

The Ethics of Israel's Conquest of Canaan

Few issues in Old Testament interpretation are as difficult or as troubling as the Lord's command to the Israelites to dispossess the Canaanites and take over their land. How could a good God command the elimination of a whole race, including men, women and children? Is this not genocide of the worst sort? Many refuse to take the Old Testament seriously because of this single issue, and many refuse the gospel of the New Testament because of its guilt by association: the New Testament is part of Christians' Bible which includes divinely sanctioned and ordered elimination of an entire race of people. How shall we answer the questions regarding this problem that people raise? Some have answered the question by allegorizing the whole business. The genocidal commands are not meant to be taken at face value but rather were designed to convey some sort of higher truth about Christ. John Cassian, a Scythian Monk (from what is modern Bulgaria; ca. AD 360–435) suggested the seven nations whose land God promised to Israel in Deuteronomy 7:1 signify seven virtues necessary to overcome innumerable vices. However, this is scarcely how Moses and Joshua understood them. The following represent factors we need to consider in wrestling with this problem. None of the points below is satisfying in and of itself; they must all be brought into the conversation.

1. Perhaps this is a metaphor for absolute religious fidelity. Some argue that the commands of Deuteronomy 7:1-5 were never intended to be interpreted literally. The issue in vv. 3-4 involves intermarriage with Canaanites, which would compromise the Israelites' devotion to YHWH (Moberly). The conquest records also raise questions. Although Joshua is said to have obeyed YHWH fully (Josh. 11:23), the narratives of Joshua and Judges suggest this policy was actually carried out in only four places: Jericho (Josh 6:24), Ai (8:28), Hazor (11:13-14), and Laish (Judg. 18:27; cf. Josh. 19:47). This agrees with the archaeological record, which does not point to widespread destruction of Canaanite cities, as well as texts within Deuteronomy that authorize the Israelites to take intact fortified cities, storehouses filled with harvested and processed agricultural products, cisterns, vineyards, and olive groves (6:10-11).
2. This is not a distinctly Old Testament issue. In a 9th century B.C. inscription King Mesha of Moab wrote:

And Kemosh said to me: "Go, take Nebo from Israel!" And I went in the night, and I fought against it from the break of dawn until noon, and I took it, and I killed [its] whole population, seven thousand male citizens(?) and aliens(?), and female citizens(?) and aliens(?), and servant girls; for I had put it to the ban (𐤀𐤍𐤏𐤍) for Ashtar Kemosh. And from there, I took the[e ves]sels of YHWH, and I hauled them before the face of Kemosh." (As translated by K. A. Smelik in *Context of Scripture*, vol. 2, p. 138).
3. As the creator of all things and all human beings and as the one who is sovereign over all, God can do anything he wants with anyone and be right in doing so. He was Israel's Commander-in-Chief. He does not need to account to us for his actions or his commands. Therefore if he decides to command the Israelites to eliminate the Canaanites he is perfectly within his rights. Obviously this answer will satisfy few but hard core Calvinists.
4. The ways of God are a mystery. Since we will never completely understand him we might as well relax with the questions in our minds. Isaiah 55:8-9 offers some consolation.
5. According to the biblical picture of the Canaanites, these peoples were extremely wicked and their annihilation represented God's judgment for their sin. But the elimination of the Canaanites was neither the first nor the last time God did/would do this. The difference between the elimination of the Canaanites and all of humanity (except for Noah's family) as described in Genesis 6-9 is one of scale

and of agency. God chooses a variety of ways to punish people for their wickedness. Sometimes it is through natural disaster (the great flood), sometimes through plagues or drought or sickness (Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28). The difference with the Canaanites is that he chose to use human beings to be the agents of judgment. But he would do so many times in history.

6. The Israelites were never to make the divinely prescribed policy concerning the Canaanites their general policy toward outsiders. According to Deuteronomy 7:1, the targets are expressly identified and the scope of the policy is clearly limited. This approach was not to be followed in dealing with Aramaeans or Edomites or Egyptians, or anyone else. And, contrary to the way Christians have used these texts, this policy provides no justification for Christian violence against Jews and Muslims in the context of the Crusades or Europeans' claim to some sort of "manifest destiny" in their dispossession and slaughter of native North Americans.
7. The Canaanites suffered a fate that ultimately all sinners will face: the judgment of God. The only difference between them and other lost peoples is that they (especially the children) met their doom earlier than most. In the last analysis, apart from the grace of God we are all Canaanites, and it is only divine grace that we are not cut off like they were (this goes for modern nations—Canada, US, etc.—as well as ancient).
8. In biblical times people had a sense of corporate identity that is difficult for us modern westerners to understand. To us each individual is a separate entity and individual fulfillment is the highest ideal. According to the ancient Near Eastern ideal, one found one's significance and identity in relation to the community. When one member hurt, they all hurt; when one prospered they all prospered (1 Corinthians 12-14). For this reason few would have objected to the fact that children would share the fate of their parents.
9. We must understand God's hatred of sin and his desire to transform a fallen world. God's elimination of the Canaanites was a necessary step in the history of salvation. In order for Israel to achieve the goals that God had in mind for them at this stage in redemptive history—that they might declare to the world his glory and grace—they needed a clean slate. A holy people needs a holy land.
10. Although the Canaanites as a whole were subject to the judgment of God, they had at least 40 years of advance warning (see Rahab's confession in Joshua 2:8-11). Not only did the conquest of Canaan not catch them by surprise; any individual who declared faith in Yahweh would be spared. Rahab is a perfect example. Although she was a prostitute (the lowest of the low!), her life and the lives of her family were spared because they believed in Yahweh. 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! (Matthew 1) If God can save Rahab he can save anyone!
11. God really does not play favorites. Yes, he chose Abraham and his descendants to be his covenant people, but Deuteronomy warns them over and over that if they ever forget God and live like Canaanites they will experience the same fate as the Canaanites (7:26; 8:19-20). And this is what the northern Israelites got in 734-22 B.C., and the southern Judahites got in 586 B.C.

None of these answers will satisfy everyone, and none of them should be taken in isolation. The command to eliminate the Canaanites troubles me greatly. But when I consider this complex of considerations I can relax, knowing that God is good and God is always right. The challenge for us is that we treasure God's grace in our own lives, and pray for him to extend his grace to others. Perhaps when they see what God has done for us, non-Christians will, like Rahab, confess faith in our God.