

The Deplorable God? (Part 2)

In the previous article, I pointed out that one of the most ferocious and daunting challenges facing Christians today is the claim that the God of the Bible is a moral monster. It is not merely that He does not exist, or that He fails to prevent evil in the world, but that He is the perpetrator of evil. For Christians who have been trained to think of God as their merciful and gracious Redeemer, such a characterization is shocking and repulsive. Perhaps worse, though, is that such an accusation is unsettling – it knocks us off balance and forces us to look at events through a very different lens. Opponents of Christianity who argue this way do so mainly on the basis of the conquest narrative as recorded in Joshua and Judges. Likening it to the genocidal ethnic cleansing of Rwanda they claim God did not and indeed could not have had a justifiable reason for ordering the destruction of the Canaanites. To clear God of this charge, it is imperative that we understand terms. Genocidal ethnic cleansing is "the deliberate and systematic destruction of an ethnic minority by a dominant majority to achieve ethnic homogeneity."¹ This is emphatically *not* what God commanded (nor is it what motivated Him). Every single aspect of this charge is false, as I will show below.

Israel's Conquest Was Not Genocidal Ethnic Cleansing: To properly understand God's actions, we need to situate the conquest in its larger narrative context. As early as Genesis 12:3 we see God establishing a covenant with Abraham for the expressed purpose of blessing *all* the families of the earth through his offspring.² Later, in the law, God again revealed His deep love for those outside Israel and commanded His people to share and exemplify that love. Leviticus 19:34 is clear, "*But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*" Far from xenophobic, God showed great concern for foreigners. He ensured that they enjoyed the same legal rights as natural born Jews (Lev. 24:22). They were invited to participate in Israel's most important ceremonies such as Passover and on the same basis as native Israelis (Ex. 12:48-49). God forbade their ill-treatment and demanded they receive justice in court (Ex. 23:6-9). In short, God's loving character toward *all* people including the Canaanites was already well established *before* the conquest ever took place. This fact puts the lie to the notion that God's attack on the Canaanites was ethnically motivated. Rather, it was their sin that angered God. His longsuffering had waited over 400 years but rather than turning to Him in repentance they had progressively grown more defiant and brazen in their idolatry to the point that they practiced incest, bestiality, sodomy, and even burnt their children alive in self-serving sacrifice (Lev. 18:6-24). They did these things, moreover, despite knowing better. In Joshua 2:10-11 Rahab, a harlot from Jericho, testified "*we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt ... and as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man, because of you: for the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath.*" The Canaanites were fully appraised of God's power and intentions, and still, they rebelled. Nevertheless, even in the face of their stubbornness, God's command to destroy them was not absolute. As Jeremiah later explained, "*At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them*" (Jer. 18:7-8). I realize that Jeremiah came long after Israel invaded Canaan, but God was ever the same. Clear evidence of this is that every Canaanite/foreigner who repented and trusted in the Lord was spared and even welcomed into Israelite society. Whether Rahab, the Gibeonites, the unnamed man from Bethel, Ruth, the Kenites, or Naaman the Syrian, all who put their trust in the Lord received mercy.³ Moreover, the nation of Israel itself later suffered the identical fate because she too fell into the same idolatry and rebellion. (Deut. 4:25-26; Jer. 25:9). These facts are grossly inconsistent with an agenda of ethnic cleansing, but they fit perfectly with God's righteous judgment upon sin.

God's Judgment Served A Greater Purpose: A second justification of the conquest also requires a look at the big picture. It is important to recognize that God's desire that "*all the families of the earth be blessed*" through Israel was ultimately fleshed out in at least two ways. On the one hand, God's Word including His morals, principles of equity, fairness, and righteous governance, which serve as the foundation for all modern civilized societies, could not have been expressed or exemplified in a vacuum. It took a national homeland wherein those values could take root, establish a culture, and spread. In short, possessing the land was an essential means of bringing God's blessing to the world. The same is true for the Messiah. God's plan for blessing the nations required reconciling them to Himself and forging a relationship with them in which they serve Him alone. The nation of Israel was God's chosen conduit for bringing the instrument of such reconciliation (i.e., Jesus – the Messiah) and they had to have a land through which He could arise. Hence, God was more than justified in ordering the destruction of Canaanite civilization especially since it was a limited, unique, isolated, and *historically necessary* event in the history of global redemption.⁴ In a related vein, to criticize God's actions as recorded in the Bible without regard to its sister statements about His infinite knowledge and benevolent character is blatantly inconsistent. However, if the Bible's affirmation of His all-good nature is accepted, then it necessarily follows that all of His actions, including His judgment on the Canaanites, are entirely consistent with that perfect character. In other words, if all the biblical data is accepted, then we are forced to conclude that God judged them *because* He is good and because He *knew* it was best in the long run. Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf put it beautifully. "My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed, my people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry... How did God react to the carnage? By dotting on the perpetrators in a grandparently [sic] fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators' basic goodness? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com>

² Cf. Genesis 22:18; 26:4; 28:14

³ Cf. Joshua 2:8-21; 9:24; Judges 1:24-26; Ruth 2:12; 2 Kings 5:17.

⁴ Ross D. Inman, "God Behaving Badly?" (Classroom Lecture Notes, Spring, 2017).

rebel against a God who *wasn't* wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful *because* God is love."⁵

Critics Misunderstand What God Intended And What Israel Accomplished: In the previous article I commented that the impression that God ordered or that Israel attempted the wholesale and indiscriminate extermination of the Canaanites stems from sloppy exegesis since God's command applied only to those Canaanites who stubbornly refused to be dispossessed. The proof of this is too long and involved to fully present in this format.⁶ Suffice it to say here that a comparative survey of the relevant passages (e.g., Exodus 23:27-31, Deuteronomy 7:1-2; 20:17, etc.) highlights two different types of commands. On the one hand are passages in which God ordered Israel to "*drive out*" the inhabitants of the land, even promising to aid in their dispossession by sending His "*fear*" upon them and "*hornets*" into their territory. On the other hand, are passages in which He instructed Israel to "*utterly destroy*" the Canaanites. Flannagan notes, "The dispossession words would indicate that the population "*ran away*"—migrated out of the land prior to any encounter with the Israelites; [whereas] the destruction words would indicate the occurrences for those who stayed behind. What then is the mix of these two sets of words? The "Dispossession" words outnumber the "Destruction" words by 3-to-1! This would indicate the dominant "intended effect" was for the peoples in the [Promised] Land to migrate somewhere else" [brackets added].⁷ Connecting this fact with the points made above, we can see that God intended to drive out the Canaanites precisely so He could have a "base of operations" from which to bless the world (including whatever Canaanites would repent). Of course many refused to repent or to leave and so were "*utterly destroyed*." However, even here we must be careful. Ancient warfare rhetoric, even that recorded in Joshua, makes regular use of hyperbole. For example, Joshua 10:36-40 states that Israel destroyed Hebron and Debir as well as "*all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale*" and "*left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded*." However, in Judges 1:9-11 we're told: "*the children of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites, that dwelt in the mountain, and in the south, and in the valley*" including Hebron and Debir.⁸ The narrator has not made an error or mistakenly inserted a contradiction; something deliberate is going on. As Copan explains, "Exaggerated language to denote a total and decisive victory in battle was very common in military/conquest accounts in ANE."⁹ It was used for emphasis just as it still is today. Consider how common it is to hear something like, "Alabama annihilated Ole Miss"¹⁰ and yet we all know the teams will play again next year. My point is that to read "genocide" into the text is to misunderstand what God *intended* and to mischaracterize what Israel *accomplished*.

God Has The Right To Judge Sin: One final point cannot be left unsaid. Regardless of whether my understanding and explanation of the text are valid or not, the fundamental issue is whether "God has a moral right to execute judgment for human sin, and take life as He sees fit."¹¹ As sole Creator and Sovereign of the universe, God unequivocally affirms this right. Moreover, He has exercised it not only regionally in the conquest of Canaan, but also globally through Noah's flood. More to the point, He *is* exercising it today – even as you read this. Every time a sinner dies, it is the result of God's judgment. In my view, this right to judge is the real issue. Critics who object to the conquest do so because they refuse to acknowledge God's rightful authority. But unless they repent, they will find themselves every bit as subject to it as did the Canaanites.

⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2005), 138-139.

⁶ Comprehensive treatments have been offered by Wolterstorff, Flannagan, Copan and Miller. Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Reading Joshua," in *Divine Evil?: The Moral Character of the God of Abraham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, *Did God really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014); Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); <http://www.british-israel.ca/Canaanites.htm> accessed October 2018.

⁷ Copan and Flannagan, *Did God really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God*, 81.

⁸ The Hebrew makes clear these are the exact same locations.

⁹ ANE - Ancient Near East; Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God*, 172.

¹⁰ <https://www.saturdaydownsouth.com/ole-miss-football/state-alabama-destroyed-ole-miss-back-back-weeks/>

¹¹ Inman, "God Behaving Badly?"