

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

THE KINDNESS AND SEVERITY OF GOD:  
A DEFENSE OF THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN

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## ABSTRACT

The Conquest of Canaan has become a hot-button issue in Christian apologetics because of the moral dilemma it poses. Would an all-loving God command the wholesale slaughter of the Canaanite men, women, and children? Christians throughout the centuries have grappled with this problem and have offered many interpretations to alleviate the tension between God's love and God's wrath displayed in the Conquest. This dissertation defends a straightforward reading of the account: God really *did* command the destruction of the Canaanites, and the Israelites carried it out as described in the pages of the Old Testament. When understood in its biblical, historical, and theological context, the Conquest is the long-awaited and just punishment of the Canaanites. The God of the Bible is the Author of life and can take life whenever He chooses by a variety of means at His disposal and in accordance with His greater purposes. Sometimes this includes the wholesale destruction of men, women, and children because, in a fallen world, the innocent often die along with the wicked as collateral damage. However, the innocent are not judged *eternally* for sins they have not committed. Such is the case with the Canaanite children. The Conquest also fulfills God's promises to the patriarchs in accomplishing His purposes for Israel within the plan of salvation for the world. Mercy was available to the Canaanites, as seen in the conversion of Rahab, but the greater concern was the spiritual preservation of God's chosen people, Israel, because of their role in God's plan to bless the world.

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to the Lord Himself who has granted me the great privilege of studying the Scriptures for many years in my desire to be an “approved workman” who correctly handles the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15). I would also like to express my gratitude to my gracious wife, Rebecca Ballard, and to my father and mother, Rod and Molly Ballard, who have supported me every step of the way. Finally, I am indebted to many godly professors at the Liberty University Rawlings School of Divinity who have poured into me over the years—especially Dr. Gary Habermas, Dr. Gary Yates, Dr. Kevin King, Dr. David Wheeler, and Dr. Ed Hindson, who is now with the Lord. Thank you for investing in my life and ministry.

## Contents

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	iii
<b>COPYRIGHT</b> .....	iv
<b>DEDICATION</b> .....	v
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem of the Conquest of Canaan</b> .....	1
Significance of the Study .....	1
Need for the Current Study .....	6
Research Questions .....	8
Thesis Statement .....	8
Key Definitions/Concepts .....	9
<i>Hērem</i> .....	9
Holy War .....	11
Genocide .....	14
Methodology .....	17
Presuppositions/Limitations .....	17
Apologetic Significance .....	22
<b>Chapter 2: The Conquest in the Old Testament (Part 1)</b> .....	23
Blotting Out the Amalekites .....	23
The Initial Ambush .....	24
A Persistent Threat .....	25
Saul and Agag .....	27
David and the Amalekites .....	30
Two Final Appearances of the Amalekites .....	31
Summary .....	32
The Conquest <i>Before</i> the Conquest .....	32
Conquering the Amorites .....	33
Background to the Amorite Animosity .....	33
The Initial Encounter .....	34
Defeating and Dispossessing .....	35
Destroying the Amorites .....	37
Aftermath of the Amorites .....	39

Destroying the Canaanites in Arad .....	40
The Moabite/Midianite Seduction .....	41
Summary and Observations .....	46
A Template for <i>Hērem</i> .....	46
Instilling the Fear of the Lord .....	47
Prone to Idolatry .....	48
<b>Chapter 3: The Conquest in the Old Testament (Part 2)</b> .....	50
Background: Israel in the Plan of God .....	50
The Beginning of God’s Plan .....	51
Blessing the World .....	53
A Holy Nation .....	56
The Land of Canaan .....	62
Summary .....	67
Punishing Canaanite Wickedness .....	68
Background of the Canaanites .....	68
Early Canaanite Wickedness .....	69
Later Canaanite Wickedness .....	75
Canaanite Religious Beliefs .....	76
Canaanite Religious Practices .....	77
Canaanite Sexual Immorality .....	82
Summary .....	86
Excursus: Were the Canaanites More Wicked than Other Nations? .....	87
Instructions Concerning the Conquest .....	89
Limitations on Which Land .....	89
The Lord Would Fight for Israel .....	91
Destroy the Canaanite Implements of Worship .....	95
Drive Out and Destroy the Canaanites .....	96
Rules for Warfare .....	98
Blessing for Obedience .....	100
Punishment for Disobedience .....	101
Summary .....	104

Executing the Conquest .....	106
Overview of the Book of Joshua .....	107
The Lord's Involvement .....	109
Imposition of the Ban.....	113
Exceptions to the Ban .....	115
An Addition to the Ban .....	119
Results of the Conquest .....	122
Canaanites Remaining .....	122
Eventual Spiritual Corruption .....	124
Continuing Spiritual Corruption .....	127
Concluding Observations .....	128
<b>Chapter 4: Interpreting the Conquest .....</b>	<b>130</b>
The Conquest and the Critics .....	132
Ancient Critics .....	133
Marcion .....	133
Faustus .....	140
Summary and Evaluation .....	142
Enlightenment Critics .....	142
Matthew Tindal .....	144
Thomas Morgan .....	146
Thomas Chubb .....	148
J. D. Michaelis .....	149
Thomas Paine .....	151
Summary and Evaluation .....	152
Modern Skeptics .....	153
The New Atheists .....	154
Hector Avalos .....	155
Thom Stark .....	158
Wes Morriston .....	162
Summary and Evaluation .....	163
Excursus: Answering the Skeptics .....	163



Summary .....	173
The Conquest and Christian Criticism .....	173
Supporting Arguments .....	175
Explaining the Conquest .....	180
Examples, Not Precepts .....	181
Moral Progress .....	183
Accommodation .....	185
Redefining Biblical Inspiration and Authority .....	187
Summary and Evaluation .....	189
The Conquest is Inexplicable .....	195
No Appeal to Natural Theology .....	195
Skeptical Theism .....	197
Finite Human Knowledge .....	198
Appeal to Mystery .....	201
Summary and Evaluation .....	203
The Conquest and Historical Revision .....	205
God Alone Fought .....	205
Historical Fiction .....	206
The Canaanites were Offered Peace .....	212
The Conquest Accounts are Exaggerated .....	218
Summary and Evaluation .....	221
The Conquest and Nonliteral Interpretations .....	228
Allegorical Interpretations .....	229
Origen .....	229
Gregory of Nyssa .....	235
Jerome .....	237
John Cassian .....	237
Gregory the Great .....	239
Isidore of Seville .....	241
<i>Glossa Ordinaria</i> .....	243
Martin Luther .....	244

The Conquest is Typological .....	245
The Conquest is Metaphorical .....	250
The Conquest is Mythical .....	251
Summary and Evaluation .....	253
The Conquest is Exemplary .....	253
The Crusades .....	254
The Spanish Conquest .....	258
Colonizing the New World .....	261
Other Examples .....	266
Summary and Evaluation .....	269
Other Interpretations of the Conquest.....	270
The Dark Side of God .....	270
A Moral Exception .....	272
Changing Morality .....	273
Intrusion Ethics .....	275
Cultural Relativism .....	278
Reader-Response Interpretations .....	279
A Deconstructionist Interpretation .....	281
Identity Removal .....	285
Conclusion .....	289
<b>Chapter 5: An Apologetic for the Canaanite Conquest .....</b>	<b>290</b>
God Commanded the Conquest .....	291
God's Right to Take Life .....	293
God's Chosen Means of Judgment .....	296
Israel's Moral Obligation .....	299
Conflicting Commandments and Graded Absolutism .....	303
Punishing the Canaanites .....	307
God's Love and God's Wrath .....	310
Mercy Available .....	311
Israel's Spiritual Preservation and God's Greater Plan .....	313
An Object Lesson for the Israelites .....	315

Other Clarifying Considerations .....	317
Fulfilling Promises, Not World Domination .....	317
An Exception, Not the Rule .....	317
Not for the Church .....	318
The Ban Applied to Israel .....	320
The Conquest and the New Testament .....	321
Killing the Canaanite Children .....	322
Initial Remarks .....	323
Conquest-Specific Explanations .....	324
Canaanite Children Considered Guilty .....	325
Canaanite Children Too Corrupted .....	325
Canaanite Children Too Damaged .....	327
No Future for the Canaanite Children .....	327
Biblical-Theological Explanations.....	328
God’s Judgment and the Death of Children .....	329
Corporate Solidarity .....	333
Collateral Damage .....	335
Children and the Afterlife .....	338
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion</b> .....	340
Summary of Arguments .....	340
Contribution to the Field of Apologetics .....	346
Areas for Further Research .....	347
<b>Appendix 1: Biblical Usage of <i>Hērem</i></b> .....	348
The Ban in Israel .....	348
The Ban and the Canaanites .....	350
The Ban in Judges .....	352
The Ban under Saul and David .....	353
The Ban in Israel’s Later History .....	356
The Ban in the Future .....	358
Summary .....	361
Excursus: The Moabite Stone .....	362

<b>Appendix 2: Biblical and Extrabiblical Commentaries on the Conquest .....</b>	<b>364</b>
Old Testament Commentary on the Conquest .....	364
Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles .....	365
Psalms .....	367
Prophets .....	370
Ezra and Nehemiah .....	371
Summary .....	373
New Testament Commentary on the Conquest .....	374
The Teachings of Jesus .....	374
Stephen's Speech .....	375
Paul's Speech .....	376
The General Epistles .....	377
Summary .....	378
Extra-Biblical Commentary on the Conquest .....	379
The Apocryphal Literature .....	379
The Conquest is Historical .....	380
Canaanite Wickedness and God's Justice .....	381
Do Not Intermarry .....	383
Other Passages .....	385
Summary .....	387
Philo of Alexandria .....	387
Numbers 21 .....	388
Deuteronomy 20 .....	390
Exodus 17 .....	391
Summary .....	392
Josephus .....	393
Concluding Observations .....	396
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>397</b>

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem of the Conquest of Canaan

### Significance of the Study

Christianity has always had its detractors—sometimes because of its messages, and at other times because of its messengers. At various times in Church history, certain doctrines have been criticized by those outside the faith in an attempt to discredit Christianity as a whole. As early as the second century AD, for example, the Jewish scholars Aquila and Theodotion, along with the Ebionite scholar Symmachus, demythologized the virgin birth from Isaiah 7:14 in their translation of the Old Testament into Greek, thereby casting doubt upon the fulfillment of prophecy in the birth of Christ as cited in Matthew 1:23.<sup>1</sup> If Jesus were not born of a virgin, then perhaps He was an illegitimate child, which would call into question His deity and the reliability of Matthew's Gospel account. Early Christian leaders such as Justin Martyr,<sup>2</sup> Origen,<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom,<sup>4</sup> and Jerome<sup>5</sup> ardently defended the LXX translation of “virgin” in Isaiah 7:14 to align with Matthew's own translation of the Hebrew word.<sup>6</sup> The issue at stake was both

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<sup>1</sup> These three authors translated the Hebrew word עַלְוִית (“virgin, maiden”) with νεᾱνίς (“girl”) instead of the LXX's παρθένος (“virgin”). See Maarten J. J. Menken, “The Textual Form of the Quotation from Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23,” *Novum Testamentum* 43, no. 2 (2001): 151.

<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1, by Philip Schaff, ed. and trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2001), 43.4–8; 66.1–3; 67.1–2; 71.1–3; cf. 69.1–3; 70.4.

<sup>3</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, in *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, by Philip Schaff, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Frederick Crombie (1885, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2006), 1:34–35; cf. James P. Sweeney, “Modern and Ancient Controversies over the Virgin Birth of Jesus,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160, no. 638 (Apr./June 2003): 158.

<sup>4</sup> John Chrysostom, *The Homilies of St. Chrysostom on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. George Prevost (1888, repr., Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009), Homily V.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series 2, vol. 6, by Philip Schaff, trans. W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley (1892, repr., Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009), 1:32; cf. Adam Kamesar, “The Virgin of Isaiah 7:14. The Philological Argument from the Second to the Fifth Century,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 41, no. 1 (Apr. 1990): 62ff.

theological and apologetic in nature. Did Christ fulfill Old Testament prophecy, as Matthew's Gospel teaches? The early Christians answered, Yes. There was no compromise, and that became the pattern for much of Church history moving forward.

Centuries later, however, Christianity faced new challenges as Enlightenment thinkers elevated human reason to the highest position for knowledge. As the focus shifted from divine revelation to natural law, human autonomy triumphed over adherence to religious beliefs, and many sought harmony and an age of utopia apart from religion.<sup>7</sup> Such rationalistic assumptions led Benedict Spinoza (1632–77), for example, to argue that the world was a closed system that did not allow for miracles and to deny many of the traditional beliefs about biblical authorship and inspiration.<sup>8</sup> Later, the biblical scholar and closet skeptic Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) broke new ground when he argued against special revelation, disputed the historicity of Old Testament accounts like the crossing of the Red Sea, denied that the Old Testament taught the concept of an afterlife, and concluded that the entire story of Jesus' resurrection must be mistaken because of alleged contradictions between the Gospel accounts.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the empiricist philosopher David Hume (1711–76) ruled out the possibility of divine intervention in

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<sup>6</sup> Others who affirmed the Matthew's translation of the Hebrew include Irenaeus, Tertullian, Lactantius, Eusebius, Athanasius, Ephrem the Syrian, Basil the Great, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine, Theodoret, Leo the Great, Maximus of Turin, and Cassiodorus. See Robert Louis Wilken, Angela Russell Christman, and Michael J. Hollerich, trans. and eds., *Isaiah: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 104–106; cf. Steven A. McKinion, ed., *Isaiah 1–39*, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 10:60–64; Johanna Manley, comp. and ed., *Isaiah Through the Ages* (Menlo Park, CA: Monastery Books, 1995), 130–137.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 15–23.

<sup>8</sup> See Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume One* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002), 317–19; Michael L. Morgan, ed., *Spinoza: Complete Words*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> See Charles H. Talbert, "Introduction," in *Reimarus: Fragments*, ed. Charles H. Talbert, trans. Ralph S. Fraser (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 18–21.

the world when he argued that the laws of nature are inviolable based on our everyday experience of them. Since a wise man “proportions his belief to the evidence,” then one always has more reason to *doubt* a miracle story than to believe one.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) limited pure reason to what can be known through sense experience (*phenomena*) and believed that what is beyond the senses (*noumena*) is unknowable (e.g., religious truths). Although Kant believed that God and immortality are necessary postulates for morality (the *summum bonum*), his focus on “practical reason” within oneself in place of “pure reason” resulted in an anthropocentric belief system.<sup>11</sup>

The abovementioned *a priori* philosophical assumptions, as well as alleged Bible difficulties, posed a serious threat to traditional Christian theology. Christian apologists such as Joseph Butler (1692–1752),<sup>12</sup> Thomas Reid (1710–96),<sup>13</sup> and William Paley (1743–1805)<sup>14</sup> did not accept the criticisms of Reimarus, Hume, Kant, and others. Instead, they cogently responded to the skeptical arguments in defending the Christian faith. However, not all within the Christian fold defended the faith as such. Some theologians decided to rework Christianity in light of modern ideas, elevating human intuition and newfound philosophical assumptions above biblical revelation. In so doing, they formulated a new kind of Christianity. One such example is

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<sup>10</sup> See David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, “Sect. X. Of Miracles,” accessed September 19, 2020, <https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/hume/enquiry.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Grenz and Olson, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology*, 25–31.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736, repr., New York: Harper & Brothers, 1860).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense*, 6th ed. (Edinburgh: Ad Neill & Co., 1810).

<sup>14</sup> William Paley, *Natural Theology: Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1803, repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); idem., *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (Edinburgh: George Ramsay & Co., 1811).

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), who was greatly influenced by Reimarus’ skepticism but who nonetheless believed that the truth of Christianity obtains regardless of Reimarus’ efforts to debunk the Bible.<sup>15</sup> As a rationalist, Lessing believed that all truth must be necessary, eternal, and universal.<sup>16</sup> As he famously stated, “contingent truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason.”<sup>17</sup> Since Christian truths are contingent, temporal, and accessible to only some, then there is a “broad and ugly ditch” between the past and the present.<sup>18</sup> The historical truths of Christ’s miracles and resurrection—even if they occurred—are no longer accessible today, but the truth of the Christian teachings themselves, which may have been novel for Jesus’ audience, are actually timeless, eternal, and universal.<sup>19</sup> Christianity can press on despite historical criticism (e.g., Reimarus) because the truths found within it transcend the flawed, biblical record.<sup>20</sup> The problem is that Lessing’s “ditch” created something other than

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<sup>15</sup> Lessing was the librarian to the Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg at Wolfenbüttel in Germany. He published seven fragments of Reimarus’ 4,000-page diatribe between 1774–78 after Reimarus’ death in 1768. These fragments were published anonymously to protect Reimarus’ reputation and family, and they became known as the *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*. See Talbert, “Introduction,” 3–18; Warren S. Kissinger, *The Lives of Jesus: A History and Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), 14.

<sup>16</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 309; cf. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 343–48.

<sup>17</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “On the proof of the spirit and of power,” in *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 85.

<sup>18</sup> For a substantive critique of “Lessing’s Ditch,” see William Lane Craig, “Leaping Lessing’s Ugly, Broad Ditch,” accessed September 30, 2020, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/leaping-lessings-ugly-broad-ditch/>.

<sup>19</sup> Lessing, “On the proof of the spirit and of power,” 87.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Lessing wrote, “Christianity existed before the evangelists and apostles wrote about it. . . . The religion is not true because the evangelists and apostles taught it; on the contrary, they taught it because it is true. The written records must be explained by its inner truth, and none of the written records can give it any inner truth if it does not already have it” (Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, “Commentary on the ‘Fragments’ of Reimarus,” in *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. by H. B. Nisbet [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 63).



biblical Christianity as it had been traditionally recognized. In the end, it became a bridge too far in terms of acceptance into orthodoxy.

Another example of recreating Christianity because of *a priori* assumptions is seen in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), the so-called “father of modern theology.”<sup>21</sup> Like Lessing, Schleiermacher began his life with traditional Christian beliefs, but the rising skepticism in Christendom proved too much for him.<sup>22</sup> In a bombshell letter to his father in 1787 while studying at a Moravian seminary, the teenage Schleiermacher admitted that his religious doubts had overcome his prior faith:

I cannot believe that He, who called Himself the Son of Man, was the true, eternal God: I cannot believe that His death was a vicarious atonement, because He never expressly said so Himself; and I cannot believe it to have been necessary, because God, who evidently did not create men for perfection, but for the pursuit of it, cannot possibly intend to punish them eternally, because they have not attained it.<sup>23</sup>

The above statement details Schleiermacher’s disbelief in the deity of Christ, the atonement of Christ, and the doctrine of eternal punishment. Rather than dismiss Christianity altogether, as someone like Bertrand Russell would do in the twentieth century,<sup>24</sup> Schleiermacher instead retained the religious piety and mysticism that he learned from the Moravian teachings<sup>25</sup> but also

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<sup>21</sup> W. A. Hoffecker, “Schleiermacher, Friedrich Daniel Ernst,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1064.

<sup>22</sup> His doubts actually began as early as eleven years of age. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Friedrich Schleiermacher, as Unfolded in His Autobiography and Letters*, trans. Frederica Rowan (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1860), 1:5–8.

<sup>23</sup> Schleiermacher, *The Life of Friedrich Schleiermacher*, 1:46–47.

<sup>24</sup> Russell also had a problem with the biblical doctrine of hell, among other Christian beliefs: “There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ’s moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment” (Bertrand Russell, *Why I am Not a Christian* [London: Watts & Co., 1927], accessed October 1, 2020, <https://users.drew.edu/~jlenz/whynot.html>).

<sup>25</sup> See Schleiermacher, *The Life of Friedrich Schleiermacher*, 1:283–84.

incorporated the new ideas from Enlightenment rationalists and critics. The result was a new kind of Christianity defined in terms of religious feeling, or “God-consciousness”, that is completely novel when compared to historic Christianity.

What the above examples demonstrate is that Christianity has had critics since the earliest times, but the responses of Christian leaders have varied. Among the Church Fathers, there was a consensus that Christian doctrine must be defended without compromise, but with the dawn of the Enlightenment, it became more common for Christian theologians to embrace new ideas and to reframe Christianity accordingly. The result of such philosophical and doctrinal compromises is a Christianity that is further and further away from biblical, historic Christianity. This is seen in the writings of Lessing and Schleiermacher as well as others since their time.<sup>26</sup> However, in the past two decades, a new issue has taken center stage in Christian apologetics: the Conquest of Canaan as recorded in the book of Joshua.

#### Need for the Current Study

The present study is needed because the Conquest has become a favorite barb for atheists and critics to hurl at Christians to cast Christianity in a bad light, morally speaking. The alleged immorality of the Conquest has also become a formidable objection to Christianity on the debate stage. Even though the Conquest has no direct bearing on the question of God’s existence or the foundational nature of morality, the subject has gained currency for its rhetorical value. Christians are left in the awkward position of having to either defend the alleged blemish on the biblical record or distance themselves from it. If they defend genocide, then what about the

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<sup>26</sup> For some twenty-first century examples, see Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010); Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

teachings of Jesus to love one another? As Gundry frames the question, “How could the God of the Bible command such an indiscriminate slaughter of an entire people, especially since in the New Testament Jesus commands us to love and to pray for our enemies?”<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, denying the historicity of the Conquest or questioning the morality of God’s actions casts a shadow over biblical inspiration and authority, which runs counter to New Testament bibliology (cf. Matt 5:17–18; Luke 24:44; 2 Tim 3:16). There are practical consequences too. Kaiser posits that “if we are to have a balanced and full presentation of all of God’s truth, it is absolutely essential that we include the Old Testament in our teaching and preaching.”<sup>28</sup> But if the Old Testament has historical and/or moral errors, then perhaps Christians should *avoid* teaching and preaching from certain passages of Scripture. Some even believe that there is no comprehensive, workable solution. Arnold writes,

We have no completely satisfactory answer to this issue [of the Conquest]. The best explanations go a long way to understanding the problem. But it must be admitted, these offer no complete resolution.... It is not fair to apply our twenty-first-century sensibilities to their ancient context, and thus we leave the topic unsettled and must live with the tension.<sup>29</sup>

In the past two decades, Christian scholars and apologists have done an admirable job of trying to defend the biblical record from an evangelical, conservative viewpoint. Many such examples will be discussed in this paper. However, there is a significant gap, or sticking point, when it comes to the issue of taking the (presumably) innocent life of the Canaanite children. What if the Israelites really *did* slaughter the Canaanites, including men, women, and children?

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<sup>27</sup> Stanley N. Gundry, ed., “Introduction,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 7.

<sup>28</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 17.

<sup>29</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 204.

There is a need for a comprehensive, biblical-theological explanation to why the innocent perished with the wicked in the Conquest of Canaan, which is the aim of this dissertation.<sup>30</sup>

### Research Questions

The questions that need to be answered in this dissertation are: 1) What does the biblical record actually state concerning the Conquest of Canaan? 2) What contextual factors contribute to the overall picture of the Conquest? 3) What do the later biblical and extra-biblical commentaries on the Conquest contribute to the overall understanding of the Conquest? 4) Is there a contradiction between the Old Testament and the New Testament? In other words, would (or did) Jesus approve of the Conquest? 5) What are the strengths and weaknesses of various interpretations of the Conquest? 6) Are there solutions to the problem of taking innocent life (i.e., the lives of the Canaanite children) in the broader teaching of Scripture regarding God's character, knowledge, purposes, and judgment?

### Thesis Statement

The Conquest was necessary to God's overall purpose of using one nation to bring forth the Messiah to redeem mankind even though it included the destruction of sinful Canaanite men and women along with presumably-innocent Canaanite children. God desires all to be saved from their sins, and mercy was available for those who repented (e.g., Rahab), but the punishment visited upon the Canaanites was just and right. The same type of judgment was also meted out to the Israelites who rebelled against God's commands and worshiped other gods, demonstrating that there is no partiality with God. Neither is there any injustice with God commanding the taking lives of the Canaanite children because God, as the Author of life, has

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<sup>30</sup> The final section of chapter 5 directly addresses the moral question of killing the Canaanite children. The chapters that precede that section provide the larger context for the discussion.

the prerogative to give and take life as He wills. He also has the right to determine the means of taking life—whether that is with a flood, earthquake, plague, famine, or by the sword. In a fallen world, there is collateral damage because the effects of sin are far-reaching, as is displayed in many biblical examples of corporate solidarity. However, in the final judgment, there will be no guilt assigned to the innocent. There is no injustice resulting from the Conquest.

### Key Definitions/Concepts

#### *Hērem*

The Conquest of Canaan is often associated with the Hebrew term *hērem* (הֶרֶם). The word appears 78 times in the Old Testament, with 50 occurrences in verb form<sup>31</sup> and 28 in noun form.<sup>32</sup> The term is most often translated as “ban, devote, exterminate” (verb) and “devoted thing, devotion, ban” (noun).<sup>33</sup> The LXX normally translates הֶרֶם with ἀνάθεμα, which originally referred to a votive offering in the temple but later came to mean “curse”, and with ἐξολεθρευμα, which means “destroy.”<sup>34</sup> The primary idea is not necessarily *destruction*,

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<sup>31</sup> Exod 22:20; Lev 27:28, 29; Num 21:2, 3; Deut 2:34; 3:6 (2); 7:2 (2); 13:15; 20:17 (2); Josh 2:10; 6:21; 8:26; 10:1, 28, 35, 37, 39, 40; 11:11, 12, 20, 21; Judg 1:17; 21:11; 1 Sam 15:3, 8, 9 (2), 15, 18, 20; 1 Kgs 9:21; 2 Kgs 19:11; 1 Chron 4:41; 2 Chron 20:23; 32:14; Ezra 10:8; Isa 11:15; 34:2; 37:11; Jer 25:9; 50:21, 26; 51:3; Dan 11:44; Mic 4:13. The verb does not appear in Qal form but only in Hiphil or Hophal form.

<sup>32</sup> Lev 27:21, 28 (2), 29; Num 18:14; Deut 7:26 (2); 13:17; Josh 6:17, 18 (3); 7:1, 11, 12 (2), 13 (2), 15; 22:20; 1 Sam 15:21; 1 Kgs 20:42; 1 Chron 2:7; Isa 34:5; 43:28; Eze 44:29; Zech 14:11; Mal 4:6.

<sup>33</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Edward Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 355–56; cf. Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1:354; Jackie A. Naudé, “הֶרֶם,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:276; Alexander Jones, ed., *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 281; J. P. U. Lilley, “Understanding the Herem,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993): 169–77.

<sup>34</sup> See N. Lohfink, “הֶרֶם *hārem*; הֶרֶם *hērem*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 5, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 181; cf. Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Sir Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (1843, repr., Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 104, 597; Abraham Malamat, “The Ban in Mari and in the Bible,” *Neotestamentica* 1 (1966): 40–49; C. Sherlock, “The Meaning of HRM in the Old Testament,” *Colloquium* 14, no. 2 (May 1982): 13–24; Mark Fretz, “Herem in the Old Testament: A Critical Reading,” *Essays on War and Peace: Bible and Early Church*, Occasional

though. The etymology of *הֶרֶם* suggests the idea of consecration or separation.<sup>35</sup> An Israelite could devote common things to the Lord such as a field, a man, an animal, or family land (Lev 27:21, 28), and everything in Israel that was devoted to the Lord was given to the priests for their consumption and use (Num 18:14; Eze 44:29). One's property could even be "devoted" (confiscated) for failure to assemble in certain situations (e.g., Ezra 10:8). Additionally, the spoils of war could be devoted to the Lord, as seen in the aftermath of the battle of Jericho (Josh 6:18–19, 24; 7:1–26; cf. Mic 4:13). Once an item was devoted to the Lord, it could not be sold or redeemed because it was considered most holy to the Lord (Lev 27:28). Thus, the "devotion" was permanent and immutable; something consecrated to the Lord could not be bought back. One can detect here a relationship between *הֶרֶם* and *קָדַשׁ* ("be holy"). Objects could be devoted to God, in which case they would be holy to the Lord (Lev 27:28), or objects could be devoted to God to be destroyed if they were *unholy* and opposed to God's plan.<sup>36</sup> Such objects were "contagious" in the sense that they could make others unholy and liable to death, as in the case of Achan (Josh 7).<sup>37</sup> Another way to think about *הֶרֶם* is in terms of a complete loss, or giving over to God—whether property or life.<sup>38</sup> Of course, the context determines the appropriate translation as

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Papers No. 9, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1986), 21–22; Mina Glick, *Herem in Biblical Law and Narrative*, PhD diss. (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania, 2007); Arie Versluis, "Devotion and/or Destruction?: The Meaning and Function of *הֶרֶם* in the Old Testament," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 128, no. 2 (2016): 233–46.

<sup>35</sup> C. Brekelmans, "*הֶרֶם* *hērem* ban," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, eds. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 625.

<sup>36</sup> Leon J. Wood, "*הֶרֶם*," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 324. Moore contrasts *hērem* with *qodesh* as opposite sides of the same coin referring to sacrosanct items; the former term refers to things that Yahweh hates while the latter reverts to things Yahweh appropriates for his pleasure or service (George F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895], 36n17).

<sup>37</sup> Richard D. Nelson, "*Herem* and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience," in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature: Festschrift C.H.W. Brekelmans*, eds. M. Vervenne and J. Lust (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1997), 46. This is similar to certain objects making someone unclean in the Old Testament.

either “devote” or “destroy.” When **הָרַם** is paired with words such as **נָכָה** (“strike”), **כָּרַת** (“cut off”), or **אַבַּד** (“destroy”), then destruction is obviously in view.<sup>39</sup> This is often the case with the verses concerning the Conquest of Canaan, but the occurrence of **הָרַם** signifies that the destruction was to be total. A number of instances of **הָרַם** are accompanied by language indicating that in certain situations, there were no survivors, there was no mercy, and/or all of the men, women, and children were destroyed (e.g., Deut 2:34; 3:3; 7:3). For this study, **הָרַם** will be transliterated as *hērem* (noun) to signify both the noun and verb for the sake of simplicity and will be understood to mean “devote to destruction,” “ban,” or “annihilate” based on the common usage of the term. For a more extensive discussion of the usage of *hērem*, see Appendix 1.

## Holy War

The second concept to consider at the outset is that of “holy war.”<sup>40</sup> Is the biblical *hērem* holy war, and if so, in what way? The answer to this question, of course, depends on what one means by “holy war,” and the implications follow upon the answer to that question. For starters, a war would be “holy” rather than “profane” if it somehow involved God or gods. In the ancient Near East, it was a common belief that the gods participated in human warfare.<sup>41</sup> Preparations for war included prayers and sacrifices to the gods, consultation of omens, astrological signs,

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<sup>38</sup> A. C. Emory, “*HĒREM*,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 387.

<sup>39</sup> See Lohfink, “**הָרַם** *hārem*; **הָרַם** *hērem*,” 183.

<sup>40</sup> The term “holy war” was coined by Friedrich Schwally in 1901 (Friedrich Schwally, *Der heilige Krieg im alten Israel* [1901, repr., Dresden: Erscheinungsort, 2015]). Two other works from around the same time use the term “holy war” as well. See Wilhelm Caspari, “Was stand im Buche der Kriege Jahwes?” *Zeitschrift für Wissenschaftliche Theologie* 54 (Jan. 1912): 150; Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie III. Das antike Judentum* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1921), 99.

<sup>41</sup> For examples, see Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 8–63; Moshe Weinfeld, “Divine Intervention in War in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East,” in *History, Historiography and Interpretation*, eds. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1983), 121–47.

hepatoscopy (divination by inspecting an animal liver), pronouncing curses, and seeking oracles. Troops would bear the emblems of the gods in battle, and the presence of the gods in battle was vital to success. At the conclusion of the battle, the gods would get credit for the victory. Thus, war in the ancient Near East was often a religious endeavor.<sup>42</sup> One example is an Assyrian account that states, “Enlil did not let anybody oppose Sargon, the king of the country. Enlil gave him (the region from) the Upper Sea (to) the Lower Sea.”<sup>43</sup> In this passage, the god Enlil intervenes to support Sargon king of Assyria. A second example comes from the Moabite Stone:

I (am) Mesha, son of Chemosh-[...], king of Moab, the Dibonite—my father (had) reigned over Moab thirty years, and I reigned after my father,—(who) made this high place for Chemosh in Qarhoh [...] because he saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries.<sup>44</sup>

Here, Chemosh secures victories for Mesha over Mesha’s enemies. Examples from Canaanite and Assyrian accounts are similar.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the overlap of human and divine activity in warfare is evident in the ancient Near East, though many ancient accounts of warfare include the obliteration of entire populations without divine sanction.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Gwilym H. Jones, “The Concept of Holy War,” in *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives*, ed. R. E. Clements (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 300–302.

<sup>43</sup> “Sargon of Agade,” in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 267.

<sup>44</sup> “The Moabite Stone,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed., ed. James B. Pritchard, W. F. Albright, trans. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 320.

<sup>45</sup> See Jones, “The Concept of Holy War,” 300.

<sup>46</sup> For example, the ancient Greeks had a concept of “so-called sacred war,” (Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, in *Delphi Complete Works of Thucydides*, trans. Benjamin Jowett and H. G. Dakyns [Delphi Classics, 2013], 1.112). However, the slaughter of innocent women and children was often done simply out of cruelty, spite, or expedience rather than for religious reasons (See 2 Macc 5:13; 4 Macc 4:25; Jth 16:5; cf. 1 Macc 1:60–61; 2 Macc 6:10; cf. Ian Worthington, *By the Spear: Philip II, Alexander the Great, and the Rise and Fall of the Macedonian Empire* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], 255–56; Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Benjamin Jowett [Delphi Classics, 2013], 7.29; John Rooke, trans., *Arrian’s History of the Expedition of Alexander the Great*, 2d ed. [London: W. McDowell, 1813], ch. 8; Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, in *The Complete Works of Plutarch*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin [East Sussex, UK: Delphi Classics, 2013], Lycurgus 16:1–2;



Like the ancient Near Eastern examples above, the Old Testament is littered with accounts of Yahweh's involvement in the planning, preparation, execution, and aftermath of Israelite wars.<sup>47</sup> The Conquest of Canaan is a prime example. To mention just a few points, the Lord gave Joshua the battle plan for defeating Jericho (Josh 6:1–5), the Lord threw the Canaanites into confusion at Gibeon (Josh 10:10), and the Lord hurled large hailstones upon the Canaanites in one battle (Josh 10:11). In fact, the Lord was integrally involved in each battle with the exception of the initial defeat at Ai due to Israel's (Achan's) sin (Josh 7:1–5). At the end of the Conquest, Joshua credited the Lord for driving out the Canaanites and for fighting on behalf of Israel (Josh 23:9–10). The Old Testament also mentions the “Book of the Wars of the LORD” (Num 21:14), “the battles of the LORD” (1 Sam 18:17; 25:28; cf. 17:47), and the fact that the Lord would be at war with the Amalekites from generation to generation (Exod 17:16). That the Old Testament presents Yahweh as a warrior God (Exod 15:3) is well attested. In one sense,

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Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. G. C. Macaulay, rev. Donald Lateiner [New York: Sterling Publishing, 2005], 1.146; Dennis D. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece* [London: Routledge, 1991], 7–12).

Likewise, the barbarous Carthaginians were accustomed to slaughtering “without distinction of sex or age but whether infant children or women or old men, they put them to the sword, showing no sign of compassion” (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, vol. 5, trans. C. H. Oldfather [London: William Heinemann LTD, 1935], 13.57.2). In similar fashion the writings of Josephus, Tacitus, and Suetonius contain accounts of Roman Caesars and Roman soldiers killing men, women, and children without pity, yet there is no indication that such acts were part of a “holy war” (See Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston [Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 1997], 1.4.6; 2.14.9; 2.18.8; 4.1.10; 5.10.2–3; cf. 1.18.2; 2.18.2; idem., *Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston [Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 1997], 14.16.2; Tacitus, *The Annals*, trans. John Jackson [New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1931], 1.51; Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars*, trans. Alexander Thomson, rev. and corrected by T. Forester [The Project Gutenberg EBook, 2006], 2.6.36; 2.7.12; 3.61; 3.74). By contrast, the annihilation of the Canaanite men, women, and children was done at the Lord's command as recorded in the Old Testament. The imposition of the ban was not done for spite or cruelty.

<sup>47</sup> The seminal work on the concept of “holy war” in Israel is von Rad's *Holy War in Ancient Israel* in which he lists twelve indications of holy war from the Old Testament. These include such things as the blowing of trumpets, the consecration of the soldiers, Yahweh giving the enemies into Israel's hand, Yahweh directly fighting for Israel, and the spoils of war going to Yahweh (see Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, trans. and ed. by Marva J. Dawn [1958, repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 41–ff; cf. idem., *Studies in Deuteronomy*, trans. David Stalker [London: SCM Press Ltd., 1953], 46–49). One problem with von Rad's work is that the biblical accounts are variegated; no single account includes all twelve features of “holy war.” For example, trumpets were used at Jericho but not at other battles. Another example is seen in the fact that the Israelites devoted all of the spoils of war to Yahweh after the victory at Jericho (Josh 6:17–19) but were allowed to *keep* the plunder and livestock after conquering Ai (Josh 8:2). For this reason, von Rad's thesis is limited in its applicability (see Gwilym H. Jones, “‘Holy War’ or ‘Yahweh War’?” *Vetus Testamentum* 25, no. 3 [July 1975]: 642–58).

then, “holy war” or “Yahweh War”<sup>48</sup> could refer to any Israelite war or battle where Yahweh is involved.<sup>49</sup> Israel’s wars were expressions of the Lord’s legal judgment to resolve conflicts between Israel and her enemies,<sup>50</sup> and since wars in the Old Testament often involved the Lord, then perhaps it is fair to label the entire history of Israel as a holy war.<sup>51</sup> However, since the term “holy war” appears nowhere in Scripture, perhaps it should be avoided altogether.<sup>52</sup>

## **Genocide**

The third question to consider is whether it is appropriate to label the Conquest as “genocide.” At first glance, “genocide” has a negative connotation in light of the atrocities of the twentieth century that have been labeled “genocide.” Because the murder of six million Jews in Nazi concentration camps is deemed “genocide”, for example, then labeling the Conquest of the Canaanites as “genocide” would be pejorative without further investigation. Once again, definitions are key, and so this study must begin with the definition of “genocide” and then examine the Conquest in light of that definition.

Before the term “genocide” was coined in 1943, genocidal acts were commonly referred to as “acts of barbarity.” The Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin gave the following definition in 1933:

Whosoever, out of hatred towards a racial, religious or social collectivity, or with the view of the extermination, undertakes a punishable action against the life, bodily

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<sup>48</sup> Rudolf Smend, *Yahweh War & Tribal Confederation: Reflections upon Israel’s Earliest History*, 2d ed., trans. Max Gray Rogers (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970).

<sup>49</sup> L. E. Toombs, “War, Ideas of,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Emory Stevens Bucke (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 797–98.

<sup>50</sup> Robert M. Good, “The Just War in Ancient Israel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104, no. 3 (Sept. 1985): 385–400.

<sup>51</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 264.

<sup>52</sup> Brent A. Strawn, *The Old Testament: A Concise Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 79.

integrity, liberty, dignity or economic existence of a person belonging to such a collectivity, is liable, for the offense of barbarity....<sup>53</sup>

Acts of barbarity also included deeds that today are distinguished as “war crimes” (e.g., murdering hostages or killing prisoners of war) and “crimes against humanity” (e.g., rape, torture, or enslavement).<sup>54</sup> Therefore, a more precise definition was needed. Following World War II, the United Nations Treaty Series (1951) defined *genocide* as “any...acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”<sup>55</sup> Acts of genocide include killing members of a group, causing serious bodily or mental harm, imposing conditions on a group to bring about its destruction, preventing births within a group, and forcibly transferring children from one group to another.<sup>56</sup> There is no mention of hatred in the definition here as with “acts of barbarity”, but it was widely recognized after interrogating the perpetrators of the Holocaust that genocide often involves the dehumanization of the victims since it is much easier to commit mass murder if one sees the victims as less than human.<sup>57</sup>

Should the Conquest be considered an “act of barbarity” or “genocide” by these definitions? Since the mission was to exterminate the seven Canaanite nations without mercy (cf. Deut 7:1–2), then the answer appears to be Yes on both counts.<sup>58</sup> However, it is questionable

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<sup>53</sup> Raphael Lemkin, “Acts Constituting a General (Transnational) Danger Considered as Offences Against the Law of Nations,” accessed October 11, 2021, <http://www.preventgenocide.org/lemkin/madrid1933-english.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Norman M. Naimark, *Genocide: A World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>55</sup> “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,” accessed October 11, 2021, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> David Livingstone Smith, *Less than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), 142.

<sup>58</sup> The Conquest would also violate the 1929 Geneva Convention, which calls for the humane treatment of prisoners of war, since no Canaanite prisoners taken. See “Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War.

whether the Conquest is truly an “act of barbarity” since there is no direct statement of hatred on the part of the Jews toward the Canaanites. Any army will naturally feel animosity toward enemies on the battlefield, but the reasons for the Conquest itself do not include hatred according to the biblical text. In fact, the Canaanite Rahab and her family were spared because she helped the spies (Josh 2:8–21; 6:17; cf. Judg 1:22–25). This surely would not have taken place if the Israelites *hated* the Canaanites. Secondly, there is no indication that the Israelites dehumanized the Canaanites. True, the Lord (through Moses) painted an unfavorable picture of the Canaanite culture and worship practices (cf. Lev 18:1–30; 20:22–24), but it was the *Lord*, not the Israelites, who abhorred the Canaanite peoples because of their idolatry, promiscuity, and child sacrifice (Lev 20:23; cf. 18:25).<sup>59</sup> After the death of Joshua, the Israelites intermarried with the Canaanites and incorporated their Baal worship (Judg 2:7–3:6), which would not have taken place if the Israelites hated or dehumanized the Canaanites. For these reasons, it may be better to refer to the Conquest as “moral cleansing” since it was designed primarily to bring about God’s judgment upon the Canaanites.<sup>60</sup>

In the end, however, it seems fair to brand the Conquest as “genocide” since the mission was to exterminate the Canaanites in the land without mercy, assuming a straightforward reading of the biblical text.<sup>61</sup> The question then becomes, “Is genocide ever permissible?” Or, to put it

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Geneva, 27 July 1929,” accessed October 11, 2021, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/305>; cf. “The Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949,” accessed October 11, 2021, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-0173.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> One must keep in mind that the Israelites were chosen because of the Lord’s promises to the patriarchs (Deut 7:8–9; cf. Gen 15:13–16), not because of their own righteousness (Deut 9:1–6). They would dispossess the Canaanites because of Canaanite wickedness, not because of the Israelite righteousness (Deut 9:4).

<sup>60</sup> Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 277.

<sup>61</sup> Whether or not the accounts were exaggerated or hyperbolic will be discussed later.

another way, “Is genocide *always* wrong?” The knee-jerk reaction is to judge genocide as morally reprehensible no matter the situation, but to answer the question as objectively as possible requires an important distinction. The Canaanite “genocide” should not be automatically equated with examples of genocide from the twentieth century. To do so poisons the well. Rather, the Conquest must be unpacked and studied in its own right. Then, one can evaluate whether or not the Conquest is an exception to the rule of “Genocide is always wrong.”<sup>62</sup>

## Methodology

### Presuppositions/Limitations

This dissertation aims to present a comprehensive, internally consistent, biblical defense of God’s command to exterminate the Canaanites. At the outset, though, it is important to recognize the presence of presuppositions. No one approaches the Bible (or any text) with a clean slate free of beliefs and influences.<sup>63</sup> As Bultmann posited, “...every interpreter brings with him certain conceptions, perhaps idealistic or psychological, as presuppositions of his exegesis, in most cases unconsciously.”<sup>64</sup> In fact, the greatest prejudice may be the assumption that one has no prejudices.<sup>65</sup> The more popular term today for presuppositions is *preunderstanding*, or that which one brings to the task of interpretation. This includes things like

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<sup>62</sup> For a more extensive discussion of various definitions of genocide, see Shawn Kelley, *Genocide, the Bible, and Biblical Scholarship* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 3–ff. For the purposes here, the above definition will suffice.

<sup>63</sup> Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 30; cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 283.

<sup>64</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era*, ed. Roger A. Johnson (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991), 307; cf. idem., *New Testament & Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 145.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Phenomenological Research*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 2; cf. István M. Fehér, “Prejudice and Pre-Understanding,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, eds. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016), 286.

one's language, social conditioning, intelligence, and cultural values.<sup>66</sup> Preunderstanding is not necessarily a barrier to interpretation because without preunderstanding, there would be no frame of reference for humans to understand anything about reality.<sup>67</sup> Rather, preunderstanding may simply refer to what one already knows about a given subject. It may also be attitudinal, reflecting one's predispositions or biases, or ideological in terms of how one views the whole of reality. Or, it may be methodological, referring to the approach one takes to understanding a given subject.<sup>68</sup> It is this last point that is most relevant here.

For this dissertation, this author admits the methodological presupposition of an evangelical Christian worldview. A worldview is “the conceptual lens through which we see, understand, and interpret the world and our place within it.”<sup>69</sup> An evangelical Christian worldview, then, sees the world through the framework of biblical truth. This author will make several assumptions about the Bible in this dissertation. First is the belief that the Bible is the product of divine revelation with both a divine and a human author (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20–21; John 10:35). Second, the Bible is authoritative and true since God cannot lie (Num 23:19; Titus 1:2). Third, the Bible is diverse in its genres but unified by the rule of faith that Scripture interprets Scripture. Fourth is the assumption that the Bible is understandable to the reader (i.e.,

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<sup>66</sup> William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 227; cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, “Hermeneutics and Theology: The Legitimacy and Necessity of Hermeneutics,” in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 160–72.

<sup>67</sup> Duncan S. Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 14; cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 15.

<sup>68</sup> Ferguson, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 13.

<sup>69</sup> Tawa J. Anderson, W. Michael Clark, and David K. Naugle, *An Introduction to a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 64; cf. James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 5th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 20.

the perspicuity of Scripture).<sup>70</sup> Along with the assumption that the Bible is divinely inspired is the belief that it is also inerrant and infallible. If God is the ultimate Author of Scripture behind the human authors, and if God cannot lie, then God's Word would not contain errors or falsehoods.

There are two reasons for presupposing an evangelical Christian worldview. First, this is the personal worldview of the author. Arguing from one's own belief-system safeguards against misrepresenting the issues since this researcher has an interest in being fair and honest in arguing from his own view of Scripture.<sup>71</sup> Second, the Conquest presents the greatest challenge to one who holds to a high view of Scripture. For those who do not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, for example, the Conquest may be dismissed as ahistorical or immoral. There is no bite if the Bible is a book written by ancient, fallible, morally-benighted people. One would expect it to contain stories that reflect what people today consider to be substandard morality if it were merely a human book. Assuming that the Bible is the Word of God, however, raises more difficult challenges when it comes to the character of God, the inspiration of the biblical text, and the historicity of the events described.

A second presupposition is the truth of moral realism, which is the view that there are some moral truths that are necessary and immutable.<sup>72</sup> In other words, objective moral values and duties exist.<sup>73</sup> The term "moral values" refers to whether something is good or bad. The term

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<sup>70</sup> Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 210–22.

<sup>71</sup> As Vanhoozer states, interpretive virtues include honesty, openness, and attention (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 376–77.

<sup>72</sup> David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 48.

“moral duties” refers to whether something is right or wrong and to whether something ought or ought not to be done.<sup>74</sup> The term “objective” means that moral values exist, and moral duties obtain, independent of human acknowledgment.<sup>75</sup> This is a common-sense view of the world and is required to understand everyday experiences. As one philosopher states,

We seem to hold moral beliefs, have moral disagreements, seek evidence for our opinions; we act as if there were something to discover, as if we could be mistaken, as if there is a fact of the matter; and we even talk of moral claims being true or false, and of people knowing the better (even while doing the worse).<sup>76</sup>

This is in contrast to, for example, the contention of the New Atheist Sam Harris that morality is merely *subjective* since, in his view, there is no God to provide objective morality as the divine Lawgiver.<sup>77</sup> If this were true, then Harris’ contention that the God of the Old Testament is cruel and unjust would merely be his opinion rather than a true statement of objective morality.<sup>78</sup> The most Harris could say is, “I do not *like* the Conquest,” which would just be a statement about his psychological state. As Craig comments,

Thus, if atheism is true, it becomes impossible to condemn war, oppression, or crime as evil. Nor can one praise brotherhood, equality, or love as good. It doesn’t matter what

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<sup>73</sup> The existence of moral facts is either grounded in the existence of God (e.g., in God’s nature) or in Platonism (i.e., abstract objects). For more information on the subject of God and abstract objects, which has bearing on the foundation of objective morality, see Paul Gould, ed., *Beyond the Control of God? Six Views on the Problem of God and Abstract Objects* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>74</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3d. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 172–73.

<sup>75</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 173.

<sup>76</sup> Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, ed., “Introduction: The Many Moral Realisms,” in *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 9.

<sup>77</sup> See Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010); cf. idem., *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012); idem., *Making Sense: Conversations on Consciousness, Morality, and the Future of Humanity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020).

<sup>78</sup> See the debate transcript of “Is the Foundation of Morality Natural or Supernatural? The Craig-Harris Debate,” accessed September 18, 2020, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-the-foundation-of-morality-natural-or-supernatural-the-craig-harris-deba/>.



you do—for there is no right and wrong; all things are permitted.... So if theism is false, it's very hard to understand what basis remains for objective moral duties.<sup>79</sup>

C. S. Lewis reached the same conclusion when he stated, “A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.”<sup>80</sup> In order to condemn or commend the Conquest, one must assume an objective moral standard. Without objective morality, there is no point in discussing the Conquest. Therefore, this author will assume that objective morality exists and that God is the ultimate Lawgiver. Since this author is making an assumption about the Bible's inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility, then he will also assume that the Bible's teachings constitute God's moral standards. This is not gratuitous but actually complicates the matter. If the Bible is God's Word, then there appears to be a contradiction between God's command to destroy the Canaanites and God's loving character.

The third presupposition is the veracity of the Old Testament historical accounts. This is in contrast to critical scholars who deny that the Israelites conquered the Canaanites in possessing the Promised Land. Although critical interpretations will be briefly discussed in the literature review, and this researchers recognizes that it is possible that Old Testament narratives could have been manufactured out of whole cloth for political or religious reasons, the assumption for the sake of argument is that the historical accounts are true in order to face the moral challenge of the Conquest head-on rather than sidestepping it because of the belief that the Conquest never really happened.<sup>81</sup> This aligns with the author's evangelical presuppositions

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<sup>79</sup> Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 175; cf. Paul Copan, “Can Michael Martin Be A Moral Realist?: *Sic et Non*,” *Philosophia Christi* 1, no. 2 (1999): 45–72.

<sup>80</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1952), 45.

<sup>81</sup> The reader is referred to resources that defend the historicity of the Old Testament accounts rather than retreading that ground here. See, for example, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. and exp. (Chicago: Moody, 1994); James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); idem., *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the*

about the Bible outlined above and is necessary for making an internally-consistent defense of the Conquest.

### **Apologetic Significance**

This dissertation is situated in the realm of biblical apologetics. However, the questions here are moral rather than historical. Skeptics and critics point to the Conquest as a moral blemish on the Old Testament, so the issue must be addressed. As Davies states,

Clearly, there is nothing to be gained from minimizing the problems presented by the ethically unpalatable passages of the Hebrew Bible, or by closing our eyes and pretending that they do not exist. The fact is that these passages *do* exist, and the problems which they cause must be faced head-on.<sup>82</sup>

Bible-believing Christians may embrace cognitive dissonance and so compartmentalize their theological beliefs that the moral problem is marginalized, but that may also lead to emotional doubt or to the denial biblical inerrancy. Instead, this dissertation will defend the Conquest—both *against* the critics and on *for* the benefit of Christians—so that Christians can better understand God’s nature, God’s actions, and God’s Word.

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*Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); J. Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out: What Archaeology Reveals About the Truth of the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997); Jeffrey J. Niehaus, “Joshua and Ancient Near Eastern Warfare,” *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31, no. 1 (March 1988): 37–50; David Merling, “The Book of Joshua, Part I: Its Evaluation of Nonevidence,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 61–72; idem., “The Book of Joshua, Part II: Expectations of Archaeology,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 39, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 209–21; K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003); J. Randall Price and H. Wayne House, *Zondervan Handbook of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017). See also the spate of articles at [www.biblicalarchaeology.org](http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org) such as Bryant G. Wood, “Conquest of Canaan under Joshua & the Inception of the Period of the Judges 1406-1371 BC,” accessed October 21, 2021, <https://biblearchaeology.org/research/chronological-categories/conquest-of-canaan>.

<sup>82</sup> Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 21 (emphasis original).

## Chapter 2: The Conquest in the Old Testament (Part 1)

Before discussing various interpretations of the Conquest, it is important to see what the Old Testament itself states about the Conquest and other related passages. The Conquest in the Old Testament can be understood in two senses. The Conquest *narrowly* defined (chapter three) refers to the time in Israel's history when the Israelites entered the Promised Land after leaving bondage in Egypt and after spending forty years wandering in the wilderness. The Israelite army conquered the Canaanite cities and drove the Canaanites from the land under Joshua's leadership with the Lord's help. In the process, they reportedly killed men, women, and children as total annihilation was the objective. It is this concept that will be examined here in chapter two and also in chapter three. The Conquest *broadly* (chapter two) defined includes the command to exterminate the Amalekites, the extermination of the Amorites and Canaanites in the wilderness, and the commands to exterminate the Canaanite nations in the Promised Land. In each of these cases, the annihilation is inclusive of the entire citizenry, including women and children, and so, these passages will be considered together. Chapters two and three will provide context to the interpretations laid out in chapter four so that the reader can evaluate the interpretations in light of the biblical discussions presented here. These chapters will also supply the necessary background material for the arguments in chapter five when it comes to defending the Conquest.

### Blotting Out the Amalekites

The Conquest broadly defined began when the nation of Israel was attacked by the Amalekites after leaving Egypt en route to Mount Sinai. This was the first time divine annihilation was pronounced over Israel's enemies. The Amalekites were descendants of Amalek, the son of Eliphaz and his concubine Timna. Eliphaz was the son of Esau and his Hittite wife Adah, which makes Amalek the grandson of Esau (Gen 36:2, 12, 16; 1 Chron 1:36). The

Amalekites settled in the territory south of Judah and west of Edom in the Negev (Num 13:29), though they apparently migrated north into Israelite territory (Judg 12:15) and west into Philistine territory (1 Sam 30:1–2) for raiding expeditions and perhaps to find resources that would otherwise be scarce in the desert regions.<sup>83</sup> The “whole territory of the Amalekites” is mentioned back at the time of Abraham (Gen 14:7), referring to the land that the Amalekites would inhabit later.<sup>84</sup> This information supports the idea that Amalek was “first among the nations” (Num 24:20) as one of the world’s oldest nations (cf. 1 Sam 27:8). Although the Amalekites were not part of the larger group of Canaanites (cf. Num 14:25, 43–45) and were not included in the lists of Canaanite nations to be exterminated (e.g., Deut 7:1), they are included in this study because their destruction is pronounced and later executed as recorded in the Old Testament.<sup>85</sup>

### **The Initial Ambush**

The book of Exodus records how the Amalekites ambushed the Israelites soon after the Israelites had left Egypt. The passage states the following:

The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, “Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.” So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses’ hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under his and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will

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<sup>83</sup> Gerald L. Mattingly, “Amalek,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:169.

<sup>84</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Genesis*, Ariel’s Bible Commentary (San Antonio: Ariel Ministries, 2008), 263.

<sup>85</sup> The Amalekites are not mentioned in other ancient Near Eastern literature, so everything known about their origin, activities, and destiny comes from the Old Testament (Mattingly, “Amalek,” 1:169).

completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. He said, “For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD. The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation” (Exod 17:8–16).<sup>86</sup>

The pronouncement of the Lord to “blot out” (מחה) the Amalekites speaks of obliteration. The same word appears in the Flood narrative where the Lord states, “I will wipe (מחה) mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth...” (Gen 6:7; cf. 7:4, 23; Judg 21:17). Blotting out included erasing the memory of Amalek, which meant not only the death of the Amalekites but also the eventual removal of what would be subsequent generations of Amalekites.<sup>87</sup> However, the statement at the end of the passage hints at the fact that the destruction of the Amalekites would not happen immediately but would happen over the course of generations: “The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites *from generation to generation*” (Exod 17:16). Joshua and the Israelites won the battle at Rephidim that day, but the Lord’s war against the Amalekites would continue for some time.

### **A Persistent Threat**

After the initial ambush against Joshua and the Israelites, the Amalekites resurface in the book of Numbers. The Israelite spies brought back a bad report about the Amalekite and Canaanite inhabitants of the land, and the Lord determined that only Joshua, Caleb, and those under the age of twenty would enter the Promised Land while the generation of unbelieving adults would die in the wilderness. Rather than pressing on to the Promised Land, where the Israelites would face Amalekite and Canaanite enemies living in the valley, the Lord told Moses

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<sup>86</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all Bible quotations are from the NIV (1984).

<sup>87</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 269. There are a handful of textual similarities between the Flood narrative and the Conquest narratives that may link the two accounts, with the Conquest being a recapitulation of God’s judgment at the time of the Flood. See Kyle C. Dunham, “Yahweh War and *Herem*: The Role of Covenant, Land, and Purity in the Conquest of Canaan,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 21 (2016): 19–21.

to turn around and head back into the wilderness (Num 14:25). The Amalekites again appear as Israel's enemies, but the Israelites would have to fight them at a future date—or so it seemed. Against the Lord's command, however, some of the Israelites went up to fight against the Amorites, Amalekites, and Canaanites anyway, but the Lord was not with them, and the Israelites were defeated and driven back as far as Hormah (Num 14:39–45; cf. Deut 1:41–46). The Amorites, Amalekites, and Canaanites won the day, and the first generation of Israelites did *not* carry out the extermination of the Amalekites.

The task of annihilating the Amalekites would fall to subsequent generations of Israelites who came out of Egypt, as indicated by two statements to Israel during their time in the wilderness. First is the statement from the false prophet Balaam in his final oracle against (for) Israel: “Amalek was first among the nations, but he will come to ruin (אָפֵל) at last” (Num 24:20). The phrase “at last” speaks to the eventual destruction. The second statement comes near the end of Deuteronomy and explains *when* the destruction will take place.

Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God. When the LORD your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out (מָחָה) the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deut 25:17–19).

Here the Israelites were commanded to remember (and not to forget) what the Amalekites did when they attacked the Israelites. The timing of the Amalekite destruction was set. After Israel settled in the Promised Land and had God's rest from warring against the Canaanite enemies, *then* they were to finish the job with the Amalekites. The book of Joshua explains that at the end of Joshua's life, there was still land to be taken from the Canaanites (Josh 13:1–6), and so one can deduce that this was not the appropriate time to destroy the Amalekites. Instead, blotting out the Amalekites would be passed down to the *third* generation of Israelites who left Egypt. The

problem is that after the death of Joshua, the next generation of Israelites *did not know* the Lord or the things He had done for Israel (Judg 2:7–10). The Israelites failed to drive out the Canaanites and instead turned to Baal worship (Judg 2:11–3:6), so there is no record of the extermination of the Amalekites during the tumultuous period of the judges. Quite the opposite, the Amalekites continued to attack and suppress certain Israelite tribes during this time as recorded in Judges (Judg 3:13; 5:14 [cf. 12:15]; 6:3, 33; 7:12; 10:12), thereby solidifying their identity as Israel’s sworn enemies (cf. Psa 83:7). The task of exterminating the Amalekites was deferred again, eventually being passed on to Israel’s first king, Saul.

### **Saul and Agag**

Once Israel had a centralized monarchy with a national fighting force (1 Sam 8:10–12), and Saul and his son Jonathan had already demonstrated success in battle (1 Sam 11:1–11; 14:1–23), it was time to settle the score with the Amalekites. The summary statement of Saul’s victories in battle notes, “Wherever he (Saul) turned, he inflicted punishment on them (Israel’s enemies). He fought valiantly and defeated the Amalekites, delivering Israel from the hands of those who had plundered them” (1 Sam 14:47–48). Apparently, the Amalekites were still in the habit of plundering the Israelites—a pattern established during the period of the judges. For this reason, the Lord gave Saul the order to wipe out the Amalekites.

Samuel said to Saul, “I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the LORD. This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels, and donkeys’” (1 Sam 15:1–3; cf. 15:18).

There is no ambiguity about the command. The Amalekites were subject to total annihilation. For the first time, the specific word *hērem* (“devote to destruction”), which is customarily used with respect to the Canaanites (e.g., Deut 7:1), appears with reference to the Amalekites. The

concept is analogous to “blot out” in Exodus 17:14 and Deuteronomy 25:19 and “come to ruin” in Numbers 24:20. The time had come for the Amalekites to be destroyed. However, another desert-dwelling people—the Kenites—would be spared. Saul announced to them, “Go away, leave the Amalekites so that I do not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt” (1 Sam 15:6). The Amalekites had attacked nascent Israel, but the Kenites had showed them kindness. Consequently, the Kenites were considered allies of Israel more than enemies of Israel,<sup>88</sup> and the utter destruction of the Amalekites would not include the wanton killing of the Kenites.

The rest of the events of 1 Samuel 15 are well known. Saul attacked the Amalekites from Havilah to Shur to the east of Egypt (1 Sam 15:7; cf. 27:8; Gen 25:18). He totally destroyed the Amalekites with the sword but took Agag king of the Amalekites alive and then spared the best sheep, cattle, fat calves, and lambs for himself. All that was good was plundered, and all that was despised and weak was totally destroyed (1 Sam 15:7–9). One might wonder whether Saul understood the marching orders, but the command was not unclear: “Do not spare them” (1 Sam 15:3). Additionally, Saul was familiar with the concept of total destruction because he had previously wanted to apply the ban to the Philistines (1 Sam 13:36) and at some point in his kingship had actually applied the ban to the Gibeonites in violation of the peace treaty made with

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<sup>88</sup> The Kenites are mentioned several times in the Old Testament. They first appear in the list nations inhabiting the land promised by God to Abraham’s descendants (Gen 15:19), and their genealogical record is found in 1 Chronicles 2:55. The Kenites lived in tents (Judg 5:24) and were associated with the Amalekites because of their proximity to them in the Negev (1 Sam 15:6; 27:10). Unlike the Amalekites, however, the Kenites were not entirely regarded as enemies of Israel. Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, was a Kenite (Judg 1:16; cf. 4:11) and a priest of Midian (Exod 3:1) who offered helpful advice to Moses (Exod 18:1–27). David tricked the Philistine king into thinking that he was conducting raids against the Kenites in the Negev of Judah when in reality he was conducting raids against Israel’s enemies, the Geshurites and Amalekites (1 Sam 27:8–10). After David plundered the Amalekites, he sent some of the plunder to the elders of Judah to curry favor with them, but he also sent some to the towns of the Kenites (1 Sam 30:26–31). This demonstrates that the Kenites were not the sworn enemies of Israel. In Balaam’s oracle against the Kenites, he stated that the Kenites would be destroyed when the Assyrians took them captive in the future (Num 24:21–22), but not at the hands of Israel.



them at the time of the Conquest (2 Sam 21:1–14; cf. Josh 9:1–27). Saul’s partial obedience in only destroying some of the livestock and in sparing the king amounted to total disobedience. He had grieved the Lord (1 Sam 15:10, 35) and had done evil in His eyes (1 Sam 15:19). Shortly thereafter Saul erected a monument in his own honor (1 Sam 15:12), he was confronted by Samuel the prophet but was full of excuses. First, Saul claimed that the animals were spared so that they might be sacrificed to the Lord (1 Sam 15:15). However, the command was very specific: “Put to death...cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys” (1 Sam 15:3). Next, Saul postulated that *he* had obeyed the Lord but that *the soldiers* were responsible for sparing the animals for sacrifice (1 Sam 15:21). Third, he finally acknowledged that he sinned but only because he was afraid of the people (1 Sam 15:24). In other words, he caved to the pressure from others, so it was not entirely his fault. Samuel accused Saul of rebellion (partial obedience) and arrogance (e.g., the monument) and declared that the Lord had rejected Saul as king. In the Lord’s estimation, obedience is better than offerings and sacrifices (1 Sam 15:22–23). Despite Saul’s pleading, the kingdom would go to another because “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind” (1 Sam 15:29). God had determined that the wicked Amalekites must die as far back as Exodus 17, and His mind had not changed. Because Saul had failed to carry out the Lord’s “fierce wrath” against the Amalekites (1 Sam 28:18), the Lord would not change His mind regarding Saul’s removal as king. Although the punishment may seem harsh, the consequence for disobeying the ban elsewhere was death (cf. Josh 7:25).<sup>89</sup> The account concludes when Samuel called for Agag king of the Amalekites and put him to death himself (1 Sam 15:32–34).<sup>90</sup> Samuel’s statement to Agag

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<sup>89</sup> Paul S. Evans, *1–2 Samuel*, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 166.

is noteworthy: “As your sword has made women childless, so will your mother be childless among women” (1 Sam 15:33). Justice was served in this case and would continue to be served during the reign of David.

### **David and the Amalekites**

The destruction of the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15 did not mean that there were no Amalekites left on the face of the earth, however. Those whom Saul attacked were completely destroyed, but others remained and apparently reconstituted their fighting forces. Saul’s successor, David, conducted raids against the Amalekites while he was temporarily stationed in Ziklag serving under Achish king of the Philistines. David did not leave man or woman alive, though he took the plunder of the livestock and clothing back to Achish (1 Sam 27:6–9). David’s reason for killing all the Amalekites was so that there would be no one to take word of his escapades back to Achish (1 Sam 27:11), but his actions also highlight the fact that the Amalekites remained under the ban first placed on them in Exodus 17. Nothing negative from the Lord or from any of His prophets is stated about the Amalekite destruction at the hands of David. In fact, the Amalekites proved to be a thorn in David’s side. When David and his fighting men were assisting the Philistine army and were away from Ziklag, their temporary hometown, the Amalekites raided Ziklag, burned the city, and captured the women and children belonging to David and his men (1 Sam 30:1–2). With the Lord’s help (1 Sam 30:6–8, 23), David and his men tracked down the raiding party, killed the Amalekite soldiers (except for four hundred who escaped on camels), and recovered their families and livestock (1 Sam 30:16–20). David sent some of the plunder from “the LORD’s enemies” (i.e., the Amalekites) to the elders of Judah and

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<sup>90</sup> The name “Agag” may be a common name for Amalekite kings like “Pharaoh” in Egypt (Duane L. Christensen, “Agag,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 1:88); cf. Num 24:7.

to a number of the towns in that region (1 Sam 30:26–30). The Amalekites persisted as enemies of the Lord and of His people during David’s transition to king of Israel (2 Sam 1:1–15)<sup>91</sup> and during his actual kingship (2 Sam 8:11–12; 1 Chron 18:11). However, “The LORD gave David victory wherever he went” (2 Sam 8:6). This included military victories over the Amalekites in accordance with the ancient promise that the Lord would blot them out (Exod 17:14).

## **Two Final Appearances of the Amalekites**

The Amalekites are mentioned twice more in Israel’s history, and both occurrences align with the Lord’s promise to annihilate the Amalekites. First was when a group of five hundred Simeonites went to the hill country Seir (Edom) and defeated the people living there, including the Amalekites remaining in that area. The Simeonites continued to live in that territory for centuries (1 Chron 4:42–43). The second reference is to a particular Amalekite in the fifth century BC. Although it appears from history that the Amalekites eventually merged with other people groups and came to be identified by the generic term “Arab,”<sup>92</sup> Haman son of Hammedatha is called “the Agagite” (Est 3:1), tracing his lineage back to the Amalekite king Agag in 1 Samuel 15:8 (cf. Num 24:7). Haman the Agagite persuaded the Persian ruler Xerxes to issue a decree calling for the extermination of the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire (Est 3:8–14). For this reason, Haman was deemed “the enemy of the Jews” (Est 3:10; 9:24).

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<sup>91</sup> At the end of his life, Saul was mortally wounded in battle against the Philistines and wanted his armor-bearer to run him through so that the Philistine soldiers would not abuse him before he died. However, his armor-bearer did not have the courage to do it, so Saul took his own sword and fell on it (1 Sam 31:1–4; cf. 1 Chron 10:1–6). Three days later, after returning from defeating the Amalekites, David received the message of Saul’s and Jonathan’s death by way of an Amalekite messenger, who apparently was a mercenary in Saul’s army. The Amalekite messenger claimed that he had finished off Saul at Saul’s own request. As proof of the deed, the Amalekite brought Saul’s crown and armband to David (2 Sam 1:1–10). Because the Amalekite’s story conflicts with the accounts in 1 Samuel 31 and 1 Chronicles 10, it seems likely that the Amalekite fabricated the story so that he might receive some reward from David. Instead, David decreed that the Amalekite be put to death because he killed the Lord’s anointed, Saul (2 Sam 1:13–15). David appeared to have doubted the man’s story since he told the Amalekite that his blood would be on his own head (2 Sam 1:16).

<sup>92</sup> Mattingly, “Amalek,” 1:171.

Although it seemed like Amalek (Haman) would accomplish the annihilation of Israel (the Jews) rather than the other way around, the tables were providentially turned on Haman (Est 4:1–7:10). Xerxes reversed the decree and allowed the Jews throughout the empire to exact vengeance upon those who had plotted their demise (Est 8:1–9:17), and Haman the Agagite and his sons were hanged on the gallows Haman had constructed for Mordecai the Jew (Est 7:10; 9:10, 13, 25). These last two episodes with the Amalekites point to the providential fulfillment of the Lord's promise to blot out the memory of Amalek.

### **Summary**

In summary, the Amalekites appear throughout Israel's early history and monarchy as persistent enemies. They ambushed Israel soon after the Exodus. They defeated the Israelites in battle in the wilderness. They raided the Israelites during the period of the judges. They continued to plunder and threaten the Israelites during Israel's monarchy and even in the postexilic era. Because of the initial ambush in Exodus 17, the Lord pronounced their destruction to come in the future. The Israelites were the primary instrument of the Lord's judgment as seen in 1 Samuel 15, and the judgment included the annihilation of men, women, children, and animals. "Do not spare them" means that there was no mercy available for them.

### *The Conquest Before the Conquest*

The Israelites had four military engagements before they actually entered the Promised Land, each of which is recorded in the book of Numbers. Three of the battles employed the ban against the Canaanites and Amorites while the fourth used a modified form of the ban. These represent the first instances of total destruction of Israel's enemies as well as the first instance of near-total destruction of Israel's neighbors (cf. Deut 20:10–18). This section will explore these episodes as they set the stage for the Conquest of Canaan to come later in the book of Joshua.

## Conquering the Amorites

### The Background to the Amorite Animosity

The Amorites were one of the seven to ten nations that inhabited the land of Canaan.<sup>93</sup> They were descendants of Canaan (Gen 10:16) who lived in the Transjordan region since the days of Abram (Gen 14:7).<sup>94</sup> Abram lived near the great trees of Mamre the Amorite in alliance with the two brothers of Mamre, Eschol and Aner (Gen 14:13). There appears to have been relative peace between Abram, the father of the Israelites, and the Amorites during this period. However, Abram's grandson, Jacob, took land from the Amorites with his sword and bow (Gen 48:22). The animosity evidently started then but was curtailed since the Israelites went down to Egypt soon thereafter. As early as the time of Abram, though, the Lord had promised to give the land of the Amorites to the Israelites. This would fulfill both the Lord's promise to make Abram into a great nation (Gen 12:1–2), since a nation must occupy land, as well as the Lord's plan to

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<sup>93</sup> During the time of the Abraham, the land was inhabited by ten nations or people groups: the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites (Gen 15:19–21). Later lists include seven of these ten: Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Hivites, and Jebusites, with the occasional omission of the Hivites (see Exod 3:8, 17; 23:23; 33:2; 34:11; Deut 7:1; 20:17; Josh 3:10; 12:8; 24:11; Neh 9:8). In the New Testament, Paul mentions “seven nations in Canaan” (Acts 13:19), which would have included all seven listed above (cf. Deut 7:1). The four nations not included in the later lists are the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, and Rephaites. For more information about these groups, see J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, eds., “Kenaz, Kenizzite,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 801; Stephen A. Reed, “Kadmonites,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:4; Mark S. Smith, “Rephaim,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:675.

<sup>94</sup> The Amorites were a Canaanite people group (see Gen 10:16). Little is known about them outside the Bible because there is no known Amorite language and consequently no extant Amorite literature detailing their religious beliefs or historiography. Archaeology has yielded very little that can be identified as Amorite. What is known of the Amorite people and civilization comes from the written records of other surrounding peoples (Robert M. Whiting, “Amorite Tribes and Nations of Second-Millennium Western Asia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 2, ed. Jack M. Sasson [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955], 1231). After Abraham's time, the Amorites inhabited much of the Mesopotamian region and even controlled Babylon during the early second millennium BC (Tremper Longman III, ed., “Amorites,” in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013], n.p.).

judge the Amorites. The judgment and the land dispossession would be postponed for four generations, though:

Then the LORD said to him (Abram), “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen 15:13–16).

Although the Amorites were on relatively friendly terms with the Israelites during the time of the patriarchs, they would later become more wicked and would be ripe for divine judgment. For this reason, the Amorites are included in the lists of specific nations that the Lord would drive out before the Israelites<sup>95</sup> and which the Israelites were commanded to destroy (Deut 7:1–2; 20:17).

#### The Initial Encounter

The first time the Israelites as an incipient nation encountered the Amorites was after the Exodus on their way to the Promised Land. As Moses recounted in Deuteronomy 1:6–8, the Lord told the people to go up into the hill country of the Amorites, to the neighboring peoples of the Arabah, to the mountains and western foothills, to the Negev, along the coast, to the land of the Canaanites, and to Lebanon all the way to the Euphrates. The Israelites were commanded to go up and take possession of the land that the Lord had promised to give to the patriarchs and to their descendants. The Israelites set out from Horeb toward the hill country of the Amorites and eventually came to Kadesh Barnea (Deut 1:19–20), which borders the Promised Land but which is not in the land.<sup>96</sup> The Israelites requested sending spies to the land first to bring back a report about the land, and the idea seemed good to Moses and was then commanded by the Lord (Deut

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<sup>95</sup> See Exodus 3:8, 17; 13:5; 23:23; 33:2; 34:11; cf. Deut 7:1; 20:17; 31:4; Josh 3:10; 10:12; 24:8, 11, 18.

<sup>96</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 100.

1:22–23; Num 13:1–2). Two of the spies brought back a good report, but ten brought back a bad report. The people grumbled against the Lord and talked about stoning Joshua and Caleb, the two faithful spies who encouraged the people to go up and take possession of the land with the Lord's help. As a result, the Lord killed the ten unfaithful spies with a plague and then sent the unfaithful generation back into the wilderness. The Conquest would be postponed until that entire generation had died off. Only Joshua, Caleb, and those under the age of twenty would enter the Promised Land (Num 13:26–14:38; Deut 1:26–40). Without faith, the people would not enter the land. However, the Israelites tried to go up and take possession of the land anyway, but Moses warned them against such actions because the Lord would not be with them. The Amorites, Amalekites, and Canaanites in the hill country defeated the Israelites (Num 14:41–45; Deut 1:41–46).<sup>97</sup> The initial victory went to the Amorites, but this would not be the final word on the matter.

#### Defeating and Dispossessing

After the initial defeat, the Israelites again faced the Amorites on two occasions. Like the Amalekite ambush after leaving Egypt (Exod 17:8–16), the Amorites were the ones who provoked the Israelites to war. In the first case, the Israelites sent messengers to Sihon king of Heshbon requesting passage through his land east of the Jordan. The Israelite messengers assured Sihon that the Israelites would just pass through on the king's highway without turning aside to any field, vineyard, or well, and they would pay for any food or water offered by the Amorites (Num 21:10–23; cf. Deut 2:26–29). The Israelites sued for peace (Deut 2:26; cf. 20:10) in hopes that the Amorites would allow them to simply pass through the land. This was what had

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<sup>97</sup> According to the spies' report, the Amalekites lived in the Negev, and the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites lived in the hill country. The Canaanites lived near the sea and along the Jordan River (Num 13:29), and the Amalekites and the Canaanites were living in the valleys (Num 14:25).

happened previously with the Edomites and Moabites (Deut 2:29). The Lord instructed the Israelites *not* to provoke the Edomites to war when passing through the hill country of Seir on their way to the Promised Land (Deut 2:4–6) even though the Edomites had denied the Israelites passage along the king’s highway and had mustered troops to fight the Israelites (Num 20:14–20).<sup>98</sup> Instead, the Israelites went around Edom (Num 21:4). The Israelites were not to provoke the Moabites or the Ammonites to war either.<sup>99</sup> The reason is that the Lord had given these nations their own land.<sup>100</sup> Likewise, the Lord had done the same for the Caphtorites who lived on the coast and who were the ancestors of the Philistines.<sup>101</sup> In fact, the Lord *Himself* had driven out the peoples who had occupied the land before these nations—the Emmites, Horites, Zanzummites, and Avvites—just as He would do for the Israelites (Deut 2:10–23; cf. Josh 24:4). In terms of the land, Israel’s boundaries were clearly marked (Num 34:1–12; Deut 3:12–20; Josh 13:1–19:51); they would not be allowed to possess land that the Lord had allotted to other nations. The seven Canaanite nations were an exception, though. The difference between the Amorites and the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites is that the sin of the Amorites (and other Canaanite groups) had finally reached its full measure (cf. Gen 15:16). Consequently, the Lord made Sihon’s spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate as an act of judgment in order to deliver him over to the Israelites (Deut 2:30).

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<sup>98</sup> For more about the Edomites, see J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, eds., “Edom,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 386–88.

<sup>99</sup> See Deut 2:9, 18–19, 37; Judg 11:12–18; 2 Chron 20:10.

<sup>100</sup> For more about the Moabites and Ammonites, see J. Maxwell Miller, “Moab,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:890–91; Jean-Michel de Tarragon, “Ammon,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, trans. Gerard J. Norton, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:196.

<sup>101</sup> See Gen 10:14; 1 Chron 1:12; Jer 47:4; Amos 9:7.



As expected, Sihon denied Israel's request for safe passage and mobilized his army against Israel in the desert. The Lord commanded the Israelites to fight the Amorites and to take over their land (Deut 2:24, 31), and it was the Lord who procured the victory for Israel over all of the Amorite towns (Deut 2:32, 36; cf. Judg 11:21–23). Sihon, his army, and his sons were defeated in battle, and the Israelites took over the Amorites' land all the way to the border of the Ammonite territory (Num 21:23–31).<sup>102</sup> Moses also sent spies to the Amorite city of Jazer, and the Israelites captured its settlements and drove out the Amorites there as well. From there, the Israelites journeyed on the road to Bashan, and another Amorite king, Og of Bashan, and his entire army mobilized against the Israelites at Edrei. The Lord instructed Moses not to be afraid of them since the Lord would deliver them over to Moses and the Israelites. The Israelites won the day (Num 21:32–35).<sup>103</sup> In time, the Israelites came to occupy all of the land and cities of Og of Bashan (Num 32:33; Deut 3:8–18).<sup>104</sup>

### Destroying the Amorites

In conquering and dispossessing the Amorites, the Israelites were used as an instrument of the Lord's judgment against the Amorites. According to the biblical record, this judgment included the wholesale destruction of men, women, and children. After the battle with Sihon king of the Amorites, the account in Numbers records that "Israel captured all the cities of the Amorites and occupied them" (Num 21:25). There is no mention of killing the citizenry,

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<sup>102</sup> The land east of the Jordan was occupied by Moabites and Ammonites (cf. Josh 13:25; 21:26) and was therefore not originally part of the land promised to Israel (cf. Deut 2:9, 19, 37). That which was possessed by the Amorites was given to the Israelites, though (Deut 2:31). The spies also reported that the descendants of Anak lived in the Promised Land (Num 13:28; cf. Deut 1:28; 9:2).

<sup>103</sup> See also Deut 3:1–7; Josh 12:2–5; 24:8, 12; Amos 2:9.

<sup>104</sup> See also Deut 4:46–48; 29:7–8; Josh 13:30–31; Judg 11:19–26; 1 Kgs 4:19; Neh 9:22; Pss 135:10–12; 136:16–22.

although this may be inferred. In the second episode, the text states that Moses “drove out” the Amorites living in Jazer and the surrounding settlements (Num 21:32). This makes it likely that there were Amorite survivors who fled. In the third episode, the Lord told Moses to do to Og king of Bashan what Moses had done to Sihon king of the Amorites (Num 21:34). The text states, “So they (the Israelites) struck him (Og) down, together with his sons and his whole army, leaving them no survivors. And they took possession of his land” (Num 21:35). From these statements, one can deduce that the Israelites destroyed all of the *fighting men* but not necessarily the women and children. However, when Moses later recounted the battle with Sihon, he wrote:

When Sihon and all his army came out to meet us in battle at Jahaz, the LORD our God delivered him over to us and we struck him down, together with his sons and his whole army. At that time we took all his towns and completely destroyed (חרם) 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. From Aroer on the rim of the Arnon Gorge, and from the town in the gorge, even as far as Gilead, not one town was too strong for us. The LORD our God gave us all of them (Deut 2:32–36).

This passage clarifies the nature of the conquest of the Amorites. Moses and the Israelites applied the ban in killing men, women, and children. Since the Lord instructed Moses to do to Og king of Bashan what Moses had done to Sihon king of the Amorites, then it may be presumed that those Amorites were completely destroyed as well. Again, Moses’ later statements about these events bring clarity:

So the LORD our God also gave into our hands Og king of Bashan and all his army. We struck them down, leaving no survivors. At that time we took all his cities. There was not one of the sixty cities that we did not take from them—the whole region of Argob, Og’s kingdom in Bashan. All these cities were fortified with high walls and with gates and bars, and there were also a great many unwalled villages. We completely destroyed (חרם) them, as we had done with Sihon king of Heshbon, destroying (חרם) every city—men, women and children. But all the livestock and the plunder from their cities we carried off for ourselves (Deut 3:3–7).

As with Sihon, so it was with Og. A straightforward reading of the text reveals that 1) the Israelites applied the ban; 2) the ban included killing men, women, and children; and 3) the Lord

gave the Israelites the victory. The fact that there were no survivors may refer to the armies, or it may refer to the cities and villages that were destroyed. On at least two occasions, the Israelites drove out the Amorites (Num 21:32; 32:39–42; cf. Deut 3:12–17), which implies that there were survivors who fled but also that any who stayed behind were put to death.

#### Aftermath of the Amorites

The Israelites destroyed the Amorites living east of the Jordan River, but there were Amorites on the west side of the Jordan occupying the Promised Land as well. Some were defeated in battle with the help of the Lord (Josh 10:1–28; 11:1–9; 12:8), but at the end of Joshua’s life, there was still much of the Promised Land to be possessed, including the region of the Amorites (Josh 13:1–5). The Lord promised to drive out the inhabitants of the land (Josh 13:6), but the Israelites failed to complete the work of expelling/destroying the Canaanite peoples.<sup>105</sup> The Amorites were particularly troublesome to the Danites in that they forced the Danites to live in the hill country rather than in the plain (Judg 1:34). The Amorites also overpowered the house of Joseph for a time until the Israelites eventually grew stronger. Rather than exterminating the Amorites, though, the Israelites pressed them into forced labor (Judg 1:35; cf. Josh 9:1–27). The Israelites continued to live among the Amorites and ultimately intermarried with them and began to worship their gods (Judg 3:35–36; cf. 6:10) against the warnings from Joshua (Josh 24:14–24). The Amorites ended up oppressing the Israelites during the period of the judges (Judg 10:11–12) but later lived at peace with the Israelites during the reign of Saul (1 Sam 7:14). Later on, Solomon conscripted the Amorites and other Canaanite groups into forced labor. These were the remaining descendants of the peoples that the Israelites had failed to exterminate. Solomon did not exterminate them either (1 Kgs 9:20–21; 2 Chron

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<sup>105</sup> See Josh 15:63; 16:10; 17:12–18; 19:47–48; 23:5–8, 12–13; Judg 1:19–21, 27–36.

8:7). While it may seem that conscripting the Canaanites for forced labor was a wise move on Solomon's part,<sup>106</sup> allowing the Canaanites to live in the land was a violation of the Law of Moses (Deut 7:2; 20:16–18) and arguably paved the way for the “re-Canaanization”<sup>107</sup> of the land under Ahab (1 Kgs 16:29–34). The Amorites eventually faded from memory, but not in the way in which the Lord intended due to the negative influence they would have upon Israel.

### **Destroying the Canaanites in Arad**

Before the Israelites encountered the Amorite kings Sihon and Og, they were also attacked by the Canaanite king of Arad who lived in the Negev toward the end of their time in the wilderness. This king had actually captured some of the Israelites, and in their distress, the Israelites made a special vow to the Lord: “If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy (חרם) their cities” (Num 21:2). In other words, if the Lord would intervene for His people, then the Israelites in turn would “devote” the Canaanites to the Lord. The Lord listened to the prayer, and the Israelites indeed completely destroyed the Canaanites *and* their towns (Num 21:3). The destruction of the Canaanite towns indicates that noncombatants such as women and children were put to death, and the fact that the place was named *Hormah* (“destruction”) speaks to the way in which the Israelites “devoted” the Canaanites to the Lord.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1987), 64.

<sup>107</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2006), 76.

<sup>108</sup> The town of “Hormah” is first mentioned in Numbers 14:45, where the Amalekites and Canaanites in the hill country attacked the Israelites and drove them back (cf. Deut 1:44). This was at the time when the Lord told the Israelites that they would not enter the Promised Land for forty years, but some of the Israelites decided to go up and attack the Canaanites anyway in spite of the warning from Moses. Later, when the Israelites defeated the Canaanite king of Arad on the road to Atharim (Num 21:1–3), they named the place “Hormah.” It is probably the case that Moses referred to the place as Hormah in Numbers 14 in anticipation of the events of Numbers 21 (John Lloyd, *The Book of Joshua: A Critical and Expository Commentary of the Hebrew Text* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1886], 189). The exact location of Hormah is uncertain (Trent C. Butler, *Judges*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 8 [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006], 206–207), but since it is listed in the territory of Judah (Josh

It may be inferred that the Israelites killed all whom they encountered. In this example, the application of the ban was Israel's idea, but the Lord listened to their cry for help and handed over the Canaanites to Israel in battle. In so doing, the Lord gave a divine stamp of approval to the destruction of the Canaanites, and Israel learned firsthand what *hērem* warfare entailed.

### **The Moabite/Midianite Seduction**

The fourth military engagement in the book of Numbers involved the Moabites<sup>109</sup> and Midianites.<sup>110</sup> The Israelites traveled to the plains of Moab and camped along the Jordan River opposite Jericho in preparation for invading the Promised Land (Num 22:1; cf. Deut 1:1–5). Balak king of Moab and the Moabite people were afraid of the Israelites because they had defeated the Amorite kings Og and Bashan. The Moabites and the Midianite elders worried that the Israelites would exploit the land (Num 22:2–4) even though the Israelites were merely passing through on their way to Jericho. In response, the elders of Moab and Midian (Num 22:7) hired the false prophet Balaam to pronounce a series of curses upon the Israelites (Num 22:4–24:9). The Lord changed Balaam's curses into blessings for Israel (Num 24:9; cf. Gen 12:3),

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15:30) that was allotted to Simeon (Josh 19:4; 1 Chron 4:30), then it may be assumed that it was somewhere in the southern region of Judah (cf. 1 Sam 30:30). The list of thirty-one kings that Joshua conquered includes the “king of Hormah” (Josh 12:14), which may refer to the battle back in Numbers 21 or to a later battle during the time of the Conquest when Joshua was leading the troops rather than Moses. The name “Hormah” is also given to the Canaanite town of Zephath after the men of Judah and Simeon utterly destroyed it (Judg 1:17). Perhaps the original location (Num 21:3) was later reinhabited by other Canaanites and then destroyed again, or there may be two places in view.

<sup>109</sup> See note 99 above for background information on the Moabites.

<sup>110</sup> The Midianites were descendants of Abraham through his second wife, Keturah (Gen 25:1–2; 1 Chron 1:32). They lived east of the Jordan and the Dead Sea and also south in the Arabah. The Ishmaelites traders (Gen 37:25) who sold Joseph to Potiphar are called “Midianites” (Gen 37:28, 36), which perhaps signifies that they came from the desert region known as “Midian.” Centuries later, Moses fled to Midian and married Zipporah, the daughter of Reuel (aka Jethro), the priest of Midian (Exod 2:15–21). After the Exodus, Moses met up with his father-in-law again, and Jethro offered sacrifices to the God of Israel and acknowledged Him as greater than all other gods (Exod 18:1–12). Moses later invited his brother-in-law, Hobab, to join the Israelites in their journey to the Promised Land (Num 10:29–33). Although Hobab declined at first, it appears that he ultimately accepted Moses' invitation since Hobab's descendants (the Kenites) settled in the land of Canaan (Judg 4:11 [cf. 1:16]; Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2003], 80).

much to the chagrin of Balak (Num 24:10–14). The Lord also gave Balaam an oracle stating that the coming ruler in Israel would crush the forehead of Moab (Num 24:17). This judgment was no doubt a response to Moab’s actions against Israel. Even though the Lord thwarted the plans of the Moabites to harm Israel, the Moabites would have their revenge. While the Israelites were camped at Shittim in the plains of Moab (cf. Num 33:49)—the place from which Joshua sent the spies to Jericho (Josh 2:1; 3:1)—the Moabite women joined with some Midianite women and seduced the Israelite men.<sup>111</sup> They also enticed them to worship and sacrifice to Baal of Peor.<sup>112</sup> Apparently, the false prophet Balaam was the one who put the women up to it (Num 31:15), so this was evidently another attempt by Moab to deter Israel.

The punishment for the guilty parties in Israel was swift and severe. The biblical text conveys that the Lord was angry with the Israelites because of the idolatry (Num 25:3). The later biblical commentary on this passage states that the Israelites sacrificed to “lifeless gods” (Psa 106:28), which was a violation of the first of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:3). Worshiping other gods was high treason before the Lord, who is described as a jealous God (Exod 34:14; cf. Deut 6:14–15), and in worshiping Baal of Peor, the Israelites became as vile as the idol itself (Hos 9:10) and were therefore deserving of death. Although *hērem* is not used in the passage, one is reminded of Exodus 22:20: “Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the LORD must be destroyed (*hērem*).” The Israelites had also violated the seventh commandment in committing adultery, which was punishable by death too (Lev 18:20; 20:10; Num 5:11–31; Deut 22:22). For

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<sup>111</sup> The biblical text portrays the women as Moabite but also as Midianite (Num 25:1, 6, 14, 15, 16–28). It appears that the Moabites and Midianites were working together to assail Israel (Pekka Pitkänen, *A Commentary on Numbers: Narrative, Ritual, and Colonialism* [London: Routledge, 2018], 164). This was the second attempt by the Moabites and Midianites to harm Israel (cf. Num 22:4, 7).

<sup>112</sup> “Baal of Peor” may refer to a specific god worshiped in the nearby locale of Peor, or the phrase may be translated as “Master of Peor” in reference to another Moabite god (Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 2000], 283).

these reasons, the Lord ordered Moses to kill all of the Israelite leaders of the sinning group and to expose them in broad daylight before the Lord. Only then would the Lord's anger be turned away from Israel (Num 25:3–4; cf. Jer 18:20). Moses commissioned Israel's judges, and they carried out the task by putting to death all of the men who had sinned by joining in the worship of Baal of Peor (Num 25:5). The Lord also sent a plague against the Israelites that killed twenty-four thousand people (Num 25:9).<sup>113</sup> The plague was abruptly ended when Phinehas, the grandson of the high priest Aaron, killed an Israelite man and a Moabite woman who were sinning right before Moses and the whole assembly of Israel—an action for which Phinehas was commended by the Lord (Num 25:5–13).

The Lord's judgment extended to the Midianites too.<sup>114</sup> Because of their actions, the Lord told Moses that the Midianites were to be treated as enemies of Israel and that they should be killed because of the affair of Peor (Num 25:16). Shortly before Moses' death, the Lord commanded him to take vengeance upon the Midianites (Num 31:1). In response, Moses commanded the Israelites to go to war against the Midianites and to “carry out the LORD's vengeance on them” (Num 31:3). The biblical text states that the Israelites killed all of the Midianite men in the battle (Num 31:7),<sup>115</sup> including the five kings of Midian (Num 31:8) who

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<sup>113</sup> It is not clear from the passage in Numbers whether the plague only afflicted the guilty parties or whether other Israelites were affected too. It stands to reason that the plague would have continued spreading among the Israelites had Phinehas not acted. The plague, then, impacted the entire community (cf. Josh 22:17). Moses' later comments on the incident clarify that the Lord destroyed all who sinned, but all who held fast to the Lord were not harmed (Deut 4:3–4). Perhaps the plague affected the community in the sense that many in the community who were guilty lost their lives, while those who were faithful to the Lord were spared.

<sup>114</sup> Why the Midianites were singled out over the Moabites is unclear. Balaam, presumably working for the Moabites, was the one who advised the Midianite women to seduce the Israelites (Num 31:16), and it may be assumed that the Midianites were the primary agents in this episode. Although Balaam returned home after the failed attempts to curse Israel (Num 24:25), he apparently stayed with the Midianites sometime shortly thereafter since he lost his life in the battle between Israel and Midian (Num 31:8).

<sup>115</sup> This does not mean that there were no Midianite men (or boys) left on the face of the earth but that all of the Midianites whom the Israelites encountered in battle were put to death (contra George Buchanan Gray, *A*

had been allied with Sihon the Amorite king (Josh 13:21). On the other hand, Israel suffered no casualties (Num 31:49). The Israelites captured the Midianite women, children, and livestock as plunder, and they burned all of the towns and camps where the Midianites had settled (Num 31:9–10). However, Moses was angry when he found out that the Israelites had spared the Midianite women. These were the same women who had led the Israelites into sexual immorality and Baal worship, which resulted in a plague upon Israel. Moses ordered the Israelites to kill all of the women and boys but to spare the women who had not slept with a man.<sup>116</sup> Those women who had sinned would be killed, but the virgin girls were undefiled, and so they would not defile the Israelites if spared.<sup>117</sup>

The number of women spared was 32,000 (Num 31:35). Half of the plunder of animals and women went to those who fought in the battle, while the other half went to the rest of the Israelites, which amounted to 16,000 women. At the Lord's direction, one out of every fifty women (320 total) were given to the Levites who were responsible for the Lord's tabernacle (Num 31:40–47). These Midianite women and girls would be allowed to assimilate into Israel either as wives (or possibly as slaves) because they were *not* from the seven Canaanite nations

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*Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, The International Critical Commentary [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1903], 418–419). Those who took part in the seduction were singled out for destruction.

<sup>116</sup> Bailey questions whether the order may have come from Moses and not from God. He also questions whether the order was even carried out (Lloyd R. Bailey, *Leviticus–Numbers*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary [Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005], 581). When one reads the passage, though, there is no hint of divine disapproval. In fact, the woman whom Phinehas killed, which resulted in the cessation of the plague, is named in the text (Num 25:15), and Phinehas' actions were commended by the Lord (Num 25:10–13). There is no insinuation that the Lord disapproved of killing this woman who engaged in the sinful behavior. Also, the Lord instructed Moses concerning the distribution of the plunder, which included the women (Num 31:25–47). The fact that the Israelites had a count of the women who had not slept with a man (32,000) implies that they had carried out the order to execute those who *had* sinned. Identifying the virgins may have been as simple as considering the age of the girls (cf. Judg 21:11–12).

<sup>117</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume One: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 497.



that the Lord had entirely condemned. The instructions of Deuteronomy 21:10–14 clarify what would have taken place in this situation:

When you go to war against your enemies and the LORD your God delivers them into your hands and you take captives, if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife. Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails, and put aside the clothes she was wearing when captured. After she has lived in your house and mourned her father and mother for a full month, then you may go to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife. If you are not pleased with her, let her go wherever she wishes. You must not sell her or treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her.

There is no insinuation of rape or concubinage here. Rather, there is a high standard of conduct in place for the Israelites.<sup>118</sup> The Midianite women would come under the blessing of the covenant community of Israel.<sup>119</sup> Another group of 32 Midianite women were set apart as tribute for the Lord (Num 31:40). These were likely given to the priests and would have served as slaves or would have worked in the sanctuary (cf. Exod 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22).<sup>120</sup> If they were slaves, then they would have had the benefit of eating from the priest's sacred food, which came from the sacrificial offerings (Lev 22:11). The women may have married the priests too (cf. Lev 21:7), with the exception of the high priest, who was only to marry a virgin from his own people (Lev 21:14–15). The Midianite boys,<sup>121</sup> on the other hand, were put to death. No specific reason is

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<sup>118</sup> John W. Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil: Can We Believe in the Goodness of God?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 96.

<sup>119</sup> R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary, vol. 3B (Nashville: B&H, 2000), 499. Foreigners, including those who chopped wood and carried water (slaves), were included in Israel's renewal of the covenant (Deut 29:10–11) and were in the assembly gathered to hear the reading of the Law (Deut 31:12–13; cf. Josh 8:35). They were participants in the covenant.

<sup>120</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 212. There is no reason to supposed that the Midianite women were used as concubines in Israel (contra Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968], 231).

<sup>121</sup> The Hebrew states that the Israelites were to kill every male among the little ones. The Hebrew word for “little ones” (טַף) includes those too young to know good from evil (cf. Deut 1:39) and is the common term for children in the Old Testament.

given in the text, but they may have been killed in order to prevent a future rebellion from the Midianites.<sup>122</sup> During the period of the judges, the Midianites oppressed Israel for seven years (Judg 6:1–6) before the Lord empowered Gideon to deliver Israel from the Midianites (Judg 7:1–8:21; cf. Psa 83:9; Isa 10:26). That was the last time that the Midianites exerted control over Israel (Judg 8:28), and they eventually disappeared from the biblical record and from the earth.<sup>123</sup>

### Summary and Observations

In summary, the Israelites had a foretaste of the Conquest with their encounters with the Canaanites, Amorites, and Moabites/Midianites in the book of Numbers. The Lord was faithful to deliver them in the battles, and the Israelites did their part by destroying those placed under the ban (Canaanites and Amorites) as well as those who were guilty of idolatry and sexual immorality (certain Israelite men and Moabite/Midianite women) along with the Moabite soldiers and male children. The imposition of the ban in the period of the wilderness wandering before the Israelites entered the Promised Land leads to a number of observations. Each of these adds to the greater context surrounding the Conquest.

#### A Template for *Hērem*

The first observation concerns the nature of the *hērem* in Numbers 21. As stated at the end of Deuteronomy, the destruction of the Amorites became a model or template for warfare in the book of Joshua:

The LORD your God himself will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy those nations before you, and you will take possession of their land.... And the LORD will do to them what he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, whom he destroyed along with their land. The LORD will deliver them to you, and you must do to them all that I have

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<sup>122</sup> Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 595.

<sup>123</sup> See J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, eds., “Midian, Midianites,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 942.

commanded you. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you (Deut 31:3–6).

The Israelites were to do to the Canaanites living in the Promised Land what they had done to the Amorites: they were to completely destroy them. This aligns with the Lord's commands to show the Canaanites no mercy (Deut 7:2) and to take no Canaanite prisoners (Deut 20:16–17) but contrasts with the rules for warfare regarding nations *outside* the land, where women and children were generally spared (Deut 20:10–15; cf. Num 31:1–18). The reasons for the harsh treatment of the Canaanites will be discussed later, but at this point, it may be concluded that the Israelites had experience with *hērem* warfare, and they had specific instructions concerning the destruction of the Canaanites by the time they entered the Promised Land. It should also be noted that it was the Lord Himself who issued the marching orders to teach the Israelites about *hērem* warfare (cf. Judg 3:2).

#### Instilling the Fear of the Lord

The second observation is that the destruction of the Amorites was instrumental in instilling fear in Israel's enemies, and that fear produced varying results. Balak king of Moab reacted out of fear in attempting to harm Israel through Balaam's curses (Num 22:2–3), but the curses were reversed into blessings for Israel (Num 23:1–24:25; cf. Josh 24:9–10) and a curse upon Moab (Num 24:17). The Gibeonites, on the other hand, were an Amorite/Hivite group (Josh 11:19; 2 Sam 21:2) that concocted a ruse to save themselves when they heard what the God of Israel did to the Egyptians and to the two Amorite kings (Josh 9:9–10). While this deception saved their lives, the biblical text casts an unfavorable light on the men of Israel for accepting a peace treaty with the Gibeonites because the Israelites neglected to inquire of the Lord (Josh 9:14). Because of the treaty, the Israelites reduced the Gibeonites to manual labor for the

generations to come (Josh 10:22–23, 26–27; cf. 2 Sam 21:2) because the Israelites feared the Lord and did not want to break the oath they had sworn before the Lord (Josh 9:19–20).<sup>124</sup> A third response is seen in Rahab the Canaanite prostitute, who acted in faith because of what she had heard about the God of Israel destroying the Amorites. In hiding the Jewish spies, she saved her own life and the lives of her family members (Josh 2:10–13). Rahab assimilated into Israelite society (Josh 6:25) and is even listed in the genealogy of Christ as the mother of Boaz (Matt 1:5). In the New Testament, she is commended for her faith (Heb 11:31) and serves as an example of faith and deeds working together (James 2:25). In summary, the conquest of the Amorites made an impact on nations and individuals, which God used to accomplish His greater purposes of judgment and salvation.

#### Prone to Idolatry

A third observation is that Israel's dalliance with the Baal of Peor in the wilderness continued in the years ahead. After the Conquest had ended, the assembly of Israelite leaders stated, "Up to this very day we have not cleansed ourselves from that sin [of Peor], even though a plague fell on the community of the LORD!" (Josh 22:17). It seems that the worship of Baal of Peor continued to be a problem in Israel even after the Lord brought them safely into the Promised Land.<sup>125</sup> This explains why Joshua challenged the Israelites to put away their idols and

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<sup>124</sup> One of the Gibeonite descendants ended up serving as one of David's mighty men generations later (1 Chron 12:4), so perhaps there was some good that came out of that situation besides the slave labor. One may even interpret the Gibeonites' humble attitude as a response of faith, though the text is less than certain on this point; perhaps the Gibeonites were just trying to save their own necks. The city of Gibeon was eventually incorporated into the tribe of Benjamin (1 Chron 6:60), and it later became the site of Tabernacle and the altar of burnt offering (1 Chron 21:29; cf. 16:39; 2 Kgs 1:3). It was at Gibeon that Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings to the Lord and where the Lord appeared to him in a dream (1 Kgs 3:4–5). It is unclear what impact these events may have had upon the Gibeonites, but Gibeon apparently was the center of Israelite worship before the temple was finished.

<sup>125</sup> David M. Howard, Jr., *Joshua: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary, vol. 5 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 409.

to serve the Lord at the end of his life (Josh 24:14–15). For their part, the Israelites vowed to serve the Lord as Joshua had implored (Josh 24:16–18), but Joshua remained unconvinced. He warned the Israelites that the Lord is a jealous God and that He would not forgive their rebellion and sin if the Israelites turned away to serve other gods (Josh 24:19–20). The Israelite leaders again affirmed that they would serve the Lord, and Joshua again challenged them to put away their foreign gods (Josh 24:21–24). Joshua, no doubt, recalled the Lord’s words to Moses and Joshua at the end of Moses’ life:

You (Moses) are going to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them. On that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide my face from them, and they will be destroyed.... Now write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the Israelites and have them sing it, so that it may be a witness for me against them.... [A]nd when they eat their fill and thrive, they will turn to other gods and worship them, rejecting me and breaking the covenant.... I know what they are disposed to do, even before I bring them into the land I promised them on oath (Deut 31:16–21).

As it turns out, the Israelites served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who outlived Joshua, but once these leaders were gone, the Israelites quickly turned to worshiping the gods of the nations (Judg 2:6–15). The events in the book of Numbers show Israel’s initial trajectory toward spiritual unfaithfulness that would later come to full fruition. The next chapter will continue the examination of the Conquest in the Old Testament.

### **Chapter 3: The Conquest in the Old Testament (Part 2)**

As noted at the beginning of chapter two, the Conquest broadly defined includes the annihilation of the Amalekites, Amorites, and Canaanites recorded in the books of Exodus and Numbers, but these engagements were somewhat incidental in that each of these people groups displayed hostility toward Israel during the journey from Egypt to Canaan and resulted in one-time military engagements and applications of the ban. The Conquest more narrowly defined refers to God's command to Moses and the Israelites to drive out and completely destroy the Canaanites living in the Promised Land—a command executed in the book of Joshua. This chapter will first explore the biblical passages that situate the Conquest in God's overarching plan for the nation of Israel before turning to the biblical reasoning behind the Conquest. Then, this chapter will consider the instructions for the Conquest given in Deuteronomy as well as the execution of the Conquest in the books of Joshua and Judges with the goal of examining the biblical data before turning to later interpretations of the events described.

#### **Background: Israel in the Plan of God**

The Conquest of Canaan must be understood in light of the larger context of God's plan for humanity beginning in the early chapters of Genesis and then spelled out in the promises to Israel's patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's intentions for humanity at the beginning of creation were forfeited at the Fall but would be restored through the promised Messiah who would come from one nation (Israel) descended from one man (Abraham) living in one land (Canaan). In the unfolding of time, God would bless the entire world through Israel and through her Messiah.

## The Beginning of God's Plan

According to the biblical storyline, God created the world in a paradisaical state characterized as “good” and “very good” and without sin and death (Gen 1:1–2:3). Adam and Eve were made in God’s image and likeness and were commanded to rule over creation, to be fruitful and to multiply, and to fill the earth (Gen 1:26–28). They were placed in the Garden of Eden, which was located in ancient Mesopotamia (Gen 2:10–14), and were allowed to eat from any tree in the garden with the exception of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen 2:9, 16–17). This tree was included so that Adam and Eve could have free will, since without it, there would be no opportunity to obey or disobey. God wanted to create partners who would carry out His greater purposes, not mere puppets.<sup>126</sup> The Garden also contained the Tree of Life that enabled people to live forever (Gen 2:9, 22). The presumption is that Adam and Eve and their progeny would live forever in perfect fellowship with their Creator, who spoke with them (Gen 2:16) and walked with them in the garden (Gen 3:8).<sup>127</sup> However, Adam and Eve disobeyed the commandment of God by eating the forbidden fruit. They experienced an immediate, internal change when they ate the fruit. This caused them to realize their physical nakedness and instilled in them new feelings of fear and shame (Gen 3:7–10). The perfectly-harmonious and innocent relationship between the Creator and His creatures was fractured. The New Testament states that the default human status *now* is being “dead in your transgressions and sins” (Eph 2:1), which

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<sup>126</sup> John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>127</sup> It is not that man was originally immortal in the sense that he contained life in himself, for God alone is immortal in that sense (cf. 1 Tim 1:17; 6:16). Neither is it the case that man would have died regardless of the disobedient act (contra Michael A. Knibb, “Life and Death in the Old Testament,” in *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives*, ed. R. E. Clements [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 402–403). Humanity would have lived forever in harmony in the Garden by taking from the Tree of Life that God had created. The Tree of Life appears again in the renewed creation (Rev 2:7; 22:2) that will no longer contain death (Rev 21:4) and will presumably serve the same purpose.

amounts to spiritual separation or alienation from God (cf. Col 1:21). Adam and Eve were then expelled from the Garden of Eden so that they could no longer eat from the Tree of Life and live forever in that fallen condition (Gen 3:22–24). Eventually, Adam died physically (Gen 5:4), thus fulfilling God’s promise that disobedience would bring death (Gen 2:17).<sup>128</sup>

From this point forward, death would visit all of humanity as a result of the Fall and humanity’s connection to Adam as the federal head of the human race (cf. Gen 5:5–31; Rom 5:12; 6:23).<sup>129</sup> Death also became a punishment for human sinfulness administered by God Himself (e.g., Gen 38:7, 10) or mediated through human instruments on behalf of God (e.g., Gen 9:5–6). Thus, the relationship between God and humanity changed in this way too. As Tertullian (d. 220) stated, “Up to the fall of man, therefore, from the beginning God was simply good; after that He became a judge....”<sup>130</sup> Finally, the creation itself was cursed (Gen 3:14–19; cf. Rom 8:18–21; Rev 22:3). However, it is important to recognize the immediate initiation of “the promise-plan of God”<sup>131</sup> seen in the prophecy of Genesis 3:15: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring (זרע) and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” Although somewhat cryptic, the New Testament clarifies that the “ancient serpent” is Satan and the devil (Rev 12:9) and that Jesus came to destroy the work of the devil (1 John 3:8).<sup>132</sup> How that will play out unfolds in the remainder of the Old and New Testaments.

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<sup>128</sup> Although the Bible does not record Eve’s death, she obviously died too.

<sup>129</sup> Two biblical exceptions of people taken directly to heaven without dying include Enoch (Gen 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11). In addition, the virgin birth shielded Jesus from the taint of original sin since He had no earthly father. Consequently, His life was offered as a sinless, atoning sacrifice on behalf of humanity (cf. 2 Cor 5:21).

<sup>130</sup> Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, in *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, by Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes, ed. Allan Menzies (1885, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2006), 2.11.

<sup>131</sup> Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament*, 33.



## Blessing the World

After the creation the world, the fall of mankind, and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Gen 1–3), God’s plan for humanity and for the world continued to move forward. As Merrill summarizes, “The remainder of the biblical story is the plan of God whereby that alienation [from the Fall] can be overcome and His original purposes for man—that he have dominion over all things—can be reestablished.”<sup>133</sup> Unfortunately, human sinfulness would also continue to affect the plan of God. Cain, the first son of Adam and Eve, murdered his younger brother, Abel, in the heat of passion (Gen 4:1–8). One of Cain’s descendants married two women and boasted of murdering another man (Gen 4:23–24). After several generations of human proliferation, the human population had become so wicked and corrupt that God decided to wipe out the entire human race through a worldwide flood. Only one righteous man—Noah—and his family were spared from the human population (Gen 6:1–13; cf. 1 Pet 3:20; 2 Pet 2:5). After the Flood, Noah’s three sons and their wives spread out toward Africa (Ham), Europe (Japheth), and Mesopotamia (Shem) (Gen 9:18–10:32). Shem’s descendant, Abram (Gen 11:10–26), became the father of the Hebrew race, and Ham’s descendant, Canaan occupied the Promised Land. Noah’s sons Shem and Japheth would be blessed along with their descendants (Gen 9:26–27), but Ham’s son Canaan would be cursed (Gen 9:25) because of Ham’s act of dishonoring his father, Noah (Gen 9:20–24).<sup>134</sup> The descendants of Ham and Shem would

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<sup>132</sup> Additionally, the LXX translation favors a messianic reading since it uses a *masculine* pronoun (“he” [αὐτός] in reference to a neuter noun (“seed” [σπέρμα])). The seed of the woman is a definite person (“he”) who would one day crush the head of the serpent.

<sup>133</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, “A Theology of the Pentateuch,” in *Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1991), 12.

<sup>134</sup> According to Justin Martyr (d. 165), Noah *prophetically* cursed Canaan but blessed Shem and Japheth (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 139). This puts the curse of Canaan in the same category as the Lord’s revelation to Moses that future generations of Israelites would rebel against the Lord (Deut 31:14–29) and also aligns with the prophetic statement of Genesis 15:16 that the sins of the Amorites had not yet reached their full

eventually clash in the Conquest, but at this point in Genesis, all that is revealed is that Canaan was under a curse, Shem was under God's blessing, and the Canaanites occupied the land God would deed to the nation of Israel.<sup>135</sup>

It is at this point that the story of the Old Testament narrows in focus to Abram, son of Terah, who was from the line of Shem but who had no children of his own because his wife was barren (Gen 11:27–30). Terah decided to move with his son Abram, Abram's wife (Sarai), and Abram's nephew (Lot) from Ur of the Chaldeans (Babylonia) to the land of Canaan. Before they reached Canaan, though, Terah decided to settle in Haran (Syria) instead (Gen 11:31). Sometime later, God called Abram to leave his country, his people, and his father's household in order to go the land of Canaan (Gen 12:5). The call included seven promises of blessing: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:1–2).<sup>136</sup> God also promised Abram that kings would come from him (Gen 17:6, 16; Gen 35:11), signifying that from Abram's descendants would become a royal nation. Thus, one can already see that land is involved since God called Abram to a specific place and since kings of a future nation would necessarily occupy land.

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measure. God pronounced judgment upon Canaan, knowing that they would indeed become a wicked, idolatrous nation. One reason why Ham was not cursed is because he was already under the blessing of God (Gen 9:1), which could not be reversed (cf. Num 22–24). It may also be the case that Noah saw perverse tendencies in the youngest son of Ham, which is why Canaan is singled out among his other brothers, Cush, Mizraim, and Put. The curse on Canaan is probably included in the biblical storyline to explain to later generations of Israelites why the Canaanites were to be removed from the land. God had given the people ample time to repent, but their moral depravity had been foretold by Noah. See the discussion in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Baruch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 116–18.

<sup>135</sup> Allen P. Ross, "The Table of Nations in Genesis 10—Its Content," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1980): 30.

<sup>136</sup> See Gen 18:18–19; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; 35:11; 46:4.

God's calling and election of Abram also had a universalistic scope. God would take a barren, elderly couple and miraculously create one nation through which He would bless the entire world. In other words, God's blessing was not just for the nation of Israel. Rather, Abram and his descendants would have a mediatorial role between God and the human race.<sup>137</sup> This is seen most clearly in the Lord's words to the nation of Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai: "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..." (Exod 19:5–6).<sup>138</sup> This statement conveys the central purpose behind God's election of the nation of Israel. As Enns writes, "A priest was a mediator, representing the people to God; in that sense the entire nation Israel was to be a mediator of the kingdom of God to the nations of the world. Israel's was a universal priesthood."<sup>139</sup> Other nations would marvel at the fact that Israel's God was near to the people in order to hear their prayers and at the wisdom in God's decrees and laws given to Israel (Deut 4:6–8). This would no doubt attract foreigners to worship and follow the one true God. The same can be said of God's marvelous wonders, which would inspire the members of other nations to know that Yahweh is God.<sup>140</sup> Finally, Israel's Messiah—the Servant of the Lord—would be a light to the Gentiles (Isa 49:6). Again, God's election of Israel was not simply a matter of ethnocentrism, where God loved one nation at the expense of the rest, but rather God's means of lovingly interacting with the entire world through His choice of Israel as the means by which to bless the world.<sup>141</sup> God's promises were

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<sup>137</sup> Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," 26–27.

<sup>138</sup> Cf. Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18–19; Isa 6:16; 1 Pet 2:5, 9.

<sup>139</sup> Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, rev. and exp. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 60.

<sup>140</sup> See Exod 7:5, 17; 14:4; 18:11; Josh 2:11; 1 Kgs 8:43; 2 Kgs 5:15; Eze 38:23.

established in the Abrahamic Covenant,<sup>142</sup> which provided the unique identity for Israel as the people of Yahweh, putting them in a special relationship with God to bring about the purposes of God.<sup>143</sup> Israel's success in achieving God's purposes would be conditioned on her obedience as a kingdom of priests but also as a holy nation.<sup>144</sup>

## **A Holy Nation**

The first step in fulfilling God's plan to bless the world through Abraham's offspring was to actually create the nation of Israel. When Abram received the call of God in Genesis 12, he was just one man with a wife and no son. In the course of time, and in the provision of God, Abram would indeed become a "great nation" (Gen 12:2). This began with the birth of Isaac, the son of promise, and then continued through Isaac's son Jacob, whose name was later changed to "Israel" (Gen 35:10). The promises of God to Abraham were eventually extended to Isaac and Jacob as the patriarchs of what would become the nation of Israel.<sup>145</sup> At the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob's family included a total of seventy people who migrated to Egypt during the famine that affected the land of Canaan (Gen 46:27; Exod 1:5). The nation was still in nascent form but soon became exceedingly numerous in the subsequent generations (Exod 1:6–10). After 430 years in bondage in Egypt (Exod 12:40),<sup>146</sup> the Israelite men numbered around 600,000

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<sup>141</sup> See Joel S. Kaminsky, "Did Election Imply the Mistreatment of Non-Israelites?" *Harvard Theological Review* 96, no. 4 (2003): 397–425; cf. Brad E. Kelle, *Telling the Old Testament Story: God's Mission and God's People* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 96–97; Andrew S. Malone, *God's Mediators: A Biblical Theology of Priesthood* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 125–37.

<sup>142</sup> See Gen 12:2–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–21; 22:15–18; 24:7.

<sup>143</sup> John H. Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians: From Ancient Context to Enduring Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 106.

<sup>144</sup> Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," 12.

<sup>145</sup> See Gen 17:19–21; 21:12; 25:11, 23; 26:2–5, 12, 24–25; 27:27–29; 28:1–4, 10–15; 30:43; 31:3; 32:1–2, 22–30; 35:1, 9–13; 45:5–11; 48:3–4; 50:19–20.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Gen 15:13; Acts 7:6; Gal 3:17.

(Exod 12:37),<sup>147</sup> which means that the population as a whole was upwards of 2,000,000 people when counting men, women, and children. The biblical description compares their vastness to the number of the stars in the sky (Deut 1:10; 10:22) in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham (Gen 15:5; 22:17; cf. Num 10:36).

The next step in God's plan was to deliver Israel from slavery in Egypt so that they would become *His* nation. They were a nation in the sense that they had a large population, but they were without a land and were under foreign dominion. The Lord would be their God, and they would be His people (Exod 6:6–8). Although the whole earth belongs to the Lord (Exod 19:5), Israel would be to Him a firstborn son (Exod 4:22–23) and “the people of his inheritance” (Deut 4:20). But at this point, the Israelites had little knowledge of how to properly relate to the Lord or how to live as His chosen people. The Israelites had at times experienced the blessing of God in Egypt and knew to fear God (Exod 1:20–21). They also knew to cry out to the Lord in their bondage (Exod 2:23), and they still had the promises given to the patriarchs (Exod 2:24; 3:16–17; 6:2–8). But the Lord had bigger plans to reveal His identity (Exod 3:14–15; cf. 6:2–3), His character (Exod 34:6–7), His power (Exod 9:16), His supremacy (Exod 15:11), His glory (Exod 14:4), His deliverance (Exod 14:13–14), His provision (Exod 16:35), His plan (Exod 19:4–6), and His laws and decrees concerning proper conduct, proper worship, and atonement and punishment of sins.<sup>148</sup> At the proper time (cf. Gen 15:13–16), the Lord raised up Moses to be

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<sup>147</sup> While it is true that the Hebrew word for “thousand” (עָלֵף) can mean “family” or “clan” (e.g., Num 1:16; 10:4; Josh 22:21, 30), which would reduce the number of Israelite men from 600,000 to 600 families, the larger context of the Old Testament clarifies that there were indeed hundreds of thousands of men. When the Levites took up the half-shekel offering for the tabernacle from all of the men age twenty and older who had left Egypt, they had half shekels for 603,550 men (Exod 38:26), which is the same as the number of men who crossed over (Num 1:46).

<sup>148</sup> See Exod 20–40; Lev 1–27; Num 5–10; 15; 18–19; 27–30; 35–36; Deut 4–30. Israel was not the first or the only ancient Near Eastern nation to have its own laws. Ancient legal texts have been discovered from a handful of nations including the Babylonians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Egyptians, though there is no extant legal code in the Canaanite literature. See the discussion of these legal texts in John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its*

a leader for the Israelites (Exod 2:1–4:31) and supernaturally delivered the Israelites from Egypt (Exod 6:1–14:31), bringing judgment upon Pharaoh (Exod 14:4), the Egyptian people (Exod 10:2), and the gods of Egypt (Exod 12:12). For the first time, the Lord demonstrated His willingness and ability to fight for His people Israel. The people learned that “the LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name” (Exod 15:3).

To accomplish His purposes, the Lord desired for Israel to be a *holy* nation. More specifically, the Israelites were to be holy as the Lord Himself is holy, thereby being set apart from the nations (Lev 20:24, 26). The basic idea of holiness is to be free from impurity. God, by His nature, is absolutely pure without limitations or moral imperfections. He alone is holy and without sin.<sup>149</sup> The Lord called Israel to holiness because the nation would be called by His name (Num 6:27; Deut 28:9–10; cf. Jer 25:29), and failing to live as a holy people would bring dishonor upon the name of the Lord (Eze 36:23). Of course, the Lord knew that the Israelites would not live up to the standard of moral perfection (cf. Deut 31:16–18), but that did not negate the purpose of revealing and establishing the Lord’s laws, statutes, and decrees for Israel. Without laws that reflect God’s morally perfect nature, the people would be left to anarchy and would be no different than the surrounding nations, thereby nullifying their opportunity to teach the nations God’s laws (cf. Deut 4:7–8; Isa 2:3). Israel was chosen to be the Lord’s treasured possession (Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2) and would be set high above the other nations (Deut 26:18–19). The Lord would walk among them and be their God, and they would be His people (Lev 26:12). In this way, they would consider themselves separate from the nations (Num 23:9).

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*Cultural Context: A Survey of Parallels Between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 69–93.

<sup>149</sup> See 1 Sam 2:2; Pss 99:9; 111:9; Isa 6:5; Hab 1:13; Rev 15:4; cf. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (1871, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2005), 315–16.

In order for the Israelites to actually become a holy nation and maintain their distinctiveness from the surrounding nations, the Lord gave them specific laws to follow.<sup>150</sup> For example, the Israelites were to distinguish between the “holy” and the “common” and between what was ceremonially “clean” and “unclean” (Lev 10:10–11; 15:31; 20:25–26; cf. Num 5:1–4). This pertained to dietary restrictions (Lev 11; 17; Deut 14:1–21), purification rites (Lev 12), infectious skin diseases and contaminated clothing (Lev 13–14; cf. Num 19:1–22), and bodily discharges (Lev 15). With the Lord living in their midst—first in His presence in the Tabernacle (cf. Exod 40) and then later in the temple (cf. 1 Kgs 8)—the Israelites had to maintain ceremonial cleanness so that the camp would be holy unto the Lord (cf. Deut 23:9–14). The Law of Moses also included instructions for proper worship. First and foremost, the Israelites were forbidden from worshiping other gods and from making idols to represent the Lord (Exod 20:3–6; 34:17; Lev 19:4; 26:1). To make an idol of the Lord would misrepresent the Lord by limiting Him to an object of wood or stone in the likeness of something from creation (Deut 4:15–20; cf. Exod 32; Rom 1:18–32). It would also provoke the Lord to jealousy and anger because it would lead to the worship of other gods (Deut 4:23–24; cf. Exod 34:14). This was a grievous sin and a capital offense in Israel (Exod 20:3, 23; Deut 6:14–15; 13:1–18). The Law also included specific instructions for how to worship the Lord through sacrifice and how to atone for sin (Lev 1–7; 16).<sup>151</sup> Finally, the Law of Moses included the Lord’s instructions for proper conduct with one

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<sup>150</sup> For more about the similarities between the Mosaic Law and ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties and law codes, see Meredith G. Kline, “The Two Tables of the Covenant,” *WTJ* 22 (1960): 133–46; Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, eds., *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, 3d. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 101–ff; John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 37–53, 70–93.

<sup>151</sup> For a comparison of Israel’s worship, sacrifices, and festivals with those of other ancient Near Eastern peoples, see Roy E. Gane, “Worship, Sacrifice, and Festivals in the Ancient Near East,” in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, eds. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 361–67.

another. This ranged from the general statutes in the second half of the Decalogue (Exod 20:12–17) to the casuistic laws and their corresponding penalties for various situations that would present themselves in an ancient society (Exod 21:1–23:9; Lev 18–20; 24:13–22; Deut 15:12–18; 19; 21–22; 24–25).

It bears repeating that God’s overall intention was to bless the people living in the land of Israel (cf. Lev 26:1–13; Num 6:22–27; Deut 28:1–14). The Lord would provide an inheritance for the people of Israel (land), rest from their enemies, and safety (Deut 12:10). He would enlarge their territory (Deut 12:20), and He would put His Name among the people as a dwelling (Deut 12:5). They would live long in the land and would prosper (Deut 5:32–6:3; 11:9; 29:9). The Israelites would be able to eat as much meat as they wanted (Deut 12:20) and would eat the offerings in the presence of the Lord with rejoicing (Deut 14:22–23, 26; cf. 15:19–20). The same applied to the crops. The Lord would bless the land with rain in season that would bring forth grain, new wine, and oil, along with grass for the cattle so that the Israelites would eat and be satisfied (Deut 11:14–15). “For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete” (Deut 16:15). The prosperity would be used to bless others within the land of Israel, to include the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows (Deut 14:28–29). The Lord would bless the people so much that there should be no poor in the land, but even if there were poor people in the land, the Israelites would be blessed enough to help them (Deut 15:4, 7–11). Israel was to be a nation and society where people looked after one another (cf. Deut 22:1–4). They were to appoint judges and pursue justice (Deut 16:18–20). They would lend to many nations but borrow from none. They would rule over many nations but would not be ruled over by another nation (Deut 15:6). Israel would truly become a blessed and unique people. As Moses wrote,



Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other (Deut 4:32–35).

Obedience was the key to God’s blessings. The objective is summarized toward the end of the Law: “Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may prosper in everything you do” (Deut 29:9). If the Israelites obeyed God’s commands “to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut 11:13; cf. 10:12–13), then they would be kept alive. Such obedience would itself be the righteousness of the people (Deut 6:24–25). However, God knew that the Israelites were prone to stray from His commands. They had demonstrated this a number of times during their journey from Egypt to Canaan.<sup>152</sup> He therefore instructed the Israelites to keep His words fixed in their hearts and minds. The people were to tie them as symbols on their hands, bind them on their doorposts, teach them to their children, talk about them when they sat at home and walked along the road, and write them on the doorframes of their houses and on their gates (Deut 11:18–20). The Lord would set them high above all the nations on earth and would bless them (Deut 28:1–2). They would be blessed in the city and in the country (Deut 28:3). They would be blessed with fertility, crops, and abundant livestock (Deut 28:4, 11). Their food supply would be blessed (Deut 28:5). They would be blessed when they came in and went out (Deut 28:6). They would have divine protection from enemies (Deut 28:7). The Lord would bless their barns and everything the Israelites put their hand to (Deut 28:8). The Lord would establish the Israelites as His holy people, just as He promised, if the Israelites would keep His commands (Deut 28:9). “Then all the peoples on earth will see that you

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<sup>152</sup> See Exod 16:27–28; 32; Lev 10:1–10; 17:7; 24:10–12, 23; Num 11–14; 15:32–36; 16–17; 20:1–13; 25.

are called by the name of the Lord, and they will fear you” (Deut 28:10). The Lord would send rain on the land in season to bless all the work of the Israelites’ hands. The Israelites would lend to many nations but would borrow from none (Deut 28:12). The Lord would make them the head, not the tail, and they would always be at the top and never at the bottom of the nations (Deut 28:13).

But if the Israelites would not follow the Lord’s commands and decrees, then the covenant curses would come upon them until the nation was destroyed. The curses would be the exact *opposite* of the blessings and would include: curses on the livestock, progeny, and food supply; destruction and sudden ruin; disease, illness, scorching heat, drought, blight, mildew, a deadly plague, and swarms of locusts; defeat and subjugation by foreign enemies; boils, tumors, and incurable skin diseases; madness, blindness, and confusion of mind; lack of success in all they would do; oppression and robbery; foreign captivity of their sons, their daughters, and the king; enemy siege of the cities, leading to cannibalism; all the diseases of Egypt, as well as sickness and disasters not recorded in the Book of the Law; massive reduction in the Israelite population; the scattering of the people among the nations to worship other gods; anxious minds, weary eyes, and longing hearts; returning to Egypt on ships; and being sold as slaves (Deut 28:15–68; cf. Lev 26:14–39). The Lord would not share His glory or praise with other gods (cf. Isa 42:8); He alone was Israel’s God (Deut 32:12) and king (Deut 33:5). As Moses wrote, “He is your praise; he is your God, who performed those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes” (Deut 10:21).

### **The Land of Canaan**

The Israelites could only be a holy *nation* if they actually occupied a land of their own, and land was a part of the promise from God’s initial call upon Abram’s life: “Leave your

country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you" (Gen 12:1).

The Lord confirmed this to Abram several times. After Abram obeyed God's command and traveled to the land of Canaan, the Lord said to Abram, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Gen 12:7). On another occasion, the Lord said to Abram,

Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you (Gen 13:14–17).

The innumerable offspring conveys the notion that Abram would become not just any nation but a "great nation" (Gen 12:2), and a great nation would surely possess a sizeable land. In addition, the statement that God would "give" the land to Abram implies that God is the rightful owner of the land. Anyone living in the land was merely a tenant, whether Canaanite or Israelite, since the land belongs to the Lord (cf. Lev 25:23). Therefore, the Lord could deed it to whomever He wished, and He could evict the tenants too since He is the landlord.

The next time the Lord appeared to Abram to confirm His covenant, the Lord told Abram "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it" (Gen 15:7). That Abram and his descendants would have to "take possession" (יָרַשׁ) meant that the land was already occupied and that a conflict awaited Abram's descendants in the future. The timing was not right, though. The Lord told Abraham that his descendants would be strangers in a foreign country (i.e., Egypt) for four hundred years<sup>153</sup> because the sin of

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<sup>153</sup> Genesis 15:13 states that the Israelites would be enslaved for four hundred years. Genesis 15:14 states that in the fourth generation, Abram's descendants would return to the Promised Land. The "fourth generation" means a period of roughly four hundred years based on Ugaritic and Assyrian parallels, where a generation can mean a span of time of eighty or more years (Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* [London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966], 54).

the Amorites had not yet reached their its measure (Gen 15:13–16). God’s purpose in giving the Israelites an inheritance coincided with His purpose to judge the Amorites, and His dual purposes would be accomplished at the proper time. The implication here is that it would have been premature, and hence unjust, for God to pour out judgment (i.e., the Conquest) ahead of schedule. Plus, Abram was just one man at this stage, not a nation with a standing army. In the same encounter, the Lord confirmed to Abram that although the promise would be fulfilled in the distant future, it would nonetheless come to pass: “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites” (Gen 15:18–20). On the next visit, the Lord revealed that He would give the *entire* land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants: “The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God” (Gen 17:8). On Abraham’s last recorded visit from the Lord, he was informed that his descendants would “take possession of the cities of their enemies” (Gen 22:17; 24:60), making the same point that there would be enemies in the land who would need to be dislodged.

The promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, which is called an “everlasting covenant” (Gen 17:7), were not completely fulfilled in Abraham’s lifetime. He had the son of promise (Isaac), but his descendants did not yet become a great nation or possess the land. The only land that Abraham actually owned during his lifetime was the cave of Machpelah near Mamre that he purchased from Ephron the Hittite as a burial site for his wife Sarah (Gen 23:1–20; cf. 25:9–10; 50:13). Likewise, Jacob settled near Shechem, a Canaanite city, and purchased a plot of land outside the city from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of silver (Gen 33:18–19). Jacob also took a ridge of land from the Amorites with his own sword and bow

(Gen 48:22), showing that there was already armed conflict between the Israelites and the Amorites.<sup>154</sup> But at the end of Genesis, the Israelites migrated down to Egypt to survive the famine, leaving behind the Promised Land. The relocation would have been no surprise to Abraham since the Lord had revealed to him that his descendants would be strangers in a foreign land and would not return until the fourth generation. Isaac and Jacob also expected the Lord to fulfill His promises to make them into a great nation, to give them the land, and to bless the world through their offspring,<sup>155</sup> and later in Jacob's life, the Lord told Jacob not to be afraid to go down to Egypt during the time of the famine because the Lord would make Israel into a great nation there (Gen 46:1–4). Again, this fits with what was revealed to Abraham (Gen 15:13–16) and aligns with the truth that the patriarchs acted in faith even though they did not see the complete fulfillment of God's promises in their lifetime (cf. Heb 11:8–16). After Jacob journeyed to Egypt, he affirmed to Joseph that God would bring His people back to the land of their fathers (Gen 48:3–4, 21–22). Joseph in turn reassured his brothers that God would surely bring the Israelites out of Egypt and back to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He even made his brothers promise to take his bones back to Canaan (Gen 50:24–25), thereby testifying to his faith in God's promise (cf. Heb 11:22). When the Israelites left Egypt, they remembered to take Joseph's bones (Exod 13:19), which were eventually buried in the land of Canaan (Josh 24:32; cf. Acts 7:16).

After approximately four hundred years in Egypt, it was time for God to make good on His promise. At the burning-bush encounter, the Lord told Moses,

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<sup>154</sup> Since the Israelites did own *some* of the land at this time, then one could reasonably argue that they were simply *repossessing* the land promised to their forefathers during the Conquest (Heinrich Ewald, *The History of Israel*, vol. 2, 2d ed., ed. and trans. by Russell Martineau [London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869], 237).

<sup>155</sup> See Gen 24:7; 26:3–5; 28:4, 13–15; 31:13; 35:9–13.

I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt (Exod 3:7–10).

Moses received this message from the Lord and was to communicate it to the Israelites (Exod 6:6–8). The message conveys that the Lord had not forgotten His covenant even though hundreds of years had passed. It also reveals that the land of Canaan was “good and spacious” and “flowing with milk and honey.” In other words, it was large enough to accommodate the Israelite people and had plenty of livestock and natural resources. After the Exodus, Moses sent the twelve spies to explore the Promised Land, and they brought back large clusters of grapes along with some pomegranates (Num 13:23) and confirmed that the land did indeed flow with milk and honey (Num 13:27)<sup>156</sup> and that it was “exceedingly good” (Num 14:7; cf. Deut 1:25; 6:18; 11:17). It was not like Egypt, where the Israelites planted their seed and irrigated it like a vegetable garden (Deut 11:10). Rather, it was a land full of mountains and valleys that “drinks rain from heaven” (Deut 11:11). It was a land with streams, pools of water, flowing springs, valleys, hills, wheat, barley, vines, fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil, and honey (Deut 8:7–8). It was a land where the Israelites would not run out of bread or lack anything and a land with iron and copper that the Israelites could dig out of the hills (Deut 8:9). In essence, it was an abundant land. The Promised Land is also described as “the land the LORD your God cares for; the eyes of the LORD your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end” (Deut 11:12). The Israelites therefore were to have no worries when it came to divine provision and protection.

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<sup>156</sup> Cf. Exod 3:17; Deut 11:9; 27:3; Josh 5:16.

What is more, the Lord would give the Israelites cities they did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things they did not provide, wells they did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves they did not plant (Deut 6:10–11). All of this was based on the Lord’s promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob<sup>157</sup> grounded in His love for them and His election of them (Deut 4:37). For this reason, the land is called an “inheritance” (נַחֲלָה)<sup>158</sup> and the land which the Lord was *giving* to the Israelites.<sup>159</sup> The Lord brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt (Lev 22:33; 23:43; 25:42, 55), He would lead the people into the Promised Land (Num 14:8–9, 31; 15:18), and He would drive out Israel’s enemies in the land (Num 32:21). For their part, the Israelites were to go in and take possession of the land,<sup>160</sup> and if they carefully followed the Lord’s laws by loving Him and walking in His ways, then He would enlarge their territory and given them the entire land (Deut 19:8–9). Israel’s success or failure in taking possession of what was theirs as an inheritance depended on their obedience.

## Summary

The background to the Conquest demonstrates that God had a larger plan for the nation of Israel and for the world. He selected Abram from among the nations as a conduit to bless *all* nations, and this would be accomplished through a holy nation living in the land of promise. This would all transpire at the appointed time and would facilitate God’s many purposes, including the deliverance of His people from bondage, the demonstration of God’s great power and wonders, the giving of God’s Law to His people, and the exacting of God’s judgment upon the

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<sup>157</sup> See Exod 3:8; 13:5; 33:1; Deut 7:13; 8:1; 10:11; 11:9, 21; 29:13; 30:20; 31:20; 34:4.

<sup>158</sup> See Num 34:2, 13, 29; 36:2; Deut 19:10; 21:22–23; 24:4; 25:19.

<sup>159</sup> See Lev 25:2, 38; Num 11:29; 13:2; Deut 5:31; 11:31; 19:1–3; 21:23; 27:2, 3.

<sup>160</sup> See Deut 1:8, 21; 3:18; 12:1; 23:20; 25:19.

people living in the land of Canaan. The next section will explore the reasons for God's judgment upon the Canaanites.<sup>161</sup>

### Punishing Canaanite Wickedness

#### Background of the Canaanites

The Canaanites are first mentioned in the Bible as descended from Noah's grandson Canaan, son of Ham (Gen 9:22). Ham's other sons included Cush, Mizraim (Egypt), and Put (Gen 10:6). As explained above, Ham dishonored his father, Noah (Gen 9:20–23), which resulted in a prophetic curse: "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers" (Gen 9:24; cf. 9:26–27).<sup>162</sup> The curse was not on all of Ham's line but just on his one son, Canaan. This did not mean that every *individual* Canaanite had to continue in moral decadence. Rahab the prostitute was a Canaanite who exercised faith in the Lord when she hid the spies (Josh 2:1–21; cf. Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25) and was later incorporated into the nation of Israel (Josh 6:22–25; cf. Matt 1:5). From Canaan descended the Sidonians, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarites, and Hamathites (Gen 10:15–18; cf.

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<sup>161</sup> Some scholars believe that the Promised Land was Yahweh's designated "sacred space" and that the Conquest was designed to remove what was unholy (i.e., the Canaanites) from the holy or sacred land. Certain verses support the idea of the land of Israel being designated as a chosen or holy place (Exod 15:17; cf. Psalms 78:54; Neh 1:9). However, the biblical presentation in this chapter reveals that the removal of the Canaanites had more to do with Canaanite sinfulness than simply removing what was profane from a "sacred space." Like the civilizations at the time of the Flood and like the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Canaanites were particularly, spiritually debased, and so they had to be rooted out of the land that God's people, Israel, would occupy. The land of Canaan would be a holy or sacred place because of the Lord's presence there, but Mount Sinai was also considered to be holy (Exod 19:23), and the encampment in the wilderness was a holy place (Deut 23:12–14). This was before Israel entered Canaan, and so the common factor for what was considered "sacred space" was the Lord's manifest presence—whether at Mount Sinai, in the Tabernacle in the wilderness, or later in the Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8; cf. Eze 10)—not just a designated area. For a more in-depth discussion of the idea of the land of Canaan as a "sacred space," see G. K. Beale and Mitchell Kim, *God Dwells Among Us: Expanding Eden to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014); John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanites* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 69–70; William J. Webb and Gordan K. Oest, *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric? Wrestling with Troubling War Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 52–ff.

<sup>162</sup> The literal fulfillment of the curse on Canaan occurred when the Canaanites became Israel's slaves during the period of the Conquest (Josh 9:22–27; 16:10; 17:13).



15:19–21). The Canaanites came to occupy a land stretching from Sidon in the north to Gerar in the south as far as Gaza and then eastward toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim and as far as Lasha (Gen 10:18–19). Terah, the Semite (from Shem) and father of Abram and grandfather of Lot, moved his family from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan but ended up settling to the north in Haran (Gen 11:31). When Abram moved to the land of Canaan (Gen 12:1–5, 12; 16:3), the Canaanites were already living in the land (Gen 12:6; 13:7). The Canaanites became the dominant group in the region, and the name “Canaanite” came to apply to any such group that originally derived from Canaan.<sup>163</sup>

### **Early Canaanite Wickedness**

The patriarchs had a handful of interactions with the Canaanites before Jacob and his family moved down to Egypt. Although the Canaanites as a whole were not as wicked at this time as they would eventually become hundreds of years later (cf. Gen 15:13–16), there were already indications that they were largely a wicked people. One example occurs during Abram’s time. Abram agreed to help the Canaanite kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim fight against the five-king coalition from the north that had attacked the cities in the region. Abram did this in order to rescue his nephew Lot who had been taken captive by the northern coalition (Gen 14:1–12). After the victory, Abram did not accept any gift from the king of Sodom, stating, “I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the

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<sup>163</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary, vol. 2 (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 544. For a discussion of the Canaanites’ origin and history from secular literature and archaeology, see Samuel J. Schultz, *The Old Testament Speaks*, 3d ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 89–93; Keith N. Schoville, “Canaanites and Amorites,” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, eds. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 159–64; Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E.* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005) 93–ff.

thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, ‘I made Abram rich’” (Gen 14:22–23). Even though he was willing to help them, Abram had a certain disdain for the Canaanites, probably because they were already sinning greatly against the Lord (Gen 13:13).

Later in Abram’s life, the outcry against the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah was so great that the Lord decided to go down to investigate the matter Himself (Gen 19:20–21). He decided not to hide the matter from Abram, whose name was changed to Abraham, but rather showed him the severity of His judgment so that Abraham and his descendants would learn the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just (cf. Gen 19:16–19). At first, Abraham questioned God’s justice in wanting to destroy the two wayward cities. That would result in killing the righteous along with the wicked, Abraham reasoned (Gen 18:23–33). Abraham asked the Lord to withhold the judgment for the sake of fifty righteous individuals who may be living in Sodom, and the Lord agreed not to destroy the city if there were in fact fifty righteous. At Abraham’s behest, the Lord agreed to the same terms if there were forty-five, then forty, then thirty, and then twenty righteous people. Finally, the Lord agreed not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if there were just ten righteous people left in the city (Gen 18:32).

The Lord sent two angels, who looked like men (Gen 19:1), to Sodom to investigate. Upon arriving, the men planned to spend the night in the town square, but Lot strongly persuaded them to stay at his house instead (Gen 19:2–3), implying that it was too dangerous to stay in the town square because the Sodomites would harm the men. A short time later, the men of the city—both young and old—surrounded Lot’s house and demanded that Lot hand over the two men staying with him so that the men of Sodom might “know” (יָדָע) them, which means they wanted to have sex with the men (cf. Gen 4:1). Ezekiel described the sin of the city of Sodom as follows: “She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the

poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me” (Eze 16:49–50). This last entry no doubt refers to the attempted rape of the two visitors. Lot’s response, presumably influenced by his time among the godless Sodomites, was to offer his two virgin daughters for the mob to defile instead, but the men of the city rejected his offer and attempted to break down the door. However, the angels struck the men with blindness so that they could not find the door (Gen 19:6–11), and then the angels proceeded to evacuate Lot and his family before the Lord destroyed the city.

In the end, there were not even ten righteous people in Sodom. The only ones who fled the city were “righteous Lot”,<sup>164</sup> his wife, and his two daughters. These were mercifully spared (Gen 19:16). Even Lot’s two sons-in-law would not listen to his warning that the Lord was going to destroy the city (Gen 19:14). Thus, there were only *four* who were saved, which means that the rest were wicked.<sup>165</sup> Had there been six more righteous, then perhaps the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah would have been spared, but that was not the case. Hence, there was no injustice with God’s decision to destroy the cities. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed with burning sulfur coming from the heavens (Gen 19:24). The last thing to note from this story is that Lot’s daughters took it upon themselves to get their father drunk and sleep with him in order to procreate since they were isolated from the Canaanites after Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed (Gen 19:30–38). Perhaps they were accustomed to incest after their time living among the Canaanites in Sodom.

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<sup>164</sup> The New Testament states that Lot was a “righteous man” who was “distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men” and that he was “tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard” (2 Pet 2:7–8).

<sup>165</sup> However, the term “wicked” would not have applied to children and infants who were too young to know good from evil (cf. Deut 1:39; Isa 7:16). This topic will be discussed more later.

A second indication that the Canaanites were already corrupt came at the end of Abraham's life. In Genesis 24, Abraham tasked his chief servant (presumably Eliezer [cf. 15:2]) with finding a wife for Abraham's son Isaac. However, Abraham set an important condition: "I want you to swear by the LORD, God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living" (Gen 24:3). Instead, the chief servant was to go back to Haran, Abraham's country of origin, to find a wife for Isaac from among Abraham's own people (Gen 24:3, 37). Isaac in turn issued the same command to his son Jacob when Jacob fled to Paddan Aram from his brother, Esau (Gen 28:1, 6–7). Jacob's brother Esau, on the other hand, married two Hittite women,<sup>166</sup> which was a source of grief to his mother Rebekah (Gen 26:34–35). In time, Rebekah became disgusted with living with her Hittite daughters-in-law (Gen 27:46), so Esau decided to marry an Ishmaelite woman as well (Gen 28:8–9) and then settled in the land of Canaan (Gen 33:18). The obvious implication from these two accounts is that the people of Canaan were morally and spiritually bankrupt; a Canaanite wife would not be suitable for Isaac or Jacob in fulfilling God's plan to create a nation through which He would bless the world.

The third example of Canaanite corruption involves an incident with Jacob's family. After spending twenty years avoiding his brother Esau while working in Haran, Jacob returned to Canaan with his wives, concubines, and children. It was there that he encountered his brother Esau after Jacob stole the birthright and blessing from Esau. Jacob expected hostility but was surprised to find Esau happy to see him (Gen 32:1–33:11). Esau wanted Jacob to move with his family and his livestock to Seir to be near Esau, but Jacob apparently did not trust him, so Jacob moved to a place outside the Canaanite city of Shechem (Gen 33:12–18). It was near Shechem

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<sup>166</sup> They are also called "Canaanite women" in Gen 28:8 (cf. 10:15; 36:2).

that Jacob bought some land from Hamor the Hivite (Gen 34:2; cf. 10:17), the ruler of Shechem, in order to pitch his tent and to build an altar to the Lord (Gen 33:19–20). Jacob’s daughter Dinah went out to meet some of the Canaanite women one day but was spotted by Shechem, the son of Hamor, who took her and “violated” (עָנָה [cf. Deut 22:24]) her (Gen 34:1–2). The biblical text states that Shechem loved Dinah, so he asked his father to make the arrangements for Dinah to be his wife (Gen 34:3–4). The larger scheme was to swindle Jacob out of his wealth (Gen 34:23). Hamor made the proposition that Jacob and his family should intermarry with Shechem and his family. That way, they could all share the land, thereby uniting as one people (Gen 34:8–10). This, of course, would railroad God’s plan to make a unique nation out of Abraham’s offspring.

When Jacob’s sons heard that their sister was raped, they were grieved and enraged (Gen 34:7, 31), and they plotted revenge. In keeping with Shechem’s idea to blend the two families, Jacob’s sons convinced the men of Shechem to undergo circumcision (Gen 34:13–24). While the men were recovering from the operation, Jacob’s sons Simeon and Levi covertly slaughtered the men of Shechem and rescued their sister Dinah. They also plundered the livestock, wealth, women, and children from the city of Shechem (Gen 34:25–29). Jacob was greatly disturbed by their actions, fearing that the Canaanites would band together and exact vengeance upon Jacob and his family until they were destroyed (Gen 34:30). After this episode, the Lord told Jacob to return to Bethel where Jacob first met God (Gen 35:1; cf. 28:10–22). Jacob obeyed and took his family with him. Before the trip, though, he commanded all of the members of his household to throw out the foreign gods and to purify themselves and even change their clothes. Then, they could go together as a family and build an altar to God. It seems that even Jacob’s *family* had been corrupted by the ungodly Canaanite influences nearby. Still, Jacob’s family acquiesced.

They handed over the foreign gods and earrings, and Jacob buried them under the oak tree at Shechem. After that, the terror of God fell upon the towns around them so that no one pursued Jacob's family (Gen 35:2–5). In other words, God protected Jacob and his family once they detoxed from the Canaanite idols and implements of worship.

The fourth example of early Canaanite corruption is found in Genesis 38, which is an historical interlude within the Joseph narrative concerning Judah, the fourth son of Jacob. The biblical text states that Judah left his brothers and went to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah who became a friend of his (Gen 38:1, 12). It was there that Judah married a Canaanite woman named Shua who bore him three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah (Gen 34:1–5). When the boys were old enough to marry, Judah got a wife named Tamar for Er, the oldest son (Gen 38:6). Since Judah did not return to Haran to get a wife for himself or for his son like Abraham and Isaac had done for their sons, then it is safe to assume that Tamar was a Canaanite woman like Judah's wife Shua. In other words, Judah was intermarrying with the Canaanites.

Judah's firstborn son Er was wicked in the Lord's sight, so the Lord put him to death (Gen 38:7). Nothing more is said about Er, but it is not unreasonable to think that he had become wicked from Canaanite influence. Judah's next son, Onan, was charged with producing a son with Er's widow, Tamar, to carry on the lineage of the eldest son. Onan was not willing to fulfill his obligation to his deceased brother and the widow, so the Lord put Onan to death for his wickedness too (Gen 38:8–10). The third son, Shelah, was too young to marry Tamar, so Judah instructed Tamar to live as a widow in her father's house until Shelah reached the age to marry (Gen 38:11). However, Judah later found another wife for Shelah (Gen 38:14). Judah's own wife died during that period, so Judah went to Timnah to the men who were shearing his sheep. When Tamar learned of this, she disguised herself as a shrine prostitute by covering her face and then

waited for Judah to pass by. Judah propositioned the prostitute, slept with her, and unknowingly impregnated her. When Judah discovered that Tamar was pregnant from prostitution, he called for her execution until she revealed that she had become pregnant by him, after which he revoked the judgment (Gen 38:13–26).

What this story shows is that the sexual deviation of the Canaanites described later in the Bible (Lev 18; 20) had already sprung up during the patriarchal period. Two practices that were later forbidden by Israelite law surface here: shrine prostitution (cf. Deut 23:17–18) and incest (Lev 18:15).<sup>167</sup> Additionally, there was nothing good that came of Judah's intermarriage with the Canaanites. His sons turned out to be wicked, and Judah himself seems to have lost his own moral compass.

### **Later Canaanite Wickedness**

Little is recorded about the Canaanites within the biblical record once the Israelites went down to Egypt. The Israelites eventually became slaves, and the four hundred years elapsed. When the Canaanites are again mentioned in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, it is evident that their moral degradation had spiraled out of control. This is confirmed by the discovery of Canaanite literature from roughly the same time period as well, which attests to the fact that the Canaanites were morally and spiritually corrupt and that the Lord dispossessed the Canaanites not as innocent victims but because of their inherent wickedness (Deut 9:4–6). Though it may appear that Canaanites were simply demonized in a propagandistic manner so that the Israelites would destroy them without caution or remorse,<sup>168</sup> the fact remains that the

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<sup>167</sup> One other example may be included here. Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben, slept with Jacob's concubine, Bilhah, thereby dishonoring his father (Gen 35:22; cf. 49:4). Reuben's actions may have been his own, or he may have been influenced by the Canaanites during his time living near Shechem (cf. Gen 33:18–19).

<sup>168</sup> So Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 194.

Canaanites lived up to their reputation.<sup>169</sup> The Canaanite sins fall into two broad categories: false worship, which included human sacrifice, and sexual immorality.

### Canaanite Religious Beliefs

The first topic to examine is Canaanite religion. From ancient artifacts and ancient literature, scholars have determined that while the religion of Canaan no doubt varied widely from one place and time to another, the religion of Ugarit—a port city of ancient Syria—was polytheistic with as many as two hundred gods.<sup>170</sup> Within the Ugaritic pantheon, which is closely akin to Canaanite beliefs,<sup>171</sup> El was the head of the pantheon and was known as “the King” and “the Father of the gods.” El and his wife, the goddess Athirat (aka Asherah or Elat)—the fertility goddess—produced seventy other gods, including Baal (aka Hadad), “the Mighty One.” Baal was the Ugaritic god of agricultural fertility and “Lord of Ugarit” who became the king of the pantheon and the dominant god over El. Baal is depicted as having a club in one hand and a lightning bolt in the other, and he is often accompanied by storm elements such as clouds, wind, and rain.<sup>172</sup> In Ugaritic mythology, Baal often appears with his sister, “Virgin Anat,” who was also his consort. In the Bible, however, Baal and Asherah appear as counterparts, which suggests

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<sup>169</sup> Even though much of what is known about the Canaanites is shaped by the biblical writers, that does not discount its historical value in the least, especially when it is corroborated by discoveries from antiquity (contra Frédéric Gangloff, “Joshua 6: Holy War or Extermination by Divine Command (*Herem*)? *Theological Review* 25, no. 1 [2004]: 22).

<sup>170</sup> Dennis Pardee, “Canaan,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Leo G. Perdue (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 164.

<sup>171</sup> Most of what are considered to be Canaanite religious beliefs and practices come from the Ugaritic writings. However, there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between the two. For example, the Old Testament links Canaanite worship with “high places.” Such worship sites have been discovered at Megiddo and other places, yet there is no mention of them in the Ugaritic literature. Another example is the difference between Baal being “Lord of Earth” in the Ugaritic literature and “Lord of Heaven” in a Phoenician inscription. Caution may be warranted in equating what has been discovered at Ugarit with Canaanite worship. See A. R. Millard, “The Canaanites,” in *Peoples of the Old Testament Times*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 44.

<sup>172</sup> Another derivation of Baal is Baal-zebub (“lord of flies”) the god of the Philistine city Ekron (2 Kgs 1:2; cf. Matt 12:24).



that over time, Baal worship supplanted El worship, and Baal then took over the marriage to Asherah as well. Other gods who play prominent roles in Canaanite mythology are the god of craftsmanship (Kathir-and-Khasis), the god of the sea (Yam), the god of death (Mot) and the god of grain (Dagan/Dagon).<sup>173</sup> The Hittite religion went even further in boasting that Hatti was “the land of a thousand gods.”<sup>174</sup> Thus, there were many gods in Canaanite and Hittite religion, and these gods were depicted with idols and worshiped with implements such as poles, altars, and sacred stones, which the Israelites were commanded to destroy (Exod 23:24; 34:13 Deut 7:5; 12:2–3).

### Canaanite Religious Practices

Canaanite religion incorporated other illicit practices too. For example, the Canaanites used male and female prostitution and also included serpent worship. These elements were present to some degree in Egyptian and Babylonian religion but not to the same extent.<sup>175</sup> Shrine prostitution was forbidden in Israel (Deut 23:17) because Yahweh was not worshiped with sexual acts. However, this was evidently a feature of Canaanite worship. The same goes for serpent worship, which would have been a form of idolatry (Exod 20:4–6) and would be more akin to Satan worship (cf. Gen 3:1; Rev 12:9) than Yahweh worship. The Canaanites also used sorcery, divination, and witchcraft (Deut 18:9–14) to discern the will of the gods. None of these

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<sup>173</sup> See Michael D. Coogan and Mark S. Smith, eds. and trans., *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, 2d ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 5–8; Charles F. Pfeiffer, *Ras Shamra and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 29–35; Mark S. Smith, trans., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997), 3–4; Tilde Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel and the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Glenn S. Holland, *Gods in the Desert: Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

<sup>174</sup> Trevor Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 135–36.

<sup>175</sup> W. F. Albright, “The Role of the Canaanites in the History of Civilization,” in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, ed. G. Ernest Wright (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961), 338.

was permitted in Israel.<sup>176</sup> Instead, the Lord promised to raise up prophets to reveal His words to the people (Deut 18:14–22). But the most egregious worship practice among the Canaanites as well as other ancient Near Eastern peoples was human sacrifice. The Bible records that the Canaanites practiced child sacrifice: “You [Israelites] must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods” (Deut 12:31; cf. 18:10; Lev 18:21; 20:1–5).<sup>177</sup> Passing children (or adults) through fire may have been symbolic of purging human imperfections in order to attain immortality, as attested in the same practice among the ancient Greeks.<sup>178</sup> Whatever the case, it constituted murder, and bloodshed polluted the land (Num 35:33–34).<sup>179</sup> The depiction of child sacrifice is itself ghastly:

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<sup>176</sup> In Genesis, divination was practiced by Laban, the brother of Rebekah and father of Leah and Rachel (Gen 30:27). Laban also had household gods (Gen 31:19, 30–35), which Rachel stole before Jacob and his family returned to Canaan. Jacob later commanded his household to get rid of the idols and even their clothes, which perhaps had some pagan symbolism from the Canaanite culture (Gen 35:2).

<sup>177</sup> This practice was also referred to as “passing through the fire” (Lev 18:21; 2 Kgs 23:10; Jer 32:35; cf. 2 Kgs 16:3; 21:6; 2 Chron 33:6) and “burning” (Jer 7:31; 19:5; cf. 32:35; Isa 30:33).

<sup>178</sup> Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 586–87.

<sup>179</sup> Not all scholars accept the straightforward reading and/or interpretation of the biblical depiction of child sacrifice in Molech worship. For example, Gottwald argues that Canaanite religion, which would have included human sacrifice, was off limits for Israel but was acceptable to Yahweh for the Canaanites (Norman K. Gottwald, “‘Holy War’ in Deuteronomy: Analysis and Critique,” *Review & Expositor* 61 [Fall 1964]: 304). Levenson concludes that because of alleged contradictions in the biblical accounts of child sacrifice to Molech, Molech may be a fictitious biblical character altogether (Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993], 20–21). Tatlock argues that human sacrifice was a regular practice of the Israelite cult at certain times (e.g., Gen 22; Judg 11) (Jason Tatlock, “The Place of Human Sacrifice in the Israelite Cult,” in *Ritual and Metaphor: Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. Christian A. Eberhart [Atlanta: SBL, 2011], 33–48). Hattingh and Meyer argue that human sacrifice may be hinted at in Leviticus 27:29 (A. J. K. Hattingh and E. E. Meyer, “‘Devoted to Destruction.’ A Case of Human Sacrifice in Leviticus 27?” *Journal of Semitics* 25, no. 2 [2016]: 630–57).

There is nothing wrong with examining such interpretations, but upon closer inspection, they amount to mere speculation. Contra Gottwald, there is nothing in the Old Testament that hints at any approval of Canaanite religion in Yahweh’s eyes. Contra Levenson, the alleged contradictions can be harmonized and do not negate the biblical record. Contra Tatlock, Hattingh, and Meyer, sacrificing children to Molech is not to be confused with dedicating the Israelite firstborn to the Lord (Exod 13:2, 11–16; 22:29; 34:20; Num 3:12–13; 8:15–19; 18:14–15; Neh 10:36; Luke 2:23). In Israel, only the *firstborn* were dedicated to the Lord, but children in general were

In ancient times Moloch was represented by a huge bronze hollow statue of a bull-headed man with upturned hands. Some descriptions say the statue had seven compartments for holding various sacrifices. The idol was heated until it glowed red, then firstborn children were sacrificed to him by placing them on its hands, which then moved and deposited them through the mouth and into the furnace within which they were cremated and their lives used to renew the power of the sun.<sup>180</sup>

There is little wonder that the Lord required the death of those who practiced such things, whether Canaanites or Israelites. As Goldingay states, “This aspect of the Canaanites’ faith and life is one thing that shows that the Canaanites were not just nice people who were simply unlucky to be in the wrong place at the wrong time because God wanted to give their land to Israel.”<sup>181</sup> They were in fact guilty of murder.

According to ancient historians, human sacrifice was utilized in many ancient cultures.<sup>182</sup>

The most infamous accounts come from the Carthaginians (or Phoenicians), who were the

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sacrificed to Molech, not just the firstborn. In addition, the firstborn *sons* in Israel were dedicated to the Yahweh, but in the cult of Molech, both sons *and* daughters were sacrificed in the fire (2 Kgs 23:10; Psa 106:37–38; Jer 7:21; 32:35). Therefore, one should not confuse the dedications to Yahweh with sacrifices to Molech (John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000], 216).

<sup>180</sup> Theresa Bane, *Encyclopedia of Demons in World Religions and Cultures* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 225–26. For a discussion of the debate concerning the nature of Molech worship, as well as a defense of the traditional view that Molech worship involved child sacrifice, see George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 43 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985); John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>181</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Ethics: A Guided Tour* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 267.

<sup>182</sup> For example, Diodorus recorded that the ancient Egyptians sacrificed red oxen to Osiris since red was the color of Typhon, the god who plotted the death of Osiris and who was subsequently punished by Isis, the wife of Osiris. Diodorus also recounted the tradition that the Egyptians would also sacrifice men (primarily foreigners) who had red skin at the tomb of Osiris (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, vol. 1, trans. C. H. Oldfather [London: William Heinemann LTD, 1935], 88.4–5). Plutarch also records this tradition (Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*, in *The Complete Works of Plutarch*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin [East Sussex, UK: Delphi Classics, 2013], 73). However, Herodotus denied that the Egyptians practiced human sacrifice. If it was illegal for them to sacrifice any animals besides swine, male oxen, and male calves, Herodotus reasoned, then human sacrifice was surely out of the question (Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. G. C. Macaulay, rev. Donald Lateiner [New York: Sterling Publishing, 2005], 2.45). Diodorus also recorded that the ancient Gauls constructed great pyres and sacrificed captives to honor their gods (Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 5.32.2–6). He furnished an example of human sacrifice from ancient Greece too (ibid., 5.56.6–7). Likewise, Herodotus recorded that Menelaos, the mythological king of the Mycenaean Spartans, sacrificed two Egyptian children out of frustration for being detained in Memphis due to unfavorable weather conditions (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 2.119). Herodotus also wrote that Xerxes and the Persians took nine

spiritual descendants of the Canaanites.<sup>183</sup> In short, the Carthaginians offered human sacrifices to Kronos, the “child-eater.”<sup>184</sup> This god was also known as Baal-Hammon.<sup>185</sup> In one example, Diodorus records that the Carthaginians were losing in battle to the Greeks and believed that the misfortune had come from the gods. It was believed that they had angered the god Heracles, who was identified as the Tyrian god Melqart, or “the Tyrian Baal.”<sup>186</sup> In response, the Carthaginians sought to appease the anger of the gods of Tyre with monetary offerings. But Diodorus also recorded the following:

They also alleged that Cronus [i.e., Baal or Molech] had turned against them inasmuch as in former times they had been accustomed to sacrifice to this god the noblest of their sons, but more recently, secretly buying and nurturing children, they had sent these to the sacrifice; and when an investigation was made, some of those who had been sacrificed were discovered to have been suppositious. When they had given thought to these things and saw their enemy encamped before their walls, they were filled with superstitious dread, for they believed that they had neglected the honours of the gods that had been established by their fathers. In their zeal to make amends for their omission, they selected two hundred of the noblest children and sacrificed them publicly; and others who were under suspicion sacrificed themselves voluntarily, in number not less than three hundred. There was in their city a bronze image of Cronus, extending its hands, palms up and sloping toward the ground so that each of the children when placed thereon rolled down and fell into a sort of gaping pit filled with fire.”<sup>187</sup>

Similarly, the ancient historian Quintus Curtius wrote the following about the Carthaginians:

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native-born children in the land of the Edonians and buried them alive as an offering to the gods, which was a Persian custom (ibid., 12.112–114). The ancient Messenians, at the instruction of a certain priestess, sacrificed a maiden in order to gain the victory in war (ibid., 13.8.1–3).

<sup>183</sup> For a defense and explanation of the link between the Carthaginian and Canaanite practices of human sacrifice, see Henry B. Smith, Jr., “Canaanite Child Sacrifice, Abortion, and the Bible,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 90–125.

<sup>184</sup> For more about human sacrifice in and around ancient Carthage, see Roland de Vaux, *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964), 75–ff.

<sup>185</sup> Jan N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion and Culture, the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 84.

<sup>186</sup> See “Melqart,” accessed May 27, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Melqart>.

<sup>187</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, vol. 10, trans. Russel M. Greer (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1954), 20.14.1–6.

Some even proposed renewing a sacrifice which had been discontinued for many years, and which I for my part should believe to be by no means pleasing to the gods, of offering a freeborn boy to Saturn—this sacrilege rather than sacrifice, handed down from their founders, the Carthaginians are said to have performed until the destruction of their city—and unless the elders, in accordance with whose counsel everything was done, had opposed it, the awful superstition would have prevailed over mercy.<sup>188</sup>

At several sites of Phoenician Punic colonies in North Africa, the sacred sites of precincts devoted to Baal Hammon and his consort Tanit contain the remains of burned babies and young animals (mostly lambs). Above each child is a decorative stela with symbols of Baal Hammon and Tanit, and many depict swaddled babies as well.<sup>189</sup> In summary, human sacrifice is well established from ancient history of the Carthaginians and fits nicely with the biblical record of the Canaanites who occupied the same area of northern Syria and Phoenicia.

Needless to say, human sacrifice in ancient Israel went against the dictates of the Mosaic Law. In the first place, there were express prohibitions against sacrificing children in the fire to foreign gods (Lev 18:21; Deut 18:10). This rule applied to foreigners living in Israel as well, and the penalty was death by stoning (Lev 20:2). If the community refused to execute the punishment, then the Lord Himself would set His face against that family and those people who likewise followed Molech (Lev 20:3–5). Second, the Israelites were to worship Yahweh alone, as stated in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1–3; Deut 5:6–7). Third, the Israelites had special instructions for sacrifices in general (e.g., no unclean animals), and none included prescriptions for human sacrifices. The Israelites were warned *not* to worship the Lord in the ways of the Canaanites, which included detestable practices such as child sacrifice (Deut 12:29–31). Instead,

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<sup>188</sup> Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, vol. 4, trans. John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946), 4.3.23.

<sup>189</sup> Francesca Stravakopoulou, “Child Sacrifice in the Ancient World: Blessings for the Beloved,” in *Childhood and Violence in the Western Tradition*, eds. Laurence Brockliss and Heather Montgomery (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), 24.

the Israelites were commanded to destroy all implements of Canaanite worship (Deut 12:1–3) since such things were abominable (תועבה) to the Lord (Deut 7:25–26).

### Canaanite Sexual Immorality

The next topic to examine is Canaanite sexual immorality. To begin, there was a stern warning against imitating the practices of the Canaanites and Egyptians in the Mosaic Law:

You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God. Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD (Lev 18:3–5).

The passage goes on to provide a litany of prohibited sexual behaviors: incestual relations with any close relative or in-law (Lev 18:6–16); sexual relations with both a woman and her daughter (Lev 18:17–18); sexual relations with a wife and her sister (Lev 18:18); sexual relations with a woman during menstruation (Lev 18:19); sexual relations with a neighbor's wife (i.e., adultery [Lev 18:20]); lying with a man as one lies with a woman (i.e., homosexuality) (Lev 18:22); and sexual relations with an animal (i.e., bestiality) (Lev 18:23). The text then states,

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. Everyone who does any of these detestable things—such persons must be cut off from their people. Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the LORD your God (Lev 18:24–30).

What Leviticus 18 reveals is that these sexually-perverse practices were common among the Canaanites and were strictly taboo for the Israelites. Most sexual sins of this sort were capital offenses in Israel (cf. Lev 20:10–21). The reason is given in the above passage—namely, that sexual sin defiles the land, which is why the Canaanites were being expelled. The Canaanite

abominations were so deplorable that the land was, in a sense, vomiting out the Canaanite population, and the same thing would happen to the Israelites if they adopted Canaanite ways.

Leviticus 20, the counterpart to Leviticus 18, underscores this point:

Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, so that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them. But I said to you, “You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey.” I am the LORD your God, who has set you apart from the nations.... You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own (Lev 20:22–24, 26).

Israel was to be set apart as holy to the Lord, but they could only do so if they obeyed God’s laws and abstained from sexual immorality that would corrupt all of society and would lead Israel to become a debased nation like the Canaanite nations.

One question that arises is whether or not the biblical portrayal of Canaanite immorality is accurate.<sup>190</sup> The book of Genesis hints at the fact that the Canaanites were sexually perverse. The Canaanite men of Sodom wanted to have sexual relations with the two men/angels who visited Lot (Gen 19:1–5). Lot seems to have been influenced by the Canaanites as well since he was willing to offer his virgin daughters to the mob to abuse in place of his male guests (Gen 19:6–8). Lot’s daughters resorted to incest with their father in order to procreate (Gen 19:30–38). Judah’s Canaanite daughter-in-law did something similar, disguising herself as a shrine prostitute in order to seduce her father-in-law (Gen 38:13–26). The Canaanite prince of Shechem raped Jacob’s daughter Dinah and then wanted to marry her, showing no remorse for his actions (Gen 34:1–4). In other words, there is ample biblical support from an earlier period in Canaanite history that the Canaanites were sexually deviant.

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<sup>190</sup> See the discussion in Smith, “Canaanite Child Sacrifice, Abortion, and the Bible,” 93–ff.

The record of Canaanite and Hittite literature supports the biblical portrait as well. Canaanite cultic practices included male and female cult prostitution<sup>191</sup> as well as adultery.<sup>192</sup> Incest was also practiced, at least among the gods. The Canaanite and Hittite mythology that has survived reveals that Baal had sexual relations with his mother Asherah,<sup>193</sup> his sister Anat,<sup>194</sup> and his daughter Pidray.<sup>195</sup> Consanguineous (incestuous) marriages are recorded in the genealogies of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom as well. These occur throughout all classes of society and include such combinations as father-daughter, mother-son, aunt-nephew, and brother-sister.<sup>196</sup> In the Hittite laws, certain sexual practices were prohibited, including sexual relations with one's mother, daughter, or son. Men were also prohibited from having sex with two sisters or with one's sister-in-law, step-daughter, mother-in-law, or the sister of one's mother-in-law. Other sexual practices, however, were permissible, including sexual relations with sisters who were slaves or a mother and her daughter if they were slaves. It was also acceptable for a father and

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<sup>191</sup> Jonathan N. Tubb, *Canaanites: Peoples of the Past* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 76.

<sup>192</sup> See the examples and references in Clay Jones, "We Don't Hate Sin So We Don't Understand What Happened to the Canaanites," *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 1 (2009): 59–60.

<sup>193</sup> See "El, Ashertu and the Storm-god," in *The Ancient Near East: Supplementary Texts and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed., ed. James B. Pritchard, trans. Albrecht Goetze (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 519.

<sup>194</sup> There is some question as to whether Baal and Anat, his sister, had sexual relations because the texts that suggest this are badly damaged. However, the relationship between Baal and Anat may be deduced from an Egyptian text in which Anat and Astarte appear as the wives of Seth, the Egyptian substitute for Baal, and in an Aramaic funerary stele that names Baal as "the husband of Anat." See Mark S. Smith and Wayne T. Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 303.

<sup>195</sup> William Foxwell Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 145; cf. Smith and Pitard, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, 2:118–19.

<sup>196</sup> See M. A. Murray, "Notes on Some Genealogies of the Middle Kingdom," *Ancient Egypt* 12, no. 1 (March 1925): 45–46; cf. Jaroslav Černý, "Consanguineous Marriages in Pharaonic Egypt," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 40 (Dec. 1954): 23–29; Walter Scheidel, "Ancient Egyptian Sibling Marriage and the Westermarck Effect," in *Inbreeding, Incest, and the Incest Taboo*, eds. Arthur P. Wolf and William H. Durham (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 93–108.



son to have sexual relations with the same slave or prostitute and for two brothers to have sex with the same free woman.<sup>197</sup> Homosexuality is not mentioned in the Canaanite literature, but neither is it condemned. In fact, there is no blanket prohibition against homosexuality anywhere in the ancient Near Eastern literature.<sup>198</sup> Only in the biblical laws is it explicitly denounced.

Bestiality is represented in pagan religions too. In the Baal mythology, for example, Baal mates with a heifer, which comports with the portrayal of Baal as a bull.<sup>199</sup> The fifth tablet of the “Baal Cycle” has the following lines: “Mightiest Baal hears; He makes love with a heifer in the outback, [a] cow in a field of Death’s Realm. He lies with her seventy times seven, [m]ounts eighty times eight; [She conceiv]es and bears a boy.”<sup>200</sup> The Hittites, on the other hand, outlawed intercourse with pigs, dogs, and sheep on penalty of death. This may suggest that such sexual deviance was common among the people. What is peculiar is that another law *withholds* punishment from those who have intercourse with a horse or a mule.<sup>201</sup> Bestiality in the Law of Moses was punishable by death, and the animal was to be killed too (Lev 20:15). This may explain why the Israelites were ordered to slaughter the animals at Jericho. Animals who were used to having sex with humans would have been unwanted<sup>202</sup> and perhaps even dangerous.

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<sup>197</sup> Billie Jean Collins, *The Hittites and Their World* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 120; cf. Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, trans. Helen and Mervyn Richardson (Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), 269–270.

<sup>198</sup> Eve Levavi Feinstein, *Sexual Pollution in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 115.

<sup>199</sup> Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, vol. 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 108.

<sup>200</sup> Smith, *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, 148. Similarly, Baal fathers a bull in another text. See Simon B. Parker, trans. *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997), 181–86.

<sup>201</sup> Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World*, 47–48; cf. Henry A. Hoffner, Jr., “Incest, Sodomy and Bestiality in the Ancient Near East,” in *Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Henry A. Hoffner, Jr. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 81–90.

<sup>202</sup> Jones, “We Don’t Hate Sin,” 66.

## Summary

The biblical and extrabiblical records show that the Canaanites were spiritually and morally corrupt. This diagnosis had been revealed to Abraham four generations earlier (Gen 15:13–16), as mentioned above, and was already apparent in the book of Genesis, though not to the same extent as later. By the time the Israelites were to take possession of the Promised Land, the Canaanites were polytheistic idolators who practiced child sacrifice, serpent worship, sorcery, divination, witchcraft, shrine prostitution, adultery, incest, homosexuality, and bestiality. According to Deuteronomy 32:17, worshiping idols and sacrificing to other gods was really demon worship,<sup>203</sup> which means that the Canaanites were engaged in demonic activity.

The first and obvious reason for the Conquest, therefore, was the punishment of Canaanite wickedness. The Lord would no longer tolerate the murder of children, the perversion of sexuality, the violation of the creative order that separates mankind from the animals, and the worship of demons. The Canaanites would experience capital punishment, which is different than genocide. In addition, the Lord decreed the Conquest in order to expel the evil influences that had the potential to corrupt the nation of Israel. Failure to drive out the Canaanites would have disastrous results: “But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live. And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them” (Num 33:55–56; cf. Exod 23:33; Lev 18:3; 20:23). In other words, the Canaanites would corrupt the Israelites if they remained in the land together, and Israel would no longer be a holy nation set on God’s greater purpose to bless the world. In fact, Israel herself would be expelled from the land if she

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<sup>203</sup> Cf. Psa 106:37–38; 1 Cor 10:18–22; Rev 9:20–21; Jub 1:10; 11:4; 22:17; 1 En 19:1–2.

engaged in the Canaanite worship practices or sexual perversions (Lev 18:24–28). The punishment applied to Canaanites and Israelites alike. It was *that* detestable to the Lord.

### **Excursus: Were the Canaanites More Wicked than Other Nations?**

One question that surfaces is whether the Canaanites were more wicked than any other nation. If not, then it would seem that the main reason for destroying and driving out the Canaanites was due to the land promise, not to Canaanite wickedness in particular. In other words, if the Lord had promised the land of the Moabites or Ammonites to the Israelites instead of the land of the Canaanites, then the Moabites or Ammonites would have been placed under the ban. Three responses to this question are in order. First, it is true that all nations are comprised of sinners who are guilty before a holy God (cf. Rom 3:23; 6:23). From a theological standpoint, God would be just to punish any nation or individual for sins. However, His justice is also in accordance with His mercy since God wants all to be repent and be saved from their sins (cf. Eze 18:23; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9). For that reason, He does not immediately punish all sinners the moment they start sinning; no one would have a chance at life. God is patient and gives people time to repent. This was true for the Canaanites too, which leads to the second point.

From a biblical standpoint, the Canaanites *were* more wicked than the other nations. The sins of the Amorites had not yet reached their full measure in Abraham's day (Gen 15:16), but God knew that they would be ripe for punishment four hundred years later, which is why the promise to give Israel the land was delayed (Gen 15:13–15). The Canaanites at Sodom and Gomorrah were more wicked than the Amorites and other peoples, which is why the outcry against them warranted a special investigation on God's part (Gen 18:20–21). There were not even ten righteous, and so those Canaanites were destroyed (Gen 18:22–33). The same was true of the people on the earth at the time of the Flood (Gen 6:5–7) and of the Canaanites living in the

land of Canaan at the time of the Conquest as explained above. From a biblical standpoint, the Canaanites were being destroyed and removed because of their sinfulness.

Third, from a biblical perspective, the surrounding nations as a whole did not worship the Lord but also worshiped false gods. For example, the Ammonites worshiped Molech (1 Kgs 11:7), and the Moabites worshiped Chemosh (Num 21:29). They were no different than the Canaanites in this regard. However, the moral and spiritual corruption in these other nations were evidently not as pervasive at this point in history as with the Canaanite nations. The Ammonites and Moabites would be judged for their wickedness too, but not until centuries later, as seen in later prophecies against these nations (cf. Eze 25:1–17). Israel's neighbors were mostly hostile toward Israel as seen in the books of Numbers, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, but Israel had separate rules for warfare with those nations (Deut 20:10–15). This fact suggests that the neighboring nations were not as morally and spiritually debased as the Canaanites since they were not subject to annihilation at the time of the Conquest. In fact, the women and children could be taken captive and could join Israelite society (cf. Num 31:9, 17–18; Deut 21:10–14). They would be included in the covenant along with the Israelites and other foreigners (cf. Deut 29:9–15; Josh 8:30–35). This was not the case with the Canaanites, as Deuteronomy makes clear (Deut 7:1–3; 20:16–18). Finally, one of the stipulations of the Law was that no Ammonite or Moabite could enter the Lord's assembly down to the tenth generation because of hostility toward Israel during the journey in the wilderness. The Israelites were not to friendship with them (Deut 23:3–6). However, they were not to annihilate them, and after the ten generations had passed, the Ammonites and Moabites could join the Lord's assembly. No such stipulation existed for the Canaanites. This suggests that, from the biblical perspective, Canaanite wickedness exceed that of the surrounding nations.

## Instructions Concerning the Conquest

Having established the biblical portrait of the Canaanites as morally and spiritually corrupt, it is clear to see that the Canaanites would pose a moral and spiritual threat to the Israelites if they were allowed to live together in the land. The results of religious syncretism would then jeopardize the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people as well as threaten the overall plan of God to bless the world. For these reasons, the Lord gave specific commands to the Israelites through Moses about which land to take, which people to destroy, and what would be the consequences for leaving the job unfinished. These are found primarily in Deuteronomy but are mentioned in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers too.

### **Limitations on Which Land**

The Israelites were given specific instructions about which lands/peoples to attack and which ones to leave alone because the Lord had already allotted certain territories to other nations. The premise here was that “[t]he earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Psa 24:1; cf. Exod 9:29). God created the world, and so He ultimately owned the land. That was also why property rights were included in the Law of Moses (Lev 25:23, 28; Deut 5:19, 21). God owns the land, so He makes the rules. What is more, Deuteronomy 32:8 teaches that the Lord had already divided up the nations and given boundaries for the peoples (cf. Gen 10–11). On that basis, the Lord had promised Abraham a specific territory for Abraham’s descendants: “The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God” (Gen 17:8; cf. 10:19; 15:18–20).

The limitation of the land conquest is expounded upon in Deuteronomy 2. On their way from the wilderness to the Promised Land, the Israelites were told to pass through the land of

Seir, which was the territory belonging to the Edomites who were descendants of Jacob's brother Esau. The Israelites were prohibited from provoking the Edomites to war because the Israelites would not be given any of that land since the Lord had already given the hill country of Seir to the Edomites (Deut 2:4–6; cf. Num 20:14–21). The Lord had also given the land of Ar to the Moabites, the descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot, so the Israelites were not to provoke the Moabites to war or take any of their land either (Deut 2:9). The same was true for the Ammonites—also descendants of Lot—who lived in the land of the Zanzummites. The Israelites were not to harass them or take any of their land since the Lord had given the Ammonites their own land to possess (Deut 2:16–19). Moreover, the Lord had given these nations their lands only after *they* had conquered and dispossessed other peoples. The Moabites dispossessed the Emmites, who were strong and numerous and as tall as the Anakites (Deut 2:10–11). Likewise, the Ammonites had thrust out the Rephaites who were strong, numerous, and as tall as the Anakites (Deut 2:20–21). The Edomites too had driven out the Horites and destroyed them just like Israel would do to the Canaanites (Deut 2:12). Each of these three nations had their own conquests, and the Lord had actually helped them in their battles:

The LORD destroyed (שָׁמַד) them [the Zanzummites] from before the Ammonites, who drove them out and settled in their place. The LORD had done the same for the descendants of Esau, who lived in Seir, when he destroyed the Horites from before them. They drove them out and have lived in their place to this day. And as for the Avvites, who lived in villages as far as Gaza, the Caphtorites coming out from Caphtor destroyed them and settled in their place (Deut 2:21–23).

The Conquest of Canaan was not a unique event. The Lord had destroyed other nations beforehand and had given their lands to other peoples related to Israel. The reasons are not given, so one can only assume that the Emmites, Zanzummites, Horites, and Avvites were wicked like the Canaanites. Whatever the case, the passage above makes the point that the Lord is sovereign

over the earth. He can raise up one nation to punish another, and He can thrust out one nation and give its land to another according to His justice and His greater purposes for the world.

### **The Lord Would Fight for Israel**

The Israelites would not be able to inherit the Promised Land without a fight since the Canaanites were not willing to leave. Therefore, the Lord promised Israel that He would fight for them. This would accomplish His dual purposes of judging the Canaanites and fulfilling His promise to Israel's patriarchs to give them the Promised Land in order to work in and through the nation of Israel to bless the world. The Lord first demonstrated His actions as warrior in the plagues visited upon Egypt and then in the Exodus event (Exod 6–14). Following that, the Lord helped the Israelites secure the victory against the Amalekites in the wilderness (Exod 17:8–16) on their way to Mount Sinai. When the Lord gave Moses His laws and decrees, He included the promise to send His angel (or “messenger”) ahead of the Israelites to guard them along the way to the Promised Land (Exod 23:20; cf. 32:34; 33:1–2). That way, the Israelites would have nothing to fear from potential enemies on their journey to Canaan (cf. Num 21–24). The Israelites were simply to follow the divine messenger's lead and obey his commands since the Lord's Name was in him (Exod 23:21–22). Then the Lord would be an enemy to Israel's enemies and bring the people into the land belonging to the Canaanites, and the Lord Himself would wipe out the Canaanites (Exod 23:23). The Lord also promised to send terror<sup>204</sup> upon Israel's enemies to throw them into confusion so that the enemies would turn their backs and run away from Israel (Exod 23:27; cf. Deut 2:25; 11:25; Josh 2:8–11). He would send the “hornet”<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Outside of Psalm 55:5 and Isaiah 33:18, the term “terror” (פַּחַד) refers not to a subjective, internal feeling of emotions but to the panic that causes those emotions. It is used objectively as a parallel to darkness, weapons, rod, and hand (Dennis J. McCarthy, “Some Holy War Vocabulary in Joshua 2,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33, no. 2 [Apr. 1971]: 229).

ahead of Israel to “drive out” (שׁוּר [Hif.]) the Canaanites too (Exod 23:28; cf. Deut 7:10, 20; Josh 24:12).<sup>206</sup> The Lord would “do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world” so that the Canaanites would “see how awesome is the work that I, the Lord, will do for you” (Exod 34:10). Israel would be the Lord’s agent in driving out the Canaanites, but the Lord would be Israel’s “glorious sword” (Deut 33:29) to help them drive out and destroy their enemies. The practical reason for this is that the Israelites were smaller, weaker, and militarily inexperienced. The Canaanites, on the other hand, were well established in the land, having lived there for hundreds of years. With the Lord fighting for Israel, the outcome would be favorable for Israel, unless Israel proved unfaithful, which is what happened initially.

On the journey to Canaan, the Lord instructed Moses to send twelve spies—one from each tribe—to explore the land over a period of forty days. Their mission was to learn about the people, the cities, and the land (Num 13:17–20). When the spies brought back the report (Num 13:26–33), they informed Moses, Aaron, and the assembly of Israelites that the land indeed was abundant and prosperous as the Lord had told them (cf. Exod 3:8), but the people were powerful, and the cities were fortified and very large (cf. Deut 9:1; Josh 6:1; 10:20; 19:35–38). They even reported seeing Anakites (giants),<sup>207</sup> which would make a military victory impossible in the view

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<sup>205</sup> According to Augustine, the hornet may be understood metaphorically to refer to the sharp stings of fear that afflicted the Canaanites, or it may refer to wicked angels (cf. Psalms 78:49) or perhaps to literal wasps that were not recorded in the book of Joshua. See Augustine, “Questions on Joshua 27,” in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament IV. Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, ed. John R. Franke (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 95.

<sup>206</sup> Verses that state that the Lord would drive out the Canaanites include: Exod 23:28–31; 33:2; 34:11, 24; Deut 4:37–38; 7:1; 9:3; 11:23–25; 33:27; Josh 24:12, 18; cf. Num 21:32; 32:39; 33:51–56; Deut 2:12, 20–23; 19:1; Judg 2:3.

<sup>207</sup> For biblical and apocryphal texts about “giants” (very large people), see Deut 2:10; 3:11; 1 Chron 11:23; 14:8–12, 16; 20:6–8; Amos 2:9; Bar 3:24–28; Sir 16:6–9; Jud 16:4–7. Josephus affirmed that there were giants in the land of Canaan at the time of the Conquest: “There were till then left the race of giants, who had bodies so large, and countenances so entirely different from other men, that they were surprising to the sight, and terrible to the hearing. The bones of these men are still shown to this very day, unlike to any credible relations of other men” (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 5.2.3; cf. 1.14.2). Josephus also believed that the pre-Flood Nephilim were giants (ibid.,



of ten of the spies: “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (Num 13:32–33). The other two spies—Joshua and Caleb—were ready to go up and take possession of the land (Num 13:30), believing that the Lord would provide the victory (Num 14:6–9), but the Israelites were so distraught at the “bad report” (Num 13:32) from the ten spies that they wept aloud, grumbled against Moses and Aaron, debated going back to Egypt with a new leader, and contemplated stoning Joshua and Caleb (Num 14:1–10). Naturally speaking, the Canaanite nations were “greater and stronger” than Israel (Deut 4:38; cf. 7:2; 11:23), but they were not greater and stronger than the Lord. That was the point. The Israelites were looking at the situation from their own perspective rather than from God’s perspective.

Because the generation of Israelites that left Egypt were unbelieving, the Lord decided to keep the Israelites in the wilderness for thirty-eight years until that entire generation of adults had died off. Only Joshua, Caleb, and those under the age of twenty would enter the Promised Land while the rest would perish in the wilderness (Num 14:11–35; cf. Deut 2:14–15). The consequences for unbelief were severe: the Lord sent a plague that killed the ten spies who spread the bad report (Num 14:36–37). If the Israelites would not trust the Lord, then they would not be successful in the Conquest, plain and simple. The Lord would still accomplish His plan of giving the Israelites the Promised Land in accordance with the promise to the patriarchs, but He would not do so with that unbelieving generation. The Israelites tried to go up and take the land

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1.3.1; cf. Gen 6:4) as well as the Rephaim who were defeated at the time of Abram (ibid., 1.9.1; cf. Gen 14:5–6) and the descendants of Rapha who were among the Philistines fighting against David (ibid., 7.12.1–2; cf. 2 Sam 21:15–22). For further discussion, see Clyde E. Billington, “Goliath and the Exodus Giants: How Tall Were They?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 3 (Sept. 2007): 495–96.

anyway despite Moses' efforts to deter them, but without the Lord fighting for them, they were soundly defeated by their superior foes (Num 14:39–45).

The Lord did not assist the Israelites in battle again until the Israelites were attacked by the Canaanites (Num 21:1–3) and Amorites (Num 21:21–35; cf. Deut 2:24–3:11) in the wilderness. These groups had more military experience, but the Lord gave Israel the victory (Num 21:3, 34). Moses told Joshua, the next leader, at that time, “You have seen with your own eyes all that the LORD your God has done to these two kings. The LORD will do the same to all the kingdoms over there where you are going. Do not be afraid of them; the LORD your God himself will fight for you” (Deut 3:21–22; cf. Josh 1:6–9).<sup>208</sup> Later, Moses delivered the same message to the Israelites as a whole:

You may say to yourselves, “These nations are stronger than we are. How can we drive them out?” But do not be afraid of them; remember well what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt.... The LORD your God will do the same to all the peoples you now fear.... Do not be terrified by them, for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a great and awesome God.... He will give their kings into your hand, and you will wipe out their names from under heaven. No one will be able to stand up against you; you will destroy them (Deut 7:17–24).

Size would matter—including that of the Anakites in the land:

The people are strong and tall—the Anakites! You know about them and have heard it said: “Who can stand up against the Anakites?” But be assured today that the LORD your God is the one who goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire. He will destroy them; he will subdue them before you. And you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly as the LORD has promised you (Deut 9:2–3).

Prior to this statement, Israel had faced the Amorite king, Og of Bashan, who was one of the Rephaites (giants; cf. Deut 3:11). Yet, the Israelites defeated him and his army because the Lord was on their side (Num 21:34; cf. Josh 12:4; 13:12). Joshua would later do the same to the

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<sup>208</sup> Moses himself was not allowed to enter the Promised Land because he disobeyed the Lord on one occasion (Num 20:1–13; cf. Deut 1:37–38; 34:5–8).

Anakites living in the land (cf. Josh 11:21–22). The size of the Anakites did not matter, nor did the strength or numbers of the enemy armies. The Israelites simply needed to follow the Lord’s command to take possession of the land that He had given to them to possess (Num 33:53).

### **Destroy the Canaanite Implements of Worship**

The Israelites were given strict orders concerning Canaanite worship paraphernalia: “Do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces” (Exod 23:24). They were also commanded to break down the Canaanite altars, cut down their Asherah poles, destroy all the carved images, cast idols, and high places, and wipe out the names of their gods from those places (Exod 34:13; Num 33:52; Deut 7:5; 12:2–3). The Canaanite gods were to be burned in the fire, and anyone who took the silver or gold from the idols for personal gain would be devoted to destruction (חרם) along with the booty (Deut 7:25–26; cf. 13:16–17). The Lord actually abhorred the Canaanites because of their evil ways, which is why Israel was forbidden from living according to Canaanite customs and worshiping God in their ways (Lev 20:23; Deut 12:4). Such detestable worship practices had defiled the land to the point that the land was vomiting out the Canaanites, and the land would vomit out the Israelites if they too practiced Canaanite religion (Lev 18:24–30; cf. 20:1–5). What is more, the Canaanites had polluted the land with bloodshed because of their child sacrifices (Lev 20:1–5, 23), and there was no atonement that could be made for bloodshed except by executing the guilty parties (Num 35:33–34; cf. Lev 27:29). If the Israelites worshiped the Lord alone as a holy nation set apart from the rest (Lev 20:26), then His blessing would be upon their food, water, and health, and they would live a long life (Exod 23:25–26).<sup>209</sup> God’s intention, therefore, was to bless the Israelites, but they had to worship Him alone since He is a

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<sup>209</sup> Cf. Lev 18:1–5; 26:3–6; Deut 11:8–15; 28:1–14.

jealous God (Exod 34:14), not wanting Israel to be unfaithful to Him by bowing down to other gods. There could be no religious syncretism for God's "treasured possession" (Deut 7:6). The Israelites were to love the Lord with all of their being, to teach the Lord's ways to their children, to be careful not to forget the Lord, to fear the Lord and serve Him only, and to do what was right and good in His sight (Deut 6:1–19). Then, all would go well for them in the land (Deut 6:18–19; cf. 5:28–29).

### **Drive Out and Destroy the Canaanites**

The Israelites were instructed to drive out the Canaanites rather than let them continue to live in the land:

When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you.... But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live. And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them (Num 33:51–52, 55–56).

The reason for such extreme measures was the threat of spiritual influence and corruption. This point is also made in reference to making treaties with the Canaanites: "Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you" (Exod 34:12). Similarly, they were to make no covenant with the Canaanites or with the Canaanite gods: "Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods. Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you" (Exod 23:32–33). The same point is made in regard to blending the Israelite and Canaanite civilizations: "Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly

destroy you” (Deut 7:3–4). Again, the threat of spiritual corruption in Israel would be inevitable if the Canaanites were allowed to live in the land.

The Israelites were commanded to destroy the Canaanites without mercy or pity:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you—and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally (הָרַגְתֶּם). Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy<sup>210</sup>. . . . You must destroy (אָבַד) all the peoples the LORD your God gives over to you. Do not look on them with pity and do not serve their gods, for that will be a snare to you (Deut 7:1–2, 16).

This would not be accomplished because of Israel’s own designs or power. Rather, it was the Lord’s mission to accomplish this end by means of the nation of Israel:

You may say to yourselves, “These nations are stronger than we are. How can we drive them out?” But do not be afraid of them; remember well what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. You saw with your own eyes the great trials, the miraculous signs and wonders, the mighty hand and outstretched arm, with which the LORD your God brought you out. The LORD your God will do the same to all the peoples you now fear. . . . No one will be able to stand up against you; you will destroy (שָׁמַד) them (Deut 7:17–19, 23; cf. 9:3; 19:1; 31:1–6; 33:26–29).

What this passage teaches is that Israel’s objective was crystal clear: they were to drive out the Canaanites and destroy any who remained to fight.<sup>211</sup> On the flip side, the Canaanites were not looking to surrender, to leave willingly, or to change religions.<sup>212</sup> To show mercy would mean

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<sup>210</sup> The JPS translation softens the ban by translating “show them no mercy” as “give them no quarter” (Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 382–83), but this is without lexical warrant.

<sup>211</sup> It may appear on the surface that the command to destroy the Canaanites conflicts with the command to drive them out. If the Canaanites were driven out, then they could not also literally be destroyed (killed). If they were literally destroyed, then they could not also be driven out. However, the two commands are complementary. If the Canaanites remained in their cities and towns to fight against the Israelites, then they were to be annihilated. If the Canaanites abandoned their towns, then they were to be driven out of the land to go live elsewhere so that the land would be rid of Canaanite corruption. The apparent contradiction is easily harmonized.

<sup>212</sup> There are only a couple of exceptions, which will be discussed below.

letting the Canaanites live among the Israelites, and then the Canaanite religion would continue in the Promised Land, including child sacrifices and all of the sexual sins in Leviticus 18. The result would be the perpetual pollution of the land as well as the corruption of the nation of Israel itself. Apparently, Canaanite religion was too enticing (e.g., sensual) and widespread for Israel to resist. The Israelites had already sinned against the Lord with the golden calf (Exod 32:1–35; cf. Deut 9:7–21) and with Baal of Peor (Num 25:1–18), and at least some of them were worshiping goat idols in the wilderness (Lev 17:7). They were prone to idolatry and the worship of other gods, and so the Canaanites had to be eliminated or expelled from the land. But even after the Conquest had concluded, the Israelites were warned about adopting Canaanite worship practices:

The LORD your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess. But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, “How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.” You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods. See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it (Deut 12:29–32; cf. 4:25–32).

Once again, there was no tolerance for Canaanite worship practices, which included child sacrifice as well as divination, sorcery, witchcraft, casting spells, and consulting mediums and witches to perform necromancy (Deut 18:9–14).

### **Rules for Warfare**

As if to make the point even clearer, the book of Deuteronomy further distinguishes between warring with nations at a distance (non-Canaanites) and with those nearby (Canaanites).

Nations at a distance were not subject to the ban:

When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. When the LORD your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take

these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the LORD your God gives you from your enemies. This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby (Deut 20:10–15).

The rules for warfare begin with an offer of peace—something not extended to the Canaanites. If accepted, then the foreigner enemies would become subject to forced labor and would presumably pay tribute to Israel.<sup>213</sup> If the foreign city rejected the peace offer, then the Israelites were to besiege the foreign city and put to the sword the men who lived in the city, probably because the men would continue to fight in a kill-or-be-killed scenario.<sup>214</sup> The women, children, livestock, and everything else in the city could be taken as plunder for the Israelites, which means that the majority of the people would have become part of the population of Israel.<sup>215</sup> The Israelite men were allowed to take a non-Canaanite, captive woman for a wife (Deut 21:10–14). This was the case with the virgin Midianite women in the wilderness who had *not* enticed the Israelite men into sexual immorality (Num 31:15–18). These foreign women would have been assimilated into the nation of Israel as seen with Ruth, the Moabitess (Ruth 1–4; cf. 2 Chron 12:13). The Israelites were commanded not to oppress aliens<sup>216</sup> but to love them and treat them

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<sup>213</sup> There were different types of slavery in the ancient world. One form was indentured servitude whereby someone who owed a debt could work as a slave (or bondservant) for a period of time until the debt was repaid (see Exod 21:2–11; Lev 25:35–43; Deut 15:1–18). The second type included slaves purchased from foreign nations (Lev 25:44–46). These servants would have been incorporated into Israelite society and would have been expected to keep the Law of Moses just like the Israelites. When the Israelites renewed the covenant on the plains of Moab, the foreigners who chopped wood and carried water were present along with the men, women, and children of Israel (Deut 29:11). The third type included slaves who were kidnapped and forced into servitude, which was outlawed as a capital offense in Israel (Deut 24:7).

<sup>214</sup> Derek Kidner, *Hard Sayings: The Challenge of Old Testament Morals* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972), 42. In at least one case, a group of Aramean soldiers was spared, given food and water, and sent back to their own country (2 Kgs 6:8–23).

<sup>215</sup> Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1–21:9, Revised*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 6A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 444.

<sup>216</sup> There were three categories of biblical aliens: strangers or sojourners (גֵּר), foreigners (נָכְרִי), and outsiders (אֲחֵרִי). For more information about the distinctions, see Adriane Leveen, *Biblical Narratives of Israelites and Their Neighbors: Strangers at the Gate* (London: Routledge, 2017), 5–ff.

equally since the Israelites had once been aliens in Egypt (Exod 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:33–34; Deut 10:19; 23:7).<sup>217</sup> Those born of a foreign marriage were not initially allowed to enter the assembly of the Lord, though subsequent generations of such citizens would be allowed (Deut 23:2–8).

Thus, there was a place for foreigners in Israel but not the worship of foreign gods.

The rules for warfare against the Canaanite nations were far different:

However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy (חָרַם [Hif. inf. abs.]) 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 20:16–18).

For the Canaanite nations, there would be no peace or mercy as stated earlier in Deuteronomy.

Joshua and the Israelites were not to leave alive anything that breathed, which is code for total annihilation (cf. Josh 10:40; 11:11; 1 Kgs 15:29). Again, the reason is that if the Canaanites were allowed to live, then they would lead Israel into apostasy.

### **Blessing for Obedience**

The Israelites would be immensely blessed if they obeyed the Law of Moses. The blessing would positively affect their land, reproduction, produce, livestock, health, safety, protection, and prosperity (Deut 6:10–12; 7:13–15; 28:1–14). Such obedience was a privilege, not a burden, and it would be a testimony to the nations:

Observe [the decrees and laws] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I (Moses) am setting before you today? (Deut 4:6–8).

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<sup>217</sup> This is not a contradiction to Deuteronomy 20:16–18, where the foreigners (Canaanites) living in the land were to be exterminated or driven out (contra Rannfrid I. Thelle, “The Biblical Conquest Account and Its Modern Hermeneutical Challenges,” *Studia Theologica* 61, no. 1 [Apr. 2007]: 71). Rather, the foreigners who were to be treated well were *already* living among the Israelites. The Canaanites are not in view here.



Obedience was both an expression of the covenant relationship (Deut 10:12–11:32; 26:16–19) and outward evidence of the internal circumcision of one’s heart (Deut 30:6). Additionally, obedience to the Law was reasonable and achievable.<sup>218</sup> The choice was up to them:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.... No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.... This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Deut 30:11, 14, 19–20).

It was in Israel’s best interest to faithfully obey the Lord. It was also in keeping with the Lord’s plan to bless all nations through Israel (Gen 12:3). Israel must faithfully follow the Lord’s decrees, laws, and statutes so that they would truly be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:6). Among those decrees was the command to destroy the Canaanites.

### **Punishment for Disobedience**

The instructions concerning the Conquest not only included punishment for the Canaanites but also punishment for the Israelite nation, town, or individual that disobeyed the Lord’s commands relating to the Conquest or Canaanite practices and worship. At the national level, failure to carry out the Lord’s commands to drive out and destroy the Canaanites without mercy or pity would result in religious syncretism and then consequent apostasy. Hence, there was the command to “destroy all the peoples the LORD your God gives over to you. Do not look on them with pity and do not serve their gods, for that will be a snare to you” (Deut 7:16). The Lord even promised to apply to the Israelites the punishment reserved for the Canaanites (i.e., the ban) for failing to obey the Lord’s commands: “But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the

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<sup>218</sup> Daniel I. Block, “Deuteronomy,” in *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig Bartholomew, and Daniel J. Treier (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 78–79.

land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live. And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them” (Num 33:55–56). Thus, the Israelites had only two options: destroy/drive out the Canaanites as the Lord commanded, or disobey the Lord by *not* destroying/driving out the Canaanites and allow them to live in the land. The latter option could be accomplished whether Israel won, lost, or tied a battle or war. If they won, they could take pity on the Canaanites and let them live. If they lost, that would mean that the Lord was not fighting for them because of sin in the camp (cf. Josh 7) or because the Israelites did not have faith to go up and fight the bigger, stronger, better-equipped Canaanites (cf. Deut 20:1–4; Judg 1:19–21). If there were a draw, then the Israelites could persist in driving out the Canaanites or relent and let them continue living in the land as neighbors. In other words, the nation and its military leader (Joshua) and tribal leaders would either drive out the Canaanites or let them live in the land; there was no third option. However, allowing the Canaanites to live in the land would lead to spiritual apostasy and would set Israel on a downward trajectory leading to a series of covenant *curses* and eventual exile from the land (Lev 26:14–45; Deut 28:15–68; 29:9–28; 30:17–18). If the Israelites became like the Canaanites, then they too would be removed from the Promised Land. It would actually please the Lord to ruin and destroy Israel in that situation (Deut 28:63).

Punishment for disobedience was prescribed for local situations too. If one of the Israelite towns went astray and started worshiping foreign gods, then a thorough investigation would be conducted, and if claims were true, then the Israelites were to put to the sword everyone living there. The entire town would be placed under the ban (Deut 13:15), including both people and livestock, and then all of the plunder of the town would be gathered into the town square and publicly burned. The town was never to be rebuilt, and no one was to confiscate any of the

banned items. Only purging the land of this great evil would replace the fierce anger of the Lord with His mercy, compassion, and blessing (Deut 13:12–18). Thus, the ban applied to the Canaanite towns and Israelite towns alike; the worship of false gods through bloodshed and sexual immorality was abominable (תועבה)<sup>219</sup> to the Lord no matter who was responsible for it.

On an individual level, committing the sins of the Canaanites was severely punished too. The Israelites were to “cut off” such persons (Lev 18:29), which meant either execution or banishment from the clan, community, land, city, parental home, or worship community.<sup>220</sup> Leviticus 20:10–19 clarifies that the sexual sins of adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and incest would be punishable by death.<sup>221</sup> Any man or woman who worshiped other gods would be stoned to death after an investigation was conducted. In this way, Israel would purge the evil from among themselves (Deut 17:2–7).<sup>222</sup> Likewise, false prophets who spoke in the name of other gods were to be put to death (Deut 18:20),<sup>223</sup> as were sorceresses (Exod 22:18). The same was true of any prophet or dreamer who led the Israelites to follow and worship “other gods” with miraculous signs and wonders (Deut 13:1–5). The Israelites were required to purge the evil from among themselves because the person had tried to turn the Israelites to following other

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<sup>219</sup> Regarding Canaanite abominations, see Lev 18:22, 26, 27, 29, 30; 20:13; Deut 7:25, 26; 12:31; 13:14; 17:4; 18:9, 12; 20:18; 23:18; 27:15; 32:16.

<sup>220</sup> Rolf P. Knierim, “On Punishment in the Hebrew Bible,” in *God’s Word for Our World: Theological and Cultural Studies in Honor of Simon John De Vries*, vol. 2, eds. J. Harold Ellens, Deborah L. Ellens, Rolf P. Knierim, and Isaac Kalimi (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 225.

<sup>221</sup> There are two exceptions. If a man slept with his aunt or married his brother’s wife, then the couple would die childless for dishonoring the uncle or brother (Lev 20:20–21).

<sup>222</sup> Cf. Exod 22:20; Deut 13:5; 17:12–13; 19:13, 19; 21:9, 18–21; 22:20–24; 24:7; cf. Judg 20:13; 2 Sam 4:1–12; 1 Kgs 22:46; 23:24–25.

<sup>223</sup> Cf. 1 Kgs 18:40; 19:1; 2 Kgs 10:25; 23:20; 2 Chron 15:13.

gods (Deut 13:5). Even close friends and relatives were to be executed if they invited the Israelites to worship other gods:

If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods” (gods that neither you nor your fathers have known, gods of the peoples around you, whether near or far, from one end of the land to the other), do not yield to him or listen to him. Show him no pity. Do not spare him or shield him. You must certainly put him to death. Your hand must be the first in putting him to death, and then the hands of all the people. Stone him to death, because he tried to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Then all Israel will hear and be afraid, and no one among you will do such an evil thing again (Deut 13:6–11).

The Canaanites were to be shown no mercy or pity for their evil worship, and the same was true in Israel, no matter how close the relations. The covenant curses would be upon idolators, murderers, and those who committed incest or bestiality, among other crimes (Deut 27:15–26).<sup>224</sup>

## Summary

In concluding this section, several observations are in order. First, the Lord would fulfill His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give their descendants the land of Canaan. This would take place not because of Israel’s own righteousness (Deut 9:4–6; cf. 7:7–10) or because they were more numerous (Deut 7:7–8) but because of the covenant with the patriarchs (Deut 9:5; 29:13). Second, the Lord would use Israel as His means of punishing the Canaanites because of Canaanite sexual sins and aberrant worship practices, which included child sacrifice. However, there was no tolerance for these practices in Israel either. If the Israelites adopted and persisted in Canaanite worship customs, they would suffer the same fate as the Canaanites. This was true of the nation as a whole as well as for towns and individuals. As Constable notes, the Conquest was about God’s war against *sin*: “God is constantly at war with sin because it is an

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<sup>224</sup> Later in Israel’s history, the Lord would show no pity to the impenitent idolators in Israel. See Isa 27:11; Jer 13:14; Eze 5:11; 7:4, 9; 8:18; 9:10; 24:14.

affront to His holiness and because it destroys people whom He loves and desires to bless.”<sup>225</sup>

Third, destroying and driving out the Canaanites was essential to the spiritual preservation of Israel. Allowing the Canaanites to live among the Israelites would lead to moral compromise and spiritual apostasy. Separation from the gods of other nations required separation from the nations themselves.<sup>226</sup> For this reason, there was to be no mercy, covenant, treaty, or intermarriage with the Canaanites. Fourth, Israel’s rules for war were different for non-Canaanite nations. In those situations, peace and assimilation were available. The Conquest, then, was a unique event with its own set of rules. Fifth, the Conquest was limited to a certain land and was therefore not an exercise in world domination.<sup>227</sup> Israel was not to take the land that the Lord had allotted to other nations. Sixth, the Lord Himself would lead Israel and fight for Israel to bring about the victory. The Conquest was His idea and would be accomplished through His power.<sup>228</sup> Moses makes this point in his final speech to Israel:

The LORD your God himself will cross over ahead of you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you will take possession of their land. Joshua also will cross over ahead of you, as the LORD said. And the LORD will do to them what he did to Sihon and Og, the kings of the Amorites, whom he destroyed along with their land. The LORD will deliver them to you, and you must do to them all that I have commanded you. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you (Deut 31:3–6).

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<sup>225</sup> Thomas L. Constable, “A Theology of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 105.

<sup>226</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 440.

<sup>227</sup> George L. Carey, “Biblical-Theological Perspectives on War and Peace,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (Apr 1985): 165.

<sup>228</sup> As Longman and Reid observe, “In ancient Israel, all of life was religious, all of life was related to God. Warfare was no exception.... Holy war was always initiated by Yahweh, never Israel” (Tremper Longman III & Daniel G. Reid, *God is a Warrior* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995], 32–33).

Seventh, there were blessings for obedience and punishments for disobedience. Israel had to obey all of the Lord's decrees, laws, and statutes in order to obtain the blessings and avoid the curses, and among the decrees were the commands to destroy the Canaanites and their articles of worship. Divine punishment would equally apply to the Israelites if they failed to execute the Conquest and then adopted Canaanite religion and behavior. The ground rules for the Conquest had been laid out, and the stage was set for its execution. However, the Lord had already revealed to Moses that the Israelites would soon turn to foreign gods and suffer many disasters as punishment from the Lord (Deut 31:16–21; cf. 31:24–29; 32:15–43), but this would only take place on a national scale after the death of Joshua, the human leader of the Conquest of Canaan.

#### Executing the Conquest

After reviewing the historical, contextual foundation for the Conquest along with the biblical prescriptions for the Conquest, it is now appropriate to examine the book of Joshua and the opening chapters of Judges to see what the Bible records about the execution of the Conquest. This section will provide a brief overview of the book of Joshua and then will explain what the book records concerning battles involving the ban, exceptions and additions to the ban, and Israel's ultimate failure to drive out the Canaanites and the effect this had upon the next generation of Israelites as recorded in the book of Judges. This section will show that the Conquest included the annihilation of the Canaanites that as Israel engaged them in battle, the Lord intervened to help Israel defeat their enemies.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> This section will deal with the biblical text as written, assuming for the sake of argument that the Conquest took place historically as recorded while recognizing that there is still debate about the dating and historicity of the events in Joshua.

## Overview of the Book of Joshua

The book of Joshua can be divided into four sections based on the contents of each section as well as the reoccurrence of a key verb in each section.<sup>230</sup> First is the entrance into the land of Canaan (Josh 1:1–5:12). This section includes Joshua’s commission (Josh 1), the scouting expedition to Jericho (Josh 2), crossing the Jordan River (Josh 3–4), and the recognition of the covenant through circumcision and celebration of the Passover at Gilgal (Josh 5:1–12). The verb עָבַר (“to cross, go over”) occurs twenty-eight times in this first section of Joshua.<sup>231</sup> The second section depicts the actual conquest of the land of Canaan (Josh 5:13–12:24). The captain of the Lord’s army encountered Joshua near Jericho (Josh 5:13–15) and gave him the battle plan for taking the city of Jericho, which Joshua and the Israelites accomplished through divine intervention (Josh 6). Then the Israelites faced defeat at Ai because of sin in the camp (Josh 7). After dealing with Achan’s sin, the Israelites went back to successfully conquer Ai (Josh 8:1–29) and then renewed the covenant at Shechem (Josh 8:30–35). The next series of chapters describe successful military campaigns in the south (Josh 9–10) and in the north (Josh 11:1–15) before giving a summary of Joshua’s success in battle with the help of the Lord (Josh 11:16–23) and a list of the Canaanite kings Joshua defeated (Josh 12). The verb that occurs frequently here is לָקַח (“to take”), which occurs when Achan took some of the devoted items as well as when Joshua took cities in battle.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> See Mark F. Rooker, “Joshua,” in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, eds. Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 279–82.

<sup>231</sup> Josh 1:2, 11 [2], 14; 2:23; 3:1, 2, 4, 6, 11, 14, 16, 17 [2]; 4:1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11[2], 12, 13, 22, 23[2]; 5:1.

<sup>232</sup> Josh 6:18; 7:1, 11, 21, 23, 24; 8:1, 12; 9:4, 11, 14; 11:16, 19, 23.

The third major section of Joshua recounts the division of the land of Canaan after the major campaigns had concluded (Josh 13:1–21:45). The key words are חָלַק (“to divide”)<sup>233</sup> and גִּזְרָל (“lot, allotment”).<sup>234</sup> This section begins with the recognition that there was still land to be taken (Josh 13:1–7) and then goes on to record the allocation of the land east of the Jordan (Josh 13:8–33), the land west of the Jordan (Josh 14), and the specific lands for each of the twelve tribes (Josh 15–19). Although the major battles had concluded, the Israelites were responsible for finishing the work of driving out the Canaanites little by little over time (cf. Deut 7:22). Last are the instructions for cities of refuge (Josh 20) and cities for the Levites (Josh 21:1–42). The final three verses in this section summarize the Lord’s faithfulness to Israel throughout the Conquest:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled (Josh 21:43–45).

The final three chapters of Joshua describe the return of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh to their lands on the east side of the Jordan River (cf. Num 32) as well as the civil war that nearly broke out against those tribes when the two-and-a-half tribes set up an altar for worship on the east side of the Jordan River (Josh 22). Fortunately, there was a simple misunderstanding, and the tribes east of the Jordan reassured the rest that they were not acting unfaithfully to the Lord but were merely setting up a memorial site for future generations (Josh 22:26–29). Joshua then bade farewell to the leaders (Josh 23), and the tribes of Israel renewed the covenant at Shechem (Josh 24:1–28). The book concludes with the death of Joshua and

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<sup>233</sup> Josh 13:7; 14:5; 18:2, 5, 10; 19:51.

<sup>234</sup> Josh 14:2; 15:1; 16:1; 17:1, 14, 17; 18:6, 8, 10, 11 [2]; 19:1, 10, 17, 24, 32, 40, 51; 21:4 [2], 5, 6, 8, 10, 20, 40.



Eleazar the high priest, the reburial of Joseph's remains in the land of Israel (cf. Gen 50:25; Heb 11:22), and the statement that Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who had experienced all that the Lord had done for Israel (Josh 24:29–33). The key verb in this final section is עָבַד ("to serve"),<sup>235</sup> which occurs in Joshua's final charge to the leaders:

Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD (Josh 24:14–15).

### **The Lord's Involvement**

There is no question that the book of Joshua records Israel's overall success in the Conquest. This was due to the Lord's involvement and not because of Israel's military strength, strategy, or weaponry.<sup>236</sup> Of course, success had already been predicted in Exodus and Deuteronomy and had been demonstrated by Israel's military victories over the Canaanites and Amorites in the wilderness (Num 21). The book of Joshua depicts the continuation of the Lord's role as designer, director, instigator, and participant in the battles of the Conquest. The first consideration is the Lord's commands and promises to Joshua, Israel's new military leader in place of Moses. The Lord told Joshua that He would give the land to the Israelites (Josh 1:2–4,

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<sup>235</sup> Josh 22:5, 27; 23:7, 16; 24:2, 14 [3], 15 [4], 16, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 31.

<sup>236</sup> The weapons mentioned in the book of Joshua include the sword (Josh 6:21), the javelin (Josh 8:18), and the bow (Josh 24:12), but the Israelite weapons and armor overall appears to have been substandard since they did not have iron chariots (Josh 17:16). The same is true during the period of the judges. Ehud had a double-edged sword or dagger (Judg 3:16), but Shamgar had to use an ox goad (Judg 3:31), and Samson resorted to using the jawbone of a donkey (Judg 15:15). The Benjamites had slings (Judg 20:16), which would have had some use, but not against the Canaanites' iron chariots (Judg 1:19; 4:3). As Hobbs observes, "There are no references to Israelite spears, bows, shields, javelins, axes, [or] maces in this early period, and there is no reference to protective body armour" (T. R. Hobbs, *A Time for War: A Study of Warfare in the Old Testament* [Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989], 110). By contrast, the Philistine and Egyptian soldiers pictured in reliefs from that time period had uniforms, body armor, shields, swords, spears, and bows and arrows, much like what appears later when David faced Goliath (cf. 1 Sam 17:4–7; Hobbs, *A Time for War*, 110–11).

15; cf. 23:13; 24:13), and no one would be able to stand against the Israelites (Josh 1:5). The Lord would be with Joshua as He was with Moses (Josh 1:5; cf. 1:17; 3:7; 6:27), which would ensure military success for Joshua and the Israelites (Josh 1:9). Second, the Lord worked behind the scenes to instill fear in the hearts of the Canaanites (Josh 2:8–11; 9:9–10, 24–25; 10:1–4), which gave confidence to Joshua and the Israelites that they would succeed in battle (Josh 2:24). He also hardened the hearts of the Canaanites for destruction: “For it was the LORD himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally (חרם), exterminating them without mercy, as the LORD had commanded Moses” (Josh 11:20). He had already done this to Pharaoh<sup>237</sup> in order to compel Pharaoh to let the Israelites go (Exod 3:19–20) and to the Amorite king Sihon (Deut 2:30), and He also hardened the hearts of the Canaanite kings as an act of judgment upon them. Of course, the Canaanites apparently hardened their own hearts too. When they heard about what had happened at Jericho and Ai, they banded together to make war against Joshua and the Israelites (Josh 9:1–2), though the Gibeonites at least recognized the need to try to make peace with Israel (Josh 9:3–27).

Third, the Lord would do amazing things among the people (Josh 3:5) to show them that He was with them and that He would certainly drive out the inhabitants of the land (Josh 3:10). Thus, there was a didactic, faith-promoting purpose behind the Lord’s miracles. The first miracle was the crossing of the Jordan River on dry ground with the ark of the covenant—the symbol of God’s presence (Exod 25:22; 30:6)—leading the way (Josh 3:14–17; cf. 6:6). Other miracles in the book of Joshua take place in the context of battle. The Lord made the walls of Jericho come tumbling down at the sound of trumpets and shouting (Josh 6:20), leaving the city vulnerable to

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<sup>237</sup> See Exod 7:3, 13; 8:15; 9:12, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8; cf. 1 Sam 6:6; Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “Divine Hardening in the Old Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (Oct.–Dec. 1996): 410–34.

attack. The Lord also honored the prophetic curse Joshua put on the city of Jericho for anyone who tried to rebuild it (Josh 6:26–27).<sup>238</sup> The Lord sent “the hornet” to drive out the Canaanites (Josh 24:12; cf. Exod 23:28; Deut 7:10), and He was responsible for the Israelites’ initial defeat at Ai due to sin in the camp (Josh 7:1–12) as well as their subsequent success against Ai (Josh 8:1–2, 7, 18, 26). The Lord delivered over the five-king Amorite coalition to the Israelites (Josh 10:8, 12, 19) by throwing them into confusion (Josh 10:10), by sending large hailstones to kill them directly (Josh 10:11), and by extending the daytime so that Joshua and the Israelites could finish the battle (Josh 10:12–14).<sup>239</sup> The miracles in battle would have confirmed to the Israelites that it was really *the Lord* who had commanded the extermination of the Canaanites and that they were acting in obedience to God’s will rather than acting according to their own wills.<sup>240</sup> As the text states, “Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel!” (Josh 10:14; cf. 10:42; 23:3, 10). Joshua told Israel’s commanders that the Lord would do this to all of Israel’s enemies (Josh 10:25), as demonstrated later when the Lord delivered over the Canaanites in the southern cities (Josh 10:30, 32) and the northern cities (Josh 11:6, 8).

Fourth, the Lord was the one who designed and directed the battle plans. As noted above, the Lord had given instructions to Moses concerning the total destruction of the Canaanites (e.g., Deut 7:1–5; 20:16–18). In the book of Joshua, the Lord Himself ensured their fulfillment. This is

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<sup>238</sup> Hundreds of years later, during the time of King Ahab, the curse was fulfilled. A man named Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho but only at the cost of his firstborn son, Abiram, and his youngest son, Segub, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken by Joshua son of Nun (1 Kgs 16:34). The curse on Jericho did not preclude people from living at the site of Jericho (cf. Josh 18:21; Judg 1:16; 3:13; 2 Sam 10:5). Rather, it applied to anyone who would try to rebuild Jericho with a foundation and gates (Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 116).

<sup>239</sup> Although there is much debate about what exactly took place when Joshua said, “O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon” (Josh 10:12), the point here is that there was *some* kind of divine activity in this event.

<sup>240</sup> See Matthew Rowley, “The Epistemology of Sacralized Violence in the Exodus and Conquest,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 1 (2014): 63–83.

first seen when the Lord appeared to Joshua before Israel's initial battle (Josh 5:13–15). When Joshua was nearing Jericho, he was stopped by a “man” standing in front of him with a drawn sword. Joshua seemingly did not know the identity of the man because he asked the man whether he was on the side of Israel or the side of Israel's enemies. The man responded that he was not on either side but that he had come as “commander of the army of the LORD” (Josh 5:14).<sup>241</sup> The Lord then told Joshua that He had delivered Jericho into Israel's hands (Josh 6:2), and He proceeded to give Joshua the battle plan for taking Jericho (Josh 6:3–5). The Lord was the architect behind the destruction of Jericho and its citizens. The Lord was also the one who commanded Joshua to destroy Achan (Josh 7:12) and the city of Ai (Josh 8:1–3). When Joshua subdued the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills, and the mountain slopes, he left no survivors in accordance with what the Lord had commanded (Josh 10:40; 11:12, 23). Joshua was simply being obedient to the word of the Lord: “As the LORD commanded his servant Moses, so Moses commanded Joshua, and Joshua did it: he left nothing undone of all that the LORD commanded Moses” (Josh 11:15; cf. 11:23). The summary statement at the end of Joshua's life looking back encapsulates the Lord's active role in the Conquest of Canaan:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of the enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled” (Josh 21:43–45; cf. 23:9–10).

After the major campaigns were finished, the Lord told Joshua that there was still land remaining for the Israelites to take (Josh 13:2–5), and the Lord would drive out the inhabitants from before

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<sup>241</sup> This person was arguably a theophany (or Christophany) because when Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, Joshua was not rebuked by the “man” (cf. Rev 19:10; 22:8–9). Instead, the commander of the Lord's army told Joshua, “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy” (Josh 5:15). This is an obvious reference to Moses' encounter with the Lord at the burning bush (Exod 3:5). Then, the text states that the Lord spoke to Joshua (Josh 6:2), thereby identifying the commander of the Lord's army with the Lord Himself. The Lord was indeed *with* Joshua.

the Israelites (Josh 13:6; cf. 24:5). The Conquest was ultimately the Lord's mission (Josh 22:3), and the Lord was responsible for giving Israel the land.<sup>242</sup>

### **Imposition of the Ban**

The book of Joshua contains a number of examples of the imposition of the ban against the Canaanites. The term **חרם** ("devote to destruction") is used in several places to refer to the destruction of the Amorites (Josh 2:10) and Canaanites (Josh 6:21; 8:26; 10:1, 28, 35, 37, 39, 40; 11:11, 12, 20, 21; cf. Judg 1:17) as well as to the plunder from Jericho that was consecrated to the Lord as "devoted things" (Josh 6:18). The "devoted people" were to be destroyed in accordance with the Lord's will to punish the Canaanites, and the "devoted things" were off limits for the Israelites (cf. Deut 7:26). When the Israelites conquered Jericho, "They devoted (**חרם**) 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; cf. Deut 2:34). The only ones who were spared were Rahab and her family (Josh 6:17, 22–23, 25), which included her father and mother, brothers and sisters, and all who belonged to them (Josh 2:13). This was in response to Rahab's act of faith in hiding the spies and assisting Israel (Josh 2:1–21). The fact that Rahab and her family were the only ones spared implies that the rest of the people in Jericho were put to death as the text states (cf. Judg 1:22–26). This also follows from the fact that even the animals were killed at Jericho.<sup>243</sup> Total annihilation is also implied because Joshua and the Israelites

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<sup>242</sup> See Josh 1:2–4, 6, 11, 15; 2:9, 14; 11:23; 12:7; 21:43; 24:13.

<sup>243</sup> Davies thinks that the animals were killed gratuitously: "Now a moment's thought should have alerted exegetes to the fact that this [Canaanite wickedness] could not have been the *real* reason why the Canaanites had to be exterminated, for if they were annihilated simply on account of their wickedness, why was there need to destroy the animals as well? It is perfectly obvious that the real reason the Canaanites were decimated was because they happened to be living in the land in which the Israelites wanted to settle (or, rather, the land in which God wanted the Israelites to settle)" (Davies, *The Immoral Bible*, 127–28). What Davies does not realize is that it would have been *more* beneficial to slaughter the people and keep the livestock if the Conquest were simply a land grab. However, the animals may have been involved in bestiality and therefore would need to be slaughtered as well (cf.

burned the city of Jericho to the ground (Josh 6:24). They did the same to Ai (Josh 8:28) and Hazor as well (Josh 11:11, 13). When the cities were burned, the citizens either had to flee or be taken as captives to avoid being killed. In this situation, though, the Israelites were instructed to show no mercy, and there is no record of Canaanites fleeing these cities. In fact, the citizens of Jericho were shut up inside the walls (Josh 6:1) in hopes that the city walls would protect them. Even if there were some who fled beforehand, the rest would have been killed in the battle.

Israel's second battle at Ai also resulted in the death of twelve thousand men and women of Ai, which included all who lived at Ai (Josh 8:24–26). Although children are not mentioned in the text, it is likely that they would have been present but just not listed. Adoni-Zedek, king of Jerusalem, heard that Joshua had totally destroyed Ai just as he had done to Jericho (Josh 10:1), which may be a clue that children were present at Ai since they were present at Jericho (Josh 6:21). The book of Joshua also describes how the Israelites “put to the sword” cities and all that were in them (Josh 10:28, 30, 32, 35, 37, 39; 11:11, 14), which speaks of utter destruction. In several places, the text states that the Israelites left no survivors (Josh 10:28, 30, 33, 37, 39, 40; 11:8, 22) and that “all who breathed” were destroyed (Josh 10:40; 11:11, 14; cf. Deut 20:16). However, the emphasis of the book is not on the glorification of brutality but on obedience to the Lord.<sup>244</sup> Deuteronomy prescribes the ban, and Joshua records<sup>245</sup> its execution in accordance with the Lord's commands:

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Lev 18:23–24). The Lord did allow the Israelites to take plunder and livestock from Ai (Josh 8:2, 27) and from the northern cities (Josh 11:14). The text does not give a reason for the difference, so one can only speculate as to the change in policy.

<sup>244</sup> David T. Lamb, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 77–78.

<sup>245</sup> The book of Judges also records a few episodes of the ban. When the Israelites attacked Jerusalem, which was occupied by the Jebusites, they took the city, put it to the sword, and set it on fire (Judg 1:8). The men of Judah went with the Simeonites and attacked the Canaanites living in Zephath and totally destroyed the city, which was later called “Hormah” (destruction) for that reason (Judg 1:17; cf. Num 14:45; 21:1–3). The house of Joseph

So Joshua subdued the whole region.... He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded.... Joshua took all these royal cities and their kings and put them to the sword. He totally destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded.... As the LORD commanded his servant Moses, so Moses commanded Joshua, and Joshua did it; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD commanded Moses.... So Joshua took the entire land, just as the LORD had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions (Josh 10:40; 11:12, 15, 23).

## Exceptions to the Ban

The book of Deuteronomy is clear that there were to be no treaties made (Deut 7:2) and no captives taken (Deut 20:16–18) during the Conquest. However, Joshua and Judges record three exceptions to the rule. First is Rahab the prostitute who lived in Jericho. Before Joshua and the Israelites crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land, Joshua sent two spies (cf. Num 13:1–24) over to Jericho to do some reconnaissance. Upon arriving, they entered the house of Rahab the prostitute who acted in faith (cf. Jas 2:25) and hid the two spies, saving them from being captured by Jericho's authorities (Josh 2:1–7). In conversing with the spies, she conveyed her own faith in the Lord, the God of Israel:

I know that the LORD has given this land to you 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 and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and that you will save us from death (Josh 2:9–13).

Although she had been a prostitute and therefore was probably deeply involved in Canaanite religion, she appears to have had a change of heart in that she was willing to harbor the spies

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attacked Bethel (Luz) and put the city to the sword, sparing only the man who helped them enter the city and his family (Judg 1:22–26). Although the term *ḥērem* is not used, Judges 19–21 appears to be an episode where the ban was implemented against the tribe of Benjamin within Israel itself. See Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 69–72.

rather than hand them over. She also recognized the supremacy of Yahweh, and she bargained for mercy from the spies for herself and her family. When Joshua and the Israelites conquered Jericho, they made sure to spare Rahab and her family (Josh 6:17), and the biblical text records that she lived in Israel “to this day”<sup>246</sup> (Josh 6:25), which means that she continued to live in Israel afterwards. There is no indication in Joshua that the Israelites did anything wrong in sparing Rahab and her family, and Rahab is even listed in the genealogy of Christ in the New Testament (Matt 1:5). The New Testament also distinguishes her from the wicked Canaanites. Because she welcomed the spies, “she was not killed with those who were disobedient” (Heb 11:31).

The second example is like the first. In the opening chapter of the book of Judges, which picks up the Conquest narrative from Joshua, the men from the house of Joseph sent spies into the city of Bethel (formerly called Luz). Like the situation in Joshua 2, the spies met a man coming out of the city who agreed to show the Israelites how to get into the city, and in turn, the Israelites spared the man and his whole family after they put the entire city to the sword. The man moved to the land of the Hittites and built a city called Luz (Judg 1:22–26). Although there is not as much detail in this story concerning the man and his faith, one can deduce that the man acted in faith as well since he chose to help the spies rather than report them, and he asked for mercy in exchange for his help.

What these two examples show is that mercy was available for the Canaanites after all. As Waltke states, “*hesed* has priority over *herem*.”<sup>247</sup> Such mercy was conditioned upon

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<sup>246</sup> For other examples of “to this day” in Joshua, see Josh 4:9; 5:9; 7:26; 8:28, 29; 9:27; 10:27; 13:13; 14:14; 15:63; 16:10; 19:47; 23:9; cf. Judg 1:21, 26.

<sup>247</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 516; cf. Jas 2:13.



repentance, though. If the Canaanites simply surrendered but continued in their wickedness, then they were to be executed. The book of Joshua records no such surrender because the Canaanites were bent on evil and because the Lord hardened their hearts. The only exception is the Gibeonites, who resorted to a ruse (discussed below). If the Canaanites had truly turned toward the God of Israel in faith, then they could have obtained mercy and then assimilated into Israel, and there would have been no threat of spiritual corruption for any who proselytized to the God of Israel since they would have shared the same faith and would have become participants in the same covenant obligations. The issue was faith, not ethnicity. This is demonstrated by the fact that there were already foreigners living among the Israelites dating all the way back to the Exodus (cf. Exod 12:19, 48–49; 22:1; 23:9). There were foreigners among the Israelites at the time of the Conquest too. After the victory at Ai, Joshua set up an altar at Mount Ebal, made a copy of the Book of the Law of Moses, and read the blessings and curses to the people gathered at the base of Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal as Moses had instructed. Those present included aliens and citizens, elders, officials and judges, and women and children (Josh 8:30–35; cf. Deut 27:1–8). Everyone living in the land—both native born and foreigner—was included in the covenant and was expected to keep the laws and decrees (Lev 18:26; Deut 29:9–15). This would have included Rahab and her family as well as the man from Luz and his family.<sup>248</sup>

The third example of an exception to the ban is found in Joshua 9. When Canaanite kings in the western foothills and hill country and along the coast heard what Joshua and the Israelites

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<sup>248</sup> Another interpretation is that the exceptions to the ban prove that there was a tension between the book of Joshua and the harsh prescriptions in Deuteronomy such that the author(s) or editor(s) of Joshua wanted to minimize or soften the severity of the Law by including a couple of stories of sparing Canaanites (J. Cornelius de Vos, “Violence in the Book of Joshua,” in *Violence in the Hebrew Bible: Between Text and Reception*, eds. Jacques van Ruiten and Koert van Bakkum [Leiden: Brill, 2020], 161–76). However, there is no tension between the two books. As shown above, the book of Joshua continually points back to obedience to the Law of Moses, and the book of Deuteronomy teaches that there were already foreigners included in the faith and society of Israel.

had done to Jericho and Ai, they formed a coalition against Joshua and Israel (Josh 9:1–2). However, the Gibeonites put on a ruse to try to make peace with the Israelites instead (Josh 9:3–6). The Gibeonites were a Hivite (or Amorite [cf. 2 Sam 21:2]) group, which was one of the seven Canaanite nations the Lord put under the ban (Josh 9:7; cf. Deut 7:1). They beguiled Joshua and the Israelite leaders by claiming to be from a distant land, which would make the rules of warfare different than if they were known to be Canaanites (cf. Deut 20:10–15). The Gibeonites had heard of the Lord’s fame and what He had done to Egypt and to the Amorite kings Sihon and Og (Josh 9:9–10), which is perhaps evidence of genuine faith (cf. 2:9–11). After a close inspection of the Gibeonites’ supplies, Joshua and his men made the peace treaty under oath, concluding that the Gibeonites did indeed reside in a distant land (Josh 9:11–14). However, the text is clear that the men of Israel did not inquire of the Lord (Josh 9:14), which implies that had they done so, then the Lord would have revealed to them the true identity of the Gibeonites, resulting in the divinely-mandated execution of the Gibeonites, who would have been no less deserving of divine punishment than any of the other Canaanites. However, the Gibeonites tricked the Israelites and made the treaty. Three days later, the Israelites uncovered the ruse and went to the Gibeonite cities to settle the score. In the end, the Israelites did not permit themselves to break the oath they had sworn before the Lord God of Israel (Josh 9:16–18; cf. Num 30:1–2; Deut 23:21–23; Psa 15:4) because they feared that the wrath of God would fall on them if they were to break the oath (Josh 9:19–20). Instead, Joshua chastised the Gibeonites for the deception and placed them under a curse to serve as woodcutters and water carriers for the house of his God (Josh 9:21–23; cf. 16:10; 17:13). This would have given them access to the covenant as members of the community (cf. Deut 29:11). The pericope concludes as follows: “So Joshua

saved them from the Israelites, and they did not kill them” (Josh 9:26). As to the question of how to interpret the actions in Joshua 9, Waltke offers the following insights:

Nevertheless, both Israel and Gibeon fulfill the divine will in the wrong way and are punished. Israel fails to consult I AM and therefore loses possession of four Gibeonite cities (9:16–17). The Gibeonites, unlike Rahab, seek to effect a treaty with Israel by subterfuge, and because of their unethical means, are put under a curse to become Israel’s slaves in I AM liturgy. This curse becomes the first fulfillment of Noah’s curse that Canaan would be a slave of Shem (Gen. 9:26). Moreover, Israel’s sparing of Gibeon and the villages around it shows that exceptions could and must be made to the Law. When compromising situations arise because the word of God has not been sought or followed, leaders are to pursue the path of holiness and to avoid breaking still other laws. In this case, Israel’s leaders, in spite of the grumbling of the people, refuse to rectify their first wrong by breaking their vows (Josh. 9:16–21).<sup>249</sup>

As with Rahab, the Gibeonites were an exception to the ban, albeit through deception.<sup>250</sup>

### **An Addition to the Ban**

Not only were there a few exceptions to the ban, but there was also a significant *addition* to the ban. Just before the Israelites took the city of Jericho, Joshua gave the following warning to the Israelites:

The city and all that is in it are to be devoted (חרם) to the LORD.... But keep away from the devoted things (חרם), so that you will not bring about your own destruction (חרם) by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction (חרם) and bring trouble on it. All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury (Josh 6:17–19; cf. Deut 7:25–26).

Not only were the city and the citizenry devoted to the Lord, but so was the plunder in this case.

Any violation of this simple command was punishable by death. If someone took the items devoted to destruction, then the ban would be imposed on him. After the battle, the biblical text

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<sup>249</sup> Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 522. For further discussion, see Lawson G. Stone, “Ethical and Apologetic Tendencies in the Redaction of the Book of Joshua,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1991): 25–36.

<sup>250</sup> Centuries later, King Saul put to death some of the Gibeonites as an imposition of the ban upon them, which violated the peace treaty established at the time of the Conquest. Because of this, the Lord allowed a three-year famine in Israel during David’s reign until there was some atonement for the bloodshed (2 Sam 21:1–14).

states, “But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things. Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the LORD’s anger burned against Israel.” (Josh 7:1). When Joshua sent troops to attack the next city, which was smaller and less formidable than Jericho, his men were defeated, and 36 soldiers were killed (Josh 7:2–5). The Lord did not secure the victory, and Joshua knew it (Josh 7:6–9). Although Joshua was upset, the Lord corrected him and informed him of the infraction: “Israel has sinned” (Josh 7:11). As Robinson summarizes, “The sin of Israel is stated in five successive points, viz. the overstepping of the covenant..., by infringement of the *herem*, through theft, implicit lying, and appropriation of Yahweh’s property.”<sup>251</sup> Achan robbed the whole nation of its purity and holiness before God.<sup>252</sup> Consequently, the Israelites could not succeed against their enemies until the devoted things had been removed (Josh 7:13). The next day, the Lord revealed to Joshua the identity of the perpetrator, and Achan confessed to his misdeed (Josh 7:14–21). His sin had found him out (cf. Num 32:23). In response, Joshua and the Israelites confiscated the plunder from Achan’s tent and then took him along with his sons, daughters, cattle, donkeys, sheep, tent, and possessions out to the Valley of Achor where they proceeded to stone them to death in order to placate the Lord’s fierce anger (Josh 7:22–26).

One important topic introduced by the story of Achan’s sin is the concept of corporate responsibility. This subject will be discussed at length later, but the basic idea is that the actions of the individual affect the larger group. One man sinned, but the condemnation fell upon the entire nation of Israel as if all of Israel had sinned. The only way to rectify the situation was to stamp out the evil from within Israel. Why his children were included in his punishment is the

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<sup>251</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *Deuteronomy and Joshua* (New York: Henry Frowde, 1907), 297.

<sup>252</sup> Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, 120.

subject of speculation and debate. Calvin believed that the reason for destroying the plurality for the sake of the individual was a mystery.<sup>253</sup> Another suggestion is that Achan's children were participants in the deception. Since he hid the forbidden items in his tent, then it is unlikely that the children were ignorant of his actions.<sup>254</sup> One potential problem with this view is that Achan's livestock and belongings were destroyed too, though the livestock would not have been party to the sin. A third suggestion is that the Lord dealt more severely with Achan as an example to the Israelites at this point in Israel's history.<sup>255</sup> This may be the case since later in Israel's history, Saul kept for himself the Amalekite animals placed under the ban rather than destroying them, and yet he was not immediately destroyed, though the Lord rejected him as king and tore the kingdom away from him as a consequence (1 Sam 15:1–35). Another interpretation is that when Achan stole the devoted things, Achan and everything belonging to him became “contaminated” and had to be destroyed, just like the Canaanites at Jericho and their families and possessions. Whatever the case, this story demonstrates the severity of the ban as well as the fact that the ban could be applied to Israel just as much as it was applied to the Canaanites.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> “We formerly explained why the punishment of a private sacrilege is transferred to all; because although they were not held guilty in their own judgment or that of others, yet the judgment of God, which involved them in the same condemnation, had hidden reasons into which, though it may perhaps be lawful to inquire soberly, it is not lawful to search with prying curiosity” (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Joshua*, trans. Henry Beveridge, accessed May 23, 2019, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom07.pdf>).

<sup>254</sup> John David Michaelis, *Commentaries on the Law of Moses*, vol. 3, trans. Alexander Smith (Aberdeen: A. Chalmers & Co., 1814), 404.

<sup>255</sup> Constable, “A Theology of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth,” 105; cf. Acts 5:1–11.

<sup>256</sup> John Goldingay, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 34. Another situation that almost resulted in an addition to the ban is found in Joshua 22, where the ten-and-a-half tribes living west of the Jordan thought that the two-and-a-half tribes east of the Jordan had built an altar to another god, thereby apostatizing from the faith of Israel, which would have warranted destruction (cf. Deut 13:12–18). It turned out that it was all a big misunderstanding, but what the story teaches is that there was a genuine concern that the Lord's wrath would fall upon the entire nation for the sins of some of its members just like when the Israelites sinned by worshiping Baal of Peor (Josh 22:17 [cf. Num 25:1–18]) and just like Achan's sin (Josh 22:20; cf. 7:1–26). At that time in Israel's history, apostasy was fresh in their minds as a threat to their national and spiritual wellbeing.

## Results of the Conquest

### Canaanites Remaining

Although Joshua and the Israelites had success in the major campaigns recorded in Joshua 6–11 with the exception of the initial battle at Ai, the book of Joshua also teaches that at the end of Joshua’s life, there was still land to be taken from the remaining Canaanites (Josh 13:1–5). This may at first seem to contrast with Joshua 11:23, which states, “So Joshua took the entire land, just as the LORD had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions.” A similar statement comes at the end of the book of Joshua:

So the LORD gave all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled (Josh 21:43–45; cf. 23:14).

From reading these verses, one might assume that the Israelites occupied the entire land and that there were no Canaanites left. Even the word “Conquest” itself can imply a completed process.<sup>257</sup> The summary statements above may also appear to contradict the book of Judges, which states that the Israelites did *not* succeed in driving out the Canaanites (Judg 1:27–3:6).<sup>258</sup> There is no contradiction, though. The Lord had already told the Israelites that He would not drive out the Canaanites all at once but that He would expel them little by little (Exod 23:29–30; Deut 7:22; cf. 12:29–32). In general, the Conquest *was* finished, even if there were still Canaanites left to drive out (cf. Josh 13:6).<sup>259</sup> The Lord had given the land rest from war (Josh 11:23; 22:4; 23:1),

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<sup>257</sup> Daniel C. Trimmer, “Joshua,” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the Old Testament: The Gospel Promised*, ed. Miles V. Van Pelt (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 163.

<sup>258</sup> Rudolf Smend, “The Unconquered Land,” in *‘The Unconquered Land’ and Other Old Testament Essays: Selected Studies by Rudolf Smend*, eds. Edward Ball and Margaret Barker, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: Routledge, 2013), 103; cf. Moore, *Judges*, 7–8.

but the Canaanites remained here and there throughout the land. The major campaigns had destroyed armies and major cities and fortresses, but that did not mean that the Israelites had rooted out every town and village that they would inherit (cf. Josh 15:21–62) or driven out those who fled during a battle (cf. Josh 10:20). It seems that in at least one case, the Canaanites reoccupied one of the cities that had been conquered (Josh 15:13–16; cp. 10:36–37; Judg 1:10).

As Goldingay comments,

Historically, one consideration to keep in mind is that presumably the hapless inhabitants of these cities didn't simply wait within them for Joshua to come and slaughter them. Cities under attack don't do that. As the Old Testament observes elsewhere, when a city is under attack, its people run to the hills. They sit out the siege and the battle and the departure of the attackers, then come back home and start their lives over again when the attackers have gone. That helps to explain the way some cities and peoples have to be attacked, defeated, and annihilated on several occasions....<sup>260</sup>

Therefore, it is no surprise to find Canaanites still in the land after the war had ceased (Josh 23:12). With the Lord's help, the Israelites would need to continue their efforts in driving out the Canaanites (cf. Josh 13:6; 14:12; 23:5). Neither is it astonishing to find Canaanites around after Joshua and the Israelites imposed the ban on them. Wherever the ban was imposed, there were no survivors *there*, but that does not mean that there were no Canaanites elsewhere.<sup>261</sup> The statements about the Israelites' success and the Lord's faithfulness refer to Joshua 6–12, not to the subsequent failures by individual tribes to finish the job of driving out Canaanite pockets of resistance. The fact that the land was divided and distributed to the Israelites (Josh 13–19) shows

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<sup>259</sup> Gustav Friedrich Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Ellen D. Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874), 124.

<sup>260</sup> Goldingay, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth for Everyone*, 356. This fact is attested by ancient battle accounts as well. See Hugo Grotius, *On the Law of War and Peace*, trans. De Jure Belli ac Pacis (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), 285–86; Xenophon, *Anabasis*, trans. Carleton L. Brownson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), 3.5.16–4.1.8.

<sup>261</sup> The same is true of Korah's rebellion (Num 16:31–33; cp. 26:11), the slaughter of the Midianites (Num 31:7, 17; cp. Judg 6:1), the destruction of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:7–8; cp. 27:8–9; 30:1, 2, 17; 1 Chron 4:43), and the killing of all the Edomite men (1 Kgs 11:16; cp. 2 Kgs 8:22).

that the Israelites had destroyed the Canaanite's domination of the country and had come to possess the land.

### **Eventual Spiritual Corruption**

The book of Joshua is largely a story of success as Joshua faithfully led the Israelites to destroy, drive out, and dispossess the Canaanites. As noted above, the summary statements in the book attest to the Lord's faithfulness and Israel's accomplishments. But after the individual tribes had received their allotment, it was their responsibility to continue to expel the Canaanites while trusting in the Lord to help them. The corporate responsibility was shifted to each tribe under its own leaders. Some were successful in their endeavors. Caleb, for example, was eager to take Hebron and face the Anakites:

Now then, just as the LORD promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the desert. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I'm just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the LORD promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but the LORD helping me, I will drive them out just as he said (Josh 14:10–12; cf. Num 14:24).

Caleb and his clan did in fact drive out the Anakites and settle in his portion of Judah's allotment (Josh 15:13–19). A few other examples are found in the opening chapter of Judges where the men of Judah successfully dislodged the Canaanites in their territory and then applied the ban to the city of Jerusalem and set it on fire (Judg 1:1–15). Similarly, the men of Judah went with the Simeonites and attacked the Canaanites living in Zephath and totally destroyed (חרם) the city, which was later called “destruction” (הַרְמָה) for that reason (Judg 1:17; cf. Num 14:45; 21:1–3). The men of Judah also took the three Philistine cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, and Ekron along with their territories (Judg 1:18). At least two of the tribes—Judah and Simeon—experienced success.



Unfortunately, the initial success of the Judahites was short-lived. Although the Lord was “with” the men of Judah in their military endeavors (Judg 1:19), they were unable to dispossess the inhabitants of the plains because the Canaanites had iron chariots (Judg 1:19; cf. Josh 17:16–18). Since the Israelites were later able to defeat the Canaanite general Sisera with the Lord’s help (Judg 4:14–24) even though Sisera had 900 iron chariots (Judg 4:3, 13), then the failure appears to be on the part of Judah. Perhaps the men of Judah were unfaithful or did not persevere (cf. Josh 23:12–13). When the men from the tribe of Joseph asked Joshua for a larger territory since Joseph was a numerous people, Joshua told them to take their large group and clear out some of the forest land belonging to the Perizzites and Rephaites. But the men of Joseph objected because the Canaanites had iron chariots, to which Joshua assured them that they could drive them out despite the iron chariots (Josh 17:14–18). The deciding factor, in other words, was obedience to the Lord’s commands both for the men of Joseph and for the men of Judah. The initial success of destroying Jerusalem (Judg 1:8) was also overturned. Later on, the Benjamites failed to dislodge the Jebusites, who apparently moved back in to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city (Judg 1:21; cf. Josh 15:63).

In the end, most of the tribes failed to drive out and destroy the Canaanites. Some of these tribes were initially hesitant to venture out and take possession of their inheritance (Josh 18:3), perhaps showing a weakness in their faith. Eventually, they were unable to drive out the Canaanites, who were determined to live in the land, and instead decided to press them into forced labor while allowing them to live among the Israelites (Josh 13:13; Josh 16:10; 17:12–13; Judg 1:27–35). This arrangement lasted for hundreds of years (cf. 1 Kgs 9:20–21; 2 Chron 8:7–8). To make matters worse, the Amorites confined the Danites to the hill country and would not allow them down in the plains (Judg 1:34), and so the Danites later abandoned their territory and

moved to another area because they still had not come into their inheritance (Josh 19:47–48; Judg 18:1–31). The Israelites ended up making covenants with the people of the land and did not break down their altars (Judg 2:2), so the Lord said, “Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you” (Judg 2:3; cf. Num 33:55–56; Josh 23:12–13).

While Israel served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who outlived Joshua (Josh 24:31; cf. Judg 2:7), the book of Judges states:

After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress (Judg 2:10–15).

Apparently, the second generation of Israelites to leave Egypt—those who participated in the Conquest—failed to teach its children the laws and decrees of the Lord (cf. Deut 6:4–9; Psa 78:4). The rest of the book of Judges is largely the story of apostasy, punishment, and defeat, as Joshua had predicted (Josh 23:15–16). Because the Israelites violated the covenant by worshiping other gods, the Lord no longer drove out the enemy nations remaining after Joshua died (Judg 2:20–21, 23). In fact, He was *against* them, as He had warned.<sup>262</sup> The Lord did not drive out the Canaanites on His own. Rather, He left the Canaanite nations to test the Israelites to see whether they would keep the way of the Lord and walk in it as their forefathers had done (Judg 2:22; 3:4). The Lord also allowed the enemy nations to remain in the land in order to teach

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<sup>262</sup> See Deut 4:25–28; 8:19–20; 11:16–17, 26–28; 16:21–22; 28:25, 33; 29:24–28; 31:16–18, 29; Josh 24:15–16.

warfare to the Israelite descendants who had not had previous battle experience (Judg 3:1–2).

The surviving nations included the five rulers of the Philistines, all of the Canaanites, the Sidonians, and the Hivites living in the mountains of Lebanon from Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo Hamath (Judg 3:3). These remaining peoples occupied and controlled their own lands in defiance of Israel (cf. Judg 10:8; 12:15; 21:12). The Israelites lived among them and intermarried with the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. They also began serving their gods (Judg 3:5–6; 6:7–10; 8:33–34; 10:6–16).<sup>263</sup> It was not until the time of David that the Israelites regained control over the Promised Land (2 Sam 5; 8; 10).

### **Continuing Spiritual Corruption**

The rest of the book of Judges records the cycles of apostasy, repentance, deliverance, and peace that repeat throughout this period of Israel's history. Unfortunately, the success and blessings of the book of Joshua were quickly replaced by "the Canaanization of Israel."<sup>264</sup> Instead of Israel being a holy nation with the mission of blessing the nations, they became religiously syncretistic and compromised. Even the Levites and priests became corrupt (cf. Judg 17–19), and the tribe of Benjamin was nearly exterminated due to its wicked behavior (Judg 19–21). Additionally, the Baal worship that began in this period lasted for centuries to come,<sup>265</sup> and the child sacrifice that was characteristic of the Canaanite religions eventually infiltrated Israel.<sup>266</sup> King Manasseh of Judah even outdid the Amorites in terms of his wickedness (2 Kgs

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<sup>263</sup> The book of Judges has many references to the Israelites doing evil in the eyes of the Lord: Judg 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1; 20:3, 12, 13; cf. 1 Sam 2:23.

<sup>264</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary, vol. 6 (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 75.

<sup>265</sup> See Judg 2:11, 13; 3:7; 10:6; 1 Sam 7:4; 12:10; 1 Kgs 16:31–33; 22:53; 2 Kgs 1:2–16; 3:2–3; 10:18–29; 17:7–17; 21:1–9.

<sup>266</sup> See 2 Kgs 16:3; 21:6; Isa 57:5–9; Jer 7:30–32; 19:5–6; 32:34–35; Eze 16:20–21; 20:31; 23:36–39.

21:11), and the Israelites were ultimately removed from the Promised Land for their covenant infidelity (cf. 2 Kgs 17; 25). When the Israelites returned to the land after seventy years in exile in Babylon, they once again intermarried with the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites (Ezra 9:1) and “mingled the holy race with the peoples around them” (Ezra 9:2). Knowing the gravity of the situation, Ezra, the spiritual leader, issued a drastic order for the Israelite men to separate from their foreign wives, and the Israelites complied (Ezra 10:1–17), thereby averting the same another exile from the land.

### Concluding Observations

Several observations are in order. First, the Conquest was in the plan of God going back to the time of Abram. The Israelites would drive out their enemies and possess the Promised Land, but it would not take place for centuries because the sin of the Amorites had not yet reached its full measure. The timing was not right, in other words, and it would have been premature to apply the ban to the Canaanites until centuries later. The exception was the Lord’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which was a foretaste of both Canaanite wickedness to come later and the severe judgment that accompanied the Conquest. Second, the Lord’s plan from the beginning was to *bless* the nations through Abram and his descendants. Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to reach the other nations. The ultimate blessing would come through Israel’s messiah. Third, the key to being a holy nation was spiritual separation. Israel was strictly forbidden from adopting Canaanite sexual immorality and aberrant religious practices such as witchcraft, idolatry, and child sacrifice. Any of these crimes was punishable by death, and if an individual town went apostate, then the entire town was to be put to death and burned. The same ban/curse upon the Canaanites would also fall upon the Israelites if they followed Canaanite ways. Fourth, the prescriptions for the Conquest called for total annihilation

without pity, mercy, treaty, covenant, or intermarriage. Otherwise, the Canaanites would corrupt the Israelites. The book of Joshua records that Joshua and the Israelites exacted the ban upon the Canaanites, killing men, women, and children at a number of Canaanite cities. This does not mean that there were no Canaanites remaining, for some had fled to the mountains or lived in smaller towns. The Israelites were to continue driving them out of the land once the major campaigns were finished. However, the Israelite tribes ultimately failed in the Conquest, and after Joshua and the leaders were deceased, the next generation of Israelites intermarried with the Canaanites and worshiped Canaanite gods—a practice which continued for centuries in Israel. Fifth, mercy was available for any who exercised faith in the Lord and turned away from the Canaanite gods, as seen in the case of Rahab. However, Rahab's case was rare. Sixth, the Bible attributes the Conquest's planning and execution to the Lord. It was His idea, and He secured the victories. This means that it was the Lord's will to impose wholesale slaughter upon Canaanite men, women, and children. There is no qualification or apology in the Bible about this point. Seventh, the question of why the presumably-innocent Canaanite children had to be killed is not directly addressed in the Law of Moses or in Joshua and Judges.

## Chapter 4: Interpreting the Conquest

This dissertation has demonstrated a few key points thus far. First, the main problem with the Conquest in the Old Testament is ethical in nature. How could a loving God command the slaughter of entire populations? Second, the concept of “devote to destruction” included the annihilation of men, women, and children if the biblical accounts are taken at face value. Third, the Conquest was predicted, designed, commanded, and executed by the Lord along with the help of His human instrument, Israel. Fourth, the Conquest was designed to punish Canaanite wickedness and to fulfill covenant promises to Abraham’s descendants regarding the land. Fifth, Israel’s spiritual preservation was paramount because of God’s greater plan to bless all nations through the nation of Israel. The Canaanites had to be destroyed or driven out for Israel to maintain spiritual purity, though mercy was available for those who repented (e.g., Rahab). Sixth, the judgment applied to the Canaanites also applied if the Israelites apostatized. Seventh, the Old and New Testaments endorse the Conquest without reservation. The same appears true of the ancient Jewish interpretations in the Apocrypha, Philo, and Josephus.

At this juncture, it is now appropriate to survey the literature to see how interpreters both ancient and modern have dealt with the Conquest and with the killing of the Canaanite children, especially in light of the comprehensive biblical survey in chapters two and three. The survey of the research below reveals that the moral questions surrounding the Conquest are not new.<sup>267</sup> Rather, they have been discussed at length throughout Church history. This underscores the point that modern sensibilities are the same as those of the distant past. No one finds war to be

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<sup>267</sup> Various interpretations have been surveyed in other works such as Hofreiter, *Making Sense of Old Testament Genocide*; idem., “Genocide in Deuteronomy and Christian Interpretation,” in *Interpreting Deuteronomy: Issues and Approaches*, eds. David G. Firth and Philip S. Johnston (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 240–62; William L. Lyons, *A History of Modern Scholarship on the Biblical Word Hērem* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010).

pleasant, and Christians and critics have long recognized the ethical problem of taking innocent life. The history of interpretation reveals a number of ways in which Jews, Christians, and non-Christians have handled the Conquest. Some find fault with the Bible for *recording* the Conquest as the command of God, with the Israelites for *executing* a command that was immoral, or with the God of the Old Testament for *issuing* such a command. Others take an allegorical approach to soften the text. Some deny the historicity of the Conquest altogether. Still others accept the Conquest as the just dessert for the Canaanites but shift the focus to theological matters such as the overarching promise of God, the removal of the Canaanite identity from the land, or to the Conquest as a type of the eschatological annihilation of God's enemies.

One way to think about the various approaches to the Conquest is in terms of how each one deals with the following four statements:<sup>268</sup>

1. God is good and compassionate.
2. The Old Testament is a faithful record of God's dealings with humanity.
3. The Old Testament describes events that are identified as genocide.
4. Genocide is always evil.

Since these four points cannot all be held together without contradiction, then interpreters must do one of the following:

1. Reevaluate God. This is the approach of those who deny that God is good and compassionate.
2. Reevaluate the Old Testament as God's Word. This is the approach of those who deny that the Old Testament is inspired in recording that God, who is loving and compassionate, commanded the Canaanite genocide.
3. Reevaluate the Conquest. This is the tactic of some who believe that the Conquest did not result in genocide as it is normally understood today.
4. Reevaluate the concept of genocide. This is the approach of those who defend God's actions. In some situations, divinely-mandated genocide is permissible.

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<sup>268</sup> See Charlie Trimm, "YHWH & Genocide: Reflections on an Unpleasant Topic in the Old Testament," accessed October 31, 2020, <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/talbot-magazine/2017/yhwh-and-genocide>.

This section will pursue a threefold task: 1) Elucidate each interpretation. 2) Evaluate each interpretation in light of the biblical discussions in the preceding chapters. 3) Determine what each interpretation does with the problem of killing the Canaanite children. Although there are nuances and subsets of each broad approach to interpreting the Conquest, the survey of research will show that some interpretations fit the biblical portrait better than others and that a gap still needs to be filled when it comes to killing the Canaanite children.

### The Conquest and the Critics

Christianity has always had its detractors. This is not a surprise to Christians since the New Testament warns about the coming of false messiahs, false teachers, false prophets, and false apostles, some of whom were even around in the early Church.<sup>269</sup> The writings of Christianity's opponents date back as early as the second century BC and then continue for roughly a century and a half until the Edict of Milan (AD 313), which made Christianity the state-sponsored religion of the Roman Empire under the Roman emperor Constantine. Counter-Christian writings proliferated again with the dawn of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and have continued ever since. This discussion will document the interpretations of heretics, critics, and skeptics. As it pertains to this investigation, heretics are those who come from within Christianity but embrace an aberrant version of Christianity; critics are those who attack Christianity from within orthodox Christianity; and skeptics are those who attack Christianity from outside the faith. The sources of the attacks are not as important as the criticisms themselves, though, whether ancient or modern. Neither is criticism altogether bad since it helps Christians to better articulate what they believe about God and the Scriptures.

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<sup>269</sup> See Matt 7:15–20; 23:1–30; 24:24; Acts 20:28–30; 2 Cor 11:13; 2 Tim 4:3–4; 2 Pet 2:1–22; 3:14–18; 1 John 4:1–6.



## Ancient Critics

This section will examine two early critics of Christianity: Marcion of Sinope and Faustus of Mileve. Marcion is well known because of his rejection of the God of the Old Testament as a separate being from the God and Father of Jesus Christ. This would greatly affect the interpretation of the Conquest, of course. The views of Faustus come from the writings of Augustine and are also critical of the God of the Old Testament. There were a number of other critics of Christianity in the early Church, both of these authors directly mention the wars of Moses or the Canaanites, so they are included here.<sup>270</sup>

### Marcion

Marcion of Sinope (AD 85–160) was a second-century teacher known for his heterodox views on Old Testament teachings and on the canon of the New Testament. Although much of Marcion's life, teachings, and background to his views remains a mystery,<sup>271</sup> he was likely a wealthy shipmaster and possibly even the son of a Christian bishop in Pontus of Asia Minor. He traveled to Rome sometime between AD 135–140 where he made a large donation to the Christian community and was welcomed into the fold with the assumption that he was an orthodox Christian. However, Marcion was expelled from the Christian community in AD 144

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<sup>270</sup> Hofreiter documents three early sources that approach the Old Testament as partly true and partly false: Ptolemy's *Letter to Flora*, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and *Pseudo-Clementines*. The problem is that none of these directly criticizes the Conquest, and so one has to project the interpretation of the Conquest based on the other comments about the Old Testament (Hofreiter, *Making Sense of Old Testament Genocide*, 48–54). Two other early sources are related to the Conquest, though they do not address it directly. The fourth century Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate (AD 332–63) questioned the morality of God punishing the children for the sins of the father and also faulted Moses for acting like a wicked general, but it is unclear what he meant by the latter statement. It could be that he had the Conquest in mind. The same is true of Ambrosiaster's *Questions and Responsiones* (late fifth century AD) in which the author questioned the justice in God punishing children to the third and fourth generation for the sins of the father and also the punishment of Achan's entire family because of Achan's sin (ibid., 55–56).

<sup>271</sup> Epiphanius (AD 310–403) stated that Marcion supposedly practiced celibacy in his early life and that he was the son of a bishop of the holy catholic church but that he later became acquainted with and seduced a virgin and was consequently excommunicated by his own father for the disgrace he brought upon his father (Epiphanius, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis Book I*, 2d ed., trans. Frank Williams [Leiden: Brill, 2009], 1.42.1.3–6).

after a number of disputes, and his financial gift was returned to him. Rather than disappearing altogether, Marcionite groups cropped up across the region and posed a formidable challenge to orthodox Christianity.<sup>272</sup> For this reason, Marcion was arguably the most dangerous and therefore the most attacked heretic of early Christianity.<sup>273</sup> Church Fathers who wrote against Marcion include Tertullian, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and Theophilus of Antioch (writings no longer extant). Later writers include Hegesippus, Philip of Gortyna, and Modestus (according to Eusebius). Origen also expounded upon Marcion's views in *Contra Celsus*<sup>274</sup> through his representation of Marcionism in the views of his opponent Celsus. Learning about Marcion's views from Christian critics naturally raises questions as to the accuracy of the portrayal of Marcion's views. Perhaps the Christian apologists poisoned the well.<sup>275</sup> There is also some variation in the presentation of Marcion's views among the Christian writings. However, the core tenets of Marcionite teachings are apparent across the different representations.

The major teaching<sup>276</sup> of Marcion that departed from the Christian tradition was his belief that the God of Old Testament Judaism differs from the God and Father of Jesus Christ, resulting

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<sup>272</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 3d ed., trans. Neil Buchanan (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1901), 267n366.

<sup>273</sup> See Harry Y. Gamble, "Marcion and the 'canon,'" in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Vol 1: Origins to Constantine*, eds. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 195–96.

<sup>274</sup> Gamble, "Marcion and the 'canon,'" 195n1.

<sup>275</sup> The Church Fathers did not hold back in expressing their disdain for Marcion. For example, according to Irenaeus, Polycarp himself met Marcion on one occasion. Marcion asked "Do you know me?" Polycarp replied, "I do know you, the first-born of Satan" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1, by Philip Schaff, ed. and trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson [1885, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2001], 3.3.4).

<sup>276</sup> There are only two works known to have come from Marcion. First is a letter mentioned by Tertullian (*Against Marcion*, 1.1; 4.3) indicating that Marcion had lost his faith. Second is his *Antitheses* (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4.6), which must be reconstructed based on the writings of others. See Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, 2d ed., trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1924),

in a sort of di-theism where the Creator-God is an inferior demiurge in relation to the higher God of the New Testament.<sup>277</sup> The origins of this view go back to a man from Rome named Cerdo who subscribed to the teachings of the followers of Simon Magus of Samaria and who held the ninth place in the episcopal succession from the apostles. He taught that the God of the Law and Prophets was not the Father of Jesus Christ. The God of the Old Testament was known and was righteous, but the Father of Jesus Christ was unknown and benevolent.<sup>278</sup> Marcion succeeded Cerdo and further developed his doctrine by declaring the God of the Old Testament to be “the author of evils, to take delight in war, to be infirm of purpose, and even to be contrary to Himself.”<sup>279</sup> Jesus came from the Father, who is *above* the Creator-God of the Old Testament (the “Cosmocrator”), in order to abolish the Law and the Prophets and all the works of the Old Testament God.<sup>280</sup> By posing two different gods, Marcion denied that the Father of Jesus Christ created the world.<sup>281</sup>

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52–ff; Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 272–73.

<sup>277</sup> Gamble, “Marcion and the ‘canon,’” 197.

<sup>278</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.27.1.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 1.27.2. Tertullian stated the point similarly: “For the rest, however, we know full well that Marcion makes his gods unequal: one judicial, harsh, mighty in war; the other mild, placid, and simply good and excellent” (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1.6).

<sup>280</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.27.1.

<sup>281</sup> As Justin Martyr wrote, Marcion “even now [teaches] men to deny that God is the maker of all things in heaven and on earth, and that the Christ predicted by the prophets is His Son, and [he] preaches another god besides the Creator of all, and likewise another son” (Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1, by Philip Schaff, ed. and trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson [1885, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2001], ch. 58). Likewise, Irenaeus summarized Marcion’s view as follows: “And, indeed, the followers of Marcion do directly blaspheme the Creator, alleging him to be the creator of evils, [but] holding a more tolerable theory as to his origin, [and] maintaining that there are two beings, gods by nature, differing from each other—the one being good, but the other evil” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.12.12).

Marcion's understanding of God impacted his views on Scripture and the canon too. Not surprisingly, Marcion had to excise many teachings of the New Testament to maintain his theological positions.<sup>282</sup> For example, he removed the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke that links Jesus with the Creator-God of the Old Testament. He also eliminated all Pauline material teaching that the God who made the world is the Father of Jesus Christ and any prophetic passages cited by the apostles showing that the coming of Jesus was predicted in the Old Testament.<sup>283</sup> What remained of Marcion's New Testament was the "Gospel" (Luke) and the "Apostle" (Pauline epistles), which were meant to correspond to the "Law" and the "Prophets" of the Jewish Scriptures.<sup>284</sup> Even these books were shortened because of supposed interpolations. But concerning the Old Testament, Marcion aligned with orthodox Judaism in regarding the Jewish Scriptures as entirely reliable and true with one qualification: he rejected all allegorical and typological explanations of the Old Testament.<sup>285</sup> Taking the Old Testament at face value, Marcion blamed the Creator-God (the Demiurge) for the evil in the world, including particular acts of alleged evil in the Old Testament. For example, Marcion blamed the despoiling of the Egyptians by the Israelites not on the Jews but instead on their God since the command came from God.<sup>286</sup> According to Theodoret, the Marcionites "blaspheme not only against the Creator,

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<sup>282</sup> Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4.5. Marcion also pitted Paul against Peter (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.13.1).

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 1.27.2. The Marcionites also taught that the prophets of the Old Testament were from a different God than the Father of Jesus Christ (ibid., 4.34.1), they denied that Jesus created the world (ibid., 3.11.2), and they believed that Christ was put to death by the Jews who followed the Creator-God of the Old Testament, a different god than the Father of Jesus Christ. This led Irenaeus to conclude that Marcion had cut himself off from the Gospel (ibid., 3.11.9).

<sup>284</sup> John Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament: An Essay in the Early History of the Canon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1942), 2–3.

<sup>285</sup> Harnack, *Marcion*, 58–59.

but also label the patriarchs and prophets as lawbreakers, in order to depict the Demiurge as a lover of evil.”<sup>287</sup>

Concerning the question of Old Testament violence and the particular case of the Canaanite Conquest, Marcion contrasted the Creator-God of the Old Testament with Jesus and the God of the New Testament. First, Marcion taught that “Joshua conquered the land with violence and cruelty, but Christ forbade all violence and preached mercy and peace.”<sup>288</sup> Second, Marcion taught that while the Creator-God honored Moses when Moses stretched out his hands to kill as many Amalekites as possible (Exod 17), Jesus instead stretched out His hands to save men.<sup>289</sup> Third, the Creator-God sanctioned the slaughtering of the Canaanites by extending the length of the day (Josh 10), but the God of the New Testament taught through Paul that Christians should not let the sun go down on their anger (Eph 4:26).<sup>290</sup> Harnack states by way of summary, “According to Marcion, one should read the gospel, the epistles, and the Old Testament *only* in the perspective of how new is the message of the redeeming God of love, and how frightful and deplorable at the same time is the evil-righteous God of the world and of law.”<sup>291</sup> However, it should be noted that Marcion believed that even the wicked Canaanites would be saved in the end, though righteous men like Abel, Enoch, Noah, and those who came

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<sup>286</sup> Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 2.20; cf. Sebastian Moll, *At the Left Hand of Christ: The Arch-Heretic Marcion*, PhD diss. (Edinburg: The University of Edinburgh, 2009), 88.

<sup>287</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *A Compendium of Heretical Mythification*, trans. István Pásztori-Kupán (New York: Routledge, 2006), 24.

<sup>288</sup> This is a quotation from Harnack’s reconstruction of Marcion’s *Antitheses* (Harnack, *Marcion*, 60).

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.* Harnack lists many other such Marcionite contrasts between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. See *ibid.*, 60–62.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 62–63 (emphasis original).

from the patriarch Abraham—including all of the prophets—did not partake of salvation.<sup>292</sup> Even Abraham was excluded from salvation according to Marcion.<sup>293</sup> As Irenaeus (d. ca. 200) wrote,

In addition to his blasphemy against God Himself, he [Marcion] advanced this also, truly speaking as with the mouth of the devil, and saying all things in direct opposition to the truth—that Cain, and those like him, and the Sodomites, and the Egyptians, and others like them, and, in fine, all the nations who walked in all sorts of abomination, were saved by the Lord, on His descending into Hades, and on their running unto Him, and that they welcomed Him into their kingdom.<sup>294</sup>

Thus, one can see that Marcion condemned the violent acts of the Creator-God while affirming that the Canaanites, unlike the heroes of the Jewish faith, were really saved after all.

As expected, the response of the early Church toward Marcion, Marcionites, and Marcionism was overwhelmingly negative. Marcion's heretical views of God, Jesus, and Scripture provided ample opportunities for early Christian apologists to defend the faith. Irenaeus, for example, defended the traditional view that there can only be one, supreme God. Anything beyond God would itself be the supreme being, or fullness (Pleroma), and anything that had a beginning, middle, or end relative to that which is beyond God could not itself be God. This applies both to Marcion's Old Testament demiurge as well as his New Testament god of goodness.<sup>295</sup> Additionally, there can be no infinite regress of gods without beginning; there must be a supreme being above them all.<sup>296</sup> Irenaeus also found fault with the idea that one god could be righteous and just while the other god could be benevolent and merciful. Justice without

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<sup>292</sup> Theodoret, *A Compendium of Heretical Mythification*, 24.

<sup>293</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.8.1.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 1.27.3.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 2.1.2.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 2.1.4–5.

goodness would lead to injustice, and love without justice would not be loving.<sup>297</sup> Thus, one cannot have a god who is only just or loving.<sup>298</sup> Likewise, Tertullian critiqued Marcion's god for being weak since he could not punish sins. Since he is not to be feared as judge, then licentiousness results.<sup>299</sup> For Tertullian, God "ought to be worshiped rather than judged; served reverentially rather than handled critically, or even dreaded for His severity."<sup>300</sup> Tertullian also explained how God's goodness is compatible with His justice and judgment:

Up to the fall of man, therefore, from the beginning God was simply good; after that He became a judge both severe and, as the Marcionites will have it, cruel.... Thus God's prior goodness was from nature, His subsequent severity from a cause. The one was innate, the other accidental; the one His own, the other adapted; the one issuing from Him, the other admitted by Him.<sup>301</sup>

God is to be both loved and feared; the two go together.<sup>302</sup> Origen also reached the conclusion that "the God of the law and the Gospels is one and the same, a just and good God, and that He

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 3.25.2.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 3.25.3. Tertullian made the same point: "You do not, however, disprove God's being a judge, who have no proof to show that He is a judge. You will undoubtedly have to accuse justice herself, which provides the judge, or else to reckon her among the species of evil, that is, to add injustice to the titles of goodness. But then justice is an evil, if injustice is a good. And yet you are forced to declare injustice to be one of the worst of things, and by the same rule are constrained to class justice amongst the most excellent. Since there is nothing hostile to evil which is not good, and no enemy of good which is not evil. It follows, then, that as injustice is an evil, so in the same degree is justice a good. Nor should it be regarded as simply a species of goodness, but as the practical observance of it, because goodness (unless justice be so controlled as to be just) will not be goodness, if it be unjust. For nothing is good which is unjust; while everything, on the other hand, which is just is good" (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 2.11).

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 1.25–26.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 2.1.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 2.11.

<sup>302</sup> As Tertullian wrote, "Thus far, then, justice is the very fulness of the Deity Himself, manifesting God as both a perfect father and a perfect master: a father in His mercy, a master in His discipline; a father in the mildness of His power, a master in its severity; a father who must be loved with dutiful affection, a master who must needs be feared; be loved, because He prefers mercy to sacrifice; be feared because He dislikes sin; be loved, because He prefers the sinner's repentance to his death; be feared, because He dislikes the sinners who do not repent. Accordingly, the divine law enjoins duties in respect of both these attributes: Thou shalt love God, and, Thou shalt fear God. It proposed one for the obedient man, the other for the transgressor" (ibid., 2.13).

confers benefits justly, and punishes with kindness; since neither goodness without justice, nor justice without goodness, can display the (real) dignity of the divine nature.”<sup>303</sup>

Faustus

The second early opponent of Christianity of relevance to the Conquest is Faustus of Mileve, a Manichæan<sup>304</sup> bishop who lived in the fourth century. In about AD 400, Augustine wrote a reply to Faustus because Faustus had published an attack on the Old Testament Scriptures as well as on the New Testament teachings that did not align with Manichæism.<sup>305</sup> Faustus did not have much use for the Old Testament because it was mainly written for the Jews, not for Christians, and because it is a “poor fleshly thing” when compared to the spiritual blessings conveyed in the New Testament.<sup>306</sup> Faustus rejected the Old Testament because both he and Augustine did not follow its precepts for the Sabbath, dietary laws, circumcision, sacrifices, or the observance of the festivals: “You [Augustine] cannot blame me [Faustus] for rejecting the Old Testament; for whether it is right or wrong to do so, you do it as much as I.”<sup>307</sup> Thus, Faustus rejected the Old Testament because it is fleshly and obsolete.<sup>308</sup> Next, Faustus made a general indictment of the God of the Old Testament as cruel and capricious.

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<sup>303</sup> Origen, *De Principiis*, in *The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, by Philip Schaff, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Frederick Crombie (1885, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2006), 2.5.3; cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 2.14–16; Ignatius, *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1, by Philip Schaff, ed. and trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2001), ch. 6; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.14.4.

<sup>304</sup> Manichaeism was a gnostic, dualistic religion founded in Persia in the third century BC that spread throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Europe (“Manichæism,” accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09591a.htm>).

<sup>305</sup> Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series 1, vol. 4, ed., Philip Schaff, trans. Richard Stothert (1887, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), preface.

<sup>306</sup> Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 4.1.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.1.



These books, moreover, contain shocking calumnies against God himself. We are told that he...was enraged sometimes against his enemies, sometimes against his friends; that he destroyed thousands of men for a slight offense, or for nothing; that he threatened to come with a sword and spare nobody, righteous or wicked.... [We are also told] how Moses committed murder, and plundered, and waged wars, and commanded, or himself perpetrated, many cruelties.... Either your writers forged these things, or the fathers are really guilty. Choose which you please; the crime in either case is detestable, for vicious conduct and falsehood are equally hateful.<sup>309</sup>

Here, Faustus questioned the veracity of the Old Testament accounts when they record God's direct acts of judgments as well as the military campaigns of Moses, which would refer to any one of the following: the battle with the Amalekites (Exod 17), the extermination of the Canaanites and Amorites (Num 21), or the battle against the Midianites (Num 31). The "many cruelties" Moses allegedly committed no doubt refers to the ban. For Faustus, either these accounts are false, which invalidates the Old Testament as a reliable source, or the men who perpetrated these acts and others<sup>310</sup> are guilty of cruelties.

Augustine used the New Testament to respond to Faustus' overall criticism of the God of the Old Testament as cruel.<sup>311</sup> First, the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are the same. Divine judgment and discipline can be located in both testaments. Second, the same criticisms leveled at the Old Testament could be applied to the New

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<sup>308</sup> Augustine replied as follows: "But if a Jew asks me why I profess to believe the Old Testament while I do not observe its precepts, my reply is this: The moral precepts of the law are observed by Christians; the symbolical precepts were properly observed during the time that the things now revealed were prefigured. Accordingly, those observances, which I regard as no longer binding, I still look upon as a testimony, as I do also the carnal promises from which the Old Testament derives its name. For although the gospel teaches me to hope for eternal blessings, I also find a confirmation of the gospel in those things which 'happened to them for an example, and were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the world are come'" (ibid., 10.2).

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 22.4–5.

<sup>310</sup> The ellipses in the quotation above include a litany of Old Testament characters who made bad choices, such as Abraham having a child with Hagar and David taking Bathsheba from Uriah. Faustus held the Old Testament God and the Old Testament itself guilty for the behaviors of certain individuals, even though the bad behaviors of Old Testament characters is nowhere condoned by God.

<sup>311</sup> See ibid., 22.14.

Testament, except that the Manichæans liked the New Testament and were therefore not being consistent in their critique of Christianity. Third, God's judgment will always be perceived negatively by unbelievers, though that does not mean that God is cruel or unjust. The righteous consider the same event and recognize that God is just in His actions.

### Summary and Evaluation

Marcion and Faustus provided the first examples of many criticisms to come. Marcion thought that God in the Old Testament is so cruel and merciless as to be a separate being from the God and Father of Jesus Christ. In other words, Marcion could not put together the love and justice of God, and his conundrum continues in the minds of some today as well. The same is true of Faustus' criticism that either the God in the Old Testament is cruel and unjust, or the biblical authors misrepresent God in the Old Testament. Faustus' criticism of the biblical portrait of God has become commonplace today too. In evaluating Marcion and Faustus, it should be noted that everyone recognizes that the Old Testament is different than the New Testament, but that is not to say that the *God* of the Old Testament is different than the God of the New Testament.<sup>312</sup> Marcion's dualistic hypothesis does not fit the biblical data and suffers from philosophical flaws. Faustus' criticisms are biblically inconsistent. There are plenty of criticisms from Marcion and Faustus, but not much by way of an actual interpretation that takes the biblical text seriously without being dismissive.

### Enlightenment Critics

During the seventeenth-century Protestant Enlightenment, a group of philosophically- and religiously-inclined men put pen to paper in order to promote rationalism over and against belief in divine revelation found in the Christian religion. This cadre came to be known as "the

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<sup>312</sup> Preston Sprinkle, *Fight: A Christian Case for Nonviolence* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2013), 45.

English deists”<sup>313</sup> and included the likes of Charles Blount, John Toland, Anthony Collins, Matthew Tindal, Thomas Woolston, Thomas Morgan, Thomas Chubb, and Peter Annet.<sup>314</sup> These men were “freethinkers” in that they were interested in a rational examination of accepted beliefs.<sup>315</sup> Anthony Collins defined “free-thinking” as “[t]he use of the Understanding, in endeavoring to find out the Meaning of any Proposition whatsoever, in considering the nature of the Evidence for or against it, and in judging of it according to the seeming Force or Weakness of the Evidence.”<sup>316</sup> Of course, such dissenting views were not very well tolerated and were often proscribed, so many of these men maintained their public identity as Protestants and had to be discreet in publishing their true opinions.<sup>317</sup> Their primary goal was to promote rational liberty and toleration within the state rather than to persuade their readers that Christianity is false.<sup>318</sup> However, they were not shy in criticizing the Bible and the church from a philosophical point of view. A handful of examples will be discussed below. This section will also include the criticism of the Old Testament scholar J. D. Michaelis and those of Thomas Paine who, like the English Deists, were critical of the Conquest.

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<sup>313</sup> Deism is to be distinguished from atheism because deism acknowledges a Creator but denies His involvement in the world since creation.

<sup>314</sup> See Wayne Hudson, *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 1–27.

<sup>315</sup> Hudson, *The English Deists*, 21–22.

<sup>316</sup> Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking, Occasion'd by the Rise and Growth of a Sect call'd Free-Thinkers* (London, 1713), 5.

<sup>317</sup> Hudson, *The English Deists*, 3, 17.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

## Matthew Tindal

Matthew Tindal (1657–1733) was an English deist and freethinker who, despite his religious upbringing, came to deny the spiritual authority of the clergy and denounced the moral authority of the Scriptures since, in his view, morality is available to people of all religions through the light of reason without reference to God.<sup>319</sup> Though controversial at the time,<sup>320</sup> Tindal's views likely had an impact on later critics of religion such as Reimarus, Lessing, Kant, and Feuerbach.<sup>321</sup> The work that concerns this discussion is Tindal's *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730), which set out to prove that any truths discovered in Christianity can just as easily be discovered as truths of Reason, thereby making Christianity's teachings either redundant or false.<sup>322</sup> The title of the first chapter reflects this sentiment: "That God, at all times, has given Mankind sufficient means of knowing whatever he requires of them; and what those means are."<sup>323</sup> Tindal reasoned that if there were such a thing as the Law of Nature that is indispensable for both God and His creatures, then no religion can be true that contradicts the Law of Nature. The Gospel inculcates the precepts of the Law of Nature with the result that both Jews and Gentiles alike are to do good to one another. How then can the Conquest of the Canaanites be justified? Tindal wrote the following:

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<sup>319</sup> Stephen Lalor, *Matthew Tindal, Freethinker: An Eighteenth-Century Assault on Religion* (London: Continuum, 2006), 1–3.

<sup>320</sup> In fact, two of Tindal's publications—*The Rights of the Christian Church asserted, against the Romish and all other Priests who claim an independent Power over it* (1706) and *A Defence of the Rights of the Christian Church* (1709)—were burned by the common hangman at the order of the House of Commons in 1710 (Lalor, *Matthew Tindal*, 12–16).

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 150–53.

<sup>322</sup> This book was so controversial that it was the subject of over one hundred published replies and was criticized in over sixty major works (Lalor, *Matthew Tindal*, 17).

<sup>323</sup> Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation; or, the Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London, 1731), 1.

[T]ell me how you can account for the conduct of the *Jews*, in invading, and that too without any Declaration of War, the *Canaanites*, a free and independent Nation, and against whom they had not the least cause of complaint, and on pretence of their being idolaters, destroying not only the Men & Women, but Infants incapable of idolatry, or any other crime. This, you know, has given great advantage to the Enemies of our Religion, who represent the whole proceeding, as an unparallel'd piece of injustice & cruelty, & therefore, I should be glad to know what our Divines, if they do not interpret this fact allegorically, or as only done in vision, say, to shew 'tis not contrary to the Law of Nature, & those Precepts of the Gospel which are founded on it.<sup>324</sup>

Tindal was concerned both with the morality of the Conquest (e.g., killing infants) as well as with the reputation of Christianity among outsiders who were critical of the Conquest.

Some may respond with the notion that God may dispense with the Law of Nature on occasions, but Tindal countered that this would make everything subject to the arbitrary will of God rather than based on fixed natural law. Another response is to appeal to divine-command theory to argue that God has the supreme right to command the destruction of the Canaanites. But Tindal retorted that if someone today claimed that God gave him the same command to destroy his idolatrous neighbors, surely that man would be more justified in obeying the inner conviction of the Light of Nature *not* to carry out such a command than any supposed command from God. A third response is that miracles could justify that a divine command had been issued, but Tindal combatted this idea by stating that miracles could come from an evil being just as much as from a good God, so one could never be certain of the source of such miracles that accompany the command to destroy one's neighbors. Where Tindal did find certainty is in the fact that a good and wise God would never communicate such a command that contradicts the duty of humans to love one another.<sup>325</sup> While God has the right to punish wicked nations, He would not do so by such means as what is forbidden by the Law of Nature: "If God would punish

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<sup>324</sup> Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 247 (emphasis original).

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 247–48.

the *Canaanites*, for acting contrary to the Law of Nature, wou'd he, in order to do this, require the *Israelites* to act contrary to the same Law, in murdering Men, Women, & Children, that never did them the least injury?"<sup>326</sup> Tindal posited that God would act in such a supernatural manner as all would see and know that it was His doing, that it was justified, and that it was done with a distinction between the guilty and the innocent.<sup>327</sup> Christians leaders deem other religions to be false for commanding things contrary to the Law of Nature, so the same applies in this case.<sup>328</sup>

Thomas Morgan

The Welsh deist Thomas Morgan (d. 1743) took a different approach. Speaking through his fictitious Christian deist Philalethes in dialogue with a Christian Jew, Morgan expressed incredulity at the historical accuracy of the Exodus and the Conquest of Canaan. First, Philalethes argues that if Moses lived six hundred years before Homer and depicted history in much the same way as Homer, then one should assume that the biblical accounts were written in "the same oratorical and dramattick Way" as Homer, Aesop, Ovid, and other pagan poets and mythologists.<sup>329</sup> Second, Philalethes scoffs at the notion that "God in those Days, appear'd, spoke, and acted like Man, or as a finite circumscribed Being, in a visible, sensible Manner; that

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 248 (emphasis original).

<sup>327</sup> Ibid. Tindal commented only on the long day of Joshua 10 (ibid., 250) but discounted the miracle as confirmation of the divine commandment to exterminate the Canaanites because it came late in the Conquest narrative and because the promise of complete victory over the Canaanites (Josh 10:8) was, in Tindal's opinion, negated by the fact that the Canaanites were not entirely driven out of the land (cf. Josh 15:63).

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 249. Tindal went on to argue that the Canaanites should have had some knowledge of the divine command concerning their own extermination and that it would have therefore been their right to defend their own lives (ibid). However, this objection is answered in the text of Joshua itself. Rahab told the spies that the citizens of Jericho had heard about what Yahweh had done to the Egyptians (forty years earlier) and to the two Amorite kings and that the citizens of Jericho were melting in fear (Josh 2:10–11). Throughout the book of Joshua, the Canaanites *did* fight the Israelites in battle, as would be expected.

<sup>329</sup> Thomas Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher. In a Dialogue Between Philalethes a Christian Deist, and Theophanes a Christian Jew* (London, 1737), 252.

he conversed intimately and familiarly with *Moses, as a Man talketh with his Friend*.<sup>330</sup> He draws the same conclusion about the rest of God's activities in the Exodus narrative: "In short, God himself, as visible and personally present, acted as the General, and *Moses* had nothing to do but to follow Orders and obey the Word of Command, which a Fool might have done as well as a wise Man."<sup>331</sup> This would make God subject to the interests of Moses. Third, Philalethes believes that the promise given to Abraham about possessing the land of Canaan was not realized until the time of King David, which was about four hundred years after the time of the Conquest. Although the Israelites conquered small portions of the land, they could not ultimately drive out the Canaanites because the Canaanites had iron chariots (cf. Judg 1:19). However, this would have been no challenge for the Lord to destroy after He caused the walls of Jericho to fall.<sup>332</sup>

While the Exodus and Conquest cannot be historical, Philalethes reasons that Moses should not be faulted for using fables and allegories to communicate simple truths because the Israelites were liable to believe all manner of superstition.<sup>333</sup> According to Philalethes, the Israelites were so benighted that they had lost any conception of the eternal truths of Nature and Reason and therefore required, in their own view, supernatural confirmations like dreams, visions, and voices from heaven.<sup>334</sup> In other words, Moses accommodated his supposed revelations from God to a superstitious people.<sup>335</sup> To sum up, Philalethes states his (Morgan's)

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<sup>330</sup> Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 253 (emphasis original).

<sup>331</sup> Ibid (emphasis original).

<sup>332</sup> Lessing expressed the same indignation concerning this point: "He blows and shouts down the strongest walls, although he cannot shout away the aggravating iron chariots any more than he can bid them stop" (G. E. Lessing, *Fragments from Reimarus*, vol. 1, ed. Charles Voysey [London: Williams and Norgate, 1879], 71).

<sup>333</sup> Morgan, *The Moral Philosopher*, 253–55.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 256.

rationalist presupposition: “God has given Men sufficient, natural, and moral Means of Happiness, where they will use them. In the rational Use of these Means there can be no Need of Miracles, and without such a Use of Means all the Miracles in the World can signify nothing.”<sup>336</sup>

Thomas Chubb

The English deist Thomas Chubb (1679–1747) decried the Conquest as unjust because he believed that the Canaanites were no more idolatrous or wicked than any other idolatrous nation at the time:

To say that those Canaanites entertained wrong and unworthy notions of a Deity, and of his providential government of the world, that their tutelar Gods were merely fictitious, and that their manner of worshipping them was ridiculous in itself, as well as directed to false objects, is only to say, that they were as weak, vain, and ridiculous as other Idolaters, who have not fallen under such resentment.<sup>337</sup>

Chubb believed that God—the Supreme God—would not have singled out the Canaanites. In fact, God *could not* act in such a partial manner without violating strict justice. If two men commit the same crime, then it would be a violation of justice for one to be punished while the other is treated with leniency. If God exercises pity toward one creation, then it is reasonable to

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<sup>335</sup> What is more, the Israelites were most certainly mistaken in thinking that God had a special place in history for them as His chosen people who would have the nations as their inheritance (cf. Psalms 2:8). The passage of time has failed to substantiate their belief. No appeal can be made to the land promise of the Abrahamic Covenant since the covenant promises were conditioned upon obedience, but Israel’s checkered history shows their failure to obey and worship the Lord (ibid., 257–59).

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 264. A similar view was put forth by John Toland (1670–1722) concerning the role of Reason in understanding the Christian religion: “On the contrary, we hold that Reason is the only Foundation of all Certitude; and that nothing reveal’d, whether as to its Manner or Existence, is more exempted from its Disquisitions, than the ordinary Phenomena of Nature. Wherefore, we likewise maintain, according to the Title of this Discourse, that there is nothing in the Gospel contrary to Reason, nor above it; and that no Christian Doctrine can be properly call’d a Mystery (see John Toland, *Christianity not mysterious, or, A treatise shewing that there is nothing in the Gospel contrary to reason, nor above it and that no Christian doctrine can be properly call’d a mystery*, 2d ed. [London: n.p., 1696], 6–ff). What this means is that anything in the Bible (e.g., the Conquest) that does not make sense to human reason must be mistaken.

<sup>337</sup> Thomas Chubb, *Posthumous Works*, vol. 1 (London: E. Easton, 1748), 217.



conclude that He must exercise pity toward all others.<sup>338</sup> Likewise, if God were just in exterminating the Canaanites, then it follows that all idolaters must be destroyed.<sup>339</sup>

J. D. Michaelis

Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791) was a Prussian biblical scholar and one of the pioneers of what developed into the historical criticism of the Bible. He studied at the University of Halle and there shed the pietistic beliefs of his upbringing in favor of empirical rationalism.<sup>340</sup> Michaelis is renowned for his four-volume commentary on the Law of Moses (1814) in which he defended the origin of the Mosaic Law against the attacks from deists and atheists by explaining that it was intended for the early years of the Israelite nation but that it is no longer obligatory for Christians now that biblical religion has developed from its primitive state.<sup>341</sup> When he addressed the matter of the Conquest, Michaelis agreed that the Canaanites committed heinous acts as depicted in Leviticus 18, but he believed that the same sins were committed in Israel. The difference was that the Canaanites practiced those things publicly and approvingly, whereas in Israel, they were practiced in private and were not accepted.<sup>342</sup> Michaelis acknowledged that the Canaanites were more wicked than other nations at the time, so they were deserving of extermination.<sup>343</sup> The Amalekites too needed to be wiped out because they were a perpetual

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<sup>338</sup> Chubb, *Posthumous Works*, 1:218–22.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 230–31.

<sup>340</sup> James C. O’Flaherty, “J. D. Michaelis: Rational Biblicist,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 49, no. 2 (Apr. 1950): 173–74.

<sup>341</sup> Henning Graf Reventlow, “Biblical Authority in the Wake of the Enlightenment,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:1035–49.

<sup>342</sup> John David Michaelis, *Commentaries on the Law of Moses*, trans. Alexander Smith (Aberdeen: A. Chalmers & Co., 1814), 2:92–93.

<sup>343</sup> Michaelis, *Commentaries on the Law of Moses*, 4:14–15. Regarding the command to utterly destroy the Canaanites, the Israelites took extreme measures due to retaliation and revenge, much like a homeowner would

threat to Israel. Destroying them was no different than killing pirates in Michaelis' time.<sup>344</sup> While it seems like Michaelis would have been a defender of the Conquest, he ended up as a critic because of one issue. In his view, the Conquest was merely an Israelite land-grab.

The extirpation of the Canaanites, which generally strikes the reader at first as a very extraordinary command, and from which the mind recoils, as little savouring of divine authority, was yet nothing more than the natural consequence of a war carried on, not by a sovereign for the sake of acquiring new subjects, but by a people to obtain lands; and who, in order to secure their acquisitions, have no other alternative than to dispatch those who obstinately stand in their way, and who will not resign what they hold.<sup>345</sup>

In Michaelis' view, the Canaanites had not provoked the Israelites, nor had they tampered with the ancient Israelite burial sites at Hebron or Shechem from the time of the patriarchs. Rather, the Israelites were the aggressors, and Moses' declaration of the Conquest was, therefore, incomprehensible.<sup>346</sup> If God were to use Israel's army as His instrument of punishment against the Canaanites, He would violate the commandments prohibiting murder and stealing and would cast doubt upon Judaism being the true religion. Furthermore, the Canaanites, like all peoples, believed that their religion was the true religion. It was therefore unjustified to wage war against them simply on the pretext of a supposed command from God, especially when one nation has no right to judge another nation.<sup>347</sup>

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punish a robber even after the goods had been recovered. Michaelis did acknowledge Moses' concern that the Canaanites would infect the Israelites in a moral sense, though. He also speculated that the Canaanites could have been allowed to live peaceably in other countries once driven out of the land (ibid., 1:315–18).

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 1:68–69.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 1:111.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 1:112–13.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 1:116–19. Michaelis also responded to a handful of other scholars who interpreted the Conquest differently than he did in terms of taking the land (see ibid., 1:119–53). One scholar named Nonne Bremen (1755) argued that the three sons of Noah partitioned the territories such that Palestine went to Shem and not to Ham. The descendants of Ham—the Canaanites—broke the agreement and moved into Palestine, and the Israelites were merely taking back what belonged to them. Michaelis responded with the fact that this tradition is not found in the Bible but appears later in the writings of Epiphanius (AD 310–403), thereby casting doubt on its veracity. Another scholar named Oepke suggested that the *Canaanites* were the aggressors and that the Israelites were merely

Thomas Paine

Another critic of the Conquest was Thomas Paine (1737–1809), one of the founding fathers of the United States of America. In his famous work, *The Age of Reason* (1794), Paine had a number of questions concerning the Conquest:

There are matters in [the Bible], said to be done by the *express command* of God, that are as shocking to humanity and to every idea we have of moral justice as anything done by Robespierre, by Carrier, by Joseph le Bon, in France, by the English Government in the East Indies, or by any other assassin in modern times. When we read in the books ascribed to Moses, Joshua, etc., that they (the Israelites) came by stealth upon whole nations of people, who, as history itself shows, had given them no offence; that they put all those nations to the sword; that they spared neither age nor infancy; that they utterly destroyed men, women, and children; that they left not a soul to breathe — expressions that are repeated over and over again in those books, and that, too, with exulting ferocity—are we sure these things are facts? Are we sure that the Creator of man commissioned these things to be done? Are we sure that the books that tell us so, were written by his authority?.... To charge the commission of acts upon the Almighty, which in their own nature, and by every rule of moral justice, are crimes, as all assassination is, and more especially the assassination of infants, is [a] matter of serious concern. The Bible tells us, that those assassinations were done by the *express command of God*. To believe therefore the Bible to be true, we must *unbelieve* all our belief in the moral justice of God; for wherein could crying or smiling infants offend? And to read the Bible without horror, we must undo every thing that is tender, sympathising, and benevolent in the heart of man. Speaking for myself, if I had no other evidence that the Bible is fabulous than the sacrifice I must make to believe it to be true, that alone would be sufficient to determine my choice.<sup>348</sup>

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responding in kind. Michaelis acknowledged that the Israelites were attacked by various groups on their way to the Promised Land, but he countered that the actual Canaanite nations living in Palestine on the west side of the Jordan River had nothing to do with the attacks in the wilderness. Therefore, Israel was out of line in acting as the aggressor, and the Canaanites had every right to defend themselves. A third scholar named Prof. Faber maintained that the Israelites had to go *somewhere* after leaving Egypt and that the Israelites had asked for permission to graze their cattle in the open pastures of Canaan. When the Canaanites refused the request, the Israelites began to drive them out rather than become subjects again to a foreign power. Michaelis retorted that this situation would not give Israel the right to take what belonged to someone else—especially at a time when there was plenty of open land to possess around the world. Michaelis also postulated that divine providence could have continually sustained the Israelites in the wilderness as an alternative to driving out the Canaanites.

<sup>348</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (London: R. Carlile, 1818), 2.1–2 (emphasis original). The German biblical scholar Georg Lorenz Bauer (1755–1806), who was a contemporary of Paine, expressed the same outrage at the destruction of women and children in the Conquest: “Joshua, who was a revengeful, cruel, and bloodthirsty man, does not hesitate to ascribe the attributes of cruelty and vengeance to his God.... Dead to all the feelings of humanity, he suffers women, innocent children, and helpless babes, to pass under the edge of the sword; but, what is far worse, he perpetrates every species of cruelty and atrocity in the name of Jehovah his God” (Georg Lorenz Bauer, *The Theology of the Old Testament* [London: Charles Fox, 1838], 45–46).

Paine raised a couple of important issues here. First, he compared the Conquest to other known atrocities. In his view, the killing of innocent children goes against all human reason. Second, he questioned whether this could possibly be the express will of God. To accept the biblical record at face value was too much. Therefore, the Bible *cannot* be the Word of God. According to Paine, the Bible resembles the work of a demon more than the work of God:

Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon, than the Word of God. It is a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind; and, for my own part, I sincerely detest it, as I detest everything that is cruel.<sup>349</sup>

Here, Paine outright rejected the Bible rather than seeking to understand the Conquest in the larger context of the biblical story and the love and justice of God.

### Summary and Evaluation

In summary, the Enlightenment critics who directly addressed the Conquest were rather simplistic in their rejection of the Conquest as a just act of God through the nation of Israel. Tindal questioned how one could know that the Conquest was God's will rather than the will of an evil spirit, but the simple response is that God *did* validate the Conquest through the divine activity in the book of Joshua (e.g., crossing the Jordan River on dry ground, the angelic visit before the battle of Jericho, the collapse of the walls of Jericho, the hail in battle, and Joshua's long day). If there were no miracles, then Tindal's point would be valid, but there were plenty of miracles from the Exodus through the Conquest to attest to God's will in the matter. Tindal also questioned why God would not separate the guilty from the innocent (e.g., infants) when destroying the Canaanites. This is the main reason for Paine's rejection of the Conquest too, and it is a good question that will be addressed more fully in the next chapter. Morgan expressed

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<sup>349</sup> Paine, *The Age of Reason*, ch. 7.

skepticism about the historical accuracy of the Exodus and the Conquest accounts, especially since they include miracles, because in a rational world, God works through natural law, not through miracles. Yet Morgan merely assumed that the universe is a closed system, where God does not act, rather than arguing the point. Chubb's main contention was that if God were just in exterminating the Canaanites, then it would follow that all idolaters must be destroyed. But if the Canaanites were worse than other idolaters, then God would want to rid the earth of them, especially if their practices would corrupt Israel. Also, all idolaters *are* punished, sooner or later since there is a final judgment. Michaelis criticized the biblical record of taking the Promised Land away from the Canaanites as theft, but since God owns the land, then He could evict the Canaanites and give it to the Israelites if He so desired. God even evicted the Israelites when they turned to other gods. Land distribution is His prerogative, as is judging wicked nations. In the end, these critics raised some important biblical and theological questions and also laid the groundwork for others to come later, but they did not offer a very good explanation of the text that takes the full biblical data into account and that adequately deals with the death of the Canaanite children. Again, dismissing the Bible is not the same as grappling with the issues.

### **Modern Skeptics**

The next section will consider the questions and comments of modern skeptics, which differ somewhat from those of the ancient heretics and Enlightenment critics. Included here are the New Atheists as well as a handful of philosophers and theologians who are critical of the Conquest. While there may not be much agreement between evangelicals and skeptics in the end, it is still instructive to consider the objections from the skeptics—especially as they criticize the morality of the Conquest. That way, Christians can ponder more deeply what the Bible does (and does not) teach concerning God and His ways.

## The New Atheists

It is no surprise that skeptics take issue the biblical commands to destroy the Canaanites. To begin, skeptics are at most agnostic about God's existence. As the atheist biologist Richard Dawkins posits, "there almost certainly is no God."<sup>350</sup> Therefore, any purported command coming from God is to be rejected *a priori*. God cannot issue commands like "Show them no mercy" if God does not even exist. But the criticisms do not end there. Dawkins is famous for his portrayal of the God of the Old Testament as "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>351</sup> What is more, Dawkins writes the following about the Conquest:

The ethnic cleansing begun in the time of Moses is brought to bloody fruition in the book of Joshua, a text remarkable for the bloodthirsty massacres it records and the xenophobic relish with which it does so.... And the Bible story of Joshua's destruction of Jericho, and the invasion of the Promised Land in general, is morally indistinguishable from Hitler's invasion of Poland, or Saddam Hussein's massacres of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs. The Bible may be an arresting and poetic work of fiction, but it is not the sort of book you should give your children to form their morals."<sup>352</sup>

Similarly, fellow New Atheist Christopher Hitchens claimed that "[t]he Bible may, indeed does, contain a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre, but we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human mammals."<sup>353</sup> In the seminal debate between a third member of the

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<sup>350</sup> See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006), ch. 4.

<sup>351</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>353</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 102.

New Atheists—neuroscientist Sam Harris—and the Christian apologist William Lane Craig, Harris attacked Craig as follows:

Now here is where religious people, like Dr. Craig, begin to get a little queasy, as I think they should. And many see no alternative but to insert the God of Abraham—an Iron Age god of war—into the clockwork, as an invisible arbiter of moral truth. It is wrong to cheat on your spouse because Yahweh deems that it is so. Which is curious, because in other moods, Yahweh is perfectly fond of genocide, and slavery, and human sacrifice.”<sup>354</sup>

In the same way, atheist cosmologist Lawrence Krauss taunted Craig on the debate stage because of the events described in the biblical account of the Conquest:

The best example, one of the examples I used before, is this awful aspect of the immorality of the Old Testament in Deuteronomy where God tells the Israelites to kill all the Canaanite children and, and women and children—kill everyone in the cities. It’s awful. That’s the reason we’re happy that we’ve gotten rid of that. We don’t—in the modern world—we don’t appease genocide because we say God did it.<sup>355</sup>

The bottom line for these skeptics is that genocide is always wrong, so the Bible is evil for portraying God (whom they do not believe in) as the architect of genocide.

Hector Avalos

The atheist religious scholar Hector Avalos offers more sophisticated remarks than the abovementioned atheists in his response to Christian apologist Paul Copan’s article<sup>356</sup> defending

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<sup>354</sup> See the debate transcript of “Is the Foundation of Morality Natural or Supernatural? The Craig-Harris Debate,” accessed September 18, 2020, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-the-foundation-of-morality-natural-or-supernatural-the-craig-harris-deba/>; cf. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2004), 18.

<sup>355</sup> Taken from the debate transcript of “Life, the Universe, and Nothing III: Is it Reasonable to Believe there is a God?” accessed September 18, 2020, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/life-the-universe-and-nothing-iii-is-it-reasonable-to-believe-there-is-a-go/>.

<sup>356</sup> Paul Copan, “Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics,” *Philosophia Christi* 10, no. 1 (2008): 7–37. See also idem., “That’s Just Your Interpretation.” *Responding to Skeptics Who Challenge Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 161–70; idem., “Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites: Divinely-Mandated Genocide or Corporate Capital Punishment? Responses to Critics,” *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 1 (2009): 73–90; idem., *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 158–97; idem., “How Could God Command Killing the Canaanites?” accessed January 15, 2022, <https://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/Issues/2010/Fall-2010/How-Could-God-Command-Killing-the-Canaanites>; Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, “The Ethics of ‘Holy War’ for Christian Morality and Theology,” in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and the Old Testament Problem*, eds. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul

the Conquest.<sup>357</sup> First, Avalos questions whether loving one's neighbor is the moral heart of the Mosaic Law since the Israelites were also commanded to destroy their neighbors.<sup>358</sup> There appears to be an implicit contradiction in the Law. Second, Yahweh's intolerance of other religions goes against the modern sentiment of religious freedom Americans hold dear. The Bible, therefore, "is a setback for humanity, not an advance."<sup>359</sup> Third, Avalos believes that the Canaanite genocide conflicts with the evangelical belief that the *imago Dei* makes all of humanity equally valuable to God. In his view, "[the] Canaanite women and children are to be killed despite being made in the image of God...."<sup>360</sup> Thus, there is a moral conflict within the Bible's teachings. As Avalos puts it, "Apparently, the value of practicing the right religion supersedes the value of life."<sup>361</sup> Fourth, Avalos maintains that the biblical assumptions that God exists and that God has the authority to take human life could equally be assumed by other religions. "[If] Allah exists, does he have any prerogatives over human life? Indeed, a jihadist Muslim could say that Allah has the authority to wipe out all Americans because they are incorrigible and wicked."<sup>362</sup> If correct, then how could one validate the command of one god over another?

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Copan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 208–28; cf. idem., "Was Israel Commanded to Commit Genocide?" accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.equinox.org/article/israel-commanded-commit-genocide/>; cf. Matthew Flannagan, "Did God Command the Genocide of the Canaanites?" in *Come Let Us Reason: New Essays in Christian Apologetics*, eds. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 225–50.

<sup>357</sup> See Hector Avalos, "Yahweh is a Moral Monster," in *The Christian Delusion: Why Faith Fails*, ed. John W. Loftus (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), 209–16.

<sup>358</sup> Avalos, "Yahweh is a Moral Monster," 217; cf. John J. Collins, *What Are Biblical Values? What the Bible Says on Key Ethical Issues* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 150.

<sup>359</sup> Avalos, "Yahweh is a Moral Monster," 218.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 219.



Fifth is the claim that the Canaanites were not treated the same as the Israelites. Yahweh showed the Israelites mercy and patience when *they* strayed from His commands, but the Canaanites were simply to be exterminated without mercy.<sup>363</sup> Sixth, Avalos avers that since the Conquest did not work in banishing idolatry from the land of Canaan, as is evident from the idolatry seen throughout the history of Israel, then the killing of Canaanite women and children was gratuitous.<sup>364</sup> Seventh, Avalos takes issue with the evangelical belief that children who die before they reach an age of accountability go straight to heaven. If true, then Christians should be in favor of abortion: “Why allow any child to be born if we can send him or her straight to heaven? After all, isn’t the salvation of souls more important than any human experience?”<sup>365</sup> Since Christians would not support this view, then there must be an internal, theological conflict. Eighth, killing the Canaanite children violated one statute of the Mosaic Law: “Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their fathers; each is to die for his own sin” (Deut 24:16).<sup>366</sup> The Conquest is unjustifiable by the Bible’s own standards. Ninth, Avalos wonders why God did not use another means of eliminating the Canaanites such as causing the women to be barren like he did to Abimelech’s household (cf. Gen 20:17–18). Then, the Canaanites would have died off within a generation or two.<sup>367</sup> Thus, Avalos offers a bevy of purported problems and contradictions in accepting the Conquest of Canaan as morally justified.

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<sup>363</sup> Ibid. See also Paul N. Anderson, “Genocide or Jesus: A God of Conquest or Pacifism?” in *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. J. Harold Ellens (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 33–34.

<sup>364</sup> Avalos, “Yahweh is a Moral Monster,” 220.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 220–21.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 221.

His solution for religion overall is the removal of all scriptures that contains religious violence since any depiction of God as violent must be false.<sup>368</sup>

Thom Stark

Another critic, Thom Stark, levels a number of attacks against the arguments of evangelicals who have tried to justify the Conquest. First, Stark believes that the Canaanites were no worse than the Israelites. He alleges that both groups practiced child sacrifice but did so to different gods. Thus, the issue was merely the *object* of worship, not the act itself: “Canaanite worship was abominable to Israel because Yahweh was not its object. They worshiped other gods, and Yahweh was jealous for Israel’s affections.”<sup>369</sup> The annihilation of the Canaanites was unjustified since they were no worse than the Israelites in terms of child sacrifice. Second, Stark takes issue with the slaughter of the Canaanite children. Would Canaanite infants *really* grow up to worship Canaanite deities if they were raised in Israelite homes to worship Yahweh? Numbers 31 states that the Midianite women and female children were incorporated into Israelite society. Only the men, the boys, and the promiscuous women were executed. If they were spared, then why not spare the Canaanite women and girls? Stark sees a contradiction between Numbers 31 and Deuteronomy 7 and 20 since the latter passages forbid intermarriage with foreign women.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), 360–ff; idem., “The Letter Killeth: A Plea for Decanonizing Violent Biblical Texts,” *Journal of Religion, Conflict, and Peace* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 1–18.

<sup>369</sup> Thom Stark, *The Humans Faces of God: What Scripture Reveals When It Gets God Wrong (And Why Inerrancy Tries to Hide It)* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 103; cf. idem., *Is God A Moral Compromiser? A Critical Review of Paul Copan’s “Is God a Moral Monster,”* 2d ed. (n.p., 2011), 209–ff.

<sup>370</sup> Stark, *The Humans Faces of God*, 103–105. Similarly, Evan Fales states, “Either cultural determinism is true, in which case the Canaanite children could not have been held responsible for growing into corrupt adult Canaanites, or else it’s false—in which case God could have provided them with guidance and opportunity to transform Canaanite culture” (Evan Fales, “Satanic Verses: Moral Chaos in Holy Writ,” in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, eds. Michael Bergman, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rae [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 100).

Third, Stark is critical of the common apologetic argument from Genesis 15:13–16 that the sin of the Amorites (Canaanites) had not reached its full measure and that therefore God patiently waited for four hundred years in order to give them time to repent. In his view, God should have sent Abraham to preach repentance to the Amorites to prevent them from becoming more and more wicked. After all, when Jonah went to Nineveh, the people repented at *his* preaching. Why did God not try to prevent the Canaanite moral degradation?<sup>371</sup> Fourth, Stark questions the justice in punishing the Amorites. Who is to say when their punishment was fully deserved? If an appeal is made to the doctrine of original sin, then all people—including the generation of Amorites in Abraham’s own day—would be ripe for judgment. In fact, every child would be deserving of death the moment he or she entered the world.<sup>372</sup> Fifth, Stark questions the logic of Deuteronomy 20:10–18, which spells out Israel’s rules for war whereby they were allowed to make peace with the nations outside the Promised Land but were forbidden from making peace treaties with the Canaanites within the land. Stark wonders whether the people *outside* the border of Israel were really any less wicked than those *inside* the border.<sup>373</sup>

A sixth criticism from Stark concerns the appeal to God’s overarching plan to bring forth the Messiah through the nation of Israel, which is believed to justify the need to keep Israel morally and spiritually pure by exterminating the Canaanites. If God were omnipotent, Stark posits, then He could have found a way to bring forth the Messiah without slaughtering the Canaanite children. Stark claims that this was just a utilitarian approach to ethics where the end justified the means. Although genocide is morally wrong, it was necessary to protect the lineage

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<sup>371</sup> Stark, *The Humans Faces of God*, 107.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

of the Messiah.<sup>374</sup> Seventh, Stark sees the threat of equal punishment against the Israelites if they turned away and worshiped other gods as compounding the problem in that it makes Yahweh responsible for the Canaanite genocide *as well as* the atrocities against Israel by other nations.<sup>375</sup> In addition, Stark wonders why the Israelite children had to suffer for their parents' sins (cf. Eze 18:20). The same injustice imposed on the Canaanite children was imposed on the Israelite children later.<sup>376</sup> Eighth, Stark is critical of the argument sometimes offered by evangelicals that killing the Canaanite children was actually an act of mercy in that it saved them from being sacrificed to false gods by their Canaanite parents. Stark questions the logic of saving the children by killing the children. Why could they not have been adopted?<sup>377</sup> Ninth, Stark responds to the common observation that the Conquest was a one-time event and not the normal practice of warfare in Israel's history by stating, "A nation does not have to be 'constantly on the warpath' in order to be guilty of war crimes."<sup>378</sup>

Tenth, Stark takes issue with God's killing of children during the Flood, at Sodom and Gomorrah, during the Passover, and during the downfall of Babylon (cf. Isa 13:15–22).<sup>379</sup> The Conquest is not an isolated event in terms of God's killing innocent children. Eleventh is Stark's complaint that it was wrong for God to take vengeance against the Amalekites (1 Sam 15) because the aggressions happened hundreds of years earlier during the time of Moses (Exod 17).

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>375</sup> See Lev 26:27–29; Eze 5:8–10; Jer 19:9; Lam 2:20–21; Hos 13:16.

<sup>376</sup> Stark, *The Humans Faces of God*, 113–16.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 120–22.

Why punish a later generation for the sins of their ancestors?<sup>380</sup> The twelfth criticism pertains to evangelicals who believe that the Canaanite genocide was a concession in the Law of Moses, like divorce or slavery, to the common practice of ancient peoples. The same evangelicals will justify the Conquest based on the approval of New Testament authors, which appears to be a contradiction.<sup>381</sup> Stark perceives another problem here too. Stating that the ancient Israelites had one idea of morality that allowed for genocide while modern people have the standards of the Geneva Convention amounts to moral relativism.<sup>382</sup> Finally, Stark finds fault with evangelicals who appeal to God's goodness to defend the Conquest. Some believe that God is good and that whatever God does is therefore good, even if they do not completely understand it. Stark sees a double standard of "Do as I say, not as I do." If God is supposed to be essentially morally good, but then God does something (genocide) that He forbids His creatures from doing, then God is going against God's own command.<sup>383</sup> At the end of his diatribe, Stark concludes as follows:

To be clear, my argument is not that God is evil for commanding genocide. I am not claiming "to know better than God"—an accusation Christian apologists often make against Christians who hold my position. My contention is that God never did command the Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites wholesale. These accounts reflect a standard ideology that Israel shared with many of its ancient neighbors, and I read them as products of ancient culture, rather than products of pure divine revelation. Therefore, my claim is not that I know better than God, but that we all know better than those who wrongly killed women and children in God's name.<sup>384</sup>

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 122–23. This criticism is found in an earlier work too. See G. W. Foote and W. P. Ball, eds., *A Bible Handbook for Freethinkers and Inquiring Christians: Part I – Bible Contradictions* (London: Progressive Publishing Company, 1891), 33.

<sup>381</sup> Stark, *The Humans Faces of God*, 124–25.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 126–27.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 134–35; cf. Raymond D. Bradley, "A Moral Argument for Atheism," accessed October 30, 2021, <https://infidels.org/library/modern/raymond-bradley-moral/>.

<sup>384</sup> Stark, *The Humans Faces of God*, 101–102.

Wes Morriston

In addition to the points made above by the New Atheists, Avalos, and Stark, the philosopher Wes Morriston offers two additional criticisms. First, he casts doubt on the purpose of teaching the Israelites through the Conquest, especially when modern readers know better.

Killing men, women, and children—even when it’s all part of a so-called *hērem*—can only be bad for the moral and spiritual development of a person or a people. It makes life seem cheap, expendable, not worth saving. If I thought that such deeds had been commanded by a god whose primary reason for commanding them was to prevent us from worshipping other gods, I would be terrified. But I hope I would not submit to so vile a command. The ancient Israelites mightn’t have been capable of such discrimination. But precisely because we have a purer conception of deity, we must refuse to believe that God commanded them to do such things.<sup>385</sup>

Second, Morriston questions whether the Canaanites really had enough spiritual knowledge to know that they were rebelling against God and were thereby deserving of death.

Finally, something must be said on behalf of the much maligned Canaanites. The children, at least, were innocent. But what about the adults? What evidence—really—do we have for thinking that they were in willful rebellion against God? No doubt they viewed the Israelites as enemies. But that doesn’t imply that they knew that temple prostitution and child sacrifice were wrong, or that they knowingly disobeyed the one true God! The Canaanites undoubtedly had many false beliefs and harmful practices. But was genocide the appropriate response to their ignorance and error? Would it not have been both fairer and more loving to show them the error of their ways? Or did God simply not care for Canaanites?<sup>386</sup>

Although Morriston’s questions are on the skeptical side and are themselves speculative, it does no harm to probe deeper into the issues surrounding the Conquest.

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<sup>385</sup> Wes Morriston, “Comments on ‘What Does the Old Testament Mean?’” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, eds. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 230; cf. idem., “Did God Command Genocide? A Challenge to Biblical Inerrantists,” *Philosophia Christi* 11, vol. 1 (2009): 7–26; idem., “Ethical Criticism of the Bible: The Case of Divinely Mandated Genocide,” *Sophia* 51, no. 1 (2012): 117–35; idem., “The Problem of Apparently Morally Abhorrent Divine Commands,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, eds. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 144–59; idem., “‘Terrible’ divine commands revisited: a response to Davis and Franks,” *Religious Studies* 52, no. 3 (2015): 361–73.

<sup>386</sup> Morriston, “Comments on ‘What Does the Old Testament Mean?’” 231.

## Summary and Evaluation

The criticisms from skeptics in this section range from surface-level complaints to difficult questions to ponder.<sup>387</sup> A number of the charges can be cleared by revisiting the biblical study in chapters two and three of this dissertation. Many of the complaints coming from the skeptics disappear upon a closer reading of the Bible. Other criticisms bank on speculations of what *would* have been a better course of action, but this presumes a level of knowledge not attainable, so there is no certainty that the skeptics' ideas would have worked any better. The criticisms that really stick are the question about the love of God in light of God's judgment and the question about the need to kill children along with parents. These will be addressed in the next chapter. The excursus below will address the particular objections from the skeptics in this section. In conclusion, the modern skeptics are often more sophisticated in their critiques of the Conquest, but they do not offer any solution besides dismissing the Bible and the God of the Bible, which comes at the high cost of atheism or agnosticism.

### Excursus: Answering the Skeptics

The first group to address here is the New Atheists, who are not particularly familiar with the biblical text because they operate in other fields such as the hard sciences and psychology rather than religious studies or history.<sup>388</sup> The New Atheists never actually make any arguments

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<sup>387</sup> For similar criticisms from other skeptics, see John Shelby Spong, *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005); Adrian Thatcher, *The Savage Text: The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); M. L. Gutierrez, *The Bible Dilemma: Historical Contradictions, Misquoted Statements, Failed Prophecies and Oddities in the Bible* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2009); Steve Wells, *Drunk with Blood: God's Killings in the Bible* (Moscow, ID: SAB Books, 2010); *ibid.*, *The Skeptics Annotated Bible* (Moscow, ID: SAB Books, 2012); Dan Barker, *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction* (New York: Sterling, 2016).

<sup>388</sup> See Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 21–22.

against God's existence on the basis of the Conquest.<sup>389</sup> They just *dislike* God's actions in the Conquest, which is not an argument. This says more about the New Atheists than about the God of the Bible. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "When we merely say that we are bad, the 'wrath' of God seems a barbarous doctrine; as soon as we *perceive* our badness, it appears inevitable, a mere corollary from God's goodness."<sup>390</sup> Because the New Atheists do not see things from a biblical worldview, then they perceive the Conquest incorrectly.

Furthermore, the New Atheists have to assume an objective moral standard in order to criticize the Conquest as objectively wrong. As Christian apologist Frank Turek remarks, "If there is no God, why is any Old Testament 'atrocities' wrong? What's is your moral standard? If you're an atheist, there is no moral standard. It's just your opinion."<sup>391</sup> Without God, all that is left is moral relativism, which means that "moral rules are merely personal preferences and/or results of one's cultural, sexual, or ethnic orientation."<sup>392</sup> There would no longer be any basis by which anyone could criticize another culture.<sup>393</sup> The New Atheists would just be *different* than

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<sup>389</sup> Robert Stewart, "'Holy War,' Divine Action and the New Atheism," in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and the Old Testament Problem*, eds. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 265–84.

<sup>390</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1947), 46 (emphasis original).

<sup>391</sup> Frank Turek, "Did God Really Command That All the Canaanites Be Killed?" accessed November 21, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxSZXBrxOEY>; cf. idem., *Stealing from God: Why Atheists Need God to Make Their Case* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), ch. 4. Chad Meister makes the same point: "If good and evil are objectively real, they need an objective foundation. No atheist has provided one, and it's doubtful that one will be forthcoming" (Chad Meister, "God, Evil and Morality," in *God is Great, God is Good: Why Believing in God is Reasonable and Responsible*, eds. William Lane Craig and Chad Meister [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009], 115); cf. Normal L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 178–79; John C. Lennox, *Gunning for God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2011), 138; Christopher R. J. Holmes, *The Lord is Good: Seeking the God of the Psalter* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 111.

<sup>392</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, "Why I Am Not a Moral Relativist," in *Why I Am a Christian: Leading Thinkers Explain Why They Believe*, eds. Normal L. Geisler and Paul K. Hoffman (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 17; cf. idem., "Is Morality Relative?" in *Passionate Conviction: Contemporary Discourses on Christian Apologetics*, eds. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 211.



the ancient Israelites rather than morally superior to them.<sup>394</sup> In addition, if atheism were true, then humans would not have any free will to change their behaviors. Instead, they simply respond to stimuli in accordance with their DNA and environment; there is no such thing as “free will.” Dawkins concedes this point: “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.... DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.”<sup>395</sup> Without God, there is no good or evil and no opportunity to even recommend different moral behaviors.<sup>396</sup> Evolutionary naturalism cannot account for moral realism either.

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<sup>393</sup> As Lewis remarks, “The moment you say that one set of moral ideas can be better than another, you are, in fact, measuring them both by a standard, saying that one of them conforms to that standard more nearly than the other. But the standard that measures two things is something different from either” (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 13).

<sup>394</sup> Sam Harris tries to equate “the good” with human flourishing in order to make morality objective (Harris, *The Moral Landscape*, 7). That way, certain things are objectively right and wrong, and he can criticize the Bible and the God of the Old Testament, for example. William Lane Craig’s critique, though, is decidedly apropos: “He [Harris] says he wants to develop a science of human flourishing. And my reaction to that is to say, well, wait a minute, why equate human flourishing with ‘the good’?.... But on atheism, on naturalism, I see absolutely no reason to invest that with moral value, and to equate human well-being with the morally good....” (“Sam Harris and The Moral Landscape,” accessed November 2, 2020, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/reasonable-faith-podcast/sam-harris-and-the-moral-landscape/>; cf. “Is the Foundation of Morality Natural or Supernatural? The Craig-Harris Debate,” accessed November 2, 2020, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/is-the-foundation-of-morality-natural-or-supernatural-the-craig-harris-deba/>).

<sup>395</sup> Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 132–33. Similarly, the skeptic Michael Shermer admits that being “moral” is a part of human nature just like being hungry or being in love (Michael Shermer, *The Science of Good and Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule* [New York: Henry Hold, 2004], 56–57). Lewis critiques this position, which he formerly held, in his classic work, *Mere Christianity*: “My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? If the whole show was bad and senseless from A to Z, so to speak, why did I, who was supposed to be part of the show, find myself in such violent reaction against it? A man feels wet when he falls into water, because man is not a water animal: a fish would not feel wet. Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist—in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless—I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality—namely my idea of justice—was full of sense. Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning: just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be without meaning” (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 45–46).

<sup>396</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 247.

All that would result from naturalism would be moral beliefs arising from adaptive behaviors centered on their fitness rather than their truth, leading to moral skepticism.<sup>397</sup> Why should one trust his moral beliefs (in condemning God) if they are the byproduct of a materialistic, valueless, mindless process of evolution? Our beliefs would hold survival value, but they would not necessarily be true.<sup>398</sup> Therefore, the main critique of the New Atheists that the God of the Old Testament is mean or evil would disappear if atheism itself were true. If atheism is false, then God exists, and it behooves the studious interpreter to make a greater effort to understand the biblical text before dismissing it.

This is where Avalos comes in. He teaches in the area of religious studies, so his proficiency in biblical studies is much higher even though he is not a Christian himself. As a result, Avalos offers critiques that are specific to the biblical text as well as to Christian theology as a whole. The problem is that he tends to overstate the case. For example, no Christian would support abortion just because people who die before reaching an age of accountability go to heaven. The same logic would make infanticide and filicide (parents killing their children) commendable, which is ludicrous. Christian theologians will naturally prefer another explanation. Neither does the *imago Dei* mean that God cannot take human life as a just punishment. Moreover, the command to love one's neighbor as oneself does not negate the commands to take life in wartime situations and to punish capital offenses.<sup>399</sup> Loving one's

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<sup>397</sup> Mark D. Linville, "The Moral Poverty of Evolutionary Naturalism," in *Contending with Christianity's Critics: Answering New Atheists & Other Objectors*, eds. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (Nashville, B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 62.

<sup>398</sup> Robert McQuilkin and Paul Copan, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics: Walking in the Way of Wisdom*, 3d ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 181–82.

<sup>399</sup> Brian Rainey rejects the Conquest as an act of xenophobia and believes that conceptualizing ethnic groups as devoted to destruction or contaminated is inherently toxic and dehumanizing. Not only that, but the Conquest could then be used to encourage discrimination today: "Believing that the Bible's portrayal of the

neighbor pertains to everyday living and does not overrule capital punishment. Avalos' question as to why God could not have exterminated the Canaanites through another means such as making all of the women barren is presumptuous since there is no certainty that this would have accomplished God's overall purposes *better* than the Conquest. For example, if God made the Canaanite women barren, then perhaps the Canaanite men would have invaded neighboring nations to kidnap their wives, thereby spreading their corruption further. As Reichenbach posits,

But it is not enough merely to conceive of particular instances which could be better than at present or classes of evils that could be eliminated; one must conceive of an entire system of natural laws and world-components which would have consequences, both individually and in toto, which would be superior to this world. But surely this is impossible.<sup>400</sup>

No one has a God's-eye view to speculate with any degree of certainty. In fact, if God exists, and if God has all knowledge and is completely good, holy, and just, then it is impossible for God to be wrong and for a human to know better.<sup>401</sup>

A couple of Avalos' other arguments are just spurious. The fact that Americans hold different values today than ancient Israelites is nothing more than a commentary on sociology. There could be any number of explanations for the differences, not to mention the fact that the

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Canaanites was warranted and that Yahweh's pronouncements were just legitimates stigmatizing, caricaturing polemical discourse against foreigners. The texts suggest that some peoples, including their children and infants, by virtue of their ethnic background, can become incorrigibly corrupt, and inherently sinful" (Brian Rainey, *Religion, Ethnicity and Xenophobia in the Bible: A Theoretical, Exegetical and Theological Survey* [London: Routledge, 2019], 253). The problem with his logic is that while it is normally not the case that a nation is so depraved as to be incorrigible, there may be times when a nation is so wicked that the entire civilization is worthy of punishment. Such is the case with the Canaanites. But that in no way sets an example to follow without just cause, let alone without a divine sanction. What is more, the Conquest was not xenophobic since there was at least one family—Rahab's—who became a part of Israel because of Rahab's faith. If the Conquest were purely xenophobic, then the Israelites would have killed Rahab and her family too since they were Canaanites.

<sup>400</sup> Bruce R. Reichenbach, *Evil and a Good God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 116.

<sup>401</sup> Lewis makes this point well: "But there is a difficulty about disagreeing with God. He is the source from which all your reasoning power comes: you could not be right and He wrong any more than a stream can rise higher than its own source. When you are arguing against Him you are arguing against the very power that makes you able to argue at all: it is like cutting off the branch you are sitting on" (Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 52–53). Avalos would no doubt retort that he does not believe in God's existence, but this is a separate point. Within a *biblical* worldview, the Conquest is coherent because of the biblical portrait of God and because of the reasons given for the Conquest.

Old Testament Israelites lived in a different dispensation than modern Christians. The argument that other religions could claim that their god also has authority to take life is irrelevant since there can be only one, supreme Creator who would have such a prerogative as the Author of life. It is not difficult to invalidate other religions that claim divine authority for taking lives. All one has to do is deconstruct the religion to prove that it is false. But numerous false religions does not negate the teachings of a true religion.<sup>402</sup>

Two of Avalos' biblical arguments are also easily answered. One is his claim that the Israelites were treated differently than the Canaanites in that the Israelites were shown mercy whereas the Canaanites were not. However, the Canaanites *were* given four hundred years to repent, and any who turned to the Lord (e.g., Rahab) were saved. The Israelites, on the other hand, were swiftly punished a number of times in the wilderness, in the book of Judges, and then ultimately in the Babylonian Exile. There was no mercy for the guilty parties in those situations, so the charge of unfair treatment vanishes. Avalos' argument that the Conquest did not work and so it was therefore gratuitous ignores the fact that the Conquest *did* work in giving the Israelites the land overall and in punishing a number of Canaanites initially. Israel was firmly situated in the land from that point forward for hundreds of years, whereas the Canaanite powers were largely overthrown, and many of the Canaanites got their just dessert for their wickedness.

Next is the laundry list of criticisms from Thom Stark. For starters, Stark alleges that the Canaanites were no worse than the Israelites. He even avers that the Israelites practiced child sacrifice. But according to the biblical record and what is known about the Canaanites from

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<sup>402</sup> Some critics compare the Conquest to Islamic jihad (e.g., J. Harold Ellens, "The Obscenity of War: The Imperative of the Lesser Evil," in *The Just War and Jihad: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. R. Joseph Hoffmann [Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006], 39), but this is an oversimplification since there are many differences between the concept of holy war in the Bible and holy war in the Koran. See Reuven Firestone, "Conceptions of Holy War in Biblical and Qur'anic Tradition," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 99–123.

ancient Near Eastern accounts, the Canaanites were especially corrupt and wicked, and when Israel eventually became like the Canaanites and then exceeded Canaanite wickedness during the period of the divided monarchy, the Israelites themselves were punished. Next, Stark questions the need to kill the Canaanite children. This will be discussed more in the next chapter, but one can reason at this point that it is altogether possible that the Canaanites were more wicked than the Midianite women and girls and thus could not be assimilated into Israel without risk of spiritual corruption. There may be other reasons why the children were killed along with the parents, but at this juncture, it is presumptuous to think that they could have simply been adopted into Israelite society without major consequences.

Third, Stark takes issue with God's patience in giving the Amorites (Canaanites) four hundred years to repent. Why did God not send Abraham to preach repentance to them like God sent Jonah to Nineveh? This could be answered with any number of postulates since it is a speculative objection. For example, God knew that the Ninevites would repent at Jonah's preaching, which is why He sent Jonah there, but perhaps God knew that it would do no good to send Abraham to the Canaanites. Judging by the evils at Sodom, Gomorrah, and Shechem, the Canaanites were already morally and spiritually compromised in Abraham's day. Fourth, Stark balks at the justice in punishing the Amorites for their sins since no one knows when their punishment is fully deserved. This may be true from a human point of view, but God would certainly know when enough was enough.

Stark also questions whether the rules for war in Deuteronomy 20:10–18 were appropriate since, in his mind, the Canaanites were no more wicked than any of Israel's neighbors living outside the land. Again, the biblical record characterizes the Canaanites as especially wicked, which is why they were judged. Next is Stark's criticism that killing the

Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15 was wrong because the Amalekites had attacked the Israelites hundreds of years before. As seen in chapter two, the Amalekites were still a threat to Israel during the time of Saul, and God had promised in the Law of Moses to one day settle the score, which is His right to do. The Amalekites in Saul's day were no less wicked and deserving of judgment than those in Moses' day. They were still hostile to Israel.

The next criticism from Stark is aimed at God's overall plan to bring the Messiah from Israel. Could not God have derived a plan that did not involve the slaughter of Canaanite children? Perhaps so, but thinking there is a better way to accomplish God's purposes for Israel and the world assumes a breadth and depth of knowledge of which humans are incapable, especially given human freedom and possible worlds. Stark's next criticism is that the problem of the Conquest is only amplified when God punished the Israelites for turning away to worship other gods since God was then responsible for the Canaanite genocide as well as atrocities against Israel by other nations. In response, though, it must be pointed out that one of God's prerogatives is His right to judge humans—including the right to take life. If God is perfectly good and just, as the Bible teaches, then He would not exact punishment inappropriately. This applies to God's killing of men, women, and children at other times too (e.g., Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, plagues in Egypt). People may not *like* God's judgments, but that does nothing to thwart God's right to act as Judge. God is free to act in punishing evil. He is not in "permanent deistic retirement."<sup>403</sup> This does not amount to a double standard either, as Stark supposes. God is God, and He can take life or command His creatures to execute justice on His behalf while at

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<sup>403</sup> Stephen N. Williams, "Holy War and the New Atheism," in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and the Old Testament Problem*, eds. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 325.

the same time forbidding humans from going rogue and killing other humans without divine sanction, which would be unjust.<sup>404</sup>

Stark's next disagreement is with evangelicals who see the killing of Canaanite children as an act of mercy since it saved them from being sacrificed to false gods by their parents. Stark wonders why the children could not just be adopted rather than killed. This is a fair point and will be considered more in the next chapter. The comments above address the point about adoption, though. Sparing the children from a gruesome death in the fires of a Molech altar may be a consequence of the Conquest, but there were likely other reasons for killing the children along with the parents, especially since children were killed along with their parents at other times where children were not in danger of being offered as a sacrifice (cf. Num 16; Josh 7).

Stark also makes a fair critique of the evangelical argument that the Conquest was a one-time event. Just because it only happened once, that does not mean that it was necessarily moral. However, evangelicals normally make the argument in order to show that the Conquest is not something to be repeated *today*. However, Stark makes a good argument against evangelicals who believe that the Conquest was merely a concession in the Law of Moses to the practices of ancient peoples. The argument would be that because other ancient nations practiced genocide, then God allowed the Israelites to do the same. This argument will be examined closer at a later

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<sup>404</sup> Atheist John Loftus discounts God's right to give and take life with the following statement: "If I give someone a gift, I cannot just take it back. Doing so is both immoral and illegal. I cannot give someone blood to save her life and then demand it back from her. Nor can I give someone money for a lifesaving medical procedure and demand the money back, or take her life later because I previously saved it. Why can't I? Because once a gift is given it is no longer mine to take back. If Christians respond that God's gifts always have strings attached, like our obedience, then God never truly gives us anything. What kind of gift is it if I save a person's life and then threaten to kill her if she doesn't do as I say? For Christians to retort that God can do whatever he wants to because he's God, still doesn't morally justify his actions" (John W. Loftus, *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* [New York: Prometheus Books, 2008], ch. 13). Loftus' argument depends on a loose definition of "give." God *gives* life, but everything ultimately belongs to Him and could not be otherwise since He is God. Therefore, human analogies to gift-giving and ownership are limited.

point in this chapter. In the view of this author, there are better explanations for the Conquest than the idea that God used something evil in order to accommodate ancient customs.

The last skeptic mentioned above is the philosopher Wes Morriston, who offers two main critiques. First, Morriston doubts that the Conquest would have a didactic value for the Israelites. Rather, he believes that the Conquest would have only *negatively* impacted the Israelites since they would have had to execute men, women, and children. However, this criticism overlooks what the Conquest *would* teach the Israelites—namely, the fear of the Lord. When the Israelites came face to face with the penalty for worshiping false gods, for child sacrifice, and for sexual immorality, they would have arguably been motivated to obey the Lord’s commands themselves. This may be why the Conquest generation did not stray; they experienced the Lord’s blessings but also witnessed His wrath. It was the *next* generation that turned away from the Lord—perhaps because they did not remember the firsthand experience of executing the wicked Canaanites.

Morriston’s second critique is that the Canaanites did not have enough spiritual knowledge to know that they were in violation of God’s commands and therefore worthy of execution. But from a biblical worldview, the knowledge of God is evident to all, and a person or society has to willfully reject that knowledge in turning to the worship of creation and to sexual immorality (cf. Rom 1:18–32). In addition, each person has a God-given conscience. God’s laws are written on the hearts of humans so that even when they do not have the written law of God, they know what is right and wrong (Rom 2:14–15). God did not judge the Canaanites for failing to follow Israel’s dietary laws or festivals but for so-called “crimes against humanity”—acts so heinous as to be repugnant to anyone with a functioning conscience. Any skeptic would agree that sacrificing children in fire is an evil act and that any society that persisted in such practices



should be stopped. When Morriston asks whether the Israelites had to kill the Canaanites rather than lovingly show the Canaanites the errors of their ways, he assumes that the Canaanites would have willingly changed their ways. However, the Canaanites continued their abominable practices for centuries, as seen above in the practices of the Carthaginians.

## Summary

This section has considered the interpretations of those outside the Christian faith who have been critical of the Conquest, the Bible, and the God of the Bible in general. Some of the arguments are biblically-based, while others are more theological or philosophical. In the end, the ancient heretics, Enlightenment critics, and modern skeptics reject the Conquest as immoral for a handful of reasons. These reasons have been addressed above, but the critics in this section offer very little by way of explanation except to dismiss the Conquest, the Bible, and the God of the Bible. A major factor, of course, is the worldview of the interpreter. Those who are atheists or deists have no trouble jettisoning the Bible, but there is too much biblical, historical, and theological material on the table to disregard the Conquest.

## The Conquest and Christian Criticism

The Conquest has not only been criticized by those outside the Christian faith but also by those within Christian scholarship, broadly speaking.<sup>405</sup> This may come as a surprise since

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<sup>405</sup> See Stephen T. Davis, *The Debate About the Bible: Inerrancy Versus Infallibility* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 97–98; Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); John Barton, “Old Testament Theology,” in *Beginning Old Testament Study*, ed. John Rogerson (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 90; Robert P. Carroll, *The Bible as a Problem for Christianity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 46–48; Ronald S. Hendel, “When God Acts Immorally,” *Bible Review* 7, no. 3 (June 1991): 34–37, 46–50; Gareth Lloyd Jones, “Sacred Violence: The Dark Side of God,” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 20, no. 2 (1999): 184–99; C. S. Cowles, “The Case for Radical Discontinuity,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 11–44; Jeremy Young, *The Violence of God and the War on Terror* (New York: Seabury, 2008); Randal Rauser, “Let Nothing that Breathes Remain Alive,” *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 1 (2009): 27–41; idem., “On William Lane Craig’s Defense of the Canaanite Slaughter (Part 1),” accessed September 18, 2020, <http://randalrauser.com/2013/02/on-william-lane-craigs-defense-of-the-canaanite-slaughter-part-1/>; idem., “On William Lane Craig’s Defense of the Canaanite Genocide (Part 2),” accessed September 18, 2020,

Christians traditionally accept and defend the Bible, but a number of scholars today condemn the Conquest with statements that echo the skeptics and sometimes even exceed the skeptics in terms of moral outrage. Christian scholars Webb and Oeste, for example, maintain that biblical war texts (e.g., the Conquest) are “bloody, brutal, and barbaric” and “deeply troubling.”<sup>406</sup> Old Testament scholar Eric Seibert refers to the God of the Old Testament as a “mass murderer” and “genocidal general”<sup>407</sup> because of God’s acts of judgment such as the Conquest. Christian theologian C. S. Cowles considered it virtually impossible to justify holy war in the light of God’s character revealed in the Bible and even referred to the Conquest as the “Canaanite holocaust.”<sup>408</sup> In his view, “genocide at any time, in any form, for any reason is absolutely antithetical to love.”<sup>409</sup> Old Testament scholar Peter Enns takes it even further:

No need to be afraid to attack and kill, because God will be right there with them making sure they come up winners.... He will stand watch as they run their swords through every living thing in Canaan: men, boys, infants, someone’s grandmother, or pregnant wife, and even livestock. God will be with the Israelites, pleased as they level town after town, deaf to screams and cries for mercy. This takes my breath away. It’s enough to make you want to stop reading.”<sup>410</sup>

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<https://randalrauser.com/2013/02/on-william-lane-craigs-defense-of-the-canaanite-genocide-part-2/>; idem., “Did God Really Command Genocide: A Review (Part 1),” accessed September 18, 2020, <http://randalrauser.com/2015/01/did-god-really-command-genocide-a-review-part-1/>; Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); idem., *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament’s Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 118; idem., “Recent Research on Divine Violence in the Old Testament (with Special Attention to Christian Theological Perspectives),” *Currents in Biblical Research* 15, no. 1 (2016): 8–40; idem., “God, the Bible, and Moral Concerns,” in *The History of Evil from the Mid-Twentieth Century to Today*, eds. Jerome Gellman, Charles Taliaferro, and Chad Meister (London: Routledge, 2018), 169–87; Keith Ward, *The Word of God? The Bible after Modern Scholarship* (London: SPCK, 2010); Philip Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can’t Ignore the Bible’s Violent Verses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011); Thomas Römer, *Dark God: Cruelty, Sex, and Violence in the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013); Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

<sup>406</sup> Webb and Oeste, *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric?* 1.

<sup>407</sup> Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 20–26.

<sup>408</sup> C. S. Cowles, “A Response to Eugene H. Merrill,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 97–98.

<sup>409</sup> Cowles, “A Response to Eugene H. Merrill,” 101.

Similarly, the “Tentative Apologist” Randal Rauser speculates at the aftermath of the Conquest:

As a result, thousands of people are forced to flee the only lives they’ve ever known, setting off into the desert with what they can carry. In extreme conditions like this, the handicapped, the sick, the widows, and the elderly, are most likely to be left behind, along with the occasional child who is separated from his/her desperate family. And what happens to these desperate folks on the margins of society who are left behind? They are to be hacked apart by the advancing Israelite armies.<sup>411</sup>

Reading statements like these from Enns and Rauser doubtless make readers hesitant to accept the Conquest in light of modern sensibilities—especially because the Conquest involved so much innocent suffering since children were killed.<sup>412</sup> Anglican priest and theologian Jeremy Young wonders why so many Christians have accepted the Conquest and concludes that “[a] major reason for this is, I believe, that many of us have been brought up listening to the biblical stories in an uncritical manner: the behaviour of God was presented to us as normal and commendable before we were old enough to make an informed judgement [sic].”<sup>413</sup> When one looks at the Bible with a more critical understanding, then it becomes apparent that the God of the Bible is abusive and that violence is at the core of the entire Bible.<sup>414</sup>

### Supporting Arguments

There are three main arguments underlying the viewpoints of the Christian who criticize the Conquest. The first is summarized in the following syllogism from Rauser:<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*, 37.

<sup>411</sup> Rauser, “Did God Really Command Genocide? A Review (Part 1).”

<sup>412</sup> So Dwight Van Winkle, “Canaanite Genocide and Amalekite Genocide and the God of Love,” Winifred E. Water Lectures 1 (1989), 25; accessed June 22, 2021, [https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/weter\\_lectures/1](https://digitalcommons.spu.edu/weter_lectures/1).

<sup>413</sup> Young, *The Violence of God and the War on Terror*, 8.

<sup>414</sup> See *ibid.*, 11–ff.

<sup>415</sup> See Rauser, “Let Nothing that Breathes Remain Alive,” 28–29.

- (1) God is the most perfect being there could be.
- (2) Yahweh is God.
- (3) Yahweh ordered people to commit genocide.
- (4) Genocide is always a moral atrocity.
- (5) A perfect being would not order people to commit a moral atrocity.
- (6) Therefore, a perfect being would not order people to commit genocide (4, 5).
- (7) Therefore, Yahweh did not order people to commit genocide (1, 2, 6).

As the syllogism states, it is impossible for Yahweh as a perfect being (God) to order the destruction of the Canaanites since that would be genocide and since genocide is a moral atrocity. Therefore, Yahweh *could not* have ordered the Conquest, and so Yahweh *did not* order the Conquest. There must be another explanation for what is recorded in Scripture. Of course, the syllogism depends heavily on premise (4). If genocide is a moral atrocity for humans but *not* for God because God as God has the right to take life—including when God acts through human instruments (e.g., capital punishment)—then the problem disappears. Nevertheless, Rauser’s syllogism explains the moral outrage that many scholars express toward the Conquest.

The second argument is that Jesus would never have approved of the Conquest since the God that Jesus described is kind and loving.<sup>416</sup> As Cowles wrote, “The vengeful spirit that dehumanizes, depersonalizes, and demonizes a whole town or city or nation is not of God. The

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<sup>416</sup> Many of the same arguments are found in the works of other theologians. For examples, see H. Eberhard von Waldrow, “The Concept of War in the Old Testament,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 6, no. 2 (1984): 27–48; John Dear, *The God of Peace: Toward a Theology of Nonviolence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994); Rolf P. Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Substance, Method, and Cases* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 99, 318; J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); John Howard Yoder, *The War of the Lamb: The Ethics of Nonviolence and Peacemaking*, ed. Glen Stassen, Mark Thiessen Nation, and Matt Hamsher (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009); David J. Neville, “Toward a Teleology of Peace: Contesting Matthew’s Violent Eschatology,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30, no. 2 (2007), 131–61; cf. idem., *A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013); idem., *The Vehement Jesus: Grappling with Troubling Gospel Texts* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017); Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Jesus and the Subversion of Violence* (London: SPCK, 2011); Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament’s Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); idem., *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).

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).”<sup>417</sup> Cowles went on to state that any such portraits are more descriptive of Satan than of God:

If ours is a Christlike God, then we can categorically affirm that God is not a destroyer.... 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.<sup>418</sup>

God does not use death to punish; that is Satan’s domain. Therefore, any depiction of God that falls short of the picture Jesus painted of God must be rejected, as Seibert argues:

If we accept these two assumptions—that Jesus reveals God’s character most fully and clearly and that God’s character is consistent over time—it stands to reason that the God whom Jesus reveals should be the standard by which all portrayals of God are measured and evaluated. Every image of God, biblical or otherwise, can be judged by Jesus’ revelation of God. Portrayals that correspond to the God Jesus reveals should be accepted as accurate reflections of God’s nature. Those that stand in tension with Jesus’ revelation of God should be regarded as distortions of the same.<sup>419</sup>

Cowles used the New Testament to support these contentions. For example, the New Testament teaches that Jesus is superior to Moses and to the angels (Heb 1:4–14; 3:1–6) since He is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15) in whom all the fullness of deity dwells bodily (Col 2:9). Therefore, it should not be surprising to find that Jesus corrected Moses. For example, Jesus rejected Moses’ divorce laws (Mark 10:4–9) and redirected Mosaic laws concerning vengeance with the command to “overcome evil with good” (Matt 5:38–42). He also contravened the Law of Moses when He pardoned the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1–11) since the Law of Moses

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<sup>417</sup> Cowles, “The Case for Radical Discontinuity,” 26.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>419</sup> Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 187; cf. Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 81–82.

called for the execution of adulterers (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22).<sup>420</sup> In addition, Jesus' 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."<sup>421</sup> While it is true that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets (Matt 5:17), His statements of "you have heard it said, but I tell you..." recast the teachings of the Old Testament under the law of love.<sup>422</sup> The Law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Therefore, Cowles concluded that "God is not like the first Joshua, a warrior, but like the second, the Prince of Peace,"<sup>423</sup> and "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."<sup>424</sup>

This leads to the third argument. Not only would Jesus *not* have condoned the Conquest, but God Himself is actually *nonviolent* and therefore would not have ordered the Conquest.<sup>425</sup> In

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<sup>420</sup> Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," 33.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>425</sup> Cowles argued that two early Christian writings may support the idea that God is opposed to violence, which would bolster his case (see *ibid.*, 23). First is *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, which is possibly the very first Christian apologetic work, dating perhaps even before the works of Justin Martyr (d. 165). However, nothing is known about the author, Mathetes ("disciple"), or Diognetus, the recipient of the letter (see *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe [1885, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2001], 72–73; cf. Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Volume II* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003], 123–27). There is one line that states, "for violence has no place in the character of God" (*The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, ch. 7). This sounds like something that agrees with Marcion, but the line must be read in context: "As a king sends his son, who is also a king, so sent He Him; as God He sent Him; as to men He sent Him; as a Saviour He sent Him, and as seeking to persuade, not to compel us; *for violence has no place in the character of God*. As calling us He sent Him, not as vengefully pursuing us; as loving us He sent Him, not as judging us. For He will yet send Him to judge us, and who shall endure His appearing?" (*ibid.*, [emphasis added]). The teaching in context is that God does not *coerce* people to believe in Christ, not that God never commits acts of violence. Other ways to translate the line in question are "compulsion is not an attribute of God" (Kirsopp Lake, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2 [London: William Heinemann, 1913], 365) or "force is no attribute of God" (J. B. Lightfoot, trans., *The Epistle of Diognetus*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. J. R. Harmer [London: MacMillan and Co., 1891], 7.4).

support is the biblical teaching that God is the God of peace (Rom 15:33; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 5:23; 2 Thess 3:16; Heb 13:20) and Jesus' statement that "peacemakers" would be called "sons of God" (Matt 5:9). Additionally, when Jesus read from scroll in the temple (Luke 4:18–19), He omitted the part at the end about the "day of vengeance of our God." In so doing, Jesus introduced "the shocking, unprecedented, and utterly incomprehensible news that God is non-violent and that he wills the well-being of all humans, beginning with the poor, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised."<sup>426</sup> Since God loves the world (John 3:16) and does not want anyone to perish (2 Pet 3:9), then He would not have ordered the Conquest. Whenever God *does* judge people, He passively turns them over to their sinful ways (Rom 1:24) and allows them to suffer the built-in consequences for their choices, which ultimately lead to death (Rom 6:23).<sup>427</sup>

Raymund Schwager summarizes the point as follows:

Thus God's anger means that God fully respects the evil that people do with all its consequences. By turning away from the creator, they have distorted their hearts' striving and their thinking. Sinners are now entirely handed over to and victims both of the passions which have thus arisen and of the overpowering pictures of a thought process which has lost all foundation. Their life with God, their dealing with their fellow humans, and the way they relate to themselves and to the good things of this world are ruined: for this they punish themselves (mutually).<sup>428</sup>

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A second example from the same letter states that God is "free from wrath." Again, this sounds like a nonviolent God: "For God the Master and Creator of the universe, who made all things and arranged them in order was not only kind to man, but also long-suffering. Nay, he was ever so and is and will be, kindly and good and *free from wrath* (ἀόργητος) and true, and he alone is good" (Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2:367 [emphasis added]). The expression "free from wrath" seems to support the idea that God is nonviolent. However, the Greek word could also be translated as "dispassionate" (Lightfoot, *The Epistle of Diognetus*, 8.8) or simply "without anger" (Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers: Volume II*, 149). The emphasis here is on the love of God, but the love of God does not exclude the punishment of God. In the very next section of the letter, the author states, "For our unrighteous way of life came to fruition and it became perfectly clear that it could expect only punishment and death as its ultimate reward. But then, when the time arrived that God had planned to reveal at last his goodness and power (Oh, the supreme beneficence and love of God!), he did not hate us, destroy us, or hold a grudge against us. But he was patient, he bore with us, and out of pity for us he took our sins upon himself" (ibid., 149–50). The concept of God's impending judgment is present along with His grace in sending Jesus to atone for the sins of mankind. There is no clear teaching that God is nonviolent, though.

<sup>426</sup> Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," 24.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 26–27.

The solution, then, is to read the Bible nonviolently, “which means resisting all readings that—wittingly or unwittingly—cause harm, justify oppression, sanction killing, or in some way reinforce the value and ‘virtue’ of violence.”<sup>429</sup> The truth is that in the Bible, “violence is always committed by human beings,”<sup>430</sup> not by God. This approach helps the reader to see the side of the victims in the text by asking questions like, “How would an Amalekite child react to seeing armed Israelites slaughtering her people and eventually coming to kill her (1 Samuel 15)?”<sup>431</sup>

### **Explaining the Conquest**

One question at this juncture is, How does one explain the Conquest in light of the abovementioned arguments—that genocide is always wrong, that Jesus presented a different God than the one portrayed in the Old Testament, and that the God of the Bible is actually nonviolent—when a simple reading of the text pins the responsibility on God? The answer from Christians who criticize the Conquest is that the Old Testament portrait of God is *wrong*. All accounts where humans committed acts of violence in the name of God were not truly commanded by God, and any biblical stories where God Himself acts violently (e.g., the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah) are mythical.<sup>432</sup> It may even be the case that the devil was the one behind the violent actions of the Old Testament or that the Israelites attributed the work of the devil to

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<sup>428</sup> Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the Drama of Salvation* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), 165.

<sup>429</sup> Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture*, 3.

<sup>430</sup> Raymund Schwager, *Must There be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, trans. Maria L. Assad (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 66.

<sup>431</sup> Eric A. Seibert, “When God Smites: Talking with Students about the Violence of God in Scripture,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 17, no. 4 (Oct. 2014): 330.

<sup>432</sup> Schwager, *Must There be Scapegoats?* 66–70.



God.<sup>433</sup> This highlights the need to distinguish between the “textual God” versus the “actual God.”<sup>434</sup> As Fretheim and Froehlich explain,

Biblical characters, God included, are literary constructs; they are not “flesh-and-blood” personalities. Words on the page are not the same as characters in real life. The characters portrayed in the pages of the Bible are not the actual Moses or the actual Jesus or the actual God. The God portrayed in the text does not fully correspond to the God who transcends the text, who is a living, dynamic reality that cannot be captured in words on a page. God can give himself to us in, with, and under the text, but that God does not fully correspond to the character portrayed.<sup>435</sup>

Therefore, when reading biblical texts, it is important to separate the wheat from the chaff in searching for value in problematic passages without abandoning the text altogether.<sup>436</sup> But why would God leave texts in the Bible that portray Him incorrectly? The next section will survey several explanations for why the Conquest attributes the killing to God’s will.

#### Examples, Not Precepts

One interpretation to consider is that, with a few exceptions such as the prohibition against murder, the Bible teaches examples rather than precepts so that people can work out their own morality for modern issues and situations.<sup>437</sup> Rogerson explains as follows:

The fact is that, as humanity gets older, its natural morality becomes more sensitive. That is why injunctions demanding the death penalty for cursing or striking one’s parents, and suchlike, sound barbaric to us today.... Unfortunately, the fact that humanity has become more sensitive to moral matters does not mean that the human race has become more

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<sup>433</sup> Derek Flood, *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives, and Why We All Need to Learn to Read the Bible Like Jesus Did* (San Francisco: Metanoia Books, 2014), 95.

<sup>434</sup> Hélène M. Dallaire, “Taking the Land by Force: Divine Violence in Joshua,” in *Wrestling with the Violence of God: Soundings in the Old Testament*, eds. Daniel M. Carroll and J. Blair Wilgus (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 53.

<sup>435</sup> Terence E. Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God: In a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 116.

<sup>436</sup> Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 213.

<sup>437</sup> J. W. Rogerson, *According to the Scriptures?: The Challenge of Using the Bible in Social, Moral, and Political Questions* (London: Routledge, 2014), 80–86.

moral or humane, as the ghastly history of the twentieth century has shown and that of the twenty-first century continues to show.<sup>438</sup>

Rogerson shifts the focus away from the specific commandments of the Bible to the driving forces at work behind them. The Exodus narrative, for example, exhibits “structures of grace” in setting the captives free, though there are also “structures of oppression” present with the plagues on Egypt and the commandment to destroy the Canaanites.<sup>439</sup> In dealing with this contradiction, Rogerson states, “There is no point in trying to deny that these negative points exist. However, they are only an embarrassment if it is being claimed that the Old Testament is a propositional revelation of God’s character....”<sup>440</sup> Rogerson denies the proposition, though, and instead maintains that the Old Testament features Israel’s “natural morality” that has both good and bad elements. “What remains of value is that the Old Testament challenges contemporary readers to devise appropriate ‘structures of grace’ for today’s world; to legislate compassion as a profound way of understanding humanity, the world of nature and divinity.”<sup>441</sup> Similarly, Rauser postulates that the Bible may be using irony in stating that God commanded genocide when, in fact, He condemned it even when it appears that He commended it. There may be a deeper purpose in the Conquest story, such as the dismantling of the in-group/out-group distinction where Achan was condemned (in-group) while Rahab was commended (out-group).<sup>442</sup> The

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<sup>438</sup> J. W. Rogerson, *An Introduction to the Bible*, 3d. ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 156.

<sup>439</sup> Rogerson, *An Introduction to the Bible*, 157.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid.

<sup>442</sup> John W. Loftus and Randal Rauser, *God or Godless? One Atheist. One Christian. Twenty Controversial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), ch. 6; cf. Robert Allen Warrior, “Canaanites, cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, conquest, and liberation theology today,” *Christianity and Crisis* 49, no. 12 (Sept. 1989): 264; Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 147; Lori L. Rowlett, *Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence: A New Historicist Analysis*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 226 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 12–13.

examples in the Old Testament are thus open to modern interpreters to draw their own conclusions.

### Moral Progress

Another explanation is that there are different perspectives on God and violence in the Old Testament that demonstrate moral development within the Bible itself. The Israelites were tainted with the ideas of superstitious, primitive religion in the same way as the nations around them,<sup>443</sup> so they did not fully understand the perfection of God's moral nature at that early stage and mistakenly attributed the Conquest to His commands.<sup>444</sup> The Law of Moses was supposed to be worked out in the life of the nation and then eventually mature into new moral conceptions, but it would take time for moral progress to commence.<sup>445</sup> The Law of Moses, as inferior to the New Testament,<sup>446</sup> is the starting point, or the first step away from unrestrained barbarism.<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> See Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible*, vol. 1, ed. C. H. W. Johns (New York: G. F. Putnam's Sons, 1903), 199; Hinckley G. Mitchell, *The Ethics of the Old Testament* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1912), 62; Harry Emerson Fosdick, *A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1938), ch. 1; G. Ernest Wright, "The Book of Deuteronomy," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1963), 392; Rex Mason, *Propaganda and Subversion in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1997), 6; Eryl W. Davies, "The Morally Dubious Passages of the Hebrew Bible: An Examination of Some Proposed Solutions," *Currents in Biblical Research* 3, no. 2 (Apr 2005): 200; Philip R. Davies, "The Biblical and Qumranic Concept of War," in *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 209; John J. Collins, "The God of Joshua," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 28, no. 2 (2014): 228.

<sup>444</sup> G. E. Wright, "The Deuteronomistic History of Israel in Her Land," in *The Book of the Acts of God*, eds. G. E. Wright and R. H. Fuller (London: Duckworth, 1960), 99–130; cf. Martin Buber, "Samuel and Agag," trans. Maurice Friedman, *Commentary* 33, no. 1 (Jan. 1962): 63–64.

<sup>445</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 283.

<sup>446</sup> See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 3d. ed., trans. H. R. Mackintosh (1830, repr., New York: T&T Clark, 2016), §132.2; Ludwig Köhler, *Old Testament Theology*, 3d ed., trans. A. S. Todd (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 109; Friedrich Baumgärtel, "The Hermeneutical Problem of the Old Testament," in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, trans. Murray Newman (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), 147; Franz Hesse, "The Evaluation and the Authority of Old Testament Texts," in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, trans. James A. Wharton (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), 300.

Christians scholars have long recognized the progress or revelation from early Scriptures to later Scriptures,<sup>448</sup> and the idea of moral progress runs along these lines. An illustration of this view would be to say that Ezekiel, a later prophet, had a more correct view of God than Samuel, an earlier prophet, and Christians today have even more revelation and spiritual insight in recognizing that the Conquest was never commanded by God. As Lasor, Hubbard, and Bush summarize,

God takes the people where they are, and leads them step by step until at last they will be where God is. Divine revelation is progressive. At this point, the Israelites did not have as their Torah the Sermon on the Mount (“love your enemies”). This understanding of love had to wait for the New Joshua (Jesus) to make it known in his life and death.<sup>449</sup>

The biblical authors portrayed God as best they understood, but now such texts must be wholeheartedly rejected since they reflect a morally inferior understanding of God.<sup>450</sup> While it is true that God blessed Joshua’s obedience in the biblical story even though it was misguided, this demonstrates the principle still in operation today: God requires a perfect heart of obedience but

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<sup>447</sup> Mark W. Hamilton, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 92.

<sup>448</sup> See James Orr, *The Problem of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906), 468–77; J. M. Powis Smith, *The Moral Life of the Hebrews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1923), viii; C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 255.

<sup>449</sup> William Sanford Lasor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 148; cf. Lois Barrett, *The Way God Fights: War and Peace in the Old Testament* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 70; John. H. Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 101–102.

<sup>450</sup> Derek Flood, *Disarming Scripture*, 97–105; cf. Cowles, “The Case for Radical Discontinuity,” 38–40; Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture*, 118; Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 171–77. From a more conservative point of view, the earlier biblical authors were not aware of the distinction between God’s active will and God’s permissive will. They attributed both good and evil to God rather than recognizing that God is all good and cannot cause evil, though He does allow for Satan to directly cause evil through His permissive will. Biblical writers from Chronicles forward, including the New Testament authors, recognized this distinction and thus attributed sin and evil to Satan and to fallen humans (Matthew J. Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI & Thomas Aquinas* [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013], 190–ff). This does not mean that the earlier authors were in error. “They knew that their all-powerful Father was Lord of the entire universe, but they were not privy to additional revelation of distinctions that would help later inspired authors to articulate the relationship of good and evil more profoundly” (Ramage, *Dark Passages*, 191).

not necessarily a perfect understanding of God.<sup>451</sup> In the end, though, “*Herem* was not an ethically perfect norm, or one worthy of imitation.... *Hērem* was one of the imperfections of the Old Testament.”<sup>452</sup> One must make a distinction between the *explicit* teachings of God in Scripture, which point in the appropriate direction of redemption and which include commandments like “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” and “You shall not kill” with other passages containing an *internal* witness to God’s truth that are warped by human sinfulness, such as the commandments to destroy the Canaanites. These texts point toward the brokenness of humanity, not to something commendable.<sup>453</sup>

### Accommodation

A third interpretation is that God accommodated Himself to the practices of the ancient Israelites. This is different than the previous interpretation in that the progress-of-revelation view sees the Conquest as something that Israel enacted *without* God’s approval even though they mistakenly attributed the Conquest to God’s command. The accommodation view sees the Conquest as something that God *did* authorize but as an accommodation rather than as an ideal. The Conquest is like divorce (Deut 24:1–4; cp. Mal 2:16) and polygamy (Exod 21:7–11; cp. Deut 17:17). God accommodated these things because of the hardness of human hearts (Matt 19:8). War too was an evil in which God participated to accomplish His greater purposes, even though it makes God Himself appear as unethical. As Craigie reasons,

Therefore, if God is to work on behalf of man in the world, He must give the appearance to man of using sinful means—He must seem to be unethical in His behaviour.... War

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<sup>451</sup> Cowles, “The Case for Radical Discontinuity,” 41.

<sup>452</sup> Paul Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. William G. Heidt (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1955), 213–14.

<sup>453</sup> Kenton L. Sparks, *Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Side of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 110; cf. idem., *God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 230–31.

cannot be looked at apart from man; it is a part of the world, a part of man's sinful self. To say that God uses war is to say in effect that God uses sinful men in His purposes. In the Old Testament, if we were to expect to see God working only 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>454</sup>

In other words, God only has bad options from which to choose (i.e., sinful humans), and so He must accommodate Himself to man's sinfulness. Accommodation was also necessary because humans have a finite understanding of God's infinite mind and because the biblical authors were fallible like all other humans.<sup>455</sup> However, God did the best with what He had:

God works in the world with what is available, i.e., with human beings as they are, with all their foibles and flaws, and within societal structures, however inadequate. God wills righteous behavior from people, but must "make do" with whatever they come up with, including even using evil to achieve a redemptive purpose. God does not perfect these aspects of the world before working in and through them. This does not necessarily confer a positive value on those human means through which God chooses to work. Thus, the results of such work will always be mixed, and less than what would have happened had God chosen to act alone.<sup>456</sup>

Another reason for accommodation is that God's work in the world is conditioned by and limited by societal structures, to include Israel's monarchy and even ancient Near Eastern holy war. When holy war disappeared from use, then so did God's appropriation of it.<sup>457</sup> What this

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<sup>454</sup> Peter C. Craigie, "'Yahweh is a Man of Wars,'" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 29 (1969): 186; cf. idem. *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 43; Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright, *Joshua*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 30; Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 89; Elmer A. Martens, "Toward Shalom: Absorbing the Violence," in Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens, *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 47; Stephen B. Chapman, "Martial Memory, Peaceable Vision," in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and the Old Testament Problem*, eds. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 64.

<sup>455</sup> Helen Paynter, *God of Violence Yesterday, God of Love Today?* (Eugene, OR: Wipe & Stock, 2019), 26.

<sup>456</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Deuteronomistic History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 71.

<sup>457</sup> Fretheim, *Deuteronomistic History*, 71; cf. idem., "Violence and the God of the Old Testament," in *Encountering Violence in the Bible*, eds. Markus Zehnder and Hallvard Hagelia (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 110–12.

means is that “[h]uman beings will never have a perfect perception of how they are to serve as God’s instruments in the world. Each perception will have been informed in significant ways by the context of which it was a part....”<sup>458</sup> With this in mind, one must conclude that God’s involvement in the Conquest was a necessary evil but still preferable to no divine activity at all, which would have resulted in the triumph of the forces of evil.<sup>459</sup> Another interpretation is that God’s participation in war (e.g., the Conquest) is an accommodation with an overarching redemptive purpose:

Scripture does not present a detached vision of God. Rather, we find a God who is willing to engage our messy world. Yahweh puts on hip waders as he walks within the ethical sewer water of this fallen world; his actions taken via humans (whether his holy warriors are Israel or Assyria or Babylon) do not automatically cast what he does into a pristine ethical category. Like many assets of the temporal, fallen-world justice of Scripture, God stoops down (way down) in our world as he seeks to bring about his redemptive story.<sup>460</sup>

### **Redefining Biblical Inspiration and Authority**

What authority does the Bible have if the Old Testament account of the Conquest gives examples rather than precepts, is tainted by primitive ideas of morality, and/or amounts to an accommodation on God’s part to evil human customs? It would seem that there is little or no

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<sup>458</sup> Fretheim, *Deuteronomistic History*, 72.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 74. Wegman also views the Conquest as a necessary evil but for a different reason: “During the time of Joshua, the *herem* was a necessary evil; the Israelites were entirely dependent on God just for survival, and it was important that any threat to their loyalty be eliminated to ensure that the Lord would continue to protect them” (Mike Wegman, “Joshua 6:15-21: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of the Herem,” *Verbum* 4, no. 1 [Dec. 2006]: 55).

<sup>460</sup> Webb and Oeste, *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric?* 361; cf. Chapman, “Martial Memory, Peaceable Vision,” 65. Webb and Oeste develop their “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” by arguing that Christians should read the Bible through both ancient and modern horizons. When this occurs, Christians will recognize that there is movement from the “somewhat redemptive” words on the pages of the Old Testament (an ethic “frozen in time”) to the “more redemptive” ethical standards of modern culture (in light of the Geneva and Hague Conventions) and then finally toward the ultimate ethical application seen in the spirit of the biblical text (Webb and Oeste, *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric?* 77–83). Although humanity has not arrived at the final stage of redemption, and God still accommodates humanity in the meantime, God will one day right all the wrongs in the eschaton (ibid., 359).

authority, at least from those texts that describe the Conquest. For Seibert,<sup>461</sup> the Bible is not authoritative because it is divinely inspired but because it has functional authority:

[W]hat makes the Bible authoritative is not its divine inspiration nor its alleged historical reliability or unassailable theological veracity. Rather, the Bible is authoritative—or, perhaps better said, functions authoritatively—when people take it seriously and allow their lives to be transformed by it in faith-affirming and God-honoring ways. To put it another way, we might say that affirming the authority of Scripture has less to do with what we say about it and more to do with how we live in light of it. Affirming the authority of Scripture is not primarily about giving cognitive assent to comprehensive statements about the Bible’s trustworthiness and reliability. Rather, it is about giving ourselves to the God who speaks through its pages and calls us to live lives of faithfulness and obedience. We affirm the authority of Scripture by demonstrating our willingness to be shaped by these texts even as we enter into a critical dialogue with them.<sup>462</sup>

Greg Boyd agrees that the traditional view of the verbal, plenary inspiration Scripture cannot be maintained in light of the inaccurate, violent depictions of God. To affirm the “inspiration” of Scripture while also acknowledging that the Bible contains many errors and problems, Boyd appeals to Barth’s view of Scripture, where the Bible itself is a flawed, human book that *becomes* the Word of God in a secondary sense when God infallibly speaks through it to its readers. The Bible is not revelation *itself* but rather the *means* of God’s revelation.<sup>463</sup> Boyd explains that God partnered with His free, fallible creatures when God “inspired” the writing of the Bible without overriding human freedom. As a result, the Bible has all the markings of imperfection, though Boyd still affirms plenary inspiration (but not *verbal* plenary inspiration).<sup>464</sup> Ultimately, the

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<sup>461</sup> While the authors cited here are representative, it should be noted that the topic of God’s accommodation to human cultures and practices more generally is a separate matter with plenty of latitude for nuance among evangelicals and nonevangelicals.

<sup>462</sup> Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture*, 161; cf. Bruce C. Birch, Jacqueline E. Lapsley, Cynthia Moe-Lobed, and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life: A New Conversation* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2018), 3–12.

<sup>463</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *Inspired Imperfection: How the Bible’s Problems Enhance its Divine Authority* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020), 52–71.

<sup>464</sup> Boyd, *Inspired Imperfection*, 106–24.



Bible reflects God's accommodation to His creatures' thoughts and ways, "but this doesn't remove our need to discern how these inspired violent depictions of God point to Jesus."<sup>465</sup> Boyd calls this a "cross-based" or "cruciform" model of inspiration.<sup>466</sup>

Since the cross reveals what God has always been like, and since all Scripture is God-breathed for the ultimate purpose of pointing us to the cross, I submit that we should read Scripture with the awareness that God sometimes reveals God's beauty by stooping to bear the ugliness, foolishness, and fallibility of God's people. More specifically, we should read Scripture with the awareness that sometimes the surface meaning of a passage will not reflect what God is truly like; it will rather reflect the way God's fallen and culturally conditioned ancient people viewed God, for this is the sin that God is stooping to bear.<sup>467</sup>

Similarly, Weaver believes that "the words of the Bible are important, but they are not the primary authority. The ultimate authority for Christians is the narrative of Jesus that is contained in the words of the Bible."<sup>468</sup> In other words, as long as Christians understand Jesus correctly, then it does not matter what the Old Testament records about God.

### Summary and Evaluation

In summary, the biblical account of the Conquest is accurate in that the Israelites exterminated the Canaanites in an act of genocide, but since genocide is always wrong, then the Conquest was also morally abominable. The Christian criticism therefore mirrors the atheistic and skeptical criticism in the previous section. However, Christians who are critical of the Conquest offer some interpretations not found among the skeptics, such as the explanation that

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid., xvi.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., xviii–xix.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>468</sup> Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 136. Two recent Roman Catholic popes have taken the same position—namely, that the "dark" passages of the Old Testament must be carefully interpreted and understood in light of the fuller revelation found in Christ. See Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010), §42; Joseph Ratzinger, *'In the Beginning...'* *A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 9; idem., *God and the World: Believing and Living in Our Time. A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 155.

the Bible records negative examples to learn from rather than precepts to follow. Or, the Conquest simply reflects Israel's primitive thoughts about how God acts. The Israelites actually carried out the Conquest themselves and mistakenly attributed the victory to God even though God would never have endorsed genocide. A third interpretation is that God accommodated the warfare customs of the ancient Israelites and actually did engage in the extermination of the Canaanites but only as a necessary evil or as a part of his redemptive movement in history from less ethical to more ethical. With the progress of revelation, God's people would come to understand that God does not normally engage in genocide since He is really loving and peaceable. Biblical authority and inspiration may be redefined to incorporate biblical errors,<sup>469</sup> but as long as the Bible points the reader to Christ, then God continues speaking through the Bible.

The first point of criticism is that Christians who reject the Conquest outright follow in the footsteps of the ancient heretic Marcion and are therefore appropriately labeled with the unflattering description of "practical Marcionites."<sup>470</sup> Seibert denies this charge because, unlike Marcion, he only rejects *some* Old Testament portrayals of God rather than the *entire* Old Testament.<sup>471</sup> But in so doing, he has created a canon within a canon since he is selective about which Scriptures to accept.<sup>472</sup> To reject all violent depictions of God would be to de-canonize three-fourths of the Bible.<sup>473</sup> Stump summarizes the problem with this approach as follows:

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<sup>469</sup> It must be recognized that evangelicals who subscribe to an accommodation view may have different opinions on how such accommodations fit with the doctrine of biblical inspiration.

<sup>470</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies: Pressing Questions about Evolution, Sexuality, History, and Violence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 164.

<sup>471</sup> Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 211.

<sup>472</sup> Longman, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies*, 162.

One way to reject the story would be to claim that it is not true and not in any way, direct or indirect, part of a divine revelation. But, in religious terms, the cost for this reaction to the story would be high. It would require not only the rejection of the traditional Jewish and Christian view that the entire Hebrew Bible has to be taken as divinely revealed; it would in effect require the rejection of the entire idea of divine revelation in these texts. If one text purporting to be part of a divine revelation is to be rejected because it strikes us as incompatible with our moral intuitions, then other texts alleged to be divinely revealed will also need to be examined to see if they should be rejected for similar reasons. And now our moral intuitions are the standard by which the texts are judged. In that case, the texts do not function as divine revelation is meant to function, as a standard by which human beings can measure and correct human understanding, human behavior, and human standards.<sup>474</sup>

The reason for rejecting the Conquest is because of our moral intuitions reflected in the fourth premise of Rauser's syllogism—namely, that genocide is always a moral atrocity. But is this correct? If it is false, then the entire syllogism collapses. No one denies that human genocide without divine sanction is mass murder because it violates God's prohibition against murder, but it is an entirely different matter for God Himself to authorize capital punishment through human agencies—whether for individuals or nations—since He has the right to give and take life. Therefore, it is wrong to condemn God in the same way humans are condemned. God has the final authority on life and death; humans do not.

A second critique is that the biblical arguments used to support the belief that God is nonviolent are overly simplistic and selective. One cannot get away from the fact that the God of the Bible acts in judgment throughout the course of history—sometimes alone (e.g., the Flood), and sometimes through human agents (e.g., the Conquest). As Knierim wrote, "In light of the fact that Yahweh is said to be involved in war and that Yahweh's own wars are considered

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<sup>473</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "A Response to C. S. Cowles," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 47.

<sup>474</sup> Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Evil and the History of Peoples: Think Amalek," in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, eds. Michael Bergman, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rae (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 181. For similar remarks, see Paul D. Hanson, "War and Peace in the Hebrew Bible," *Interpretation* 38, no. 4 (Oct. 1984): 345.

sacred wars, the most obvious conclusion from the statement that ‘war is sin’ is that the primary sinner is none other than Yahweh....”<sup>475</sup> As chapter three showed, the Conquest was not simply Moses’ or Joshua’s idea; it was God’s idea from as early as the time of Abraham. Appealing to Jesus and the New Testament for a better portrait of God does not help since the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is also the God of Jesus (Matt 22:32) and Peter (Acts 3:13).<sup>476</sup> Plus, the Prince of Peace will return at the end of time to slay His enemies in an event that dwarfs the Conquest in its global destruction (Rev 19:1–5). Christians who are critical of the Conquest must selectively reject the violent portraits of God and Jesus in the Book of Revelation<sup>477</sup> or to try to explain away the violent depiction of Jesus there.<sup>478</sup> It is much simpler, and much more biblically defensible, to conclude that God is both loving and holy. As Seitz reflects, “There is no access to an account of God as ‘loving’ absent an account of his justice and holiness, and vice versa. This dialectic is absolutely central to the account of God in OT and NT and it cannot be spliced into segments....”<sup>479</sup>

Finally, there are several problems with the moral-progress and accommodation interpretations. First, the moral progression interpretation smacks of chronological snobbery.<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> Rolf P. Knierim, “On the Subject of War in Old Testament and Biblical Theology,” in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium: Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective*, eds. Wonil Kim, Deborah Ellens, Michael Floyd, and Marvin A. Sweeney (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 79–80.

<sup>476</sup> Merrill, “A Response to C. S. Cowles,” 49.

<sup>477</sup> Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 145.

<sup>478</sup> Neufeld, for example, believes that the sword coming out of the mouth of the Lamb in Revelation 19:15 is merely a symbol and that the Lamb’s robe is drenched in His own blood. Those who follow the Lamb “conquer” through their endurance or resistance to the empire (Neufeld, *Jesus and the Subversion of Violence*, 132).

<sup>479</sup> Christopher Seitz, “The Character of the God of the Hebrew Bible,” in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, eds. Michael Bergman, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rae (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 307.

<sup>480</sup> John W. Rogerson, *A Theology of the Old Testament: Cultural Memory, Communication, and Being Human* (London: SPCK, 2009), 135.

Modern readers would do better to consider that morality today is not exactly at an all-time high. Second, if earlier Bible passages are morally substandard, then Christians today should just ignore them just as people today ignore outdated science textbooks that teach a heliocentric universe. Third, God's ideals are worked out from Genesis forward, not just from later Old Testament texts. An example is God's plan for marriage in Genesis 2. It was because of human sin that standards were eventually lowered (e.g., divorce laws).<sup>481</sup> Plus, in the critical view of dating the Old Testament books, Deuteronomy and Joshua came from the time of the prophets in the sixth and seventh centuries BC and therefore should be markedly more advanced than the supposed primitive morality of earlier Israelites.<sup>482</sup> Fourth, the Conquest cannot be the result of primitive theology because "[t]he Bible's most advanced interpretations in later ages saw there nothing but a most dramatic illustration of the power, grace, and justice of God."<sup>483</sup>

The same types of critiques apply to the accommodation interpretation. Biblically speaking, there are a few concessions in the Bible such as divorce and polygamy as mentioned above. These are examples of case laws, though: "If a man has two wives..." (Deut 21:15); "If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him...and he writes her a certificate of divorce..." (Deut 24:1). These were not commanded by God, though. If that were the case, then the Law would read, "A man may (or should) marry two wives..." or "A man should divorce his wife if he finds her displeasing." Neither is stated. As Jesus explained regarding divorce, it was *permitted* because of hard-heartedness (Matt 19:8). The Conquest is different in that it was

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<sup>481</sup> John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Clements Publishing 2002), 58–59.

<sup>482</sup> James Orr, *The Problem of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), 468–69.

<sup>483</sup> G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 126. Appendix 2 expounds more on the biblical and extrabiblical commentaries on the Conquest.

actually commanded by God, not just permitted as something that Moses or Joshua wanted to do but that was really against the will of God. Second, there is nothing in the Old Testament to indicate that the Conquest was a concession.<sup>484</sup> There is no explicit statement condemning the Conquest as evil. Third, if the Conquest was not issued by God but was merely an accommodation to evil practices, would it have been right for the Israelites to disobey God? Could they be more righteous than God? Fourth, appealing to accommodation makes God out to be a moral compromiser or relativist, which does not fit the God of the Old Testament, who holds nations and individuals accountable for violating His laws and decrees. Fifth, Israel went to great lengths to be separate from the peoples around them, which militates against the idea that God had to accommodate Israel's practices of war to allow for genocide while knowing it was wrong.<sup>485</sup>

Sixth, Israel had two standards for warfare—one for the Canaanites and one for those living outside the land. The Canaanites were to be destroyed, but those outside the land could be offered peace (Deut 20:10–18). Therefore, God did not accommodate Himself to Israel's ideas of warfare. The more humane policy was already in place for everyone else. Only the Canaanites had to be destroyed because of their wickedness. Seventh, the idea of accommodation due to moral progress is negated by the fact that God Himself destroyed entire populations *before* the Conquest (the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah) without any need to accommodate to human standards, and God will once again destroy large populations in the end-times judgments before Christ returns (Rev 6–19). The issue is not accommodation but what God deems as appropriate judgment in a given situation. For the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Canaanites, and those

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<sup>484</sup> Yoder, *The Original Revolution*, 90.

<sup>485</sup> For similar remarks, see Fales, "Satanic Verses: Moral Chaos in Holy Writ," 93.

who side with the Antichrist during the Great Tribulation, God determined that severe judgment is appropriate. He does not accommodate to substandard, human practices in these cases.

### The Conquest is Inexplicable

The first set of interpreters above leans toward skepticism regarding the Old Testament text, and the second set of interpreters—the Christians who criticize the Conquest—recognizes the problem of genocide in the Old Testament but explains it through a handful of what this author considers to be concessions in the area of biblical authority and inspiration. The next group averts explaining the moral problem with the Conquest by appealing to the limits of natural theology, to a philosophical view called “skeptical theism,” to the finitude of human knowledge, or to the mystery of God’s ways. These interpreters have a high view of Scripture but stop short of trying to give a biblical, theological defense of the Conquest. The Conquest is simply inexplicable from a moral or ethical standpoint.

### No Appeal to Natural Theology

The first interpretation to consider is that of the German Neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth (d. 1968). In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth addressed the Conquest by referring to his well-known understanding of God’s revelation. For Barth, God is completely transcendent and ineffable; only through the revelation of Himself is He known to mankind. Furthermore, God’s revelation is completely free, and even in His revelation, God is still concealed.<sup>486</sup> Therefore, any

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<sup>486</sup> According to Barth, “It is the very nature of this God to be inscrutable to man. In saying this we naturally mean that in His revealed nature He is thus inscrutable. It is the *Deus revelatus* who is the *Deus absconditus*, the God to whom there is no path or bridge, concerning whom we could not say nor have to say a single word if He did not of His own initiative meet us as the *Deus revelatus*. Only when we have grasped this as the meaning of the Bible do we see the full range of its statement that God reveals Himself, i.e., that He has assumed form for our sake.... It necessarily means that even in the form He assumes when He reveals Himself God is free to reveal Himself or not to reveal Himself. In other words, we can regard His self-unveiling in every instance only as His act in which He reveals Himself to a man who is unable to unveil Him, showing Himself indeed in a specific form, but still unveiling Himself” (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume I: The Doctrine of the Word of God Part One*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975], 8.2).

religion—including the Canaanite religion—that portrays God with idols is attempting to limit God and is therefore out of bounds, theologically speaking. As Barth wrote, “From this standpoint [of man creating gods in human fashion] the sharpness of the prohibition of images is to be seen as a ban not so much on the enjoyment of the senses as on the pious obtrusiveness and cocksureness of the religion of Canaan.”<sup>487</sup> Thus, Canaanite religion was illegitimate because it presumed to know God in making idols apart from God’s act of revealing Himself to the Canaanites. The act of the Conquest, then, was the “radical dedivinisation of nature, history and culture—a remorseless denial of any other divine presence save the one in the event of drawing up the covenant.”<sup>488</sup> So far, this seems like a traditional defense of the Conquest with some Barthian theology interlaced. Barth also recognized that the main reason for the Conquest was the intolerance of religious syncretism between Israel and the Canaanites,<sup>489</sup> and he argued that Israel was reclaiming the land promised to the patriarchs.<sup>490</sup> But when Barth came to the ethical problems surrounding the Conquest, he pointed to God’s sovereignty and reasoned as follows:

It [ethical reasoning] has not to reckon with man’s possession of a kind of moral nature, with a knowledge of good and evil which is peculiar to him, and of which he is capable apart from the fact that he is under the overlordship of the divine command.... It has to be on its guard against conferring on man the dignity of a judge over God’s command.<sup>491</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.I.*, 8.2.

<sup>488</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume I: The Doctrine of the Word of God Part 2*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970), 14.2.

<sup>489</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.II.*, 14.2.

<sup>490</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume II: The Doctrine of God Part 2*, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (London: T&T Clark, 1957), 36.1.

<sup>491</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.II.*, 36.1.



In other words, man should not presume to judge God and “think that out of his own resources, he knows what is good and evil.”<sup>492</sup> Barth warned against using natural theology—that is, human reasoning—to supplant God’s revelation when it comes to theological ethics:

Annexation remains annexation, however legal it may be, and there must be no armistice with the peoples of Canaan and their culture and their cultus. Therefore theological ethics must not and will not disarm its distinctive Whence ? and Whither ? in order to assure itself a place in the sun of general ethical questions.<sup>493</sup>

Although Barth began by presenting some traditional reasons for the Conquest, he did not grapple with the ethical questions because of his denial of the role of natural theology in ethical reasoning. The interpreter must accept the Conquest and let the questions remain unanswered.

### **Skeptical Theism**

The Christian philosopher Victor Reppert believes that God did not order the slaughter of the Canaanites (or Amalekites) since the ban is not in line with the teachings of Jesus in his opinion. However, he states that it *may be the case* that God had reasons for the Conquest that are unknown to us but that, in a consequentialist scheme of morality where the evaluation of good and evil depends on the outcome, the Conquest may have been justified in the mind of God. This position is known as “skeptical theism.” In short, one is not justified in rejecting the existence of God based on the idea that God allows (so much) evil in the world because human knowledge is too limited to rule out the possibility that God has good reasons for allowing such evils to exist.<sup>494</sup> This would extend to the Conquest too, since Reppert believes that God would not (normally) order genocide. But, he proposes, while it is wrong to slaughter innocent children,

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<sup>492</sup> Ibid.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid.

<sup>494</sup> See Trent Dougherty, “Skeptical Theism,” accessed August 2, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skeptical-theism/>.

what if one knows that one of them is Baby Hitler? Would genocide and the slaughter of innocents be justified in that case?<sup>495</sup> If God operates within a consequentialist framework, then that may be the case, but since humans are not privy to know why God permits all of the evil in this world, then the only conclusion to draw is that there is not enough information to know one way or the other.

### **Finite Human Knowledge**

The third interpretation comes from the philosopher Mark C. Murphy and is related to the skeptical theism but is more expansive. Murphy proposes an *a priori* philosophical argument concerning the plausibility of condemning God's actions against the Canaanites in ordering their annihilation.<sup>496</sup> First, Murphy considers the question of God's motives and states that humans are far too limited in their knowledge to condemn God. Doing so would require much more information about God's ends as well as how successful God's command would be in accomplishing those ends. Second, Murphy questions whether the Canaanites had intrinsic value such that their annihilation would be morally unjustified. Again, Murphy appeals to human ignorance: "For there is no reason to suppose that the human being's grasp of intrinsic value and the means of realizing it is sufficient to give us justified confidence that God inadequately responded to the intrinsic value of the [Canaanites]."<sup>497</sup> Instead, Murphy believes that the Conquest is, to the best of human knowledge, part of (or the best means to) an overall plan that has more (or not less) intrinsic value than what would have resulted if the Canaanites had been

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<sup>495</sup> Victor Reppert, "Amalekites, Canaanites, theo-utilitarianism, and skeptical theism," accessed August 2, 2021, <http://dangerousidea.blogspot.com/2011/10/amalekites-canaanites-theo.html>.

<sup>496</sup> Murphy, "God Beyond Justice," in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, eds. Michael Bergman, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rae (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 150–67.

<sup>497</sup> Murphy, "God Beyond Justice," 155.

left alone. To assume that humans know better than God when it comes to human-centered goodness is like goldfish thinking they know more about goldfish-centered goodness than their human caretakers. It may seem that Murphy's arguments are unnecessary since the biblical record *does* provide reasons for God's command to exterminate the Israelites. Murphy grants these reasons as compatible with his position but also maintains that humans still have a dim sense of the moral goods God may have wanted to accomplish as well as the moral evils He may have been trying to prevent in commanding the Conquest.<sup>498</sup>

Murphy's third argument is that the relationship between God and human beings—the Canaanites in this case—is not one in which God could ever wrong humans. This makes God's relationship to humans different than human-to-human relationships. In short, the Canaanites had no right or authority to tell God that He could not order their destruction. In order for there to be wrongdoing between one party and another, there must be a shared normative order both in content and in the source of that normative order. To take an example from everyday life, it is impossible for one person to cheat another person in a game of checkers unless both parties are playing the same game. The game requires the same rules but also the same origin so that two players from different countries understand the game in the same way. Additionally, two parties must have mutuality, which means they must be able to grasp and act upon the same concepts of what is right. This is the case, for example, when two parties both grasp the rules of chess, at least characteristically even if not fully. Granted the truth of these relational premises, Murphy argues that God and human beings do not share any order where wrongdoing extends from God

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<sup>498</sup> Ibid., 155–56.

toward humans (Canaanites). God, as the source of all justice, is not bound to an external source that would make Him an equal party to human beings since God is not subject to anything.<sup>499</sup>

One objection here is that if God and humans do not share such a relationship as described above where God cannot wrong humans, then the converse is also true in that humans cannot wrong God. Murphy agrees with this somewhat odd statement but qualifies it by stating that while humans cannot *wrong* God, they can *act wrongly* with respect to God by blaspheming God, for example, since acting wrongly with respect to something entails some sort of value in the party (God) being wronged. Now if God chose to enter into a certain relationship with the Israelites by appropriating human language in order to reveal His will to them, then humans could evaluate the truthfulness and justice of God's words and deeds:

The moral is: of them with whom God cooperates, we can speak coherently of what it would be for God to wrong them, and so make sense of the praise given to God that God would never do such a thing, because God is perfectly faithful. To those with whom God is not cooperating, we cannot speak coherently of what it would be for God to wrong them, for God neither shares nor enters into the form of justice with them. *The slightest breach of promise or smallest lie to the Israelites by God would have been a divine injustice, and would have morally discredited God; the total destruction of the [Canaanites] was not, and did not.*<sup>500</sup>

In concluding his argument, Murphy turns to the love of God and affirms that God loves all people, including the Canaanites, but is unsure of how God's love fits with the destruction of the Canaanites except to say that there is mystery involved. In the same way that a child may not understand his parent's ways of dealing with the child, so are humans with respect to God. They must assess the situation by what they *do* know about God as seen in the incarnation in order to

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<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 157–63.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 165 (emphasis original).

form conclusions about God's other actions that may seem puzzling.<sup>501</sup> As with Barth and Reppert, the final answer is faith.

### **Appeal to Mystery**

A handful of other Christian scholars abandon the task of providing definitive answers to the moral problem of killing the Canaanites and instead prefer to appeal to mystery. Christian Philosopher Alvin Plantinga, for example, considers the ways that Christians have dealt with the Conquest to show that each view is epistemically possible and even sensible,<sup>502</sup> and while he favors the traditional justification for the Conquest based on the wickedness of the Canaanites and the need to keep Israel spiritually and morally pure, he recognizes the difficulty in squaring this interpretation with the love of God. Therefore, Plantinga considers the story of Job where God had morally justifiable reasons for permitting the evil in Job's life even though Job was not privy to those reasons. Plantinga wonders if the same was not true for the Conquest. As a Christian philosopher, though, he looks to the incarnation and atonement of Christ to prove what Christians *do* know about God's loving character. He concludes as follows:

So we are perplexed about those OT passages: did God really command something like genocide? But then we recall the love revealed in the incarnation and atonement, and we see that whatever God did, he must indeed have a good reason, even if we can't see what the reason is.<sup>503</sup>

Likewise, evangelical scholar Daniel Block is pessimistic that there will ever be a satisfactory answer to the problems raised by genocide in the Old Testament. He offers several points to give context to the Conquest that mirror those mentioned by other evangelicals (e.g.,

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<sup>501</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>502</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, "Comments on 'Satanic Verses: Moral Chaos in Holy Writ,'" in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, eds. Michael Bergman, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rae (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 109–113.

<sup>503</sup> Plantinga, "Comments on 'Satanic Verses: Moral Chaos in Holy Writ,'" 113.

God's plan, Canaanite wickedness, Israelite purity, God's judgment, etc.),<sup>504</sup> and he defends God's perfect, moral character, as taught in the book of Deuteronomy,<sup>505</sup> but Block eventually stops short of trying to defend the Conquest and instead appeals to mystery:

In many ways, God's policy of *hērem* is inscrutable and incredible, and even distasteful. How could a God of mercy and grace call for the extermination of an entire population? Isaiah 55:8–9 reminds us that the ways of God are a mystery. In the end, modern readers may not like Yhwh's policy of *hērem*, but the divine will is not determined by human sensitivities or values, and God is not bound by the definition of the *World Report on Violence and Health*. While for many this is precisely the problem, the challenge for us is not to forget the context in which we find this violence and the violence demanded in Israel's administration of justice.<sup>506</sup>

Wright too believes that there is no satisfying solution to the problem of Canaanite genocide:

I have wrestled with this problem for many years as a teacher of the Old Testament, and I am coming to the view that no such "solution" will be forthcoming. There is something about this part of our Bible that I have to include in my basket of things I don't understand about God and his ways. I find myself thinking, "God, I wish you had found some other way to work out your plans." There are days I wish this narrative were not in the Bible at all (usually after I've faced another barrage of questions about it), though I know it is wrong to wish that in relation to the Scriptures. God knew what he was doing – in the events themselves and in the record of them that he has given us. But it is still hard.<sup>507</sup>

One reason why the Conquest is inexplicable may be the fact that modern readers live in the dispensation after Christ, where there is more revelation about God and His ways than the Israelites had. This explains why Christians are unable to understand or explain the Canaanite genocide from our privileged position in salvation history.<sup>508</sup> In the end, Christian interpreters

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<sup>504</sup> Daniel I. Block, "How Can We Bless YHWH? Wrestling with Divine Violence in Deuteronomy," in *Wrestling with the Violence of God: Soundings in the Old Testament*, eds. Daniel R. Carroll and J. Blair Wilgus (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 43–ff.

<sup>505</sup> Block, "How Can We Bless YHWH?" 36–37.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>507</sup> Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, 86; cf. idem., *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 472–79.

have one of several responses in wrestling with this issue. One option is to just suspend judgment when it appears that the God of the Bible is acting in a vengeful rather than a loving way.<sup>509</sup> Another response is to appreciate the fact that the mysteries of Scripture prompt Christians to greater faith. As Schlimm writes, “Real, honest faith emerges in the midst of unsettled ambiguities, unanswered questions, and unresolved problems. Amid the messiness, suffering, and tragedies of a violent world, God shows up.”<sup>510</sup> A third response is to recognize that God has no obligation to explain Himself to mankind. Calvin made this point in reference to the severity of the Conquest<sup>511</sup> and in reference to the fact that Achan’s children were put to death along with Achan.<sup>512</sup> Frame summarizes this sentiment as well:

In his decisions, he will not submit to man’s judgment. He reserves the right to behave in a way that might offend human values, that might even appear, from a human viewpoint, to contradict his own values. And when that happens, he is not under man’s judgment. He is not obligated to explain.<sup>513</sup>

## Summary and Evaluation

This section has examined a number of scholars who neither justify nor condemn the Conquest. In Barth’s view, humans cannot use natural theology (i.e., human reason) to judge God’s revelation. The discussion ends there. For Reppert, it may be the case that God had hidden reasons for the Conquest that are simply unknown to mankind. Murphy echoes this idea and adds

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<sup>508</sup> Arie Versluis, *The Command to Exterminate the Canaanites: Deuteronomy 7* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 380–81.

<sup>509</sup> Gregory A. Boyd and Edward K. Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic: A Son Wrestles with His Father’s Questions about Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 191.

<sup>510</sup> Matthew Richard Schlimm, *The Strange and Sacred Scripture: Wrestling with the Old Testament and Its Oddities* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 82.

<sup>511</sup> Calvin, *Joshua*, 144.

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*, 96–97.

<sup>513</sup> John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, 2d ed., ed. Joseph E. Torres (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 174.

the thought that God had no obligation to the Canaanites since He was not in a relationship with them like He was with the Israelites. However, he concludes with the appeal to mystery, much like Plantinga, Block, and Wright. While it may seem that God's ways are evil, one can trust God's character based on the love expressed in the atonement of Christ, even if there appears to be no solution to the moral problem of the Conquest. Or, humans may just have to resign themselves to the fact that they have no right to scrutinize God and His ways.

The main concern with these interpretations is that they do not provide any solution to the problem of Canaanite genocide. As Fretheim writes,

An escape of a different order, but still an escape, is to attribute the "ban" to the mysterious ways of God, and then to suggest that any attempt to justify *God's* actions is inappropriate. But, whatever such theology might gain in divine invulnerability, it loses in pertinence to the human struggle with the problem of evil. Israel, itself, worked at explaining what this phenomenon was all about (Deuteronomy 7, 9), and we can do no less.<sup>514</sup>

The appeal to mystery may be a genuine response from scholars who are honestly struggling to come to grips with God's vengeance, but at the same time, it may come across as dishonest<sup>515</sup> when the Old Testament provides a number of reasons for the Conquest, as outlined in chapters two and three.<sup>516</sup> There is nothing wrong with exercising faith or suspending judgment or even recognizing that some of God's ways are inscrutable to humans, but it seems that there is ample biblical evidence to offer a better explanation for the Conquest.

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<sup>514</sup> Fretheim, *Deuteronomistic History*, 70–71 (emphasis original).

<sup>515</sup> So Bernard A. Asen, "Annihilate Amalek! Christian Perspectives on 1 Samuel 15," in *Fighting Words: Religion, Violence, and the Interpretation of Sacred Texts*, ed. John Renard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 67.

<sup>516</sup> Morriston makes this point in critiquing Murphy's article. See Wes Morriston, "Comments on 'God Beyond Justice,'" in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, eds. Michael Bergman, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rae (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 168–73. See also Murphy's rejoinder to Morriston (Mark C. Murphy, "Reply to Morriston," in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, eds. Michael Bergman, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rae [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 174–79).



## The Conquest and Historical Revision

The next set of interpretations questions the historicity of the biblical accounts in one way or another in attempting to wrestle with the moral problem of the Conquest. One idea is that God and God alone was responsible for the Conquest. Another view is that the Conquest never happened. Other interpretations are that the Israelites offered peace to the Canaanites before they destroyed the Canaanites or that the Conquest accounts are exaggerated in their description of killing men, women, and children. In each situation, the apologetic discussion is reframed as each interpretation softens the moral problem a bit by stating that the Conquest happened differently than one may think. This section will examine how closely these views align with the biblical presentation in chapters two and three and then assess the impact they have on the moral problem of the Conquest.

### God Alone Fought

The first interpretation comes from the pacifist tradition, which shares the same attitude toward nonviolence as the Christian criticism mentioned above but which makes an important distinction.<sup>517</sup> Warfare is evil and is a result of the Fall of mankind, but in a fallen world, God still uses war to exact punishment since He has the divine right to give and take life.<sup>518</sup> However, it is wrong for *humans* to take life. Although the events in Scripture actually happened, it was God and God alone who was responsible for the Conquest. From a theological standpoint, Abram was promised the land of Canaan on the basis of grace alone, and so there was no need

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<sup>517</sup> For more about Christian pacifism in general, see Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 152–61; Myron S. Augsburger, “Christian Pacifism,” in *War: Four Christian Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981), 82–97.

<sup>518</sup> See Waldemar Janzen, “War in the Old Testament,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 46 (1972): 155–66.

for his descendants to try to take the land by works (i.e., fighting a war).<sup>519</sup> *God* would bring the promises to fulfillment, not the Israelites through their own efforts. The Exodus event is the prime example of God acting on behalf of Israel without Israel's assistance. Later, the command to take possession of Canaan required the obedience of the people, but it was the Lord who would fight for Israel (Deut 1:30), place the fear of Israel upon their enemies (Deut 2:25), and deliver the enemies into Israel's hand (Deut 3:31, 33). As Lind summarizes, "The command [to go in and take possession of the land] was therefore seen not primarily as an order to fight but as a command to trust and to have confidence in Yahweh 'who goes before you' and who 'will himself fight for you' ([Deut] 1:30)."<sup>520</sup> Therefore, the Israelites did not participate in the Conquest. Rather, it was God's doing.

### **Historical Fiction**

The second interpretation in this section comes from the sector of liberal theology, or critical scholarship, which denies that the Conquest even happened. To understand this position requires a brief overview of the historical development of "modern" (or liberal) theology. Liberal theology engages in thoughts and ideas stemming from the period of modernity following the Enlightenment, which is thought to have begun in the seventeenth century with the philosophical revolution of René Descartes (d. 1650) and which included the scientific revolution of Galileo

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<sup>519</sup> Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 38; cf. idem., "Paradigms of Holy War in the Old Testament," *Biblical Research* 16 (1971): 16–31.

<sup>520</sup> Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior*, 160. During the time of Israel's monarchy (and perhaps even earlier), faith in the divine acts of Yahweh was replaced by faith in Israel's standing army. This is seen, for example, when David conducted the census (2 Sam 24), which marked a shift away from faith in miracles and reliance upon prophetic oracles to trust in human effort throughout Israel's history (ibid., 118–121).

Galilei (d. 1642), the scientific and mathematical advances of Sir Isaac Newton (d. 1727), and the later philosophical revolution of Immanuel Kant (d. 1804).<sup>521</sup>

Several characteristics of Enlightenment thinking are worth noting. First is the power of human reason to discover truth about the world, as seen in Kant's summary statement, *Sapere aude!* ("Dare to think!"). The Enlightenment was thus deemed the "Age of Reason" where humans use their own rational faculties to gain various types of knowledge (innate, experiential, emotional) in a critical way unencumbered by concern for human authority or religious revelation. In this way, human reason is employed to disassemble traditional ideas in order to rebuild them. A second characteristic of the Enlightenment is skepticism toward honored institutions and traditions of the past such as the Church and Christian dogma. This was accompanied by the idea that the present age is marked by substantial progress when compared to the past. Third is the proliferation of scientific thinking compared with what was common in the Middle Ages, as seen in the scientific method of Sir Francis Bacon (d. 1626). Rather than studying nature to discover the beauty God created, scientists divorced scientific truth from religious truth, resulting in two separate spheres of knowledge and inquiry and thereby pitting science and religion against each other.<sup>522</sup>

The result of "modern" thinking was that critical scholars began to cast doubt upon the historicity of biblical events—especially those containing miracles. This included the denial of biblical creationism, Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the Exodus from Egypt, and the Conquest of Canaan, among many other things. Many critical scholars today perceive the

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<sup>521</sup> Roger E. Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology: From Reconstruction to Deconstruction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 17–19.

<sup>522</sup> James M. Byrne, *Religion and the Enlightenment: From Descartes to Kant* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 4–14.

commandment to slaughter the Canaanite men, women, and children as primitive, barbaric, and immoral, but they do not believe that the Conquest actually occurred as depicted in the Old Testament. The higher-critical approach to the Old Testament includes the belief that the “Deuteronomistic history” (Joshua–Kings) was something written in the sixth century BC by the “Deuteronomist” (not by Joshua) and then later edited and expanded upon by others.<sup>523</sup> In short, there was no conquest of Canaan as recounted in the book of Joshua. The archaeological record casts doubt upon the Conquest as an historical event in the view of critical scholars,<sup>524</sup> and there

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<sup>523</sup> For this view or similar views, see Mitchell, *The Ethics of the Old Testament*, 161–62; L. A. Poore, “Joshua,” in *The Twentieth Century Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., eds. G. Henton Davies, Alan Richardson, and Charles L. Wallis (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), 158–59; Manfred Weippert, “The Israelite ‘Conquest’ and the Evidence from Transjordan,” in *Symposia: Celebrating the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research (1900–1975)*, ed. Frank Moore Cross (Cambridge, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1979), 15–25; Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, trans. Jane Doull, et al. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 10–11, 36–41, 84–88; John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 329–30; Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 266–69; Alexander Rofé, “The Laws of Warfare in the Book of Deuteronomy: Their Origins, Intent and Positivity,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32 (1985): 23–44; Philip D. Stern, *The Biblical Herem: A Window in Israel’s Religious Experience*, Brown Judaic Studies 211 (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 1991), 98–103; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992); Michael Walzer, “The Idea of Holy War in Ancient Israel,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 20, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 215–28; Rowlett, *Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence*, 38–44; Douglas A. Knight, “Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomists,” in *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present, and Future. Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker*, eds. James Luther Mays, David L. Petersen, and Kent Harold Richards (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 61–79; Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, trans. Leo G. Perdue (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 136; Yoshihide Suzuki, “A New Aspect of חֶרֶם in Deuteronomy in View of an Assimilation Policy of King Josiah,” *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 21 (1995): 3–27; Walter Dietrich, “The ‘Ban’ in the Age of the Early Kings,” in *The Origins of the Ancient Israelite States*, eds. Volkmar Fritz and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 196–210; Jonathan Klawans and David A. Bernat, “Introduction: Religion, Violence and the Bible,” in *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage*, eds. Jonathan Klawans and David Bernat (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 8; L. Daniel Hawk, “Conquest Reconfigured: Recasting Warfare in the Redaction of Joshua,” in *Writing and Reading War: Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, eds. Brad E. Kelle and Frank Rithel Ames (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 145–60; C. L. Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 180; Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword*, 53–ff; Römer, *Dark God*, 71–91; Christoph Levin, *Re-Reading the Scriptures: Essays on the Literary History of the Old Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 149; Harald Samuel, “Deuteronomistic War Prescriptions and Deuteronomistic Wars,” in *The Reception of Biblical War Legislation in Narrative Contexts: Studies in Law and Narrative*, eds. Christoph Berner and Harald Samuel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 145–47.

<sup>524</sup> Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 1–7, 105–22; Israel Finkelstein, “The Rise of Early Israel: Archaeology and Long-Term History,” in *The Origin of Early Israel-Current Debate: Biblical, Historical and Archaeological Perspectives*, eds. Shmuel Ahituv and Eliezer D. Oren (London: Routledge, 1998), 9–10; idem., “When and How Did the Israelites Emerge?” in *The Quest for the Historical Israel:*

are alleged historical inaccuracies within the book of Joshua itself that prove that the book is mythical.<sup>525</sup> What is found in the “official” account in Joshua<sup>526</sup> is biblical tradition reworked over a period of hundreds of years in order to answer relevant questions about Israel’s origin and identity as a nation. This revised history telescopes the lengthy, complex account (actual history) of Israel’s arrival in Canaan into a simple, unified story of conquest and divine deliverance (historiography), which must then be reconstructed by modern scholars to discover what actually occurred in the past.<sup>527</sup> Therefore, one must distinguish “biblical Israel,” which appears on the pages of Scripture, with “historical Israel,” which is the people group that actually lived in Palestine. There is no such thing as “ancient Israel” which produced the Bible, though.<sup>528</sup> The traditions passed down have experienced “contamination” in that those who recorded the traditions had their own interests and influences that differed from their successors, who likely discarded those interests and influences in favor of their own, and so on.<sup>529</sup>

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*Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel*, ed. Brian B. Schmidt (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 73–83; John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 15; Barry L. Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2009), 208.

<sup>525</sup> W. M. L. De Wette, *A Critical and Historical Introduction to the Canonical Scriptures of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, trans. Theodore Parker (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850), §166–67.

<sup>526</sup> The Joshua figure in the Conquest stories may even represent Josiah based on surface-level parallels between the two men. See Richard D. Nelson, “Josiah in the Book of Joshua,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100, no. 4 (Dec. 1981): 531–540; Robert B. Coote and Mary P. Coote, *Power, Politics, and the Making of the Bible: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 63–64.

<sup>527</sup> Abraham Malamat, *History of Biblical Israel: Major Problems and Minor Issues* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 9–10; cf. E. John Hamlin, *Inheriting the Land: A Commentary on the Book of Joshua*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 92–93.

<sup>528</sup> See Philip R. Davies, *In Search of ‘Ancient Israel’* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); cf. idem., *Memories of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History—Ancient and Modern* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1948), 28; James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1973), 53–58; Keith W. Whitlam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996), 23; idem., *Revealing the History of Ancient Palestine*, ed. Emanuel Pfoh (London: Routledge, 2018), 281–299; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. and exp. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 27.

<sup>529</sup> J. Alberto Soggin, *A History of Ancient Israel: From the Beginnings to the Bar Kochba Revolt, A.D. 135*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 20; cf. idem., *Introduction to the Old*

There are four theories of how the nation of Israel emerged.<sup>530</sup> One is that Israel came from the outside the land and abruptly took over the land through military conquest. This is the account depicted in the Bible but largely rejected by critical scholars.<sup>531</sup> Second is the theory that Israel came from the outside the land but gradually took over the land through migration.<sup>532</sup> The third and fourth theories see the Israelites as having emerged from *within* the land of Canaan. The Israelites were actually of the same ethnicity and religion as the Canaanites originally<sup>533</sup> but then took over the land of Canaan abruptly through social revolution<sup>534</sup> or gradually through peaceful, cultural differentiation.<sup>535</sup> It was only later in the time of Elijah that the land was

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*Testament: From Its Origin to the Closing of the Alexandrian Canon*, 3d ed., trans. John Bowden (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 42; Robert B. Coote and Keith W. Whitelam, "The Emergence of Israel: Social Transformation and State Formation following the Decline in Late Bronze Age Trade, *Semeia* 37 (1986): 109.

<sup>530</sup> Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume One: Israel's Gospel*, 488. For an overview of critical scholars' evolving theories concerning the history of Israel as a nation, see Ingrid Hjelm and Thomas L. Thompson, "Introduction," in *History, Archaeology and the Bible Forty Years After 'Historicity,'* Changing Perspectives 6, eds. Ingrid Hjelm and Thomas L. Thompson (London: Routledge, 2016), 1–14.

<sup>531</sup> At most, critical scholars recognize that *something* happened in Israel's history before legend took over (e.g., Paul N. Anderson, "Genocide or Jesus: A God of Conquest or Pacifism?" in *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. J. Harold Ellens [Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003], 42–45).

<sup>532</sup> William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites, and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 178–83.

<sup>533</sup> Niels Peter Lemche, *The Canaanites and Their Land: The Tradition of the Canaanites*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 110 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 22–24; cf. idem., "Joshua and Western Violence," in *Far from Minimal: Celebrating the Work and Influence of Philip R. Davies*, eds. Duncan Burns and John W. Rogerson (London: T. & T. Clark, 2012), 275–81.

<sup>534</sup> Hermann Schultz, *Old Testament Theology: The Religion of Revelation in its Pre-Christian Stage of Development*, vol. 1, 4th ed., trans. J. A. Paterson (Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1892), 140; George E. Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," *The Biblical Archeologist* 25, no. 3 (Sept. 1962): 81; cf. idem., *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Traditions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel. 1250-1050 BCE*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 555–ff; John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 134–43.

<sup>535</sup> Martin Noth, *The History of Israel*, 2d ed., trans. P. R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 69–72; Albrecht Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 133–69; cf. C. H. J. De Geus, *The Tribes of Israel: An Investigation into Some of the Presuppositions of Martin Noth's Amphictyony Hypothesis* (Assen, Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1976), 212; Abraham Malamat, "Israelite Conduct of War in the Conquest of Canaan," in *Symposia: Celebrating the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of*

thought to be holy, requiring the purging of idol worship.<sup>536</sup> By the time the Pentateuch reached its final form, which would have been late into the monarchical period, the Canaanites were not even around. There was therefore no extermination of the Canaanites at all; the ban was “fortunately purely theoretical”<sup>537</sup> and was included as “an anachronistic literary formulation”<sup>538</sup> for one of several possible reasons. One suggestion is that the book of Joshua was written to explain the transition of Israel from a group of tribes into a monarchy as well as to reconstitute the monarchy and cult during the time of Josiah as the nation of Judah moved to a colonial status under foreign dominion.<sup>539</sup> The Conquest may have been created as an ideology to repudiate the Canaanite lifestyle<sup>540</sup> or to promote a utopian ideal.<sup>541</sup> Another possibility is that the Israelites

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*the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research (1900–1975)*, ed. Frank Moore Cross (Cambridge, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1979), 39–40; A. Graeme Auld, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 3–4; cf. J. Maxwell Miller and Gene M. Tucker, *The Book of Joshua*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 11–13; Niels Peter Lemche, *Early Israel: Anthropological and Historical Studies on the Israelite Society Before the Monarchy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 44.

<sup>536</sup> Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. and eds. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press, 1952), 93.

<sup>537</sup> Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, vol. 2, trans. John Bowden (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 391.

<sup>538</sup> Bernard M. Levinson, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 382.

<sup>539</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, “Theological Education as a Theory-Praxis Loop: Situating the Book of Joshua in a Cultural, Social Ethical, and Theological Matrix,” in *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium*, eds. John W. Rogerson, Margaret Davies, and M. Daniel Carrol R. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 108–115; cf. Yoshihide Suzuki, “A New Aspect of חרם in Deuteronomy in View of an Assimilation Policy of King Josiah,” *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 21 (1995): 3–27.

<sup>540</sup> Joe M. Sprinkle, *Biblical Law and Its Relevance: A Christian Understanding and Ethical Application for Today of the Mosaic Regulations* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2006), 180; cf. R. E. Clements, “Achan’s Sin: Warfare and Holiness,” in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw*, eds. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 123; Christoph Bultmann, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Pentateuch*, The Oxford Bible Commentary, eds. John Muddiman and John Barton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 197; Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume One: Israel’s Gospel*, 500–501.

<sup>541</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, “The Ban on the Canaanites in the Biblical Codes and its Historical Development,” in *History and Traditions of Early Israel: Studies Presented to Eduard Nielsen*, eds. André Lemaire and Benedikt Otzen (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 159–60.

invented or crafted the *hērem* laws in order to draw insider-outsider lines between what was acceptable Israelite worship and what was prohibited, with the Canaanites being the chosen scapegoat for false religion.<sup>542</sup> Whatever the case, the moral problem of the Conquest is merely theoretical since the Canaanites were not *actually* exterminated.

### **The Canaanites were Offered Peace**

The third interpretation in this section comes from the Jewish tradition, which is a bit of a mixed bag when it comes to the destruction of the Amalekites and Canaanites. Some like Nahmanides (1194–1270) believed that the Amalekites deserved divine punishment since they opposed God. Yitzhak Abrabanel (1437–1508) concurred and thought that blotting out the Amalekites would deter other nations from following in their path. However, other Jewish scholars in the halakhic tradition, such as Avraham Bornstein (1839–1910), condemned the annihilation of the Amalekites at the time of King Saul because they believed that it violated the law in Deuteronomy about punishing the children for the sins of the father. Another group preferred a metaphorical interpretation in which the destruction of the Amalekites symbolizes the personal struggle between good (Israel) and evil (Amalek).<sup>543</sup> As a general rule, though, rabbinic interpretations tended to add details to the Scriptures. As Neusner summarizes,

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<sup>542</sup> See Norbert Lohfink, “The Destruction of the Seven Nations in Deuteronomy and the Mimetic Theory,” trans. James G. Williams, *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 2 (Spring 1995): 111; Mark G. Brett, “Genocide in Deuteronomy: Postcolonial Variations on Mimetic Desire,” in *Seeing Signals, Reading Signs: The Art of Exegesis: Studies in Honor of Antony F. Campbell, SJ for his Seventieth Birthday*, eds. Mark A. O’Brien and Howard N. Wallace (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 84–85; idem., *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 87–91; T. M. Lemos, “Dispossessing Nations: Population Growth, Scarcity, and Genocide in Ancient Israel and Twentieth-Century Rwanda,” in *Ritual Violence in the Hebrew Bible: New Perspectives*, ed. Saul M. Olyan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 48; cf. Yair Hoffmann, “The Deuteronomistic Concept of the Hērem,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 111 (1999): 196–210.

<sup>543</sup> Avi Sagi, “The Punishment of Amalek in Jewish Tradition: Coping with the Moral Problem,” in *Avi Sagi: Existentialism, Pluralism, and Identity*, eds. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 33–47; cf. Zev Garber, “Amalek and Amalekut: A Homiletic Lesson,” in *Jewish Bible Theology: Perspectives and Case Studies*, ed. Isaac Kalimi (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 154–55.



The halakha set forth in the tractate Sanhedrin deals with the organization of the Israelite government and courts and the punishments administered thereby.... While Scripture supplies many facts, the Oral Torah organizes and lays matters out in its own way. Where the Written Torah does not provide information that sages deem logical and necessary, they make things up for themselves. Where verses of Scripture play a role in the halakhic statement of matters, they are cited in context.... The upshot is that at specific topics, Scripture, cited here and there, contributes facts, but the shape and program of the tractate as a whole is not to be predicted on the basis of the Written Torah.<sup>544</sup>

This hermeneutical tradition is especially evident in the Conquest discussions.<sup>545</sup>

The interpretation highlighted in this section is the novel view that the Canaanites were actually offered peace before Joshua and the Israelite army destroyed them. The homiletic commentary on Deuteronomy records the following midrash:

Who fulfilled this section (Deuteronomy 20:10–15)? Yehoshua bin Nun. Said Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman: What did Yehoshua do? He put out an edict everywhere he went to conquer, and this is what was written in it: “Anyone who wants to leave, can leave. Anyone who wants to make peace, make it. Anyone who wants to wage war, wage it.” What did the Gergashites [sic] do? They turned and left from before them, giving the Holy One, blessed be He, a land as beautiful as His land, called Africa. The Gibeonites made peace [with] him, Yehoshua [sic] made peace with them. But the 31 kings came to wage war with him, the Holy One, blessed be He, made them fall into his hand. How do we know? As it says, (Deuteronomy 3:3) “We struck them down, leaving no survivors.”<sup>546</sup>

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<sup>544</sup> Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Jerusalem Talmud: A Translation and Commentary on CD*, trans., Jacob Neusner and Tzvee Zahavy (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 7947.

<sup>545</sup> The main source for rabbinic interpretations is the Talmud, which is the Jewish law code and commentary to the law code. There are two Talmuds: the Talmud of the Land of Israel, which is also known as the Jerusalem Talmud or *Yerushalmi* (ca. AD 400), and the Babylonian Talmud or *Bavli* (ca. AD 600). Each Talmud is constructed from the same law code—the Mishnah (ca. AD 200). The commentary on the Mishnah from both Talmuds is called the *Gemara*, and the Gemara is normally just included as a part of the Talmud (Neusner, *The Jerusalem Talmud*, 12). The term *Mishnah* means “study” and is derived from the Hebrew *shanah* (“to repeat”), which refers to learning or teaching oral tradition by repeated recitation. The Mishnah includes the three areas of Jewish tradition: midrash (interpretation of Scripture), the halakhot (extrabiblical statutes), and the haggadot (non-halakhot traditions). See H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 2d ed., trans. and ed. by Markus Bockmuehl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 109.

<sup>546</sup> *Devarim Rabbah* 5:14, accessed February 18, 2022, [https://www.sefaria.org/Devarim\\_Rabbah.5.15?ven=Sefaria\\_Community\\_Translation&vhe=Midrash\\_Rabbah\\_--\\_TE&lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Devarim_Rabbah.5.15?ven=Sefaria_Community_Translation&vhe=Midrash_Rabbah_--_TE&lang=bi). For more information about the rabbinic legends and traditions, see Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York: Schocken Books, 1992).

Here, the midrash posits that the Canaanites were offered peace, even though Deuteronomy 20:10–15 states that peace was only to be offered to nations at a distance. Anyone who wanted to leave could leave, and anyone who remained presumably stayed to wage war against Israel and against the Lord. Their punishment in that case was deserving. The Gibeonites, on the other hand, made peace, which is presented here as a good thing even though the book of Joshua presents it as a mistake on the part of Israel’s leaders since they did not inquire of the Lord (Josh 9:14). The midrash even passes along the tradition that some Canaanites fled to Africa.<sup>547</sup> Since Deuteronomy 7:1 includes the Girgashites, but 20:7 only lists six nations and not seven, then the rabbis inferred that the Girgashites were allowed to live.<sup>548</sup> Thus, there were options for the Canaanites: make peace, flee, or fight. Therefore, the Conquest was not as severe as the traditional interpretation that the Canaanites were to be exterminated without mercy.

The medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1138–1204) interpreted along these lines too.<sup>549</sup> In accordance with Deuteronomy 20:10, enemies were to be offered peace first before

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<sup>547</sup> There are two accounts of the Canaanites fleeing to Africa, though they are probably spurious. The first is a tradition from the Byzantine scholar Procopius (AD 500–570) that the Canaanites not killed by Joshua fled to Egypt and then to Libya. There, “they established numerous cities and took possession of the whole of Libya as far as the Pillars of Heracles, and there they have lived even up to my time, using the Phoenician tongue. They also built a fortress in Numidia, where now is the city called Tigisis. In that place are two columns made of white stone near by the great spring, having Phoenician letters cut in them which say in the Phoenician tongue: ‘We are they who fled from before the face of Joshua, the robber, the son of Nun’” (Procopius, *History of the Wars: The Vandalic War*, trans. H. B. Dewing [London: William Heinemann, 1916], 4.10.13–23). Similarly, the Italian political philosopher and diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) relayed a tradition of the Maurusians, an ancient Syrian people group, fleeing from the Hebrews: “...I shall cite the instance of the Marusians, a people who anciently dwelt in Syria, but hearing of the inroad of the Hebrews, and thinking themselves unable to resist them, chose rather to seek safety in flight than to perish with their country in a vain effort to defend it. For which reason, removing with their families, they went to Africa, where, after driving out the native inhabitants, they took up their abode; and although they could not defend their own country, were able to possess themselves a country belonging to others” (Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, trans. Ninian Hill Thomson [London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1883], 2.8.2).

<sup>548</sup> Jeffrey H. Tigay, “Jewish Interpretations of the Canaanite Genocide,” accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FdNO2SFcsg>.

Israel was to go to war with them. The enemy could accept the offer of peace and commit to fulfilling the seven Noahide laws, which reflect a universal moral law and include prohibitions against profaning God’s name, cursing God, murder, eating limbs of living animals (i.e., not causing undue pain), stealing, and sexual immorality as well as the establishment of courts of justice.<sup>550</sup> If the enemy nation would agree and submit, then they would be subjugated as outlined in Deuteronomy 20:10–15, and the king would decide what tribute the nation would pay, though he was supposed to deal honestly. If the enemy nation rejected the peace settlement, or agreed to the peace settlement but rejected the seven Noahide laws, then war would commence. As Deuteronomy 20:14 states, the men were to be killed, and the women and children were to be taken captive. This applies to the nations at a distance. But concerning the Amalekites and the seven Canaanite nations—those living *within* the land of Canaan—Maimonides believed that *they too* should have been offered a peace settlement. Only if they refused would they be exterminated. Citing Joshua 11:19–20, which states that no cities made peace treaties with the Israelites except for the Gibeonites, Maimonides inferred that all of the cities *were* offered peace first, but only the Gibeonites accepted while the rest refused and were destroyed. Maimonides also believed that Joshua sent three letters to the Canaanites before he entered the Promised Land. The first one read, “Whoever desires to flee, should flee.” The second stated, “Whoever desires to accept a peaceful settlement, should make peace.” The third letter read, “Whoever desires war, should do battle.” Thus, the Canaanites had options, and peace was available.<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>549</sup> See Maimonides, *Melachim uMilchamot* - Chapter 6, accessed February 18, 2022, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1188350/jewish/Melachim-uMilchamot-Chapter-6.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1188350/jewish/Melachim-uMilchamot-Chapter-6.htm).

<sup>550</sup> “The 7 Noahide Laws: Universal Morality,” accessed February 18, 2022, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/62221/jewish/The-7-Noahide-Laws-Universal-Morality.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/62221/jewish/The-7-Noahide-Laws-Universal-Morality.htm).

<sup>551</sup> For a summary of the halakhic legislation that includes the interpretation of Maimonides as well as a few other points, see Norman Lamm, “Amalek and the Seven Nations: A Case of Law vs. Morality,” in *War and*

Rabbi Norman Lamm summarizes<sup>552</sup> the halakhic legislation about the Conquest with the following interpretations in addition to the ones mentioned already:

- Ammonites and Moabites, because they mistreated the Israelites in their long trek from Egypt, could not be accepted as proselytes, forever; but it was forbidden to wage war against them.
- All treaties must be solemnly observed by both parties—Israel and the enemy.
- A siege may be laid against a “city”—a term which excludes a village or a metropolis.
- It is forbidden to lay a siege merely for the purpose of destroying a city or taking its inhabitants as slaves.
- The peace terms must be offered by Israel *before* any attack against a city by a blockade of hunger, thirst, or disease.
- The peace terms must be offered to a hostile city for three consecutive days, and even if the terms are rejected, a siege may not be undertaken before the enemy has commenced hostilities.
- No direct cruelties may be inflicted even when the city is under siege.
- No city may be totally blockaded; an opening must be left for people to leave the city.
- Soldiers of Israel were expected to act with exemplary behavior; even slander and gossip were not to be tolerated.
- Those of the enemy condemned to death (i.e., those who rejected the offer of observing the Seven Commandments) were to be killed as painlessly as possible.
- Enemy dead were to be buried honorably.
- A city was not to be razed needlessly.
- Women, children, the old, and the sick were not to be harmed.
- Captives of war were to be treated humanely.

Obviously, there is a lot of historical backfilling here since most of these points are not mentioned in the biblical text. There is no doubt that the rabbis were trying to soften the harshness of the Conquest presented in the Bible to make it more palatable. Likewise, the Talmud (*Sotah* 35b) teaches that the Canaanites would have been accepted if they had repented:

The verse states, “When you go forth to battle against your enemies, and the Lord your God delivers them into your hands, and you take them captive” (Deuteronomy 21:10), implying that there is no obligation to destroy them, to include not only gentiles who are not Canaanites, but even Canaanites that are living outside of Eretz Yisrael, as, if they repent, they are accepted and allowed to live in Eretz Yisrael.<sup>553</sup>

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*Peace in the Jewish Tradition*, eds. Lawrence Schiffman and Joel B. Wolowelsky (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2007), 212.

<sup>552</sup> Lamm, “Amalek and the Seven Nations,” 212.

While it is true that Rahab repented since she exercised faith in Yahweh in hiding the spies, the book of Deuteronomy singles out the Canaanites for destruction in contrast to the other nations.

Another attempt to soften the extermination passages is seen in how the rabbis questioned the morality of the destruction of the Amalekites (*Sefer Ha-Aggadah* 1.8.24). There is even a fictitious conversation between Saul and the Lord where Saul questions the command to exterminate the Amalekites (*Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, 1.6.75).<sup>554</sup> Tigay summarizes rabbinical hermeneutics concerning the Conquest passages as follows:

The rabbis' rejection this view [that the Canaanites should be annihilated unconditionally in accordance with Deuteronomy 7] is probably a reflection of their own sensibilities. They must have regarded the unconditional understanding of the Law as implausible because it's so harsh and inconsistent with other values such as the legal principle in rabbinic law that wrongdoers may not be punished unless they have been warned that their action is illegal and informed of the penalty, and the prophetic concept of repentance, and the prediction that idolators will someday abandon false gods. The rabbis modified and softened the Law by means of interpretation. Their methods included the following interpretive strategies: First, treating the reason for the law...as part of the law so as to undermine or overrule its literal meaning. Secondly, exploitation or creation of an ambiguity in the law.... Third, they exploited a seemingly meaningless detail (e.g., that the Girgashites are omitted in Deut 20:7) to change the meaning of the law.<sup>555</sup>

Another reason why the rabbis may have softened the Law's statements concerning the *ḥērem* and other prohibitions against idolatry in the land is because the land of Israel in the centuries after the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70) was no longer comprised mostly of Jews. Rather, Gentiles inhabited the land as well.<sup>556</sup> The result is a Conquest that is more morally agreeable.

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<sup>553</sup> *The William Davidson Talmud: Sotah 35b*, accessed February 18, 2022, [https://www.sefaria.org/Sotah.31b.1?ven=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_English&vhe=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_Vocalized\\_Aramaic&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Sotah.31b.1?ven=William_Davidson_Edition_-_English&vhe=William_Davidson_Edition_-_Vocalized_Aramaic&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en).

<sup>554</sup> For more examples, see Tigay, "Jewish Interpretations of the Canaanite Genocide"; Neusner, *The Jerusalem Talmud, Sanh.*, ch. 5; 7:10–11; 8:1–6.

<sup>555</sup> Tigay, "Jewish Interpretations of the Canaanite Genocide."

<sup>556</sup> Jacob Neusner, *The Theology of the Halakhah* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 241.

## The Conquest Accounts are Exaggerated

The last interpretation in this section is the one which states that the Bible contains exaggerated language in the Conquest accounts with the result that there was no mass slaughter of Canaanite men, women, and children.<sup>557</sup> This interpretation does not explicitly deny biblical inerrancy because it maintains that the biblical authors employed hyperbolic language as a literary device. The biblical authors did not intend to deceive, nor did they report an error; they simply used the historiographic custom of their day. The main argument for this interpretation is that other ancient Near Eastern accounts have similar overstatements. For example, the Hittite annals (ca. 13<sup>th</sup> century BC) record that over the course of a two-year period, the Hittite king Mursili II conquered “the whole of the land of Arzawa” and that he deported troops and horses too numerous to count,<sup>558</sup> which is undoubtedly an exaggeration. Another example comes from an Egyptian text recounting the victory of Rameses II at the Battle of Kadesh against the Hittites (c. 1274 BC). The text states:

His majesty [Rameses II] charged into the force of the Foe from Khatti and the many countries with him.... His majesty slew the entire force of the Foe from Khatti, together with his great chiefs and all his brothers, as well as all the chiefs of all the countries that had come with him, their infantry and their chariotry falling on their faces one upon the other.... I attacked all the countries, I alone. For my infantry and my chariotry had deserted me; not one of them stood looking back.”<sup>559</sup>

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<sup>557</sup> Those who hold this view include K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990); Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction & Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996); Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Reading Joshua,” in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, eds. Michael Bergman, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rae (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 249–55. This view has been popularized by the Christian apologist Paul Copan (e.g., *Is God a Moral Monster?*) and appears in Lamb, *God Behaving Badly*, 77; Joshua Ryan Butler, *The Skeletons in God’s Closet: The Mercy of Hell, the Surprise of Judgment, and the Hope of Holy War* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014). For the most extensive collection of examples of hyperbolic ancient Near Eastern accounts, see Webb and Oeste, *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric?* 136–51.

<sup>558</sup> Ian Russell Lowell, trans., *Annals of Mursilis II*, Year 4: Ten Year Annals, CTH 61.I.A.iii:1–41, accessed June 8, 2021, <http://y.deliyannis.free.fr/hatti/texts.php?id=mursili1-8>.

The account propagandistically portrays Rameses II as securing the victory singlehandedly, but in reality, the battle ended in a truce.<sup>560</sup> The account of complete victory in Joshua is no different than the above examples. The language of “no survivors” is not to be taken in a wooden, literal sense.<sup>561</sup> Rather, the language of total destruction is basically ancient “trash talk”, or an exaggerated way of speaking, that refers to military victories, not civilian massacres.<sup>562</sup>

There are several lines of reasoning that support this interpretation.<sup>563</sup> First is the belief that the Bible should be interpreted *literarily*, not simply *literally*. Ancient near Eastern war texts contain hyperbole, and the Bible follows suit by using the literary customs of the time. Second, the primary task of the Conquest was driving out the Canaanites rather than annihilating them. The texts that speak of “driving out” (e.g., Exod 23:28) should be used to interpret the *hērem* passages (e.g., Deut 7:2). After all, God told the Israelites that the Canaanites would be driven out gradually (Deut 7:22–23). The Israelites could not drive out the Canaanites *and* wipe them out, so dispossession was the main command. Third, there is biblical tension between the passages which speak of total destruction and those that speak of Canaanites remaining in the land after the Conquest. The book of Joshua records that Joshua and the Israelites attacked Hebron and Debir and put to the sword all of their inhabitants, leaving no survivors (Josh 10:36–39). However, the book of Judges records that the men of Judah conquered Hebron and Debir

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<sup>559</sup> Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature Volume I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 377–78.

<sup>560</sup> See Ian Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 289–90.

<sup>561</sup> Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 246–47.

<sup>562</sup> Butler, *The Skeletons in God's Closet*, 228–31.

<sup>563</sup> See Copan and Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?* 49–ff; Wolterstorff, “Reading Joshua,” 250–ff; Webb and Oest, *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric?* 151–ff.

sometime later (Judg 1:9–13; cf. Josh 15:15–19). If the Israelites had annihilated the Canaanites the first time, then they would not have had to conquer these cities a second time. Therefore, the account in Joshua 10 must be hyperbolic. Fourth, when the Angel of the Lord confronted the Israelites about their unfaithfulness (Judg 2:1–3), He stated that the Israelites had failed to destroy the Canaanite altars, not the Canaanite people, which implies that the main task was to destroy Canaanite worship, not the people. Fifth, the language of “destruction” describes the Israelites when they went into captivity (e.g., Jer 6:19; 9:11; 25:9), yet they were not annihilated. This too was an exaggeration. Sixth, if the *ḥērem* commands are taken literally, then Joshua did not obey all that Moses commanded since there were survivors remaining. Yet, the biblical text states that the Lord *did* fulfill His promises to the nation of Israel (Josh 24:15). Seventh, the archaeological record does not support the utter destruction of the Canaanites. Instead, the Israelites gradually infiltrated the land of Canaan.

Another contention is that there were no noncombatants killed in the Conquest—that is, no innocent women and children.<sup>564</sup> There are several supporting arguments offered. First, the Hebrew term עִיר (city) has the more general meaning of “population center” since it can be used more broadly to refer to small towns (e.g., Josh 3:16; 1 Sam 20:6), tent encampments (Judg 10:4; 1 Chron 2:22–23), citadels (2 Sam 12:26), and fortresses (2 Sam 5:7; 1 Chron 11:5, 7). Jericho was probably a small fortress because the Israelites could march around it seven times in one day and because there are no designations in the biblical text about its great size, as is the case with

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<sup>564</sup> The following arguments are found in Hess, *Joshua*, 673–75; idem., “The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua,” in *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, eds. Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray Jr. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 35–36, 38–39, 45–46; idem., “War in the Hebrew Bible: An Overview,” in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 29–30; cf. idem., Appendix 2: Apologetic Issues in the Old Testament,” in *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*, by Douglas Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 662–76; idem., *The Old Testament: A Historical Theological, and Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 189–91.



Gibeon (Josh 10:2) and Hazor (Josh 11:10). Furthermore, there are no noncombatants mentioned except for Rahab and her family. It appears that Jericho did not have a large population of citizens who would be noncombatants. Jericho probably had a strategic position and was primarily a military outpost rather than a metropolis. Second, if there were any peasants or noncombatants around, they likely would have fled before the Israelites launched their attack. Third, the verses that depict the destruction of men/women and young/old (e.g., Josh 6:21; 8:25) draw upon stereotypical language that should not be taken literally. The Hebrew reads “from man and unto woman”—a phrase that occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament with the same apparent contextual meaning of “everyone” (1 Sam 15:3; 22:19; 2 Sam 6:19 [1 Chron 16:3]; 2 Chron 15:13; Neh 8:2). If Jericho was a fort rather than a populated city (Rahab and her family being exceptions), and if “men and women” just means “all were killed”, then there were no noncombatants put to death at Jericho or Ai. The ban, therefore, was directed against the Canaanite armies, religious leaders, and political leaders living in the Canaanite cities and fortresses. The Conquest, therefore, entailed disabling military raids rather than the slaughter of innocent women and children. Since God never really intended for Joshua and the Israelites to exterminate the Canaanites entirely, and since there were no noncombatants killed, then the moral problem of the Conquest is significantly reduced.<sup>565</sup>

### **Summary and Evaluation**

This section has examined four interpretations of the Conquest that deviate from the standard, historical reading of the book of Joshua. First, the pacifist view is that God alone acted in the Conquest. Second, the view of many critical scholars is that the Conquest in the Bible is

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<sup>565</sup> As Webb and Oeste conclude, the hyperbolic interpretation reduces the severity of the Conquest and eliminates the notion that the Conquest was genocide (Webb and Oeste, *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric?* 171–72).

just fiction. Third, the rabbinical interpretations include offers of peace for the Canaanites. Fourth, a popular evangelical interpretation is that there were no noncombatants killed and that the Conquest accounts are exaggerated. The upside is that “these historical versions of Israel’s taking the promised land turn out to be less violent, less oppressive, and less morally repugnant than the version in the biblical narrative...”<sup>566</sup> The main question is whether these interpretations fit the biblical text.

By way of critique, the pacifist view is selective in its interpretation in that it ignores the many passages where the Israelites themselves do God’s bidding in killing the Canaanites; God did not act alone. Although pacifism may be an ideal, it is not realistic in a fallen world. Some wars must be fought—especially when God commands them. In addition, the pacifist view is puzzling since it presents God as prohibiting humans from killing even in warfare, yet God Himself engages in the same activity.<sup>567</sup> The end result is the same. The Canaanites were destroyed by God (rather than human instruments), and so the moral problem remains.

Turning to the view of critical scholars, the first thing to note is that critical scholars have a fundamentally different approach to the Bible than evangelicals. For many critical scholars, the Bible is *not* God’s Word and is not inspired in any way. Rather, it is a human, fallible book.<sup>568</sup> Therefore, critical scholars have no problem criticizing the biblical text, finding alleged contradictions, and appealing to archaeological minimalism to discount the historicity of the book of Joshua.<sup>569</sup> However, the argument that Deuteronomy was written (not discovered) during

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<sup>566</sup> Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 61.

<sup>567</sup> Rowlett, *Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence*, 67.

<sup>568</sup> See the critiques of this position from H. A. C. Hävernicks, *A General Historico-Critical Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. William Lindsay Alexander (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1852), 389–ff.

the reign of Josiah in the seventh century BC is inconclusive at best.<sup>570</sup> The arguments about alleged biblical contradictions have been addressed in chapter three, and the archaeology of Jericho and other cities from the Conquest is open to debate.<sup>571</sup> Archaeological minimalism does not need to be the default position. Texts and artifacts require subjective interpretations and are complementary when properly understood.<sup>572</sup> As a methodology, texts that present historical

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<sup>569</sup> For a critique of archaeological minimalism, see Lawson G. Stone, “Early Israel and Its Appearance in Canaan,” in *Ancient Israel History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources*, eds. Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 132–34; Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 146–47.

<sup>570</sup> There are several arguments against the view of critical scholars that Josiah invented rather than discovered Deuteronomy. First, the scroll in the temple was probably more than just Deuteronomy. The scroll that Hilkiah the priest “discovered” in the temple is called the “book of the law” (2 Kgs 22:8, 11; 2 Chron 34:14–15), and Deuteronomy is also called the “book of the law” (Deut 28:61; 29:21; 30:10; 31:24–26), but the scroll is also called “the book of the covenant” (2 Kgs 23:2–3, 21; 2 Chron 34:30–31), which is a term never used in Deuteronomy but which does appear in Exodus 24:7. The implication is that what Josiah discovered was *more* than just the book of Deuteronomy and may have been the entire Torah. Second, discovering the “book of the law/covenant” does not mean that it was authored or compiled at that time. There is nothing in 2 Kings or 2 Chronicles to support that idea. Third, the chronological evidence from 2 Chronicles suggests that Josiah’s reforms began in the twelfth year of his reign, which was six years *before* the discovery of the scroll (2 Chron 34:3, 8). This means that Josiah already knew what the Law taught about idolatry, and the recovery of the scroll simply reinforced his decision to purge the land of idolatry (Eugene H. Merrill, “Deuteronomy,” in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, eds. Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti [Nashville: B&H, 2011], 255–56). Fourth, the book of Joshua makes no mention of things that characterized Israel’s monarchy, such as the centralized court, the temple, the militia, or the administration. Instead, Joshua instructed the Israelite houses, families, and tribes to conquer and claim their own lands (Norman C. Habel, *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995], 67). Fifth, if Deuteronomy were written at the time of Josiah (or later), then the anti-Canaanite polemic would be merely theoretical. Yet, reading Deuteronomy does not give this impression. Deuteronomy is about choosing between Yahweh and the other gods, but there is no criticism of syncretism like that found in the prophets leading up to the Babylonian Exile (e.g., Amos 5:21–24; Micah 6:6–8). The attitude of Deuteronomy toward false religion differs from that of the later prophets. On the other hand, Deuteronomy’s depiction of a king in Israel is theoretical (Deut 17:14–20) in contrast to the actual depiction of kings in 1–2 Kings (J. G. McConville, *Grace in the End: A Study of Deuteronomistic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], 48–50). Finally, in regard to the theory that Joshua was created as a Josiah-like character, there are many differences between Joshua and Josiah. As Holloway summarizes, “Joshua was no monarch and Josiah implemented no land reform reflecting the inheritance boundaries of Joshua 13–22. If the book of Joshua was intended to provide an ideological foundation for the policies of Josiah, the book’s celebration of the defeat of fallen monarchs (Joshua 12:7–24) seems an odd way to make the point” (Jeph Holloway, “The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 41, no. 1 [Fall 1998]: 44–69).

<sup>571</sup> For example, one reason for the alleged paucity of archaeological evidence for the Conquest is that the Canaanite cities themselves were not destroyed except in the cases of Jericho, Ai, and Hazor. The Israelites were supposed to live in the rest of the Canaanite cities (Deut 6:10–12) (Alan Millard, “Amorites and Israelites: Invisible Invaders - Modern Expectation and Ancient Reality,” in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*, eds. James K. Hoffmeier and Alan Millard [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 160).

<sup>572</sup> William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 81–82.

information should be treated as historical until proven otherwise, not the other way around.<sup>573</sup>

The critical interpretations about Israel's entry into the land discussed above, on the other hand, are dubious and *without* evidence when compared with the traditional interpretation of the text.<sup>574</sup> As far as the apologetic argument is concerned, the critical interpretation just shifts the burden without addressing the problem. As Barr admits, "Even if the whole tradition of the holy war was 'a fiction', this does not deal with the problem: the problem is not whether the narratives are fact or fiction, the problem is that, whether fact or fiction, the ritual destruction is commended."<sup>575</sup> One cannot avoid the theological questions just by answering the historical questions about the Conquest.<sup>576</sup>

The rabbinic interpretations are interesting but ultimately without a textual basis. There is no biblical passage in which Joshua and the Israelites offered peace to the Canaanites or offered them a chance to flee. These have to be read *into* the text. Plus, the rabbinic interpretations lead to more questions. For example, if the Canaanites were to be treated the same as nations outside the land, then why were there two sets of rules for warfare in Deuteronomy 20? Why would the

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<sup>573</sup> See James K. Hoffmeier, "The North Sinai Archaeological Project's Excavations at Tell el-Borg (Sinai): An Example of the 'New' Biblical Archaeology?" in *The Future of Biblical Archaeology: Reassessing Methodologies and Assumptions*, eds. James K. Hoffmeier and Alan Millard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 58.

<sup>574</sup> See John M. Monson, "Enter Joshua: The 'Mother of Current Debates' in Biblical Archaeology," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, eds. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 427–58; Richard S. Hess, "Early Israel in Canaan: A Survey of Recent Evidence and Interpretations," in *Israel's Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography*, ed. V. Philips Long (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 492–518.

<sup>575</sup> James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 209; cf. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament*, 51; Gerd Lüdemann, *The Unholy in Scripture: The Dark Side of the Bible*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 44; J. P. U. Lilley, "The Judgment of God: The Problem of the Canaanites," *Themelios* 22, no. 2 (1997): 6; John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 3d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 205; Seitz, "The Character of the God of the Hebrew Bible," 301.

<sup>576</sup> Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "God the Warrior: A Problem in Biblical Interpretation and Apologetics," *Interpretation* 19 (Jan. 1965): 41.

Gibeonites create a ruse to obtain peace if Joshua were offering peace to the other Canaanite cities? Why would God harden the hearts of the Canaanites if peace was available? None of these questions has a very good answer; the biblical text points away from the rabbinic historical revisions. What is more, the rabbinic interpretations ignore one of the main reasons for the Conquest: God's judgment upon the Canaanites. The rabbinic interpretations accomplish the goal of making the Conquest more agreeable, but they fall short because they are unfounded.

The last interpretation from Younger, Wolterstorff, Hess, Copan/Flannagan, and Webb/Oeste is more sophisticated and has some compelling biblical arguments but is nonetheless inadequate for several reasons.<sup>577</sup> First, although hyperbole may be present in some ancient Near Eastern war records, Joshua did not have the egocentric motive to exaggerate his victories, and God did not need to accommodate the exaggerations present in secular records. Second, attempts to downplay the severity of the *hērem* passages are unsatisfactory upon closer examination. It is claimed that the phrase “men and women” in Joshua 8:25 is stereotypical and could include anyone, whether men or women, but 1 Samuel 22:18–23 provides an exception to the rule, so the biblical argument is not as strong as presented. Plus, in Deuteronomy 2:34, which states that Sihon and the Amorites were completely destroyed (*hērem*), including men, women, and children (cf. Num 21:21–35), there is no stereotypical construction (cf. Deut 3:6). Even if the Israelites did not kill noncombatants in the Promised Land, they did so in the wilderness, and so the problem resurfaces. Additionally, the ban was also carried out against the animals (Josh 6:21; 7:24; 1 Sam 15:3), which militates against the idea that stereotypical language was used rather than taking the text to mean that men, women, children, and even animals were put to death.

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<sup>577</sup> For other critiques of this interpretation, see G. K. Beale, *The Morality of God in the Old Testament: Christian Answers to Hard Questions* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 40–41; Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 945–ff.

Finally, the same listing of “women and children” occurs in Israel’s rules for war. For nations at a distance, the women, children, livestock, and anything else in the city could be taken as plunder for the Israelites (Deut 20:10–15), which means that there were normally noncombatants in cities.

The third argument against the hyperbolic interpretation draws upon the fact that Rahab was living with her father, mother, brothers, and all who belonged to her (Josh 6:23). This indicates that there were civilians (noncombatants) in Jericho and probably in the other cities. The biblical text also states that the tribes of Israel inherited the surrounding settlements, towns, and villages (Num 32:39–42; Josh 19:38–39; cf. Deut 31:10–13). Even if there were no women and children in the fortresses (e.g., Jericho), which seems unlikely to this author, the Israelites would have still imposed the ban on the Canaanites in the towns and villages where people refused to leave. The stories of the Israelites killing the Midianite boys in the wilderness (Num 31:17) and killing all the Benjamites women and children (Judg 20:48) demonstrate that the Israelites were accustomed to killing children in certain situations. The same is true of the command to completely destroy the citizenry in apostate towns (Deut 13:12–18).<sup>578</sup>

Fourth, as demonstrated in chapter three, there is no contradiction between the commands to “drive out” and the commands to “destroy” that would lead to a non-literal or hyperbolic reading of the Conquest in Joshua. Harmonizing these two commands is fairly simple. The initial battles were most likely disabling raids where the Israelite army conquered the military fortresses of the Canaanite nations. It was not until after the military campaigns that the Israelites attempted to settle in the land. The Israelites completely destroyed the Canaanites in battle and spared no one in the cities and fortresses they conquered except for soldiers who had escaped (cf. Josh

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<sup>578</sup> Cf. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 951–59.

10:20). Any remaining Canaanites had either left the cities and returned after the battles or lived outside the cities and would need to be driven out by the Israelites. The Lord had told Moses that He would not drive out the Canaanites all at once (Deut 7:22), so it is no surprise that there were Canaanites scattered here and there after the Conquest (e.g., Josh 13:13). Joshua and his armies *did* totally destroy the Canaanites they encountered in local battles even though there were other Canaanites living in the land that they were supposed to drive out later.

Fifth, even though one can raise questions about the fate of the Canaanites in the book of Joshua, the commands in Exodus and Deuteronomy are fairly straightforward. As Kaiser writes, “All attempts to mitigate or tone down this command to totally wipe out the population are ruined on the clear instructions of texts like Exodus 23:32–33; 34:12–16; Deuteronomy 7:1–5; and 20:15–18.”<sup>579</sup> Sixth, there are other examples in the Old Testament where God commanded war and bloodshed, including the imposition of the ban against the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15. One would have to assume that *all* of the warfare accounts are exaggerated and that no noncombatants were ever killed in these other situations, which seems ad hoc. But even if the Conquest accounts (and 1 Samuel 15) are hyperbolic, they would only be exaggerated in the *number* of men, women, children, and animals killed.<sup>580</sup> The fact remains that noncombatants were killed, even if there were fewer than one might gather from a literal reading. Seventh, if the *ḥērem* commandments were hyperbolic, then the punishment of Achan seems inexplicable. The same goes for the instructions in Deuteronomy 13 concerning apostate towns. In both cases, the punishment extended to the entire family (Achan) or town (Deut 13).

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<sup>579</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 266.

<sup>580</sup> Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, 947.

Eighth, if the ban did not include total destruction, then there is no reason for the Gibeonite deception since the Gibeonites could have struck a peace deal like the nations at a distance without the need for deception. The text of Joshua states that the Gibeonites along with the other Canaanite groups heard what the Israelites had done to the Canaanites at Jericho, Ai, and Hazor (Josh 9:1–2), which is why the Gibeonites panicked. There is no other explanation except that the ban required annihilation. Ninth, the fact that Saul disobeyed the Lord in *failing* to exterminate the Amalekite king and animals means that the ban was to be applied literally.<sup>581</sup> Tenth, the hyperbolic interpretation does not solve the overall problem. If even *one* child (noncombatant) died, then the problem remains.<sup>582</sup> In the final evaluation, this interpretation is more robust than the other interpretations in this section but does not adequately account for all of the biblical data.

### The Conquest and Nonliteral Interpretations

The next set of interpretations go in a different direction from those previously discussed. Rather than criticizing the Conquest or recasting the historical situation in Joshua, a number of scholars think that the Conquest should be interpreted in a nonliteral manner. Some believe the

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<sup>581</sup> Webb and Oestrich believe that it is oversimplistic and misrepresentative of the biblical text to interpret the Israelites' overall disobedience in Judges 2–3 as a failure to *destroy* the Canaanites. Instead, they believe that the failure was in regard to making covenants, intermarriage, and allowing Canaanite altars to stand since the elimination of Canaanite religion was more important than eliminating the Canaanite people. Plus, there were Canaanites remaining in the land during the time of David and Solomon, but there is no condemnation of these kings for failing to destroy the Canaanites (Webb and Oestrich, *Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric?* 174–ff). This thesis creates an odd scenario, though. If the Israelites were only supposed to kill the Canaanite soldiers but *spare* the women, children, and any other noncombatants, then what was to become of those Canaanites? They would ostensibly continue living in their Canaanite cities alongside the Israelites in an apartheid state where they would not be allowed to marry the Israelites or continue practicing their Canaanite religion and customs. Or, they could have been expelled from the cities, towns, and villages to form new Canaanite cities, towns, and villages but without men. Or, they could have been driven out beyond the borders of the Promised Land without any men. None of these scenarios is recorded in the Bible, though. As for the remaining Canaanites during the days of David and Solomon, David *did* conquer the Jebusites in Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:6–12), and it is just as plausible to interpret Solomon's decision to conscript the leftover Amorite, Hittite, Perizzite, Hivite, and Jebusite peoples as a foolish decision since he later married many foreign women, including Hittite women, which led to his downfall (1 Kgs 11:1–13; cf. 1 Kgs 9:20).

<sup>582</sup> Longman, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies*, 171.



Conquest was a literal event but add allegorical interpretations that focus primarily on spiritual applications for the Church. Another interpretation emphasizes a typological relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and others believe the Conquest is metaphorical or mythical, thereby denying its historicity and instead offering altogether different interpretations. Each view will be examined and critiqued.

### **Allegorical Interpretations**

Allegorical interpretations of the Conquest date all the way back to the Church Father Origen and then continue throughout much of Church history up to the Protestant reformer Martin Luther. The main thrust is that the Conquest has a deeper meaning that points to something in the Church or in the Christian life. It is not that the allegorists denied the historicity of the Conquest. Rather, they *added* allegorical interpretations on top of the literal interpretation and seemed to prefer the deeper, spiritual readings.

#### **Origen**

Origen of Alexandria (ca. 184–253) was an influential Church Father, apologist, and Christian teacher. He was well educated and was extremely knowledgeable in the Scriptures and in Greek literature. His works include biblical commentaries, sermons, and apologetic treatises. Origen sought to defend the Christian faith against Gnostics such as Marcion, Valentinus, Basilides, and their followers.<sup>583</sup> One pressing matter for Origen was the relationship between the God of the Old Testament and the God and Father of Jesus Christ. As explained above, the Marcionites taught that the God of the Old Testament was just but not good, pointing to a number of examples of divine judgment in the Old Testament including the Flood, Sodom and

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<sup>583</sup> Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, The Early Church Fathers, ed. Carol Harrison (London: Routledge, 1998), 7–8.

Gomorrah, and the generation of unbelieving Israelites left to die in the wilderness. According to Origen, the second-century opponent of Christianity Celsus even taught that the God of the Old Testament “does the most shameless deeds, or suffers the most shameless sufferings,” and that “He favours the commission of evil.”<sup>584</sup> The God of the New Testament, on the other hand, is depicted as perfectly good and compassionate.

Origen addressed this challenge in two ways. First, he took a direct approach in exposing the error that the God of the New Testament is *good* only (but not just). Origen referenced Jesus’ teachings about Hell, His condemnation of the unbelieving cities, and the parable of the king’s banquet where the guest without the proper attire is tossed into outer darkness. These examples prove that Jesus and the God of the New Testament are both good *and* just. To combat the Marcionites’ view that the God of the Old Testament is *just*, Origen challenged the justice in punishing children for the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generation. This is exemplified when “He exterminated innocent and sucking children along with cruel and ungodly giants,” apparently referring to the Conquest.<sup>585</sup> To understand this literally would be to attribute injustice to the God of the Old Testament, which negates the Marcionites’ claims about God being just (but not good). In Origen’s view, the heretics erred when they read the Bible for its literal meaning while neglecting its spiritual meaning.<sup>586</sup> This led to Origen’s second method of dealing with the heretics, which is a turn to allegorical interpretations.

Origen followed the example of Clement of Alexandria, his spiritual predecessor at Alexandria, by using Greek philosophy and an allegorical method of interpretation in dealing

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<sup>584</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.13. Origen is dismissive since Celsus did not furnish specific examples.

<sup>585</sup> Origen, *De Principiis*, 2.5.2; cf. 2.4.1–2.

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.1.9.

with the Gnostics.<sup>587</sup> In many instances, Origen simply read the Old Testament and imported New Testament theology to derive a deeper, spiritual meaning. His *Homilies on Joshua* furnish many such examples. For instance, in the book of Joshua, Rahab typifies the Church. All who wanted to be saved from the Israelites had to go to her house, and all who want to be saved today must be in the Church. Rahab's scarlet cord stands for the blood of Christ, and her open window prefigures the incarnation of Christ.<sup>588</sup> Joshua circumcising the second generation of Israelite men (Josh 5:2–7) prefigures the forgiveness of sins for those who are in Christ<sup>589</sup> as well as the removal of filthy habits from the life of the believer.<sup>590</sup> The city of Jericho is a type of the world,<sup>591</sup> and its destruction at the sound of trumpets is a picture of the time when Christ returns to judge the world at the sound of trumpets (cf. 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thess 4:16).<sup>592</sup> The ban on looting the forbidden items in Jericho (Josh 6:18) means that Christians should avoid mixing worldly things with the things of God (cf. 1 John 2:15; Rom 12:2).<sup>593</sup> Achan's sin teaches that the actions of one can affect all in the Church, which is why there is a time when the rebellious person must be removed from the congregation (cf. 1 Cor 5:13).<sup>594</sup> The city of Ai is a symbol for sin, chaos, and the devil, each of which destroys a Christian's life. Origen furnished similar, spiritual

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<sup>587</sup> Trigg, *Origen*, 9–10.

<sup>588</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, ed. Cynthia White, trans. Barbara J. Bruce, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 105 (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 3.5.

<sup>589</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 5.5; cf. 5.6.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.1.

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.4.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. 7.1.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.4.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.6. Achan's sin is also a warning to Christians against the false teachings of poets and philosophers who seek to entice believers (*ibid.*, 7.7).

interpretations for the Gibeonite deception,<sup>595</sup> Joshua's long day,<sup>596</sup> and some of the events in the latter half of the book of Joshua.<sup>597</sup> Without necessarily denying the literal interpretation of the Old Testament events,<sup>598</sup> Origen focused more on what the text means for *Christians* than what the text meant in its historical context.

Returning to the question of God's justice and the slaughter of innocent children, Origen opted for a spiritual interpretation rather than a literal interpretation. This is seen first in the way he addressed the Old Testament's teaching on generational punishment:

If any shall say that the response, "To children's children, and to those who come after them," corresponds with that passage, "Who visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me" (Exod 20:5), let him learn from Ezekiel that *this language is not to be taken literally*; for he reproves those who say, "Our fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Eze 18:2), and then he adds, "As I live, saith the Lord, every one shall die for his own sin" (Eze 18:3–4). As to the proper meaning of the figurative language about sins being visited unto the third and fourth generation, we cannot at present stay to explain.<sup>599</sup>

For Origen, there is a contradiction between the statement in Exodus that God will visit the sins of the parents on the children and the statement in Ezekiel that people are individually responsible for their sins. Origen solved the apparent contradiction by taking one statement

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<sup>595</sup> The Gibeonite deception pictures carnal Christians in the Church who are truly saved but who make no effort to shed their sinful habits (ibid., 10.1).

<sup>596</sup> Joshua's long day signifies the lengthening of time for the salvation of more people until Christ returns (ibid., 11.2–3).

<sup>597</sup> Joshua taking the whole land (Josh 11:23) portrays Christ conquering all sin (ibid., 15.5). The mixing of the Jebusites among the Judahites (Josh 15:63) pictures the wheat (godly) and the tares (ungodly) in the Church (cf. Matt 13:24–30; ibid., 21.1). The fact that the Levites had no land as an inheritance because the Lord Himself was their inheritance (Josh 13:14) speaks to the faithful, fruitful Christians who have the Lord as an inheritance and who possess a certain strength of spirit (ibid., 17.2). Expelling the Perizzites and Rephaites (Josh 17:14–15) pictures the removal of the fruit of sin and the purging of the fruit of unrighteousness (ibid., 22.4).

<sup>598</sup> See, for example, Origen's straightforward, historical reading of Joshua's success at the battle of Ai (ibid., 8.1).

<sup>599</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, 8.40 (emphasis original); cf. idem., *De Principiis*, 2.5.2.

literally and the other spiritually. Since Origen believed that taking the lives of innocent children was unjust, he interpreted the annihilation of the Canaanites as nonliteral as well:

As to the promise made to the Jews that they should slay their enemies, it may be answered that any one who examines carefully into the meaning of this passage will find himself unable to interpret it literally. It is sufficient at present to refer to the manner in which in the Psalms the just man is represented as saying, among other things, “Every morning will I destroy the wicked of the land; that I may cut off all workers of iniquity from the city of Jehovah” (Psa 101:8). Judge, then, from the words and spirit of the speaker, whether it is conceivable that, after having in the preceding part of the Psalm, as any one may read for himself, uttered the noblest thoughts and purposes, he should in the sequel, according to the literal rendering of his words, say that in the morning, and at no other period of the day, he would destroy all sinners from the earth, and leave none of them alive, and that he would slay every one in Jerusalem who did iniquity. And there are many similar expressions to be found in the law, as this, for example: “We left not anything alive” (Deut 2:34).<sup>600</sup>

For Origen, the words of the psalmist cannot possibly be taken literally, and the same is true of the Conquest passages that describe total destruction.

Although Origen did not accept a literal reading of the full extent of the slaughter of the Canaanites, he did recognize elsewhere that the Israelites had a right to make war to defend their own country,<sup>601</sup> but he preferred to focus on the spiritual interpretation in the case of the Conquest. The Jews of his day understood the Conquest as literal killing but missed the deeper mystery that the text teaches—namely, that there is spiritual warfare in the life of the believer.<sup>602</sup>

Therefore, all holy persons kill the inhabitants of Ai; they both annihilate and do not release any of them. These are doubtless those who guard their heart with all diligence so that evil thoughts do not proceed from it, and those who heed their mouth, so that “no

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<sup>600</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 7.19.

<sup>601</sup> “But in the case of the ancient Jews, who had a land and a form of government of their own, to take from them the right of making war upon their enemies, of fighting for their country, of putting to death or otherwise punishing adulterers, murderers, or others who were guilty of similar crimes, would be to subject them to sudden and utter destruction whenever the enemy fell upon them; for their very laws would in that case restrain them, and prevent them from resisting the enemy” (ibid., 7.26).

<sup>602</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 8.7.

evil word” proceeds from it. Not to leave any who flee means this: when no evil word escapes them.<sup>603</sup>

As seen here, annihilating the Canaanites is transformed into annihilating sin. In Origen’s view, the destruction of Israel’s enemies was not cruel, as the heretics thought, but instead represents the way in which Jesus destroys the sin that reigns in Christians.<sup>604</sup> Origen even longed for the ultimate conquest of his own sinful nature, finding hope in Joshua’s victory over the Canaanites.<sup>605</sup> The Conquest, therefore, if rightly understood, was a godly venture since it ultimately teaches about spiritual warfare and is not an example of the cruelties of war:

But meanwhile Jesus (Joshua) destroyed the enemies, not teaching cruelty through this, as the heretics think, but representing the future sacraments in these affairs, so that when Jesus destroys those kings who maintain a reign of sin in us, we can fulfill that which the Apostle said, “Just as we presented our members to serve iniquity for iniquity, so now let us present our members to serve righteousness for sanctification” (Rom 6:19).<sup>606</sup>

Finally, Origen viewed the command to drive out the Canaanites as synonymous with Paul’s teaching about putting to death the sinful nature:

For if at last we come to perfection, then the Canaanite (the flesh) is said to have been exterminated by us and handed over to death. But as to how this is accomplished in our flesh, hear the apostle saying, “Mortify your members that are upon the earth: fornication, impurity,” and the other things that follow (Col 3:5). And again it says, “For those who belong to Christ have crucified their flesh with its vices and lusts” (Gal 5:24). Thus, therefore, in the third stage, that is, when we come to perfection and mortify our members

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<sup>603</sup> Ibid; cf. 11.4.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid., 11.6.

<sup>605</sup> “And yet, if only my Lord Jesus the Son of God would grant that to me and order me to crush the spirit of fornication with my feet and trample upon the necks of the spirit of wrath and rage, to trample on the demon of avarice, to trample down boasting, to crush the spirit of arrogance with my feet, and, when I have done all these things, not to hang the most exalted of these exploits upon myself, but upon his cross.... If we understand these things spiritually and manage wars of this type spiritually and if we drive out all those spiritual iniquities from heaven, then we shall be able at last to receive from Jesus as a share of the inheritance even those places and kingdoms that are the kingdoms of heaven, bestowed by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, ‘to whom is the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen!’ (1 Pet 4:11)” (ibid., 12.3; cf. 13.3–4).

<sup>606</sup> Ibid., 11.6.

and carry around the death of Christ in our body, the Canaanite is said to be exterminated by us.<sup>607</sup>

In summary, Origen was familiar with the moral problem posed by some of Christianity's early critics. He was not opposed to the concept of God's anger or wrath<sup>608</sup> or ancient Israel's right to defend itself in war, but he stopped short of endorsing the actual extermination of the Canaanites in the book of Joshua. Instead, he put the focus on his spiritual interpretation, believing that the real conquest occurs when Christians gain victory over the devil and the flesh.

Gregory of Nyssa

Like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–395) employed the Alexandrian hermeneutics, but he did so in reference to the death of the firstborn Egyptians rather than to the death of the Canaanite children in the Conquest: “Intending to remove his (Moses’) countrymen from evil, he brought death upon all the firstborn in Egypt. By doing this he laid down for us the principle that it is necessary to destroy utterly the first birth of evil. It is impossible to flee the Egyptian life any

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<sup>607</sup> Ibid., 22.2.

<sup>608</sup> Origen wrote in another place that the anger of God in the Bible is to be understood spiritually rather than literally: “But when we read either in the Old Testament or in the New of the anger of God, we do not take such expressions literally, but seek in them a spiritual meaning, that we may think of God as He deserves to be thought of” (Origen, *De Principiis*, 2.4.4). However, in the context, Origen argued from the position that God is impassible (without passions). He was not trying to minimize the wrath and anger of God: “And now, if, on account of those expressions which occur in the Old Testament, as when God is said to be angry or to repent, or when any other human affection or passion is described, (our opponents) think that they are furnished with grounds for refuting us, who maintain that God is altogether impassible, and is to be regarded as wholly free from all affections of that kind...” (ibid.). Origen also discussed God's wrath in *Against Celsus*: “We speak, indeed, of the ‘wrath’ of God. We do not, however, assert that it indicates any ‘passion’ on His part, but that it is something which is assumed in order to discipline by stern means those sinners who have committed many and grievous sins” (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 4.72.). He invoked a few Old Testament references that speak of God's wrath (Psa 6:1; Jer 10:24) as well as a New Testament statement about God's wrath (Eph 2:3) but then argued that “wrath” is also something that Christians are to abstain from (Col 3:8; cf. Psa 37:8). Wrath, therefore, appears to be a vice, not a virtue. God's “wrath” must be a reference to His punishment of the wicked but not to an ungodly feeling of anger. Rather, it is an anthropomorphic expression, like the psalmist's request for God to awaken from slumber (Psa 44:23). Origen did not deny God's right to punish the wicked, but he denied that God has ungodly anger when God executes His wrath (ibid.).

other way.”<sup>609</sup> In other words, the death of the firstborn pictures the Christian putting to death the deeds of the flesh. Gregory went on to write the following in highlighting the ethical problem:

It does not seem good to me to pass this interpretation by without further contemplation. How would a concept worthy of God be preserved in the description of what happened if one looked only to the history? The Egyptian acts unjustly, and in his place is punished his newborn child, who in his infancy cannot discern what is good and what is not. His life has no experience of evil, for infancy is not capable of passion. He does not know to distinguish between his right hand and his left.... If such a one now pays the penalty of his father’s wickedness, where is justice? Where is piety? Where is holiness? Where is Ezekiel, who cries: *The man who has sinned is the man who must die and a son is not to suffer for the sins of his father?* How can the history so contradict reason?<sup>610</sup>

Gregory answers his own query by turning to a spiritual interpretation, leaving aside the question of the literal killing of the Egyptian children:

Therefore, as we look for the true spiritual meaning, seeking to determine whether the events took place typologically, we should be prepared to believe that the lawgiver has taught through the things said. The teaching is this: When through virtue one comes to grips with any evil, he must completely destroy the first beginnings of evil. For when he slays the beginning, he destroys at the same time what follows after it. The Lord teaches the same thing in the Gospel, all but explicitly calling on us to kill the firstborn of the Egyptian evils when he commands us to abolish lust and anger and to have no more fear of the stain of adultery or the guilt of murder. Neither of these things would develop of itself, but anger produces murder and lust produces adultery.<sup>611</sup>

Although Gregory did not directly address the Conquest here, the killing of the firstborn in Egypt is related to the killing of the Canaanite children since both groups were presumably innocent and since they were put to death in an act of judgment against the Egyptian and Canaanite parents. Gregory’s interpretation is an example of the allegorical method being applied to blunt the emotional force of killing children.

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<sup>609</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulest Press, 1978), 2.90.

<sup>610</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 2.91 (emphasis original).

<sup>611</sup> Ibid., 2.92–93.



## Jerome

The Christian theologian and historian Jerome (d. 420) was also given to spiritual interpretations of the Conquest. A few examples will illustrate the point. In Jerome's view, the saving of Rahab signifies the faithful church of the Gentiles.<sup>612</sup> The attack on the five kings hiding in the cave at Makkedah (Josh 10:16–17) symbolizes the five senses of sight, smell, taste, hearing, and touch that hold power over people until Christ enters the body (the cave) and kills them so that their power will no longer be an instrument of death.<sup>613</sup> The division of the land (Josh 14) typifies the Church in heaven.<sup>614</sup> When it came to the justice of punishing Achan's children for the sin of the father, Jerome appealed to God's sovereignty in the matter.<sup>615</sup> Thus, Jerome employed a mixture of spiritual and literal interpretations. He tended toward spiritual interpretations of some elements in the Conquest story, but concerning Achan's case, he interpreted the text literally and resigned himself not to question God.

## John Cassian

John Cassian (360–435) was a disciple of Chrysostom, the fountainhead of western monasticism, and the founder of monasteries in Marseilles in Gaul. He was also an expert in Egyptian asceticism and developed a theology of monasticism based largely on the teaching of

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<sup>612</sup> Jerome, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, vol. 2, trans. Sister Marie Liguori Ewald, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 57 (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 237.

<sup>613</sup> Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, 1.21.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid., 2.34.

<sup>615</sup> Jerome, *The Dialogue Against the Pelagians*, in *Saint Jerome: Dogmatic and Polemical Works*, trans. John N. Hritz, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 53 (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 1.37.

Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399) and Origen.<sup>616</sup> In Cassian's fifth conference,<sup>617</sup> he expounded on the Canaanite Conquest (in the voice of Abbot Serapion) in order to explain the eight principal faults and how to overcome them. The eight principal faults are gluttony, fornication, avarice, anger, dejection, listlessness or low spirits, boasting or vain glory, and pride. As can be seen, this list closely resembles the traditional "seven deadly sins" of envy, wrath, lust, greed, gluttony, sloth, and pride.<sup>618</sup> Some of these faults, Cassian posited, require an action, such as gluttony or fornication, while others arise from within, such as sloth and dejection, but the antidote to each is to mortify the fleshly nature (cf. Col 3:5–10). Cassian looked to the Old Testament to make the point that the battle with the flesh requires the help of the Lord and that victory is not secured because of our own righteousness, citing Deuteronomy 9:4–5 in support. Further, he employed a spiritual interpretation of the Conquest in order to explain the battle against sin in the life of Christians. Just as the Canaanites were more numerous than the Israelites, so there are many more than just eight principal sins that a person encounters, including complaining, backbiting, uncleanness, bitterness, blasphemy, and so on, as mentioned by Paul (cf. Eph 4:19, 31). These additional sins are actually manifestations of the principal eight, though. For example, gluttony can lead to drunkenness, fornication can lead to filthy speech, and covetousness can lead to lying, theft, and murder. All of these temptations, like the Canaanites when compared to the

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<sup>616</sup> See Benjamin B. Warfield, "Introductory Essay on Augustine and the Pelagian Controversy," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (1887, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), xxi; J. T. Miller, "Monastic theology," in *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, 2d ed., eds. Martin Davie, Tim Grass, Stephen R. Holmes, John McDowell, and T. A. Noble (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 589–91.

<sup>617</sup> See John Cassian, *The Conferences of John Cassian*, trans. Edgar C.S. Gibson (1894, repr., Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), 5.1–27.

<sup>618</sup> This classification was originally devised by Evagrius (AD 345–399), who was the primary influence upon Cassian. See Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian: A Study in Primitive Monasticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 82–87, 94.

Israelites, are stronger than a Christian's own desire for virtue in his own earthly nature.<sup>619</sup> Once the faults (Canaanites) are driven out of the land (heart/life), then the virtues (Israelites) will take possession. Humility replaces pride, patience replaces anger, chastity replaces fornication, and so forth. In summary, God's original intent was for the human heart to be filled with virtue, but sin crept in and took over. By the grace of God, one must drive out sinful attitudes and behaviors so that virtue is restored to its rightful place.

### Gregory the Great

Gregory the Great (AD 540–604) was a Roman prefect who left the political sphere at the age of thirty-five to become a Benedictine monk. He founded six monasteries in Sicily and was later ordained as one of the seven deacons in Rome by Pope Benedict I before becoming abbot of St. Andrew's in Rome. Pope Benedict I was followed by Pelagius II, and upon his death, Gregory was elected to be the next pope (AD 590–604). Gregory wrote his *Dialogues* to give accounts of the lives and miracles of different Italian saints and included as an essay on the immortality of the soul.<sup>620</sup> He also did exegetical work in Job and Song of Songs, and he wrote homilies on Ezekiel and the Gospels. The book that concerns the present discussion is Gregory's

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<sup>619</sup> In responding to the question of why there are eight principal faults but only seven Canaanite nations, Cassian states that Egypt in the Old Testament represents the first of the eight. As the Lord delivered Israel from Egypt, so the monks must first overcome gluttony through fasting and moderation before grappling with the seven remaining sins. But this leads to another question—namely, why the seven Canaanite nations were to be destroyed but the Egyptians were not. It would seem that there is a lack of correspondence to the eight principal faults. Cassian explains that gluttony (Egypt) is not annihilated because Christians can never be free from the temptation of gluttony since even monks have to eat each day in order to live. Although the appetite for gluttony cannot be entirely destroyed, it must be shunned and avoided. As Paul writes, "...make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (Rom 13:14 NKJV), and "...having food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (1 Tim 6:8 NKJV). However, the other seven sins (Canaanites) must be completely rooted out so that there is not even a hint of them (cf. Eph. 4:31; 5:3–4 [Cassian, *Conferences*, 5.17–19). Cassian also notes that God told Abraham that Abraham's descendants would take possession of the land belonging to *ten* nations, not seven or eight (see Gen 15:18–20). The additional two, Cassian explains, are idolatry and blasphemy, which afflict the unregenerate but which are overcome by those who come to know God and partake of the grace of baptism (ibid., 5.22).

<sup>620</sup> Odo John Zimmerman, trans., *Saint Gregory the Great: Dialogues* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1959), v–vi.

*Moralia in Iob* (“Morals on Job”), which was among the longest books written in Latin at the time<sup>621</sup> and which was directed at his audience of monks who, like Gregory, were committed to living a life of contemplation.<sup>622</sup> Following Origen and Jerome, Gregory employed a three-fold interpretation to derive the historical, allegorical, and moral meaning of Scripture with the historical and allegorical interpretations leading to moral edification. In discussing the struggle between virtue and vice in the Christian life,<sup>623</sup> Gregory drew upon a spiritual interpretation of the comments in Joshua and Judges concerning the fact that the Canaanites were not entirely expelled from the land. Just as the Ephraimites allowed the Canaanites to live in the land, so Christians allow small faults to continue in their lives even though they have an inward hope of eternity. The fact that the Ephraimites made the Canaanites pay tribute (cf. Josh 16:10) points to the usefulness of small faults in our own lives. One is humbled by his shortcomings and is reminded that he cannot defeat even the small things in his own strength. In fact, the Lord allowed the Canaanites to remain in order to test Israel (Judg 3:1), and in the same way, the Lord allows these faults to remain in Christians’ lives so that they do not become presumptuous about the victory while the enemies are still to be overcome.<sup>624</sup> Thus, one sees a spiritual interpretation of the Conquest that does not necessarily negate the historicity of the events in the book of

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<sup>621</sup> John Moorhead, *Gregory the Great*, The Early Church Fathers, ed. Carol Harrison (London: Routledge, 2005), 1.

<sup>622</sup> Scott Degregorio, “Gregory’s Exegesis: Old and New Ways of Approaching the Scriptural Text,” in *A Companion to Gregory the Great*, eds. Bronwen Neil and Matthew Dal Santo (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 276.

<sup>623</sup> Gregory adapted Cassian’s list of principal vices but reversed the order and placed pride, rather than gluttony, as the root of all evil. See Carole Straw, “Gregory’s Moral Theology: Divine Providence and Human Responsibility,” in *A Companion to Gregory the Great*, eds. Bronwen Neil and Matthew Dal Santo (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 189–190.

<sup>624</sup> Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, trans. by members of the English Church (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), 1.1.4.44.

Joshua but which seeks to go beyond the historical events to find a spiritual application to the Church.

### Isidore of Seville

Isidore of Seville (560–636) was the head of the Catholic Church in Visigothic Spain and was the last of the Latin Church Fathers.<sup>625</sup> Isidore was raised by his older brother, Leander, and was likely educated in Seville in the monastery school where his brother was the abbot. After Leander's death, Isidore was made the bishop of Seville in his brother's place. Isidore wrote a number of works, most of which are still extant.<sup>626</sup> He is cited by many subsequent writers, showing his importance to Medieval Christian thought,<sup>627</sup> and he is considered to be the most learned man of his time.<sup>628</sup> During his time as the leader of the Spanish church, Isidore presided over two church councils and helped to promote Christian education among the clergy in terms of both secular and sacred knowledge.<sup>629</sup>

In his biblical writings, Isidore often preferred allegorical over literal interpretations. In his *Allegoriae*, for example, he expounded upon 170 allegories pertaining to prominent figures in the Bible.<sup>630</sup> This same method was applied to the command to exterminate the Canaanites in his comments on Deuteronomy 7. Following Cassian, Isidore saw a spiritual parallel between

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<sup>625</sup> Bat-sheva Albert, "Isidore of Seville: His Attitude Towards Judaism and His Impact on Early Medieval Canon Law," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 80, no. 3/4 (Jan–Apr 1990), 207.

<sup>626</sup> Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof, trans., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 7–10.

<sup>627</sup> Ernest Brehaut, *An Encyclopedist of the Dark Ages: Isidore of Seville*, PhD diss. (New York: Columbia University, 1912), 17.

<sup>628</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume IV: Mediaeval Christianity. A.D. 590–1073* (1882, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002), 376.

<sup>629</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume IV*, 408–409.

<sup>630</sup> Albert, "Isidore of Seville," 209.

Israel's ancient enemies and the Christian's battle with the flesh. The seven Canaanite nations are akin to the seven deadly sins, but just as the Canaanites outnumbered the Israelites, so too the vices outnumber virtues. These include things such as fornication, jesting, covetousness, deceit, rage, apathy, laziness, blaspheme, and many others.<sup>631</sup> The Christian must exterminate the seven vices that encapsulate all of the substrata of vices and then replace those behaviors with the virtues.<sup>632</sup> Similar to Origen, Isidore derived a spiritual interpretation of the battle of Jericho in the book of Joshua. Jericho represents the world, the ark of the covenant is the Church, the encircling of the walls of Jericho is the preaching of the Gospel throughout the world, and the walls falling down symbolize the destruction of all obstacles to faith. Even the scarlet ribbon from Rahab's window represents the scarlet blood of Christ.<sup>633</sup> Achan's sin in Joshua 7 pictures false teachers infiltrating the church such as Arius, Marcion, and Basilides, and the king of Ai represents the devil.<sup>634</sup> The apportioning of the Promised Land is likened to the distribution of the gifts of the Spirit in the Church.<sup>635</sup> Following Gregory's *Moralia*, Isidore stated that the vices of the Christian life, like the Canaanites at the end of the book of Joshua, will not entirely be expelled. The battle with the flesh continues.<sup>636</sup> Isidore offered a similar interpretation of the ban against the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15, which pictures the Christian's battle with the vices that must be exterminated.<sup>637</sup>

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<sup>631</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Mysticorum expositiones sacramentorum seu Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum*, in *Sancti Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi, Opera Omnia*, vol. 5, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Patrologia Latina, 1862), 470–71.

<sup>632</sup> Hofreiter, *Making Sense of Old Testament Genocide*, 95.

<sup>633</sup> Isidore, "Mysticorum," 481–82; cf. Hofreiter, *Making Sense*, 95.

<sup>634</sup> Isidore, "Mysticorum," 482–83.

<sup>635</sup> *Ibid.*, 486.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

## *Glossa Ordinaria*

The *Glossa ordinaria*, or Ordinary Gloss, was a widely used text in Europe during the Middle Ages beginning around 1140. The *Glossa* contains the biblical text along with marginal and interlinear comments and explanations taken mostly from the patristic writings. The Glossed Bible was so expansive that it contained about twenty-one volumes in a full set, and it was used along with the Bible for hundreds of years. The origins of the *Glossa* go back to Anselm of Laon (d. 1117), though there remains a measure of uncertainty as to its composition and contributors.<sup>638</sup> Like the entries above, the *Glossa ordinaria* comments on Deuteronomy and Joshua and reflects a spiritual reading of various Conquest passages. For example, Sihon signifies the devil, Israel is the Christian people, and Og and Bashan stand for carnality and turpitude (wickedness). These “Canaanite” enemies must be totally destroyed without any offer of peace since they represent vices that hinder a Christian’s life. Similarly, the rules for war in Deuteronomy 20 refer to spiritual matters. The enemies of Israel are heretics and others who oppose the Church. The city that opens its gates willingly represents those who open their hearts to extend hospitality to Christ. If anyone does not want to make peace, then the Christian must make war with him using the testimony of the Scriptures, figuratively speaking. The cities at a distance (Deut 20:15) are diverse religions as opposed to the nearby cities of the Catholic Church.<sup>639</sup> Other such glosses are found in the book of Joshua and in 1 Samuel 15.<sup>640</sup>

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<sup>637</sup> Ibid., 514; cf. Hofreiter, *Making Sense*, 96.

<sup>638</sup> Lesley Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria: The Making of a Medieval Bible Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 1–2.

<sup>639</sup> See Hofreiter, *Making Sense of Old Testament Genocide*, 98–101.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid., 101–105.

## Martin Luther

The Protestant reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) also offered some comments on the hidden meaning of Deuteronomy 7 that complement the literal, historical Conquest. In his view, Christians who are members of the “spiritual nation” (Church) use the “sword” (Word of God [cf. Eph 6:17]) to “slay” the Gentiles, which means converting Gentiles from the errors of their ways. The images to be destroyed are godless teachings derived from the idea of worshiping God by works rather than faith. The pagan altars that must be torn down are the efforts and exercises that accompany the false religion of works without faith. When God sends the hornet, it means that the terror of the Law stirs up the hearts of the godless to confess their godlessness. That the Gentiles (unbelievers) are “destroyed” gradually rather than immediately means that the battle between the flesh and the Spirit persists throughout the Christian life.<sup>641</sup> The following quotation shows Luther’s allegorical interpretation of the Conquest:

So there remain in the confines of our flesh the Jebusite, the Canaanite, and the Philistine, that is, the remnants of sin to make us restless and give us practice in the use of our spiritual weapons. On the other hand, what cruel and bloodthirsty beasts are smug presumption, vain-glory, pride, and carelessness, when forgetful of our infirmity, we ascribe to our powers what belongs only to grace and mercy which rules over us and does not impute our faults to us!<sup>642</sup>

Luther also provided an allegorical interpretation of the rules of war in Deuteronomy 20. The Canaanites nations symbolize three kinds of heretics from Luther’s own time. The first group of heretics, when admonished, makes peace and serves in love. The second group resists the truth and seeks to defend itself with Scripture. The “males are to be killed” means that the

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<sup>641</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works Volume 9: Lectures on Deuteronomy*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel Poellot, trans. Richard R. Caemmerer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 88–89; cf. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Concise Commentary on the Bible* (1706, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), 245; Jonathan Bayley, *From Egypt to Canaan* (London: Charles P. Alvey, 1867), 93–94.

<sup>642</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, 89.



leaders are to be condemned, forsaken, and treated as unbelievers (cf. Matt 18:17) while others are “carried off as booty”—that is, taken back and “assigned to the works of love.” The third group—those nearby—are to be wiped out, which means that the hard-hearted, incorrigible heretics are to be declared accursed by the Word and expelled. Luther explicitly stated that he was not referring to physical violence. Rather, it is the Word of God that smites the consciences of the unbelievers in spiritual conquest. The peace offered is the Gospel of peace, and the fruit trees that are not to be cut down are the teachings of the heretics that happen to be true and that should remain intact, though the unfruitful (false) are to be cut down.<sup>643</sup>

### **The Conquest is Typological**

The typological interpretations are the same as the allegorical interpretations in that they recognize the Conquest as historical but also argue for a deeper interpretation to draw out. However, they differ in that the allegorical interpretations tend to be fanciful in spiritualizing various details in the text, whereas the typological interpretations look for more obvious, established types first before drawing out a secondary interpretation. The Old Testament type is *like* something in the life of Christ but in a lesser way. The allegorical interpretations read New Testament theology into the Old Testament, but the typological interpretations look for parallels and applications for the Christian life. In addition, the typological interpretations are not necessarily concerned with softening the text for apologetic purposes.

A handful of early Christian writers compared Joshua in the Conquest to Jesus in a number of ways that reflect biblical typology more than allegory. One example is the typology in *The Epistle of Barnabas* (ca. AD 70–135).<sup>644</sup> The major theme of the book is that the Old

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<sup>643</sup> Ibid., 205–206.

Testament ultimately points to Christ.<sup>645</sup> In order to make his case, the author (hereafter Barnabas) made the key assumption that the Old Testament is a Christian book. In fact, the covenant was taken away from the Jews and given to the Christians.<sup>646</sup> Therefore, Christians should not be surprised to find spiritual typology throughout the Old Testament. For example, the Old Testament sacrificial system was a type that was fulfilled in Christ,<sup>647</sup> circumcision was about the heart rather than the flesh (cf. Deut 30:6),<sup>648</sup> and the gematria of Abraham circumcising the 318 men born in his household (Gen 14:14) points to Jesus.<sup>649</sup> Barnabas also found a deeper meaning in the story of when Moses stretched out his hands in the battle against the Amalekites (Exod 17:8–13). In making the shape of a cross with his arms, Moses procured the victory for Israel.<sup>650</sup> However, when Moses grew tired, and his hands were lowered, the battle turned against

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<sup>644</sup> *The Epistle of Barnabas* was a popular writing in the early Church and was even regarded, like the *Shepherd of Hermas*, as Scripture by some Church Fathers, though it was counted as spurious by later Christians. The book is anonymous and probably dates to the early second century, long after the time of the Barnabas in the book of Acts. It may have been written in Alexandria, Egypt because of its figurative exegesis like that of Philo and Origen and because the book was first quoted by Clement of Alexandria (Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., “Introduction,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. II, The Loeb Classical Library 25, ed. Jeffrey Henderson [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003], 1–7; cf. James Carleton Paget, *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1994], 1–42; Clayton N. Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: A Student’s Introduction*, 2d ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012], 1.2.4.).

<sup>645</sup> Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation Volume I: From the Old Testament to Origen*, trans. Leo G. Perdue (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 120–21.

<sup>646</sup> *The Epistle of Barnabas*, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. II, ed. and trans. Bart D. Ehrman, The Loeb Classical Library 25, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 4.6–8; cf. 14:1–9; 16:1–5.

<sup>647</sup> *The Epistle of Barnabas*, 7.6–8.6.

<sup>648</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.1–7.

<sup>649</sup> The number 318 can be broken down as follows: 18 is Iota (J) + Eta (E) = JE (Jesus); 300 is Tau (T) = a cross (*ibid.*, 9.8).

<sup>650</sup> A number of others in the early Church expounded upon this point too. Tertullian, for example, wrote the following: “Again, in the case of Moses, wherefore did he at that moment particularly, when Joshua was fighting Amalek, pray in a sitting posture with outstretched hands, when in such a conflict it would surely have been more seemly to have bent the knee, and smitten the breast, and to have fallen on the face to the ground, and in such prostration to have offered prayer? Wherefore, but because in a battle fought in the name of that Lord who was one day to fight against the devil, the shape was necessary of that very cross through which Jesus was to win the

Israel. According to Barnabas, this shows that Israel cannot be saved unless they hope in Moses, the type of Jesus.<sup>651</sup>

Concerning the Conquest, Barnabas saw Joshua himself as a type of Christ since the Hebrew name “Joshua” is equivalent to the Greek name “Jesus.” This explains why Moses changed the name of Hoshea son of Nun to Joshua (Num 13:16). The typology goes further:

And so, after Moses gave Jesus (Joshua) the son of Naue (Nun) this name, he sent him as a reconnaissance scout over the land and said, “Take a small book in your hands and record what the Lord says, that in the last days the Son of God will chop down the entire house of Amalek at its roots” (cf. Exod 17:14). Again, you see Jesus, not as son of man but as Son of God, manifest here in the flesh as a type.<sup>652</sup>

For Barnabas, Joshua was a type of Jesus, but it also appears that Barnabas adds “Son of God” to Exodus 17:14. The biblical text simply states, “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.’” It may be the case that Barnabas interpreted the Old Testament eschatologically: the Son of God (Jesus) will eventually triumph over Amalek (forces of evil).<sup>653</sup>

A second example comes from the Church Father Justin Martyr (AD 100–165). Justin argued that the Old Testament was filled with mysteries that anticipated the person and work of Christ. Like Barnabas, Justin argued that Joshua son of Nun had the same name as Jesus in the Hebrew language. Second, Justin compared Joshua, who had the Israelite men circumcised physically with knives of stone, to Jesus, who circumcises the idols from the lives of

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victory?” (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 3.18); cf. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 90; Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 12.30.

<sup>651</sup> *The Epistle of Barnabas*, 12:1–4.

<sup>652</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:9–10.

<sup>653</sup> Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (London: Burns & Oates, 1960), 232.

Christians.<sup>654</sup> Third, it was Joshua who was told to blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven, but the Amalekites remained after Joshua's time. However, as foreshadowed in the Old Testament, the crucifixion of Christ destroyed the demons, which are symbolized by the Amalekites in Justin's mind:

...as well as in the type of the extending of the hands of Moses, and of Oshea being named Jesus (Joshua); when you fought against Amalek: concerning which God enjoined that the incident be recorded, and the name of Jesus laid up in your understandings; saying that this is He who would blot out the memorial of Amalek from under heaven. Now it is clear that the memorial of Amalek remained after the son of Nave (Nun): but He makes it manifest through Jesus, who was crucified, of whom also those symbols were fore-announcements of all that would happen to Him, the demons would be destroyed, and would dread His name, and that all principalities and kingdoms would fear Him; and that they who believe in Him out of all nations would be shown as God-fearing and peaceful men; and the facts already quoted by me, Trypho, indicate this.<sup>655</sup>

Thus, Joshua was the shadow, and Jesus is the reality. Joshua was a lesser example, and Jesus is the greater fulfillment.<sup>656</sup>

A third example is found in the writings of Berthold of Regensburg (1220–1272) and focuses on the eschatological typology between Joshua and Jesus. Berthold was a Franciscan preacher known for his large crowds and lively, engaging sermons in which he would interact with members of the audience in confronting the heresies of the times.<sup>657</sup> In a sermon on Joshua, Berthold proclaimed Joshua as a type of the Lord Jesus Christ who would come to judge the world—the “seven nations of Canaan”, which signify those who have practiced the seven principle sins/vices of Christendom. Christ will be joined by twelve categories of saints (i.e., the

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<sup>654</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 113.

<sup>655</sup> Ibid.

<sup>656</sup> For a modern example of this kind of interpretation, see H. A. Ironside, *Joshua* (1950, repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 10–11.

<sup>657</sup> Jeannine Horowitz, “Popular Preaching in the Thirteenth Century: Rhetoric in the Fight against Heresy,” *Medieval Sermon Studies* 60, no. 1 (Sept. 2016): 69–71.

twelve tribes of Israel) when He returns to judge the world, and the saints will show no mercy to sinners on Judgment Day. Those who have rebelled against God—the seven peoples (“Canaanites”)—will be eternally slain with the sword. By way of application, Berthold challenged his audience to be like the Gibeonites who, fearing annihilation, sought peace with Israel and her God.<sup>658</sup>

The fourth example comes from the evangelical theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer, who compares the Conquest to the redemptive work of Christ. As Vanhoozer writes,

The violence we see in the Old Testament, though real, is also typological, an anticipation of the bloody violence (the *herem*?) directed to Jesus on the cross, and thence of peace for all the nations. A biblically literate interpreter ought to hear overtones of the conquest narrative in the passion narrative as well; here too God spares nothing that breathes. The definitive battle over evil is indeed accomplished on the cross, where Jesus “*breathed his last*” (Matt. 27:50 NRSV, my emphasis).<sup>659</sup>

Vanhoozer does not deny the historicity of the Conquest but draws parallels to the atonement of Christ in order to broaden the picture of warfare in Joshua to the larger battle with evil throughout history. He goes on to compare the violence in the book of Joshua to Jesus’ act of cleansing the temple:

Jesus worked some violence himself when he “cleansed” the temple, driving out people who profaned it with their money (Mark 11:15–16). In other words, *Jesus himself displayed the same jealous zeal* for the house of God that Yahweh had earlier for his land and people. What is God’s must be consecrated to God, and to him alone.... The divine command...to kill the Canaanites, when properly interpreted in its redemptive historical context and viewed in the shadow of the cross, no more contradicts Jesus’ teaching...than God’s holiness contradicts God’s love.<sup>660</sup>

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<sup>658</sup> Hofreiter, *Making Sense of Old Testament Genocide*, 105–107. Typological interpretations related to eschatology also appear in Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture: Viewed in Connection with the Entire Scheme of the Divine Dispensations*, vol. 2, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: William S. & Alfred Martien, 1859), 386–87; Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, 113.

<sup>659</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Augustinian Inerrancy: Literary Meaning, Literal Truth, and Literate Interpretation in the Economy of Biblical Discourse,” in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy*, eds. J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 233. Everything in this quotation is from Vanhoozer.

<sup>660</sup> Vanhoozer, “Augustinian Inerrancy,” 234 (emphasis original).

Jesus was just like Joshua in His zeal for God, and this becomes a justification for accepting the Conquest for what it teaches since Jesus' teaching about consecration harmonizes with God's holiness in the Old Testament.

### **The Conquest is Metaphorical**

The Old Testament scholars R. W. L. Moberly and Jerome F. D. Creach propose a metaphorical understanding of *ḥērem* to mean “complete devotion to God” rather than a command to exterminate the Canaanites. They offer several supporting arguments.<sup>661</sup> First, the term *ḥērem* carries a religious connotation of devotion to God. Second, the destruction interpretation of the ban is ad hoc in Numbers 21:1–3 when the Israelites vow to utterly destroy the Canaanites if Yahweh will provide the victory. In the Deuteronomic tradition, the ban is Yahweh's command, not Israel's idea, so there may be a distinction between the two with the former being “devotion to Yahweh” rather than “utter destruction.” Third, some have interpreted Deuteronomy 7 in a spiritual way (e.g., Origen) or in another way besides “show them no mercy” (e.g., the rabbis), and these interpretations are much closer to the plain sense of the text. Fourth, Deuteronomy 7 is connected to the Shema in Deuteronomy 6 with the result that the ban in Deuteronomy 7 is really an extension of the Israelites' obligation to love the Lord with all their heart and obey His commands (Deut 6:4–5). The prohibition against intermarrying with the Canaanites and the command to destroy their idols dealt with religious purity (Deut 7:3–6), not the annihilation of the Canaanites. Deuteronomy presents the traditional language of *ḥērem* but

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<sup>661</sup> See R. W. L. Moberly, “Toward an Interpretation of the Shema,” in *Theological Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, eds. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 134–37; idem., *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 53–74; idem., “Election and the Transformation of *Ḥērem*,” in *The Call of Abraham: Essays on the Election of Israel in Honor of Jon D. Levenson*, eds. Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2013), 67–98; Jerome F. D. Creach, *Violence in Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 97–ff.

really intends it be a metaphor for religious fidelity. And if Joshua was written during the time of Josiah, which is the view of critical scholars as noted above, then religious reform and purity were the main point. Creach summarizes the position as follows:

What this reading suggests is that God (according to Deuteronomy) did not order Israel to ritually annihilate the residents of Canaan. To be sure, the language of the ban is still present and the language itself remains troubling. But the language must be read as figurative, as an emblem of something higher and nobler, however reprehensible the background of the figure might be.... Since the command to place the residents of the land under the ban is illustrated by further commands to avoid intermarriage and to destroy sacred objects of alien religions, it seems that *hērem* really does signal a concern not to “be conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2), just as Origen said.<sup>662</sup>

### **The Conquest is Mythical**

The last nonliteral interpretation sees the Conquest as a myth, where “myth” is defined as a symbolic story that explains an ancient custom, institution, or other important aspect of life.<sup>663</sup>

Mythical texts look beyond the literal or historical sense to what lies beneath, offering more insight, which is the way the Old Testament scholar Douglas S. Earl interprets the Conquest:

Thus as “myth” an Old Testament narrative may be understood as a particular cultural expression that testifies in an existentially engaging fashion to an imaginative world that seeks to shape the way in which the community and the individual lives, thinks and feels, especially as these relate to response to God.... Reading Joshua in this way, the focus is taken off construing Joshua’s significance in terms of a bloody genocide and xenophobia. Rather, the book of Joshua is a narrative set in a foundational, prototypical time—a setting that grants the narrative legitimacy—and a narrative that expresses a desire for rest.<sup>664</sup>

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<sup>662</sup> Creach, *Violence in Scripture*, 107. Creach also recognizes the difficulty in squaring his interpretation with the specific instructions for war in Deuteronomy 20:10–18 because the text states that the nations who were in the land of Canaan were to be completely destroyed without any offer of peaceful surrender. However, Creach states that the Israelites *were* to offer peaceful terms to *every* town and not just to distant nations as Deuteronomy 20 states, which agrees with the rabbinical interpretations presented earlier in this chapter. This is implied, Creach believes, in Joshua 11:19, which states by way of summary that there were no peace treaties between the Israelites and the Canaanites except for the one instance of the Hivites living in Gideon (cf. Josh 9:1–27) (ibid., 108–109; cf. Bernard P. Robinson, “Rahab of Canaan—and Israel,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 23, no. 2 [Dec. 2009]: 272).

<sup>663</sup> John Van Seters, *The Pentateuch: A Social-Science Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 115.

The book of Joshua also teaches about identity construction, the perception of the “otherness” of outsiders (Rahab), the comfortable insider (Achan), and the story of altar building (Josh 22) that speaks to the status of the land.<sup>665</sup> As for the *ḥērem*, it too should be read in a second-order, mythical sense that goes beyond the literal interpretation of annihilation. The ban was not about annihilation in the here and now:

So the extreme *herem* really serves literary and structural requirements – it need not be descriptive of actual practice. Thus the extreme *herem* of Jericho need not be understood in the sense of it *being* a historical report of an actual command and practice, and need not be understood as an expression of ancient Israelite ethics, at least in the “plain sense.”<sup>666</sup>

The Conquest was really about separation from idols and the avoidance of intermarriage with foreigners, assuming a late date for the Deuteronomistic history.<sup>667</sup> Reading the book of Joshua this way evokes new responses to God, such as “challenging assumptions of the ethnic or sociopolitical definition of the people of God and how this is worked out in daily life.”<sup>668</sup>

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<sup>664</sup> Douglas S. Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 47. Other scholars have compared the Conquest to Yahweh’s (supposed) battle with the forces of “chaos” in the Old Testament in a different type of mythical interpretation. See Stern, *The Biblical Herem*, 117–18; J. G. McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology: Genesis–Kings* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 101, 103; Barna Magyarosi, *Holy War and Cosmic Conflict in the Old Testament: From the Exodus to the Exile*, Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 2010), 106–11.

<sup>665</sup> Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, 47.

<sup>666</sup> Idem., *The Joshua Delusion? Rethinking Genocide in the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 39 (emphasis original).

<sup>667</sup> Idem., *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, 109–111.

<sup>668</sup> Idem., “Holy War and *ḥrm*: A Biblical Theology of *ḥrm*,” in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and the Old Testament Problem*, eds. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 171.



## Summary and Evaluation

This section has examined a number of nonliteral interpretations from antiquity to the modern era, but each has its shortcomings. While the allegorical interpretations are admirable in comparing Scripture with Scripture, they are fanciful in reading New Testament theology back into the Old Testament. There are no controls with allegorical interpretations, and so the story of the Conquest can seem to mean anything, as seen in the variety of interpretations of the same passages from various commentators in this group. In addition, the allegorical interpretations do not really solve the problem of killing the Canaanites—especially the children. The typological interpretations, on the other hand, make a greater effort to find actual types in the Old Testament rather than allegorical applications, but there is so much focus on typology that the apologetic issues never come to the fore. The metaphorical and mythical interpretations suffer the same critiques as the nonhistorical interpretations of critical scholars earlier in this chapter since they are built upon the assumption that Deuteronomy and Joshua date to the late monarchial period in Israel’s history, leading to novel interpretations that run counter to the historical (not metaphorical or mythical) presentation of the Conquest in the book of Joshua.<sup>669</sup> Finally, these interpretations do not answer the moral question of killing the Canaanite children, even from a metaphorical or mythical point of view.

### The Conquest is Exemplary

The previous sections outlined a number of approaches that criticize, soften, or spiritualize the Conquest in one way or another. This section will go in a different direction by

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<sup>669</sup> As McConville writes, “The problem with a metaphorical understanding is that Joshua speaks about real peoples, land, and politics” (J. G. McConville, “Joshua,” in *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig Bartholomew, and Daniel J. Treier [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 89).

examining the popular claim that the Bible has been used to justify the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the annihilation of native people groups in the Americas.<sup>670</sup> In other words, some Christians have used the extermination of the Amalekites and Canaanites as a model for fighting actual battles and wars during the present dispensation. This section will evaluate the historicity of this claim as well as the overall interpretation that the faith principles of the Conquest should be used for modern Jews and Christians.

### **The Crusades**

In general, a “crusade” may be defined as a war in response to an act of aggression done for religious reasons. A crusade is not conquest but *reconquest*. “The Crusades” refers to the period of roughly two-hundred-year period during the eleventh and twelfth centuries when European Christians waged holy war against Middle-Eastern Muslims as both groups vied for territorial control of the Holy Land. The medieval Christians wanted to retake the land of Palestine that the Muslims had conquered.<sup>671</sup> The basic concept of Christian holy war arose due to several factors: the ninth- and tenth-century Norman invasions of Italy, the Christian duty to protect the poor and defenseless, and the recent success of Christian armies in Spain, south Italy, and Sicily. This was combined with the papal benediction of war against the Muslims in Spain, prayers for blessings on weapons, and the belief that the warriors were instruments of God’s will.<sup>672</sup>

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<sup>670</sup> E.g., Joel B. Green, “Introduction,” in *The Old Testament and Ethics: A Book-by-Book Survey*, eds. Joel B. Green and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), xv.

<sup>671</sup> Harold O. J. Brown, “The Crusade or Preventative War,” in *War: Four Christian Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981), 155–56.

<sup>672</sup> Edward Peters, ed., *The First Crusade: The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Materials*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 15–16.

Although church leaders had traditionally looked to Augustine's (354–430) lengthy defense of the concept of just war, Pope Gregory VII (1020–85) departed from the just-war tradition of Augustine. The Crusades went beyond biblical holy war of fighting with the Lord's miraculous intervention (e.g., Josh 10) to fighting *on behalf* of the Lord at the behest of His purported leader on the earth—the pope.<sup>673</sup> Instead of seeing Christian warfare as primarily *spiritual*, Gregory promulgated the notion that Christians must defend the Latin Church's "soldiers of Christ" through literal warfare. In order to recruit more troops, Gregory went so far as to promote holy war as a means of obtaining the remission of sins. As one scholar writes, "For the laity, the Crusade was a way to take up the cross and a means, thus, to remit for sin, a way of acting religiously that had previously been open only to monks and clerics."<sup>674</sup> This policy was softened by Gregory's successor, Pope Urban II (1088–99), due to its controversial nature.<sup>675</sup>

There is no doubt that the Crusades used holy-war language in the rhetoric and beliefs about fighting the Persians and Turks for control of the holy land. On November 27, 1095, at the Council of Clermont, Pope Urban II issued the call to an armed pilgrimage to help the Christians in the East and to liberate Jerusalem.<sup>676</sup> In his sermon,<sup>677</sup> he gave ample justification for the need to make war and commissioned the crusade with the belief that God would secure the victory:

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<sup>673</sup> Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace*, 44–45; cf. Daniel R. Heimbach, "Distinguishing Just War from Crusade: Is Regime Change a Just Case for Just War?" in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 85–87; idem., "Crusade in the Old Testament and Today," in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and the Old Testament Problem*, eds. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 182–86.

<sup>674</sup> Kevin Madigan, *Medieval Christianity: A New History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 111.

<sup>675</sup> Thomas Asbridge, *The Crusades: The Authoritative History of the War for the Holy Land* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 1–17.

<sup>676</sup> Peters, *The First Crusade*, 2.

From the confines of Jerusalem and the city of Constantinople a horrible tale has gone forth and very frequently has been brought to our ears, namely, that a race from the kingdom of the Persians, an accursed race, a race utterly alienated from God, a generation forsooth which has not directed its heart and has not entrusted its spirit to God, has invaded the lands of those Christians and has depopulated them by the sword, pillage and fire; it has led away a part of the captives into its own country, and a part it has destroyed by cruel tortures; it has either entirely destroyed the churches of God or appropriated them for the rites of its own religion. They destroy the altars, after having defiled them with their uncleanness. They circumcise the Christians, and the blood of the circumcision they either spread upon the altars or pour into the vases of the baptismal font. When they wish to torture people by a base death, they perforate their navels, and dragging forth the extremity of the intestines, bind it to a stake; then with flogging they lead the victim around until the viscera having gushed forth the victim falls prostrate upon the ground. Others they bind to a post and pierce with arrows. Others they compel to extend their necks and then, attacking them with naked swords attempt to cut through the neck with a single blow. What shall I say of the abominable rape of the women? To speak of it is worse than to be silent. The kingdom of the Greeks is now dismembered by them and deprived of territory so vast in extent that it cannot be traversed in a march of two months. On whom therefore is the labor of avenging these wrongs and of recovering this territory incumbent, if not upon you? You, upon whom above other nations God has conferred remarkable glory in arms, great courage, bodily activity, and strength to humble the hairy scalp of those who resist you.<sup>678</sup>

The Persians (Muslims) had committed moral atrocities and therefore deserved to be punished.

When Pope Urban II had finished his discourse, the people exclaimed, "It is the will of God! It is the will of God!"<sup>679</sup> There was the Old Testament sentiment that the Church is the new people of God and that wars conducted with the pope's endorsement aligned with God's will.

Another reason Pope Urban II gave for fighting the Muslims was that the Muslims had taken the holy land where the Lord lived, died, was buried, and was raised:

Under Jesus Christ, our Leader, may you struggle for your Jerusalem, in Christian battleline, most invincible line, even more successfully than did the sons of Jacob of old-struggle, that you may assail and drive out the Turks, more execrable than the Jebusites, who are in this land, and may you deem it a beautiful thing to die for Christ in that city in which He died for us.... Most beloved brethren, if you reverence the source of that

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<sup>677</sup> There are actually five different versions of Urban's speech or sermon. The excerpts and references here are from different accounts but make the same point. See Peters, *The First Crusade*, 25–ff.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid., 28.

holiness and glory, if you cherish these shrines which are the marks of His foot-prints on earth, if you seek [the way], God leading you, God fighting in your behalf, you should strive with your utmost efforts to cleanse the Holy City and the glory of the Sepulchre, now polluted by the concourse of the Gentiles, as much as is in their power.<sup>680</sup>

Notice that the crusaders were going into “Christian battle” and that the Turks were compared to the Jebusites living in the land of Canaan at the time of the Conquest. Pope Urban II had the following remarks for priests and bishops:

Moreover, you who are to go shall have us praying for you; we shall have you fighting for God’s people. It is our duty to pray, yours to fight against the Amalekites. With Moses, we shall extend unwearied hands in prayer to Heaven, while you go forth and brandish the sword, like dauntless warriors, against Amalek.<sup>681</sup>

The Muslim invaders were compared to the Amalekites, and the Church leaders were compared to Moses lifting up his hands in the wilderness. The crusaders also utilized the cross in their attire. Taking up one’s cross to follow Jesus was symbolized by wearing a cross on the forehead or chest while engaged in battle, and then upon returning, it was worn on the soldier’s back between his shoulders.<sup>682</sup>

Despite the general Conquest comparisons above, there are notable differences between the Conquest and the Crusades that makes it doubtful that the Conquest was used as the theological *basis* for the Crusades. First, there is nothing in the pope’s message about withholding mercy or killing men, women, and children as with the Canaanites in the Old Testament. Second, the Crusades were directed at the soldiers who had taken over the land of Israel—land that the Christians were trying to reclaim. Third, the book of Joshua was more often interpreted in a spiritual manner at this time, and the Maccabean Revolt was referenced as the

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<sup>680</sup> Ibid., 32, 34.

<sup>681</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>682</sup> Ibid., 29.

main example of righteous religious warfare more than the Conquest.<sup>683</sup> Therefore, although there is some Conquest terminology in Pope Urban II's addresses, the Crusades were not modeled strictly on the Conquest.

### **The Spanish Conquest**

The next example to consider is the Spanish Conquest of the East Indies. Originally, the Spanish Conquest was designed to recover the Holy City for the Church and to spread the Gospel and convert the heathen.<sup>684</sup> Consider Columbus' opening journal entry from his first voyage:

Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians, and princes who love and promote the holy Christian faith, and are enemies of the doctrine of Mahomet, and of all idolatry and heresy, determined to send me, Christopher Columbus, to the above-mentioned countries of India, to see the said princes, people, and territories, and to learn their disposition and the proper method of converting them to our holy faith....<sup>685</sup>

There was the assumption at this time that if barbarous countries like Britain could become civilized after turning to Christianity, then the same could be true of other nations.<sup>686</sup> Columbus was soon to discover that he was not destined for the East Indies but for the New World of the Americas—a world that was already inhabited. The prospect of world evangelization took a different turn once the Spaniards encountered the native peoples in the Americas.

It is well known that the Spanish conquistadors often brutalized the Indians they encountered during this period of the Spanish Conquest. The atrocities of the Spanish Conquest

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<sup>683</sup> See Douglas S. Earl, "Joshua and the Crusades," in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and the Old Testament Problem*, eds. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 19–43.

<sup>684</sup> Djelal Kadir, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth: Europe's Prophetic Rhetoric as Conquering Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 30–31.

<sup>685</sup> "Medieval Sourcebook: Christopher Columbus: Extracts from Journal," accessed July 2, 2021, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/columbus1.asp>.

<sup>686</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 61.

are documented in the writings of the Dominican bishop of Chiapas, Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566), as seen in the following account:

Which the *Spaniards* no sooner perceived, but they, mounted on generous Steeds, well weapon'd with Lances and Swords, begin to exercise their bloody Butcheries and Strategems, and overrunning their Cities and Towns, spar'd no Age, or Sex, nay not so much as Women with Child, but ripping up their Bellies, tore them alive in pieces. They laid Wagers among themselves, who should with a Sword at one blow cut, or divide a Man in two; or which of them should decollate or behead a Man, with the greatest dexterity; nay farther, which should sheath his Sword in the Bowels of a Man with the quickest dispatch and expedition. They snatcht young Babes from the Mothers Breasts, and then dasht out the brains of those innocents against the Rocks; others they cast into Rivers scoffing and jeering them, and call'd upon their Bodies when falling with derision, the true testimony of their Cruelty, to come to them, and inhumanely exposing others to their Merciless Swords, together with the Mothers that gave them Life. They erected certain Gibbets, large, but low made, so that their feet almost reacht the ground, every one of which was so order'd as to bear Thirteen Persons in Honour and Reverence (as they said blasphemously) of our Redeemer and his Twelve Apostles, under which they made a Fire to burn them to Ashes whilst hanging on them: But those they intended to preserve alive, they dismiss'd, their Hands half cut, and still hanging by the Skin, to carry their Letters missive to those that fly from us and ly sculking on the Mountains, as an exprobaton of their flight.<sup>687</sup>

If the account here is accurate, then the Spaniards applied *hērem*-like tactics in killing the Indian men, women, and children. The question is whether the Spaniards did so because they were inspired by the Conquest in the Old Testament. Since the conquistadors went *beyond* the dictates of the Old Testament in torturing and brutalizing the Indians, then the answer seems to be a resounding No.

One theologian— Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1494–1573)—*did* justify killing the Indians by invoking the Old Testament, though. The question of how to conquer and colonize the New World came to a head with a famous debate at Valladolid in Spain in 1550 between Sepúlveda and de Las Casas. Sepúlveda sought to justify the conquest of the Americas and the indigenous

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<sup>687</sup> Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552, repr., The Project Gutenberg EBook, 2007).

people by appealing to common principles of just war as well as to Aristotle's notion that men are either born to be masters or born to be slaves.<sup>688</sup> He believed that the Spanish had every right to rule over the indigenous people because the natives were inferior in every way.<sup>689</sup> The common belief that the Indians were barbaric, cannibalistic, idolatrous, immoral, and incorrigible people came from the Italian historian Peter Martyr D'Anghera (1457–1526), who passed on this description of the Indians from Friar Tomaso Ortiz:

On the mainland they eat human flesh. They are more given to sodomy than any other nation. There is no justice among them. They go naked. They have no respect either for love or for virginity. They are stupid and silly. They have no respect for truth, save when it is to their advantage. They are unstable. They have no knowledge of what foresight means. They are ungrateful and unchangeable. They boast of intoxicating themselves with drinks they manufacture from certain herbs, fruits, and grains, similar to our beers and ciders. They are vain of the products they harvest and eat. They are brutal. They delight in exaggerating their defects. There is no obedience among them, or deference on the part of the young for the old, nor of the son for the father. They are incapable of learning. Punishments have no effect upon them. Traitorous, cruel, and vindictive, they never forgive. Most hostile to religion, idle, dishonest, abject, and vile, in their judgments they keep no faith or law.... When taught the mysteries of our religion, they say that these things may suit Castilians, but not them, and they do not wish to change their customs.... About the age of ten or twelve years, they seem to have some civilisation, but later they become like real brute beasts. I may therefore affirm that God has never created a race more full of vice and composed without the least mixture of kindness or culture.<sup>690</sup>

Even with this information, Las Casas opposed the use of extreme measures to spread Christianity abroad.<sup>691</sup> Sepúlveda, on the other hand, justified the extermination of the barbarians

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<sup>688</sup> It should be noted that Sepúlveda strongly denounced the accusation that he favored enslaving or looting the Indians. He may have been referencing the concept of medieval serfdom instead and was simply misunderstood by later interpreters. See Robert E. Quirk, "Some Notes on a Controversial Controversy: Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Natural Servitude," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 34, no. 3 (Aug. 1954): 357–60.

<sup>689</sup> Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, *Tratado sobre las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios* (1550, repr., Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1987), 101.

<sup>690</sup> Francis August MacNutt, trans., *De Orbe Novo: The Eight Decades of Peter Martyr D'Ánghera*, vol. 2 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), 7.4.

<sup>691</sup> See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 151–ff.



by turning to Deuteronomy 13 where any Israelite towns that turned to worship idols fell under the ban and were to be annihilated. Since the Indians were barbaric idol worshipers, then there was every reason to subject them and then to either evangelize them or punish them. In Sepúlveda's view, this principle is clearly stated in Scripture but is also evident in natural law.<sup>692</sup> Therefore, Sepúlveda did give some biblical justification for exterminating the Indians that would not convert to Christianity or who fought the conquistadors by citing a *hērem* passage after the fact.

### **Colonizing the New World**

The third example of using the Conquest as an example to follow comes from roughly the same timeframe as the Spanish Conquest of the New World but in the Americas, where the American Indians were compared to the Canaanites and the colonization of America was compared to the Conquest. The English Catholic merchant Sir George Peckham (d. 1608), for example, believed that Christians were the new Chosen People, that North America was the Promised Land, and that the Indians were like the Canaanites of the Old Testament with their heathenism and idolatry. Any who resisted the colonists were to be exterminated or used for slave labor. However, Peckham was hopeful that the Indians would yield up their land peacefully and argued that the Indians would benefit from colonization by learning the English arts and sciences as well as the Christian Gospel, thereby improving their quality of life and saving their souls from hell. In his view, the English colonists were entitled to Indian commodities since they were voluntarily bringing the Gospel to them.<sup>693</sup> A second example comes from the Anglican

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<sup>692</sup> Sepúlveda, *Tratado*, 114–16.

<sup>693</sup> See Alfred A. Cave, "Canaanites in a Promised Land: The American Indian and the Providential Theory of Empire," *American Indian Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Autumn 1988): 281–82.

minister Robert Gray, who delivered a sermon that was printed in 1609 and was widely circulated. In the sermon, Gray offered several justifications for the English colonization of the New World. The sermon text was Joshua 17:14: “The people of Joseph said to Joshua, ‘Why have you given us only one allotment and one portion for an inheritance? We are a numerous people, and the Lord has blessed us abundantly.’” His primary point was that, like the Israelite tribes, the English needed more living space, which is why they sought to colonize the New World. The Christians should try to convert the heathen first, but if that did not work, then the Christians would be justified in destroying the heathen idolators:

...[I]t is everie mans dutie to travell both by sea and land, and to venture either with his person or with his purse, to bring the barbarous and savage people to a civill and Christian kinde of government, under which they may learne how to live holily, justly, and soberly in this world, and to apprehend the meanes to save their soules in the world to come, rather than to destroy them, or utterly to roote them out: for a wise man, but much more a Christian, ought to trie all meanes before they undertake warre: diastation and depopulation ought to be the last thing which Christians should put in, yet forasmuch as everie example in the scripture as I saide is a precept, we are warranted by this direction of Joshua, to destroy wilfull and convicted Idolaters, rather than to let them live, if by no other meanes they can be reclaimed.<sup>694</sup>

A third example is seen in Edward Eggleston’s 1883 article depicting the early wars with the Indians. In his record of the first Indian attack on a colony in Virginia in March of 1622, he wrote that the Indians attacked the colonial women and children while the men were away working in the field. The Indians used the settlers’ own axes, hatchets, hoes, and knives to hack to pieces the women and children before burning their dwellings. Eggleston noted that this was the first onslaught by the Indians in an attempt to drive the Englishmen back to the coast. It was followed by a second massacre that took the lives of three hundred forty-seven Europeans, which was one-twelfth of the entire colony. The colonists responded with an attack on the Indian

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<sup>694</sup> Robert Gray, *A Good Speed to Virginia* (London, 1609), n.p.

villages in July of 1623 in which they slaughtered the people and burned the wigwams. This type of back-and-forth fighting would continue for years to come both in Virginia and in New England. In 1676, for example, upwards of two thousand Indians in Plymouth and Massachusetts had been slain but at the cost of about one-eleventh of the able-bodied men of Massachusetts.<sup>695</sup>

In one of the battles, the Conquest of the Canaanites was referenced. Captain John Mason was ordered in May 1637 to attack the Indians at Pequot Harbor in Connecticut. After a prayer vigil held by the chaplain, the battle plans were altered, and a surprise attack was planned against the unsuspecting Indian village where five or six hundred men, women, and children perished by gunfire, sword, or fire from the burning wigwams. Eggleston wrote the following:

A whole community was destroyed at a blow. So heart-rending were the cries of the victims in the fire, so ghastly the aspect of the dead and dying about the fort, that the younger soldiers, unhardened by cruel scenes, were touched with compassion and horror; and it was necessary afterward to cite the massacre of the Canaanites, and David's "saws and harrows of iron," to justify this slaughter.<sup>696</sup>

However, Eggleston stated that many soldiers "were in much doubt then, and afterward seriously inquired, whether burning their enemies alive could be consistent with humanity and the benevolent principles of the Gospel," but the leaders spoke no word against the cruelties. Even some Christian ministers approved of the massacre.<sup>697</sup> Thus, one sees that the Conquest was used

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<sup>695</sup> Edward Eggleston, "Indian War in the Colonies," *Century Illustrated Magazine* 26 (May–Oct. 1883): 698–704.

<sup>696</sup> Eggleston, "Indian War in the Colonies," 699.

<sup>697</sup> Ibid., 717. For more on the Pequot War of 1637, see Alden T. Vaughan, *Roots of American Racism: Essays on the Colonial Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 177–ff; John Mason, *A Brief History of the Pequot War* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1736); accessed May 24, 2019, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1042&context=etas>. For an example of a Puritan sermon along these lines, see Cotton Mather, *Souldiers Counseled and Comforted: A Discourse Delivered unto some part of the Forces Engaged in the Just War of New-England Against the Northern & Eastern Indians* (Boston: Samuel Green, 1689).

as a template, but after the Indian village had been slaughtered, there were many who had mixed feelings about what had taken place in spite of the attempted biblical justification.

Another example comes from a sermon delivered in 1760 in which the New England minister Reverend Nathan Stone (1708–1781) compared the Israelite extermination of the Amalekites to the French and Indian enemies of the New Englanders: “Now, how great a resemblance is there between the case of Gods [sic] people Israel of old and their Amalekitish enemies, and the case of his New-English Israel, and their Indian and French adversaries?”<sup>698</sup> Stone continued the comparison by stating that, although the New England forefathers were not given the land by the promise of God like Old Testament Israel, they were nonetheless led by God’s providence after much consideration and humble prayer. Like Israel in the wilderness, the New England forefathers encountered enemies of their own.

Now, from the wonderful interpositions of God in his providence from time to time, in favour of our fore fathers, their enemies might plainly see, that the Lord was on their side, fought for them, and intended this land for their possession; which notwithstanding, as I suppose, was possessed with the consent, or by purchase, from the Indian nations, as they increased and needed it; and yet it’s likely, if not certain, there has been injustice done them in this matter; which may be one cause of their having been made such pricks in our eyes, and such thorns in our sides. And there was no need of these our enemies being rooted out, and destroyed, if they would but have been true and faithful, and had not proved treacherous and persidious, fighting against God, as well as men, as the Amalekites did.<sup>699</sup>

One can observe here the comparison to Old Testament Israel but also the acknowledgment that there was injustice done to the Indians early on. There is also a reluctance to exterminate the Indians, had it not been for Indian treachery. Stone also used the text of 1 Samuel 15 to compare the New Englanders’ enemies to the Amalekites in Saul’s day:

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<sup>698</sup> Nathan Stone, *Two discourses delivered at Southborough...October 9, 1760. Occasioned by the entire reduction of Canada* (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1761), 2.

<sup>699</sup> Stone, *Two discourses delivered at Southborough*, 4.

The Great God, who rules in the world, and governs among the nations, in his Providence; and our Gracious Sovereign, by his Commands, has called forth his armies, to go and smite our worse than Amalekitish enemies, for what they have done, and contrived against us; not indeed utterly to destroy all that they have, and not spare them, slaying man and woman, infant and suckling, as they too much endeavoured to do by us: but to bring them to reasonable and righteous terms of peace, that we might live quietly and safely in the land that God has given us for a possession. We sought the Lord in the day of our distress, by prayer, fasting and humbling our souls before him; and we trust he has regarded us in our low estate....<sup>700</sup>

The motive here was revenge: do to the Indians what they had done to the New Englanders. Yet, Stone also desired to bring about peace rather than to completely exterminate the Indians, so there is a departure from the total annihilation in Deuteronomy and Joshua. An additional comparison to the Conquest is the fact that intermarriage with the Indians was unknown in New England prior to 1676 because the Indians were seen as the Canaanites whom the chosen race (Christians) were not to marry.<sup>701</sup> Also, New England was known as the “New English Canaan” in the words of one author.<sup>702</sup> Thus, Conquest language and ideas were employed, even if there was not a one-to-one correspondence in every instance.

Some disagreed with the use of Conquest imagery from the Bible during this period of time. Pope Paul III gave a message in 1537 entitled “*Sublimus Dei: On the Enslavement and Evangelization of Indians*” in which he said reminded the Catholics of Jesus’ commission to “go into all nations” without exception since all people are capable of faith in Christ. This was in contrast to those who were teaching that the Indians were “dumb brutes” incapable of receiving the Catholic faith. The pope affirmed the true humanity of the Indians and stated that no Indians should be “deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be

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<sup>700</sup> Ibid., 11–12.

<sup>701</sup> J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492–1830* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), ch. 3.

<sup>702</sup> Thomas Morton, *New English Canaan* (1632, repr., Carlisle, MA: Applewood Books, n.d.).

outside the faith of Jesus Christ...nor should they be in any way enslaved.” If that were to happen, evangelization would have no effect. Rather, the Indians were to be converted to the faith “by preaching the word of God and by the example of good and holy living.”<sup>703</sup> Similarly, the English cleric William Crashaw (1572–1626) preached a sermon in 1609 in which he condemned the violence against the Indians: “The Israelites had a *commandement* from God to dwell in *Canaan*, we *leave* to dwell in *Virginea*: they were *commanded* to *kill* the heathen, we are *forbidden to kill* them, but are commanded to *convert* them....”<sup>704</sup> A good number of other ministers focused on evangelizing the heathen rather than merely conquering the New World.<sup>705</sup>

### Other Examples

There are enough examples above to illustrate how the Conquest was used as an example to follow throughout the Middle Ages and into the era of colonialism. A few other examples are worth noting here. First is the Scottish medical doctor and Puritan preacher Alexander Leighton (1568–1649) who wrote a treatise on the just causes and practices of war to King Frederick of Bohemia and Prince Charles of Great Britain in 1614.<sup>706</sup> Among his many points on just war is the reference to Joshua, who vowed to serve the Lord (Josh 24:15). In the same way, Christian soldiers must also vow to be good warriors for God, whether they are Catholic or Protestant, so that they may overcome the tyranny of the (Muslim) Turks. Then the Christians could expect to

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<sup>703</sup> Pope Paul III, “*Sublimus Dei*: On the Enslavement and Evangelization of Indians,” accessed May 24, 2019, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/paul03/p3subli.htm>.

<sup>704</sup> William Crashaw, *A sermon preached in London before the right honorable the Lord Lavvarre, Lord Gouvernour and Captaine Generall of Virginea, and others of his Maiesties Counsell for that kingdome, and the rest of the adventurers in that plantation* (London, 1610), page unnumbered (emphasis original).

<sup>705</sup> See the examples in Cave, “Canaanites in a Promised Land,” 287.

<sup>706</sup> Alexander Leighton, *Speculum Belli sacri: or the Looking-Glasse of the Holy War* (n.p., 1614).

gain the victory.<sup>707</sup> However, Leighton did not extend the *hērem* to modern situations of war.

Toward the end of his treatise, he stated that conquerors must keep their passions in check so that they would not indulge in sinful behaviors such as drunkenness, revenge, or beastliness toward the vanquished. The conquered soldiers must not be executed or abused but must be quartered, and proper burial should be given to the fallen enemy soldiers.<sup>708</sup> Thus, there was a more balanced approach of having faith like Joshua but also exercising civility toward enemies.

Another example comes from the sermon of the Puritan leader John Winthrop (1588–1649) delivered aboard the ship *Arbella* while en route to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. In exhorting the people toward the task of being a city on a hill in New England, Winthrop drew upon 1 Samuel 15 to make the point that obedience to the Lord’s commission would result in blessing, whereas neglecting the Lord’s commands for the sake of carnal living would result in the Lord’s wrath against the Puritans:<sup>709</sup> “Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when hee shall make us a prayse and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantation, ‘the Lord make it likely that of *New England*.’”<sup>710</sup> Winthrop ended the sermon with the warning from Deuteronomy 30 to obey the Lord and not to turn away lest they perish from the good land which they were going to possess.<sup>711</sup> The application of Conquest imagery is direct in this case.

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<sup>707</sup> Leighton, *Speculum Belli sacri*, 30.

<sup>708</sup> Ibid., 243–51.

<sup>709</sup> John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity*, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 3d series, vol. 7 (1630, repr., Boston, 1838), 46–47.

<sup>710</sup> Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity*, 47 (emphasis original).

<sup>711</sup> Ibid., 47–48.

The book of Deuteronomy was also used in apartheid South Africa. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Dutch-speaking settlers called “Boers” (ancestors of modern Afrikaners) immigrated to South Africa after the Dutch East India Company established a shipping station on the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>712</sup> The Boers were staunch Calvinists who understood themselves to be God’s chosen people escaping Egypt (British oppression) as they headed to the Promised Land. When they encountered the indigenous African people, the Boers believed they were “Canaanites” because the indigenous people worshiped foreign gods. Although the Boers did not want to annihilate the indigenous people, they forbade their own people from intermarrying with them in accordance with Deuteronomy 7:3–4 in order to keep the people pure.<sup>713</sup> The teachings of the Old Testament had direct application in their minds.

Several other instances show how Christians from the time of the colonial period forward used Conquest concepts and language to apply to contemporary situations. For example, some Christian leaders compared the Catholic Church to the Amalekites of old in protest against the abuses of the Catholic Church.<sup>714</sup> Or, in England’s War with the Scots (1650–51), Protestants on both sides claimed God’s providence over their own cause: “The English likened themselves to Israel against Benjamin; and then to Joshua against the Canaanites. The Scots repaid in the same

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<sup>712</sup> “Boer,” accessed February 6, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Boer-people>.

<sup>713</sup> See Ferdinand E. Deist, “The Dangers of Deuteronomy: A Page from the Reception History of the Book,” in *Studies in Deuteronomy in Honour of C.J. Labuschagne on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, eds. F. García Martínez, A. Hilhorst, J. T. A. G. M. van Ruiten, and A. S. van der Woude (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 13–29.

<sup>714</sup> E.g., Thomas Taylor, *An everlasting record of utter ruine of Romish Amaleck* (London, 1624); John Gere, *Judah’s Joy at the Oath* (London, 1641); John Flavel, *Tydings from Rome, or England’s Alarm* (London, 1667); George Whitefield, *Britain’s mercies, and Britain’s duties* (London, 1746), 14–16. Invoking Amalek to refer to religious enemies was also prevalent in early Mormon thought and in the conflict between Mormons and Protestants at that time. See John Corrigan, “New Israel, New Amalek: Biblical Exhortations to Religious Violence,” in *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, & America*, eds. John D. Carlson and Jonathan H. Ebel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 118–22.



scriptural coin.”<sup>715</sup> In the twentieth century, a handful of German Old Testament scholars—Eissfeldt, Gunkel, and Kittel—used Israelite holy-war texts to encourage their countrymen to fight in World War I.<sup>716</sup> Likewise, the Miskitu Indians of Nicaragua associated the Sandinistas with the Canaanites and Philistines who must be driven out of the land.<sup>717</sup> All of these examples have one thing in common: each group or individual used the Conquest to label another group as Amalekites or Canaanites to justify the action of making war in the present era.<sup>718</sup>

### Summary and Evaluation

This section has examined a number of examples from the Crusades forward where Christians applied Conquest terminology or ideas to those perceived to be contemporary enemies of the Church. The religious leaders generally approached the Bible in a pre-critical way in seeking to apply the biblical stories and teachings directly to current situations.<sup>719</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising to read about the examples in this section. However, it is also important to recognize that the above examples stop short of applying the ban in terms of total annihilation to any of the Church’s “enemies” (Turks, Indians, etc.). In addition, there are many examples where evangelization was the end goal, not the destruction of the indigenous peoples. This is different than the Conquest because the Canaanites were not offered peace because they were under the

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<sup>715</sup> John Morley, *Oliver Cromwell* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1900), 324.

<sup>716</sup> See the references in Charles Trimm, “Recent Research on Warfare in the Old Testament,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2012): 184.

<sup>717</sup> See Susan Hawley, “Does God Speak Miskitu? The Bible and Ethnic Identity among the Miskitu of Nicaragua,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Boston: Brill Academic, 2002), 315–42.

<sup>718</sup> As a counter example, the Jewish scholar Moshe Greenberg (d. 2010) recognized that for the modern state of Israel, studying the book of Joshua could lead pupils to wrongly apply the message of the Conquest to Israel’s contemporary enemies (Moshe Greenberg, “A Problematic Heritage: The Attitude Toward the gentile in the Jewish Tradition—An Israel Perspective,” *Conservative Judaism* 48, no. 2 [Winter, 1996]: 15–16).

<sup>719</sup> Bradley L. Crowell, “Postcolonial Studies and the Hebrew Bible,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 7, no. 2 (2009): 221.

condemnation of God.<sup>720</sup> By way of critique, interpreting the Conquest as an example to follow in the Church Age is a mistake. Christians do not battle flesh and blood in this way. Although nations still fight wars, and it is fine for Christian soldiers and leaders to seek God's protection and blessing when fighting wicked enemies, Christians cannot legitimately look to the Old Testament to identify themselves with Joshua and the Church's enemies with the Canaanites or Amalekites. Instead, Christians should derive biblical principles about trusting in the Lord and fighting for righteous causes, but they do not have the same guarantee for God's victory as Joshua did because the Church is not living in the same dispensation as Old Testament Israel. Christians live under the New Covenant, not the Mosaic Covenant.

#### Other Interpretations of the Conquest

This final section will provide an overview of a number of other interpretations that do not fall into any of the above categories. All of these are somewhat novel and have not gained a wide following, but they are included here because they look at the Conquest a little differently than the abovementioned interpretations or the traditional interpretation in the next chapter. Because each of these interpretations is unrelated, the evaluations will follow each section.

#### **The Dark Side of God**

Some theologians have addressed the moral problem of the Conquest by positing that God has a dark side—that is, that God is both good and evil, both loving and cruel. One Old Testament scholar summarizes this position as follows:

God's righteousness, grace, and mercy are the sides of his nature that dominate the Old Testament. But this does not alter the fact that the Old Testament writers were conscious of the other, darker side. They were, if only dimly, aware of the complexity and the

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<sup>720</sup> Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 53n5.

apparent contradictions experienced by the Israelite people in their encounters with this God.<sup>721</sup>

In other words, if the Israelites had a better understanding of God, then they would have known about God's dark side too. Another scholar believes that the stories of a violent God in the Old Testament addressed questions of theodicy for ancient Israel, and the conclusion to draw from the Old Testament is that suffering exists in the world because God causes it: "God is not reliably 'good' or 'benevolent,' in any human sense of the word. This provides an explanation for individual suffering in the world.... [I]t is desirable to have a god who is in control of everything, even if that necessitates a god who is not entirely trustworthy."<sup>722</sup> Another author applies this theology to explain the Conquest:

For me, the paradoxical God of Scripture—kind and cruel, good and genocidal, present and absent—is the true nature of the God of the universe. God is not all good, powerful, holy, and loving; he's partly those things and partly their opposite.... In fancy terms, belief in a less-than-perfect God provides us with a theodicy: an explanation for evil. A paradoxical deity also explains why so many good things happen amidst the evil. God is a mixture of good and bad, and so is the world.<sup>723</sup>

God is "good and genocidal" and "a mixture of good and bad", which explains why some of God's actions in the Bible are morally offensive.

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<sup>721</sup> R. N. Whybray, "'Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What is Just?' God's Oppression of the Innocent in the Old Testament," in *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right? Studies on the Nature of God in Tribute to James L. Crenshaw*, eds. David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 15. The examples Whybray discusses in this chapter do not include the Conquest, though the Conquest could fit with the selections Whybray thinks demonstrate that sometimes God kills the innocent or that God kills without reason or cause.

<sup>722</sup> David Penchansky, *What Rough Beast? Images of God in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 93. Like Whybray, Penchansky does not directly address the Conquest but could have easily devoted a chapter to the Conquest to fit the theme of his book.

<sup>723</sup> Mark Roncace, *Raw Revelation: The Bible They Never Tell You About* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2012), 80–81; cf. John Barton, "The Dark Side of God in the Old Testament," in *Ethical and Unethical in the Old Testament: God and Humans in Dialogue*, ed. Katharine J. Dell (New York: T & T Clark International, 2010), 133.

This interpretation may seem to solve the moral problem of the Conquest at first, but there are many difficulties upon closer inspection. First, this interpretation is overly simplistic. There is a lot of biblical material about God's love and God's wrath that make the issue much more complicated than attributing good and evil to God. Second, this interpretation does not include any discussion of God's holiness and justice in punishing sin, which may seem cruel and unjust to humans as God's creatures. However, if sins were left *unpunished*, then God Himself would be cruel and unjust. Lawbreakers would get off Scot free, and there would be no justice in the universe. Third, this interpretation makes God arbitrary: sometimes He is good, but at other times He is evil. But the Bible has specific reasons for God's decision to punish the Canaanites as reviewed in chapter three. Fourth, a God who is both good and evil is not worthy of worship. Fifth, it is impossible for humans to be more righteous than God and to judge God's actions as evil. Sixth, for God to be God, He would have to be morally perfect as the standard of moral goodness rather than subject to some external standard of goodness, which means that He would do no evil. In summary, this interpretation has too many shortcomings to solve the moral problem of the Conquest.

### **A Moral Exception**

Another interpretation that is related to the previous one is that the Conquest was a moral exception to God's normal operations of justice. In a sense, the Conquest was "extra-legal." The Israelites had an idea of corporate solidarity (to be discussed more in the next chapter), so they may have believed that justice would not have been accomplished unless the Canaanite women and children had been put to death along with the Canaanite men. Since this was the Israelites' belief about justice, then God made an exception to accommodate this belief. People today no longer hold to ideas of corporate solidarity, so they do not lump together the guilty with the

innocent. Instead, they send missionaries to reach pagans and work to eradicate their idolatry rather than killing the idolaters themselves.<sup>724</sup> While this interpretation is related to the accommodation interpretation above, it faces similar criticisms. If God makes moral exceptions to His own rules, then one wonders how fixed those rules are and what basis there is for expecting God to act in a morally-predictable manner. This interpretation makes God arbitrary or capricious, which is not how the Bible presents God. Plus, if God makes moral exceptions, then He violates His own justice, which is a contradiction. That would mean that either God's moral law, which reflects His nature, is malleable so that God sometimes does evil, or His justice is not complete, since He sometimes acts unjustly in extreme situations.

### **Changing Morality**

The next interpretation is related to the previous one except that instead of seeing the Conquest as an exception to the rule, morality itself changes based sheerly on the will of God. This interpretation has been labeled the “divine immunity approach”<sup>725</sup> and would also fall under the heading of *voluntarism*, which is the view that whatever God does must be right, even if it appears wrong to us; Christians must not question God or His ways. The Reformed theologian A. van de Beek lays out this view in reference to the Amalekite extermination in 1 Samuel 15:

There is no other norm for omnipotence or for goodness than the norm God himself sets. What goodness is at a specific moment is determined by the action of God at that moment. *And if today God acts differently than yesterday, goodness today is different from what it was yesterday.* God is the criterion for good and evil, for power and powerlessness. There is no authority above him to which he could be subject. Only the deeds of God afford access to his being. Consequently, the history of God's action is the only norm for the determination of good and evil. When God commands Saul to destroy the Amalekites to the last man, woman, and child (1 Sam. 15:3), and the prophet with his own hands hews in pieces the survivor (1 Sam. 15:33), *then at that moment that is good.* It is the divine will, even a divine mandate. If today we are troubled that an entire people

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<sup>724</sup> W. S. Bruce, *The Ethics of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895), 264–65.

<sup>725</sup> See Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 71–ff.

was killed and say, “but that cannot possibly be good,” that cannot be said on the basis of an external norm to which the divine command was subject, as though an abstract idea of goodness floated over the heads of the Amalekites and Israelites and above the God who issued the command. To whom or what would the God of Israel be subject? If today we do not endorse the extermination of a people, not even, rather, certainly not, on religious grounds, then that is because of a new action of God in Jesus Christ, by whom the nations were incorporated into fellowship with Israel, and because God was pleased to reveal himself on the cross and not with the sword. *From within a new moment in history the norm for goodness became different. In the eleventh century B.C. It was good to exterminate the heathen; in the first century A.D. it was not good.* If about the eleventh century we now say, “that was not good,” then that is true only proleptically with a view to Christ. Only in retrospect does the goodness of Samuel prove to be other than the goodness of the divinely sent Son of God. Accordingly, *the norm for the goodness of God alters with the history of God’s actions*, or to state this on the passive side, with the history of his revelation.<sup>726</sup>

Whatever God commands or wills or does is good because God does it, and God is not subject to some external moral code. Rather, God does what He pleases, even if it seems wrong to us or if what is good changes from one dispensation to another. Theologian Gerald Bray states something similar regarding 1 Samuel 15:

...[T]he fact remains that God ordered Saul to kill, in apparent violation of the fifth commandment. How could that be? The answer is that “good” is not an abstract concept defined by a moral code, even if that code has the authority of the Ten Commandments. Most of the time and in most circumstances, murder is wrong, but God can overrule his own orders, and when he does so, we must obey.<sup>727</sup>

This author is not stating that God sometimes commanded the Israelites to execute capital punishment in accordance with divine justice. Rather, He commanded them to actually murder, even though murder is wrong. They had to obey because God is God.

One problem with this interpretation is that it pins the problem of evil squarely on God, just as the “dark side of God” interpretation above. Sometimes God is good, and sometimes God

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<sup>726</sup> A. van de Beek, *Why?: On Suffering, Guilt, and God*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 263–64 (emphasis added).

<sup>727</sup> Gerald Bray, *God is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 357.

is evil. The difference is that even when God acts in an evil way (e.g., commanding murder), it is somehow good by virtue of the fact that God issued the command since God can do no wrong. Therefore, the definition of good and evil changes, like the previous interpretation, but on the basis of God's seemingly-arbitrary will. Another problem is that this interpretation does not leave any room for discussing God's justice and fairness.<sup>728</sup> Whatever God does is right, and that is the end of the discussion. While this may be philosophically true, it is still important to figure out *what* God did in the Old Testament and *why* God did it. The Conquest was capital punishment rather than murder, so there is no need to resort to voluntarism. Killing the children is still a problem to be explained since the children were not guilty of the sins of the parents, and that will be addressed in the next chapter. There are more biblically-sound interpretations than the idea that morality changes based on God's will.

### **Intrusion Ethics**

The next interpretation comes from the Reformed theologian Meredith G. Kline (d. 2007), who recognized as a starting point that under normal circumstances, the Conquest and despoiling of the Canaanites would be condemned as an act of unprovoked aggression and merciless barbarity. He denied that one can defend the Conquest on the grounds that God had promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants, that the sins of the Amorites had reached their full measure, and that Moses and Joshua engaged in holy war at the direction of God. None of these arguments would hold up in a tribunal during today's age of "Common Grace", which is an antithesis and anticipation of the "Consummation" to come in the eschaton. Consequently, Kline came to the following interpretation:

It will only be with the frank acknowledgment that the ordinary standards were suspended and the ethical principles of the last Judgment intruded that the divine

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<sup>728</sup> Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 73.

promises and commands to Israel concerning Canaan and the Canaanites come into their own and the Conquest can be justified and seen as it was in truth—not murder, but the hosts of the Almighty visiting upon the rebels against His righteous throne their just deserts [sic]—not robbery, but the meek inheriting the earth.<sup>729</sup>

The Conquest, therefore, is one example of “intrusion ethics” whereby an eschatological component (punishment) is implemented in the present age. In discussing the ban in Deuteronomy 7, Kline expounded further upon this idea:

Many have found a stumblingblock in this command to exterminate the Canaanites, as though it represented a sub-Christian ethic. Actually, the offense taken is taken at the theology and religion of the Bible as a whole. The New Testament, too, warns men of the realm of the everlasting ban where the reprobate, devoted to wrath, must magnify the justice of the God whom they have hated. The judgments of hell are the *hērem* principle come to full and final manifestation. Since the Old Testament theocracy in Canaan was a divinely appointed symbol of the consummate kingdom of God, there is found in connection with it an intrusive anticipation of the ethical pattern that will obtain at the final judgment and beyond.<sup>730</sup>

The intrusion of “anticipated eschatology”<sup>731</sup> required a higher level of faith on the part of the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites rather than to show mercy to them. In addition, Kline denied that the Conquest violated the tenth commandment prohibiting coveting (i.e., taking Canaanite land) because the normal understanding of “neighbor” in the age of Common Grace (i.e., during the Conquest) was overruled by God’s command and instead reflected the concept of “neighbor” found in the Judgment (i.e., the eschaton) when God’s enemies will no longer be considered the

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<sup>729</sup> Meredith G. Kline, “The Intrusion and the Decalogue,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 16 (1953): 15–16; cf. idem., *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 2d ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 154–ff; idem., *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2000), 337; Magyarosi, *The Holy War and Cosmic Conflict in the Old Testament*, 272.

<sup>730</sup> Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy: Studies and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 68.

<sup>731</sup> Kline, “The Intrusion and the Decalogue,” 16.



neighbors of the elect in heaven.<sup>732</sup> Finally, Kline qualified his discussion by pointing out that the intrusion of eschatological judgment was for a specific instance, not for all situations:

The identification of God's kingdom with the earthly kingdom of Israel brought an Old Testament anticipation of the final judgment which is to overtake those who remain outside the redemptive kingdom of Christ. This Old Testament judgment, however, could not be executed universally. For then the age of grace for the nations would have been prematurely terminated and the covenant promise that Israel should be a blessing to all nations through the messianic seed of Abraham (*cf.* Gen 12:3) would have been nullified. Therefore, the typology of final judgment was strictly applied only in warfare against nations within the boundaries claimed by Yahweh for his typical kingdom (vv. 16–18; *cf.* 7:2ff.).<sup>733</sup>

Kline's interpretation is interesting in that it recognizes the theological differences between God's dispensations in order to explain the severity of the Conquest. It is original and thought-provoking, but upon deeper reflection, it has several weaknesses. First, the Conquest was not the only situation where God killed men, women, and children. He did so with the Flood, with Sodom and Gomorrah, and with Korah's rebellion, to name a few examples. If the discussion is broadened to all examples of God taking lives through human instruments (e.g., Israel, Assyria, Babylon), then the "intrusion ethics" become rather common, which begs the question as to whether there were any such intrusion ethics operating or whether God's judgment in certain situations is just comprehensive. Second, there is a marked difference between temporal punishment (death) and eternal punishment (hell). The intrusion analogy quickly breaks down at this point. Third, the interpretation still does not explain why the intrusion ethics impacted the Canaanite children, who were presumably innocent. If eschatological judgment (hell) overtook them too, then the Canaanite children would have gone to hell, which is not a theological tenet held by any except those with a supralapsarian soteriology.

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<sup>732</sup> Ibid., 10–12.

<sup>733</sup> Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*, 105–106.

## Cultural Relativism

Another proposal appeals to cultural relativism to show how different the values and culture of ancient Israel were from modern concepts of morality.<sup>734</sup> The critical view of late-dating Old Testament books and the skepticism toward much of Old Testament history are assumed,<sup>735</sup> though these views are not entirely relevant to the discussion. Instead, the task is to study the Old Testament and note what ethics would have meant to the ancient Israelites, which leads to the conclusion that “a sharp divide opens between ourselves and the ancient Israelites.”<sup>736</sup> Turning to the particular matter of warfare in ancient Israel, which includes the Conquest, a casual reading of the Old Testament leads one to conclude that there was a general attitude of approval of warfare and no criticism of warfare,<sup>737</sup> but this only shows the difference in attitudes between people living then and people living today. In the Old Testament, war was not only accepted, but religion commonly both justified it and intensified its evil. This view of war is irredeemable, though. While it is possible to understand the attitudes of the Israelites, given their political situation among the nations of the ancient world, their practice is not to be followed and an ethic of war that can meet the modern situation has to be derived from some other source than the Old Testament.<sup>738</sup> The task, then, is to distance oneself from Old Testament teachings: “We need to leave the Old Testament where it is, in its own world—or rather worlds,

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<sup>734</sup> See Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001); cf. C. L. Crouch, “Ethics,” in *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion*, ed. John Barton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 339.

<sup>735</sup> Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 4, 186.

<sup>736</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>737</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>738</sup> *Ibid.*, 205–206.

for it stretches across different periods of history and contains the ethics of many different human groups.”<sup>739</sup> In summary, the Old Testament has a much different picture of the world and of human society than ours.<sup>740</sup> The discussion ends there.

The main problem with this interpretation is that it exaggerates the moral differences between the biblical world and the modern world, which would make the Old Testament an historical relic with *nothing* to teach people today.<sup>741</sup> A casual reading of the Old Testament leaves the impression that many of the moral standards of the Old Testament are timeless, such as the Ten Commandments. “You shall not murder” still applies today, for example. Therefore, one should not write off the Old Testament too quickly. A second problem is that cultural relativism is an untenable ethical position. If all cultures have their own practices because there is no objective standard for morality, then no culture can judge another as morally superior or deficient. Each culture would just do things differently. Some cultures outlaw murder while others promote it. No culture is *better* than another because better assumes comparison to a fixed standard. Therefore, the task of evaluating the morality of the Conquest becomes self-defeating.

### **Reader-Response Interpretations**

Another proposal is to approach the Conquest (and other troubling passages) using reader-response criticism. The British theologian Eryl W. Davies prefers this approach because the reader has the duty to converse and interact with the text in an openly-critical rather than passively-receptive manner: “Instead of tacitly accepting the standards of judgment established in the text and capitulating uncritically to its demands, [readers] are prepared to challenge its

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<sup>739</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>740</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>741</sup> Davies, *The Immoral Bible*, 61.

assumptions, to question its insights, and (if necessary) to discredit its claims.”<sup>742</sup> With this method, the reader actively reflects, judges, appraises, assesses, and evaluates the text in an effort to ultimately accept or reject the text. In addition, the reader engages in a conversation with the text and asks the question, What does the text say to *me*? The interpretive goal is to make the reader more conscious of his own responses to what he is reading.<sup>743</sup>

When considering the Conquest, Davies is quick to point out that the depiction of God is “seriously defective” and that the actions of the Israelites are “morally offensive.” All right-minded readers will question these troubling texts.<sup>744</sup> The benefit of the reader-response criticism, Davies reasons, is that it puts a spotlight on the difficult questions that are often omitted in commentaries. By reading with a hermeneutic of suspicion, one might even imagine what the Conquest would have been like from the Canaanites’ perspective.<sup>745</sup> In Davies’ mind, biblical scholars must free themselves from the hesitancy to condemn certain Bible passages like the Conquest as immoral, and reader-response criticism may help them do just that.<sup>746</sup> Finally, Davies recognizes a dialectal process in reader-response criticism where the reader not only critiques the Bible but the Bible also questions the beliefs and priorities of the reader:

Cross-cultural judgments must go in both directions, so that as we pass judgment on the Bible we must allow the Bible to pass judgment on us. In this way, an encounter with the past is transformed into an encounter with the present, and we will often find that the Bible we thought we had under cross-examination has turned the tables and begun to interrogate us. Such a reading of the Bible can prove to be a most humbling experience, for all too often we have an overweening trust in the rectitude of our own judgment and

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<sup>742</sup> Davies, *The Immoral Bible*, 120–21. Davies calls this the “resisting reader” approach.

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>744</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>745</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>746</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

in the superiority of our own perspective, and such intellectual arrogance often shields us from self-criticism and self-evaluation.<sup>747</sup>

Old Testament scholar L. Daniel Hawk offers a similar view in his “canonical approach” to interpreting the Conquest. In his estimation, the book of Joshua went through a long and complex process of composition and theological reflection before it reached its canonical form, which Christians possess today. Consequently, the canonical text of Joshua speaks with multiple voices that may even seem contradictory. On the one hand, Joshua portrays an attitude of militant triumphalism as Israel emerges victorious in battle. On the other hand, there is another voice in Joshua that is uneasy with the violence and ethnic antagonism that lies behind the ban, as seen in God’s silence regarding the survival of certain Canaanites (i.e., Rahab and the Gibeonites). The book of Joshua invites the reader into a contentious conversation where the reader may identify with Rahab and the human tragedy of war *or* with Israel in asking difficult questions about one’s own nation.<sup>748</sup> Thus, the interpretation is up to the reader, which is presented as a benefit but is also the main problem with these interpretations. Readers can derive their own interpretations, even if they end up contradicting one another, which removes all controls in the hermeneutical process. Plus, these interpretations do not adequately address the moral problem of killing the Canaanite children.

### **A Deconstructionist Interpretation**

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann offers a novel interpretation of the Conquest in his short work *Divine Presence Amid Violence* based on a deconstructionist hermeneutic,

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<sup>747</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>748</sup> L. Daniel Hawk, “The God of the Conquest: The Theological Problem of the Book of Joshua,” *The Bible Today* 46 (2008): 145–47; cf. idem., “The Truth about Conquest: Joshua as History, Narrative, and Scripture,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 66, no. 2 (2012): 129–40; idem, *The Violence of the Biblical God: Canonical Narrative and Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 140–68.

which is similar to the reader-response interpretations above but which incorporates more tenets of postmodernism. For deconstructionism, there is no objectivity in interpreting the text since the reader is always contextualized and never “above the fray” in reading a text.<sup>749</sup> This leads naturally to relativism, and Brueggemann acknowledges as much. Historical-critical studies have insisted that a text can only be understood in context and that context is necessary to hearing the text, but a person’s objectivist ideology will uncritically insist that the historical context of a text would allow the reader to be an objective interpreter without recognizing that the textual process is not (and cannot be) objective.<sup>750</sup> The interpretive process is more about constructing one’s own meaning from the text, therefore, and not simply about receiving *the* meaning from the text itself.

Concerning the Bible, Brueggemann avers that “Scripture as revelation is never simply a final disclosure, but is an ongoing act of disclosing that will never let the disclosure be closed.”<sup>751</sup> This means that knowledge is inherently pluralistic, with each person advocating his own interpretations that ring true for himself.<sup>752</sup> Thus, Scripture as revelation does not lead to a flat, obvious conclusion. Instead, it is an ongoing conversation that evokes, invites, and offers. It is the process of the text itself, in which each interpretive generation participates, that is the truth of revelation. Such an interaction is not a contextless activity, though. The context is kept open and is freshly available, depending on the social commitments of the interpreter and the sense-making conversations heard in the act of interpretation. In the interpretive process, readers claim

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<sup>749</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Divine Presence Amid Violence: Contextualizing the Book of Joshua* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), ix.

<sup>750</sup> Brueggemann, *Divine Presence Amid Violence*, x.

<sup>751</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>752</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

and confess that God's fresh word and new truth are mediated and made available.<sup>753</sup> In summary, "the canonical literature does not offer a settled, coherent account of reality; rather it provides the materials for ongoing disputatious interpretation."<sup>754</sup>

With this interpretative framework in mind, Brueggemann applies the deconstructionist hermeneutic to Joshua 11, which is one text where the moral problem of the Conquest appears. As Brueggemann writes, "It is clear that this text, like every biblical text, has no fixed, closed meaning; it is inescapably open to interpretation that reflects specific circumstance and location."<sup>755</sup> He asserts that the Canaanite city-states were monopolies of socioeconomic, political power where "horses and chariots" stand for strength and monopoly of arms supporting the economic and political monarchy.<sup>756</sup> These Canaanite city-states were threatened by the antimonarchic peasant movement of the Israelites in the land even though Israel had no "horses and chariots."<sup>757</sup> In the story, Yahweh gave Joshua and the Israelites permission to war against the Canaanites in order to "act for their justice and liberation against an oppressive adversary."<sup>758</sup> This warfare was limited to "horses and chariots" as code for "monarchic instruments of domination" rather than general warfare against people, though.<sup>759</sup> Israel was disadvantaged, oppressed, and marginalized, and so a revolution was warranted.<sup>760</sup> Brueggemann opines that

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<sup>753</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>754</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>755</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>756</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>757</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>758</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>759</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>760</sup> Ibid., 24.

“[w]hat we label as violence on Yahweh’s part is a theological permit that sanctions a new social possibility.”<sup>761</sup> However, verses about destroying all and leaving no survivors in Joshua 11 are not the normative revelation from Yahweh.<sup>762</sup> Brueggemann concludes his discussion with a modern application of reading Joshua “from the other side” within communities of domination:

We are more fully embedded in communities of horses and chariots, more fully committed to domination. The narrative and its trajectory as I have traced it suggest that such communities of domination have no warrant for arms and control, but that this God in inscrutable ways is aligned against the horses and chariots, working through hardness of heart, until the whole enterprise collapses.<sup>763</sup>

However, Brueggemann offers another interpretation elsewhere that posits tension between the violent God of Joshua and God’s creatures who help God not to be so violent:

I suggest that YHWH requires “obedient partners” who are advocates for YHWH’s better self, who are advocates for the vulnerable who stand in the path of the divine propensity to violence. Like every person in recovery, being taken seriously by faithful partners matters decisively.... And everyone, from Moses to the woman, knows that “recovery” is not quick, or easy, or unilinear. It is much more difficult and complex than that, and no doubt requires a “village” of truth-speaking support. Thus, I imagine the adherents to this God (Jews, Christians, Muslims) engaged in covenantal obedience that calls God beyond violence, as obedience takes the form of advocacy for God’s better resolve.<sup>764</sup>

The Conquest, therefore, is open to multiple interpretations as the reader draws his own responses from the text in order to craft them into messages suitable to modern situations. For this reason, it suffers the same drawbacks as the reader-response interpretations above. If there is no meaning in the text, then Scripture can mean anything the reader wants; there are no controls

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<sup>761</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>762</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>763</sup> Ibid., 64; cf. Carolyn J. Sharp, “‘Are You For Us, or For Our Adversaries?’ A Feminist and Postcolonial Interrogation of Joshua 2–12 for the Contemporary Church,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 66, no. 2 (2012): 152.

<sup>764</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The God of Joshua...Give or Take the Land,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 66, no. 2 (2012): 174; cf. idem., *God, Neighbor, Empire: The Excess of Divine Fidelity and the Command of Common Good* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 114.



at that point, despite the artificial discussion above about the role of context. Brueggemann has his interpretation about Israel fighting power structures, but who is to say that this interpretation is correct. The idea of fighting power structures is right or moral in Brueggemann's mind regardless of what he discovers in the biblical text, and so Scripture does not add anything to his knowledge of truth, history, or morals. Brueggemann's interpretation does nothing to address the moral problem of killing the Canaanite children either. Therefore, his interpretation is lacking not only in failing to produce an ontological foundation for interpreting a text but also in grappling with the details of the Conquest.

### Identity Removal

Evangelical Old Testament scholar John H. Walton and his son, J. Harvey Walton, have recently proposed an alternative interpretation of the Conquest in their book *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest*. Like the rest of John Walton's *Lost World* series,<sup>765</sup> this book incorporates ancient Near Eastern background information in an attempt to interpret the Old Testament as it would have been understood in its own time. Critics who condemn the Conquest and apologists defend the Conquest both err, in the Waltons' view, because they approach the Bible with modern questions and assumptions without first seeking to understand the ancient Israelites' worldview. According to the Waltons, the Israelites would not have been outraged by the practice of *herem*, even if modern readers are.<sup>766</sup> This is the point, though: the Conquest

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<sup>765</sup> John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009); John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013); John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015); Tremper Longman III and John H. Walton, *The Lost World of the Flood: Mythology, Theology, and the Deluge Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018); John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

<sup>766</sup> Walton and Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest*, 12.

account was not written for Israel (or the Church) to learn what is good or what leads to happiness. These are modern categories. The ancient mindset was more concerned with order and disorder.<sup>767</sup> God's plan to remove the Canaanites from the Promised Land and to give Israel a land of her own had more to do with God bringing order out of disorder than judging the Canaanites for their sins.

The Waltons argue that the Canaanites are not even depicted as guilty of sin because there is no specific exposition of the Canaanites' sin in the Conquest accounts and because the normal words for punishment and judgment are absent. Plus, the Canaanites could not have been held morally culpable for the stipulations of the Mosaic Law when they were not in a covenant relationship with Yahweh.<sup>768</sup> Although it would seem that Genesis 15:16 links the removal of future Canaanites with their sins ("the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure"), the Waltons maintain that the Amorites in Genesis 15:16 should not be equated with Canaanites in general since the two groups are listed as separate peoples elsewhere (Deut 20:17). Instead, the Waltons propose a novel translation of the Hebrew text of Genesis 15:16<sup>769</sup> that keeps the focus on the Amorites of Abraham's own time.<sup>770</sup> The Canaanites living at the time of the Conquest were in a separate category of people, and they were "invincible barbarians" who existed outside the bounds of order, which is why they were judged.<sup>771</sup> True, the Canaanites were sinners in the same sense that all humans are sinners, but according to the Waltons, "Only agents

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<sup>767</sup> Ibid., 20–22.

<sup>768</sup> Ibid., 33–133.

<sup>769</sup> "It won't be until after your lifetime is over that your family will return here because the destiny of destruction that has been decreed for your friends and allies has been and will continue to be deferred" (ibid., 62).

<sup>770</sup> Ibid., 50–63.

<sup>771</sup> Ibid., 137.

of order are capable of sin and therefore able to be punished for sin.”<sup>772</sup> The Canaanites were agents of chaos, which is the absence of order, and were guilty of badness (רעע) and behaviors outside the bounds of order (תועבה), but they were not guilty of sin (חטא), which is “the twisting, bending, perverting, distorting, or corrupting of order.”<sup>773</sup>

According to the Waltons, the main purpose of the Conquest was the removal of the Canaanite identity and the establishing of Yahweh’s order in the land of Canaan. In order to arrive at this conclusion, the authors argue that the term *hērem* means “removal of something from human use” rather than “utterly destroy.”<sup>774</sup> When applied to people groups, it refers to *identity removal* rather than destruction (though it can include destruction). As a parallel example, when the Nazis were defeated in World War II, the Allies did not round up every German citizen to be executed. Rather, they destroyed Nazi flags, toppled monuments, dismantled governmental agencies, and occupied cities in order to remove the scourge of Nazism.<sup>775</sup> The same thing occurred in the Conquest. The Canaanites were defeated in battle as recorded in Joshua (even with hyperbole), but the *hērem* was instituted not for punishing the Canaanites but for removing the Canaanite identity so that the Israelites could not appropriate it for themselves.<sup>776</sup> Individuals like Rahab denounced their Canaanite identity in order to join the Israelites, though conversion was not the goal of *hērem*.<sup>777</sup> Finally, the Waltons see the modern

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<sup>772</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>773</sup> Ibid.

<sup>774</sup> Ibid., 169–75.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>776</sup> Ibid., 190–91.

<sup>777</sup> Ibid., 213–14.

application of *hērem* when people put off their old self and take up a new identity in Christ (cf. Gal 2:20; Rom 6:6; Col 3:5–11).<sup>778</sup>

In evaluating this interpretation, it should first be acknowledged that ancient Near Eastern studies often enhance one's understanding of the biblical text. However, Tremper Longman levels several criticisms against the identity-removal interpretation.<sup>779</sup> First, the Waltons overplay the paradigm of order/disorder. While these may be helpful categories to consider, disorder leads to rebellion and moral culpability, even if the Canaanites were not in a covenant relationship with God. Other passages in the Old Testament such as Amos 1–2 indicate that Gentile nations *are* morally responsible before God for a variety of sins even if they do not know God.<sup>780</sup> In addition, the Noahic Covenant (Gen 9:1–7) preceded the Mosaic Covenant and is applicable to all of creation. A second shortcoming of the identity-removal interpretation is that it relies on a dubious translation and interpretation of Genesis 15:16. If the verse is understood in the traditional sense, then the Amorites (Canaanites) *were* punished for sins at the time of the Conquest. Third, the Waltons' book is unhelpful in addressing critics, and it may even *add* to the moral dilemma. If the Canaanites were not morally culpable before God because they were not in covenant relationship with God, then God would be even *more* uncaring to wipe them out since they would not deserve that punishment. Therefore, the identity-removal interpretation falters at several points and does not adequately solve the moral problem of killing the Canaanite children.

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<sup>778</sup> Ibid., 239–ff.

<sup>779</sup> See Longman, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies*, 172–ff.

<sup>780</sup> See Bruce C. Birch, "Old Testament Ethics," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Leo G. Perdue (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 305.

## Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed a number of interpretations of the Conquest from scholars both ancient and modern. Some are simply critical of God, the Bible, and Christianity, and so the Conquest is dismissed out of hand. Others see the Bible as a book situated in a primitive culture, and so the Conquest is an example of an evil perpetrated by the Israelites and attributed in ignorance to God or permitted by God out of a need to accommodate ancient, barbaric practices. Other approaches include allegorizing the text by focusing on spiritual applications of the Conquest such as putting off sinful ways or revising the history presented in Joshua such that the Canaanites were offered peace or the Conquest did not include the destruction of noncombatants (i.e., Canaanite children). Other scholars import their own meaning through reader-response hermeneutics or give up trying to explain the Conquest altogether. Each of these interpretations has a number of shortcomings both biblically and theologically as noted above. For this reason, the next chapter will offer a more traditional defense of the Conquest with special attention given to killing the Canaanite children.

## Chapter 5: An Apologetic for the Canaanite Conquest

By way of review, chapter one explained the moral problem of the Conquest, laid out the methodology and assumptions of this dissertation, and defined the key term *ḥērem* as “devote to destruction,” “ban,” or “annihilate.” Chapters two and three surveyed the Conquest in its broader context of Genesis through Chronicles as well as its narrower context of Exodus through Judges, letting the biblical text speak for itself with a minimal amount of interpretation. The main conclusion was that the Conquest accomplished the dual purposes of punishing the Canaanites and fulfilling the land promises to Israel, and there were a number of other subpoints that will be reiterated in this chapter too. Chapter four examined the myriad of ways in which the Conquest has been interpreted throughout the Church Age. Some interpretations have stronger points than others, but each interpretation covered in chapter four has significant weaknesses and does not settle the matter concerning the Canaanite children.

This chapter will provide a more traditional defense that the Conquest was historical, just, and necessary and will give special attention to the moral problem of killing the Canaanite children. This chapter will naturally include the comments of various defenders of the Conquest throughout Church history,<sup>781</sup> and although commentators differ in some of the arguments given, and not every argument is equally convincing, the defense here will be a cumulative case.<sup>782</sup> The underlying assumption for this apologetic is that the Bible is authoritative and true as God’s

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<sup>781</sup> It should also be noted here that some of the Christian scholars who arrive at other interpretations still make some of the same points in this chapter. There is significant overlap since Christian scholars are working with the same Old Testament text and since some scholars who arrive at different conclusions start from the same place of belief in biblical inspiration and authority.

<sup>782</sup> See, for example, the views of Eugene H. Merrill, Daniel L. Gard, and Tremper Longman III in Stanley N. Gundry, ed., *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 157–59; Derek Kidner, “Old Testament Perspectives on War,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (1985): 99–113.

Word.<sup>783</sup> This does not *prove* that the Conquest was historical, just, and necessary, but it is important to lay this card on the table first. The objective here is to develop an apologetic that has greater depth and scope than competing interpretations and that coheres within a biblical worldview, which requires accepting the Bible as God’s Word as a presupposition or starting point. The end goal is to correctly understand the Conquest in its entirety.

### God Commanded the Conquest

The first point to make in defense of the Conquest is that the Conquest was commanded by God. As the Bible presents it, the Conquest was in the mind of God all the way back in Abraham’s day (cf. Gen 15:13–16). In fact, holy war became a part of the covenant itself in the book of Deuteronomy.<sup>784</sup> The Lord Himself gave the commands for *ḥērem* (Josh 6:2; 8:1–2; 10:8, 40, 42), so the Conquest was genocide “by both design and practice”<sup>785</sup> as a part of God’s plan to judge the Canaanites. Plus, it was *the Lord* who hardened the hearts of the Canaanites in order to bring them to destruction (Josh 11:20). As Irenaeus reasoned, this aligns with Jesus’ teaching in parables in order to harden hearts (Matt 13:11–16), Paul’s teaching that God turns

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<sup>783</sup> It is not surprising to find that the default position of many in the early Church was that the biblical concepts surrounding the Conquest were accepted without much question, even if critics cast doubt upon them. For example, an early second century BC source, *Mary of Cassobelaē*, referred to certain elders in the days of Daniel who were “Canaanites in practice,” which is a derogatory characterization that assumes that the picture of the Canaanites in the Old Testament was accurate (Mary of Cassobelaē, *Epistle from Maria of Cassobelaē to Ignatius*, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol 1., by Philip Schaff, ed. and trans. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson [1885, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2001], ch. 3). Another example comes from the Church historian Eusebius (AD 265–339), who wrote approvingly of the God of the Old Testament inflicting “Divine vengeance through his means on the tyrant race”—meaning the Egyptians or the Canaanites in context (Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert [1885, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009], 1.12). The same attitude appears in later Christian writers such as John Calvin (Ronald Goetz, “Joshua, Calvin, and Genocide,” *Theology Today* 32 [1975]: 263–74) and John Gill (John Gill, *John Gill’s Exposition of the Bible (Deuteronomy 20:16)*, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/deuteronomy-20-16.html>).

<sup>784</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 66.

<sup>785</sup> Merrill, “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” 93.

people over to a depraved mind (Rom 1:28), and Paul's teaching that God will send a strong delusion through the Antichrist in the future (2 Thess 2:11).<sup>786</sup> As an act of judgment, God has the right to harden hearts, and the act of hardening the hearts of the Canaanites shows that the Conquest was *God's* plan, not that of Moses or Joshua. As Calvin explained, Joshua was simply fulfilling God's command to Moses, and so he cannot be assigned any blame:

...Joshua did not give loose reins to his passion, when he slew all from the least to the greatest. For there is now a distinct statement of what had not yet been expressed, namely, that Joshua faithfully performed his part, by fulfilling everything which the Lord had enjoined by Moses. It is just as if he had placed his hands at the disposal of God, when he destroyed those nations according to his command. And so ought we to hold that, though the whole world should condemn us, it is sufficient to free us from all blame, that we have the authority of God. Meanwhile, it becomes us prudently to consider what each man's vocation requires, lest any one, by giving license to his zeal, as wishing to imitate Joshua, may be judged cruel and sanguinary, rather than a strict servant of God.<sup>787</sup>

The exterminations began with God, not with the Israelites; the Israelites were not making war for war's sake.<sup>788</sup> Rather, they were obeying God's command, which was authenticated by miracles (e.g., crossing the Jordan, walls of Jericho, Joshua's long day, etc.).<sup>789</sup>

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<sup>786</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.29.1.

<sup>787</sup> Calvin, *Joshua*, 152.

<sup>788</sup> Kidner, *Hard Sayings*, 42.

<sup>789</sup> In a parallel example, Immanuel Kant thought that, in the context of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham should have disobeyed God because Abraham should have known that God would never issue such a command: "For if God should really speak to man, man could still never know that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for man to apprehend the infinite by his senses, distinguish it from sensible beings, and recognize it as such. But in some cases man can be sure that the voice he hears is not God's; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion. We can use, as an example, the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God's command (the poor child, without knowing it, even brought the wood for the fire). Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: 'That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven'" (Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor [New York: Abaris Books, Inc., 1979], 115). This point was discussed above in chapter four in reference to the Conquest. But God *did* do something miraculous in Abraham's life—namely, He gave him a son in his old age. Abraham had walked with God for many years and knew His voice. The same was true of Moses and Joshua. They knew the Lord, and the Lord provided miracles to accompany His commands.



## God's Right to Take Life

The second point follows from the first: God has the right to take human life. There is ample biblical support for God's sovereignty over life. He is "the Judge of all the earth" (Gen 18:25; 1 Sam 2:10) and "the God of the spirits of all mankind" (Num 16:22; 27:16). He controls who will miscarry, who will be barren, and who will live a long life (Exod 23:26; cf. Lev 20:20–21). He is also the one who gives children (e.g., Isa 8:18; Job 1:21; 42:13–15). As God, He puts to death and brings to life (Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6). He can cut short a person's life (e.g., Gen 37:7), extend life (e.g., Isa 38:5), take someone out of this life before he dies (e.g., Gen 5:24), and bring the dead back to life (e.g., 1 Kgs 17:19–22). It is also His prerogative to avenge and repay (Deut 32:35). He is the One who sent judgments upon foreign nations (e.g., Exod 7–14) and upon Israel (e.g., 2 Kgs 17:1–23). He is the one who set before the Israelites life and prosperity, death and destruction (Deut 30:15). In sum, He is the ultimate source of life. Therefore, He has the right to take life whenever He chooses; it is His to reclaim.

In one sense, God takes everyone's lives eventually. This happens to young and old, male and female, innocent and guilty. God may take life actively, or He may passively allow life to expire. As Aquinas wrote,

All men alike, both guilty and innocent, die the death of nature: which death of nature is inflicted by the power of God on account of original sin, according to 1 Kgs. 2:6 [=1 Sam 2:6]: "The Lord killeth and maketh alive." Consequently, by the command of God, death can be inflicted on any man, guilty or innocent, without any injustice whatever.<sup>790</sup>

Original sin brought on the Curse, which includes the death of all sooner or later. God can choose not to sustain a person's earthly life any longer, or He can order the cessation of human

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<sup>790</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.2.94.5.

life through human instruments as a form of punishment (e.g., the Conquest) or as a part of a greater purpose God has for humanity (e.g., the death of Christ).

As it pertains to the Canaanites, Luther wrote, “But even though those Gentiles were worthy of death, nobody, not even the Israelites, was permitted to kill them unless prompted by a sure and evident command and Word of God.... For He who gave life can rightfully take it away from those who have sinned against Him alone.”<sup>791</sup> This includes ordering the taking of life in warfare. However, it would have been wrong for the Israelites to have killed the Canaanites without the divine command. This is what Saul did in unlawfully applying the ban to the Gibeonites in violation of the covenant they had made with Joshua (2 Sam 21:1–16; cf. Josh 9:1–27). God has the right to take life, and so humans may take life under the divine sanction, as in the case of capital punishment (cf. Gen 9:6) or in the case of a just war.<sup>792</sup> As the English theologian Joseph Butler (1692–1752) wrote:

For men have no right, either to life or property, but what arises solely from the grant of God. When this grant is revoked, they cease to have any right at all in either: and when this revocation is made known, as surely it is possible it may be, it must cease to be unjust to deprive them of either. And though a course of external acts, which without command would be immoral, must make an immoral habit; yet a few detached commands have no such natural tendency.<sup>793</sup>

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<sup>791</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, 83.

<sup>792</sup> Christian theologians have devised “just war theory” to explain that war is sometimes necessary but that it must also meet certain criteria in order to be just. There must be just cause (e.g., response to enemy aggression), just intent (e.g., restoration of peace), the exhaustion of all other options, a lawful declaration by the government, and limitations on the objectives and means for war that do not go beyond what would be considered sufficient objectives and means to win the war. It is also agreed that a just war must include the immunity of non-combatants, including POW’s, medical personnel, and the like (Arthur F. Holmes, ed., “Introduction,” in *War and Christian Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975], 4–5). The Conquest fits the criteria with the exception of the last point since God decreed the extermination of Canaanite men, women, and children.

<sup>793</sup> Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion, to the Constitution and Course of Nature*, 17th ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1873), 598–99; cf. Augustine, “Questions on Joshua 10–11,” in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament IV. Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, ed. John R. Franke (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 46.

If God issues the decree for taking life, then there is nothing immoral when God's human instruments act in accordance with that decree. Augustine stated made this point long ago:

And in this latter case [of a special, divine commission], he to whom authority is delegated, and who is but the sword in the hand of him who uses it, is not himself responsible for the death he deals. And, accordingly, they who have waged war in obedience to the divine command, or in conformity with His laws have represented in their persons the public justice or the wisdom of government, and in this capacity have put to death wicked men; such persons have by no means violated the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Abraham indeed was not merely deemed guiltless of cruelty, but was even applauded for his piety, because he was ready to slay his son in obedience to God, not to his own passion.<sup>794</sup>

God cannot commit *murder* because murder is when one human "plays God" by wrongfully taking another human's life. But it is not wrong for God to "play God."<sup>795</sup> The same applies to "stealing." Everything ultimately belongs to God, and so if He wanted to give the land of Canaan to someone else, He could do so. God does not owe anybody anything when it all belongs to Him, and God is not guilty of a crime when He directly takes human life or when He commissions His creatures to take human life, whether in war or as a form of capital punishment. The same is true of God's allocation of land, which all belongs to Him (cf. Lev 25:23). The Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne makes this point in his defense of the Conquest:

God does not wrong the Canaanites (including their children) if he makes the gift of life shorter for some of them than for some other humans. If there is a God, he has made it abundantly clear that the 'gift' of life is a temporary one which he makes as long or short as he chooses. To use an analogy, I may lend you a book, saying, 'you can have this until I want it back'. I don't wrong you if I let other people use a book for a longer period than I let you use a book.<sup>796</sup>

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<sup>794</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods (1886, repr., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), 1.21.

<sup>795</sup> Greg Koukl, "The Canaanites: Genocide or Judgment?" accessed January 23, 2022, <https://www.str.org/w/the-canaanites-genocide-or-judgment->.

<sup>796</sup> Richard Swinburne, "Reply to Morrision," in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, eds. Michael Bergman, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rae (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 233–34.

Finally, God's sovereign right to take life undergirds the entire mission of Christ. As Kaiser asserts, "To reject on all grounds the right and legitimacy of our Lord to ask for life under any conditions would be to remove his sovereignty and question his justice in providing his own sacrifice as the central work of redemption."<sup>797</sup> Therefore, any discussion of the Conquest must have God's right to life at the center.

### God's Chosen Means of Judgment

The next point follows from the previous two points: God has the right to take life by His chosen *means*. A casual reading of the Bible reveals the fact that God takes life in many ways. In Genesis, He sent the Flood to destroy all of humanity except for eight people (Gen 6–8). In Abraham's time, God sent burning sulfur from heaven to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:24). He sent various plagues upon Egypt that killed many Egyptians (Exod 7–11). He also sent plagues upon Israel as judgment (e.g., Exod 32:35; Num 16:46–50; 25:9; 2 Sam 24:15). God sent fire from heaven (Num 11:1–3), an earthquake (Num 16:30–33), and venomous serpents (Num 21:6) to put rebellious Israelites to death in the wilderness. He sent the "destroyer" to kill the Egyptian firstborn (Exod 12:23), hailstones to kill the Canaanites (Josh 10:11), a lion to kill a disobedient prophet (1 Kgs 13:24), an angel to kill the Assyrian army (2 Chron 32:21), and an angel to strike down King Herod (Acts 12:23). God even allows Satan to kill on occasion (e.g., Job 1:12–19). During the Great Tribulation (Rev 6–19), the Lord will use a variety of means to bring death upon the earth. Sometimes the Lord put people to death directly (e.g., Gen 38:7, 10; 2 Sam 6:7; Acts 5:5, 10) or sent an illness to kill them (e.g., 2 Chron 26:19–21; 1 Cor 11:30). He even struck the illegitimate child of David and Bathsheba with an illness that caused the baby's death as an act of judgment upon the parents (2 Sam 12:15–19; cf. Rev 2:22). In summary, God

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<sup>797</sup> Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 53.

takes life in many different ways in the Bible—both actively and passively. He judges those who do not worship Him as well as those who do. He puts to death men and women as well as young and old. However, each of the abovementioned examples is not without just cause or a greater purpose. The acts of killing are not random or meaningless.

God also used *human* instruments to take life throughout the Bible. The first implementation of this was after the Flood when God established capital punishment (Gen 9:6). Humans were commanded to take the lives of murderers under God’s sanction. God also used human instruments to terminate the lives of idolators (Exod 32:27–28), a Sabbath-breaker (Num 15:32–36), the sexually immoral (Num 25:5–13), false prophets (1 Kgs 18:40), and various lawbreakers who committed capital offenses (e.g., Lev 20:1–27). He also used humans to put to death Achan and his family for taking the banned items from Jericho (Josh 7:25), and He used human judges to deliver the people of Israel from foreign oppressors (e.g., Judg 3:12–30). He even commanded Abraham to offer up his own son Isaac as a sacrifice in order to test Abraham’s faith (Gen 22:1–19), although God stopped Abraham from carrying out the act. The Bible also teaches that God establishes laws and human government for the purpose of punishing evildoers (Rom 13:1–5; cf. 1 Tim 1:8–11). Finally, God acted through human armies to punish nations. As Luther observed, “He who overthrew Sodom without using another nation is wont at other times to punish one nation through another nation.”<sup>798</sup> This applies to Israel’s army defeating enemy nations (e.g., Exod 17:8–16) as well as to God using foreign armies to defeat Israel, while also punishing the foreign enemies too (e.g., Isa 10:5–19; Jer 4:5–31; 50:1–51:58).<sup>799</sup> This pertains to

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<sup>798</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, 79.

<sup>799</sup> Luther noted one difference between God using the nation of Israel to punish other nations and God using other nations to punish evil: “But the swords of other peoples are different from the sword of Israel in this respect: God uses their fury in a hidden judgment and crushes the ungodly through the ungodly; but the sword of

the Conquest as well. God used war to punish the Canaanites, and Israel was merely the weapon in God's hand.<sup>800</sup> The Conquest was also used to form the nation of Israel, so there was a dual purpose. As Moses wrote,

Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, *by war*, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes (Deut 4:34 [emphasis added])?

In carrying out these wars, the Israelites had to do things according to the Lord's instructions. When they did not follow His instructions, they were defeated in battle (e.g., Num 14:39–45; 1 Sam 4:1–11).<sup>801</sup> In addition, the judgment upon the Canaanite nations, which included the death of the Canaanite children, was also applied to Israel when the northern and southern kingdoms eventually became thoroughly apostate. Hosea wrote the following to depict the judgment coming upon the northern kingdom of Israel: "The people of Samaria must bear their guilt, because they have rebelled against their God. They will fall by the sword; their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open" (Hos 13:16). Just as God raised up Israel to judge the Canaanites, so God raised up the Assyria to judge the Israelites. God used human instruments according to His justice and purposes.

The last point to make here is that there is no condemnation in Scripture when God used human instruments in warfare. The Conquest is one example, of course, where God Himself authorized the *hērem*, and so naturally, there is nothing negative in the text about Israel's actions. Later passages of Scripture praise God for His participation in human warfare. David wrote in

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Israel is hallowed by an open and certain command of God, so that with a holy and pure conscience the godly destroy the ungodly and shed blood in a sacred act of religion" (ibid., 83).

<sup>800</sup> John Piper, "The Conquest of Canaan," accessed January 16, 2022, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-conquest-of-canaan>.

<sup>801</sup> Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity," 85.

Psalm 144:1–2, “Praise be to the LORD my Rock, who trains my hand for war, my fingers for battle. He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me.” God is praised for using His human instrument (David) to subdue David’s enemies. This idea is further developed in Psalm 149:6–9:

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, to bind their kings with fetters, their nobles with shackles of iron, to carry out the sentence written against them. This is the glory of all his saints.

God even receives *praise* for working through human means to execute judgment or bring deliverance. The reason for the praise is not because warfare is God’s ideal for the world but because God’s overarching plan—in a fallen world—included the divine preservation of Israel and the Davidic line to accomplish God’s greater purpose through Israel’s Messiah.

#### Israel’s Moral Obligation

Humans have the moral obligation to obey God’s commands, even in taking human life. This is known as “divine command theory”<sup>802</sup> or “divine command morality.”<sup>803</sup> In short, moral values (good and evil) are rooted in God’s moral nature, and moral duties (right and wrong) are based on God’s commands, which flow from His moral character.<sup>804</sup> What God commands is right and must be obeyed. Since God commanded the extermination of the Canaanites as divine punishment, then the Israelites were morally obligated to obey the order in carrying out genocide. Copan and Flannagan explain the situation as follows:

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<sup>802</sup> Baggett and Walls, *Good God*, 103–ff; cf. idem., *God and Cosmos: Moral Truth and Human Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 287–ff.

<sup>803</sup> Craig A. Boyd and Don Thorsen, *Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy: An Introduction to Issues and Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 57.

<sup>804</sup> See the recent discussion of this topic by William Lane Craig, “Reasons for Divine Commands,” accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/reasonable-faith-podcast/reasons-for-divine-commands>.

If God has issued a command to all people to refrain from *P*, then engaging in *P* has the property of being wrong. However if, in a specific situation, God commands a specific person to do *P*, then *P* is no longer contrary to God's commands for that person; as such, *P* no longer has the property of being wrong for that person."<sup>805</sup>

If what is prohibited is the act of taking life (whether innocent or guilty), and that prohibition is lifted and substituted with a command to take that specific action for a given situation (e.g., capital punishment or holy war), then the prohibition no longer applies. This does not mean that God could command *anything*. The Scottish theologian John Duns Scotus (d. 1308) made a distinction between the first table of the Decalogue and the second table.<sup>806</sup> The first table (Commandments 1–4) cannot be countermanded. God cannot allow for the worship of other gods in any situation, for example. The second table (Commandments 5–10) may be dispensed with at certain times, as with the despoiling the Egyptians or when Jesus cast the demons into the pigs (Mark 5:12–13). Since God is the ultimate owner of all things, then He can do as He pleases.<sup>807</sup> The same applies to the prohibition against taking innocent life. God can overrule that command in certain situations as an act of judgment upon certain guilty parties.<sup>808</sup>

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<sup>805</sup> Copan and Flannagan, "The Ethics of 'Holy War' for Christian Morality and Theology," 205. What is interesting here is that Copan and Flannagan believe that God *could have* authorized the killing of noncombatants, but since they believe the Conquest accounts are exaggerated, then there *were* no noncombatants killed after all. The defense offered in this chapter builds upon the same divine-command-theory foundation but with the traditional interpretation that the Conquest included the killing of noncombatants.

<sup>806</sup> There is some debate on how to number the Ten Commandments, but the point remains the same. For a discussion, see Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (1872, repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1940), 272–75.

<sup>807</sup> John Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense*, 3.37.1–ff., accessed March 25, 2021, <https://www.aristotelophile.com/Books/Translations/Scotus%20Ordinatio%20III%20dd.26-40.pdf>.

<sup>808</sup> Augustine took a different approach to this question but arrived at the same conclusion that God can order things contrary to natural law. For a full discussion, see Matthew Levering, *The Theology of Augustine: An Introductory Guide to His Most Important Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 70–ff; idem., "God and Natural Law: Reflections on Genesis 22," in *The Threads of Natural Law: Unravelling a Philosophical Tradition*, ed. Francisco José Contreras (Seville, Spain: Springer, 2013), 65–83.



The next consideration is that the Israelites themselves would have been judged for disobedience had they *not* executed the *hērem*. Augustine made this point in his exchange with Faustus: “It is therefore mere groundless calumny to charge Moses with making war, for there would have been less harm in making war of his own accord, than in not doing it when God commanded him.”<sup>809</sup> Calvin made the same point but specifically in reference to Joshua slaughtering the Canaanite women and children at the direction of God. Had Joshua done this of his own accord, he would be guilty of bloodshed, but since he was merely acting in accordance with the divine command, there is no fault. Joshua had no choice but to obey God:

Here the divine authority is again interposed in order completely to acquit Joshua of any charge of cruelty. Had he proceeded of his own accord to commit an indiscriminate massacre of women and children, no excuse could have exculpated him from the guilt of detestable cruelty, cruelty surpassing anything of which we read as having been perpetrated by savage tribes scarcely raised above the level of the brutes. But that at which all would otherwise be justly horrified, it becomes them to embrace with reverence, as proceeding from God.... But as God had destined the swords of his people for the slaughter of the Amorites, Joshua could do nothing else than obey his command.<sup>810</sup>

The English theologian J. B. Mozley (1813–78) reached the same conclusion: “Nor can it be denied that as soon as a Divine command to exterminate a whole people becomes known to another people, they have not only the right, but are under the strictest obligation to execute such a command.”<sup>811</sup> The divine command was issued, and Israel had the moral obligation to obey.<sup>812</sup>

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<sup>809</sup> Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 22.78. Kierkegaard made a similar point regarding Abraham and Isaac. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 56–57.

<sup>810</sup> Calvin, *Joshua*, 144.

<sup>811</sup> J. B. Mozley, *Ruling Ideas in Early Ages and Their Relation to Old Testament Faith*, 2d ed. (London: Rivingtons, 1878), 84.

<sup>812</sup> An interesting parallel case that has frequently been discussed is God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Augustine reasoned in the same as described above: “According to the eternal law, which requires the preservation of natural order, and forbids the transgression of it, some actions have an indifferent character, so that men are blamed for presumption if they do them without being called upon, while they are

There are two main objections to divine command theory that must be addressed here. First is the contention that divine command theory results in moral nihilism. If the Moral Law has exceptions (e.g., genocide is sometimes commanded by God), then it is not objective at all. However, this is a non sequitur. It may be right to kill a particular person on a particular occasion in a particular circumstance—as with capital punishment—but this does not negate the general rule that it is wrong to take life without just cause since, presumably, there would be just cause. A second objection is that the Conquest violates the human understanding of goodness and the basic belief that God is a perfect moral being. If God commanded the slaughter of the Canaanites, then either He is not morally perfect, or a person's existing moral beliefs are opposite of reality; what ones thinks is evil is actually holy. In response, it must be acknowledged that human moral judgments are indeed fallible. Additionally, it is presumptuous to think that humans are better judges of morality than God. God may permit or order a certain action in a rare situation in order to prevent a greater evil. The exception does not negate the rule, though.<sup>813</sup> Finally, as mentioned already, God has no such prohibitions against taking life—including innocent life—because He is *God*. Humans, though, would be “playing God” if they took innocent life of their own accord since that right belongs only to God. What is more, no one is promised a long life. As Craig states, “God is under no obligation whatsoever to extend my

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deservedly praised for doing them when required. The act, the agent, and the authority for the action are all of great importance in the order of nature. For Abraham to sacrifice his son of his own accord is shocking madness. His doing so at the command of God proves him faithful and submissive” (Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 22.73). Likewise, Aquinas defended Abraham's action since it was commanded by God: “God is Lord of death and life, for by His decree both the sinful and the righteous die. Hence he who at God's command kills an innocent man does not sin, as neither does God Whose behest he executes: indeed his obedience to God's commands is a proof that he fears Him” (Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2.2.64.6, accessed January 14, 2021, <http://www.microbookstudio.org/summa.htm>). For an extensive overview of the historical views and interpretive issues surrounding the *Akedah*, see R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 71–183.

<sup>813</sup> Copan and Flannagan, “The Ethics of ‘Holy War’ for Christian Morality and Theology,” 206–208. For an expanded argument, see idem., *Did God Really Command Genocide?* 139–ff.

life for another second. If He wanted to strike me dead right now, that's His prerogative.... God has the right to take the lives of the Canaanites when He sees fit. How long they live and when they die is up to Him.”<sup>814</sup>

### Conflicting Commandments and Graded Absolutism

While it may appear that there is a contradiction between God's command not to murder—that is, to take innocent life (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17)—and God's command to exterminate the Canaanites (Deut 7:1–2), Christian apologist Norm Geisler argued for an ethical idea called *graded absolutism* to resolve such apparent contradictions.<sup>815</sup> In essence, graded absolutism is the position that in situations where there are conflicting moral absolutes, the moral absolutes must be graded so that the duty which is performed results in more good. An example is seen in the life of Samson. While Samson had a moral duty not to commit suicide, which is morally wrong, an exception was made in his case so that he could get revenge on the Philistines in his death, which also aligned with God's overall plan to judge the Philistines. The emphasis is not on choosing between two evils but between choosing that which is the greater good. When there are two conflicting moral duties, a person is exempt from performing the lower moral duty because the higher moral duty is obligatory. Geisler found biblical support for graded absolutism in the fact that, according to Jesus, there are “weightier” matters of the Law (Matt 23:23) as well as the “least” of the commandments (Matt 5:19) and the “greatest” of the commandments (Matt 22:36). Plus, Jesus taught that there is an “unpardonable sin” (Matt 12:31–32), that Judas

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<sup>814</sup> William Lane Craig and Joseph E. Gorra, *A Reasonable Response: Answers to Tough Questions on God, Christianity, and the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2013), 279; cf. William Lane Craig, “Slaughter of the Canaanites,” accessed on July 14, 2021, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/slaughter-of-the-canaanites>; idem., “The ‘Slaughter’ of the Canaanites Re-visited,” accessed July 14, 2021, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/the-slaughter-of-the-canaanites-re-visited>; idem., “Once More: The Slaughter of the Canaanites,” accessed July 14, 2021, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/Once-More-The-Slaughter-of-the-Canaanites>.

<sup>815</sup> See Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 113–ff.

committed a “greater sin” (John 19:11), and that laying down one’s life for another is the greatest act of love (John 15:13).<sup>816</sup> In summary, there are higher and lower moral laws.

Yet, there unavoidable moral conflicts in Scripture. Examples include God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac in conflict with God’s command not to murder. Or, consider God’s command to love God with all of one’s being conflicting with God’s command to obey governing authorities that may prohibit God’s people from praying (e.g., Dan 6). The Conquest is a fitting example too. Under normal circumstances, the taking of innocent life was prohibited in Israel, but in this particular situation, God also commanded the extermination of the Canaanite men, women, and children. The Israelites would have been obeying one command or disobeying another command regardless of what they did. Therefore, they were required to obey the higher command, which, in this case, was the command to exterminate the Canaanites. God would not hold the Israelites guilty of murder for acting as His instrument in bringing judgment upon the Canaanite nation since the Israelites were obeying the higher law. Although there was a conflict between the command to love God by obeying God’s order to place the Canaanites under the ban and the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself (by not killing the Canaanites), the higher command was to obey God. Geisler summed up the point as follows:

This exemption functions something like an ethical “right of way” law. In many states the law declares that when two cars simultaneously reach an intersection without signals or signs, the car on the right has the right of way. Common sense dictates that both cars cannot go through the intersection at the same time; one car must yield. Similarly, when a person enters an ethical intersection where two laws come into unavoidable conflict, it is evident that one law must yield to the other.<sup>817</sup>

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<sup>816</sup> The concept of degrees of punishment in hell (Matt 5:22; 10:15; 11:22, 24; Luke 12:47–48; Rom 2:6; Rev 20:12) and different rewards in heaven (1 Cor 3:11–15; 2 Cor 5:10) fit with Jesus’ teachings too.

<sup>817</sup> Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 120.

There are several objections leveled against graded absolutism which must be addressed,<sup>818</sup> especially since graded absolutism may be mistaken for some of the interpretations critiqued in the previous chapter. One objection is that it seems to mirror situational ethics, which is the view that morals change depending on the situation. In response, though, it should be noted that situationism does not hold to moral absolutes, whereas graded absolutism does. Situational factors are important for decision making, but for graded absolutism, discovering God's will is the ultimate goal, which may mean choosing a higher moral law over a lower moral law. Another objection is that graded absolutism leads to subjectivism, where each person has to decide for himself how to act. However, graded absolutism holds that God is the One who establishes the hierarchy of moral values, and in the case of the Conquest, God clearly revealed His will to Moses, Joshua, and the Israelites. All that was subjective in that situation was their understanding of God's commands, which may be why God left no ambiguity. A third objection is that graded absolutism does not involve absolutes at all since some commands of God may be overridden in certain situations and are therefore not absolute. In response, it should be noted that the moral absolutes are based on God's nature, which does not change, and although there are situations where there are conflicts between two of God's absolute commands, the order of priority is also absolute. For example, it would not have been morally acceptable for Joshua and the Israelites to disobey God's command to destroy the Canaanites (the higher command) in order to fulfill the other command to love their neighbors as themselves (the lower command). In fact, the Israelites' failure to fully carry out the Conquest (Judg 1:27–2:5) resulted in religious syncretism in Israel and the subsequent *judgment* of God (Judg 2:10–3:6).

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<sup>818</sup> See *ibid.*, 123–ff.

A fourth objection is that graded absolutism is really choosing the lesser of two evils, which makes choosing evil into something good. However, graded absolutism focuses not on choosing a lesser evil but on choosing a *greater good* so that the action performed is still good. For the Conquest, the act of killing was not the ultimate good. Rather, the act of moral cleansing (judgment) was good and right in God's eyes in order to rid the land of evil. Similarly, a surgeon who performs an amputation—the good act—is not held morally responsible for maiming the patient, which would be evil if done without the greater purpose of amputation. Graded absolutism allows for exemptions but not exceptions. An exception would mean that doing something evil is sometimes acceptable, depending on the situation (e.g., it is sometimes okay to murder). Graded absolutism is the view that murder is always wrong but that one is sometimes exempt from obeying a lower law (“Do not murder”) in order to obey a higher law (“Utterly destroy the Canaanites”). The same is true of killing someone in self-defense. It is always wrong to kill another person because of the sanctity of human life, but a man is exempt from the charge of murder if he follows the higher law of defending his own life.

The fifth objection is similar to the previous one in that it compares graded absolutism to utilitarianism since graded absolutism aims for the “greater good.” The difference is that the greater good (graded absolutism) is not the same as the greatest result (utilitarianism). Rather, the greater good is connected to the higher rule or command. Additionally, in graded absolutism, God is the one who determines what is the best result or the greatest good, not man. Therefore, graded absolutism is not to be mistaken for utilitarianism.

In concluding this discussion, the reader may reflect on the fact that Jesus also faced moral conflicts such as the choice between obeying His parents or obeying God (Luke 2:41–40) and between following Sabbath regulations and healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1–6). The

greatest moral conflict, one may argue, is seen in Jesus' crucifixion. On the one hand, God's justice dictates that the innocent (Jesus) should not suffer for the guilty (humanity). On the other hand, God's will was to show mercy to humanity by having one (Jesus) die for all (humanity). As Peter wrote, the righteous suffered for the unrighteous (1 Pet 3:18; cf. 2 Cor 5:21). This appears to be a contradiction unless there are higher and lower moral laws. Although both justice and mercy flow from God's nature, the greater moral act in the atonement of Christ was to show mercy.<sup>819</sup> In the Conquest, the greater moral act was to rid the land of Canaanite wickedness.

### Punishing the Canaanites

The next argument supporting the Conquest is that the Canaanites were ripe for judgment. As explained in chapter three, Canaanite practices included incest, homosexuality, bestiality, temple prostitution, idolatry, witchcraft, and child sacrifice. The Conquest would be warranted for these reasons alone. As Augustine opined, "God in giving the command, acted not in cruelty, but in righteous retribution, giving to all what they deserved, and warning those who needed warning."<sup>820</sup> This point has to remain at the center of the discussion. Like Sodom and Gomorrah, it was time to rid the earth of the Canaanites since their spiritual and moral corruption had infected the entire society. The Christian theologian R. A. Torrey made this point over a century ago by comparing the Canaanites to a spreading cancer that had to be removed:

They (the Canaanites) had become a moral cancer threatening the very life of the whole human race. That cancer must be cut out in every fiber if the body was to be saved. Cutting out a cancer is a delicate operation, but often it is the kindest thing a surgeon can do under existing circumstances. The kindest thing that God could do for the human race was to cut out every root and fiber of these grossly wicked people.<sup>821</sup>

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<sup>819</sup> Ibid., 125–26, 31.

<sup>820</sup> Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 22.74; cf. Hugo Grotius, *On the Law of War and Peace*, trans. De Jure Belli ac Pacis (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), 213.

The Conquest, then, should be more appropriately classified as *moral cleansing* than simply genocide.<sup>822</sup> In order to remove the idolatry from the land, the idolaters themselves had to be removed.<sup>823</sup> As the Christian apologist John William Haley (1834–1927) explained,

Absolute extermination of the idolaters was the only safeguard of the Hebrews. Any of the former who should be spared, would, owing to their *perverse proclivities*, prove a most undesirable and intractable element in the Hebrew theocracy. It was better for all concerned, that these idolatrous tribes should be laid under the ban; that is, altogether exterminated, that they might not teach the Israelites their abominations and sins.<sup>824</sup>

The Conquest was also necessary to rid the land of false gods. As Merrill argues,

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.<sup>825</sup>

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<sup>821</sup> R. A. Torrey, *Difficulties in the Bible* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1907), 48; cf. John Ortberg, *Stepping Out in Faith: Life-Changing Examples from the History of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 36.

<sup>822</sup> Copan and Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?* 277.

<sup>823</sup> Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, 79. John Locke (1632–1704) thought that the Canaanites were not destroyed because of idolatry because then the Moabites and other nations would have suffered the same fate. Instead, Locke argued the following point: “God being in a peculiar manner the King of the Jews, He could not suffer the adoration of any other deity (which was properly an act of high treason against Himself) in the land of Canaan, which was His kingdom. For such a manifest revolt could no ways consist with His dominion, which was perfectly political in that country. All idolatry was, therefore, to be rooted out of the bounds of His kingdom because it was an acknowledgement of another god, that is to say, another king, against the laws of Empire.” Locke believed that the laws of Israel against idolatry functioned within the land of Canaan and only for Israel's citizens. Those from other nations who were subjugated under David and Solomon were not executed for their idolatry, nor were they forcibly converted to Israelite worship. See John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, trans. William Popple (n.p., 1689), 29–30. There is some truth in this view, but it omits the greater point that the Canaanites were especially wicked, which explains the need for two sets of rules for warfare in Deuteronomy 20.

<sup>824</sup> John W. Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* (Andover, MA: Warren F. Draper, 1875), 266–67 (emphasis original).

<sup>825</sup> Merrill, “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” 71; cf. Alexander Campbell, *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Cincinnati: Central Book Concern, 1879), 352–53; R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 654.



This point need not be controversial. As Wenham wrote, “Christians would find no great difficulty with the overthrow of the Canaanites had it taken place at the hands of their heathen neighbours.”<sup>826</sup> Why, then, is it controversial if God used Israel to eradicate Canaanite wickedness? It was better to stamp out evil than to let it infect others and continue to spread. The Canaanites were incorrigible, and the Conquest was done for the good of the human race.<sup>827</sup>

The Conquest also addressed the question of how long God would tolerate wickedness.<sup>828</sup> God had a limit at the time of the Flood, and God had a limit for Sodom and Gomorrah. The same was true in Israel’s history of apostasy, and it will be true at the end of the age when Christ returns to judge the world in righteousness (cf. Acts 17:31). While it would have been premature to judge the Canaanites during Abraham’s era, by the time of the Conquest, God’s tolerance had run its course. There is a limit to God’s patience (cf. 2 Pet 3:9); there is a time when enough is enough. The Christian apologist Ron Rhodes makes the point that God would have, in fact, been *unjust* to let such moral and spiritual depravity continue indefinitely:

God’s command was issued not because God is cruel and vindictive, but because the Canaanites were so horrible, so evil, so oppressive, and so cancerous to society that—like a human cancer—the only option was complete removal. God would have been showing utter disregard for the righteous if He had not acted to stop this gangrenous nation from taking over all society.<sup>829</sup>

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<sup>826</sup> Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil*, 137. The nineteenth century Bible teacher John Cunningham Geikie (1824–1906) went even further: “The heathenism of Palestine and Syria was so foul and grading in every sense, that there is no State, even at this time, which would not put it down; if necessary, by the severest penalties. Its spread to Rome was bewailed 1,500 years later by the satirists of the day as a calamity marking the utter decay of the times” (Cunningham Geikie, *Hours with the Bible; the Scriptures in the Light of Modern Knowledge*, rev. ed. [New York: James Pott & Company, 1903], 2:447–48).

<sup>827</sup> Bayley, *From Egypt to Canaan*, 93; cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2.2.64.2; William Brenton Greene, Jr., “The Ethics of the Old Testament,” *Princeton Theological Review* 27, no. 3 (July 1929): 332–33; Edward J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 24.

<sup>828</sup> Iain Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion: What the Old Testament Really Says and Why It Matters* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 71; cf. Darrell Cole, *When God Says War Is Right: The Christian’s Perspective on When and How to Fight* (Colorado Springs: WaterBook Press, 2002), 36.

<sup>829</sup> Ron Rhodes, *The Big Book of Bible Answers* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2013), 67.

The last point here is that God's punishment of the Canaanites does not imply that the Israelites were inheriting the land because of their own righteousness (cf. Deut 9:1–6). There would come a point in Israel's history when the Israelites would reach the limit of God's patience too.

### God's Love and God's Wrath

Punishing the Canaanites naturally raises the question of the relationship between God's love and God's wrath. This is what is really behind the Marcionites' and the contemporary Christians' criticisms: How could a loving God command genocide? Lamb seems to imply this tension when he asks, "Did Yahweh abundantly love the Canaanites and the Egyptians?"<sup>830</sup> Did God love those who experienced His wrath, and if so, then how could God be loving while pouring out His wrath? To answer this question requires a broader understanding of God's many attributes. The Bible teaches that God is perfect (Matt 5:48), merciful (Luke 6:36), good (Mark 10:18), omnipotent (Matt 19:26), wrathful (Rom 1:18), kind and patient (Rom 2:4), righteous (Rom 3:21), gracious (Rom 3:23–24), wise and knowledgeable (Rom 11:33), faithful (1 Cor 1:9), truthful (Num 23:19), blessed (1 Tim 1:11), eternal and immortal (1 Tim 1:17), self-sufficient (Acts 17:24–25), immutable (James 1:17), omniscient (1 John 3:20), and love itself (1 John 4:8). The simple answer to Lamb's question is, Yes, God *did* love the Canaanites just the same as He loves other peoples, but the Canaanites were incorrigibly wicked, and so they experienced God's wrath.<sup>831</sup> At the same time God was pouring out His wrath on the Canaanites,

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<sup>830</sup> Lamb, *God Behaving Badly*, 39. Similarly, another writer asks, "Could you invite a Canaanite home for lunch?" (Alden Thompson, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989], 91). The answer is, No, if the Canaanites acted as vile and wicked as those who wanted to rape the two angels visiting Lot's house in Sodom.

<sup>831</sup> From a theological standpoint, God would have been just to rid the land of all sinners since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23) and are deserving of death (Rom 6:23). In this respect, "the Canaanites only received what all peoples deserved, and any peoples who were spared were so spared only by God's grace (David M. Howard, Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* [Chicago: Moody Publishers,

He was lovingly giving the Israelites the Promised Land as a permanent home. Another example of God's love and wrath working together is the Exodus event when the Lord had compassion on the Israelites while He poured out wrath on the Egyptians in order to deliver the Israelites from bondage.<sup>832</sup> These are two sides of the same coin. God's love is inseparable from His holiness and justice.<sup>833</sup> And yet, God's wrath is not an end in itself, nor is it capricious or random.<sup>834</sup> Rather, God's wrath "may be considered God's circumstantial will that stands in the service of God's ultimate will for life and salvation."<sup>835</sup> In order for God's ultimate will for Israel and the world to come to pass, His circumstantial will of judging the Canaanites, based on their free decisions to persist in wickedness, had to come to pass as well.<sup>836</sup>

### Mercy Available

As explained in chapter three, mercy was available for any Canaanites who defected to worshiping Yahweh, thereby abandoning their idolatry, immorality, and murderous child

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1993], 92). Howard acknowledges that this explanation is incomplete by itself since God did not destroy *every* nation. The heinousness of the Canaanite practices set them apart as objects of destruction (Torrey, *Difficulties in the Bible*, 48–49; cf. Daniel L. Gard, "A Response to Eugene H. Merrill," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003], 103–104).

<sup>832</sup> For more examples, see David Lamb, "Compassion and Wrath as Motivations for Divine Warfare," in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and the Old Testament Problem*, eds. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 133–51.

<sup>833</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God* (London: Tyndale, 1951), v; Greene, "The Ethics of the Old Testament," 326; cf. William G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, 2d ed. (1888, repr., Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 174–ff; Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume Two* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), ch. 16.

<sup>834</sup> Bruce Edward Baloian, *Anger in the Old Testament* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 103.

<sup>835</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, "Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God in the Old Testament," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24, no. 2 (2002): 25.

<sup>836</sup> The Bible teaches that God is glorified in His judgment because it demonstrates His holiness, justice, and power (cf. Exod 9:16; Rom 9:14–24; Rev 19:1–3). See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 326; cf. James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 141–42. At the same time, God is not happy that sinners perish in their ways because God truly does love all people and desires for all to come to repentance and be saved (cf. John 3:16; 2 Pet 3:9; cf. 1 Tim 2:4). Thus, the Bible affirms that God is both loving wrathful, but the exercise of God's wrath is also a just response to human sinfulness.

sacrifices. This is seen in the case of Rahab. She was a prostitute, which may mean that she was a temple prostitute in the Baal cult. Whatever the case may be, she exercised faith in Yahweh in hiding the spies and was consequently spared along with her family members and then assimilated into Israelite society. Likewise, the man from Luz who helped the men of Joseph spy out the city was spared (Judg 1:22–26); helping the spies was a probably an act of faith, as in the case of Rahab. One should also keep in mind God’s pattern of giving time for people to repent before sending judgment. There was mercy available for Noah and his family before the judgment of the Flood and for Lot and his family before the judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah, and there was mercy available for the Canaanites for four hundred years (cf. Gen 15:13–16).<sup>837</sup> The Canaanites, however, ignored God’s warnings.<sup>838</sup> As Fairbairn wrote,

That period and the one immediately succeeding, was peculiarly the day of [the Canaanites’] merciful visitation. But they knew it not; and so, according to God’s usual method of dealing, he gradually removed the candlestick out of its place—withdrew His witnesses to another region, in consequence of which the darkness continually deepens, and the iniquity of the people at last became full.<sup>839</sup>

As explained above, this does not imply a contradiction between God’s love and God’s wrath. If God hated all of the Canaanites absolutely, then He would have destroyed them long before, or He would have ordered Joshua to kill Rahab and her family along with the rest of the citizens of Jericho. The Canaanites had the opportunity to repent for generations,<sup>840</sup> but eventually, time ran out. Of course, God in His foreknowledge understood that the Canaanites as

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<sup>837</sup> Kidner, *Hard Sayings*, 42.

<sup>838</sup> Ed Hindson and Gary Yates, eds., *The Essence of the Old Testament: A Survey* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 129.

<sup>839</sup> Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture*, 384.

<sup>840</sup> Charlie Trimm, “Did YHWH Condemn the Nations When He Elected Israel? YHWH’s Disposition Toward Non-Israelites in the Torah,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55, no. 3 (2012): 536.

a whole would not repent just as God knew that Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go. God therefore hardened the Canaanites' hearts as an act of judgment so that they would fight against the Israelites, thereby luring them into their own demise.<sup>841</sup> This was not done *against* the will of the Canaanites (or Pharaoh) but *in accordance* with their will and in accordance with God's foreknowledge.<sup>842</sup> Therefore, there is no contradiction between God's love and God's mercy. There was a time when mercy was available, but only those who responded in faith received it. The rest were hardened in their ways as an act of judgment.

### Israel's Spiritual Preservation and God's Greater Plan

As discussed in chapter three, the Conquest was also necessary for preserving Israel's spiritual integrity. The Lord knew that Israel was prone to idolatry. The Israelites had goat idols in the wilderness (Lev 17:17), and the Israelite men were quick to sin with the Moabite women in worshiping Baal of Peor (Num 25:1–13) before they even reached the Promised Land. The Lord warned the Israelites that if they did not drive out and destroy the Canaanites, then the Israelites would be tempted to follow Canaanite worship practices (Exod 23:33; Lev 18:3; 20:23; Num 33:55–56). Therefore, the Conquest was decreed for the dual purpose of exterminating wickedness in Canaan and maintaining true worship of God in Israel. Bruce summarized the tough choice in the matter and why the Conquest was necessary as follows:

Either the Canaanites were to be spared to contaminate Israel with their abominations, until the latter became wholly unfit to be the instruments of revelation, or they must be swept off the face of the earth. To spare them would have been to imperil the hope of the

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<sup>841</sup> Augustine speculated that, without the hardening of hearts, the Israelites may have shown mercy to the Canaanites had the Canaanites not gone to war against Israel. This is what happened with the Gibeonites. Therefore, Augustine concluded that provoking the Canaanites to war by hardening their hearts was the only way to ensure their destruction at the hands of the Israelites. See Augustine, "Questions on Joshua 18," in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament IV. Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, ed. John R. Franke (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 69.

<sup>842</sup> This view of election and free will is explained in Norman L. Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of God's Sovereignty and Free Will*, 3d ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010).

world's salvation. It was a drastic process, but it was the only method by which the world could be saved from such poison.... He desired through one nation to bless all mankind; and yet He had to exterminate whole tribes that the elect people might be saved from idolatry, and that through them all mankind might be blessed.<sup>843</sup>

The Israelites would not have forsaken true worship for secularism or agnosticism as people do today, but they *would have* substituted Yahweh worship for Baal worship.<sup>844</sup> This is, in fact, what the Israelites did after Joshua and the other Israelite leaders from that generation passed off the scene (cf. Judg 2:6–3:6).

Another point comes from the American preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), who maintained that God's entire plan for Israel and her Messiah would have been jeopardized without the Conquest. In Edwards' view, God needed to separate a people unto Himself in order to preserve true worship since the entire world had become idolatrous after the Flood. If God had not called Abram, then it is likely that within a generation or two, the entirety of mankind would have become thoroughly corrupted again. Rather than allowing the righteous and the wicked to co-mingle, which had resulted in ungodly unions before the Flood, God set apart the nation of Israel to be a special people to receive the types and prophecies of Christ to prepare for His coming so that the light of the Gospel might shine forth to all nations.<sup>845</sup> The Anglican commentator Thomas Arnold (1795–1842) expressed something similar:

And if we are inclined to think that God dealt hardly with the people of Canaan in commanding them to be so utterly destroyed, let us but think what might have been our fate, and the fate of every other nation under heaven at this hour, had the sword of the Israelites done its work more sparingly.<sup>846</sup>

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<sup>843</sup> Bruce, *The Ethics of the Old Testament*, 263–64.

<sup>844</sup> Rick Wade, "Yahweh War and the Conquest of Canaan," accessed January 6, 2021, <https://bible.org/article/yahweh-war-and-conquest-canaan>.

<sup>845</sup> See Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption: An Outline of Church History*, ed. John Erskine (New York: American Tract Society, 1774), 59–ff.

In other words, if the Canaanites had not been exterminated, then God's plan would have been potentially compromised if not derailed. Again, God foreknew what would have happened, and so God had good reasons to command the *total* destruction of the Canaanites.<sup>847</sup>

### An Object Lesson for the Israelites

The Conquest would have been an object lesson to the Israelites by impressing on their minds the serious consequences of idolatry in the eyes of God. As Haley wrote, "As the Hebrews looked forth upon the devastated habitations, the slain animals, the dead bodies of the Canaanites, they could not but hear the solemn warning, '*These are the consequences of sin. Behold how Jehovah hates iniquity.*'"<sup>848</sup> In fact, the Israelites may have been chosen as the

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<sup>846</sup> Thomas Arnold, "Wars of the Israelites," accessed July 9, 2021, [https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/arnold/wars\\_of\\_the\\_israelites.htm](https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/arnold/wars_of_the_israelites.htm); cf. Henry A. Stimson, "The Ethics of the Old Testament," *The Biblical World* 16, no. 2 (Aug. 1900): 93.

<sup>847</sup> It is worth mentioning a few criticisms from Seibert and Cowles at this juncture. First, Seibert questions how the Conquest could have ensured Israel's religious purity since the Israelites would have always had pagan neighbors outside the land. Seibert also believes that the ban would have negated the power and appeal of worshipping Yahweh (Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 79; cf. John A. Wood, "War in the Old Testament," accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/christianreflection/PeaceandWarStudy/Guide1.pdf>; Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 33–34.). Similarly, Cowles argued that the Conquest is an admission that Israelite religion would have lost out to Canaanite religion if both were allowed to coexist, which is an unflattering view of God (Cowles, "Response to Merrill," 98). Seibert also believes that ordering the Israelites to commit genocide in order to preserve their moral purity is incoherent. The implication is that the ban would have *negatively* impacted Israelite morality. He also argues that God, like a good parent, would never have ordered His children to do something reprehensible just to accomplish a greater good (Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 79).

Several responses are warranted. First, there is a big difference between Israel having spiritually-corrupt next-door neighbors and spiritually corrupt nations around them, which explains the differentiation in rules for war in Deuteronomy 20. The next-door neighbors would infect the country from within. Second, the ban would have only negated the appeal of Yahweh worship to those who were opposed to Yahweh worship to begin with. In others, it would have inspired the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7). Concerning the criticism that Israelite religion would have lost a popularity contest to Canaanite religion if Canaanite religion were allowed to coexist, the point is that the Lord wanted to remove what was spiritually poisonous from the land of Israel, even if evil was attractive to some. Fallen human nature explains why people are attracted to sin and rebellion, but that only underscores the reason why the Lord wanted idolatry purged from the land. Next, there is nothing incoherent about the Israelites' participation in the Conquest and their moral development. If anything, the Conquest would have taught them that there were consequences for sin (e.g., Achan), which would have arguably kept the Israelites on the right path, at least for the rest of that generation. Finally, Seibert's parent analogy breaks down since God has the right to give and take life and to command human instruments to execute His judgments. Therefore, the objections do not negate the discussion of God's purposes for the Conquest expressed above.

human instruments of God's judgment rather than some other means (e.g., pestilence or famine) for this very reason. The Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne reasons along these lines:

God surely also had a reason for using the Israelites, rather than natural processes such as disease, to kill the Canaanites, which was to bring home to the Israelites the enormous importance of worshiping and teaching their children to worship the God who had revealed himself to them, and no other god.<sup>849</sup>

The pedagogical value of God's mighty deeds—including His judgments—was well established in the Exodus event. The judgments upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians would have taught the Israelites who is truly God: "Then you will know that I am the LORD your God..." (Exod 6:7; cf. 7:17). The plagues would have been a testimony to the Egyptians of the Lord's supremacy (Exod 14:4, 18), and they would have served the purpose of teaching future generations of Israelites what the Lord did in punishing the Egyptians (Exod 10:1–2). Likewise, Rahab had heard what the Lord had done to the Egyptians and Amorites, which caused her to fear the Lord and respond in faith (Josh 2:9–11). Finally, Joshua informed the Israelites that the Lord had dried up the Jordan River (and the Red Sea) for a specific purpose: "He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God" (Josh 4:24). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the Conquest would have had the same pedagogical value as the Exodus—to deter sin, to teach the Lord's supremacy, holiness, and hatred of sin; and to remind future generations of the Lord's mighty deeds.

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<sup>848</sup> Haley, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*, 267 (emphasis original); cf. Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture*, 386; Torrey, *Difficulties in the Bible*, 50; Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity," 87; Bruce R. Reichenbach, *Divine Providence: God's Love and Human Freedom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 113.

<sup>849</sup> Richard Swinburne, "What Does the Old Testament Mean?" in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, eds. Michael Bergman, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rae (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 224–25. In another place, Swinburne finds value in typological and allegorical exegesis as seen in some early Church writers such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine when it comes to troublesome passages in the Old Testament. Concerning the Conquest, Swinburne believes that "the command to exterminate can be interpreted, if we do not wish to take it historically, as the command to exterminate evil inclinations," though he thinks that the argument that God has the right to give and take life is sufficient to interpret the Conquest literally rather than typologically or allegorically (Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 190 [emphasis original]).



## Other Clarifying Considerations

Before delving into the next section about killing the Canaanite children, there are a number of other considerations worth mentioning here in defense of the Conquest. Most of these points are covered more extensively in chapters two and three and will only be mentioned here since they support the present interpretation of the Conquest. However, each is critical to rightly understanding the Conquest as historical, just, and necessary for God's plan for Israel and for the world, and each point also addresses common objections to the Conquest.

### **Fulfilling Promises, Not World Domination**

The Conquest was in line with the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob about inheriting the land of Canaan so that the Israelites would have their own territory as a nation through which God would bless the world. Therefore, any understanding of the Conquest apart from God's promises and larger plan is incomplete. The Conquest was *not* a land grab on Israel's part. Rather, God apportioned the land of Canaan to the Israelites because He is the owner of all the land (Psa 24:1) and because the Canaanites were being evicted (Lev 18:24–25). The Israelites themselves were merely tenants in the land (Lev 25:23), and God had given limits on which lands to take and which peoples to drive out (cf. Deut 2:1–37). The Conquest of Canaan, therefore, was not about world domination.

### **An Exception, Not the Rule**

*Hērem* was not the norm for Israel's warfare. As clarified in Deuteronomy 20:10–18, God gave the Israelites one set of rules for warfare against enemies living outside the land of Canaan and another set for those living within the land of Canaan. This is because the Canaanites were especially wicked and because the Canaanites would have had a corrupting influence on Israel. The Conquest, therefore, was a one-time event in the sense that all the tribes of Israel went

to war to drive out and destroy the Canaanites living in the land. Although there were later, limited applications of the ban against the Amalekites by Saul (1 Sam 15:1–33), David (1 Sam 27:8–11), and the Simeonites (1 Chron 4:40–43) in accordance with God’s long-term plan to wipe out the Amalekites (Exod 17:14; Deut 25:19), in the prophecies about Israel’s return to the land after the Assyrian Captivity and Babylonian Captivity, there is no mention of a second Conquest (e.g., Jer 31; Eze 28; 34; Isa 44; 49).<sup>850</sup> The fact that the Conquest was the exception and not the rule does not minimize the moral challenge of the Conquest because genocide is genocide even if done only on occasion. However, the overall argument of this chapter is that the Conquest was morally justified and permissible because it was authorized by God, who has the right to give and take life as He pleases. The point here is that it was not God’s will for the Israelites to exterminate *all* enemies at all times. Instead, the ban was especially designated for the Amalekites and Canaanites because of their wickedness and hostility toward Israel.

### **Not for the Church**

The preceding point implies that the Conquest was an occasional command given for a particular people group and not to be interpreted as a general command for all of God’s people at every time and in every place.<sup>851</sup> This means that there is no direct, literal application of the ban for Christians, whether ancient or modern.<sup>852</sup> This is in contrast to the interpretations in chapter

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<sup>850</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 3.5.1.

<sup>851</sup> Copan and Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?* 54; cf. Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, 79.

<sup>852</sup> The question of whether there is a modern application for Jews is a more complex. The medieval Jewish scholar Maimonides also recognized that for Jews of his own time, “The memory of them (the Canaanites) has already been obliterated” (Maimonides, *Melachim uMilchamot* - Chapter 5, accessed February 18, 2022, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1188349/jewish/Melachim-uMilchamot-Chapter-5.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1188349/jewish/Melachim-uMilchamot-Chapter-5.htm); cf. *Sefer HaChinukh: Mitzvah 425*, accessed February 18, 2022, [https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer\\_HaChinukh\\_425.1?ven=Sefer\\_HaChinukh\\_translated\\_by\\_R.\\_Francis\\_Nataf\\_Sefaria\\_2018&vhe=Sefer\\_HaChinukh\\_-\\_Torat\\_Emet&lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_HaChinukh_425.1?ven=Sefer_HaChinukh_translated_by_R._Francis_Nataf_Sefaria_2018&vhe=Sefer_HaChinukh_-_Torat_Emet&lang=bi)). Thus, there is no modern application. Concerning the Amalekites, Maimonides wrote the

four that found the Conquest to be an example to follow in the Church Age (e.g., the Crusades).<sup>853</sup> The ban is not in effect today because Christians are living under a different dispensation where they are commanded to endure all things rather than to resist an evil person (Matt 5:39) rather than to kill unbelievers. This explains why James and John were rebuked by Jesus when they wanted to call down fire from heaven on the Samaritan village that was unwelcoming to Jesus (Luke 9:51–56). Christians should mortify their sinful nature (Col 3:5) and fight battles of spiritual warfare against Satan and his demons (Eph 6:10–17),<sup>854</sup> but these are

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same except that he omitted the statement that the memory of the Amalekites had been obliterated, which implies that Amalek may still be in existence and that the law to destroy them is still in effect. The question is whether anyone alive today is still considered an Amalekite (or Canaanite). In regard to the Ammonites and Moabites, the Talmud (*Berakhot* 28a) states, “Sennacherib already came and, through his policy of population transfer, scrambled all the nations and settled other nations in place of Ammon. Consequently, the current residents of Ammon and Moab are not ethnic Ammonites and Moabites...” (*The William Davidson Talmud: Berakhot 28a*, accessed February 18, 2022, [https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.28a.6?ven=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_English&vhe=William\\_Davidson\\_Edition\\_-\\_Vocalized\\_Aramaic&lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.28a.6?ven=William_Davidson_Edition_English&vhe=William_Davidson_Edition_-_Vocalized_Aramaic&lang=bi); cf. *Mishnah Yadayim* 4:4, accessed February 18, 2022, [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Yadayim.4.4](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Yadayim.4.4)). The same would seem to apply to Amalekites and Canaanites, which means that there is no modern application of the ban for Jews either (Lamm, “Amalek and the Seven Nations,” 213–17).

A second possibility is that Amalek exists in the present but not in a literal, ethnic sense. Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik (d. 1941) taught that Amalek changes from generation to generation and that any people that seeks to destroy Israel then becomes “Amalek” (“Rav Soloveitchik on Amalek: Peshat or Derash?” accessed February 18, 2022, <https://www.torahmusings.com/2007/02/rav-soloveitchik-on-amalek-peshat-or/>). Similarly, Rabbi Jack Riemer, who served on President Bill Clinton’s rabbinic counsel and who is the founding chair of the National Rabbinic Network, compared Islamic Fundamentalism to a modern-day Amalek in 2006 (See Daniel Sieradski, “Clinton’s Rabbi Declares Islamists ‘Amalek,’” accessed February 18, 2022, <https://jewschool.com/clintons-rabbi-declares-islamists-amalek-10080>). One problem with this interpretation is that it expands the definition of “Amalek” beyond what was originally intended. Anyone who is hostile toward the Jews would fit this category, including self-hating Jews. Another problem is that the original commandment was to obliterate the Amalekites. If Nazis, for example, were really “Amalekites”, then perhaps the entire German race should have been annihilated following World War II since the original command was to destroy all of the Amalekites, which seems wrongheaded. The biblical commandment cannot, therefore, be carried out consistently with what was intended in the Old Testament (Lamm, “Amalek and the Seven Nations,” 217–ff; cf. Shalom Carmy, “The Origin of Nations and the Shadow of Violence: Theological Perspectives on Canaan and Amalek,” in *War and Peace in the Jewish Tradition*, eds. Lawrence Schiffman and Joel B. Wolowelsky [New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2007], 172–ff).

<sup>853</sup> In order for there to be a morally-justified application of the Conquest in the Church Age in the form of a crusade, three conditions would have to be met. First, a crusade would have to be initiated by God and no one else. Second, a crusade would have to be led by God. Third, a crusade would have to be initiated and led by God in a way that would be verifiable by those who would participate in the war—that is, through miracles. Each of these criteria is seen throughout the Old Testament and especially in the Conquest, but since these conditions are not met today, then a crusade would be illegitimate (Heimbach, “Crusade in the Old Testament and Today,” 196–99).

<sup>854</sup> See Longman’s explanation of the different phases of God’s warfare throughout history (Longman, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies*, 176–ff); cf. John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 241–50; Timothy G. Gombis, “The Rhetoric of Divine Warfare in Ephesians,” in *Holy War in*

unrelated to the Conquest, and there is no need to allegorize the Old Testament text just to draw modern-day correlations or applications (as seen in chapter four). Like other things in the Old Testament, the Conquest can serve as an example to Christians today (cf. 1 Cor 10:6) of the perils of idolatry and disobedience or of the power and presence of God, but Christians are living in a different time than ancient Israel, so there is no direct, literal application of the Conquest. Although Christians who serve in the armed forces can certainly pray for God's protection and providence in warfare for their own benefit and for the benefit of their country (like the Puritans and others did), the Church does not have the guarantee of God-given protection in defending political boundaries or a national territory like the ancient Israelites had since the Church is not limited to any particular nation or region.<sup>855</sup>

### **The Ban Applied to Israel**

Israel was specially chosen by God to be a channel through which God would bless the world, but the same standard of destruction reserved for the Canaanites was also applied to Israelite individuals who violated the ban (e.g., Achan) and to Israelite towns that apostatized (cf. Deut 13:6–18). In other words, there was no favoritism regarding improper worship. If the Israelites disobeyed the Lord and followed after other gods, then they would be the objects of God's wrath and would be expelled from the land just as the Canaanites had been (cf. Lev 18:28; Deut 28:15–68).<sup>856</sup> This is eventually what happened in Israel's history with the captivity and exile of the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kgs 17:1–41) and the southern kingdom of Judah (2

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*the Bible: Christian Morality and the Old Testament Problem*, eds. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 87–107.

<sup>855</sup> Cf. Daniel L. Gard, "The Case for Eschatological Continuity," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 138.

<sup>856</sup> See Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 200.

Kgs 24:1–25:30). At those times, God enacted the holy war against His own people, Israel.<sup>857</sup>

The only difference is that the Israelites were not *utterly destroyed*—that is, the Israelites did not disappear from the face of the earth. Of course, this is true of the Canaanites too. Canaanites were present in the Old Testament after the Conquest because the Israelites *failed* to completely destroy them or drive them out. However, the intention was for the Canaanites (and Amalekites) to be wiped out; there was nothing redeemable there. The Israelites, on the other hand, eventually became *more wicked* than the Canaanites (cf. 2 Kgs 21:11), but there was still a remnant of believers such as Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel, among others. Therefore, the Lord was justified in bringing the Assyrians against Israel and the Babylonians against Judah to destroy His own people, though there was a righteous remnant like at the time of the Flood and at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

### **The Conquest and the New Testament**

None of the interpretations from chapter four are represented by Jesus and the apostles in their teachings about the Old Testament. On the contrary, the teachings of the New Testament align with the interpretation of the Conquest presented in this chapter.<sup>858</sup> Consider the following points. First, Christians are still to live in the fear of the Lord (2 Cor 5:11) and to avoid idolatry (1 John 5:21). Second, God still strikes people dead even in the Church Age (e.g., Acts 5:1–11; 12:19–23; 1 Cor 11:30). Third, rebels still fall under the judgment of God (e.g., 1 Cor 5:1–13). Fourth, anyone who does not love the Lord Jesus Christ is to be accursed (ἀνάθεμα [1 Cor

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<sup>857</sup> See Heath A. Thomas, “A Neglected Witness to ‘Holy War’ in the Writings,” in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and the Old Testament Problem*, eds. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 74–79.

<sup>858</sup> Appendix 2 explains how the Old Testament and New Testament commentaries on the Conquest, as well as the commentaries in the Apocrypha, Philo, and Josephus, support the interpretation that the Conquest was historical, just, and necessary.

16:22]), which speaks not of temporal judgment but of eternal judgment. The Conquest, therefore, is in line with the teachings of the New Testament. In fact, the divine warrior theme of the Old Testament is arguably *advanced* in the New Testament.<sup>859</sup> Although the enemies of the Church are spiritual rather than physical (Eph 6:10–20), Christ will return to judge His enemies—both physical enemies and spiritual enemies (Rev 19:11–21). The Conquest is therefore a preview of the final battles in the book of Revelation and is consistent with God’s dealings at the end of time.

### Killing the Canaanite Children

The death of the Canaanite children is the thorniest aspect of the Conquest and undoubtedly the reason for the range of interpretations of the Conquest surveyed in chapter four, including those that spiritualize the Conquest, revise the history of the Conquest, deny that the Conquest was God’s command, appeal to an accommodation on God’s part, or conclude that the Conquest is inexplicable. The assumption in this chapter is that Moses, Joshua, Saul, David, and the Israelites actually killed men, women, and children as the biblical text states. This applies to the Amorites, Canaanites, and Amalekites in the abovementioned passages and is based on the study of the biblical passages in chapters two and three. There is no hyperbole or exaggeration in the text in the view of this author. Therefore, the task is to explain *why* the Canaanite children

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<sup>859</sup> Longman makes several arguments in support of this point. First, the Day of the Lord motif (e.g., 1 Thess 5:1–11) builds upon the same concept of God’s eschatological judgment found in the Old Testament (e.g., Joel 3:1–16). Second Jesus Christ is portrayed as the Conqueror (Rev 1:7; cf. Luke 21:27), which is an Old Testament motif of divine judgment (cf. Psalms 18:9–15; Daniel 7:13). Third, Jesus Himself is the Divine Warrior in the book of Revelation who opens the seals (Rev 5:1–6:17) that commence the outpouring of divine wrath upon the earth, and it is Jesus who slays His enemies at His return (Rev 19:11–21; cf. Isaiah 63:2–3). Fourth, the saints in the book of Revelation are depicted as singing a “new song” (Rev 5:9; 14:3), which harkens back to the Old Testament motif of victory over God’s enemies (Isaiah 42:10, 13; Psalm 149:1, 6–9). The divine warrior imagery is not restricted to the Old Testament; it spans from Genesis to Revelation (Tremper Longman III, “The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 40 [1982]: 290–306).

were put to death along with their parents.<sup>860</sup> Rather than raising the problem but not providing a solution,<sup>861</sup> this section will offer a comprehensive, biblical-theological solution to this apologetic problem.

### **Initial Remarks**

To begin, the entire defense of the Conquest up to this point hinges on the fact that God has the right to give and take life. Once that is established, then determining *why* God ordered the killing of the Canaanite men, women, and children becomes a secondary quest. God could have any number of reasons and reveal none of them, yet it would still be His prerogative to take the lives of *any* man, woman, or child—whether Canaanite, Israelite, or someone alive today. As explained heretofore, the biblical record reveals that God is purposeful and not arbitrary, and so one would expect there to be some reason(s) for the wholesale extermination of the Canaanites. But at the end of the discussion, God *still* has the right to take lives at any point and by any means—whether by flood, fire, earthquake, famine, plague, sword, or another means. With that in mind, it must be recognized up front that the Bible does not provide an *explicit* explanation for why the Canaanite children were to be killed along with their parents. The following discussion, therefore, will explore different answers to this question that may at times be speculative.

In this section, only the death of the Canaanite children will be discussed and not the death of the Canaanite women. Israel's rules for war included the command to kill the women and children (Deut 20:16–18) even though women and children were normally protected as plunder rather than killed (Deut 20:14).<sup>862</sup> In modern vernacular, women and children would

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<sup>860</sup> The Canaanites will be used here to represent the Amorites and Amalekites too since all were put under the ban and since the Canaanites are the primary targets in Exodus–Judges.

<sup>861</sup> See Duane A. Garrett, *The Problem of the Old Testament: Hermeneutical, Schematic, and Theological Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 17, 354–55.

have been considered “innocent noncombatants.”<sup>863</sup> However, the situation with the Canaanite women was different. They were not innocent of the Canaanite crimes listed in Leviticus 18, including child sacrifice. Therefore, they were guilty and deserving of death in God’s eyes, just as the Moabite/Midianite women who enticed the Israelite men into sexual immorality and Baal worship were put to death (Num 25; 31). The same would apply to teenage boys and girls. Whether or not the Canaanite women (or teenagers) were noncombatants is unknown,<sup>864</sup> but even if there were some who had not participated in the Canaanite wickedness, the same reason(s) for why the children had to die would apply to them, so only the children will be considered here since they were definitely innocent. Such children, one can assume, were not guilty of their parents’ sins but were put to death anyway, which is the problem to be explained in light of one’s sense of justice and in light of the biblical statement that children were not to be put to death for the sins of their parents (Deut 24:16).

### **Conquest-Specific Explanations**

The first set of explanations focuses solely on God’s dealings with the Canaanites in the book of Joshua. The premise is that God’s commands were unique for that occasion. While God may kill children elsewhere in the Bible (see below), none of those reasons necessarily applies to the situation with the Canaanite children; there was something particular about the Canaanite children that required their death. Four interpretations will be considered below.

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<sup>862</sup> See also Gen 34:25–29; Num 14:3; 31:9; 1 Sam 30:1–3; 1 Kgs 20:3–5; Jer 41:10.

<sup>863</sup> Even the assumption of innocence among noncombatants (e.g., women) needs to be scrutinized. See Jason P. Blahuta, “Re-Evaluating the Status of Noncombatants in Just War Theory and Terrorism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Ethics and War: Just War Theory in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Fritz Allhoff, Nicholas G. Evans, and Adam Henschke (New York: Routledge, 2013), 253–64.

<sup>864</sup> The book of Judges records several examples of women involved in warfare, so it is reasonable to think that the Canaanite women may have had *some* part to play in fighting Israel along with the Canaanite men. Examples in Judges include Deborah (Judg 4:9, 14), Jael (Judg 4:17–22; 5:26–27), Sisera’s mother (Judg 5:28–30), and the women of both Jabesh-Gilead (Judg 21:1–15) and Shiloh (Judg 21:16–24).



## Canaanite Children Considered Guilty

One explanation for why the Canaanite children were put to death is that the children were counted as guilty along with their parents. Longman summarizes this view when he writes,

...[T]he 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.<sup>865</sup>

While it is true that there is no biblical text that states that the Canaanite children were innocent, neither is there a text that states that they were considered guilty. It is not difficult to imagine that older children and teenagers would have imbibed the religious and moral practices and beliefs of their parents, but it is difficult to imagine that babies and toddlers were guilty in the same, conscious, complicit sense as their parents. In addition, there are other instances where God took the lives of children in the Bible where the children were definitely *not* guilty of their parents' sins (e.g., David and Bathsheba's first son), and so it seems better to pursue a different interpretation of the slaughter of the Canaanite children that may align with other biblical examples rather than basing an interpretation on something *not* stated in the biblical text.

## Canaanite Children Too Corrupted

A second interpretation is that although the Canaanite children were not necessarily *guilty* of their parents' sins, they were nonetheless raised in an evil culture and were too corrupted to simply join Israelite society. Christian apologist Clay Jones surmises that "we must not imagine Canaanite children as being in any kind of a normal home by Western standards, or even most Ancient Near Eastern family standards. Canaanite childhood wasn't a fun Brady Bunch or

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<sup>865</sup> Tremper Longman III, "The Case for Spiritual Continuity," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 173–74.

Modern Family existence: it was horrific.”<sup>866</sup> Jones also reasons that the children would have grown up curious about their birth parents, and then they would have wanted to replicate their parents’ sinful ways:

Moreover, given the evidence of Canaanite sin, it is no stretch to realize that even many young children would have already learned Canaanite ways. Thus, if God wanted to rid the world of their wickedness, then He couldn’t have them grow up wanting to imitate their birth parents with whom they bonded. Imagine the teenage rebellion in those households! Wouldn’t even infants, as they grew, begin to ask, “What practices did my parents do which resulted in your killing them?” As sad as this is, it also points to the horror of sin. Parents can corrupt their children.<sup>867</sup>

The phenomenon of adopted children growing up and seeking to learn about their birth parents is well established in modern society, so perhaps God in His foreknowledge knew that this would be the case with the Canaanite children too. This could lead to a generation of rebellious and wicked children that would be a moral, spiritual, and perhaps even criminal problem for Israel. Perhaps the Israelites would then have to frequently enact the law of putting to death incorrigibly-rebellious children (Deut 21:18–21). It is also possible that the children would have grown up wanting to avenge the death of their parents.<sup>868</sup> Like the first explanation, this interpretation from Jones is a bit speculative as well, but it is not unreasonable. Of course, it begs the question as to whether the power of God could change a person’s nature from wicked to righteous. If so, then it seems equally possible that the Lord could have done that for the Canaanite children too.

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<sup>866</sup> Clay Jones, “The Horror of Canaanite Children’s ‘Family’ Life,” accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.clayjones.net/2015/04/canaanite-children/>.

<sup>867</sup> Clay Jones, “Killing the Canaanites: A Response to the New Atheism’s ‘Divine Genocide’ Claims,” *Christian Research Journal* 33, no. 4 (2010): 6; cf. Torrey, *Difficulties in the Bible*, 49–50; Norman L. Geisler and Thomas Howe, *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties: Clear and Concise Answers from Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 137–38.

<sup>868</sup> Stephen N. Williams, “Could God Have Commanded the Slaughter of the Canaanites?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 63 (2012): 174.

## Canaanite Children Too Damaged

A third possibility is that the Canaanite children were too physically, spiritually, and psychologically damaged from their upbringing in a society that practiced idolatry, witchcraft, incest, bestiality, and child sacrifice. Perhaps they were too damaged to redeem. Christian apologist Robert Bowman elaborates on this point:

First, after generations of the sort of moral degeneracy that characterized these peoples, it may be that even the smallest children were beyond civilizing. Apparently even they were abused and forced to participate in obscene conduct, such that they would have grown up psychologically and spiritually scarred—and perhaps threatened to perpetuate the cycle. Second, the STDs and other infectious diseases that must have pervaded those cities may well have been carried by the smallest children, and if so, they may have posed a grave danger to the physical health of the Israelites. Imagine some of the nations today most ravaged by AIDS, but living more than three thousand years ago, with no access to even the most basic medical resources. It may be that infectious diseases were also ravaging the domestic animals in these cities, which would also explain why they were destroyed.<sup>869</sup>

The reasoning here may be correct, although it is a bit speculative too. Perhaps the Canaanite children were killed because they were damaged goods in every way, and so the Lord commanded the Israelites to exterminate them so that they would not infect Israel with diseases and impact them with psychological and spiritual disorders. On the other hand, one wonders whether the power of God's presence, provision, and laws would have had a redeeming effect upon any babies growing up. Again, all that one can do is speculate on the matter.

## No Future for the Canaanite Children

Another interpretation is that there would have been no future for the Canaanite children, so they were put to death along with their parents, as Wenham explains below:

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<sup>869</sup> Robert M. Bowman, Jr., "Joshua's Conquest: Was It Justified?" accessed October 31, 2020, <https://www.namb.net/apologetics/resource/joshua-s-conquest-was-it-justified/>.

As far as the heathen were concerned, the danger from female devotees of Baal (as was evidenced by the daughters of Moab on the threshold of the Promised Land and later by Jezebel) was quite as great as that from the men; and what sort of society would it be for either the women or the children, if (as would have been almost inevitable) they were reduced to the status of foreign slaves and were left with no menfolk of their own nationality to give them support?<sup>870</sup>

The concern here is both practical and ethical. Practically speaking, it would do no good to have a society of leftover Canaanite women and children without men to provide protection and provision. Ethically speaking, it would be wrong to leave the women and children without protection and provision; they would have been destitute and would have perished anyway. One problem this interpretation ignores is that the women were wicked and would have influenced the Israelites if left to live in the land as slaves. In addition, the instructions for warfare overruled the possibility of leaving the women and children alive in other situations (Deut 20:16–18). Finally, the Israelites *did* assimilate foreign women and female children into Israelite society in Numbers 31, but they were Midianite women, not Canaanites. The Canaanites were too wicked and debased to add to Israelite society without spiritual consequences.

### **Biblical-Theological Explanations**

Another set of explanations broadens the discussion of the Conquest to situate it within the larger context of the Bible as a whole. The first point to examine is how God's judgment affected children elsewhere in the Bible. If other passages shed light on *why* children are sometimes killed along with their parents, then perhaps the same reasoning applies to the Conquest too. Broadening the biblical-theological discussion also helps one understand that the Conquest was not entirely unique because, in a fallen world, children are often killed—perhaps as collateral damage or perhaps because of the principle of corporate solidarity. With the

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<sup>870</sup> Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil*, 138–39.

perspective of eternity in mind, though, the final result is that there was nothing immoral or unjust about the killing of the Canaanite children in the Conquest.

### God's Judgment and the Death of Children

God's judgment on adults in the Bible often included the death of children when there was judgment on a wide scale. Some examples will illustrate the point. First, at the time of the Flood (Gen 6), there were doubtless many young, innocent children—perhaps thousands or millions—who were washed away and drowned. It is unfathomable that there were zero children alive throughout the world, so God's judgment on the world included the death of children too. The same occurred at Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19): there were certainly children there who perished along with their parents. However, the children were not counted among the “righteous” in Abraham's discussion with the Lord (Gen 18) since there were not even ten righteous in the city of Sodom. There may be a biblical distinction, then, between the “righteous” and the “innocent.” The former know and love God, but the latter have not yet reached an age of accountability where they know enough to reject evil and choose good (cf. Isa 7:16; cf. Deut 1:39). At Sodom and Gomorrah and at the time of the Flood, the innocent (e.g., babies) and the wicked perished together.

Third, when the people rebelled in the wilderness after the bad report from the ten spies, the Lord told Moses that He intended to destroy the people with a plague and then start a new nation through Moses (Num 14:11–12). Although Moses was able to dissuade the Lord from this course of action (humanly speaking), the act would have nevertheless included the death of thousands of children had the Lord sent the plague. Fourth, the rebellion led by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num 16:1–34) resulted in an earthquake that swallowed up the men along with their wives, children, and “little ones”—meaning babies or toddlers (Num 16:27, 32). Fifth, of

course, is the ban applied to the Amorites, Canaanites, and Amalekites outlined in chapters two and three. The biblical text states that at God's command, the Israelites took the lives of men, women, and children, leaving no survivors.<sup>871</sup> Sixth, if an Israelite town became apostate, then the entire populace was to be killed, and the city was to be burned (Deut 13:6–18). This would have included the killing of young, innocent children too.

Seventh, if the Israelites rebelled against the Lord and turned to follow other gods, then the Lord would visit various judgments upon them that included the death of children. This ranged from the Lord sending famines<sup>872</sup> or plagues,<sup>873</sup> which would have no doubt impacted the children just as much as the parents (cf. Jer 11:22–23; Lam 4:4), to sending wild animals to rob the Israelites of their children (Lev 26:22; cf. Eze 5:17; 14:15–16). The Lord even predicted that the Israelites would be reduced to cannibalism (Deut 28:53–57; cf. 2 Kgs 6:24–33; Lam 2:20; 4:10), which obviously involved the killing of children. The Lord also raised up enemy nations that made the Israelites childless (Deut 32:25; cf. 2 Kgs 8:12; Jer 15:7; Lam 1:20; Eze 5:10). As the prophet Hosea wrote, the Lord had no hesitation killing the Israelite children as an act of judgment: “Even if they rear children, I will bereave them of every one. Woe to them when I turn away from them!” (Hos 9:12; cf. 9:16–17; 13:16). The prophet Ezekiel also had a vision from the Lord in which the Lord's death angel killed Israelite men, women, and children who did not have the Lord's mark on their foreheads (Eze 9:3–11). The Lord even told Jeremiah not to marry and have children because the Babylonian siege would result in the death of the Israelite men,

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<sup>871</sup> See Num 21:34–35; Deut 2:32–36; 3:3–7; 7:1–2, 16; 20:16–18; Josh 6:2, 16–21; 8:1–2, 24–29; 10:28–42; 11:6–15, 21–23; Judg 1:8, 17, 22–25; 1 Sam 15:1–3; 27:8–11; 1 Chron 4:41–43.

<sup>872</sup> See Gen 41:1–57 (cf. Psalms 105:16); Deut 28:48; 32:24; 2 Sam 21:1; 1 Kgs 8:37–40; 18:2; 2 Kgs 4:38; 7:1–4; 8:1; 25:3; Isa 5:13; 14:30; 51:19; Amos 4:6.

<sup>873</sup> See Exod 5:3; 32:25; Lev 26:25; Deut 28:21; 2 Sam 24:15–25 (1 Chron 21:14–30); 1 Kgs 8:37 (2 Chron 6:28); 2 Chron 7:13; 20:9; Amos 4:10; Hab 3:5.

women, and children living in the land (Jer 16:1–4). When the Babylonian siege came, it resulted in the death of many children (cf. Jer 6:11; 9:21; 16:1–4; 18:21; 44:7; Lam 2:11–12, 19; 4:4).

Eighth, the Lord orchestrated the killing of children in enemy nations when He brought judgment upon them (cf. Pss 21:10; 137:8–9; Isa 13:16–18; Nah 3:10). Finally, the Great Tribulation (Rev 6–19) will feature a time of famine, plague, war, and devastation that the world has never seen and will most certainly involve the death of millions of children as the Lord judges the world.

A related example is worth mentioning here too because, even though it did not involve killing children, it shows the link between the parents' sin and the children suffering as a result of the parents' sin. When the Israelite adults rebelled against the Lord in the wilderness and believed the bad report of the ten spies over the good report of Joshua and Caleb (Num 14), the Lord punished the parents by barring them entry into the Promised Land. The entire generation of Israelites twenty years and older would die in the wilderness over the remainder of a forty-year period. The Lord told Moses to tell the Israelites, "Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert" (Num 14:33). In other words, the children suffered because of the parents' sins.

In addition to the Lord's punishment of large groups of children because of national, societal, or global sins, the Lord at times punished *parents* by killing their children. One example is when the Lord put to death the firstborn sons in Egypt, including Pharaoh's own son (Exod 11). This was no doubt payback for when the Egyptians killed the Hebrew babies (Exod 1:15–22), but it serves as another example of God visiting punishment upon the parents by putting to death their children. Another example is the baby conceived through the adulterous affair between David and Bathsheba (1 Sam 11:1–27). Because the act was evil in the Lord's eyes, the Lord struck the newborn baby with an illness that led to the baby's death. David's sin was

forgiven, but there was still a consequence for his actions. Even though David sought to change the Lord's mind with fasting and prayer, the child eventually died (2 Sam 12:13–23). A third example is from the words of Jesus in the book of Revelation. The false prophetess “Jezebel” was leading the Christians in Thyatira into sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols. Although Jesus had given her time to repent, she was unwilling, so He made the following vow:

So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds (Rev 2:22–23).

Here, Jesus in judgment promised to strike Jezebel's children dead as a punishment upon her.

A few observations should be noted in light of the biblical survey above. First, it turns out that the killing of the Canaanite children in the Conquest was not a unique event once the biblical portrait of God's judgments is broadened. There were many times in the Bible when God was responsible for the killing of children—either directly or indirectly. Second, the punishment of sins applied to the *parents*, not the children. The innocent children (e.g., babies) were not guilty of the parents' sins, so the children were *killed* but were not *punished*; it was the parents who were punished, as with David and Bathsheba. Third, there is no distinction made between killing children and killing adults when God gives the orders. One life is not more inherently valuable than another, and no life is off limits for God to take. The killing of children, therefore, points back once again to the Lord's sovereignty over human life.

Fourth, the Lord did not *always* kill the children along with the parents or as a punishment upon the parents. Although the reason why He did so is not revealed in every situation, it may be reasonable to formulate some conclusions. For the plagues, famines, sieges, and end-times judgments, children suffer and die along with everybody else. There is no special provision of God whereby children get bread from heaven during a famine while the parents



starve, for example. If that were to happen, then the parents would obviously steal the children's food, one may surmise, which would negate the effects of the famine. For the situation with David and Bathsheba, the punishment may have been fitting since it drove David to repentance. Perhaps a lesser punishment would have had little impact. Likewise, the killing of Jezebel's children, along with the threat of sending some kind of debilitating illness, may have been the only way to get her attention—and that of her followers—to lead her to repentance since the Lord's previous warnings went unheeded. Whatever the case, the Lord in His wisdom, foreknowledge, and justice would have known what the appropriate punishment in each situation would be, and He had the right to exact that punishment as the Author of life.

#### Corporate Solidarity

Because there are many instances where individuals were lumped together with groups in judgment, scholars have coined the term “corporate responsibility” or “corporate solidarity” to describe this phenomenon. The basic idea is that in biblical times, individuals shared in the life of their family, clan, community, and nation, and that included participation in rewards and punishments that fell upon those societal units.<sup>874</sup> In fact, the fundamental measure of morality and worship was not so much at the individual level as at the group level. Individual relationships with the Lord still existed (e.g., David), but they were also construed through the society to which the individual belonged. In other words, the relation of man to God, like the relation of God to man, was mediated through the corporate personality of the nation.<sup>875</sup>

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<sup>874</sup> Kaiser, et al., *Hard Sayings*, 207.

<sup>875</sup> H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Religious Ideas of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), 87; cf. idem., *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), 27–ff; idem., *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 25; B. Stade, *Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1905), §96. The concept of corporate responsibility is also present in Hittite texts (Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 207–208; 354) and an Egyptian text (ibid., 328).

Examples in the Old Testament include the sin of Adam that affected the entire human race, the fact that Noah's entire family was spared because of *his* faith, and the priests who offered sacrifices on behalf of the nation of Israel.<sup>876</sup> In the book of Joshua, there is a clear example of corporate solidarity when the Lord told Joshua, "Israel has sinned" (Josh 7:11), even though it was really just one man (Achan) who had sinned. The one (Achan) represented the many (Israel), and so it was *as if* all Israel had sinned in the eyes of God.<sup>877</sup> Another example is seen with Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who hid the spies (Josh 2:1–21; 6:17, 22–23). Because of *her* faith, her entire family was spared.<sup>878</sup> As Reichenbach explains, "Groups were considered holistically; they were not merely conglomerates of individuals that could easily be individuated into guilty and innocent. Considered holistically, the entire group was responsible for the decisions taken by their leaders."<sup>879</sup> The concept of national identity or ethnic identity still exists today, as seen in the corporate identity and esprit de corps of sports teams, companies, and the military.<sup>880</sup> When the sports team wins, everyone gets a championship ring, whether or not each

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<sup>876</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1991), 158.

<sup>877</sup> Some scholars discount this as a primitive idea that Israel adopted along with other ancient societies, resulting in the dissolution of the individual in favor of the family, clan, or nation (e.g., Sir Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and its Relation to Modern Ideas*, 11th ed. [London: John Murray, 1887], 183). Robinson also held this view, which has been critiqued by Rogerson and Porter (J. W. Rogerson, "The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: A Re-Examination," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 21, no. 1 [Apr. 1970]: 1–16; J. R. Porter, "The Legal Aspects of the Concept of 'Corporate Personality' in the Old Testament," *Vetus Testamentum* 15, no. 3 [1965], 361–80). Another explanation for corporate personality is that the Israelites were unaware of the boundaries of justice, and so they overshot the mark by including men, women, and children in punishing groups rather than individuals until, in the progress of revelation, humanity learned more about individual responsibility before God (Mozley, *Ruling Ideas in Early Ages*, 84–103). The problem with this understanding is that God did not *always* accommodate such a practice in the Old Testament, which means distinctions were made. For example, the *Canaanite* men, women, and children were to be killed, but the women and children from *non-Canaanite* nations were to be spared (Deut 20:10–18). Also, there were episodes when individuals *were* singled out, such as Achan being singled out from among the Israelites (Josh 7:1–ff).

<sup>878</sup> It is also possible that Rahab's family had faith too, though the text is not clear on this point.

<sup>879</sup> Reichenbach, *Divine Providence*, 114.

player participated in the game. Or, when one member of the team is late, the entire team has a consequence. The same concept of corporate blessing and punishment appears in the Old Testament, which explains why there are numerous situations where groups are punished together. However, this does not explain every situation, such as when the Lord took the life of David and Bathsheba's son as a punishment upon the parents. There appears to be collateral damage in the Old Testament too.

### Collateral Damage

Given the fact that there are many times in the Bible when the principle of corporate solidarity resulted in the death of children along with their parents, it may further be argued that the death of the children could be classified as collateral damage. The term *collateral damage* is often used in conventional just war theory where one of the guiding principles is discrimination between attacking military and nonmilitary targets. For example, roads and bridges are attacked because they help the enemy forces, but hospitals are not attacked because they are not contributing directly to enemy efforts. The same type of distinction is applied to people in recognizing two distinct groups besides those who are combatants: *innocent civilians* and *noncombatants*. Combatants are those who contribute directly to the war effort. Noncombatants are those who do not contribute directly to the war effort (e.g., medics, military chaplains). Innocent civilians are just that—innocent civilians, though they are often included in the larger category of noncombatants.<sup>881</sup> Combatants are to be targeted in warfare because they are a threat,

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<sup>880</sup> Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 232; cf. Ludwig Köhler, *Old Testament Theology*, 3d ed., trans. A. S. Todd (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 161; Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 214–15; J. J. Finkelstein, *The Ox That Gored* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1981), 28; Joel S. Kaminsky, “Joshua 7: A Reassessment of Israelite Conceptions of Corporate Punishment,” in *The Pitcher is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 190, eds. Steven W. Holloway and Lowell K. Handy (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 321–ff.

and noncombatants are not targeted and are supposed to have immunity from intentional harm. However, noncombatants may be *unintentionally* killed, such as when a bomb accidentally misses the target. This results in *collateral damage*, or accidental, unintended (even if foreseeable) harm to noncombatants.<sup>882</sup>

When considering the Conquest, the collateral damage was not the *unintentional* killing of innocent children as in modern warfare. The Lord commanded the Israelites to kill the Canaanite children, so the act was intentional. However, the Canaanite children may have been intentionally killed along with their parents as *spiritual* collateral damage in the sense that their deaths resulted because of their parents' sins. This would be analogous to the bombing raids of World War II when the Allies killed thousands of innocent men, women, and children in the process of also killing the enemy.<sup>883</sup> Although the noncombatants were not the targets, they were included by virtue of the fact that they lived in the nation being punished for its evil. Their leaders made bad decisions, and the population was affected. This is true on an individual level too. If a father is drunk driving with his three children in the backseat and wrecks the car, the children may die as a result of the father's sinful choices. That does not mean that the children

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<sup>881</sup> There is some discussion as to whether innocence is a factor when civilians are aiding the war effort by, for example, growing food to be used for the armed forces, which would make them noncombatants rather than innocent civilians. The military contains many who serve as cooks, musicians, or drivers, for example, who arguably bear the same measure of culpability as soldiers on the front line of battle. On the other hand, civilians who work in munitions factories are considered to be noncombatants, though they may contribute far more to the war effort than those in the military (Richard Norman, *Ethics, Killing and War* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 159).

<sup>882</sup> Barbara McKinnon and Andrew Fiala, *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues*, 8th ed. (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015), 206–207, 515–16; cf. Cheryl Abbate, “Assuming Risk: A Critical Analysis of a Soldier’s Duty to Prevent Collateral Casualties,” in *Moral Reasoning: A Text and Reader on Ethics and Contemporary Moral Issues*, ed. David R. Morrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 431–32; Stephen Nathanson, *Terrorism and the Ethics of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 96; Neta C. Crawford, *Accountability for Killing: Moral Responsibility for Collateral Damage in America’s Post-9/11 Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6–10; Patricia Cook, “A Profession Like No Other,” in *Routledge Handbook of Military Ethics*, ed. George Lucas (New York: Routledge, 2015), 32–43.

<sup>883</sup> See Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe, 1939–1945* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

themselves were *guilty* of the father's sins, but they were affected by his sins, nonetheless. This is to be expected since the consequences of sin are often far-reaching.<sup>884</sup> For instance, when Achan sinned, thirty-six soldiers died in the initial battle at Ai when the Lord did not fight for Israel (Josh 7:1–12). One man's sin led to the death of thirty-six soldiers. This is certainly the case in wicked societies where the actions of the majority (e.g., Axis Powers) bring devastation and ruin upon the entire population.

The death of children in other instances could be classified as spiritual collateral damage too. The innocent children who died in the Flood died because their parents' wickedness brought the judgment of God on the entire world. In the same way, David and Bathsheba's baby died because of his parents' sin. Perhaps this is why Achan's children were put to death as well. God decided that, because of Achan's sin, everything belonging to Achan had to go. The same was true when the children died in Korah's rebellion, during Old Testament plagues and famines, and during the end-times judgments. The plagues against Egypt also affected many primary and secondary targets of people who were innocent victims but who were included with the rest of Egypt under God's judgment due to Pharaoh's actions.<sup>885</sup> The pattern is evident. Sometimes

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<sup>884</sup> The passages in the Old Testament that refer to visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children down to the third and fourth generation seem to have this in mind (cf. Exod 20:5; Num 14:18; Deut 5:9; 2 Chron 25:1–4). The sinful lifestyles and habits of parents set patterns for subsequent generations to follow, and the actions of one generation impact the next (see Lev 26:39; 1 Sam 2:31; 1 Kgs 14:10; Amos 7:17; cf. Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003], 44). Since multiple generations of family members lived together, then the divine punishment would have had some impact on the entire family unit until the one who committed the offense died. It is also important to keep in mind that the subsequent generations were still culpable for their own choices. The language of "those who hate me" (Exod 20:5; Deut 5:9) suggests that the punishment landed on those who continued in the sins of the previous generations (Mark J. Boda, *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009], 118). At the same time, under normal criminal law, individuals were punished for their own offenses (Deut 24:16; cf. Jer 31:30; Eze 18:20). When reading the Old Testament, one needs to make the distinction concerning normal court situations, corporate solidarity (e.g., national guilt because of Saul's actions in 2 Sam 21), and situations that involve a divine prerogative of final judgment (e.g., David and Bathsheba's child; see Kaiser, et al., *Hard Sayings*, 177–79).

<sup>885</sup> Charlie Trimm, "YHWH Fights for Them!" *The Divine Warrior in the Exodus Narrative* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2014), 117–18.

children—and people more generally—die because of the sinful choices of others. This is bound to happen in a fallen world where, in the moment, God chooses *not* to right every wrong or prevent every situation of collateral damage for reasons revealed or known only to God. While this may seem unjust, there is one more consideration: the final judgment.

### Children and the Afterlife

The final point to make is that although God commanded the extermination of the Canaanite children—probably due to the operating principle of corporate solidarity and because of the effects of sin upon others in a fallen world (collateral damage), and perhaps due to other reasons mentioned above such as the corruption present even in the Canaanite children—the Canaanite children (e.g., babies) were not *guilty* of their parents sins in the eternal scheme of things. They *could not* commit the sins themselves if they were too young to know good and evil. The Bible teaches that there is an age before which children do not yet know enough to distinguish between good and evil (cf. Deut 1:39; Isa 7:16), which is what interpreters refer to as the “age of accountability.” Children are not thought to be morally complicit when they are babies and toddlers since their minds have not yet developed to the point that they know right from wrong. The same is true of people who are mentally disabled or incapacitated and who cannot make moral decisions. Such persons, who would include the Canaanite children in this case, would not be morally culpable either in this life or in the life to come. Therefore, there is no injustice when God takes the life of an innocent child because temporal punishments do not necessarily lead to eternal punishments.<sup>886</sup> The Canaanite children who suffered in this life as a result of their parents’ sins would not have been punished in the afterlife for their parents sins.

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<sup>886</sup> Jonathan Lichtenwalter, “The Slaughter of the Canaanites: An Answer,” accessed January 23, 2022, <https://renew.org/the-slaughter-of-the-canaanites-an-answer/>.

What is more, it is reasonable to conclude that children who die before they reach an age of accountability go to be with the Lord. David's statement about going to be with the son who died (2 Sam 12:23) certainly lends credence to this theological tenet. Even though the Old Testament revelation about the afterlife is shadowy when compared to the New Testament revelation, the destination of the righteous, the wicked, and the innocent (e.g., babies) is established by God and is not contingent on a person's level of knowledge or ignorance about the afterlife. If this were not true, then the opposite would be the case—namely, that children who die before reaching an age in which they can exercise saving faith (whether in ancient times or today) are eternally lost, which seems absurd. William Lane Craig summarizes the point below:

Moreover, if we believe, as I do, that God's grace is extended to those who die in infancy or as small children, the death of these children was actually their salvation. We are so wedded to an earthly, naturalistic perspective that we forget that those who die are happy to quit this earth for heaven's incomparable joy. Therefore, God does these children no wrong in taking their lives.<sup>887</sup>

This does not mean that God's primary purpose was to kill the children in order to expedite their journey to heaven.<sup>888</sup> Rather, it just shows that in the eternal scheme, there is no injustice.

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<sup>887</sup> Craig and Gorra, *A Reasonable Response*, 281.

<sup>888</sup> Contra Fales, "Satanic Verses: Moral Chaos in Holy Writ," 100.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### Summary of Arguments

This dissertation began with the premise that throughout Church history, there have been many challenges to biblical interpretation and to the Christian faith. The temptation since the Enlightenment has been to adjust the interpretations of Scripture in order to suit the trends in modern thinking, but this often results in erroneous interpretations and bad theology. The challenge of the Canaanite conquest has taken center stage in apologetic discussions in the past decade or two, and the main question is, How could a loving God command the indiscriminate slaughter of the Canaanite men, women, and children? Chapter one argues that the meaning of *ḥērem* is “devotion to destruction,” “ban,” or “annihilate” (see Appendix 1 for more details). This leads to the understanding that the Conquest required the wholesale destruction of the Canaanites. The Conquest has also been deemed “holy war” and “genocide.” Either term is acceptable when one understands that any war in which the Lord was involved could be considered “holy war” and when one recognizes the moral distinction between ordinary, human genocide, which is evil, and divinely-mandated genocide, which is an act of God’s judgment.

Chapters two and three broaden the picture by examining the Conquest throughout the Old Testament. The Conquest arguably began in Exodus 17 when the Lord commanded Moses and the Israelites to blot out the Amalekites in response to the Amalekites’ ambush upon nascent Israel soon after the Exodus from Egypt. The follow-up to this occurred in 1 Samuel when the Lord commanded Saul to exterminate the Amalekites and when David enacted the ban against the Amalekites. It was the Lord’s will to destroy the Amalekites because of their wickedness and because they posed a perpetual threat to Israel. There were also a few applications of *ḥērem* while the Israelites were in the wilderness when they were attacked by the Canaanites and



Amorites. The biblical text states that the Israelites killed men, women, and children, and it was done at the Lord's command. In addition, the Lord helped Israel secure the victory over the Amalekites, Canaanites, and Amorites even though Israel's enemies were bigger, stronger, and more experienced militarily. The same was true of the Conquest in the books of Joshua and Judges. The Lord gave the battle plan, which included the destruction of the Canaanites, and the Lord fought on Israel's behalf to defeat the Canaanites even though the Canaanites had military superiority. Moses and Joshua are commended for wholeheartedly obeying the Lord, but at the end of the Conquest, there was still much work to be done in driving out and destroying the Canaanites who remained scattered throughout the land. However, the Israelites as a whole failed to accomplish the mission and instead allowed the Canaanites to live in the land under Israelite subjugation, which ultimately led to the moral and spiritual downfall of Israel in the subsequent generations as described in the book of Judges.

Chapters two and three also provide the biblical reasons for the Conquest. God had revealed to Abraham that the Israelites would be slaves in a foreign country (Egypt) for four hundred years because the sin of the Amorites (a Canaanite group) had not yet reached its full measure. In other words, one of the purposes of the Conquest was to punish Canaanite wickedness. Examining the later biblical passages (e.g., Lev 18) and the ancient Near Eastern literature reveals that the Canaanites were morally and spiritually depraved. They practiced all manner of sexual immorality and worshiped demon gods by sacrificing their children as burnt offerings. The Israelites were commanded to show no mercy or pity and to allow for no treaties or intermarriages. The Canaanites were so debased that if they were not completely destroyed and driven out of the land, then they would corrupt the Israelites. From a biblical perspective, the obliteration of the Canaanites at the time of the Conquest was historical, just, and necessary. The

other purpose of the Conquest was to fulfill the promises to the patriarchs in giving Israel the land for God's greater purpose of working through the nation of Israel to bless the world with God's special revelation, miraculous deeds, covenants, and Messiah. Thus, the Conquest fulfilled the dual purposes of punishing the Canaanites and establishing Israel as a nation.

Chapter three also explains several other facets of the Conquest. First, Israel's rules for warfare allowed for peace treaties with non-Canaanite nations, and the ban was only to be applied to the Canaanites, not to other nations. Second, mercy was available for individual Canaanites who turned to the Lord in faith (e.g., Rahab). Third, the Bible records that the ban would be applied to Israelite towns that apostatized (Deut 13) or to individuals who took the devoted items from Jericho (Achan). Fourth, if the nation of Israelite became like the Canaanites, then they too would be expelled from the land, which is eventually what happened later in Israel's history. Thus, the ban applied to Israel just as it applied to the Canaanites.

Chapter four outlines the various interpretations of the Conquest throughout Church history. The Conquest has been criticized as immoral since the days of Marcion and the Marcionites in the early Church. Marcion's solution was to differentiate between the God of the Old Testament, who is righteous and just but not loving, and the God of the New Testament, who is loving but not just. His interpretation fails both biblically and theologically, though. Nonetheless, criticizing the Conquest as cruel and immoral has continued to the present. Since the Enlightenment, the Conquest has also been reviled by skeptics, critics, and atheists, though most of these attacks turn out to be spurious. In the past half century, much criticism has come from Christian scholars who see the Conquest as immoral and who interpret the Conquest as an example of primitive morality in ancient Israel or as an accommodation on God's part to ancient

customs of warfare. Both of these interpretations flounder for biblical-theological reasons and also needlessly sacrifice a high view of Scripture in order to solve an apologetic problem.

Other Christians argue that God acted alone in the Conquest without the help of the Israelites, that God is nonviolent and would have never ordered the Conquest in the first place, or that the Conquest is inexplicable for one reason or another. However, there is too much biblical data about the Conquest and the reasons for the annihilation of the Canaanites to support these interpretations. Some have reinterpreted the history of the Conquest, concluding that it never happened, that the accounts are exaggerated, or that the Canaanites were actually offered peace, contrary to what the biblical text states if taken at face value. None of these interpretations fits the biblical data or helps apologetically. The same is true of the nonliteral interpretations (e.g., allegorical, typological, metaphorical), the interpretations that have used Conquest language and ideas for modern warfare (e.g., the Crusades), and the list of other interpretations at the end of chapter four (e.g., skeptical theism, reader-response, identity removal).

Chapter five presents an apologetic for the Canaanite Conquest that deals with the full range of biblical material and addresses the key theological issues with special attention given to the death of the Canaanite children under the assumption that the Conquest accounts included the annihilation of men, women, and children at cities like Jericho, Ai, and Hazor. With the starting premise that God is the Creator and thereby the Author of life, God has the divine right to give and take life as He pleases. He may do this actively or passively and through any number of means (e.g., flood, fire, famine, plague, sword). In fact, God ends up taking everyone's lives eventually—either actively or passively. He is God, and so when He orders the death of humans, it is not murder (homicide) but divine judgment. Israel had a moral obligation to obey God's commands, and the ethical principle of graded absolutism explains why one moral obligation

(destroy the Canaanites) trumped another moral obligation (do not murder) in the Conquest. The Canaanites were well deserving of punishment, and there was mercy available and ample time to repent, so there was no injustice in punishing the Canaanites. Neither is there a biblical or theological contradiction between God's love and wrath because, although God is loving, gracious, and merciful, He does not let wickedness go on forever, which would be unjust toward the guilty and unloving toward the rest of humanity.

The Conquest was also necessary for Israel's spiritual integrity and for God's larger plan to bless the world, and the Conquest had a didactic purpose in deterring Israel from straying into sin—at least for the first generation of Israelites to enter the Promised Land as well as for the first generation to return from exile during the time of Ezra the priest. The Conquest was not about world domination, and so it was not a land grab. It was an exceptional outpouring of God's wrath that parallels the judgments at the time of the Flood and at Sodom and Gomorrah. The ban applied just as much to Israel as it did to the Canaanites, as evidenced by God's judgments in the book of Judges and at the time of the Assyrian Captivity and Babylonian Captivity. The Conquest has no modern application for the Church since the Church does not occupy a single land or nation and since the primary battle for Christians today is spiritual, not physical. The Conquest has the support of the New Testament and aligns with God's judgments in the New Testament and at the end of the world.

The final matter is the death of the children. As argued in chapter five, the basic premise that God has the right to take lives also applies to the Conquest, where God used the human instrument of the nation of Israel to take the lives of men, women, and children. This is not unlike God's dealings elsewhere in the Bible where children suffer and die along with their parents. Children were killed at the time of the Flood, at Sodom and Gomorrah, during Korah's

rebellion, and at various times when there were plagues and famines in the land of Israel. In addition, God directly took the life of the Egyptian firstborn and David and Bathsheba's infant, and Jesus threatened to kill the children of the false prophetess "Jezebel" because she was leading the people in the church at Thyatira astray (Rev 2:22–23). A person's age does not exempt him from God's judgment.

Several explanations have been offered for killing the Canaanite children along with their parents. It may be that the children were essentially counted as guilty along with their parents, or perhaps the children were too morally corrupt or damaged to retain in Israel. Another explanation is that it was impractical to keep a society of women and children with no men around. Whether or not any of these speculative explanations is true of the Conquest is debatable. However, corporate solidarity may have been at play. This principle appears throughout Scripture when an individual represents a group and either brings a blessing upon the group (e.g., Abraham) or judgment upon the group (e.g., Achan). Corporate solidarity is still applicable today in groups like the military, sports teams, and businesses. When one errs, all experience the consequences, and when one is rewarded, all benefit in some way. This may explain why the Canaanite children were included with the parents at the time of the Conquest. God wanted to get rid of everything having to do with the Canaanites, which represented a debased and demonic culture. This meant that the children had to go too.

Another explanation is that the Canaanite children died as a result of spiritual collateral damage: the consequences of the parents' sins affected the lives of the children too. However, the Canaanite children (i.e., babies) were not *guilty* of their parents' sins, though they died as a *result* of their parents' sins. Spiritual collateral damage occurs frequently in a sinful, fallen world, and God does not intervene in every situation to protect the innocent from the far-

reaching consequences of others' sins that impact the innocent. But just because God does not intervene today, that does not mean that there is injustice forever. God will sort things out in the final judgment. No one gets away with anything in the end, and no one will be punished eternally for sins they did not commit in this life. The Canaanite children—and all children everywhere, for that matter—who died before they reached an age of accountability, where they could distinguish good from evil, would have inherited eternal life by God's grace and would not have been banished to eternal punishment like their parents. There is no injustice in the final measure.

### Contribution to the Field of Apologetics

The field of apologetics has been inundated with books and articles on the morality of the Conquest, but many scholars prefer one of the interpretations in chapter four, each of which has significant shortcomings when it comes to biblical apologetics. There is a need to craft a new apologetic that is comprehensive, not cursory, and that deals adequately with the biblical text, the theological issues, the history of interpretation, and the death of the Canaanite children. This dissertation addresses these issues and maintains that the Conquest was historical, just, and necessary. Even though the Conquest included God's judgment, which is always unpleasant, that does not mean that there is anything immoral about the Conquest. God does not delight in the death of the wicked (cf. Eze 18:23; 33:11), and neither should we. At the same time, the reader should respond with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12) when he realizes how easily people are tempted to sin (e.g., the Israelites), how far sin can take someone down demonic and destructive paths (e.g., the Canaanites), and how severe the consequences for sin are in both a temporal sense and in an eternal sense. Additionally, this author has argued that God is God, and He can take life anytime. Balking at the Conquest denies God's divine authority over life and unnecessarily denigrates the Bible's integrity. Christians should defend God's actions when He

punishes wickedness, understanding that God has the bigger picture in mind both in terms of Israel in God's plan of salvation as well as the perspective of eternal rewards and punishments.

#### Areas for Further Research

There are several areas for further research. First, the survey of Church history is extensive but not exhaustive, so there may still be interpretations to consider from lesser known figures in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Second, it would be interesting to compare the Conquest to the Muslim concept of "holy war" in both Muslim literature and history. Third, the comparison of the Conquest to God's judgments at the end of the world would be a worthwhile study since Jesus made comparisons to the judgment at the time of the Flood and to the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:26–35). Fourth, exploring the impact of alternative interpretations (e.g., accommodation) on bibliology would expand the discussion of the Conquest. Finally, it would be helpful to consider how to help Christians who struggle with emotional doubt because of God's judgment in the Conquest.

## Appendix 1: Biblical Usage of *Ḥērem*

### The Ban in Israel

The term *ḥērem* most commonly refers to something “banned” or “devoted to destruction.” What was intended was a literal<sup>889</sup> devotion to God, who is the Author of life and the supreme Judge. In this sense, a person, family, town, or nation was irrevocably sentenced to be destroyed. The ban was not solely intended for Israel’s enemies, though. Exodus 22:20<sup>890</sup> is the first occurrence of the term in the Old Testament and pertains to individuals in Israel who worshiped other gods: “Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the LORD must be destroyed (*ḥērem*).”<sup>891</sup> Like the devoted field or animal, there was no reversal of the devotion or ban: “No person devoted (*ḥērem*) to destruction (*ḥērem*) may be ransomed; he must be put to death” (Lev 27:29). This agrees with the other commandments in the Mosaic Law about putting to death idolators.<sup>892</sup> It is illustrated early in Israel’s history as a nation. Although the Israelites had been sacrificing to goat idols during their time in the wilderness, the Lord forbade them from continuing to “prostitute themselves” in that way (Lev 17:7). But the Israelite men were later enticed by the Moabite women into sexual immorality and Baal worship during the period of wilderness wandering (Num 25:1–13). The anger of the Lord burned against them, and the guilty

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<sup>889</sup> There is only one figurative use of *ḥērem* when, in the future, the Lord will “destroy” (dry up) the gulf of the Egyptian sea (Isa 11:15).

<sup>890</sup> In the Hebrew Bible, the verse is Exodus 22:19. Unless otherwise noted, all references will be to the English Bible verse numbers.

<sup>891</sup> There is textual variation between the MT and the Samaritan Pentateuch/LXX on this verse regarding the clarification of sacrificing to any god other than the Lord. For the purpose of this discussion, the point remains the same. Worshiping another god was a capital offense in Israel. For more about the text critical problem, see Lohfink, “*ḥārem*; *ḥērem*,” 181. Schäfer-Lichtenberger argues that this verse speaks of separation rather than execution (Christa Schäfer-Lichtenberger, “Bedeutung und Funktion von *Ḥērem* in biblisch-hebräischen Texten,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 38 [1994]: 274). The preceding two verses, though, prescribe the death penalty for sorcery and sodomy. Sacrificing to other gods would surely be a capital offense too (cf. Num 25:1–13).

<sup>892</sup> E.g., Exod 20:23; Deut 13:5; 17:2–5; 18:20; cf. 1 Kgs 18:40; 19:1; 2 Kgs 10:25; 23:20; 2 Chron 15:13.



parties were put to death. The Lord also sent a plague against Israel that claimed the lives of 24,000 people,<sup>893</sup> showing that idolatry was a serious matter in the Lord's estimation, though it would continue throughout much of Israel's history after the Conquest.<sup>894</sup> Although the term *ḥērem* does not appear in Numbers 25, capital punishment for worshiping other gods agrees with the ban in Exodus 22:20. Those who worshiped other gods in Israel were to be destroyed. In addition, individuals who failed to *carry out* the ban at God's direction were subject to divine punishment (1 Sam 15:1–35) or even death (1 Kgs 20:42).

The stipulations of the ban in Israel extended beyond individuals to larger groups and even the nation of Israel as a whole. If an entire Israelite town became apostate in worshiping other gods, then all of the people and livestock of that town were placed under the ban and were to be destroyed and burned. No plunder was to be taken so that the Lord's fierce anger would be turned away, and the town was never to be rebuilt (Deut 13:12–18). Apostasy was a serious offense to the Lord and brought the most severe penalty. Eventually, the entire nation of Israel would be consigned to the ban when both the northern and southern kingdoms were exiled because of idolatry (Isa 43:28). Since God's chosen nation became apostate, then God used Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon as His instrument of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem to completely destroy them (Jer 25:1–14). The threat of the ban remained even after the Israelites returned from exile. The Lord promised to send the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful

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<sup>893</sup> The biblical text is unclear as to whether this was a general plague or whether this was directed solely against the offenders. Since the command for Israel's judges to put to death all who had joined in Baal worship was also given (Num 25:4), then it may have been the case that the plague afflicted "Israel" in a general sense just as "Israel" joined in worshiping Baal of Peor (Num 25:3). This would be an example of corporate solidarity.

<sup>894</sup> The Lord informed Moses that after Moses' death, "these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them" (Deut 31:16; cf. 32:15–43). The rest of the Old Testament is the unfolding of that very thing, accompanied by the Lord's judgments as well as the accomplishment of His purpose despite Israel's unfaithfulness.

Day of the Lord to turn the hearts of the father toward their children and children toward their fathers, or else the Lord would come and strike the land with a *curse* (Mal 4:6).

### The Ban and the Canaanites

Although the ban originated as a punishment for apostasy in Israel, it is more often associated with the destruction of the Canaanites. There are three examples of the *hērem* against the Canaanites *before* entering the Promised Land. First is the episode in Numbers 21:1–3 where the Canaanite king of Arad attacked the Israelites on the road to Atharim and took some Israelite prisoners. Israel made a vow to the Lord to completely destroy (*hērem*) the Canaanite cities if the Lord would secure the victory. The Lord listened to the voice of Israel and delivered the Canaanites over to them, and the Israelites destroyed the Canaanite cities and renamed the place *Hormah* (“destruction”). Sometime later, the Israelites were accosted by the Amorite king Sihon (Num 21:21–31), but the Israelites defeated the Amorites in battle and took possession of the Amorite cities and land. Shortly thereafter, they were attacked by Og king of Bashan, and the Lord instructed Moses to do to them what he had done to Sihon king of the Amorites. The Israelites defeated the Amorites again, left no survivors, and took possession of the land (Num 21:32–35). When Moses later recounted these episodes, he stated that the Israelites totally destroyed (*hērem*) the Amorite men, women, and children in every city and left no survivors (Deut 2:34; 3:6; cf. Josh 2:10). The destruction of *everyone*, including women and children (noncombatants), is one distinctive of the *hērem* in Israel’s battles against the Canaanites and Amorites as seen here.

The ban was imposed on the Canaanite peoples living in the Promised Land as well. This was foreshadowed in Numbers 21 and was later explicitly commanded in Deuteronomy 7:2 and Deuteronomy 20:17. The Canaanites inhabiting the Promised Land were to be completely

destroyed without mercy. Additionally, the Israelites were forbidden from taking any of the Canaanite idols, which would make the Israelites themselves liable to destruction (Deut 7:26) and which actually occurred when Achan took the devoted items from Jericho and was then liable to destruction without mercy along with his children (Josh 7:1, 11–13, 15; cf. 22:20 1 Chron 2:7). The books of Joshua and Judges record how the Israelites subjected many Canaanite cities to the *hērem*, including Jericho (Josh 6:17, 18, 21), Ai (Josh 8:26; cf. 10:1), Makkedah (Josh 10:28), the southern cities of Libnah, Lachish, Gezer, Eglon, Hebron, Debir, and the surrounding areas (Josh 10:29–42); Hazor (Josh 11:11); the northern cities (Josh 11:12, 20); the Anakites in the hill country (Josh 11:21); the Jebusites in Jerusalem (Judg 1:8); and the Canaanites in Zephath (Judg 1:17). The descriptions of the battles indicate that total destruction was in view. The Israelites put the cities to the sword, left no survivors, and/or executed men, women, and children.<sup>895</sup> It is true that survivors escaped in some instances (e.g., Josh 10:20), but the implication is that everyone else in the city was executed. Joshua records the distribution of many cities in the Promised Land *without* specific reference to the *hērem* (see Josh 13:8–19:51; cf. Judg 1:18), so it may be inferred that the Israelites annihilated the occupants of those cities—or that they were *supposed* to annihilate them—based on the commands in Deuteronomy 7 and the pattern set by Joshua at Jericho, Ai, and Hazor. However, Joshua and Judges also record that the Israelites ultimately failed to exterminate or drive out the Canaanites and instead subjected them to forced labor. This eventually led to the worship of Canaanite gods in Israel and intermarriage with the Canaanites.<sup>896</sup>

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<sup>895</sup> See Josh 6:17, 21, 24; 8:22, 24–25; 10:28, 30, 32, 33, 35, 37, 39, 40; 11:8, 11, 14, 22; 19:47; Judg 1:25.

<sup>896</sup> See Josh 15:63; 16:10; 17:12–13, 16; 19:47–48 (cf. Judg 18:1–31); Judg 1:19–21, 27–36; 2:10–3:6; cf. 1 Kgs 9:21.

## The Ban in Judges

During the period of the judges following the Conquest, the ban is only mentioned a few times. This is to be expected since the Israelites failed to follow the commandments of the Law to exterminate and drive out the Canaanites. The first occurrence of *hērem* after the opening chapters of Judges is when the Danites abandoned their allotted inheritance and moved north to the city of Leshem (Laish). They put the city of Leshem to the sword, burned down the city, settled there, and renamed the city “Dan” (Judg 18:1–2, 27–31). Although the word *hērem* does not occur, the concept of total destruction is apparent from the fact that the Danites put the city to the sword (not just the fighting men) and then burned the city. Anyone living there (e.g., women, children) would have been killed.<sup>897</sup>

The second example<sup>898</sup> of the *hērem* in Judges involves the battle between the Israelite tribes and the tribe of Benjamin after the brutal rape and murder of a Levite’s concubine by the men of Gibeah, a Benjamite city (see Judg 19:1–21:25). The Israelite soldiers ambushed the city of Gibeah and put the city to the sword (Judg 20:37). Again, the word *hērem* does not appear, but the concept of total destruction is present. After the Israelites had destroyed all but 600 Benjamite soldiers who had fled into the desert, they went back through the Benjamite towns and put them all to the sword, including the animals and whatever else they found. They also set the

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<sup>897</sup> While this may seem like a fulfillment of the commandment in Deuteronomy to destroy the Canaanites, it is also an example of failure to drive out the Canaanites in the land that had actually been apportioned to the Danites (Josh 19:47–48). Additionally, the Danites were an apostate tribe. They kidnapped an illegitimate priest, stole an unauthorized ephod and a number of household gods from an Ephraimite man named Micah, and set up a site of false worship once they settled in the city of Dan (Judg 18:1–31). They had no interest in worshipping the Lord or following His commands, and so there is no reason to believe that their execution of the people of Laish was in accordance with Deuteronomy 7 rather than simply out of self-interest.

<sup>898</sup> One scholar believes that the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11 is linked to *hērem*, but the biblical evidence for this is scant. See Dolores G. Kamrada, “The Sacrifice of Jephthah’s Daughter and the Notion of *Hērem* (חֵרֵם) (A Problematic Narrative Against its Biblical Background),” in *With Wisdom as a Robe: Qumran and Other Jewish Studies in Honour of Ida Fröhlich*, eds. Károly Dániel Dobos and Miklós Köszeghy (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 57–85.

towns on fire (Judg 20:48). The *ḥērem* concept is obvious not only from the description here but also from one other detail in the story. The Israelite men had sworn an oath that none of their daughters would be given to the men of Benjamin in marriage, but all of the Benjamite women and children had been executed. As a result, there were no wives for the remaining 600 Benjaminite men, which meant that one tribe in Israel would eventually fade out of existence (Judg 21:1–7). When it was discovered that the men of Jabesh Gilead, a city of the tribe of Gad, had failed to appear in the assembly, the Israelite coalition decided to place Jabesh Gilead under the ban. Here, the *ḥērem* is specifically invoked (Judg 21:11). An army of 12,000 fighting men went to Jabesh Gilead and put to death the men, women, and children living there. Only 400 virgin women were kept alive to be given to the 600 remaining Benjamite men (Judg 21:10–12). As with the Danites, these two examples of the *ḥērem* in Judges appear to be unsanctioned. The Lord authorized the Israelite coalition to go and fight against the Benjamites (Judg 20:28), but there is no indication that the Lord wanted them to annihilate the entire tribe of Benjamin or that every town had become apostate and was subject to the ban (à la Deut 13:12–18). The imposition of the ban in Judges is misdirected at best and unlawful at worst.

#### The Ban under Saul and David

During the era of Israel's monarchy, the *ḥērem* is mentioned a few times as well—sometimes in accordance with the Mosaic Law and sometimes not. The ban is imposed three times by Saul, Israel's first king. The first example is the well-known case of Saul and Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15 (to be discussed more later). The Lord tells Samuel the prophet to instruct Saul to attack the Amalekites and to place them under the ban in fulfillment of the ancient promise to annihilate the Amalekites because of their assault on the Israelites in the wilderness (Exod 17:8–16; Deut 25:17–19). The word *ḥērem* occurs numerous times in this

chapter (1 Sam 15:3, 8, 9 [2], 15, 18, 20, 21), and the command included the directive to spare nothing, to include men, women, children, infants, cattle, sheep, camels, and donkeys in the destruction (1 Sam 15:3). Instead, Saul killed the people but spared the king as a trophy and kept the livestock as plunder (1 Sam 15:7–10). The Lord rejected Saul as king because of his disobedience (1 Sam 15:23), and Saul eventually lost the kingdom (1 Sam 15:28). This example shows that failing to execute God’s judgment results in God’s judgment against the disobedient instrument of divine punishment.

Later on, Saul implemented the ban on an unsuspecting group of priests and citizens of Nob because they had harbored David when Saul was pursuing David. Although the word *hērem* does not occur, the text states that Saul’s hitman Doeg put the entire city of Nob to the sword, including the priests, men, women, children, infants, cattle, donkeys, and sheep (1 Sam 22:19). The *hērem* was applied illegitimately to innocent Israelites, and only one man escaped to tell David what had happened (1 Sam 22:20–23). This was not the only occasion in which Saul violated the conditions of the ban. During the reign of Saul’s successor, David, the Gibeonites came to David and accused the Israelites of a gross injustice. During the time of the Conquest, Joshua and his men had ratified a peace treaty with the Gibeonites as a result of a ruse (Josh 9:1–27), but Saul had tried to annihilate the Gibeonites anyway. David allowed the Gibeonite men to execute seven of Saul’s male descendants in return, and the deed was acceptable to the Lord (1 Sam 21:1–14). In summary, Saul failed to carry out the authorized *hērem* and then imposed an unauthorized *hērem* on two separate occasions. The consequences were devastating in each case.

David, on the other hand, appears to have enacted the ban against the Geshurites, Girzites, and Amalekites during the time when he was living in Philistine territory before he ascended to the throne. Although the specific term *hērem* does not occur, when David and his

men raided these towns, they did not leave man or woman alive (1 Sam 27:8–11). The reason for killing all in the towns was so that none would escape and inform Achish, the Philistine ruler, that David had raided the towns of Philistine allies. In this way, Achish was tricked into thinking that David was more loyal to him than to Saul and the Israelites. There is a question here as to whether this was an authorized application of the ban, but when one considers that on another occasion David vowed to kill only the men in Nabal's household rather than everyone in Carmel (1 Sam 25:22), it is clear that David was not prone to invoke the *hērem* in every situation. The biblical text does not include a commandment from God for David to annihilate the Geshurites, Girzites, and Amalekites, but neither does it mention any condemnation of David's actions. The destruction of the Amalekites had been announced long before (Exod 17:8–16; Deut 25:17–19), and they had been placed under the ban during Saul's reign (1 Sam 15:1–3), which would have been just a decade or so beforehand. Their destruction would presumably still be authorized by God. The Geshurites were an Aramean people group that lived southeast of the Philistines and also northeast of the land of Canaan near Gilead.<sup>899</sup> During the time of the Conquest, the Lord told Joshua that the land remaining to conquer included the regions of the Philistines and the Geshurites (Josh 13:2). However, the Israelites failed to drive them out, so the Geshurites continued to live among the Israelites (Josh 13:13).<sup>900</sup> The fact that they were to be driven out links them with the Canaanites who were also to be driven out and/or destroyed.<sup>901</sup> The third

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<sup>899</sup> See Gerald J. Petter, "Geshurites," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:996–97; cf. Deut 3:14; Josh 12:5; 13:11.

<sup>900</sup> It is also possible that the Geshurites represent two separate people groups—one in the north (Geshurites), and one in the south (Geshuri). See C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, trans. James Martin (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1880), 256; Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 313. Either way, the point is the same in that both groups were to be expelled from the Promised Land.

group mentioned is the Girzites, but they are only mentioned here in the Bible and are unknown outside the Bible,<sup>902</sup> so it is difficult to classify them except by their association with the Amalekites and Geshurites based on their location in the desert region south of the Philistine territory (1 Sam 27:8). It is reasonable to conclude that David's annihilation of the Amalekites and Geshurites represents an authorized application of *hērem*, and the Girzites were apparently exterminated because of their association with these enemy groups.

### The Ban in Israel's Later History

The ban appears to have faded out of practice after the time of Saul and David. David's son, Solomon, chose to *conscript* the survivors of the Canaanite nations into slave labor rather than *exterminate* them (1 Kgs 9:20–21). Later, he married many foreign women, including Sidonian and Hittite women (1 Kgs 11:1) who were Canaanites by origin (cf. Gen 10:15). It is no surprise, then, that the ban did not factor into Israel's history during Solomon's reign. During the period of the divided kingdom, most of the kings did not follow the Lord wholeheartedly, and so they would not have been concerned with enforcing the ban in Israel or against Israel's Canaanite neighbors once the populations had intermingled and there were larger, geopolitical problems at hand. One exception is found in an obscure reference to the eighth-century reign of Hezekiah king of Judah (a godly king) involving the Simeonites, whose land was taken from the portion of Judah (Josh 19:1–9) and which was formerly inhabited by some Hamites (1 Chron

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<sup>901</sup> When David became king, he apparently made peace with the Geshurites by marrying Maacah, the daughter of Talmai king of Geshur. His son Absalom was from Maacah (2 Sam 3:3; 1 Chron 3:2). After Absalom killed his brother, Amnon, he fled to Talmai, his father-in-law, to seek refuge for three years (2 Sam 13:37–39; cf. 14:23, 32; 15:8). Sometime later, the Geshurites recaptured Israelite territory they had lost at the time of the Conquest (1 Chron 2:23; cf. Num 32:41; Josh 13:30), so the hostility apparently resumed.

<sup>902</sup> Additionally, there is a textual problem that casts doubt upon "Girzites" as the correct reading, but there are no likely proposals in place of "Girzites." See the discussions in Keil and Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, 256–57; Henry Preserved Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 237n8; Carl S. Ehrlich, "Girzites," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:1028.



4:40).<sup>903</sup> In the days of Hezekiah, the Simeonites attacked the Hamites and Meunites<sup>904</sup> in that region and completely destroyed them (*hērem*) and settled in their land (1 Chron 4:41). They also killed the remaining Amalekites in the hill country of Seir and occupied the territory (1 Chron 4:42–43). Nothing more is said about these episodes. Since there is no condemnation of their actions, then it may be assumed that, like David killing the Amalekites, this was an authorized use of *hērem*, though it is an isolated example. This is the last record of Israel’s implementation of the ban on her enemies.

The word *hērem* appears in two other places in the history of Israel but only in regard to Israel’s battles with other nations once the Canaanites had faded from the scene. First is the account of when the coalition of Moabites, Ammonites, and Meunites came to make war with Jehoshaphat king of Judah. Jehoshaphat sought the Lord’s help, and the Lord intervened in the battle to give Judah the victory (2 Chron 20:1–30). After they were defeated, the Ammonites and Moabites joined together to destroy (*hērem*) the Meunites before turning on one another (2 Chron 20:23). The second instance is during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem in the eighth century when Sennacherib king of Assyria sent messengers to Hezekiah to deter him from resisting the Assyrian army. According to the message, when other nations took that course of action, they were not saved by their gods but were destroyed (*hērem*) by the Assyrians (2 Kgs

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<sup>903</sup> The Hamites were descended from Noah’s son, Ham (Gen 5:32; 6:10; 7:13; 9:18; 1 Chron 1:4). Because of Ham’s sinful actions of looking upon his father’s nakedness (Gen 9:20–23), Noah pronounced a curse on Ham’s son, Canaan: “Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers” (Gen 9:25). The curse also included the stipulation that Canaan would be the slave of Shem and Japheth, Ham’s brothers (Gen 9:26–27). The genealogy of Ham in Genesis 10:6–20 explains that Ham had four sons: Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan. Each became a powerful nation, and the Hamites came to dominate the Middle East and North Africa (Gen 10:8–19; cf. 14:5; Pss 78:51; 105:23, 27; 106:22). Nations that came from Ham include the Cushites, Egypt (Mizraim), the Philistines, the Hittites, and the seven Canaanite nations, among others (1 Chron 1:8–16). Since the reference here in 1 Chronicles 4:40–41 mentions “Hamites” rather than Canaanites, then it is reasonable to conclude that these Hamites were descended from one of the other sons of Ham.

<sup>904</sup> The Meunites were an Arab people mentioned a couple of times in the Old Testament in league with Israel’s enemies (2 Chron 20:1; 26:7).

19:9–13; cf. 2 Chron 32:9–15; Isa 37:9–13). Like Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah sought the Lord, and the Lord saved the Israelites by supernaturally slaying the Assyrian army (2 Kgs 19:35–36). In both of these instances, *ḥērem* seems to have the meaning of “utterly destroy” with reference to the armies (2 Chron 20) and with reference to the entire population of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 19). This shows that, in the mind of the biblical author, *ḥērem* could be performed by other nations.

### The Ban in the Future

Although the ban faded out of use in Israel’s history, there are several examples of the *ḥērem* that refer to future events.<sup>905</sup> First is the destruction of Babylon predicted in Jeremiah 50–51. The futuristic setting is indicated by the phrase “in those days” and “at that time” (Jer 50:4, 20; cf. 51:2, 47, 52). While the destruction of Babylon in view may appear to be that which was accomplished by the Medes and the Persians in the sixth century BC,<sup>906</sup> it is arguable that the prophecy awaits a future fulfillment<sup>907</sup> since the total destruction of Babylon in the sixth century was not fulfilled exactly as described in Jeremiah 50–51.<sup>908</sup> What is certain is that just as the Lord had devoted Israel to destruction with the Babylonians as His means of judgment (Jer 25:9), so too would Babylon be devoted to destruction (*ḥērem*) at the hands of her enemies (Jer 50:21, 26; 51:3). The depiction of Babylon’s demise in Isaiah 13 includes the slaughter of women and children as well (Isa 13:15–18), which agrees with the *ḥērem* pattern established in the Conquest.

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<sup>905</sup> This section assumes a future fulfillment, but the general meaning of *ḥērem* would be the same for those who interpret these passages as depicting past events.

<sup>906</sup> See Jer 50:9, 18, 23, 35–38, 41; 51:1–2, 11, 28, 34–35, 49, 56.

<sup>907</sup> See Jer 50:5, 20, 39–40; 51:6–8, 26, 29, 37, 41–45, 47–48; cf. Rev 18:2–4, 20.

<sup>908</sup> Charles Dyer and Eva Rydelnik, “Jeremiah,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, eds. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlanginham (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 1904. Another possibility is that the prophecy failed (Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, Smyth & Helwys Commentary [Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002], 623), but this would make Jeremiah a false prophet (Deut 18:20–22) and would negate the place of his prophecies in the canon. Whether the destruction of Babylon was entirely fulfilled historically or whether there awaits a final, future fulfillment is moot for this discussion. The point is that the Lord applies the ban in situations outside the Conquest.

The difference between the *hērem* against Babylon and that in Israel's history is that the Lord would use other nations besides Israel to accomplish this destruction. This demonstrates that the concept of *hērem* is broader than just that which refers to Israel's conquest of the Promised Land. The Lord used Israel to destroy the Canaanites (Josh 6:21), Babylon to destroy the Israelites (Jer 25:9), and Media and Persia (and other nations in the future) to destroy the Babylonians (Jer 50:21). Although Israel was the Lord's chosen nation and *primary* means of implementing the ban, they were not chosen because of their own righteousness but because of the wickedness of the Canaanites (Deut 9:4–6). When Israel became apostate herself, then the Lord used other nations—even ungodly nations—to exact punishment upon Israel or upon other nations (cf. Isa 10:5–11). These situations may seem perplexing at first. How could God use a nation more wicked than Israel to punish Israel (cf. Hab 1:12–13)? However, the use of the ban in various nations underscores the fact that the Lord is sovereign over all nations. He has the divine right to use one nation to punish another, even by imposing the ban on that nation, and He does not play favorites when it comes to divine justice.

The second example of the ban in the future is that committed at the hands of the coming king predicted in Daniel 11. Again, since this section of Daniel's prophecy about future events was never fulfilled historically, then it is reasonable to conclude that it will be fulfilled in the future with the coming world ruler—Antichrist (cf. 1 John 2:18).<sup>909</sup> The king who exalts himself and who speaks against the God of gods will be bent on conquest and will engage several nations in battle (Dan 11:36–45; cf. Rev 6:2). He will even invade the “Beautiful Land,” meaning the land of Israel, and will subdue nations and peoples in the region, including Edom, Moab,

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<sup>909</sup> See John F. Walvoord, *Daniel*, rev. and ed. by Philip E. Rawley and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), ch. 11.

Ammon, Egypt, and the Libyans and Nubians (Dan 11:43). However, after his campaign in North Africa, reports from the east and the north will alarm the king, “and he will set out in a great rage to destroy (שָׂמַד) and annihilate (הָרַם) many” (Dan 11:44). The *hērem* here looks to be a general description of havoc wreaked upon the nations by the coming world ruler. This will be an unjustified use of *hērem* since there is no indication of divine authorization, and if this is indeed Antichrist, then his total destruction of peoples and nations fits with the description of his bent toward conquest in later biblical prophecy (cf. Rev 6:2; 13:7). Ultimately, the coming ruler will be destroyed (Dan 11:45) supernaturally by the Lord—that is, the Lord Jesus Christ—at the Second Coming.<sup>910</sup>

The last occurrences of *hērem* in regard to future events pertain to the destruction of the ungodly nations and the deliverance of the city of Jerusalem. In Isaiah 34, the prophet calls everyone—the nations, peoples, earth, and world—to listen to the divine pronouncement. The message is as follows: “The LORD is angry with all nations; his wrath is upon all their armies. He will totally destroy (*hērem*) them, he will give them over to slaughter” (Isa 34:2). The message goes on to depict in vivid detail the coming destruction (Isa 34:3–7), including the picture of burning sulfur and unquenchable fire (Isa 34:9–10).<sup>911</sup> The prophet singles out Edom as a representative<sup>912</sup> of the enemy nations that the Lord will judge: “My sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; see it descends in judgment on Edom, the people I have totally destroyed (*hērem*)” (Isa 34:5). The annihilation of Edom—and thus, the nations—is described as a “sacrifice” and

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<sup>910</sup> See Dan 2:34–35; 44–45; 7:23–27; Zech 14:1–4; Matt 24:30; 2 Thess 2:8; Rev 19:11–21.

<sup>911</sup> Cf. Isa 66:24; Mark 9:48; Rev 14:11; 19:3.

<sup>912</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Book of Isaiah: An Introductory Commentary*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 98; cf. Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39: with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 445.

“slaughter” (Isa 34:6), which invokes the idea of being “devoted” to the Lord. In this case, though, “devotion” signifies devotion to *destruction*. The reason is simple: “...the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion’s cause” (Isa 34:8). In judging Israel’s enemies, the Lord will repay the nations for what they have done (or what they will do in the future) to the Lord’s people, Israel. The *hērem* against Edom (and the nations) will result in the complete desolation of the land (Isa 34:11–15; cf. 13:20–22), which reinforces the idea of utter annihilation. The destruction of the nations will secure the peace and blessing for God’s people as well. Never again will Jerusalem be subject to the ban: “It (Jerusalem) will be inhabited; never again will it be destroyed (*hērem*). Jerusalem will be secure” (Zech 14:11).

### Summary

As the above study shows, the biblical verb/noun *hērem* has the broad meaning of “devote to God” and the narrow meaning of “devote to destruction.” That which was “devoted” or “banned” belonged to God exclusively.<sup>913</sup> The most common occurrence is the application to Israel’s enemies during the wilderness period, the Conquest period, and the early monarchy, but according to the Mosaic Law, the ban was also to be imposed on Israelites who broke faith by worshiping other gods. There were severe consequences for those who stole devoted objects (Achan) or committed atrocities (Benjamites). The ban could function as a means of “internal discipline” in Israel too.<sup>914</sup> Failure to carry out the ban in accordance with God’s command was a punishable offense (Saul). Various depictions of the ban include the language of *total* destruction (e.g., “no survivors”). For this reason, the term may be defined as “the annihilation of the human and animal population of a city (and the surrender to God of its possessions) as an act of

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<sup>913</sup> Evans, *1–2 Samuel*, 163.

<sup>914</sup> Davies, “The Biblical and Qumranic Concept of War,” 211.

devotion,”<sup>915</sup> although the animals were not killed in every instance (cf. Josh 8:1–2). The ban appears to have faded out of use after the time of Hezekiah king of Judah, though it will be imposed on Israel’s enemies in eschatological judgment.

#### Excursus: The Moabite Stone

The term *ḥērem* is clearly attested in only one place outside of the Old Testament.<sup>916</sup> The Moabite Stone reveals that Mesha king of Moab employed the ban against the Israelites during the mid- to late-ninth century BC (cf. 2 Kgs 3:4):

And I built Baal-meon, making a reservoir in it, and I built Qaryaten. Now the men of Gad had always dwelt in the land of Ataroth, and the king of Israel had built Ataroth for them; but I fought against the town and took it and slew all the people of the town as satiation (intoxication) for Chemosh and Moab. And I brought back from there Arel (or Oriel), its chieftain, dragging him before Chemosh in Kerioth, and I settled there men of Sharon and men of Maharith. And Chemosh said to me, “Go, take Nebo from Israel!” So I went by night and fought against it from the break of dawn until noon, taking it and slaying all, seven thousand men, boys, women, girls and maid-servants, for I had *devoted them to destruction* for (the god) Ashtar-Chemosh. And I took from there the [...] of Yahweh, dragging them before Chemosh. And the king of Israel had built Jahaz, and he dwelt there while he was fighting against me, but Chemosh drove him out before me.<sup>917</sup>

The total destruction is evident in the term “devoted to destruction” as well as in the slaying of men, boys, women, girls, and maidservants. The Israelites were slain as an offering to Chemosh,

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<sup>915</sup> Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume One: Israel’s Gospel*, 481.

<sup>916</sup> There may be a second extra biblical reference to *ḥērem* from an Old South Arabian Sabaeen text (RES 3945) from about the seventh century BC (?) that recounts the victories of the *mukarrib* Karib-ilu, the ruler of the Kingdom Sabā (biblical Sheba). The relevant lines of the text state, “he destroyed the wall of the city of Nathan until he razed it, but the city of Nathan he forbade to be burnt (*ḥrm*).” This translation, however, is subject to debate. See Lauren A. S. Monroe, “Israelite, Moabite and Sabaeen War-*ḥērem* Traditions and the Forging of National Identity: Reconsidering the Sabaeen Text RES 3945 in Light of Biblical and Moabite Evidence,” *Vetus Testamentum* 57 (2007): 318–341. For other proposed ANE parallels to the biblical *ḥērem*, see Stern, *The Biblical Herem*, 67–87. The concept of total destruction also appears in the second millennium BC Hittite texts from Anatolia, though without the term *ḥērem*. See Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 69–70; Giuseppe F. Del Monte, “The Hittite *Ḥērem*,” in *Babel und Bibel 2: Memoriae Igor M. Diakonof*, Annual of Ancient Near Eastern, Old Testament, and Semitic Studies, eds. L. Kogan, N. Koslova, S. Loesov, and S. Tishchenko (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 21–45; K. Lawson Younger, “Some Recent Discussion on the *Ḥērem*,” in *Far from Minimal: Celebrating the Work and Influence of Philip R. Davies*, eds. Duncan Burns and J. W. Rogerson (London: T. & T. Clark, 2012), 513–16.

<sup>917</sup> “The Moabite Stone,” in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 320 (emphasis added).

and Chemosh is credited with the victory. The parallels to the biblical *ḥērem* are obvious. As Snaith writes, “What was *qodesh* to Jehovah was *chērem* to Chemosh. Contrariwise, what was *qodesh* to Chemosh was *chērem* to Jehovah. One god’s *qodesh* was another god’s *chērem*.”<sup>918</sup> What the Moabite Stone shows is that the concept of obliterating enemy populations as a means of devotion to a deity existed in Moab, Israel’s close neighbor. A second observation from the Moabite Stone concerns the nature of the ban. As seen in the examples listed in the preceding section, the ban in Israel included the annihilation of men, women, and children without mercy. The same appears here on the Moabite Stone. Even though the Moabite Stone postdates the Conquest by several centuries, it confirms the meaning of *ḥērem*.

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<sup>918</sup> Norman H. Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1983), 33.

## Appendix 2: Biblical and Extrabiblical Commentaries on the Conquest

This appendix explores the biblical and early extrabiblical interpretations of the Conquest. The Old Testament and the New Testament both support the Lord's commands and Israel's actions in the Conquest and attribute Israel's success to the Lord. They also support the historicity of the Conquest, the fact that the Canaanites were wicked and deserving of punishment, and the primacy of Israel's spiritual purity. The Apocrypha, Philo, and Josephus also uphold the traditional interpretation that the Conquest was historical, just, and necessary. The earliest interpretations, therefore, support interpretations that *defend* the Conquest, not those that reinterpret the Conquest as something immoral, unnecessary, or unhistorical.

### Old Testament Commentary on the Conquest

This section will examine the Old Testament commentary on the Conquest looking back at the events. Since the Conquest continued more or less up to the period of the judges, then this section is primarily concerned with later Old Testament texts.<sup>919</sup> Did later Old Testament writers view the Conquest favorably, unfavorably, or with mixed conclusions? What about the matter of killing children in the Conquest? While the task of interpreting the events of the Conquest is complicated, it should nonetheless take into consideration the interpretation given by other biblical authors—especially for those who believe that the biblical authors were divinely inspired. Not only were the biblical authors others closer to the events historically, but they were also embedded in the cultural and religious milieu. Perhaps that makes them more objective, or perhaps that makes them more biased. Either way, the commentary from later biblical authors must be included in the discussion.

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<sup>919</sup> The author is assuming an evangelical dating of the Old Testament books, and the term “later” refers to texts that came later in the history of Israel. The Conquest was followed by the period of judges, which was then followed by the monarchy, the exile, and the post-exilic period.



## **Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles**

From a chronological perspective, the review will begin with the period of Israel's monarchy. Samuel the prophet, who was the transitional figure from the period of the judges to the period of the kings, addressed Israel in his farewell speech and mentioned "all the righteous acts" of God in Israel's history. These acts included the deliverance from Egypt, the settling in the Promised Land, and the deliverance from oppressors during the period of the Judges (1 Sam 12:6–11). This means that, in the view of the prophet, the Conquest was among God's righteous acts. This comes as no surprise since Samuel was also the messenger to Saul to destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam 15), but it does show that the Conquest received wholesale approval at this period from Israel's spiritual leader. Saul obviously would have approved of the Conquest since he tried to apply the ban to the Gibeonites in violation of the covenant they had made with Joshua and the Israelites (cf. Josh 9; 2 Sam 21). The same is true of David. Before David became king, and while he was living among the Philistines, he and his men conducted raids against the Amalekite towns and applied the ban to them, not leaving a man or woman alive (1 Sam 27:8–9). After David became king and received the promise of the everlasting dynasty from the Lord (1 Chron 17:1–14), he responded with a prayer that included the following praise:

There is no one like you, O LORD, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears. And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth whose God went out to redeem a people for himself, and to make a name for yourself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt? You made your people Israel your very own forever, and you, O LORD, have become their God (1 Chron 16:20–22; cf. 2 Chron 20:7).

What this prayer shows is that David acknowledged the Lord's greater plan to redeem Israel from Egypt and to lead the people into their own land by driving out the Canaanite nations.

David's son Solomon seems to have approved of the Conquest too since he used the leftover people from the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites to do his forced

labor in building the Lord's temple, the palace, the terraces, the wall of Jerusalem, and the cities of Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer (1 Kgs 9:15–22). The author of Kings even records that Pharaoh king of Egypt attacked the Canaanite city of Gezer, killed its inhabitants, and then gave it as a wedding gift to his daughter, Solomon's wife (1 Kgs 9:16). Although there is no explicit statement of approval or condemnation of Solomon's labor force or Pharaoh's action, the passage comes in the middle of Solomon's litany of successes, so it may be assumed that the author of Kings looked favorably upon these incidents. A little later, the author of Kings records Solomon's downfall after he loved and married many foreign women besides the Egyptian princess. He married women from the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites in violation of the Law of Moses (Deut 7:3), and his wives led him to worship other gods rather than being fully devoted to the Lord (1 Kgs 11:1–6). He even erected high places to Chemosh and Molech on a hill east of Jerusalem as well as altars for his other wives to use for worship (1 Kgs 11:7–8). The worship of these gods, as shown above, would have included child sacrifice. The author of Kings gave the Lord's judgment of the situation in stating that the Lord became angry with Solomon and vowed to tear the kingdom away from him (1 Kgs 11:9–13). The book of Kings, therefore, supports the teachings of the Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua about the danger of spiritual corruption after intermarriage with the Canaanites.

The same is true of the condemnations of evil kings who worshiped other gods throughout 1–2 Kings. Jeroboam king of Israel, for example, set up two centers of false worship with golden calves at Dan and Bethel (1 Kgs 12:25–33). King Ahab of Israel married the Sidonian princess Jezebel and built an altar to Baal—the Canaanite deity—in the capital city of Samaria (1 Kgs 16:30–33). Both of these kings, and those who followed their ways, were condemned for their actions that violated the Law of Moses. However, King Manasseh of Israel

was the worst. According to Kings, he followed the detestable practices of the nations that the Lord had driven out before the Israelites (2 Kgs 21:2)—that is, the Canaanites. He rebuilt the pagan altars his father had destroyed, made Baal altars and an Asherah pole, installed altars in the Lord’s temple to worship the stars, practiced divination, sought omens, consulted mediums and spiritists, and even sacrificed his son in the fire (2 Kgs 21:3–6). Manasseh was so wicked that he led the Israelites to do more evil than the Canaanite nations the Lord had driven out of Israel (2 Kgs 21:9–11). Manasseh would have made even the Canaanites blush. The author of Kings agreed with the picture painted by Leviticus and Deuteronomy concerning Canaanite wickedness and condemned the Israelite kings who followed Canaanite ways because they violated God’s Word and because of the spiritual decay they introduced to Israel.

## **Psalms**

The Conquest is mentioned in a number of psalms coming from various authors.<sup>920</sup> One of the Davidic<sup>921</sup> psalms is similar to David’s prayer in 1 Chronicles 16 mentioned above. In Psalm 105, David gave his own outline of Israel’s history from the Abrahamic Covenant through the Exodus and Conquest and then mentioned the promise to give Abraham’s descendants the land of Canaan (v. 11) as well as the Lord’s deeds before and during the Exodus (vss. 12–38), including the Lord’s killing of the firstborn in Egypt (v. 36). After briefly describing the wilderness wandering, David noted that the Lord “gave them [Israel] the lands of the nations, and they fell heir to what others had toiled for—that they might keep his precepts and observe his laws” (vss. 44–45). Again, we see approval of the Conquest because it was the Lord’s doing

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<sup>920</sup> This assumes the reliability of the psalms’ superscriptions, but the discussion is not affected either way.

<sup>921</sup> Although there is no superscription attributing the psalm to David, Psalm 105 appears to be Davidic because of its close parallels to David’s prayer in 1 Chronicles 16 (cp. Ps 105:1–15; 1 Chron 16:8–22).

and because of its connection to God's purpose to give Israel His precepts and laws. Similarly, the sons of Korah attributed the outcome of the Conquest entirely to the Lord:

We have heard with our ears, O God; our fathers have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago. With your hand you drove out the nations and planted our fathers; you crushed the peoples and made our fathers flourish. It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them (Psa 44:1–3).

The Lord was responsible for driving out the nations and for crushing the peoples because of His love for Israel. Another psalm from the sons of Korah has the same theme: “Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy. How awesome is the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth! He subdued nations under us, peoples around our feet. He chose our inheritance for us, the pride of Jacob, whom he loved” (Psa 47:1–4).

The psalmist Asaph also wrote approvingly of the death of the Egyptian firstborn and the Conquest, attributing the outcome to the Lord:

He struck down all the firstborn of Egypt, the firstfruits of manhood in the tents of Ham. But he brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep through the desert. He guided them safely, so they were unafraid; but the sea engulfed their enemies. Thus he brought them to the border of his holy land, to the hill country his right hand had taken. He drove out nations before them and allotted their lands to them as an inheritance; he settled the tribes of Israel in their homes (Psa 78:51–55).

Asaph wrote something similar in another psalm: “You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land” (Psa 80:8–9). Psalm 135, which is anonymous, draws a sharp contrast between the God of Israel and the false gods in describing the Exodus and the Conquest:

He struck down the firstborn of Egypt, the firstborn of men and animals. He sent his signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants. He struck down many nations and killed mighty kings—Sihon king of the Amorites, Og king of Bashan and all the kings of Canaan—and he gave their land as an inheritance, an inheritance to his people Israel (Psa 135:8–12).

The supremacy of Yahweh over the gods is another theme that fits well with the teachings of Deuteronomy and Joshua regarding the Conquest.

Psalm 136, which is anonymous, focuses more on God's love (חסד). After each line of the psalm is the repetition of the statement, "His love endures forever." The psalm opens with, "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. *His love endures forever.* Give thanks to the God of gods. *His love endures forever.* Give thanks to the Lord of lords. *His love endures forever*" (Psa 136:1–3). Then the psalm recounts the Lord's mighty deeds in creation (vss. 4–9) and in Israel's history (vss. 10–25). Among the deeds in the latter section is the killing the firstborn in Egypt (vs. 10), sweeping Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea (v. 15), striking down the mighty kings Sihon and Og (vss. 17–20), and the giving of their land to the Israelites as an inheritance (vss. 21–22). After each event comes the refrain, "*His love endures forever.*" The Lord is to be praised not just for His acts of mercy but also for His acts of judgment upon Israel's enemies.

Psalm 111, which is also anonymous, focuses more on God being just and upright in giving Israel the land: "He has shown his people the power of his works, giving them the lands of other nations. The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness" (Psa 111:6–8). The Conquest was not only good for Israel, but it was just in God's eyes. One need only recall the sins of the Canaanites to understand the psalmist's perspective. Another anonymous psalm makes a related point but focuses mostly on *Israel's* sins after the Conquest during the period of the judges:

They [the Israelites] did not destroy the peoples as the LORD had commanded them, but they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons. They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was desecrated by their blood. They defiled themselves by what they did; by their deeds they prostituted themselves. Therefore, the LORD was angry with his people and abhorred his inheritance (Psa 106:34–40).

Thus, the Lord was not only just in giving Israel the land but also in punishing Israel when the people turned away from the Lord and adopted the behaviors and worship of the Canaanites.

## **Prophets**

The Conquest is only directly mentioned in a few of the prophetic books, but at that stage in Israel's history, the prophets focused not just on the sins of the Canaanites in the past but on the sins of Israel and Judah too. The eighth-century prophet Amos pronounced judgment upon Israel's neighboring nations at first but then gave a message of judgment to the northern kingdom of Israel because of the crimes of social injustice, sexual perversion, and idolatry (Amos 2:6–8). The message contained these statements about the Conquest, showing approval of the destruction of the Amorites: "I destroyed the Amorite before them, though he was tall as the cedars and strong as the oaks. I destroyed his fruit above and his roots below. I brought you up out of Egypt, and I led you forty years in the desert to give you the land of the Amorites" (Amos 2:9–10). The passage goes on to describe how the Israelites rejected the prophets that the Lord sent them and how they corrupted the Nazirites He raised up among them. Consequently, the people would be punished for their stubborn sinfulness (Amos 2:11–16). Thus, there was no favoritism when it came to sinful behavior.

Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah recognized the Lord's hand in giving Israel the land, but he also linked it to Israel's sinful behavior that led to divine punishment in his own day:

You gave them this land you had sworn to give their forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey. They came in and took possession of it, but they did not obey you or follow your law; they did not do what you commanded them to do. So you brought all this disaster upon them (Jer 32:22–23).

This passage shows approval of the Conquest but also supports the passages in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua that state that the Lord would punish Israel just like He punished the Canaanites if the Israelites turned away from Him and started acting like the Canaanites. Ezekiel

too commented on Israel's idolatrous tendencies dating back to their time in Egypt and continuing through the Exodus and wilderness wanderings (Eze 20:1–26). He had this message from the Lord about Israel's behavior after the Conquest:

When I [the LORD] brought them into the land I had sworn to give them and they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices, made offerings that provoked me to anger, presented their fragrant incense and poured out their drink offerings.... Will you defile yourselves the way your fathers did and lust after their vile images? When you offer your gifts—the sacrifice of your sons in the fire—you continue to defile yourselves with all your idols to this day (Eze 20:28, 30–31).

The point here is that the spiritual corruption from the Canaanites continued for centuries, including child sacrifice. What is implied is that the Lord's justice in punishing Canaanite wickedness applied to punishing Israel and Judah as well.

### **Ezra and Nehemiah**

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of Israel's return from exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC after the decree of the Persian king Cyrus to let the people return. After the Israelites resettled in Jerusalem, Ezra the priest stood up on a high wooden platform before the assembly of Israelites and read aloud from the Book of the Law of Moses from morning until noon while a dozen or so Levites explained the Law to the people standing there (Neh 8:1–7). The people were able to understand the Law of God, and Nehemiah proclaimed it as a day of celebration (Neh 8:8–10). The next day, they discovered in the Law of Moses that the Israelites were to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles by living in temporary booths. As it turns out, this feast had not been celebrated since the days of Joshua son of Nun (Neh 8:13–17). Throughout the feast, Ezra read to the people from the Book of the Law of God until the feast concluded on the eighth day (Neh 8:18). Everything seemed to be going well until it was discovered that some of the Israelite men, including leaders, had taken wives from the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites and had thereby mixed the “holy

race” with the peoples of the land (Ezra 9:1–3). This was forbidden in the Law but had been practiced from the time of the judges forward, leading to spiritual apostasy in Israel. In self-abasement and mourning, Ezra prayed to the Lord and confessed the sins of the people of Israel (Ezra 9:5–15). In the middle of his prayer, he made the following statement:

But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: “The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance” (Ezra 9:10–12).

The allusions to Leviticus 18 and Deuteronomy 7 are clear from the text, and they support the earlier biblical teachings about Canaanite wickedness and the need for spiritual preservation in Israel. The prayer also informs the reader that the evil practices of the surrounding nations did not improve over time; intermarriage was no less a threat to Israel’s spiritual integrity at this time than at the time of the Conquest. Rather than repeat the sins of the past, the Israelite men responded in agreement and decided to separate themselves from their foreign wives and children in order to turn away the Lord’s anger (Ezra 10:1–17).

A few weeks later, the Israelites as a whole confessed their sins, including those who had separated from their foreign wives, and then they read from the Book of the Law and gave praise to the Lord by reciting the great deeds of the Lord in Israel’s history (Neh 9:1–37). The portion pertaining to the Conquest of Canaan contains the following praise to the Lord:

You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan. You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess. Their sons went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you handed the Canaanites over to them, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased. They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug,



vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness (Neh 9:22–25).

As with the other Old Testament references to the Conquest, there is the recognition that it was ultimately the Lord who subdued the Canaanites and gave their land to the Israelites. But just as the Canaanites were punished, so too was Israel punished for her sins (Neh 9:26–31). Therefore, the people, leaders, Levites, and priests made a new agreement before the Lord to follow the Lord's laws and decrees rather than following the ways of their ancestors (Neh 10:1–39). Their agreement contained a vow concerning intermarriage: "We promise not to give our daughters in marriage to the peoples around us or take their daughters for our sons" (Neh 10:30). Again, this is a direct reference to the teachings in Deuteronomy 7. However, Nehemiah later noticed some Israelite men who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of their mothers, and the other half spoke the language of their fathers. Like Ezra, Nehemiah was upset with the men. He rebuked them, called down curses on them, and even beat some of them and pulled out their hair because these men would bring judgment upon the entire nation. Nehemiah made them take an oath against intermarrying with the surrounding peoples, and he purified the people and the priesthood so that they would not commit the same sins as Solomon (Neh 13:23–31), which probably means that the men had to separate from their foreign wives and children as in the book of Ezra. Like Ezra, Nehemiah agreed with Moses and Joshua that intermarriage and religious syncretism were unacceptable.

## **Summary**

The later writings of the Old Testament give overall support to the teachings from Exodus–Joshua about Canaanite wickedness, the Lord's hand in defeating the Canaanites and giving the Promised Land to Israel, the dangers of spiritual corruption through intermarriage and religious syncretism, and the Lord's justice in punishing not only the Canaanites for their sins but

also the Israelites for following Canaanite gods and worship practices. The spiritual leaders in the postexilic period even resorted to divorce to address the problem of intermarriage with the Canaanites, Egyptians, Philistines, Moabites, and Ammonites. In their view, divorce was preferable to apostasy and a second exile. There is no passage that condemns the actions of the Lord or the Israelites in executing the Conquest. Rather, there is only praise for the Lord for His mighty deeds and for keeping His promises to Israel.

#### New Testament Commentary on the Conquest

##### **The Teachings of Jesus**

Since the Old Testament endorses the Conquest in Numbers and Joshua as well as the prescriptions in the Law about the Conquest, then it may come as no surprise to find the same blanket approval in the New Testament. At the start, it must be acknowledged that Jesus never directly mentioned the Conquest in the Gospels, though He did reference God's destruction of the world at the time of the Flood (Matt 24:37–39; Luke 17:26–27) as well as God's judgment of the Canaanite cities of Sodom and Gomorrah during the time of Abraham (Matt 10:15; 11:23–24). The whole destruction in the Flood and at Sodom and Gomorrah was no different than that of the Conquest except in terms of the means of destruction—whether through water, burning sulfur from heaven, or Israelite weaponry. Jesus had no apparent qualms with those other events of mass destruction, and so it seems He would not disagree with the destruction in the Conquest either. In fact, He compared the coming of the kingdom of God in the future to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in the past:

It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed.... Remember Lot's wife! (Luke 17:28–30, 32).

The Second Coming will feature judgment comparable to that of Sodom and Gomorrah. This means that Jesus endorsed the destruction of those Canaanites cities, which was a foretaste of the Conquest four hundred years later. This interpretation aligns with Jesus' overall attitude toward the Law of Moses, which He viewed as binding and immutable (cf. Matt 5:17–20; Luke 16:16–17). He even quoted from Deuteronomy—the very book that gives instructions for killing the Canaanites—during His temptations in the wilderness (cf. Matt 4:4 [Deut 8:3], 7 [Deut 6:16], 10 [Deut 6:13]).<sup>922</sup> Since He made no criticism of the Old Testament, let alone the Conquest, then it is fair to conclude that Jesus endorsed God's actions and the Israelites' actions in the Conquest.

### **Stephen's Speech**

The book of Acts tells the story of the growth of the Christian Church from just the apostles plus a few others to a network of congregations and communities throughout the Roman Empire. Once things got off the ground, the apostles recognized their need to appoint seven men to oversee the daily distribution of food to the widows so that the apostles could devote themselves to the teaching ministry of the word and to prayer (Acts 6:1–2, 4). These seven were men who were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3). The apostles prayed for these men and laid hands on them to commission them (Acts 6:6). One of them was a man named Stephen, who is described as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5) and “a man full of God's grace and power” who did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people (Acts 6:8). The Jewish leaders opposed Stephen and the others, but they could not stand up against the wisdom Stephen received from the Spirit when he spoke (Acts 6:10). Therefore,

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<sup>922</sup> For other verses where Jesus referenced the Old Testament as authoritative, see Matt 7:12; 15:3–4; 18:8–9; 19:17–19; 22:29–32, 36–40; 26:54, 56; Mark 1:44; 7:9–13; 10:5–9, 19; 12:24–31; 14:49; Luke 6:31; 16:29, 31; 18:20, 31–33; 20:37–38; 22:37; 24:25–27, 44–46; John 3:14–15; 5:39–40, 45–47; 6:45; 7:14–24, 37–38; 8:17–18; 10:22–23, 34–36; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 19:28.

the Jewish leaders conspired to have Stephen killed for speaking words of blasphemy against Moses and against God, though the charges were false (Acts 7:11–14). When Stephen gave his defense (Acts 7:1–53), he told the story of Israel from the time of Abraham through the Exodus and Conquest down to the period of the united monarchy. He made the point that Abraham’s descendants were promised the land of Canaan, though Abraham himself received no inheritance during his lifetime (Acts 7:4–6). He also referenced the prediction that Abraham’s descendants would be slaves in a foreign nation for four hundred years (Acts 7:6–7; cf. Gen 15:13–14), though he omitted the part about the sin of the Amorites reaching its full measure (Gen 15:16). He did include this comment, though: “Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them” (Acts 7:45). Like the Old Testament commentary, Stephen affirmed the historicity of the Conquest under Joshua as well as the fact that the Israelites took the land after God drove out the Canaanites. The Conquest, therefore, was God’s doing within His plan for the nation of Israel.

### **Paul’s Speech**

On Paul’s first missionary journey, he and Barnabas traveled to Pisidian Antioch and went first to the synagogue to share the Gospel with the Jews and Gentiles in that area. After reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue ruler asked the two visitors if they had any encouraging message to share with the people. Paul stood up and addressed the group (Acts 13:16–47). Like Stephen’s speech, Paul gave an overview of Israel’s history from the Exodus to the united monarchy in order to make the point that Jesus is the ultimate descendant of David, about whom David even prophesied. In his brief summary of Israel’s history, Paul stated,

The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country, he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance (Acts 13:16–20).

Paul had no hesitation in crediting the Conquest as the work of the Lord. Since Paul was the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6) and a “Pharisee of the Pharisees” (Phil 3:5), and since he was trained under the renowned Pharisee Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; cf. 5:34), then it is also reasonable to conclude that Paul’s perspective was typical of learned Jews of his day. That means that the Jewish people in the first century probably had no moral qualms about the events of the Conquest. It is at least presented that way in Paul’s speech since he gives no qualifications to the events. Paul also wrote about Israel’s failures and God’s judgments during the wilderness period and taught that they were examples to the Christians to keep them from turning to sexual immorality and idolatry, especially when he equated idolatry to demon worship (1 Cor 10:1–22). Paul appears to have supported the punishments of the Lord in the books of Exodus and Numbers, which are in the same category of severe punishments as the Conquest.

### **The General Epistles**

The General Epistles contain a few references to the Conquest as well. First is the statement from Peter about Sodom and Gomorrah, two Canaanite cities that were destroyed because of their wickedness centuries before the Conquest under Joshua but which are similar to the Conquest because of the total destruction. Peter wrote,

...[I]f he [God] condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly, and if he rescued Lot, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)—if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment (2 Pet 2:6–9).

The epistle of Jude also mentions these cities: “In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7). These commentaries affirm

that the Canaanites living in Sodom and Gomorrah were incorrigibly wicked and deserving of judgment and that the Lord did indeed rescue the godly (Lot) from their midst (cf. Rev 11:8). The same principle seems to hold true for the Conquest. The Canaanites were deserving of judgment because of pervasive wickedness, but the Lord rescued Rahab and her family and separated them from those who were punished. James commented that Rahab the prostitute was “considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction” (Jas 2:25), which agrees with the account in Joshua 2. In the same way, Hebrews 11:31 states, “By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.” This again speaks to Rahab’s faithful deed as well as to the Canaanites’ disobedience. The author of Hebrews also wrote, “By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days” (Heb 11:30). This is one more affirmation that the Conquest was a godly endeavor requiring faith in the Lord.

### **Summary**

Like the Old Testament, there is no hint of disapproval in the New Testament concerning the Conquest or even Conquest-like acts of judgment such as the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Instead, Jesus and the New Testament authors attested to God’s involvement, God’s larger plan for Israel, the faith and failures of the Israelites, and the evils of the Canaanites. Additionally, Jesus and the New Testament viewed the Old Testament as authoritative, which means that they naturally affirmed what the Old Testament teaches concerning the plan of God for the people of Israel. Therefore, any modern interpretations that find fault with the Conquest in Joshua will find themselves at odds with later Old Testament authors as well as with Jesus and the New Testament authors.

## Extra-Biblical Commentary on the Conquest

Like the proceeding section, the following discussion will examine three other areas of biblical commentary: the Apocrypha, Philo, and Josephus.<sup>923</sup> Although evangelicals do not consider them to be inspired or canonical, these sources nonetheless represent early interpretations or commentaries on the events of the Conquest. Therefore, they are included here for the purpose of broadening the discussion to include ancient commentaries. As will be seen, there is overall agreement with the biblical portrait of the Canaanites as well as support for Israel's actions in executing the Conquest.

### The Apocryphal Literature

The Apocrypha is the set of about fifteen or sixteen writings from the period after the close of the Old Testament canon and before the writing of the New Testament. The name *Apocrypha* means “hidden away” because it may have been believed that the writings contain mysterious, esoteric stories, though many of them were at least questionable if not spurious altogether. Some of these books were written in Hebrew, and all but one (2 Esdras) were included in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, though none is cited by Jesus or the apostles as Scripture.<sup>924</sup> The early Christian writings contain over three hundred

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<sup>923</sup> A fourth area for exploration is the Dead Sea Scrolls. However, the Dead Sea Scrolls are often difficult to interpret because they are fragmentary and because knowledge about the Qumran community is incomplete. Therefore, the Dead Sea Scrolls will be omitted from this discussion. To review the few passages that briefly mention or hint at the Conquest, see Arie Versluis, “The Early Reception History of the Command to Exterminate the Canaanites,” *Biblical Reception* 3 (2015): 311–14. Versluis summarizes the scant findings as follows: “In conclusion: in the non-biblical writings of Qumran the extermination of the Canaanites is rarely mentioned. The motifs that are mentioned are not new as compared to the Old Testament. There are no indications that the command to exterminate the Canaanites was viewed as a moral or theological problem. Sometimes the Canaanites are characterized as a symbol of evil; however, an application of the command to other, contemporary nations cannot be demonstrated with certainty” (Versluis, “The Early Reception History of the Command to Exterminate the Canaanites,” 314).

<sup>924</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, “The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 161–62.

quotations from the Apocrypha,<sup>925</sup> showing its importance in early Christian writings for both its historical and theological content. For this reason, it is included here as an early commentary on the Old Testament text.

### The Conquest is Historical

The first reference to the Conquest in this discussion comes from the book of Judith. In the story presented there, the general of the Assyrian army (Holofernes) was angry that the people of Israel were preparing for war. He inquired about them from the Moabite princes and Ammonite commanders and all the governors of the coastland. A man named Achior, the leader of the Ammonites, gave a summary of Israel's history in response (Jdt 5:1–14). He began the story with the statement that the Israelites lived in Mesopotamia but were driven out because they worshiped the God of heaven rather than the gods of the Chaldeans.<sup>926</sup> They came to settle in the land of Canaan but eventually ended up in Egypt due to a famine. The Israelites became slaves in Egypt until their God delivered them by afflicting the land of Egypt with incurable plagues. He even dried up the Red Sea and drove out the wilderness peoples as the Israelites were on their way to Sinai and Kadesh-Barnea. This is what Achior says about the Conquest:

So they [the Israelites] lived in the land of the Ammonites, and by their might destroyed all the inhabitants of Heshbon; and crossing over the Jordan they took possession of all the hill country. And they drove out before them the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Jebusites and the Shechemites and all the Girgashites, and lived there a long time. As long as they did not sin against their God they prospered, for the God who hates iniquity is with them. But when they departed from the way which he had appointed for them, they were utterly defeated in many battles and were led away captive to a foreign country; the temple of their God was razed to the ground, and their cities were captured by their enemies (Jdt 5:15–18).

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<sup>925</sup> David W. Bercot, ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 207.

<sup>926</sup> This extra detail is not directly found in Genesis, which simply states that Abraham's father Terah took his family and moved from Ur of the Chaldeans to Haran without explaining why the move was necessary (Gen 11:31). Furthermore, Joshua 24:2 teaches that Terah worshiped other gods rather than Yahweh, which is probably at odds with the account here in Judith that Terah left Ur over religious differences.



Whether or not this account is historical, it at least shows the view of the apocryphal author that the Conquest itself was historical, which aligns with the biblical record of defeating the Amorites east of the Jordan as well as the Canaanite nations west of the Jordan. It also agrees with the Old Testament's teaching that the Israelites themselves were expelled from the land because of their own sins, and there is no criticism of anything in the Old Testament record.

#### Canaanite Wickedness and God's Justice

The next passage to consider is Wisdom of Solomon 12, which addresses the subjects of Canaanite wickedness and God's justice in punishing the Canaanites. Consider the following excerpt:

Those who dwelt of old in thy holy land thou didst hate for their detestable practices, their works of sorcery and unholy rites, their merciless slaughter of children, and their sacrificial feasting on human flesh and blood. These initiates from the midst of a heathen cult, these parents who murder helpless lives, thou didst will to destroy by the hands of our fathers, that the land most precious of all to thee might receive a worthy colony of the servants of God (Wis 12:3–7).<sup>927</sup>

The passage here agrees with Leviticus, which states that the Lord abhorred the Canaanites (Lev 20:23) because of their detestable practices (Lev 18:30) and even adds cannibalism to the list of Canaanite offenses, though it is not listed in the Old Testament. The passage also affirms that it was the Lord's will to destroy the Canaanites through Israel as His human instrument. The last statement about giving the land to a worthy colony (Israel), however, is at odds with the biblical teaching that Israel was not inheriting the land because of her own righteousness but because of the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut 9:4–6).

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<sup>927</sup> All citations of the Apocrypha in this section are taken from Joseph B. Lumpkin, compiler, *The Apocrypha: Including Books from the Ethiopic Bible*, trans. J. B. Lightfoot (Blountsville, AL: Fifth Estate Publishers, 2009).

As the chapter continues, the author makes the point that although God was able to destroy the Canaanites expeditiously, He did so little by little in order to give the Canaanites a chance to repent, though God knew it would do them no good since they were bent on evil:

But even these thou didst spare, since they were but men, and didst send wasps as forerunners of thy army, to destroy them little by little, though thou wast not unable to give the ungodly into the hands of the righteous in battle, or to destroy them at one blow by dread wild beasts or thy stern word. But judging them little by little thou gavest them a chance to repent, though thou wast not unaware that their origin was evil and their wickedness inborn, and that their way of thinking would never change.... For if thou didst punish with such great care and indulgence the enemies of thy servants and those deserving of death, granting them time and opportunity to give up their wickedness, with what strictness thou hast judged thy sons, to whose fathers thou gavest oaths and covenants full of good promises! (Wis 12:8–10, 20–21).

The point about driving the Canaanites out little by little agrees with the Old Testament (Exod 23:29–30; Deut 7:22), but the biblical text gives a different reason for the gradual expulsion of the Canaanites—namely, that if the Lord drove out the Canaanites too quickly, then the land would become overrun with wild animals. The Lord instead drove them out little by little until Israel increased enough to take possession of the land. The Wisdom of Solomon, on the other hand, argues that the Conquest happened gradually in order to give the Canaanites time to repent, even though it was futile. The Old Testament implies elsewhere that the Canaanites had ample time to repent (Gen 15:16), but by the time of the Conquest, time had run out, which is why there were very few converts.

According to the apocryphal author, there was no injustice in the Conquest since the Canaanites were deserving of punishment and since God truly cares for all peoples and therefore does not judge unjustly:

For they were an accursed race from the beginning, and it was not through fear of any one that thou didst leave them unpunished for their sins. For who will say, “What hast thou done?” Or will resist thy judgment? Who will accuse thee for the destruction of nations which thou didst make? Or who will come before thee to plead as an advocate for unrighteous men? For neither is there any god besides thee, whose care is for all men, to

whom thou shouldst prove that thou hast not judged unjustly; nor can any king or monarch confront thee about those whom thou hast punished. Thou art righteous and rulest all things righteously, deeming it alien to thy power to condemn him who does not deserve to be punished (Wis 12:11–15).

There may be an apologetic undercurrent here since the author was trying to justify God's ways.

In the end, the Canaanites deserved their punishment because of their abominations and idolatry:

So while chastening us thou scourgest our enemies ten thousand times more, so that we may meditate upon thy goodness when we judge, and when we are judged we may expect mercy. Therefore those who in folly of life lived unrighteously thou didst torment through their own abominations. For they went far astray on the paths of error, accepting as gods those animals which even their enemies despised; they were deceived like foolish babes. Therefore, as to thoughtless children, thou didst send thy judgment to mock them. But those who have not heeded the warning of light rebukes will experience the deserved judgment of God. For when in their suffering they became incensed at those creatures which they had thought to be gods, being punished by means of them, they saw and recognized as the true God him whom they had before refused to know. Therefore the utmost condemnation came upon them (Wis 12:22–27).

#### Do Not Intermarry

A third book of the Apocrypha sheds light on the Canaanites at the time of Abraham with a strict admonition not to intermarry with them. According to the book of Jubilees, Abraham told Isaac, Ishmael, his sons from Keturah, and all of his grandsons not to take wives from the Canaanite daughters because the Canaanites would be uprooted from the land:

And he [Abraham] said, "...[D]o not let them take to themselves wives from the daughters of Canaan, because the offspring of Canaan will be rooted out of the land." He told them about the judgment on the giants, and the judgment on the Sodomites, how they had been judged because of their wickedness, and had died because of their fornication and uncleanness, and corruption through fornication together. He said, "Guard yourselves from all fornication and uncleanness, and from all pollution of sin, or you will make our name a curse, and your whole life a shame, and all your sons to be destroyed by the sword, and you will become accursed like Sodom, and all that is left of you shall be as the sons of Gomorrah. I implore you, my sons, love the God of heaven and cling to all His commandments. Do not walk after their idols and after their ways of uncleanness, and do not make yourselves molten or graven gods. They are empty, and there is no spirit in them, for they are work of men's hands, and all who trust in them, trust in nothing. Do not serve them, nor worship them, but serve the most high God, and worship Him continually, and hope for His presence always, and work uprightness and righteousness before Him, that He may have pleasure in you and grant you His mercy, and send rain on

you morning and evening, and bless all your works which you have performed on the earth, and bless your bread and your water, and bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, and the herds of your cattle, and the flocks of your sheep. You will be for a blessing on the earth, and all nations of the earth will desire you, and bless your sons in my name, that they may be blessed as I am” (Jub 20:4–10).

Of course, none of this is found in Genesis, so it is a probably just a midrash on Abraham’s instructions to his chief servant to find a wife for Isaac from among Abraham’s own people rather than from among the Canaanites (cf. Gen 24:1–8). There is a similar midrash on Rebekah’s charge to Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman like his brother Esau had done (Jub 25:1, 3–4, 9). Although not historical, these passages show the perspective of the Jewish apocryphal author that spiritual corruption through intermarriage with the Canaanites was a threat not only at the time of the Conquest but even during the time of the patriarchs.

A couple of chapters later, the book of Jubilees records the following farewell speech of Abraham to his grandson Jacob:

My son Jacob, remember my words. Observe the commandments of Abraham, your father, separate yourself from the nations, and do not eat with them. Do not emulate their works, and do not associate with them because their works are unclean, and all their ways are a pollution and an abomination and uncleanness. They offer their sacrifices to the dead and they worship evil spirits, and they eat over the graves, and all their works are empty and nothingness. They have no heart to understand and their eyes do not see what their works are, and how they go astray by saying to a piece of wood, “You are my God,” and to a stone, “You are my Lord and you are my deliverer,” because the stone and wood have no heart. And as for you, my son Jacob, may the Most High God help you and the God of heaven bless you and remove you from their uncleanness and from all their error. Jacob, be warned. Do not take a wife from any offspring of the daughters of Canaan, for all his offspring are to be rooted out of the earth. Because of the transgression of Ham, Canaan erred, and all his offspring shall be destroyed from the earth including any remnant of it, and none springing from him shall exist except on the day of judgment. And as for all the worshippers of idols and the profane, there shall be no hope for them in the land of the living, and no one on earth will remember them, for they shall descend into the abode of the dead, and they shall go into the place of condemnation. As the children of Sodom were taken away from the earth, so will all those who worship idols be taken away.

Again, this speech is not found in the Old Testament and so is certainly not historical, but the allusions to Deuteronomy in this passage shed light on the Jewish beliefs about the Canaanites from the time of the apocryphal author. The passage begins with the idea of separation from the Gentiles because of the Gentiles' unclean works manifested in their abominable, idolatrous worship practices (cf. Deut 7:5, 25–26). There is also the prohibition against marrying the Canaanites (cf. Deut 7:3) as well as the teaching that the Canaanites will be wiped from the face of the earth (cf. Deut 7:2) along with any who commit the grievous sin of worshiping idols, including any Israelites (cf. Deut 13:12–18). Although there is no explicit endorsement of the Conquest in the passage from Jubilees, there is implicit approval for the removal of the Canaanites from the Promised Land because of their sinfulness dating back to the time of the patriarchs and because of the need to preserve Israel's spiritual integrity through separation.<sup>928</sup>

#### Other Passages

There are a handful of other passages that mention the Conquest or the Canaanites. One passage in Sirach gives a general commendation of the Conquest:

Joshua the son of Nun was mighty in war, and was the successor of Moses in prophesying. He became, in accordance with his name, a great savior of God's elect, to take vengeance on the enemies that rose against them, so that he might give Israel its inheritance. How glorious he was when he lifted his hands and stretched out his sword against the cities! Who before him ever stood so firm? For he waged the wars of the Lord. Was not the sun held back by his hand? And did not one day become as long as two? He called upon the Most High, the Mighty One, when enemies pressed him on every side, and the great Lord answered him with hailstones of mighty power. He hurled down war upon that nation, and at the descent of Beth horon he destroyed those who resisted, so that the nations might know his armament, that he was fighting in the sight of the Lord; for he wholly followed the Mighty One (Sir 46:1–6).

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<sup>928</sup> For further discussion, see Jacques van Ruiten, "The Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7 and the Book of *Jubilees*," in *Violence in the Hebrew Bible: Between Text and Reception*, eds. Jacques van Ruiten and Koert van Bekkum (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 152.

Here, Joshua is praised for his valor in destroying the Canaanites with the help of the Lord, as described in the book of Joshua. There is wholesale approval of the Conquest. Another passage briefly mentions the fact that the Lord was the one who overthrew Jericho, thereby attributing the Conquest to God and setting a precedent for Judas Maccabeus to follow:

But Judas [Maccabeus] and his men, calling upon the great Sovereign of the world, who without battering-rams or engines of war overthrew Jericho in the days of Joshua, rushed furiously upon the walls. They took the city [of Caspin] by the will of God, and slaughtered untold numbers, so that the adjoining lake, a quarter of a mile wide, appeared to be running over with blood (2 Macc 12:15–16).

A third passage states the general truth that the Lord overthrows nations at different times in history, which aligns with the biblical teaching about the Conquest:

The beginning of man's pride is to depart from the Lord; his heart has forsaken his Maker. For the beginning of pride is sin, and the man who clings to it pours out abominations. Therefore the Lord brought upon them extraordinary afflictions, and destroyed them utterly. The Lord has cast down the thrones of rulers, and has seated the lowly in their place. The Lord has plucked up the roots of the nations, and has planted the humble in their place. The Lord has overthrown the lands of the nations, and has destroyed them to the foundations of the earth. He has removed some of them and destroyed them, and has extinguished the memory of them from the earth (Sir 10:13–17).

A fourth passage describes the Lord's wrath against, and lack of pity for, the Canaanite neighbors of Lot who brought on their own destruction because of wicked behavior:

In an assembly of sinners a fire will be kindled, and in a disobedient nation wrath was kindled. He was not propitiated for the ancient giants who revolted in their might. He did not spare the neighbors of Lot, whom he loathed on account of their insolence. He showed no pity for a nation devoted to destruction, for those destroyed in their sins; nor for the six hundred thousand men on foot, who rebelliously assembled in their stubbornness (Sir 16:6–9).

While it is not entirely clear who was destroyed, the Canaanites fit the context. Finally, there is a passage that echoes the book of Ezra's teaching about what happened when the Israelites *did* intermarry with the Canaanites.

The people of Israel and the leaders and the priests and the Levites have not put away from themselves the alien peoples of the land and their pollutions, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Edomites. For they and their sons have married the daughters of these people, and the holy race has been mixed with the alien peoples of the land; and from the beginning of this matter the leaders and the nobles have been sharing in this iniquity (1 Esd 8:69–70; cf. 2 Esd 1:21; Jud 5:16).

The passage supports the biblical teaching about the results of intermarriage with the Canaanites.

### Summary

What the selected passages from the Apocrypha show is that there was a continuing train of thought in Jewish tradition that the Conquest was a part of God's overall plan for Israel and that it was accomplished by the Lord through His direct action as well as through His human agents. The above citations consistently teach that the Canaanites were wicked and deserving of punishment, including those living in Sodom and Gomorrah, and that God was just in His decrees, even giving the Canaanites time to repent. There is no hint of disapproval of the Conquest, nor is there any difficulty with the fact that the Conquest involved the killing of men, women, and children. The Conquest is presented as good, moral, and just in these texts.

### Philo of Alexandria

Philo of Alexandria (born ca. 13 BC) was a Jewish philosopher, Roman citizen, and Greek-speaking member of the Diaspora Jewish community living in Egypt during the first century AD.<sup>929</sup> He is well known for his biblical exegesis that went beyond the literal interpretation of the text to the spiritual meaning of Scripture.<sup>930</sup> Consequently, Philo's writings

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4. <sup>929</sup> Jean Daniélou, *Philo of Alexandria*, trans. James G. Colbert (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2014), 1–

<sup>930</sup> Daniélou, *Philo of Alexandria*, 90.

furnish an important example of biblical exegesis in the first century.<sup>931</sup> This section will examine his comments on Numbers 21, Deuteronomy 20, and Exodus 17.

## Numbers 21

Philo took a literal, unapologetic approach to at least one Conquest account. In commenting on the story in Numbers 21:1–3, where the Canaanite king Arad initiated an attack on Israel and at first captured some of the Israelite soldiers and took them prisoner, Philo wrote about how the rest of the Israelite soldiers rallied themselves to fight against the Canaanites: “Let us seize the keys of the country and strike terror into the inhabitants as deriving prosperity from the cities, and inflicting upon them in return the want of necessary things which we bring with us out of the wilderness.”<sup>932</sup> Although not mentioned in Numbers 21, Philo believed that the Israelite soldiers wanted to strike terror in the hearts of the Canaanites. The biblical text states that the Israelites applied the ban to the Canaanites and their cities, implying total destruction of the men, women, and children (cf. Num 21:3). Philo appears to have approved:

And they, at the same time, exhorted one another often with these words, and likewise began to dedicate to God, as the first fruits of the land, the cities of the king and all the citizens of each city. And he accepted their views and inspired the Hebrews with courage, and prepared the army of the enemy to be defeated. Accordingly, the Hebrews defeated them with mighty power, and fulfilled the agreement of gratitude which they had made, not appropriating to themselves the slightest portion of the booty. And they dedicated to God the cities with all the men and treasures that were in them, and, from what had thus taken place, they called the whole country an offering to God....<sup>933</sup>

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<sup>931</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>932</sup> Philo, *On the Life of Moses*, I, 251. All citations from Philo are taken from *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. D. Young (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993).

<sup>933</sup> Ibid., 252–53. Hofreiter believes that “men and treasures” may be Philo’s attempt to tone down the language of total destruction since women and children are not directly mentioned (Christian Hofreiter, *Making Sense of Old Testament Genocide: Christian Interpretations of Hērem Passages* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018], 35; cf. idem., *Reading Herem Texts as Christian Scripture*, PhD diss. [Oxford: The University of Oxford, 2013]). However, women and children are not mentioned in Numbers 21. The text simply states that the Israelites utterly destroyed the Canaanites and their cities. In addition, the phrase “men and treasures” may be inclusive of “all humans” (men) and “all plunder” (treasure).



From this statement, it is evident that Philo has no disagreement with the biblical text. In fact, he portrayed the destruction of the Canaanites as a dedication of the first fruits of the land to God.

Similarly, Philo wrote about the Israelites' swift and sound defeat of Sihon and the Amorites.

...[T]here was no need of any second battle, but the first was also the only one, and in it the whole power of the enemy was frustrated for ever. And it was utterly overthrown, and immediately it disappeared for ever. And about the same time the cities were both empty and full; empty of their ancient inhabitants, and full of those who now succeeded to their dominions over them. In the same manner, also, the stables of cattle in the fields, being made desolate, received instead men who were in all respects better than their former masters.<sup>934</sup>

The fact that the cities were empty and then full again means that the Israelites utterly destroyed the Amorites before occupying their cities.<sup>935</sup> The same is true, according to Philo, of the cities and peoples in the land of Canaan: God judged the Canaanites and gave their land to Israel:

...[T]hey did not receive a desolate land, but one in which there was a populous nation and great cities abounding in men. Yet the cities were emptied of their inhabitants and the entire race disappeared except for a small part: some as a result of wars and others as a result of divinely sent attacks because of their new and strange practices of wrongs and all of the impieties they used to commit through their great efforts to demolish the laws of nature. These things happened so that those who replaced them might be sobered by the calamities of others, and learn from their deeds that those who become devotees of evil deeds will suffer the same fate but those who have honored a life of virtue will possess their assigned portion, numbered not among emigrants but among the native residents.<sup>936</sup>

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<sup>934</sup> Philo, *On the Life of Moses*, I, 261–62.

<sup>935</sup> Contra Versluis, who thinks that Philo was stating that the Amorites had abandoned their cities in an attempt to soften the Conquest (Versluis, "The Early Reception History of the Command to Exterminate the Canaanites," 310). Versluis also points to another passage where Philo speculated that the Canaanites may have willingly surrendered (ibid.). However, Philo pondered whether the Israelites took the land by force or whether they took it without a fight, but he did not come down on the answer one way or the other. He did write, "But when they came into this land, how they were settled here, and how they got possession of the country, they show in their sacred records." This seems to point to Philo's confidence in the biblical record, not a revision of history. The fact that this section of Philo is deemed *hypothetica* means that it is speculative (see Philo, *Hypothetica: Apology for the Jews*, 6.5–9).

<sup>936</sup> Philo, *The Special Laws*, II, 170.

One can see an additional reason for the annihilation of the Canaanites—namely, that God used the Conquest to teach Israel about the consequences of evil. Philo elsewhere depicted the peoples living in the land of Canaan as wicked and deserving of death:

Who are the Kenites, the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites? Ten nations of wickedness are here enumerated, which he here destroys because of their neighbourhood....<sup>937</sup>

The examples above indicate that Philo was generally approving of Israel's wars against the Canaanites and their occupation of the land of Canaan.

#### Deuteronomy 20

There is another passage in Philo that sheds light on his understanding of Old Testament warfare.<sup>938</sup> In his discussion of Deuteronomy 20, which outlines Israel's rules for war, Philo first affirmed Israel's practice of offering peace to an adversarial city since peace was more advantageous than war. If the enemy refused the offer of peace, then the Israelites had the right to slay the enemies, "inflicting upon them what they were intended to suffer themselves."<sup>939</sup> Evidently, Philo had no scruples about killing in war. He even went beyond the biblical text by stating that the Israelite army was to burn the enemy cities to the ground.<sup>940</sup> However, he stopped short of endorsing the total destruction of men, women, and children: "But let them suffer the maidens and the women to go free, inasmuch as they did not expect to suffer any of the evils

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<sup>937</sup> Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, III, 17; cf. idem., *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, II, 65.

<sup>938</sup> See Philo, *The Special Laws*, IV, 219–ff.

<sup>939</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>940</sup> Ibid., 223. The instructions in Deuteronomy 20 do not include burning enemy cities. The only text in Deuteronomy that mentions burning cities is in regard to the apostate cities (Deut 13:12–18), though the cities of Jericho (Josh 6:24), Ai (Josh 8:19), and Hazor (Josh 11:11) were burned, as was Achan's family and possessions after the family had been stoned to death (Josh 7:25).

which war brings upon men at their hands, as they are exempt from all military service through their natural weakness.”<sup>941</sup> Women should not be lumped in with men since their way of life is “naturally peaceful and domestic.”<sup>942</sup> What is more, Philo condemned those who kill the innocent in war.<sup>943</sup> This aligns with Deuteronomy 20:14, which pertains to Israel’s wars with nations *at a distance*, so there is no apparent contradiction between Philo and Moses since the ban was only applied to the enemy nations within the land—that is, the Canaanites (Deut 20:16–18). Philo made no comments about Deuteronomy 20:16–18, so one can only speculate as to any reason for the omission, but this does not mean that he disapproved of the Conquest.<sup>944</sup>

## Exodus 17

One other passage from Philo that factors into this discussion is his interpretation of the Israelites’ victory over the Amalekites (Exod 17:8–16). Here, Philo employed his allegorical interpretation: Israel stands for the mind and Amalek for passions that may overtake the mind:

And this statement [about Moses lifting up his hands] implies, that when the mind raises itself up from mortal affairs and is elevated on high, it is very vigorous because it beholds God; and the mind here means Israel. But when it relaxes its vigour and becomes powerless, then immediately the passions will prevail, that is to say, Amalek; which name, being interpreted, means, the people licking. For he does, of a verity, devour the whole soul, and licks it up, leaving no seed behind, nor anything which can excite virtue; in reference to which it is said, “Amalek is the beginning of nations” (Num 24:20); because passion governs, and is the absolute lord of nations, all mingled and confused and jumbled in disorder, without any settled plan; and, through passion, all the war of the soul is fanned and kept alive. For God makes a promise to the same minds to which he grants peace, that he will efface the memorial of Amalek from all the lands beneath the heaven (Exod 17:14).<sup>945</sup>

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<sup>941</sup> Ibid.

<sup>942</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>943</sup> Ibid.

<sup>944</sup> Contra Katell Berthelot, “Philo of Alexandria and the Conquest of Canaan,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007): 41–44.

Like later Christian writers who derived allegorical interpretations from the Old Testament, Philo did not deny the historicity of the battle in Exodus 17 or any truth found in the literal interpretation. Rather, he appears to be adding to the literal interpretation a spiritual interpretation about virtuous living.<sup>946</sup>

### Summary

In summary, Philo approved of the Israelites' destruction of the Canaanites in Numbers 21, he characterized the Canaanite nations as wicked, and he supported Israel's rules for war found in Deuteronomy 20, even going beyond the text in instructing the Israelites to burn the cities of their enemies. He did not condone the slaughter of the innocent women from enemy nations in line with Deuteronomy 20:14. Whether Philo agreed with the total destruction of the Canaanites as outlined in Deuteronomy 20:16–18 remains an open question. He disapproved of the cruelties of war perpetrated against the Jews living in Egypt under the Roman governor Flaccus Avillius, which included the indiscriminate killing of men, women, and children.<sup>947</sup> He also opposed the practice of putting the innocent to death in place of the guilty (cf. Deut 24:16)<sup>948</sup> as well as the practice of infanticide.<sup>949</sup> However, he made no negative comments about

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<sup>945</sup> Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation*, III, 186–87; cf. idem., *On the Migration of Abraham*, 143; idem., *On Mating with the Preliminary Studies*, 54–56.

<sup>946</sup> Neither is it necessary to speculate on the omission of comments in Philo concerning the later command to annihilate the Amalekites (Deut 25:19). Philo approved of the destruction of the Amalekite army in the wilderness as outlined above, and Philo supported the teaching in Deuteronomy 24:16 that children should not be punished for the sins of the fathers (cf. Philo, *The Special Laws* III, 29–30.153–58), but that does not mean that he condemned the wholesale slaughter of the Canaanites as God's judgment (contra Louis H. Feldman, "The Command, according to Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and Josephus, to Annihilate the Seven Nations of Canaan," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 41, no. 1 [2003]: 15).

<sup>947</sup> See Philo, *Flaccus*, 58–72.

<sup>948</sup> See Philo, *The Special Laws*, III, 153–68.

<sup>949</sup> Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation*, III, 118–19.

the Israelites' destruction of the Canaanite cities in Numbers 21:1–3. In addition, Philo's allegorizing of Exodus 17:8–16 *adds* to the understanding of what the text teaches but does not *subtract* from the veracity of the historical promise that God would blot out the Amalekites. Perhaps he distinguished human cruelties in war, which are present in all times and places, from the execution of the Canaanites at the command of God. His statements about punishing the innocent for the guilty and about infanticide pertain to everyday jurisprudence in society, not a divine mandate to exterminate a wicked nation. Therefore, the most that can be said is that Philo apparently upheld the truthfulness of the Old Testament, though he condemned societal injustices and the cruelties of the Romans against the Jews.

### **Josephus**

Flavius Josephus (ca. AD 37–100) was a first-century Roman-Jewish historian who is famous for his two influential works, *The Wars of the Jews* and *Antiquities of the Jews*. The latter work gives an overview of Jewish history from creation forward, following the biblical-canonical storyline and adding in details from history, tradition, and perhaps from creative license. In general, Josephus simply restated the biblical teachings that Abraham's descendants would eventually conquer the Canaanites in war and possess their land and cities;<sup>950</sup> that other nations could be kept alive to pay tribute to Israel, but the Canaanites must be entirely destroyed;<sup>951</sup> and that the Israelites overthrew the Amorite cities and killed their inhabitants.<sup>952</sup> He even added a prophecy from Phinehas that according to God's will, the tribe of Judah would

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<sup>950</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.10.3.

<sup>951</sup> Ibid., 4.8.42, 44.

<sup>952</sup> Ibid., 4.5.2–3.

be the ruling tribe to destroy the race of the Canaanites.<sup>953</sup> Concerning the battle of Jericho, Josephus recorded the following account:

However, [Joshua] charged them [the Israelites] to kill every one they should take, and not to abstain from the slaughter of their enemies, either for weariness or for pity, and not to fall on the spoil, and be thereby diverted from pursuing their enemies as they ran away; but to destroy all the animals, and to take nothing for their own peculiar advantage.... Only that they should save Rahab and her kindred alive, because of the oath which the spies had sworn to her.<sup>954</sup>

This is a pretty straightforward reading of Joshua 6, with a little commentary to fill in some of the details missing from the biblical account. The next section, though, shows that in Josephus' mind, the ban applied to Jericho entailed total destruction:

So they entered into Jericho, and slew all the men that were therein, while they were affrighted at the surprising overthrow of the walls, and their courage was become useless, and they were not able to defend themselves; so they were slain, and their throats cut, some in the ways, and others as caught in their houses; nothing afforded them assistance, but they all perished, even to the women and the children; and the city was filled with dead bodies, and not one person escaped. They also burnt the whole city, and the country about it; but they saved alive Rahab, with her family, who had fled to her inn.<sup>955</sup>

According to Josephus, Joshua and the Israelites killed men, women, and children at Jericho. The same was true of the battle at Ai:

Accordingly, these [Israelite] men took the city, and slew all that they met with...and when [the men of Ai] were driven towards the city, and thought it had not been touched, as soon as they saw it was taken, and perceived it was burnt, with their wives and children, they wandered about in the fields in a scattered condition, and were no way able to defend themselves, because they had none to support them."<sup>956</sup>

The Gibeonites heard about what happened at Jericho and Ai and "supposed [that] they should find little mercy from him [Joshua], who made war that he might entirely destroy the nation of

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<sup>953</sup> Ibid., 5.2.1.

<sup>954</sup> Ibid., 5.1.5.

<sup>955</sup> Ibid., 5.1.7.

<sup>956</sup> Ibid., 5.1.15.

the Canaanites....”<sup>957</sup> Josephus also acknowledged that there were still Canaanites remaining in the land who retreated to fortified cities<sup>958</sup> and that Israel’s success was to be credited to God.<sup>959</sup> At the end of the Conquest, it was each tribe’s responsibility to “leave no remainder of the race of the Canaanites in the land that had been divided to them by lot....”<sup>960</sup> Thus, Josephus had no problem with the Conquest, including the complete extermination of the Canaanites.

The same is true of his commentary on the ban against the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15.

Once again, Josephus filled in some details that are missing from the biblical account:

...I [Samuel] enjoin thee [Saul] to punish the Amalekites, by making war upon them; and when thou hast subdued them, to leave none of them alive, but to pursue them through every age, and to slay them, beginning with the women and the infants, and to require this as a punishment to be inflicted upon them for the mischief they did to our forefathers; to spare nothing, neither asses nor other beasts, nor to reserve any of them for your own advantage and possession, but to devote them universally to God, and, in obedience to the commands of Moses, to blot out the name of Amalek entirely.<sup>961</sup>

This is a pretty standard, albeit expanded, reading of 1 Samuel 15, but Josephus’ later comments are instructive for his interpretation of the Conquest against the Amalekites:

...[Saul] set upon the cities of the Amalekites; he besieged them, and took them by force, partly by warlike machines, partly by mines dug under ground, and partly by building walls on the outsides. Some they starved out with famine, and some they gained by other methods; and after all, he betook himself to slay the women and the children, and thought he did not act therein either barbarously or inhumanly; first, because they were enemies whom he thus treated, and, in the next place, because it was done by the command of God, whom it was dangerous not to obey.... [F]or God hated the nation of the Amalekites to such a degree, that he commanded Saul to have no pity on even those infants which we by nature chiefly compassionate....<sup>962</sup>

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<sup>957</sup> Ibid., 5.1.16.

<sup>958</sup> Ibid., 5.1.19.

<sup>959</sup> Ibid., 5.1.20.

<sup>960</sup> Ibid., 5.1.24.

<sup>961</sup> Ibid., 6.7.1.

<sup>962</sup> Ibid., 6.7.2.

It is interesting to see Josephus' comment not only that the destruction of the Amalekites was done at the command of God but also that it was dangerous not to obey God's commands. In 1 Samuel 15, Saul did *not* fully obey, and the Lord tore the kingdom away from him. By way of summary, then, Josephus supported the Conquest of the Canaanites and Amalekites, which included the killing of men, women, and children at God's command.

### Concluding Observations

This appendix examined the biblical and extrabiblical commentaries about the Conquest to consider how the Conquest was interpreted by later Jewish authors. The biblical commentaries on the Conquest from both the Old and New Testament wholeheartedly endorse the Conquest without reservation. Those who believe in the inspiration of Scripture must consider that there is no hint of criticism from the Old Testament, Jesus, or the apostles concerning the wholesale slaughter of the Canaanites. There is consistency, therefore, in the biblical presentation of Canaanite wickedness, God's overarching plan, God's participation in warfare, and the threat of spiritual corruption in Israel. The extrabiblical material from the Apocrypha, Philo, and Josephus align with the Old Testament as well. The Jewish traditions all point in the same direction, which means that any later interpretations that find fault with the Conquest or try to reinterpret the Conquest in order to soften the text will be out of step with both the Bible as a whole and the legacy of Jewish tradition. One final note is that there is no explicit discussion in these ancient commentaries of why the Canaanite children were put to death along with their parents.



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