

But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded...

Deuteronomy 20:16–17

Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.

1 Samuel 15:3

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

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

A common contemporary objection to Christianity centers around the character of YHWH as described in the Old Testament. While protests abound in degree and diversity, many are in response to the divine prescription of Israel's invasion of the Promised Land. According to these objections, the God of the Old Testament is a mythical "moral monster" who orders the destruction of innocent peoples at the hands of His chosen Israel.

This complaint represents an important criticism that merits consideration and careful response by Christians. Without offering an exhaustive reply, I hope to illuminate a few thoughts in response to the objection and refer to a few resources that might further help in thinking through this topic.

Was the Destruction as Absolute as it Appears?

Before getting into a defense of the conquest, it is first helpful to ask whether the destruction is as absolute and universal as it may appear to be on an initial reading of the text. The Bible is clear that the nations were to be devoted to complete and utter destruction and yet there is good reason for thinking that there may have been implied exceptions.¹

Biblically, we see evidence for exceptions to the rule of complete destruction. For example, Rahab, her family (Joshua 6:22- 25),² and the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:26-27) were spared.

Additionally, some Christian ethicists have presented arguments that those who were slaughtered were not actually noncombatants. I refer in particular to an essay by Paul Copan in which he argues that the absolute language of the destruction was a common rhetorical device of the time and not necessarily to be taken as indicating total destruction of every man, woman and child present.³ Regardless of the degree to which the slaughter was prescribed and carried out, we will see that God's character is not impugned if we carefully consider the Scriptural evidence.

The Reason for the Invasion

*Do not say in your heart, after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas **it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you.** Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but **because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people.***

Deuteronomy 9:4–6

(See also: Leviticus 18:24-25; Leviticus 20:23; and Deuteronomy 18:12)

The Scripture is clear in affirming the divine rationale for the destruction of the peoples of Canaan. God was judging the nations for their sin. Without a proper understanding of the nature, universality, and consequences of sin, an understanding of the conquest will always be obscured by language of the slaughter of "innocent" people.

There is only one historical occurrence of the death of a truly innocent person – the slaughter of Jesus Christ. The peoples who were killed in Canaan were not innocent bystanders.

¹ For implied exceptions, also consider the absolute nature of Jonah's proclamation to Ninevah, "Yet forty days, and Ninevah will be overthrown." There is no explicit "unless you repent," but the nature of the narrative indicates that God's judgment was always dependent upon the response of the Ninevites. Additionally, God's sending of Jonah in the first place was a gracious provision of His compassion to bring about repentance and ultimately save the people of the city.

² It is interesting to note that Rahab's deliverance is attributed to her faith as contrasted with the *disobedience* of her people (Hebrews 11:31).

³ See "Recommended Resources" below.

While they may have been noncombatants in the physical battles,⁴ their spiritual condition was anything but neutral and noncombatant. Indeed, the biblical depiction of mankind is that none are righteous, none are good, none are innocent (Romans 3:10-12; Psalm 143:2), all are willful enemies of God and hostile to Him (Romans 8:7; Colossians 1:21), none honor and glorify God as they ought (Romans 1:21; Romans 3:23), all do evil and hate good (John 3:20-21). We are innately rebellious to God and are active and willful combatants against the King and His kingdom. Those who object to God's judgment of Canaan on the basis of the nation's innate innocence simply demonstrate a denial of the biblical testimony as to man's condition. If man is truly wicked, as Scripture testifies, then God cannot be called immoral or unjust for judging him. Overt objections to divine judgment are merely implied rejections of human sinfulness.

Let us look at the conquest in particular and not merely divine judgment in general. In Genesis 15:17-21, the LORD revealed His covenant with Abraham.⁵ In addition to the promise of blessing and an heir, Abraham is promised the land inhabited by various peoples. We see this promise echoed and confirmed in the final clause of Deuteronomy 9:5. God was giving the land to the Israelites "that he may confirm the word that [he] swore to [the] fathers."

But in order to give it to Israel, He must take it from those who possessed it before. In Genesis 15:16, we see that God delayed the fulfillment of the promise of land for four generations. Why did He do so? Because "the iniquity of the Amorites [was] not yet complete." God patiently endured the wickedness of the peoples of the land, but His patience and grace toward them would not last forever.

Some 400 years after the word spoken in Genesis 15, the iniquity of the people had reached a level at which their presence in the land would no longer be tolerated by God. According to Deuteronomy 9:4-6, the peoples of the land were being driven out as divine judgment for their wickedness. In particular, the Bible points to the essence of all evil – idolatry – as the root of Canaan's sin.⁶ The nations failed to honor and worship YHWH and instead chose to worship and serve gods of their own making.

Some objectors protest that the Canaanites should not be considered culpable because they were simply worshiping their own gods in the only way they knew how. In response, we must understand that man does not have the "right" to worship and serve other gods if by "right" one means free of interference or punishment from the One Who alone deserves our worship. Such pluralism fails to appreciate the fundamental worship that all creation owes to its one Creator and the evidence that He has given of Himself to all.⁷

Other objections claim that other nations at the time were just as cruel and oppressive as the Canaanites. Why didn't God destroy them? But how does the fact that God delayed justice to some negate His right to execute justice on others? Does the fact that some sinners receive mercy and grace nullify God's right to punish other sinners? God's justice simply demands that none receive worse than they deserve; it does not mean that He is indebted to give equally to all. He will be gracious to whomever He will and will show compassion to whomever He will.⁸ God's justice is not threatened by His giving to some better than they deserve. His actions were both just and merciful -- just toward the peoples of Canaan and merciful toward the peoples of Israel as He acted to save her from being ensnared in the same idolatry. According to Deuteronomy 7:1-4 and Deuteronomy 20:18, the presence of the idolatry of the peoples of the land would ultimately enslave and lead astray Israel herself.⁹

The amazing thing about the Old Testament narrative is not that God destroyed the nations, but that He waited so long to do so (Genesis 15:16) and that He saved Israel from what she too deserved. The latter observation is a main point of Deuteronomy 9:4-6. God did not show mercy to Israel because she deserved it, but because He is merciful and He has the right to exercise mercy when He desires and to whom He desires. He is indebted to none in regards to His mercy and grace and steadfast love. He showed justice to the peoples of Canaan and mercy to Israel. No one received *injustice*.

Objections to the Bible, which are founded upon objections to God's character, which are based upon rejections of the biblical depiction of man, are tried and found wanting. In effect, such objections state, "I do not believe the Bible (in saying man is

⁴ Again, I recommend the Copan article for his arguments on this point.

⁵ Though his name at the time of Genesis 15 was Abram, it was later changed to Abraham (Genesis 17:5). Given that Abraham is the more well known name, it will be used even though a bit anachronistic in some contexts.

⁶ The Bible describes various symptoms of this condition within the people of Canaan. In particular, it points to their regular practice of temple prostitution, child sacrifice, and various sexual sins listed in Leviticus 18.

⁷ See and consider in particular Romans 1:18-32. According to this text all humanity has an innate knowledge of the LORD which they suppress in exalting creation and creature over Creator.

⁸ Exodus 33:19

⁹ This warning all too sadly went unheeded and was thus fulfilled as child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6), sexual perversion (2 Kings 23:7), and cultic magic (2 Kings 21:6) infiltrated the nation intended to be set apart for devotion to God.

evil) and therefore I do not believe the Bible (in stating that God was right and good to judge the nations)." The only thing that is evidenced is one's own disbelief. Such objections do not prove that God is immoral, evil, unjust or monstrous, they simply prove that the objectors believe Him to be so based upon their own rejection of God's word. Protests such as these actually reveal more about the character of the questioner than they reveal about the character of God. In effect, the questioner is saying "I don't believe God when He says ____." If the Bible is true and mankind's fundamental sin involves doubting the goodness and sufficiency of the LORD and His Word, our objections and protests actually evidence man's predisposition toward disbelief and doubt of God, the very disbelief and doubt that Christianity claims is inherent to fallen humanity. Rather than providing evidence against Christianity, in some ways these objections actually enforce the validity of the Christian claim.

Relevance for Today: How to Apply and How not to Apply

In the events of the conquest, we find certain truths about God and ourselves. Thus, the invasion provides an illuminating window to the character of God and an uncomfortable mirror to our own. The Old Testament texts reveal to us that God is holy and cannot tolerate evil and yet He is patient and longsuffering in enduring it. He is faithful and fulfills His promises, though perhaps not in the timing that we might expect. He is just and surely punishes wickedness and yet He is gracious and merciful, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin.¹⁰ The texts also reveal to us who we are. We are wicked and rebellious and deserving of punishment. We are idolatrous enemies of the King of the universe and His good and righteous kingdom. Seeing more clearly the character of the Creator and His creatures represents one way in which the conquest texts should be interpreted and applied today.

How are the conquest texts not to be applied today? They are not to be applied as justification for modern jihad, Crusades,¹¹ holocaust,¹² or other forms of oppression or murder. The fact that the Old Testament conquest was justified does not therefore justify conquest today. Any who would today endeavor to carry

out homicide, genocide, infanticide, or ethnocide on the basis of the divine prescription for Israel are tragically ignorant and deceived.

The conquest of Canaan was for a particular people at a particular time in a particular place against a particular people. The kingdom of Christ is not a kingdom of this world and thus we do not fight with swords to bring it about (John 18:36; Matthew 26:52). Rather, we fight for the kingdom by laying down our lives and lovingly serving others, giving preference to them as we proclaim the good news of the death, resurrection and future return of Jesus Christ as rescue and redemption from our rebellion. The Christian ethic for treatment of our enemies is not destruction, but mercy, not slaughter, but love.¹³ We are to pray for and bless our enemies.¹⁴ Why? So that we might display the character of the God who causes His sun to rise and the rain to fall even on His enemies.¹⁵

Concluding Thoughts: The Righteousness and Patience of God

God is gracious, merciful and "slow to anger."¹⁶ He delays justice, grants mercy, and forgives iniquity. But His patience is purposeful; it is meant to lead to repentance, not justify rebellion. Over and over again in the Old Testament we see evidences of God's wrath against sin, but we also see divine forbearance and longsuffering. Man's sin in the garden merited instant judgment and yet God delayed the fulfillment of the warned consequences of death (Genesis 3). "The wickedness of man was great in the earth" and "every intention of the thoughts of [man's] heart was only evil continually" and yet God waited 120 years before opening the floodgates of heaven (Genesis 6). Following this same pattern of patience, God waited some 400 years before judging the nations of Canaan until their iniquity overflowed beyond the boundaries that His mercy allowed.

Not only do we see His abounding patience, but also His abundant mercy toward those who repented. Nineveh was an "evil" city known for its cruelty and yet God relented of the disaster He had proclaimed against it (Jonah 3). Additionally, Jeremiah 18:7-8 evidences that God was willing at all times to

¹⁰ This "tension" represents a major element of God's revelation of Himself and is expressed quite clearly in texts like Exodus 34:6-7 "...The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty..."

¹¹ For a solid historical response to some of modern misconceptions regarding the Crusades, see Rodney Starks' "God's Battalion."

¹² An interesting work on the irreconcilability between Christianity and holocaust is "Hitler's Cross" by Erwin Lutzer which examines the rather rampant and tragic silence of the "church" in Germany during the Third Reich.

¹³ Some object that God's unchanging nature implies approval of ethnic-slaughter today, but this is a misinterpretation of God's unchangeableness. Though God does not change, His revelation was given progressively in such a way that a great deal of what was mandated in one context is no longer required. For example, sacrifices and purity restrictions of the Mosaic law are no longer binding, having been fulfilled in Christ.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:44

¹⁵ Matthew 5:45; cf. Acts 14:17

¹⁶ Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:16; Psalm 103:8; Psalm 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3

spare those nations which expressed contrition and faith. Even now He patiently endures a world fixed in rebellion against Him. He does so to lead us to repentance.¹⁷ How ironic it is that man shakes his fists and blasphemes God's justice while enjoying the benefits of His mercy? Maybe instead of viewing the conquest of Canaan as evidence of God's monstrosity, we should instead see it as evidencing our own. How corrupt, perverse, idolatrous, and wicked must we be to merit such destruction? How good and generous is He that He has provided refuge from His wrath at great cost to Himself?

As Creator, God has absolute rights over His creation and can do with it as He pleases. Thankfully, His pleasure is not capricious or evil, but is righteous and good. Man has forfeited his claims to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and thus our only hope and only appeal is to the mercy and grace of our Maker and God, a mercy and grace most vividly displayed in the sacrifice of His Son for the sake of sinners. If your vision of God's love and goodness is obstructed by objections regarding the slaughter of the nations of Canaan, perhaps you need to be looking instead at another slaughter, that of an innocent Son sacrificed to save us from what we deserve.

... Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?

Genesis 18:25

*Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.*

Psalms 89:14

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Recommended Resources

- ***How Could God Kill Women and Children***
by John Piper
- ***Is God Guilty of Genocide?***
by Sam Storms
- ***Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites: Divinely Mandated Genocide or Corporate Capital Punishment?***
by Paul Copan

¹⁷ Romans 2:4-5