

Problem Passages – Canaanite Genocide (2)

Adapted from “Is God a Moral Monster?” by Paul Copan

I. **The Problem Stated: Why did God command the Israelites to seemingly wipe out whole nations, including women and children?**

A. **The Total Ban**

Was the ban always total?

Hyperbolic language is applied to Saul’s attack on the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:3), and yet they appear again in 1 Sam 27, 30 (under obedient David), 1 Chronicles 4:43, and even in the book of Esther (Haman is an Agagite). The language of the ban was stereotypical, and hyperbolic – it meant ‘everyone’, even if women and children were not present.

B. **Jericho & Ai**

Joshua 6:21, 8;25. There is no archaeological evidence for civilian populations at Jericho and Ai. Both were military strongholds. Jericho guarded the travel routes up to the populated areas. When Scripture speaks of destroying ‘men, women, and children’, it is using stereotypical language for ‘every living thing’. These cities were the fortresses of the military and the kings. Government buildings were housed in these cities, while people lived in the surrounding countryside.

C. **What about Rahab?**

Rahab was almost certainly in charge of the fortress city’s tavern or hostel. The Code of Hammurabi also mentions female tavern-keepers. Travelling caravans, royal messengers, and even spies were common in these places. The Hittites forbade the building of them for the very reason that spies and conspirators met there. Rahab would have been on the few women residing permanently in Jericho.

Rahab’s embrace of Israel’s God (Josh 2:10-11) and her exemption from judgement shows that the ban was total on all those who stubbornly resisted God. Anyone who repented would find mercy. Israel’s marching around the city seven times was an opportunity for the people within to repent.

D. **Israelite Warfare Methods**

Israel’s war was tame in comparison to Near-Eastern accounts, where boasts are made of impaled bodies, decapitated heads, gouged out eyes, and all forms of horrific torture and bloodshed. Further, recall that several of Israel’s battles were *defensive* – The Amalekites, The Amorites, Bashan King of Og, the Midianites, Israel was forbidden from land-grabbing from Moab, Ammon and Edom.

E. **Israelite Offers of Peace**

Deuteronomy 20:1-15 shows that the cities had a chance to repent before a battle ensued. Verses 16 and 17 seem to show that such offers were not to be given to the Canaanites.

However, notice Joshua 11:19. Here the Hivites are mentioned, who were among the tribes said to be beyond a peace offer. The implication seems to be that only if these nations continued in their stubborn, hardened ways, would they meet destruction.

More cooperative Canaanites were put to forced labour, not genocide (Judges 1:27-36)

F. Driving Out, Not Wiping Out Ex 23:27-30

Driving out is not the same as wiping out. Expulsion is not annihilation. The Hebrew word *yarah* means dispossess. How would this happen?

First, the non-combatants would flee to safer lands. Only those resisting as soldiers would be attacked. As Israel arrived progressively, the Canaanites had ample time to flee before the approaching army of hundreds of thousands of Israelites.

G. Did Joshua Fulfill the Commands? Josh 11:12, 14-15,20. If Joshua fulfilled the words of Moses, and Joshua did not utterly destroy every living Canaanite, it seems Moses did not mean that either. The idea was to utterly dispossess the Canaanites, destroy Canaanite religion, and bring the sword only to those resisting Israel with force of arms.

H. Archaeology

Archaeology confirms what we would expect if Israel gradually settled in the land. Only three cities – Jericho, Ai, and Hazor were burned to the ground. Excavated Canaanite houses shows that there was not a massive destruction, but a gradual assimilation. However, by 1000B.C., the time of David, the Canaanites were no longer a recognizable entity in Israel.

I. Canaanite Non-Combatants

Women were not always non-combatants. Further, though some of them may not have provided a military threat, some did provide a moral threat. They were used by the Midianites to lead Israel into grievous moral sin which led to judgement on Israel.

J. The Death of Children

First, consider how many opportunities the Canaanites had to save the lives of their children. Consider that this was a culture filled with child sacrifice, and undoubtedly, child abuse. Second, consider that children in every town except military garrisons would have been spared – and the children in those towns would have been negligible.

Third, if a Canaanite child was killed in battle, we have several Scriptures that suggest that these children go to heaven (2 Sam 12:22) The Adamic guilt of all men is paid for (Rom 5:18-19, 2 Cor 5:18-19), what remains is the personal guilt of chosen sin and rebellion, which takes over after a certain age (Deut 1:39, Jonah 4:11). This does not mean that the death of children should be taken lightly or encouraged, quite the opposite. Their deaths, like Israel's war itself came from a God-given mandate, not from the whims of men.

K. Sovereignty, Suffering and Salvation

In the end, the whole picture of human history is a mosaic of dark and light pieces, that we cannot work out from here. God weaves together His story using the threads of a fallen world, including its war, disaster, famine, sorrow and the sinful choices of men.