

Genocide in the Old Testament?  
An Examination of the Invasion of Canaan

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**Abstract**

This study examines the warfare commanded by God during the invasion of Canaan by Joshua. These battles were examples of *herem* warfare in which Yahweh Himself initiated and waged war against the Canaanites. Through historical and Biblical study it becomes clear that the Canaanites were an extraordinarily wicked people and God exercised great patience in dealing with them before their final destruction. Furthermore, the invasion of Canaan was instrumental in God's larger salvation history. Sadly, pain and death are the direct ramifications of man's sinful rebellion against God. The themes of war and condemnation are in theological continuity with the rest of the Bible, especially the return of Christ and final judgment.

## Introduction

Our generation is in greater need of an explanation of the Israelite invasion of Canaan than those of centuries past. The modern world got a first-hand viewing of genocide in 1994 when the Hutus of Rwanda, the most Christianized nation in Africa, exterminated 800,000 of the minority Tutsis in only one hundred days. Militia personnel used rifles; villagers joined in with machetes.<sup>1</sup> America herself tasted the sting of hate-fueled warfare on September 11, 2001. As survivors sought to rebuild their lives from the smoldering wreckage, the question asked so frequently was “Where is God in this?”<sup>2</sup>

Compounding this problem is the fact that the current rise in non-religious objectors of Christianity, known to many as the “New Atheist Movement,” have seized upon the war passages of the Hebrew Bible as proof texts for their own disdain for religion. In his widely-read book, *The God Delusion*, one of the leaders of the New Atheists, Richard Dawkins, writes the following:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the ethical questions raised by the Israelite invasion of Canaan have come to the forefront of Christian apologetics for three reasons. First, genocide itself is not a blurry image devoted to the distant past; the act and effects of genocide are in full view of modern man. Second, the moral difficulties relating to the invasion of Canaan in

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1. C.S. Cowles. “The Case for Radical Discontinuity,” in *Show Them no Mercy: Four Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 15-16.

2. *Ibid.*, 14.

3. Richard Dawkins, quoted by *GoodReads.com* <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/23651-the-god-of-the-old-testament-is-arguably-the-most>, accessed January 27, 2013.

Scripture can no longer be ignored by the conscientious Christian. Opponents to the faith are more than willing to address these problems if Christians do not. Third, at the heart of the argument, what is being battled over is not some doctrinal discrepancy or an academic curiosity. The very nature of God is what is being attacked by books such as Dawkins'. Few topics may claim priority over such an issue.

In light of all stated above, it is the intention of this paper to examine the moral implications of Israel's invasion of Canaan by 1) defining the *herem* warfare utilized by the Israelites, 2) examining the cause of *herem* warfare, the Canaanites sin and God's patience in relation to the sin, 3) reviewing the eternal security of the Canaanite children who suffered for their parents' sins, 4) explaining the purpose for such harsh measures in light of God's salvation history for man, 5) describing the reality of warfare, 6) establishing the rights of God as the Creator and Ruler of the Universe, 7) showing theological continuity between the invasion of Canaan and the rest of the Bible, and 8) concluding the issue with some final remarks. It is the author's hope that in writing this paper the consciences of harassed Christians may be soothed and their view of God may be affirmed.

### ***Herem Warfare***

If we are to examine the ethical nature of the invasion of Canaan and its implications concerning God's morality, we must first examine the warfare itself. *Herem Warfare* is the term given to the type of warfare waged by Israel against the peoples living in Canaan, the land of Israel's inheritance. *Herem*, from the Hebrew root *hrm*, "has

the idea of both destruction and separation or devotion.”<sup>4</sup> While scholars have debated how to express *herem* Warfare in modern terms (some have suggested “holy war” or “genocide”), one name upon which most can agree is “Yahweh war.”<sup>5</sup>

Yahweh wars had fluid factors which could change from battle to battle as well as several constant elements which set them apart from all other warfare. Using the destruction of Jericho in Joshua 6 as a paradigm, Jeph Holloway identifies four themes specific to Yahweh wars which are, for the most part, constant throughout Israel’s invasion of Canaan.

The first theme is initiation at the Lord’s command, which is illustrated by the appearing of the commander of the Lord’s army in Joshua 5:13-15.<sup>6</sup> Eugene H. Merrill agrees, writing that in Yahweh Wars, God Himself plays the role of the protagonist by conceiving and commanding the battles to occur.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Yahweh wars are the result of the choice of God, not Israel, to fight the Canaanite nations.

The second theme of the Yahweh Wars is the sacred nature of the event. This means that primary to the conquest of Canaan and the destruction of its inhabitants was the Israelites’ loyalty to and worship of Yahweh. In the battle of Jericho this is illustrated in several ways: the circumcision of Israel’s army (Josh. 5:2-9), the observance of the Passover (5:10-12), the ban which set aside all the spoils of war for God (6:18-19, 21),

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4. Eugene H. Merrill, “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” in *Show Them no Mercy: Four Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 70.

5. Peter Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1978), 49.

6. Jeph Holloway, “The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 41 (1998): 49.

7. Merrill, “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” 80-81.

and the presence of the Ark of the Covenant which is mentioned seven times in chapter 6.<sup>8</sup>

Deuteronomy 20, sometimes referred to as Israel's "Manual for War," is helpful in contrasting the sacred nature of Yahweh wars with Israel's "normal" warfare. Verses 1-15 describe how war is to be waged against those outside Israel's Promised Land. In these instances, an offer of peace is to be made to the enemy city or army. If the enemy refuses the peace offering, the battle begins. Once the enemy is defeated, all men are to be executed, but women, children, livestock, and everything else in the city may be taken as plunder. In verses 16-18, where warfare within the Promised Land is described, the instructions are quite different. In such instances, when Israel is attacking the cities that will be given to them as an inheritance, "anything that breathes" is to be destroyed in the city (verse 16, unless otherwise indicated, all texts taken from the New American Standard Bible).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in the depiction of the Yahweh war against Jericho in Joshua 6:1-27, the city itself was burned (vs. 24), and every object in the city was devoted to the Lord (vs. 18-19).<sup>10</sup> The distinction between Israel's warfare within the Promised Land and outside of it is clearly illustrated in Joshua 9. In this passage the Gibeonites deceive Joshua into believing that they are from a far-off country and thus are allowed to enter into a covenant with Israel. When confronted with their deception, the Gibeonites state that they were afraid because the Lord commanded Israel "to destroy all the inhabitants of the land before you" (vs. 24). Thus, it is clear from the text that

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8. Holloway, "Ethical Dilemma," 49-50.

9. Merrill, "Moderate Discontinuity," 70-71.

10. Ibid., 72.

Yahweh wars were sacred in nature and used only against those living in the Promised Land.

A third major theme in the Yahweh wars is the emphasis on Israel's God fighting as the Divine Warrior. This means that "God acts as the source and means of victory for Israel."<sup>11</sup> The idea of God as a Warrior is, in fact, a major theme in the Old Testament. The "Song of the Sea" in Exodus 15:1-18 refers to God as a "Man in Battle," and praises him for saving the Israelites and drowning the Egyptians. Similarly, Lord of Hosts, literally meaning "Lord of Armies," is a title used to refer to God over two-hundred times and "clearly associates God with the armies of Israel."<sup>12</sup>

In fact, many times Israel's battles were set up to reveal God as the Warrior. Israel was forbidden to use horses and chariots in their battles, and even employed "militarily dysfunctional" strategies while fighting. Using Jericho as a case-study again, marching around a city and blowing trumpets aren't exactly text-book military strategies. Israel's success revealed that God was fighting for them.<sup>13</sup> Referencing this point, G. E. Wright states, "Biblical mentions of the conquest generally omit all mention of specific battles and human activity. It is God's deed; he is the sole actor; there are no human heroes."<sup>14</sup>

The final major theme of Yahweh wars is the "sovereignty or kingship of Yahweh over Israel."<sup>15</sup> In the ancient Near East, the role of king and warrior were inseparably

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11. Holloway, "Ethical Dilemma," 50.

12. Craigie, *The Problem*, 35-36.

13. Holloway, "Ethical Dilemma," 66.

14. G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), 123.

15. Holloway, "Ethical Dilemma," 52.

bound together. Thus, God's defeat of the Egyptians (Exod. 15:18) as well as his leadership in the destruction of the Canaanites (Josh. 6) illustrates the rule of Yahweh.<sup>16</sup>

Taking this point even further, G. E. Wright illustrated that Yahweh's relationship with Israel was like that of a "Suzerain," a monarch of unequal power in his sphere. Though many implications can be drawn from this idea, the most important to our study is that if the Suzerain model is correct, then "Israel's understanding of power and authority in the world was political, governmental."<sup>17</sup> Thus, the concept of Yahweh leading Israel into battle, delivering enemies into their hands, and conquering nations would not have caused an ethical dilemma for the Israelites like it does for the modern Western mind. This is exactly what they expected their God and King to act like.

In summary of this examination of *herem* warfare, Yahweh wars were wars initiated by God and sacred in character, during which God himself fought for Israel, thus illustrating his divine sovereignty. However, identifying these characteristics has illuminated the problem rather than solved it. Many readers see tension between the portrayals of the Father of Jesus Christ expressed in the New Testament (John 16:27), and Yahweh who commanded war and destruction in the Old Testament. For some, this perceived tension can appear so great that they concluded the Old and New Testaments speak of different Gods, or at best, radically different views of the same God.<sup>18</sup>

In attempting to circumvent this problem, some scholars have argued that the war-like qualities of the God of the Old Testament are simply a reflection of the primitive

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16. Ibid.

17. G. E. Wright, *Old Testament*, 107.

18. C.S. Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," 38.

Israelite himself.<sup>19</sup> This view affirms that as man continued to develop spiritually over time, so did his view of God, until, at last, man arrived at the New Testament picture of God the Father. The danger of this view is that it trades progressive revelation for an evolutionary view of religion. In adopting such an approach, one can no longer view the Bible as God's self-revelation; instead it becomes man's search for God.<sup>20</sup> Also, attributing violence to the so-called primitive beliefs in the Pentateuch does not alleviate the difficulty. Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan, by citing war-like passages from every genre in the Old Testament, concludes that "rhetoric of war and violence runs deep and wide" through every major section of the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>21</sup> Substantiating Kuan's statement, Marion Benedict asserts that "the book of Ruth is practically the only entire document [in the Old Testament] in which Yahweh is not directly or indirectly associated with warfare."<sup>22</sup> Further, when considering an evolutionary view of religion, it is important to remember that in the New Testament neither Stephen nor Paul shy away from the description of God as a warrior in ancient Israel (Acts 7:35-36; 13:17).<sup>23</sup>

Before proceeding, it is important to note a flaw in the argument of those who seen a schism between the Old and New Testaments. In reading the Old Testament, the stereotyped images of a God of wrath are supplemented by the God of love. Consider

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19. For examples of this line of argument, see Robert B. Coote, "The Book of Joshua," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 578-79; C.S. Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," 40-41; Kah-Jin Kuan, "Biblical Interpretation and the Rhetoric of Violence and War," *Asia Journal of Theology*, 23 (2009) 201-202.

20. Craigie, *The Problem*, 37.

21. Kah-Jin Kuan, "Rhetoric of Violence and War," 191-192.

22. Marion Benedict, *The God of the Old Testament in Relation to War* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 163. It should be noted that two other exceptions are Esther and Song of Solomon, though Esther has its share of violence.

23. Craigie, *The Problem*, 38.

God's descriptions of Himself in Exodus 34: "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin;" (verses 6b-7a). God's forgiveness and mercy is evident in all His actions. In Noah's time, God gave the wicked world 120 years to repent (Gen 6:3). 2 Peter 2:5 records that during this time Noah was a "preacher of righteousness," a constant reminder to the world to repent in light of coming judgment. When God spoke to Abraham, He promised not to destroy both Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of only ten righteous citizens (Gen. 18:32). Though it was exceedingly wicked, God forgave the Assyrian city of Nineveh when they repented at Jonah's message (Jon. 3:10). When King Ahab, whom the Bible records sold himself to do evil unlike anyone else, humbled himself before God, God forgave him too (1 Kings 21:25-29)! God also continually forgave the sins of Israel corporately, though they constantly broke their covenant with Him and betrayed Him by worshipping false gods (Hos. 11). These few examples could be multiplied many times over because the God of the Old Testament is gracious and kind in His dealings with man. The Bible is consistent in its depiction of God as loving and merciful. When judgment does come, it is always after a great deal of warning and patience on the part of God. As we shall see in the next section, God's treatment of the Canaanites was no different.

### **The Patience of God and the Sin of the Canaanites**

One of the most uncomfortable facets of the Canaanite invasion is the suddenness with which God seems to decree judgment. One gets the feeling that while the Canaanites were going about their business, the Israelites sneaked into Canaan and God swooped

down with sudden wrath. However, an examination of the biblical account paints a much different picture: God was very patient with the Canaanites.

In Genesis 9:25-27, Scripture begins to forecast that God will judge the Canaanites. This is seen in Noah's curse of Canaan, Ham's youngest son, after Ham acted dishonorably toward his father. This curse specified that Canaan would be a lowly servant to his brothers, and especially to Shem, the predecessor of the Hebrews. Several generations later, one can begin to sense the trajectory of conflict when in Genesis 12:6 Abraham arrives in Canaan only to find that there "were Canaanites in the land."<sup>24</sup> A more complete explanation is given in Genesis 15:16 where God informs Abraham "that the fulfillment of the promise to him would be delayed, in part because 'the sin of the Amorites is not yet complete'" (Gen. 15:16).<sup>25</sup> For Merrill, the notion of "being complete" suggests that the Canaanite sin was to become "beyond remedy and could therefore be dealt with only by destruction."<sup>26</sup> Walter Kaiser explains God's statement by noting:

Thus, God waited for centuries while the Amalekites and those other Canaanite groups slowly filled up their own cups of condemnation by their sinful behavior. God never acted precipitously toward them; his grace and mercy waited to see if they would repent and turn from their headlong plummet into destruction.<sup>27</sup>

Far from being maliciously vindictive or quick to judge, God's attitude towards the unrepentant Canaanites was one of mercy and patience.

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24. Eugene Merrill, "Moderate Discontinuity," 83.

25. David M. Howard, *The New American Commentary: Joshua* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998), 185.

26. Eugene Merrill, "Moderate Discontinuity," 83.

27. Walter C. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984), 206.

What then were the sins which Canaanites performed? Understanding the depravity of the Canaanites will help the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, tolerance-sensitive reader to understand the harshness of God's judgment. Clay Jones has written extensively on the subject of the Canaanite sins, and gives evidence for six especially deplorable sins of the Canaanites.

The first sin of the Canaanites, and that which seems to have birth all the others, is idolatry. Whenever an individual or a nation chooses to serve another "god" besides Yahweh, be it Self, Pride, Lust, or any number of other idols, more sin will surely follow. Truly, it was the Canaanites' idolatry which led the myriad of other sins which enslaved them.<sup>28</sup> Their gods exercised deplorable morality and humiliating behavior. One text depicts the Canaanite god El as "a drunkard, plashing 'in his excrement and his urine' after a banquet."<sup>29</sup> Obviously, if this is one's view of God, one's moral life is sure to be skewed, as is evidenced by the Canaanites.

The second sin of the Canaanites is incest. Not surprisingly, the gods of the Canaanites were highly incestuous themselves. The most revered god, Baal, had sexual relations with his mother, Asherah, his sister Anat, and his daughter, Pidray. None of these acts were ever presented negatively.<sup>30</sup> Canaanite laws after the fourteenth century

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28. Clay Jones, "We Don't Hate Sin so We Don't Understand What Happened to the Canaanites," *Philosophia Christia* 11, (2009): 56.

29. Ch. Virolleaud, "Un Conte populaire de Ras Shamra: Le banquet du Pere des dieux," *Comptes rendus du Groupe linguistique d'Etudes chamitosemitiques* 9 (May 1962): 51-2. In quoting Virolleaud, Ulf Oldenburg believes that the Canaanites identified the disgraceful El with the God of Israelites, Yahweh (Ulf Oldenburg, *The Conflict Between El and Ba'al in Canaanite Religion* [Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1969] 172).

30. "El, Ashertu, and the Storm-god," trans. Albretch Goetze, ed. James B. Pritchard, in *The Ancient Near East: Supplementary Text and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 519; W.F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Winnoa Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1968), 145.

BC penalized incest with no more than a fine.<sup>31</sup> While other nations in the ancient Near East (ANE) may have written laws against incest because it produces deformed babies, some manuscripts, such as the Egyptian dream book, show incest was somewhat of a fantasy.<sup>32</sup> Also interesting is the account of Genesis 19:30-38 in which Lot's daughters become pregnant by getting their father drunk and sleeping with him. The context shows that this family had only recently escaped Sodom and Gomorrah, Canaanite cities destroyed for their wickedness. Thus, it seems that the exceeding wickedness of the Canaanite civilization had rubbed off on Lot's family.<sup>33</sup>

Following the theme of the degradation of the family, the third sin of the Canaanites, adultery, was also rampant in the ANE. This was due in large part to their fertility religions which involved temple sex. In the Canaanite religion, the Queen of Heaven "became *the* woman among the gods, patron of eroticism and sensuality of conjugal love as well as adultery, of brides and prostitutes, transvestites and pederasts."<sup>34</sup> The Queen of Heaven and similar gods were honored by worshippers imitating the god's actions. Thus, the Canaanite religion "involved priests drawn from priestly families and also sacred prostitutes, both male and female."<sup>35</sup> In fact, "sexual contact with a person whose whole life was devoted to the goddess was tantamount to union with the goddess

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31. Harry A Hoffner, "Incest, Sodomy and Bestiality in the Ancient Near East," in *Orient and Occident: Essays Present to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Harry A. Hoffner (Germany: Neukirchen Vluyn, 1973), 85.

32. Papyrus Chester Beatty III recto (BM10683) from about 1175 BC, quoted in Lise Maniche, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt* (London: Routledge, 1987), 100.

33. Jones, "We Don't Hate Sin," 57-58.

34. Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 57.

35. Jonathan A. Tubb, *Canaanites* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 74.

herself.”<sup>36</sup> This is illustrated by a story of El having sex with two women, after which directions read, “To be repeated five times by the company and the singers of the assembly.”<sup>37</sup> On this text John Gray comments that we “may well suppose that the activity of El was sacramentally experienced by the community in the sexual orgies of the fertility cult which the Hebrew prophets so vehemently denounced.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, in Canaan, adultery was not only allowed, but encouraged if performed as an act of worship.

The fourth sin of the Canaanites, child sacrifice, is probably the most offensive of all. Leviticus 18:21 and Deuteronomy 12:31 commands the Israelites not to burn their children as offerings to the gods of the Canaanites. Some scholars believe Molech, the god of the Underworld, received these offerings, while others believe *molek* was the sacrificial term and not the deity itself.<sup>39</sup> What is clear is that child sacrifice occurred in the Canaanite religion. According to late sources, Molech’s idol had bronze arms which were extended over a bronze cauldron, in which a fire raged. When the time came, children were laid into Molech’s red hot arms and burned to death.<sup>40</sup> Drums and flutes were played loudly during the sacrifice so that the sound of infants wailing would not be heard by the people. Children as old as four were sacrificed.<sup>41</sup> Many classical sources, such as Punic inscriptions, archaeological evidence, and Egyptian depictions of events

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36. Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticisms in the Biblical World: a Historical Perspective*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 33.

37. John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill 1965), 101-102.

38. *Ibid.*, 101.

39. For the first view, see John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 62; for the second view, see Albright, *Yahweh and the God of Canaan*, 236.

40. Plutarch, *De Superstitione* 13, quoted in Day, 89.

41. Shelby Brown, *Late Carthagian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in Their Mediterranean Context* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 14.

transpiring in Syria-Palestine, serve as evidence that the Canaanites practiced child-sacrifice.<sup>42</sup> In light of such masses of evidence, Shelby Brown writes:

No other ancient people, however, regularly chose their own children as sacrificial victims, or equated them with animals which could sometimes be substituted for them. The Phoenician [Canaanite] practice indicates a definition of the “family” and the boundaries belonging to it and alienation from it that was incomprehensible to others in the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, while it is debated whether the Canaanites actually worshipped Molech, the fact that they burned their children as sacrifices is undisputed.

The fifth sin of the Canaanites is homosexuality. Admittedly, the greatest evidence for this sin comes from the Old Testament itself. A prime example of this is Genesis 19:5, in which the entire male population of the Canaanite city of Sodom came out to rape Lot’s angel visitors.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, no ANE text condemns homosexuality and some texts seem to indicate that certain priests in the temples were for the use of the same sex.<sup>45</sup> Coupling this mentality with the Canaanite religion which, as previously mentioned, condoned temple sex and temple prostitutes as worship to the gods, makes it easy to see how homosexuality could have become a serious sin in Canaan.

Perversion led to greater perversion; the sixth sin practiced by the Canaanites is bestiality. Once again, the Canaanites reflected the depravity of their gods. Baal himself

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42. Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses*, 211-12.

43. Brown, *Late Carthagian*, 75. See also Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, 152.

44. Jones, “We Don’t Hate Sin,” 64.

45. See Stephanie Dally, “Erra and Ishum IV,” in *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 305; Edmund L. Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs: Glimpses of Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Philadelphia: The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1959) 248.

is depicted as having sex with heifers.<sup>46</sup> Hittite Laws 199 states, “If anyone has intercourse with a pig or dog, he shall die. If a man has intercourse with a horse or mule, there is no punishment.”<sup>47</sup> Further, Hoffner states, “there were absolutely no prohibitions against bestiality in the rest of the ANE.”<sup>48</sup> In fact, incantations to alleviate sexual problems sometimes called for sex with an animal, even to the point of tying an animal to the bed.<sup>49</sup> Examination of the Egyptian dream book shows that “their sexual fantasies involved everything that breathes.”<sup>50</sup>

Thus, the sin of the Canaanites was as immense as it was repulsive. Yet, what was their response to their own sin? Were they repentant? Did they throw themselves upon the mercy of a God who spitefully carried out his vengeance anyway? Actually, quite the opposite occurred. The Scriptures record that the Canaanites hardened their hearts against the mercy of God. Joshua 11:19-20 states that none of the Canaanite peoples, except for Gibeon, made a treaty with Israel, but instead chose to fight “for it was of the LORD to harden their hearts, to meet Israel in battle in order that He might utterly destroy them, that they might receive no mercy, but that He might destroy them, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.” This hardening of the Canaanites’ hearts must be viewed in the same vein as Pharaoh’s resisting God in Exodus (9:12; 10:1, 27; 11:10). On these passages, David Howard comments that God did not force Pharaoh to sin. Pharaoh

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46. Mark S. Smith, trans., in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997), 148.

47. Hoffner, “Incest, Sodomy and Bestiality,” 82.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Leick, *Sex and Eroticism*, 205.

50. Jones, “We Don’t Hate Sin,” 65.

initiated the hardening process and God simply confirmed Pharaoh's own choice to harden his heart.<sup>51</sup>

By focusing on Sihon King of Heshbon, we get an example of how this hardening process may have worked. Yahweh hardened Sihon's heart so that in his refusal to allow Israel to pass through his land he could be defeated (Deut. 2:30).<sup>52</sup> On this topic, David Howard believes that, like with Pharaoh, God hardened Sihon's heart only after Sihon hardened it himself.<sup>53</sup> Robert Chisholm takes a "stronger" view of God's sovereignty, believing, contrary to Howard, that God initiated the hardening process in both Pharaoh and Sihon. However, he comes to the same conclusion as Howard, that God's hardening of Pharaoh and Sihon's hearts came only as a response to their autonomous rejection of Him.<sup>54</sup> Scripture indicates that this incident is not isolated but occurred in all of Canaan (Josh. 11:19-20). The Canaanites' hardened hearts must be viewed in terms of stubborn Pharaoh who "by his own free will, withstood the demands of Israel's God and thereby invoked on himself a spirit of unrepentance that could only lead to judgment."<sup>55</sup>

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

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51. David M. Howard, *Joshua*, 186.

52. *Ibid.*, 86.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Robert B. Chisholm, "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (1996): 428-429.

55. Eugene Merrill, "Moderate Discontinuity," 86.

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. <sup>11</sup> 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 (Josh. 2:9-11).

The Gibeonites tell a similar story in Joshua 9. In a previous section, this paper has discussed the Gibeonites deceiving Israel into thinking they came from a far-off land.

When the Israelites confront the Gibeonites with their 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 (Josh. 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 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 (Exod. 23:29; Deut. 7:20; Josh. 24:21). Further, God promised to send His angel into Canaan ahead of the Israelites (Exod. 23:20,23) as well as a spirit of terror (Exod. 23:20) and confusion (Deut.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 (Exod. 23:29-20; Deut. 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 the 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. What is less clear is how God dealt justly with those who didn't have the choice of leaving Canaan. The next section will examine the Canaanites' children.

### **The Children of the Canaanites**

As powerful as this evidence is in convincing one of how deserved the Canaanite's judgment was, a major difficulty must still be addressed. Perhaps most troubling to the conscience and mind of the modern reader are God's commands, such as with the city of Jericho, to destroy all the inhabitants, including women and children (Josh. 6:17). The centrality of this issue is seen in the myriad of critics' objections to the continuity between the God of the Old Testament and the Father of Jesus Christ. The mass of questions necessitate a thorough answer. Thus, it must be observed first that the reason so many Westerners have been offended by the idea of killing children is because our morals have been formed around Judeo-Christian ethics. Ironically, the moral sensibilities

which find these texts repugnant are based on the Bible.<sup>56</sup> In addressing these issues, it is helpful to remember how God describes Himself in the Scripture. The absence of cruelty in God is clear from Ezekiel 33:11 which states, “As I live! declares the Lord GOD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?” God’s mercy towards those who sin is even clearer in His dialogue with Abraham in Genesis 18:25. In this passage, God agrees to spare the entirety of both the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if only ten righteous people could be found. The actions and descriptions of God in the Old Testament show Him to be patient, loving, and merciful.<sup>57</sup>

Why then would this God of love decree that everyone within Jericho, even non-combatants, should be killed? This question has two main answers. The first involves what is known as corporate responsibility, in which the actions of the group are attributed to individuals and vice versa. As foreign as this may seem to Western minds which favor individualism so deeply, no one is capable of existing completely isolated from the community. In the Bible, this fact can manifest itself in various ways. The whole group may be treated as a unit or a single figure may represent the whole group. In the story of Achan (Josh. 7) responsibility seems to oscillate as God states “Israel has sinned” (11) yet Achan affirms “I have sinned” (20). On a smaller scale, the idea of corporate

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56. William Lane Craig, “Slaughter of the Canaanites.” Reasonable Faith, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/slaughter-of-the-canaanites> (accessed March 23, 2013).

57. Ibid.

responsibility, or at least suffering for the sins of one's parents, seems to be in play when the child of David and Bathsheba's affair dies (2 Sam. 12:14-18).<sup>58</sup>

The second reason why God decreed the death of everyone within Jericho was the need to establish the separateness of Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, one comes across many laws which may seem completely pointless such as not mixing wool and linen or planting two crops in one field. However, strange as they may seem, "The overriding thrust of these regulations is to prohibit various kinds of mixing. Clear lines of distinction are being drawn: *this* and *not that*."<sup>59</sup> God commanded the Israelites not to intermarry with the Canaanites lest they be led astray to serve other gods (Deut. 7:3-4). Allowing the Canaanite children to live would have the same result as intermarrying; the Israelites would have been corrupted and served other gods.<sup>60</sup>

One may argue that regardless of cultural corruption, it is still wrong of God to order the death of infants. This argument is compelling; however, it fails to take into consideration the vast chasm between mankind and the divine. God is supreme, and it is His right to issue commands such as the sixth commandment "You shall not murder" (Exod. 20:13). Therefore, it would be wrong and sinful for men to kill a child, or to give the order to kill a child. However, these moral obligations do not apply to God. He is the giver of the commands, not the receiver.<sup>61</sup> This line of thinking is strengthened when one realizes that God is Giver of Life. As such, God has the right to take back that which He has given at any point. Human beings have no right to demand how long a person should

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58. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings*, 177-178.

59. Craig, "Slaughter."

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

live on earth (Job 1:21).<sup>62</sup> Copan summarizes this point concisely: “If God is God and we aren’t, then our rights will necessarily be limited in some degree.<sup>63</sup> In fact, God could have used any number of means to exterminate the Canaanites. He could have used famine, plague, or natural disasters, but He chose to use Israel.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the problem most critics have with this text is not that God killed the Canaanites, but that the Israelites did.<sup>65</sup>

However, the manner in which the Canaanite children died is vastly beside the point, for the Bible offers a great deal of evidence that those who die before reaching maturity are taken to heaven. William Hendrickson comments that the term “age of accountability” is used to describe the age at which a child is old enough to respond to God.<sup>66</sup> Hendrickson elaborates in stating that in “ancient Israel it was felt that children were covered by the covenant of God within the elected community...until, by personal rebellion, they refused to obey Him or become part of the covenant community.”<sup>67</sup>

Ronald Nash used the following list to argue for the salvation of infants:

- (1) All who die before the age of accountability are incapable of moral good or evil;
- (2) God will only punish people (in the next life) on the basis of evils committed in this life;
- (3) All who die before the age of accountability, then, will not be punished in the next life (that is, they will be saved).<sup>68</sup>

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62. Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 189.

63. *Ibid.*

64. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings*, 207.

65. Craig, “Slaughter.”

66. William Hendrickson, “The Age of Accountability,” in *Children and Conversion*, ed. Clifford Ingle (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), 84.

67. *Ibid.*, 88.

68. Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology* vol. 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2004), 444.

Support for Nash's first premise may be found in Deuteronomy 1:39 which states that children do not know good from bad. Nash's second premise is based on 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Revelation 20:12-14 which states that man will be judged by God according to his works. Nash's final premise follows logically. However, Nash cites such verses as Matthew 19:13-14, in which Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to children, in support of his third premise.<sup>69</sup>

Critics to this view have objected that children who die, regardless of their moral capabilities are condemned by the sin nature which they inherited from Adam. Often, the passage cited in defense of this objection is Romans 5, which states that Adam's sin resulted in condemnation on all men (18a). However, the passage also states that through Christ all were made righteous (18b-19). While some proponents of child salvation argue that Christ's death cancels out original sin, critics of this view cite David's statement of himself in Psalm 51 that he "was brought forth in iniquity" and conceived in sin (vs. 5). Thus, it seems more consistent with Scripture as a whole to argue that Adam's original sin is confirmed or applied to children once they reach the age of accountability and rebel against God, the same way Christ's substitutionary death is applied to children once they believe.<sup>70</sup>

Bringing the focus back to the topic of this paper, it seems clear from the Biblical text that children died as a result of the Israelite invasion of Canaan. However, if God is the Giver of Life and can take life back at any time, and if God can use any means to take

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69. Ibid., 445.

70. Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 210-211.

back life, and if God grants salvation to those who die before being capable of moral decisions, who has been wronged? Ironically, it seems as if the Israelites, who were charged with the horrifying task of killing the children, had a tougher lot than the children which were killed.<sup>71</sup> The brief amount of anguish and pain experienced by the Canaanite children is incomparable to the glory of eternity in God's presence. Thus, though the consequences of sin are harsh, God proved Himself faithful and gracious, even in the Canaanite invasion.

### **The Holiness of God and the Need to Eradicate Idolatry**

The purpose of the previous section was to illustrate that the Canaanites deserved the judgment which befell them and refused God's patience and mercy. But why would God find the need to eradicate these people from the face of the earth when so many other nations were similarly wicked? The two facets of this question which must be examined are God's motivation and purpose. In this paper, motivation will be used to refer to the driving force behind God's actions while purpose refers to what God sought to accomplish.

God's main motivation in using the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites was not xenophobia or race-hatred as the New Atheists may suppose; it was His own Holiness. God has a standard of holiness and He demands holiness from people (Exod. 19:6; Lev. 11:44). The great wickedness of the Canaanites broke God's standard of holiness and was very offensive to Him. This is seen most clearly in Deuteronomy. 9:4-5, where God himself gives an explanation for the invasion of Canaan:

Do not say in your heart when the LORD your God has driven them out before you, "Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land," but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations *that* the LORD is

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71. Craig, "Slaughter."

dispossessing them before you.<sup>5</sup> It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but *it is* because of the wickedness of these nations *that* the LORD your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.<sup>72</sup>

God's standard of holiness and the accompanying punishment for breaking it become painfully obvious when God turns his wrath against the sin of Israel. Such is true in the account of Achan in Joshua 7:1-26. As previously stated, Israel was commanded to utterly destroy the city of Jericho because everything within it was "holy to the Lord" (Josh. 6:19). However, Achan disobeyed the command of the Lord and took several articles from Jericho for himself. The results were disastrous. When Israel went up to attack the ancient city of Ai, a task which should have been easy, they were routed before Ai because the sin of Achan was seen as Israel's corporate sin.<sup>73</sup> The account of Achan is similar to the defeat of Israel at the end of the reign of the priest Eli in 1 Samuel 4-6. Eli had two wicked sons named Hophni and Phinehas. After an initial defeat by the Philistines, Hophni and Phinehas call to have the ark of the Lord brought onto the battlefield. However, as much as the ark instills fear in the Philistines, they overcome the Israelites, kill Hophni and Phinehas, and capture the ark. God could have saved Israel that day, but He did not. This pattern is recurrent throughout Scripture: Israel sins and God punishes them. The cycle continues until the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon in 586 B.C.<sup>74</sup> God's holiness demands that He punish sin.

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72. G. E. Wright, *Old Testament*, 125-126.

73. David M. Howard, *Joshua*, 186.

74. Tremper Longman III, "The Case for Spiritual Continuity," in *Show Them no Mercy: Four Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 176-177.

G. E. Wright developed the necessity of a holy God well in the chapter “God the Lord” in his book *The Old Testament and Theology*. He summarizes Tertullian’s criticism of the second-century heretic Marcion. Marcion, like many scholars of religion today, saw between Jehovah of the Old Testament and the Father of Jesus Christ in the New Testament such a dissimilarity that he concluded they were different gods. Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament, was a spiteful and angry under-god to the Father of Jesus, who was pure love and did not exercise wrath like Jehovah.<sup>75</sup> Tertullian’s response is as follows:

“What a prevaricator of truth is such a god!” he exclaimed. “What a dissembler of his own decisions. Afraid to condemn what he really condemns, afraid to hate what he does not love, permitting that to be done which he does not allow, choosing to indicate what he dislikes rather than deeply examine it! This will turn out in an imaginary goodness,” for the true God “is not otherwise fully good than as an enemy of evil” and his real goodness is shown in his hatred of wickedness.”<sup>76</sup>

Wright argues that the Christian’s worldview requires a sovereign and holy God who is free to exercise judgment and make good on blessings as well as curses. This, states Wright, is necessary in order to truly believe “that our effort on earth is worthwhile, that the worst ills of mankind can be conquered, that history, while it takes some peculiarly twisted turnings, nevertheless is going somewhere.”<sup>77</sup> Holiness, and the punishment of sin which accompanies it, is a foundational theme in the Bible and an critical character trait of God.

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75. Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity* (New York, NY: Prince Press, 2010), 61.

76. G. E. Wright, *Old Testament*, 100-101.

77. *Ibid.*, 113.

Thus, God's motivation in punishing sin, whether it be against the Canaanites or against His own people Israel, is always holiness. God destroyed the Canaanites because their wickedness offended His holiness, and, as seen in the accounts of Achan and the wicked priests, God attacked His own people because of their wickedness. This is the necessary outworking of a God who governs His universe sovereignly. But why would God choose to destroy the Canaanites at that point in history? To answer this question, God's purpose must be examined.

Upon a full reading of the Bible, one begins to see how the invasion of Canaan fits into God's broader plan. God chose Israel to be His people, and from His people would come Jesus Christ, the ultimate solution to man's problem of sin. Before that day could come, however, Israel needed a home. God had prepared a place for Israel, but at the time of the conquest, it was full of evil, idolatrous, perverted people. Thus, God needed to eradicate idolatry in Canaan in order to proceed with His salvation history for the world.<sup>78</sup>

In examining the invasion of Canaan, one begins to get a sense of the dual nature of the event. In one sense, the invasion of Canaan involves the Israelites, a rag-tag group of Semites, who have been recently freed from four hundred years of bondage in Egypt and are now seeking a homeland of their own. However, in another sense, the invasion of Canaan depicts battles of cosmic importance. Merrill refers to this image as "a struggle against the realms of evil on a massive transcendent level," which began on the creaturely level of man and will end "only when Satan and his minions are fully eradicated from

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78. Holloway, "Ethical Dilemma," 53.

God's kingdom."<sup>79</sup> Merrill believes that this fact helps explain several difficult issues. Given the cosmic plain of the conflict, it is understandable why idolatry must be completely eradicated. This no mere squabble over choice land; God's reputation and sovereignty are on the line. Similarly, the scope of the battle helps explain why the Canaanites are singled out for destruction. Though all nations live in rebellion of God and rejection of His rule, the Canaanites stood in direct opposition to the plan of God by filling Israel's Promised Land with their depravity and actively resisting God's chosen nation.<sup>80</sup>

In light of God's salvation history for man, the invasion of Canaan becomes a necessity for three reasons. The first is the protection of Israel against a massive influx of idolatry. God makes it clear in Joshua and Deuteronomy that if Israel were to fall into idolatry they would come under God's judgment (Josh. 7:4; cf. 7:25-26; 8:11-20; 28:15-19; 30:15-20 Deut. 20:16-18). God sent Israel into Egypt in order to protect them from the corruption of the Canaanites (Gen. 45:5-8; 50:20). The second reason is the complete eradication of corrupting idolatry. Obviously, idolatry cannot survive purely in abstract form but must be attached to peoples and nations. The third reason is the education of Israel and the nation by witnessing the wrath, power, glory, and grace of God. Similar to the Egyptians acknowledging the strength of Israel's God during the Exodus (Exod. 7:5; 14:4, 8), God's judgment on the Canaanites would be powerful evidence for the ANE that Yahweh is God.<sup>81</sup>

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79. Merrill, "Moderate Discontinuity," 82.

80. Ibid.

81. Merrill, "Moderate Discontinuity," 86-87.

Continuing with the theme of God's salvation history for man, Peter Craigie believes that God being a Warrior provides hope for sinful mankind.<sup>82</sup> He argues that this proves God can and will work with imperfect people in imperfect conditions. He writes:

To say that God uses war is to say in effect that God uses sinful man for His purposes. In the Old Testament, if we were to expect to see God working in what we might call an absolutely "ethical" manner, we would in effect be denying the possibility of seeing Him work at all; the men with whom God meets and deals remain essentially sinful men.<sup>83</sup>

Wright agrees, noting "that God the Warrior uses our evil to his own purposes is the ultimate source of hope in history."<sup>84</sup> Therefore, while modern man may be uncomfortable with the idea of a God who gets involved in war, God is getting involved in the lives of sinners and using their sin for good is what provides hope for mankind. The ultimate goal of the invasion of Canaan was to establish a nation through which the Hero of God's salvation history, Christ, would come.

### **The Horror of War**

Now that we have determined that God's motivation was holiness and His purpose was to proceed with the salvation history of mankind, a question still remains: why would God use such a harsh form of war such as *herem* warfare? The answer, though not thoroughly comforting, is nonetheless true: war is terrible. Craigie speaks extensively of this in his chapter, "The Problem of a 'Holy' War." He frequently cites the thoughts of Carl Von Clausewitz, a Prussian soldier and philosopher of war who lived from 1780-1831. Von Clausewitz concisely defined war, which sadly, has always been

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82. Craigie, *The Problem of War*, 43.

83. Quoted in Holloway, "Ethical Dilemma," 54.

84. Wright, *Old Testament*, 134.

part of fallen man's history, as "an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will." Clausewitz states further that "to introduce into the philosophy of war itself a principle of moderation would be an absurdity."<sup>85</sup> With this frame of mind as his base, Von Clause constructed three "principle objects" of war: 1) destroy the enemy so that he can no longer undertake war, 2) conquer the enemy's country so that a new fighting force will not emerge, 3) war could only be ended "when the enemy's will to fight had been subdued."<sup>86</sup>

Craigie's point in citing Von Clausewitz is clear: war is horror and if it to be waged, it must be done so thoroughly. Craigie denounces the thought that the battles which occur in the Old Testament could be deemed "holy wars." Though they are wars of the Lord, there is certainly nothing holy, meaning "intrinsically good and pure in itself," about them.<sup>87</sup> Elaborating on this point he states:

The theory and practice of war in ancient Israel destroy any illusions we may have about war being "not all that bad," a kind of sport played by gentlemen. The war narratives of the Old Testament are a safer guide to the reality of war than are the various formulations of the "Just War" theory that have emerged in the history of Christianity.<sup>88</sup>

Waldemar Jazen agrees with Craigie, affirming that, "within this affirmation of disharmony between God's will and man's experience war finds its place...war belongs to the fall of man."<sup>89</sup> War is horror; it always has been and it always will be. The accounts of war in the Old Testament offend our conscience because war is offensive.

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85. Craigie, *The Problem of War*, 46.

86. Ibid.

87. Ibid., 48.

88. Ibid., 53.

89. Waldemar Jazen, "War in the Old Testament," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 46, (1972): 159.

To miss the harsh reality of war is to miss much of the Old Testament. Considered for instance, that “Bethel, an important city to ancient Israel, was destroyed four hundred times in the two-hundred year period from the time of the Judges to the establishment of the Davidic monarchy,” and we will begin to understand why Israel had such a military outlook.<sup>90</sup> This being stated, the nations around Israel were far more brutal in warfare. The Assyrians in particular were renowned for their brutality. The Assyrian records and annals of the kings brag about cutting off their defeated foe’s hands, feet, tongues, and testicles, draping the skin of enemies over the walls of their cities, and burning adolescents.<sup>91</sup> In contrast, war was not something Israel enjoyed and gloried in. An element of humility was present in Israel’s warfare, as the nation recognized they she did not deserve the Promised Land, but God had given it to them. John A. Wood concludes that in Israel’s wars, “pessimism and hope existed side-by-side;” war was a present and necessary evil, but they longed for the day of “lasting peace.”<sup>92</sup>

Understanding the idea of corporate responsibility is also crucial to grasping Israel’s concept of war. As previously mentioned, Israel, and most nations of the ANE, subscribed to what is known as “corporate identity” or “corporate responsibility.” This means that “Israel saw society as an aggregate of groups rather than a collection of individuals.”<sup>93</sup> As illustrated by the sin of Achan, where seemingly “innocent” soldiers died because of the guilt which lay upon the community, the view of corporate

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90. John A. Wood, “War in the Old Testament,” *Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University*, (2004): 12.

91. *Ibid.*, 12-13.

92. *Ibid.*, 13.

93. Holloway, “The Ethical Dilemma,” 61-62.

responsibility makes it more understandable why women and children would also be subject to destruction in the *herem* ban. While this idea may be offensive to modern Western sensitivities, we still, in some way subscribe to this notion. Whenever war is declared between two nations, it is exceedingly rare that no “innocent” civilians be hurt or killed in the conflict. When these unfortunate events occur, a “time-out” isn’t called to war. The leaders of the warring nations knew that their people would die; they chose, as the corporate leaders, to proceed with war and thus people suffered because of the decisions of their leaders. Perhaps the two clearest examples of this principle in modern warfare are the atomic strike on Hiroshima and the battle of Dresden.<sup>94</sup>

It is understandable that the idea of corporate responsibility is still unappealing to the Western mind. However, the fact remains that corporate responsibility is a recurring theme throughout the Bible. Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5 in which he describes the First and Second Adam. The First Adam, the original man, sinned and plunged the entire universe, including the human race under the curse of sin. The Second Adam, Jesus Christ, fulfilled the Law perfectly and died innocent; thus all who believe in him have died to the Law as well. Therefore, though it may seem foreign or unfair to Western ears, the idea of corporate headship and corporate responsibility is literally the foundation upon which two huge eras of human existence, the Fall and Redemption are built.

This section has sought to point out that war is terrible. To deny this fact is to have an unrealistic view of the world, and the biblical depictions of warfare. Unfortunately, as long as man lives with a fallen nature on a cursed planet, war will always be among us. Thus, if war is to be waged, it must be done so thoroughly. For

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94. Ibid.

Israel, war was a necessary evil which had to be exercised in order to destroy the Canaanites who had corporately chosen to rebel against God. Yet, even acknowledging this point, a looming questions still remains: is it morally acceptable for God to use war in order to accomplish his purposes? This question is addressed in the next section.

### **The Rights of God**

This paper defines the term “right of God” as an action which God may perform without the permission or approval of anyone. Though all of God’s actions fall into this category, for the purpose of this paper it seems expedient that three should be examined.

The first is God’s right to command. In his *Old Testament Theology*, Ludwig Kohler comments:

The one fundamental statement in the theology of the Old Testament is this: God is the Ruling Lord...Everything else derives from it. Everything leans upon it. Everything else can be understood with reference to it. Everything else subordinates itself to it...[Religion is] a relationship of wills: the subject of the ruled to the will of the ruler.<sup>95</sup>

Americans now live in a democracy which was established in opposition to the despotic power in Europe. This fact has greatly shaped our perspective. Americans champion freedom and are repulsed by compulsion, especially if it comes in the form of coercion. However, the God of the Old Testament (and the rest of the Bible for that matter) was not democratically elected and He is not swayed by the opinions of constituents. He is a monarch and He is Sovereign.<sup>96</sup> Paul Copan states that modern Westerners “have gotten rid of the God who presents a cosmic authority problem and substituted controllable gods

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<sup>95</sup> Ludwig Kohler, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. A.S. Todd (Tübingen, Germany: J.C.B. Mohr, 1953), 30.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 99.

of our own devising.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, when God shows that He is not our elected official representing our views, but a Sovereign King who does as He sees fit, as in the invasion of Canaan, it presents a problem for us. Perhaps the solution to the problem lies not in justifying God’s actions to us but in expanding our view of Him. God has the right to command man.

Yet, what if God commands man to do something unethical? Would this not mean that God Himself is unethical? Indeed it would, but this is never the case, even in the invasion of Canaan. Even in telling the Israelites to conquer Canaan, take land which did not belong to them, and kill the inhabitants, both young and old, God was entirely ethical. This is because of the final two rights of God.

The second right of God is the right to give and take land. There are two perspectives on Israel acquiring Canaan: one states Israel took the land, the other states God gave the land to Israel. The second view is correct. The Hebrew word *ntn*, “to give,” occurs eighty-nine times in the book of Joshua, sixty-nine of which refer to giving of land of some kind and twenty-four of which expressly name God as the giver. Furthermore, the use of the perfect form of this verb shows not only that God was going to give Israel the land, but that He already had.<sup>98</sup> Even though God charged Israel with the task of capturing Canaan and distributing the land, they weren’t taking land for themselves. Instead, they were coming into possession of what God had already given them. God was not wrong in this action, as if He was taking what belonged to others and giving it to His people. The land was not the Canaanites’ and ultimately it was not the Israelites’, as

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97. Copan, *Moral Monster*, 193.

98. Howard, *Joshua*, 77-79.

shown in Israel's exile by Babylon. All land is God's; He created the earth and retains the right to distribute the land as He sees fit.

This leads into the final right: God has a right to take and give life. This is made plain by the Genesis account of Noah's flood. In this passage, God destroyed the entire world, except for eight people (Gen. 6:1-22). Yet, God's mercy is also made clear in His decision to give man 120 years to repent (Genesis 6:3). For a New Testament example of this principle, consider the words of Jesus in Luke 13:1-5:

Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And Jesus said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were *greater* sinners than all *other* Galileans because they suffered this *fate*? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were *worse* culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

In this passage, Jesus' followers bring to His attention some Galileans whom Pilate had killed and then mocked by mixing their blood with their sacrifices. Jesus' reaction is, essentially, that his followers should not be surprised. He cites the example of a tower that collapsed and asks if these men were worse than everyone else in Jerusalem. The obvious answer is no, but yet, these men still died. This is Jesus' point: men die, and so you better repent and get right with God before it is your time.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, Ecclesiastes 3:2 and Hebrews 9:7 make it clear that man has an appointed time to die. This is the curse man has brought upon himself by choosing sin over God in the garden. The Canaanites were going to die; who's to say how this event should or should not have occurred? God could have used plague or famine or natural disasters to kill the Canaanites, but He chose to use Israel. In actuality, dying quickly by the sword is probably much less painful than

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99. Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 1206; Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24 of *The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 369.

dying by stomach cancer or starving to death. As Copan notes, “We live in a time that sees death as the ultimate evil. Perhaps... our moral intuitions aren’t as finely tuned as they should be.”<sup>100</sup> And should death be ordered upon mankind, shouldn’t we be satisfied we can trust the Cosmic Judge who ordered it to work out all the details, especially with those we consider to be “innocent?”<sup>101</sup>

### **Theological Continuity**

Although much of this paper has been devoted to showing the guilt of the Canaanites and their deserved punishment, it is important to remember that the Canaanites were not alone in their sin. The Bible teaches that all people have fallen short of God’s standards for holiness (Rom. 3:23) and therefore deserve the strictest judgment (Rom 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.<sup>102</sup>

Daniel Grad observes that 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?”<sup>103</sup> The answer to this question 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

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100. Copan, *Moral Monster*, 192.

101. *Ibid.*, 194.

102. David Howard, *Joshua*, 184.

103. Daniel L. Gard, “The Case for Eschatological Continuity,” in *Show Them no Mercy: Four Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 140.

in light of the God who is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 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 a warrior was deeply embedded in the Israelite worldview.<sup>104</sup> 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 (Matt. 26:52-54).<sup>105</sup> So often, critics of the Old Testament contrast this picture of a peaceful Jesus who implores His followers to “love your enemies” (Matt. 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.”<sup>106</sup> 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.<sup>107</sup> In light of this,

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

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104. Longman, “The Case for Spiritual Continuity,” 179.

105. *Ibid.*, 179-81.

106. Gard, “The Case for Eschatological Continuity,” 141.

107. Longman, “The Case for Spiritual Continuity,” 181-82.

because of their sin to spiritual powers and principalities, and finally to the utter destruction of all evil, human and spiritual.<sup>108</sup>

This battle will end in eternal, unbridled, uninterrupted peace, during which the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6-7) will rule, and kingdom shall be the reign of peace (Isa. 2:3-4).<sup>109</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As stated in the introduction, it is the hope of the author that the findings of this paper may soothe the hearts of Christians and reaffirm their view of God. This topic was chosen because it troubles the conscience. The Yahweh wars in the invasion of Canaan are disturbing. Indeed, we should assume something is wrong if we are not somewhat repulsed by what we read. However, in such instances, we must keep in mind that war, death, and violence was never God's perfect plan.

This paper began by describing the nature of *herem* warfare as being sacred and issued only by God. Next, the deplorable sins of the Canaanites examined as well as God's extreme patience with the Canaanites in waiting at least 440 years for repentance, as well as sending hornets and His angel ahead of the Canaanites to drive them out. The following section dealt with the sensitive issue of why the Canaanite children suffered for the sins of their parents and came to the conclusion that man has no right to say how long a person should live and the children, being too young to make moral decisions, enjoyed eternal security. The paper then explained that the Canaanites were expelled from the Promised Land in order to protect Israel from corrupting idolatry and to provide an avenue through which Jesus, the final solution to man's sinfulness, may come. The next section examined the horror of war and the nativity of assuming that war passages in the

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108. Ibid., 185.

109. Jazen, "War in the Old Testament," 165.

Old Testament should be “softer.” The paper then listed the rights of God as the right to command, to give and take land, and to give and take life. The final section concluded by stating that God’s actions in the Old Testament are continuous with the second coming and final judgment of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

After reviewing all the information presented in this paper, one main point sticks out: God’s character is consistent. Though this theme may not be overtly noticeable in every section, it is the idea woven throughout each argument. Both Old and New Testaments depict a God of justice and mercy: justice which causes God to judge those who fall short of His standard of holiness and mercy which causes God to give a multitude of opportunities for repentance which, in the case of the Canaanites, spanned four centuries. God is also motivated by love which caused Him to send His only Son, Jesus, so that man, who ultimately shares the same spiritual judgment as the Canaanites, may be rescued from his sin.

Some time ago I participated in a football game in which a young man broke his leg. As we waited for paramedics to arrive, those present could not help but observe our poor friend’s mangled leg. The way it was bent was so unnatural that the rational response to such a sight was “*something is wrong here; it shouldn’t be this way.*” This is the view we must take in approaching the invasion of Canaan. Something *is* wrong in those passages. It *shouldn’t* be that way. However, this wrongness cannot be attributed to God; it is the result of the sin of man. The fact of the matter is the world is full of many things that shouldn’t be: children that die of cancer, divorce, rape. Even several millennia after the Israelite invasion of Canaan, war still remains. Unfortunately that’s how things are on a fallen planet. This is why Christ came to earth. Our great hope is that one day Christ will return and set things

*right.* Until that day, the people of God are called to follow His words, to spread light in the darkness, and to wait faithfully for Him to bring eternal peace.

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