

Conquest and Controversy in the Promised Land

by Tim Mackie & Aeron Sullivan

There are few stories in the Old Testament as challenging and troubling to modern readers as God's command that the Israelites should do away with the Canaanites and take over their land (see Deuteronomy 7, or Joshua 6-12). Is this the same God that revealed himself in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus? Does this qualify as genocide? How does this square with Jesus' teaching about loving your enemies or with his decision to lay down his life for his enemies? This particular issue causes many people to shun the Old Testament and even the New Testament because of its guilt by association. The New Testament is after all, part of the same Bible that includes divinely sanctioned violence against these groups of people.

This is an extremely complicated issue. It raises historical questions and challenges of interpretation. It also generates theological questions about the character of God. We won't pretend that a short blog can satisfy everyone's questions, but we want to at least throw out a handful of really important factors that you have to take into consideration when sorting out these questions.

Divine Judgement, not Human Violence

The ancient Israelite conquest of Canaan describes a limited event that was unrepeated in their history (the relevant stories are in Numbers 21 and 31, Joshua 6–12, and 1 Samuel 15). Not all of Israel's wars were sanctioned by God. In fact, some were clearly condemned as the actions of proud and greedy kings, or military rivals. Sometimes people perceive the whole Old Testament as being filled with violence and think that all the wars recounted within it are commanded by the God of the Bible. This is a false caricature.

The conquest of Canaan took place in a single generation (Joshua's) and was limited in time, locale, and scope. The word "genocide" isn't technically accurate or helpful to describe these battles, for a variety of reasons.

This was not an "Israel vs. Canaan" conflict based on ethnic identity. There were many Canaanites who recognized the God of Israel as the Lord of all nations and joined the covenant people (Rahab in Joshua 2, the Gibeonites in Joshua 9). This would not have been allowed if it were an ethnically motivated war. Many of the battles start when a Canaanite alliance attacks the Israelites who then defend themselves and win. The conflicts, recounted in Joshua 9-11, all begin with various Canaanite kings forming coalitions and attacking the Israelites. From the Israelites' perspective, these were battles for survival against hostile armies, not against helpless people.

The language used in some of these battle stories is sweeping and intense: "they left no survivor" and "the Israelites utterly destroyed them." But a close reading, along with a comparison with other ancient near eastern battle narratives, shows that the author of Joshua employs these phrases as intentional hyperbole. For example, there are cities that the Israelites conquer that we're told that no Canaanites survived (Hebron and Debir in Joshua 10:36-39). But just a few chapters later, when other Israelites go to these cities, there are still Canaanite people living there (see Joshua 15:13-15).

Again, the Israelites did not accomplish a sweeping removal of all Canaanites. The cities they engaged were small, militarily strategic outpost towns surrounded by walls. Their inhabitants were mostly combatants.

Divine Patience with Human Evil

We must also recognize there is an untold story between God and the Canaanites that we only get hints of in the Old Testament. All the way back when Abraham was first in the land, we're told that the Canaanites (called "Amorites") were very morally corrupt and unjust, and that God was being patient with them, "the fourth generation of your descendants will come back here (Promised Land), for the sin of the Amorites (Canaanite people group) has not yet reached its full measure." (Genesis 15:16)

This is very similar to how God was patient with Pharaoh for generations, giving Egypt ten "final" chances to turn back. Texts like Leviticus 18:24-25 and 20:22-24, and describe destructive sexual behavior, injustice, and harmful ritual worship (bodily mutilation), along with the widespread and abhorrent practice of child sacrifice. Canaanite culture was described as utterly corrupt, especially when it came to violence and abuse of the most vulnerable in their communities.

The Old Testament presents the Israelites as an instrument of divine justice. These are not depicted as battles for plunder or power-grabs. Rather, the Israelite conquest of Canaan is described as an act of divine punishment on an extremely corrupt society.

Divine Impartiality

God is consistent and he doesn't play favorites. He warned the Israelites that if they broke the covenant and adopted the culture and religious practices of the Canaanites, they would face the same consequences. It was clearly stated in the covenant agreement that if they behaved in the same way as the Canaanites, Yahweh would treat them as his enemy and inflict upon them the same punishment (Deuteronomy 28:25-68). Of course, that's precisely what happened. The whole point of the book of Judges is to show how the Israelites became progressively "Canaanized," with catastrophic results.

If anything, the Old Testament shows that Israel's status as God's chosen people exposed them to God's justice more than any of the surrounding nations—including those they conquered (see Amos 3:2 for an important statement of this point). Far more generations of Israelites experienced God's justice at the hands of their enemies than the single generation of Canaanites. It is simply a distortion of teaching to say that God is always for Israel and is against all other nations. God really does not play favorites in the Old Testament. He did choose the family of Abraham, and protected them on many occasions. But this was part of a larger plan to restore divine blessing to all nations. If they failed to serve this purpose by becoming like the Canaanites, they would experience the same fate.

Not Israel vs. Canaan, but God vs. Human Evil

There's an extremely important story that opens up all the battles between Israel and the Canaanites. The angel of the Lord confronts Joshua near the Jordan River (see Joshua 5:13-15). Joshua asks if the angel is on the Israelites' side or their enemies. With these words, Joshua reveals his understanding of the battles ahead: God is pro-Israel and anti-Canaanite. The angel quickly corrects him by saying "No. I am the captain of the LORD's army." The point is clear. God is going to bring his judgment on human evil. The real question is whether Israel is on God's side.

This theme is highlighted in many of the battle stories. Most often, God is the one leading the charge and the Israelites are responsible for clean-up. Jericho is a great example of this, as the Israelites play only a minor role in bringing down the walls (blowing trumpets doesn't count as a form of ancient demolition!). The Israelites are outnumbered, outgunned, and fighting against fortified cities and professional militaries. They do not have a standing military and are not professional soldiers. They are a disadvantaged militia fighting against standing armies and cavalry. Given their huge disadvantage, the likelihood of each battle turning in favor of the Israelites would be nearly impossible—a divine hand is clearly at work.

Overtures of Peace

Although the Canaanites as nations were subject to the judgment of God, they had decades of advance warning (remember what happened to Pharaoh). Not only did the conquest of Canaan not catch them by surprise, but those who declared faith in Yahweh were spared (see Rahab's confession in Joshua 2:8-11).

Rahab is one of the first and most prominent examples. Although she was a prostitute (a low social position in Canaanite culture), her life, and the lives of her family were spared because they believed in the God of Israel. In fact, so complete was Rahab's incorporation into the community of faith that in the providence of God she became the ancestor of Jesus (see Matthew 1)! God can and is willing to save anyone. We are also told that the entire tribe of the Gibeonites did escape judgment in the same way (Joshua 9). These narratives thus lead us to believe that many Canaanites escaped the judgment brought on their people by repentance and faith in Yahweh.

Joshua in the Light of Jesus

Not all of these reflections will be compelling to everyone and none of them should be taken in isolation. However, it is important to see that this is a complex moral issue and simple answers are misleading and unhelpful. From the perspective of the Old Testament, we are ultimately dealing with a question about God's justice. We join Abraham who stood before Sodom and Gomorrah, interceding for its inhabitants when he asked, "Won't the judge of all the earth do what is right?" (Genesis 18:25).

The picture shifts significantly when we place these stories into the larger biblical storyline that leads to Jesus. Jesus explicitly rejected violence as a means to further God's kingdom on earth. In fact, he said that violence was capitulating to the very forces of evil itself (Matthew 26:51-56). He taught that God's rule is expressed through non-violent resistance and by serving one's enemies with love and prayer (Matthew 5:38-48). Ultimately, for Jesus, this was not just a matter of words. He went to Jerusalem for Passover, to be enthroned as the messianic King of Israel. And he did it by giving up his life... on purpose. Jesus confronted the dark powers of evil and, as Paul says, "disarmed the rulers and authorities, making a public spectacle of them and triumphing over them by the cross" (Colossians 2:15). The upside-down victory of Jesus' war on human evil took place when he died on behalf of his enemies.

To be a Christian is to believe that when we look at Jesus, we see God's truest nature and character revealed ("If you've seen me, you've seen the Father" John 14:9). The limited occasions when God authorized violence was apparently not something he did with pleasure. In the defeat of the Canaanites, we see God's "strange work" as Isaiah called it (Isaiah 28:21). It was a necessary decision that does not express God's ultimate purpose in the world, or his heart for people. Anyone who's been in a leadership position knows what it's like to face complex decisions where there are no good options, only bad or worse possibilities. To believe that Jesus reveals God, means that our foundation for understanding God's character is in his life, death, and resurrection.

The last thing we'd like to consider is the cross of Jesus. In the execution of Jesus on the cross, the New Testament is asking us to see the very love and heartbeat of God for all broken and lost humanity. On the cross, God joins the godforsaken--including the Canaanites. Jesus' death and resurrection shows that God is not distant from the tragedies of injustice and death. Rather, in Jesus, God has fully participated in these horrific realities and overcome them with his love and life. We can come alongside Abraham and hope for even more than simply divine justice. Our hope is infused with the power of Jesus' resurrection, which is ultimately the life-giving power of God's love.