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Indiscriminate Massacre and Ethnic Cleansing?

The Killing of the Canaanites (II)

As we've said, the Old Testament's "holy wars"—or, more accurately, "Yahweh wars"—are the most emotionally charged biblical problem raised by the New Atheists and by critics generally. Like it or not, war is a common feature of our fallen world. Indeed, we know that warfare was a way of life—and often a matter of survival—in the ancient Near East. However, the problematic wars take place primarily during and shortly after Israel's second historical stage under Joshua, the theocratic stage of Israel's existence. As we've mentioned, this Yahweh warfare wasn't the standard for the other stages in Israel's history. It wasn't intended as a permanent fixture in Israel's story. It was unique to Israel at a particular point in time and was not to be repeated in later history by Israel or by other nations. Without God's explicit command (and thus his morally sufficient reasons), attacking the Canaanites would *not* have been justified.

Infiltration, Internal Struggle, and Conquest

How did the Promised Land come to be inhabited by the Israelites? Biblical scholars and archaeologists continue the effort to uncover the nature of Israel's relationship to the Canaanites, and they are finding something more

complex than the traditional Sunday school version of the conquest model. The bigger picture includes not just conquest but rather a combination of other factors. Besides military engagement, some type of infiltration took place (e.g., Judg. 1:1–2:5). Internal struggle was another feature—that is, Israel often did a poor job staving off idolatry and distinguishing itself from surrounding pagan lifestyles. Scripture's realistic acknowledgment that the Canaanites continued to live in the land suggests that something more than a military campaign took place.[1]

The books of Joshua and Judges suggest that taking the land included less-than-dramatic processes of infiltration and internal struggle. Israel's entrance into Canaan included more than the military motif. Old Testament scholar Gordon McConville comments on Joshua: we don't have "a simple conquest model, but rather a mixed picture of success and failure, sudden victory and slow, compromised progress."[2] Likewise, Old Testament scholar David Howard firmly states that the conquest model needs modification. Why? Because "the stereotypical model of an all-consuming Israelite army descending upon Canaan and destroying everything in its wake cannot be accepted. The biblical data will not allow for this." He adds that the Israelites entered Canaan and did engage militarily "but without causing extensive material destruction."[3] We'll come back to this significant point.

Ancient Near Eastern Exaggeration Rhetoric

Most Christians read Joshua's conquest stories with the backdrop of Sunday school lessons via flannel graph or children's illustrated Bible stories. The impression that's left is a black-and-white rendition of a literal crush, kill, and destroy mission. A closer look at the biblical text reveals a lot more nuance—and a lot less bloodshed. In short, the conquest of Canaan was far less widespread and harsh than many people assume.

Like his ancient Near Eastern contemporaries, Joshua used the language of conventional warfare rhetoric. This language sounds like bragging and exaggeration to our ears. Notice first the sweeping language in Joshua 10:40: "Thus Joshua struck all the land, the hill country and the Negev and the lowland and the slopes and all their kings. He left no survivor, but he utterly destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded." Joshua used the rhetorical bravado language of his day, asserting that *all* the land was captured, *all* the kings defeated, and *all* the Canaanites destroyed (cf. 10:40–42; 11:16–23: "Joshua took the whole land . . . and gave . . . it for an inheritance to Israel"). Yet, as we will see, Joshua himself acknowledged that this wasn't literally so.

Scholars readily agree that Judges is literarily linked to Joshua. Yet the early chapters of Judges (which, incidentally, repeat the death of Joshua) show that

the task of taking over the land was far from complete. In Judges 2:3, God says, "I will not drive them out before you." Earlier, Judges 1:21, 27–28 asserted that "[they] did not drive out the Jebusites"; "[they] did not take possession"; "they did not drive them out completely." These nations remained "to this day" (Judg. 1:21). The peoples who had apparently been wiped out reappear in the story. Many Canaanite inhabitants simply stuck around.

Some might accuse Joshua of being misleading or of getting it wrong. Not at all. He was speaking the language that everyone in his day would have understood. Rather than trying to deceive, Joshua was just saying he had fairly well trounced the enemy. On the one hand, Joshua says, "There were no Anakim left in the land" (Josh. 11:22); indeed, they were "utterly destroyed [*haram*]" in the hill country (11:21). Literally? Not according to the very same Joshua! In fact, Caleb later asked permission to drive out the Anakites from the hill country (14:12–15; cf. 15:13–19). Again, Joshua wasn't being deceptive. Given the use of ancient Near Eastern hyperbole, he could say without contradiction that nations "remain among you"; he went on to warn Israel not to mention, swear by, serve, or bow down to their gods (Josh. 23:7, 12–13; cf. 15:63; 16:10; 17:13; Judg. 2:10–13). Again, though the land "had rest from war" (Josh. 11:23), chapters 13 and beyond tell us that much territory remained unpossessed (13:1). Tribe upon tribe failed to drive out the Canaanites (13:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12–13, 18), and Joshua tells seven of the tribes, "How long will you put off entering to take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you?" (18:3).

Furthermore, God told the Israelites that the process of driving out the Canaanites would be a gradual one, as Deuteronomy 7:22 anticipated and as Judges 2:20–23 reaffirmed. Whatever the reason behind Israel's failure to drive them out—whether disobedience and/or God's slow-but-sure approach—we're still told by Joshua in sweeping terms that Israel wiped out all of the Canaanites. Just as we might say that a sports team "blew their opponents away" or "slaughtered" or "annihilated" them, the author (editor) likewise followed the rhetoric of his day.

Joshua's conventional warfare rhetoric was common in many other ancient Near Eastern military accounts in the second and first millennia BC. The language is typically exaggerated and full of bravado, depicting total devastation. The knowing ancient Near Eastern reader recognized this as hyperbole; the accounts weren't understood to be literally true.[4] This language, Egyptologist Kenneth Kitchen observes, has misled many Old Testament scholars in their assessments of the book of Joshua; some have concluded that the language of wholesale slaughter and total occupation—which didn't (from all other indications) actually take place—proves that these accounts are falsehoods. But ancient Near Eastern accounts readily used "utterly/completely destroy" and other obliteration language even when the event didn't literally happen that way. Here's a sampling:[5]

- Egypt's Tuthmosis III (later fifteenth century) boasted that "the numerous army of Mitanni was overthrown within the hour, annihilated totally, like those (now) not existent." In fact, Mitanni's forces lived on to fight in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BC.

- Hittite king Mursilli II (who ruled from 1322–1295 BC) recorded making "Mt. Asharpaya empty (of humanity)" and the "mountains of Tarikarimu empty (of humanity)."

- The "Bulletin" of Ramses II tells of Egypt's less-than-spectacular victories in Syria (around 1274 BC). Nevertheless, he announces that he slew "the entire force" of the Hittites, indeed "all the chiefs of all the countries," disregarding the "millions of foreigners," which he considered "chaff."

- In the Merneptah Stele (ca. 1230 BC), Rameses II's son Merneptah announced, "Israel is wasted, his seed is not," another premature declaration.

- Moab's king Mesha (840/830 BC) bragged that the Northern Kingdom of "Israel has utterly perished for always," which was over a century premature. The Assyrians devastated Israel in 722 BC.

- The Assyrian ruler Sennacherib (701–681 BC) used similar hyperbole: "The soldiers of Hirimme, dangerous enemies, I cut down with the sword; and not one escaped."

You get the idea. Let's now return to the Old Testament text to press this point further. It's true that Joshua 9–12 utilizes the typical ancient Near Eastern literary devices for warfare. But at the book's end, Joshua matter-of-factly assumes the continued existence of Canaanite peoples that could pose a threat to Israel. He warns Israel against idolatry and getting entangled in their ways: "For if you ever go back and cling to the rest of these nations, these which remain among you, and intermarry with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know with certainty that the LORD your God will not continue to drive these nations out from before you" (Josh. 23:12–13).

Earlier in Deuteronomy 7:2–5, we find a similar tension. On the one hand, God tells Israel that they should "defeat" and "utterly destroy [*haram*]" the Canaanites (v. 2)—a holy consecration to destruction. On the other hand, he immediately goes on to say in the very next verses:

> Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you. But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their Asherim [figures of Asherah, who was the Canaanite goddess of sexuality/sensuality], and burn their graven images with fire. (vv. 3–5)

If the Canaanites were to be completely obliterated, why this discussion about intermarriage or treaties? The final verse emphasizes that the ultimate issue was religious: Israel was to destroy altars, images, and sacred pillars. In other words, destroying Canaanite religion was more important than destroying Canaanite people.[6] This point was made earlier in Exodus 34:12–13: "Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, or it will become a snare in your midst. But rather, you are to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim." In Deuteronomy 12:2–3, we read the same emphasis on destroying Canaanite *religion*:

> You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and burn their Asherim with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place.

As Gary Millar writes, the concern of this destruction (*herem*) was "to see Israel established in a land purged of Canaanite idolatry as painlessly as possible." The goal was to "remove what is subject to [*herem*] laws (the idols)." The root of the dilemma Israel faced wasn't "the people themselves, but their idolatrous way of life." Failure to remove the idolatry would put Israel in the position of the Canaanites and their idols before God. Israel would risk being consecrated to destruction.[7]

Even so, the Israelites didn't do an effective job removing the snare of idolatry from the land (Ps. 106:34–35). Many of the Canaanites, as already noted, were still around "until this day," and many of them became forced laborers in Israel (Josh. 15:63; 16:10; 17:12–13; Judg. 1:19, 21, 27–35).

The Amalekites

In 1 Samuel 15 we encounter the remaining set of "destruction" references— reserved for an enemy hell-bent on Israel's annihilation. Here, God tells Saul to "utterly destroy [*haram*]" and "not spare" the Amalekites: "put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (v. 3). By the end of the chapter, Saul has apparently killed all the Amalekites—except king Agag—and he has spared lots of livestock. Saul didn't obey God fully, and the prophet Samuel had to step in and finish off Agag himself. Because Saul didn't carry out God's command completely, God rejected him as king.

As with the stories in Joshua, the surface reading here is that Saul wiped out all the Amalekites. We'll come back to this point, but first let's ask: Who were the Amalekites? These nomadic people were Israel's enemies from day one after the Red Sea crossing (Exod. 17). Weary and unprepared to fight, Israel faced a fierce people who showed no concern for the vulnerable Israelite

population. The Amalekites were relentless in their aim to destroy Israel, and they continued to be a thorn in Israel's side for generations (e.g., Judg. 3:13; 6:3–5, 33; 7:12; 10:12; etc.).

Again, the 1 Samuel 15 story appears to be a clear-cut case of complete obliteration. No Amalekites remaining, right? Wrong! In 1 Samuel 27:8, "David and his men went up and raided the Geshurites and the Girzites"—and the "utterly destroyed" Amalekites! But was that the end of them? No, they appear again in 1 Samuel 30: the Amalekites made one of their infamous raids (v. 1); David pursued them to get back the Israelites and the booty the Amalekites had taken (v. 18); and four hundred of them escaped (v. 17). So contrary to the common impression, Saul *didn't* wipe out all the Amalekites, something 1 Samuel itself makes clear. And even David didn't complete the job. The Amalekites were still around during King Hezekiah's time 250 years later (1 Chron. 4:43).

Then we get to the time of Esther, when the Jews were under the rule of the Persian king Ahasuerus/Xerxes (486–465 BC). Here we encounter "Haman . . . the Agagite" (Esther 3:1). Remember King Agag the Amalekite from 1 Samuel 15:8? Yes, Haman was an Amalekite who continued the Amalekite tradition of aggression against God's people. An "enemy of the Jews" (Esther 3:10), Haman mounted a campaign to destroy the Jews as a people (3:13).

Knowing that callous Amalekite hostility would continue for nearly a millennium of Israel's history, God reminded his people not to let up in their opposition to the Amalekites (Deut. 25:15–17). Otherwise, the hardened Amalekites would seek to destroy Israel. If the Amalekites had their way, Israel would have been wiped off the map. Unlike other Canaanites, the Amalekites just couldn't be assimilated into Israel.

The moral of the story? Don't simply adopt the surface reading about Saul "utterly destroying" the Amalekites. When we read phrases like the destruction of "everything that breathes," we should be more guarded. In fact, for all we know and based on what we've seen in Joshua (and what we'll see below), Saul could well have been engaging combatants in battle rather than noncombatants. The "city of Amalek" (1 Sam. 15:5) was probably a fortified (perhaps semipermanent) military encampment.[8] Yes, decisive defeat is certainly in view, but something more is going on here. We'll continue to explore this below.

One more related point, however: the *herem* ("ban" or "consecration to destruction") language connected to Israel's warring against other nations first focuses on the Canaanites (*herem* used thirty-seven times); the second cluster of *herem* warfare (*herem* used ten times) focuses on the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15. The use of *herem* for the conquest period—with its additional application to Israel's longstanding Amalekite enemies—indicates that the language is *restricted*. The language is not applied to Israel's warfare with other nations, nor do Israel's "holy wars" with other nations go beyond this limited time period.[9]

Men, Women, and Children

Old Testament scholar Richard Hess has written in great detail about the Canaanite question, and he offers further important insights on this topic.[10] He argues persuasively that the Canaanites targeted for destruction were political leaders and their armies rather than noncombatants. For example, Deuteronomy 20:10–18 mentions the "ban" or "dedication to destruction" (*herem*, its verb form is *haram*), which refers to the complete destruction of all warriors in the battle rather than noncombatants.[11]

However, doesn't Joshua 6:21 mention the ban—every living thing in it—in connection with men and women, young and old, ox, sheep, and donkeys? This stock phrase "men and women" occurs seven times in the Old Testament in connection with Ai (Josh. 8:25); Amalek (1 Sam. 15:3); Saul at Nob (1 Sam. 22:19 [only here are children explicitly mentioned]); Jerusalem during Ezra's time (Neh. 8:2); and Israel (2 Sam. 6:19; 2 Chron. 16:3). Each time—except at Nob, where Saul killed the entire priestly family except one (1 Sam. 22:20)—the word "all" (*kol*) is used.

The same idea applies to earlier passages in Deuteronomy: "we captured all his cities at that time and utterly destroyed the men, women and children of every city. We left no survivor" (2:34); and again, "utterly destroying the men, women and children of every city" (3:6). The expression "men and women" or similar phrases appear to be *stereotypical* for describing all the inhabitants of a town or region, "without predisposing the reader to assume anything further about their ages or even their genders."[12] (This becomes clearer in the next section.)

Let's remember that mercy was always available to any Canaanite who responded positively to the God of Israel. Although the ban was applied in specific settings, this doesn't preclude the possibility of sparing people like Rahab and her relatives. The ban allowed—and hoped for—exceptions.

Jericho, Ai, and Other Canaanite Cities

Joshua's language concerning Jericho and Ai appears harsh at first glance: "They devoted 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" (6:21 NIV); "twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai" (8:25 NIV).[13] The average person isn't going to pick up on the fact that this stereotypical ancient Near Eastern language actually describes attacks on military forts or garrisons, not general populations that included women and children. There is no archaeological evidence of civilian populations at Jericho or Ai.

Given what we know about Canaanite life in the Bronze Age, Jericho and Ai were military strongholds. In fact, Jericho guarded the travel routes from

the Jordan Valley up to population centers in the hill country. It was the first line of defense at the junction of three roads leading to Jerusalem, Bethel, and Orpah. That means that Israel's wars here were directed toward government and military installments; this is where the king, the army, and the priesthood resided. The use of "women" and "young and old" was merely stock ancient Near Eastern language that could be used even if women and young and old weren't living there. The language of "all" ("men and women") at Jericho and Ai is a "stereotypical expression for the destruction of all human life in the fort, presumably composed entirely of combatants."[14] The text doesn't require that women and young and old must have been in these cities.

The term *city* [*'ir*] reinforces this idea.[15] Jericho, Ai, and many other Canaanite cities were mainly used for government buildings and operations, while the rest of the people (including women and children) lived in the surrounding countryside. The Amarna letters (fourteenth century BC)—correspondence between Egyptian pharaohs and leaders in Canaan and surrounding regions—reveal that citadel cities or fortresses such as Jerusalem and Shechem were distinct from (and under the control of) their population centers.[16] Again, all the archaeological evidence indicates that no civilian populations existed at Jericho, Ai, and other cities mentioned in Joshua. Other biblical evidence of various cities used as fortresses, citadels, or military outposts also exists (e.g., Rabbah in 2 Sam. 12:26; Zion in 2 Sam. 5:7 and 1 Chron. 11:5, 7).

This fact is made all the more clear by an associated term, *melek* ("king"). This word was commonly used in Canaan during this time for a military leader who was responsible to a higher ruler off-site. What's more, the battles in Joshua do not mention noncombatants—women and children (we'll get to Rahab later). According to the best calculations from Canaanite inscriptions and other archaeological evidence (i.e., no artifacts or "prestige" ceramics indicating wealth/social status, as one would expect in general population centers), Jericho was a small settlement of probably one hundred or fewer soldiers. This is why all of Israel could circle it seven times and then do battle against it on the same day.[17]

As a side note, we could add that translating the numbers used in warfare accounts in the Old Testament can be tricky. The numbers simply may not be as high as what typical translations indicate. The Hebrew word *'eleph* (commonly rendered "thousand") can also mean "unit" or "squad" without specifying an exact number.[18]

So if Jericho were a fort, then "all" those killed therein were warriors along with political and religious leaders. Rahab and her family would have been the exceptional noncombatants dwelling within this military outpost.[19] The same applies throughout the book of Joshua. While the biblical text mentions specific "kings" (military leaders) who were killed in battle with Israel, it does not mention specific noncombatants who were killed. The cumulative case suggests quite the opposite of what we were taught in Sunday school class.

In addition, Saul's destruction of the Amalekites could have been a similar scenario (1 Sam. 15:3). The target could simply have been fortified Amalekite strongholds, not population centers. Again, the sweeping words "all," "young and old," and "men and women" were stock expressions for totality, even if women and children weren't present. This point is further reinforced by the fact that the Amalekites were far from annihilated. As we've already seen, Amalekites appear within the very book of 1 Samuel and well beyond (27:8; 30:1; 1 Chron. 4:43; etc.).

Rahab the Tavern Keeper

Why did the two Israelite spies hang out at a harlot's place? Doesn't this sound just a little fishy? On closer inspection, we can safely conclude that Rahab was in charge of what was likely the fortress's tavern or hostel; she didn't run a brothel, though these taverns were sometimes run by prostitutes.[20] Traveling caravans and royal messengers would commonly stay overnight at such places during this period.[21] The Code of Hammurabi parallels what we see in Joshua 2, complete with a female innkeeper: "If conspirators meet in the house of a [*female*] tavern-keeper, and these conspirators are not captured and delivered to the court, the tavern-keeper shall be put to death."[22]

Furthermore, such reconnaissance missions were common in the East. An innkeeper's home would have been an ideal meeting place for spies and conspirators. Such places notoriously posed a threat to security; because of this, the Hittites (in Turkey and northern Syria) prohibited the building of an inn or tavern near fortress walls.[23]

What about the idea of a sexual liaison? The book of Joshua goes out of its way to state that no such activity took place. The text says the spies "stayed there" not that they "stayed *with her*" (2:1 NIV). And it says they "came *into the house of* . . . *Rahab*" (2:1) not that they "went *in to Rahab*," which *would* imply a sexual relationship. Consider Samson, by contrast, who "saw a harlot . . . and went in to her" (Judg. 16:1). The Old Testament doesn't recoil from using such language; we just don't have any sexual reference here. Instead, the book of Joshua depicts Rahab as a true God-fearer. Yes, such taverns in the ancient Near East would draw people seeking sexual pleasure, but this doesn't apply to the Israelite spies, who visited there because it was a public place where they could learn about the practical and military dispositions of the area and could solicit possible support.[24]

The Canaanites' Refusal to Acknowledge the One True God

Unlike Rahab and her family, her fellow Jerichoites (and most of the Canaanites) refused to acknowledge the one true God. The example of Rahab and her

family (and to some extent Gibeon) reveals that consecration to the ban (*herem*) wasn't absolute and irreversible. God was, as we've seen, more concerned about the destruction of Canaanite religion and idols than Canaanite peoples. God repeatedly expresses a willingness to relent from punishment and preserve those who acknowledge his evident rule over the nations (cf. Jer. 18:8).

For those demanding, "If God exists, let him show himself," it doesn't get much more dramatic than the Red Sea parting. The Creator and the God of Israel had made the headlines in Canaan! In the words of Rahab, "We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt. . . . When we heard of it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath" (Josh. 2:10–11). In the words of the Gibeonites, "Your servants have come from a very far country because of the fame of the LORD your God; for we have heard the report of Him and all that He did in Egypt" (9:9; cf. Exod. 15:14–17; Deut. 2:25). Just as a pagan Nineveh repented at the sight and message of the beached (and bleached!) prophet Jonah, the Canaanites also could have repented—unless, of course, they were too far gone morally and spiritually.

In the New Testament, Jesus asserts that without a willing heart, a person won't turn to God even if someone rises from the dead (Luke 16:31). The repeated, visible pounding of Egypt's gods could have prompted the Canaanites to turn to the one true God, given they had a "heart condition" like Rahab's. Even Israel's sevenfold march around Jericho exhibited a formal opportunity for its king, soldiers, and priests to relent. The Hebrew word *naqap* ("circle, march around" in Josh. 6:3) involves various ceremonial aspects, including rams' horns, sacred procession, and shouting (cf. 2 Sam. 6:15–16). The word is found in Psalm 48: "Walk about Zion and go *around* her; count her towers; consider her ramparts" (vv. 12–13; also 2 Kings 6:14). The word suggests the idea of conducting an inspection. In the case of Jericho, the inspection was conducted to see if the city would open its gates. The city, however, refused to do so.[25] Each time the Israelites circled the city meant an opportunity for Jericho to evade the ban; sadly, each opportunity was met with Jericho's refusal to relent and acknowledge Yahweh's rule.

Israel's Warfare Methods

We've discussed Richard Dawkins's flawed claim that Israel engaged in ethnic cleansing, those "bloodthirsty massacres" carried out with "xenophobic relish." A review of Israel's warfare methods reveals otherwise. Israel's army simply didn't act like a horde of bloodthirsty, maniacal warmongers.

For one thing, the aftermath of Joshua's victories are featherweight descriptions in comparison to those found in the annals of the ancient Near

East's major empires: Hittite and Egyptian (second millennium BC), Aramaean, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, or Greek (first millennium BC).[26] Unlike Joshua's brief, four-verse description of the treatment of the five kings (10:24–27), Assyrians exulted in all the details of their gory, brutal exploits.

The Neo-Assyrian annals of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) take pleasure in describing the flaying of live victims, the impaling of others on poles, and the heaped up bodies for show.[27] They boast of how the king mounded bodies and placed heads into piles; the king bragged of gouging out troops' eyes and cutting off their ears and limbs, followed by his displaying their heads all around a city.[28]

Second, a number of battles Israel fought on the way to and within Canaan were *defensive*: the Amalekites attacked the traveling Israelites (Exod. 17:8); the Canaanite king of Arad attacked and captured some Israelites (Num. 21:1); the Amorite king Sihon refused Israel's peaceful overtures and attacked instead (Num. 21:21–32; Deut. 2:26–30); Bashan's king Og came out to meet Israel in battle (Num. 21:33; Deut. 3:1); Israel responded to Midian's calculated attempts to lead Israel astray through idolatry and immorality (Num. 31:2–3; cf. 25; 31:16); five kings attacked Gibeon, which Joshua defended because of Israel's peace pact with the Gibeonites (Josh. 10:4).

Besides this, God prohibited Israel from conquering other neighboring nations. These nations were Moab and Ammon (Deut. 2:9, 19), as well as Edom (Deut. 2:4–5; 23:7), even though they had earlier refused to assist the Israelites (Num. 20:14–21; cf. Deut. 2:6–8). Land-grabbing wasn't permitted by God, and Israel had no right to conquer beyond what God had sanctioned.

Third, all sanctioned Yahweh battles beyond the time of Joshua were defensive ones, including Joshua's battle to defend Gibeon (Josh. 10–11). Of course, while certain offensive battles took place during the time of the Judges and under David and beyond, these are not commended as ideal or exemplary.[29] We've also seen that fighting in order to survive wasn't just an adventure; it was a way of life in the ancient Near East. Such circumstances weren't ideal by far, but that was the reality.

The Midianites (Numbers 31)

As with Israel's lifelong enemies, the Amalekites (cf. Deut. 25:17–19), the Midianites also posed a serious threat to Israel. Whereas Amalek endangered Israel's very existence, Midian profoundly threatened Israel's spiritual and moral integrity as the people of God. With the help of the devious pagan prophet Balaam, the Midianites devised a plan to lead Israel into pagan worship. This involved ritual sex, feasting before their Baal, and bowing and sacrificing to

him (Num. 25:1–2; 31:16). When he couldn't bring a curse down on Israel (Num. 22–24), he sought another way.

This is why Moses gives the command, "Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man" (Num. 31:17–18 NIV). This command must be understood in the context of Numbers 25. At Peor, the Midianite women deliberately seduced the Israelite men into orgiastic adultery as well as Baal worship.

The death sentence for *all* males is unusual. However, males were the potential enemy army to rise up against Israel. (Keep in mind that *the Israelite males* who participated in the seduction were also put to death.) Midian's brazen, evil intent to lead Israel astray called for a severe judgment. The intent of Moses's command was to undermine any future Midianite threat to Israel's identity and integrity.

What about the taking of young virgins? Some critics have crassly suggested that Israelite men were free simply to grab and rape young virgins. Not so. They were saved precisely because they *hadn't* degraded themselves by seducing Israelite men. As a backdrop, have a look again at Deuteronomy 21:10–14. There, a Gentile female POW couldn't be used as a sex object. An Israelite male had to carefully follow proper procedures before she could be taken *as a wife*. In light of the highly sensitive nature of sexual purity in Israel and for Israel's soldiers, specific protocols had to be followed. Rape was most certainly excluded as an extracurricular activity in warfare.

Making Offers of Peace First

In light of Deuteronomy 20's warfare procedures, many scholars argue that Israel was to offer terms of peace to non-Canaanite cities but *not* to Canaanite cities. This is the majority view, to be sure. However, others (including traditional Jewish commentators) have argued that the destruction of Canaanite cities wasn't unconditional and that treaties could have been made under certain conditions. As with Gibeon (despite being sneaky treaty makers), a straightforward peace pact could have been available to any Canaanite city.[30] As we saw with Jericho, a sevenfold opportunity was given for Jericho to make peace with Israel, which it refused to do. Consider Joshua 11:19: "There was not a city which made peace with the sons of Israel except the Hivites living in Gibeon; they took them all in battle." Like Pharoah, who opposed Moses, these Canaanite cities were so far gone that God simply gave them up to their own hardened, resistant hearts (v. 20).

Again, the primary focus in passages like Deuteronomy 7 and 20 is on Israel's ridding the land of idols and false, destructive religious practices. The ultimate goal isn't eliminating persons, as the inspection march around Jericho also suggests.

Driving Them Out

What adds further interest to our discussion is the language of "driving out" and "thrusting out" the Canaanites. The Old Testament also uses the language of "dispossessing" the Canaanites of their land (Num. 21:32; Deut. 9:1; 11:23; 18:14; 19:1; etc.).

> I will send My terror ahead of you, and throw into confusion all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. I will send hornets ahead of you so that they will drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites before you. I will not drive them out before you in a single year, that the land may not become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. I will drive them out before you little by little, until you become fruitful and take possession of the land. (Exod. 23:27–30)

Driving out or dispossessing is different from wiping out or destroying. Expulsion is in view, not annihilation (e.g., "dispossess [*yarash*]" in Exod. 34:24; Num. 32:21; Deut. 4:38 NET). Just as Adam and Eve were "driven out [*garash*]" of the garden (Gen. 3:24) or Cain into the wilderness (4:14) or David from Israel by Saul (1 Sam. 26:19), so the Israelites were to "dispossess" the Canaanites. The Old Testament uses another term as well—"send/cast out [*shalach*]"—that sheds light on the Canaanite question: just as Adam and Eve were "sent out" from the garden (Gen. 3:23), so God would "send out" (or "drive out," Lev. 18:24; 20:23) the Canaanites. And upon examination, the driving out references are considerably more numerous than the destroying and annihilating ones.

In fact, even the verbs "annihilate/perish [*'abad*]" and "destroy [*shamad*]" aren't all that the critics have made them out to be. For example, God threatened to destroy Israel as he did the Canaanites. How? Not by literal obliteration but by removing Israel from the land to another land. Both verbs are used in Deuteronomy 28:63: "it shall come about that as the LORD delighted over you to prosper you, and multiply you, so the LORD will delight over you to make you perish and destroy you; and you will be torn from the land where you are entering to possess it." Even when Babylon *destroyed* the city of Jerusalem, all cooperative Jews were spared (Jer. 38:2, 17).[31] In short, fleeing Canaanites would escape; only the resistant were at risk. This brief examination of terms connected to Yahweh wars provides yet further indication that utter annihilation wasn't intended and that escape from the land was encouraged.

How then does this dispossessing or driving out work? It's not hard to imagine. The threat of a foreign army would prompt women and children—not to mention the population at large—to remove themselves from harm's way. The noncombatants would be the first to flee. As John Goldingay writes, an attacked population wouldn't just wait around to be killed. Only the defenders, who don't get out, are the ones who would get killed.[32] Jeremiah 4:29

suggests such a scenario: "At the sound of the horseman and bowman every city flees; they go into the thickets and climb among the rocks; every city is forsaken, and no man dwells in them."

Again, the biblical text gives no indication that the justified wars of Joshua were against noncombatants.[33] We read in Joshua (and Judges) that, despite the obliteration language, plenty of Canaanite inhabitants who weren't driven out were still living in areas where Israel settled. Moreover, Canaanites (in general) were to be displaced or driven out, not annihilated.

Joshua Utterly Destroyed Them Just as Moses Commanded

In the following texts, Joshua's utter destruction of the Canaanites is exactly what "Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded":

- "Joshua captured all the cities of these kings, and all their kings, and he struck them with the edge of the sword, and utterly destroyed them; just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded" (Josh. 11:12).
- "All the spoil of these cities and the cattle, the sons of Israel took as their plunder; but they struck every man with the edge of the sword, until they had destroyed them. They left no one who breathed. Just as the LORD had commanded Moses his servant, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses" (Josh. 11:14–15).
- "that he might destroy them, just as the LORD had commanded Moses" (Josh. 11:20).

Remember Moses's sweeping commands to "consume" and "utterly destroy" the Canaanites, not to "leave alive anything that breathes"? Joshua's comprehensive language echoes that of Moses; Scripture clearly indicates that Joshua fulfilled Moses's charge to him. So *if* Joshua did just as Moses commanded, and *if* Joshua's described destruction was really hyperbole common in ancient Near Eastern warfare language and familiar to Moses, *then* clearly Moses himself didn't intend a literal, comprehensive Canaanite destruction. He, like Joshua, was merely following the literary convention of the day.[34]

Scripture and Archaeology

With its mention of gradual infiltration and occupation (Josh. 13:1–7; 16:10; 17:12), the biblical text *leads us to expect* what archaeology has confirmed— namely, that widespread destruction of cities didn't take place and that gradual assimilation did.[35] Only three cities (citadels or fortresses, as we've seen) were

burned—Jericho, Ai, and Hazor (Josh. 6:24; 8:28; 11:13). All tangible aspects of the Canaanites' culture—buildings and homes—would have remained very much intact (cf. Deut. 6:10–11: "cities which you did not build"). This makes a lot of sense if Israel was to settle down in the same region—a lot less clean-up!

Furthermore, if we had lived back in Israel in the Late Bronze Age (1400–1200 BC) and looked at an Israelite and a Canaanite standing next to each other, we wouldn't have detected any noticeable differences between them; they would have been virtually indistinguishable in dress, homes, tableware, pottery, and even language (cf. 2 Kings 18:26, 28; Isa. 19:18). This shouldn't be all that surprising, as the Egyptian influence on *both* these peoples was quite strong.

What's more, Israel itself wasn't a pure race. For example, Joseph married an Egyptian woman, Asenath, who gave birth to Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen. 41:50); a "mixed multitude" came out of Egypt with them (Exod. 12:23; Num. 11:4); and other Gentiles like Rahab could be readily incorporated into Israel by intermarrying if they were willing to embrace the God of Israel. So how might Israelites distinguish themselves? Typically, by identifying their tribal or village and regional connections—for example, "Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite" (Judg. 3:15), "Izban of Bethlehem" (Judg. 12:8), "Elon the Zebulunite" (Judg. 12:11).

On the religious front, again, the Scriptures lead us to expect what archaeology supports. Yes, like the Canaanites, the Israelites sacrificed, had priests, burned incense, and worshiped at a "shrine" (the tabernacle). And though the Israelites were called to remain distinct in their moral behavior, theology, and worship, they were often ensnared by the immorality and idolatry of the Canaanite peoples. For example, Israel mimicked the Phoenicians' notorious practice of ritual infant sacrifice to the Baals and Asherahs and to Molech (e.g., 2 Kings 23:10; cf. Lev. 18:21; Deut. 18:10).

However, archaeologists have discovered that by 1000 BC (during the Iron Age), Canaanites were no longer an identifiable entity in Israel. (I'm assuming that the exodus from Egypt took place sometime in the thirteenth century BC.)[36] Around this time also, Israelites were worshiping a national God, whose dominant personal name was Yahweh ("the Lord"). An additional significant change from the Late Bronze to Iron Age was that town shrines in Canaan had been abandoned but not relocated elsewhere—say, to the hill villages. This suggests that a new people with a distinct theological bent had migrated here, had gradually occupied the territory, and had eventually become dominant.

We could point to a well-supported parallel scenario in the ancient Near East. The same kind of gradual infiltration took place by the Amorites, who had moved into Babylonia decades before 2000 BC. (Hammurabi himself was an Amorite who ruled Babylon.) They eventually occupied and controlled key cities and exerted political influence, which is attested by changes in many personal names in the literature and inscriptions. Babylonia's culture didn't change in its buildings, clothing, and ceramics, but a significant social shift

took place. Likewise, we see the same gradual transition taking place in Canaan based on the same kinds of evidence archaeologists typically utilize. We're reminded once again to avoid simplistic Sunday school versions of how Canaan came to be occupied by Israel.

Summary

Let's summarize some of the key ideas in this chapter.

- The language of the consecrated ban (*herem*) includes stereotypical language: "all," "young and old," and "men and women." The ban could be carried out even if women and children weren't present.
- As far as we can see, biblical *herem* was carried out in particular military or combatant settings (with "cities" and military "kings"). It turns out that the sweeping language of the ban is directed at combatants.
- The ban language allows and hopes for exceptions (e.g., Rahab); it isn't absolute.
- The destruction language of ancient Near Eastern warfare (and the Old Testament) is clearly exaggerated. Groups of Canaanite peoples who apparently were "totally destroyed" were still around when all was said and done (e.g., Judg. 1).
- The greater concern was to destroy Canaanite religion, not Canaanites per se, a point worthy of elaboration (see the next chapter).
- The preservation of Rahab and her family indicates that consecration to the ban wasn't absolute and irreversible. God had given ample indications of his power and greatness, and the Canaanites could have submitted to the one true God who trumped Egypt's and Canaan's gods, sparing their own lives.
- The biblical text, according to some scholars, suggests that peace treaties could be made with Canaanite cities if they chose to, but none (except Gibeon) did so (Josh. 11:19). The offer of peace was implicitly made to Jericho.
- The biblical text contains many references to "driving out" the Canaanites. To clear away the land for habitation didn't require killing; civilians fled when their military strongholds were destroyed and soldiers were no longer capable of protecting them.
- From the start, certain (more cooperative) Canaanites were subjected to forced labor, not annihilation (Judg. 1:27–36; 1 Kings 9:20–21; Josh. 15:63; 16:10; 17:12–13; cf. Ps. 106:34–35). This was another indication that the ban wasn't absolute.

- Joshua carried out what Moses commanded (Deut. 7 and 20), which means that Moses's language is also an example of ancient Near Eastern exaggeration. He did not intend a literal, all-encompassing extermination of the Canaanites.
- The archaeological evidence nicely supports the biblical text; both of these point to minimal observable material destruction in Canaan as well as Israel's gradual infiltration, assimilation, and eventual dominance there.

We have many good reasons to rethink our paradigm regarding the destruction of the Canaanites. On closer analysis, the biblical text suggests that much more is going on beneath the surface than obliterating all the Canaanites. Taking the destruction of anything that breathes at face value needs much reexamination.

Further Reading

Goldingay, John. *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Life*. Vol. 3. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009. See esp. chap. 5, "City and Nation."

Hess, Richard S. "The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua." In *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, edited by Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray Jr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008.

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