel is particularly disturbing to some. We find the conquest and settlement of the land chiefly in the book of Joshua, although we see some early battles in the Pentateuch, and the conquering of additional territory by Saul, David and Solomon in the Books of the Kingdom (1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings).

Many questions concerning the conquest are frequently asked, even by many Christians. How can God command Israel to completely annihilate the indigenous Canaanites who were merely defending their homeland? Doesn't this basically amount to genocide or ethical cleansing? How can God sanction this level of violence? Is this the same God of love that we find in the NT, as revealed in the teachings of Jesus? What right did Israel have to the land in the first place? A complete detailing of the subject would take a much longer treatise, so in this article, we'll attempt to answer some of these questions, such as those mentioned above, and discuss some of the main issues.

### Table of Contents

- **Context of the OT Wars**
- **Israel's Right to the Land**
- **Why Complete Extermination?**
  - **Ethnic Cleansing?**
  - **An Exception Clause**
- **Summary**

### Context of the OT Wars

Perhaps the most common method of explaining away the ethical challenges associated with warfare is by attributing the wars to the **morals and customs of the era**, characterized by a lack of moral development in an ancient pre-Christian time period. The Christological principles of forgiveness, love your enemies, turn the other cheek etc, were not yet in effect. In our dispensation, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and possess spiritual weapons to fight battles, not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces (2 Cor 10:4-5, Eph 6:10-20). The ancient Israelites did not have these advantages, or the example of the cross. Instead, they could only act with faith and obedience to God's commands as they carried out the physical battles against the

Canaanites. While the customs of the previous dispensation explain some of the difficulties, the various questions can't be summarily dismissed on this basis alone, but must be considered as legitimate and addressed accordingly.

Therefore, in considering the ethical aspects of the conquest, we must next observe the **specific and limited scope of the warfare**. God gave very explicit and detailed instructions to Israel throughout the conquest. In Deuteronomy 20, we see many unambiguous laws involving warfare which are concerned with limiting conduct and casualties during the wars. These laws clearly distinguish between enemies within and outside the boundaries of the Promised Land, the latter of which were to be offered terms of peace before attacking them (Dt 20:10).

Finally and most importantly, we must understand the **purpose of the OT wars within the framework of the history of redemption**. In the era, most wars were fought for wealth, power and other human gains. In contrast, the conquest was a continuation of the interaction of God's grace and judgment. God selected the nation of Israel to be a Kingdom of Priests, set apart for His service. Israel could not become a witness and testimony to all nations regarding the way of eternal redemption unless the influence of the wicked pagans was removed. To this ends, He commissioned them as His army to bring judgment on and reclaim His land from the depraved Canaanites whose sin had now reached its fullness (Gen 15:16). Thus, **God Himself led the conquest** (Dt 31:3-5, Jsh 24:11-13) as an act of His judgment against the immoral and decadent inhabitants and an act of His grace in fulfilling His promises to the patriarchs (Jsh 21:43-45).

God's sovereignty is undeniable throughout the OT wars, beginning with the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 15. We continue to see His promises through the Pentateuch (eg Ex 23:20-33) and Joshua (eg Jsh 10:42, 11:19-20). Just prior to the conquest, God sent the Commander of His army (Jsh 5:13-15). When Joshua asks the Commander if He is for or against Israel, He replies "neither". That is, he is not simply a human ally or adversary, but a divinely sent judgment from God (Is 13:4). The one true God was about to lead His people into battle.

## Israel's Right to the Land

The whole world was created by God and belongs to God (Ex 19:5, Ps 24:1), so in passing judgment on the Canaanites, He was merely reclaiming a portion that a depraved people had claimed for themselves. Since the land belonged to God, it needed to be

cleansed. But, considering the frequent moral failures of the Israelites, what right did they have to possess the land?

We begin by noting that Israel right to the land was **based upon God's promises to their forefathers**, not because of their inherent righteousness (Dt 7:6-9, 9:4-5). It was common among the pagan nations to attribute triumph in battle to superiority of the victorious army's god or gods, or as a reward for being favored in the eyes of the gods, even though these false deities were powerless (or even non-existent except in the minds of men). So, Israel is warned beforehand not to credit victory to their own righteousness, even though their success is still contingent upon their faithfulness to the covenant.

Next, Israel was not so much given the land in the sense of being owners, but rather as being **stewards of God's land** (Lev 25:23-34). This is the principle behind the Year of Jubilee (Lev 25:1-22). Israel was to establish a theocracy faithful to the rule of God as a witness to the other nations. Israel was also warned not to imitate the abominable practices of the previous tenants, lest the land would vomit them out when they made it unclean (Lev 18:24-24). Thus as the Israelites continued to disobey God and the covenant (despite short periods of faithfulness under a few Godly leaders), they were eventually exiled from the land.

### Why Complete Extermination?

God does not delight in the death of the wicked, but wants them to repent and live (Ezek 18:32, 33:11). The Bible however, strongly implies that there is a point beyond which judgment becomes inevitable (Jer 15:1-9). Prior to the conquest, we witnessed complete extermination due to unredeemable sin with the flood (Gen 6-7) and at Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19). When Abraham migrated to Egypt centuries before, God promised that his descendants (the Israelites) would return and occupy Canaan in four hundred years after the sins of the Amorites (as representatives of the Canaanites) reached completeness (Gen 15:16).

At the time of the conquest, the Canaanite people had reached this point of degeneration, similar to those before the flood (Gen 6:5-7). Their principle objects of worship were Baal (weather and agricultural god) and Asherah (fertility and mother earth goddess). Their religious rituals included perverse sexual practices such as male and female temple prostitutes, and infant sacrifices. **Evil had infected every level of their society** and archeologists continue to be shocked by new discoveries of these

horrendous rituals, including pottery containing the remains of children or infants who had been sacrificed to their false gods.

Now, we know that all people are sinners and consequently, legally subject to God's judgment. Even so, God in his patience, allowed the Canaanites to occupy the land an additional four centuries before sending the Israelites as agents of His divine justice. Yet, throughout history, there have been many other nations who worshiped false gods and practiced appalling rituals, including human sacrifices. In many cases, these civilizations are allowed to continue and the people are not judged until they die (Heb 9:27).

### **So, why single out the Canaanites for destruction?**

We can offer two related explanations within the context of God's history of redemption. We've already noted the first and immediate rationale of Israel being established as God's witnesses to all nations. Therefore, the idolatry and moral depravity needed to be removed so that Israel could establish her monotheistic civilization. **If left unchecked, the evil of Canaan would have contaminated Israelite religion and culture.** We have witnessed the later moral and religious problems of the Israelites due to their failure to carry out God's instructions to completely destroy the pagans, leading to their eventual exile from the land.

A second motive may relate to the role that the nation of Israel would play throughout history. Israel was God's chosen people, the apple of His eye (Zech 2:8) and the center of the earth (Ez 5:5, 38:12). From Biblical times, the eyes of the world have been focused on Israel, a small country about the size of New Jersey

So, even if it is difficult, we can reconcile the killing of adults, but why annihilate the children and animals? Although we can't completely understand the answer to this question, we can know that God's ways are never unjust (Dt 32:4) and we can trust Him even when we can't fully comprehend. Regarding the animals, all creation was cursed due to man's sin (Gen 3:17-19) and remains in this state at present (Rom 8:22). We can also be confident that these little children are now safe in heaven.

### **Ethnic Cleansing?**

While the land was promised to Israel as a nation and other nations were corporately destroyed in the process, we see that faithfulness to God is an essential prerequisite for success during the conquest, and continued obedience to the covenants as a necessary



condition for remaining in the land. These requirements, along with their resulting exile due to disobedience, eliminates the ethic factor from consideration.

**Thus, the conquest was not so much an ethical cleansing as a spiritual cleansing.** Perhaps, nothing illustrates this concept better than the contrasting accounts of the Canaanite prostitute Rahab (Jsh 2) and the Israelite Achan (Jsh 7) at Jericho. During the destruction of the city, Achan stole and hid some spoils that were to have been dedicated to the Lord. Therefore, all Israel stoned him to death.

**Rahab** however, placed her faith in the God of Israel, aiding the two Israelite scouts who came to her house. She hid them from her countrymen and helped them escape. As a Canaanite, Rahab possibly participated in the aforementioned religious rituals. Yet, based upon tales of Israel's advancement toward her land, she recognized Yahweh as the absolute "God of the heavens above and the earth below" (Jsh 2:11). As a result of her faith (Heb 11:31, Ja 2:25), Rahab and her family were the only survivors when Jericho was destroyed (Jsh 2:14, 6:22-25). The scarlet cord that Rahab tied in the window as a sign to the Israelites (Jsh 2:18-21) is reminiscence of the blood applied to the doorposts of the Israelites in Egypt during the Passover (Ex 12:13, 21-23).

Rahab later married the Judahite Salmon, and produced a descendant named Boaz (Mt 1:5). Thus, Rahab became the ancestor of Ruth (Boaz's wife), another foreign woman adopted into Israel. Boaz and Ruth then had a son named Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David (Ruth 4:13-17). So Rahab became an ancestor of King David, and one of five women cited by the Apostle Matthew in his genealogy of Jesus the Messiah. The story of Rahab remains a great testimony to the vast inclusion of God's grace.

### **An Exception Clause?**

Some scholars interpret the inclusion of the stories of Rahab and the Gibeonites (Jsh 9) as an implied "exception" to the divinely mandated "complete destruction command", however, this runs into difficulty in light of Deut 7:1-2. Others believe that the statement "There was not a city that made peace with the people of Israel except the inhabitants of Gibeon" (Jsh 11:19) implies that many city-states were offered terms of peace but refused. This finds additional support in context with the next verse, which states that God hardened their hearts so that they would receive no mercy (Jsh 11:20). Regardless, we can be assured that God is never unjust.

## Summary

In considering the ethical aspects of the conquest, we must understand that the OT wars were limited to a specific setting in space and time, very explicit regulations, and a particular objective. Although it's a very difficult concept for those of us living in modern times, the Bible clearly states that God Himself ordained the warfare. When all aspects are considered however, it is clear that, while the conquest is an act of divine justice, it is ultimately an **act of divine grace within the context of God's perfect plan of redemption.**

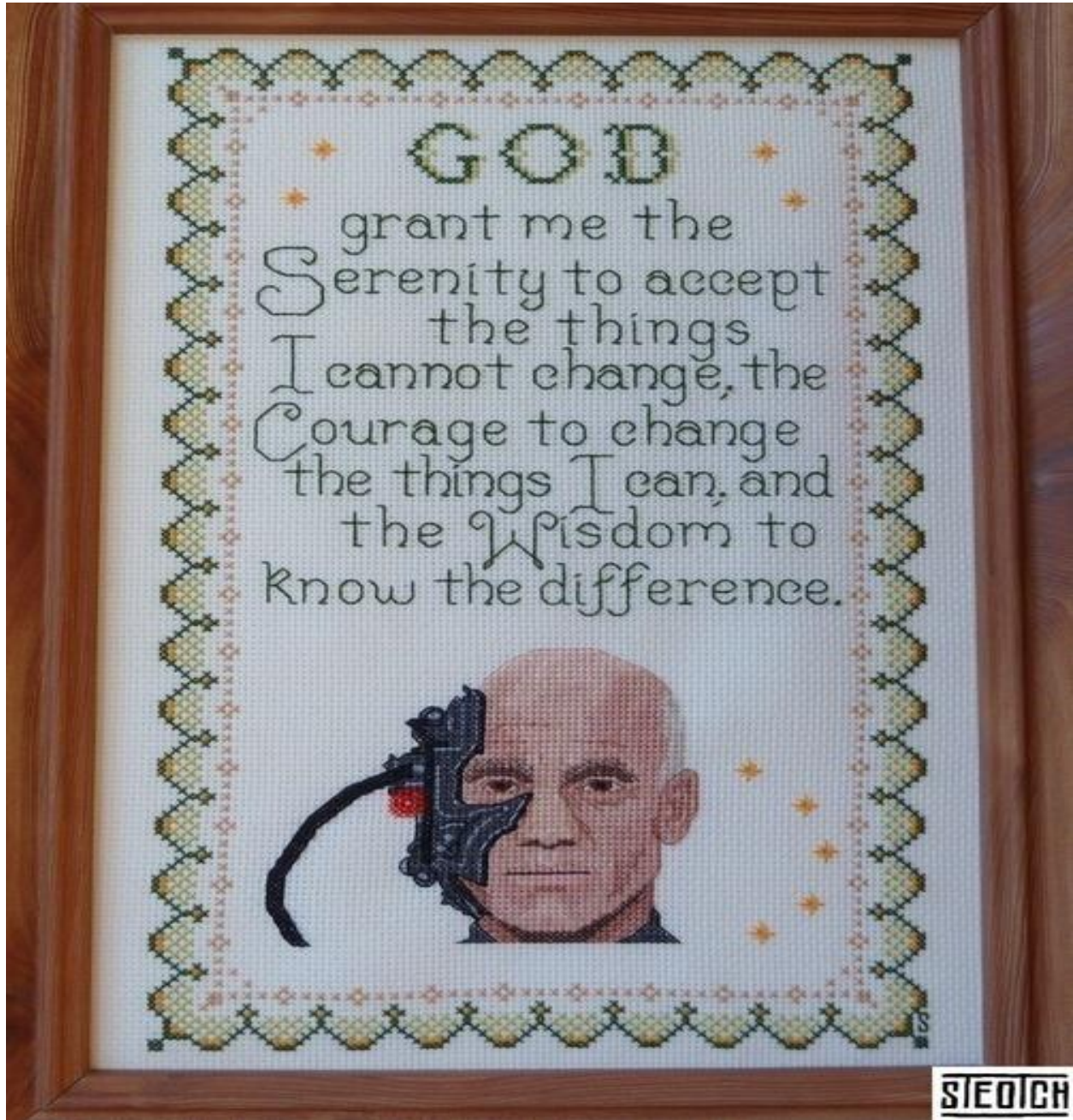
God used Israel as His instrument of divine judgment to drive out the immoral Canaanites from His land. Total destruction of the inhabitants was to protect the Israelites from adopting their wicked behavior. Israel's right to the land was based upon God's promises to the forefathers, rather than any intrinsic merit, but their prolonged occupation was subject to their continued obedience to God and His covenants. Thus, **continuation as stewards of the land was on a spiritual rather than ethnical basis.**

– ad Dei Gloriam

# **THE JEWISH WARS OF CANAAN CONQUEST IN THEIR MORAL CONTEXT**

- ✓ **While God does not reveal all the details concerning his sovereign decisions, Scripture indicates God's moral will flows from his perfectly good and just nature. Therefore, God Almighty has morally sufficient grounds for his commands even if those reasons are not to be fully revealed to humankind. Yet, in this specific case several of those reasons are evident...**

- ✓ **God's command to destroy the Canaanites was motivated by his intention to preserve Israel from the deep moral corruption that would have inevitably resulted by way of cultural assimilation with the pagan nations. God's wrathful justice upon resident indigenous Canaanites resulted in an act of mercy (protection) upon the Israelites. Therefore, through this extension of logic & under such specific conditions, God's command to destroy an entire local ethnic population did constitute a moral good.**



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- ✓ **The local Canaanites were a morally decadent and a reprobate people. Archaeological discoveries have revealed that their cultural practice included very many moral abominations such as temple prostitution, child sacrifice and even bestiality. And for hundreds of years they consistently ignored God's call for them to repent of their wicked ways (Gen. 15: 16). In God's eyes they were well beyond moral rehabilitation.**

# REPROBATE LIVING BOTH WIDE & DEEP

- 1<sup>ST</sup> – THROUGHOUT ONE'S BEING
- 2<sup>ND</sup> – THEN PROGENY & NEIGHBOR
- 3<sup>RD</sup> – THE CHARACTER OF ANIMALS
- 4<sup>TH</sup> – TO OBJECT DESIGN/PURPOSE
- 5<sup>TH</sup> – POLLUTED CURSING OF LAND

- ✓ **Life in the ancient Near-Eastern world was very brutal. And the Canaanite nations together viewed the Israelites as their enemies. In this context of warfare among nations God's conquest command to destroy these pagan peoples was a necessary act of war.**



- ✓ **God, as the sovereign creator and sustainer of life, has prerogative to take life at his just discretion (Deuteronomy 32: 39; Job 1: 21). Because the cosmos belongs to the Lord, he has the ontological right to do as he wishes with his creatures. His only constraint of action is his own moral nature.**

**God is therefore in a different moral category of being than his creatures.**

- ✓ **God's direction to exterminate the Canaanite cities was not a command to actual murder (or to take life without just cause). Rather, conversely, it instead constituted God's commandment for capital punishment of grand scale and therefore reflected a retributive form of justice (where the punishment matched the crime).**

- ✓ **The divine command for the Hebrew army to destroy the Canaanites took place in a unique historical and biblical context. This was not a common or normative event in the life of God's people. "Yahweh" is compassionate & patient and remains, in spite of this act, a God of mercy (Exodus 34: 6).**

# Summary of Salient & Significant Statements

- 1) Repo Action.** The patriarchs had once occupied the land (Genesis 13:12; 16:3; 23:20; 25:10-11; 26:6; 33:18-19; 37:1) and had purchased some of the land (Genesis 23:16-18; 25:10; 33:19; 50:13). Therefore, the Israelites were *repossessing* the land.
- 2) Cosmic Warfare in Eradication of Canaanite Idolatry.** In line with the purpose for Yahweh war is the removal not only of pagan nations that practiced idolatry but the extermination of idolatry itself. While theoretically heathenism can exist in the abstract apart from its proponents, in Israel's experience idolatry was linked to peoples & nations with whom she came in contact. This is why its removal was contingent on destruction of those nations. The Decalogue, in both its renditions, places the prohibition of idolatry immediately after the declaration that only Yahweh is God (Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 5:8-10). This juxtaposition emphatically underscores the stark distinction between the one and only true God & human representations of false gods.

- 3) Not Carnal War of Human Initiative. Holy War of Divine Initiative Fought Synergistic: War Carnage Detail was both Descriptive & Prescriptive.** The third theme of trajectory focuses on the question of whether God fights for or with his people. In other words, is God's war fought *monergistic* or *synergistic*? Battles in which God was the sole actor on behalf of his people stand in contrast to other biblical and non-biblical ancient Near Eastern warfare narratives.
- 4) Not Genocide But Judgment: 400 Years of Patience.** In Genesis Chapter 15, God confirms His unconditional covenant with Abram. God promises Father Abram a multitude of descendants who will inherit the land in which Abram sojourns. God then gives Abram a brief timeline of future events: "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own (Egypt) and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there" (Genesis 15:13). And then, "In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (verse 16).
- 5) It was Inevitable But Avoidable: 40 Years of Warning.** The fact that the Canaanites had hardened their hearts is clear from the words of Rahab of Joshua 2. If the Canaanites knew, like Rahab and the Gibeonites, that God dried up the Red Sea for Israel and that He was leading them to conquer Canaan, why were they still in the land? The logical solution is that they were

resisting what they knew to be the will of God by staying in Canaan. (God had dried up the Red Sea more than 40 yrs. prior to Israel entering Canaan.)

- 6) Imminent Warning & Warning Protocol.** After saying that the cities outside of the Promised Land could be *given the opportunity to surrender* & thus be subject to servitude, God commanded that Israel “not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them — the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God.” (Deut. 20: 16ff) As with Gibeon (despite being sneaky treaty makers), a straightforward peace pact could have been available to any Canaan city. As we saw with Jericho, a sevenfold opportunity was given for Jericho to make peace with Israel, which it refused to do. Consider Joshua 11:19: “There was not a city which made peace with the sons of Israel except the Hivites living in Gibeon; they took them all in battle.”

- 7) Although the Canaanite Conquest Was Unique & Not Normative – It Does Not Categorize On the Spectrum of Old & New Testament Dispensational Discontinuity. THE YEHWEH WAR OF CANAAN CONQUEST & CLEANSE IS CATEGORICALLY OF ESCHATOLOGICAL CONTINUITY.**

**End-Time Reaper Prefiguration.** Suspension of moral and ethical laws happens when events are to be part of pre-figurations of end-time scenarios.

## Eschatological Continuity of Yahweh Wars

**God's Command to Annihilate All the Canaanites and the Psalms' Imprecations Anticipate the End-Time Judgment When Love of the Unbelieving Neighbor Ceases.**

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