

Some Perspectives On God's Judgment On The Canaanites

Few issues in Old Testament studies are as troubling as the Lord's command to exterminate the Canaanites when Israel went into the Promised Land. How could God command the elimination of whole people groups? Many people refuse to take the Old Testament seriously because of this issue, and some will not consider the New Testament claims because of its association with the God of the Old Testament. This is a very challenging issue, and cannot be resolved with simplistic answers. Below are some perspectives that should be considered when thinking about this issue. For those who want to consider the matter in more depth, I recommend chapters 15-18 of Paul Copan's book, **IS GOD A MORAL MONSTER: MAKING SENSE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT GOD**.

1. First, the policy of total destruction is a limited policy.

It is not to be Israel's general policy toward other nations. In fact, over the two thousand years of Israel's history in the Old Testament, the events commanded here took place largely within one generation. It is a special form of warfare, the Hebrew word is *herem*—when Yahweh is the chief warrior and carries out his campaign through his people. It is a very limited policy—7 nations are listed. If you scan over to Deuteronomy 20 we discover that Israel is to offer terms of peace to other nations. Only these 7 are under the *herem* policy.

2. Second, the total destruction of the Canaanite culture is an act of just judgment upon evil.

God himself gives the command, and declares that He will be the one who will fight for them. God, being God, has not only the right, but the obligation to judge evil. This is not the first time he has done this: when the earth was filled with violence and evil once before, he brought a great flood to judge and cleanse the earth. More recently, during the life of Abraham, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had become so depraved that there was no alternative but to destroy them with fire. Later, the city of Nineveh was wiped from the face of the earth because its wickedness had piled up to heaven. Of course, the entire Bible concludes with Jesus Christ himself coming as a blazing figure to judge and make war and cleanse the old earth in preparation for a new world. God is not a God who shrugs his shoulders at evil, and if you think he is, you have a wrong view of God.

And these people were evil. Look at Deuteronomy chapter 9, verses 4-6. They were thoroughly corrupt; to borrow a title, they were the *heart of darkness*. When you scan the different passages referring to them, you can see how depraved they had become—a culture steeped in darkness—violence; all kinds of sexual perversion, including ritual sexual acts with animals; and human sacrifice—virgins women, and children, little girls and boys, were regularly offered as sacrifices to their gods.

There is a time when destruction is the only alternative against evil.

3. Third perspective: God is consistent, both in judgment and in mercy.

God is consistent. He says to the Israelites that if you start behaving like these people, I will be against you. And in fact many pages of the Old Testament are a record of God facing off against

Israel because they have forgotten Him. Look at the end of Deuteronomy 8, verses 19-20. God is consistent, and throughout the history of the Old Testament far more Israelites died at the hand of the Lord's wrath than the number of Amorites and Hittites and Canaanites. God was coming against his own people many, many, many times.

Not only is God consistent in judgment, He is consistent in showing mercy. We know that if these people groups, if these people would repent, God would spare individuals in that group. We know that from the example of what prostitute? Rahab. Because once Israel crossed the Jordan and begins to take over the land, there is this story of this prostitute who is in that land and she had heard for years of Yahweh's greatness and she starts to worship Yahweh, and God spares her life because she is repentant. So complete is this prostitute's salvation that she becomes one of the women in the lineage of Jesus Christ. In Ezekiel 33:11, God says, "*I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they would turn from their ways and live.*" God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked; he takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. God wants people to repent.

In fact, God had already waited over 400 years, watching the evil grow in Canaan. In Genesis 15 God tells Abraham that his descendants would come back to this land ... when the sin of the Amorites would reach its full measure. Not only had he waited 400 years, but he had given 40 years of warning—In Joshua chapter 2, Rahab tells the Israelite spies that 40 years earlier, when Israel was supposed to have entered the land, the people of the land had been struck by overwhelming fear, and realized that Israel's God was "*God in heaven above and on earth below.*"

We don't know how many others may have responded with repentance like Rahab, but clearly most did not.

4. Fourth perspective: physical destruction is not the same as spiritual destruction, and does not determine a person's eternal destiny.

That is, just because a person dies—even as part of a divine judgment—does not mean that they are going to hell. We know that is true, for instance, in the case of children. King David's own son died as a result of God's judgment for David's sin with Bathsheba. But David stated that while he would no longer see his son in this life, he would go and be with his son hereafter—in heaven. We believe that God's grace justifies the innocent who have no capacity for choosing faith in Him—like small children, or the mentally ill.

The New Testament speaks of individuals who belong to God, but whose lives are hurting the cause of Christ, and it is better for them to physically die and be spiritually saved than to go on misrepresenting Christ in this world.

Every person faces physical death—sooner or later, but their eternal destiny is determined by their individual faith response to the revelation God has given them. God is the Judge, and He alone knows the heart of every person.

The point is, we think of this life as if this were it, this is the main event. In reality, this is only the prologue to the book, the real story and real life is the life we will live in eternity. And God sometimes has bigger purposes in mind than our individual lives—things he is accomplishing that we cannot see or fathom; a story that he is weaving together that we play a part in but cannot see the plot or the outcome. Isaiah 55, God says, "*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*"