

Did God Command Ethnic Cleansing?

Is God a Moral Monster—part 8

June 3, 2018

When the Hebrews were led to the Promised Land they were warned about the ferocity of the different tribes living there. The “Canaanites” were a group of tribes living in that part of the world. The specific tribes included groups like the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, and many more.

God told them to defeat them in battle and to eradicate them from the land. That language sounds horrifying. To understand why this was true, imagine the modern people of Israel crossing into modern day Iran or to ISIS controlled territory to live. There is such virulent hatred against Israel that the Jewish people would have little hope of surviving. Today, they face the daily threat of terror, suicide bombers, bombs on buses, knife attacks and rockets.

DAY 1: Were the Canaanites that wicked?

Genesis 15:16 “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites (one group of the Canaanites) has not yet reached its full measure.”

1. This was spoken four hundred and thirty years before the Canaanites were driven out of the Promised Land. Rather than God being “quick on the trigger,” we see God being exceedingly long-suffering, hoping for repentance, extending mercy to a thoroughly evil people.

2. In Noah’s day, despite one hundred and twenty years of preaching, the people refused to respond to God in repentance and faith. There come times when a culture or society or people spiral down into such evil that they simply won’t repent and the damage to others becomes so grievous that judgment must be done, if for no other reason than to put a halt to evil.

Leviticus 18:20 “Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife and defile yourself with her. ²¹ “Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD. ²² “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable. ²³ “Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it. A woman must not present herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it; that is a perversion. ²⁴ “Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. ²⁵ Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.

3. How a people live has a long-term effect on a society, on the public, and on a culture. Eventually the culture, a government or a people becomes so destructive that God steps in to stop the destruction (think of Nazi Germany).

4. Human nature was designed to reflect the likeness of God in everyday life. When God is first in our life, we reflect Him well. When something or someone else is first in our lives, it has a debilitating effect on us. We will find ourselves dealing with things like depression, anxiety, poor self-image, broken families, etc.

5. The Canaanite religion had a calamitous effect on that culture. The Canaanites were judged, not just because they worshipped idols, but also because of the calamitous effect their idolatry had on their culture and people. Great evils brought great misery.

DAY 2: Can the Canaanites be held responsible for their sin?

1. God reveals Himself through different and varied ways including the bible, conscience, creation, reason, and human experience.

Romans 1:18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

Romans 1:19 ... since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

²⁰*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*

Romans 1:25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised. Amen.

2. In any communication there is the necessity of (1) clear communication, and (2) a willingness to hear what is being communicated. From today's verses,

a. What do you notice about God communicating to people?

b. What do you notice about the people's willingness to hear what was being communicated?

3. Let's personalize this study.

a. As you look back on your life, can you see times when God was speaking truth to you? How did that happen? Was there a person God used?

b. As you look back on your life, can you think of a time period in your where your response to God's truth was similar to what you read in Romans? Put a few words or sentences to this ...

DAY 3: Was it genocide and ethnic cleansing?

1. One famous atheist called the killing of the Canaanites an “act of ethnic cleansing.”
2. He went on to describe the Israelite’s victories “*bloodthirsty massacres*” carried out with “*xenophobic relish*.” (Xenophobia is a fear of strangers).
3. Words like “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” invoke a meaning of cruelty, and bitter hatred. With “relish” connotes a kind of fiendish or cruel delight. Does the Old Testament reveal this was true?
4. “Ethnic cleansing” is driven by hatred of another race. Is that the story in the Old Testament?
5. Were the Canaanites going to be dispossessed of the land because Israel hated them? Or God hated them?
6. From the beginning of Genesis, what’s evident in God’s story is His love for all mankind, all races. The issue is clearly not race but sin and sin’s damages on self and others. (Genesis 12:3 “... blessing to all nations...”)

Was ethnicity the problem?

7. In Deuteronomy 7, God tells the people to completely conquer the land. But, as only God would know, it wasn’t going to happen as it should. So notice what God tells them next.

Deuteronomy 7:3 Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.

⁵ This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire.

8. Clearly, God did not see a Promised Land where ethnic cleansing had occurred. What we would call “war” existed, which we’ll look at tomorrow.
9. The greatest danger to the future of Israel was not the Canaanite people, but the Canaanite way of life, driven by their religion, in much the same way that could be said about ISIS today.
10. Their religious thinking and practices were at the root of creating a catastrophic culture, not just for themselves, but for anyone who came alongside them. Again, think of the fanatical side of Hamas and their utter disdain and stated wish that Israel could be utterly destroyed.

DAY 4: How did the entry into the Promised Land occur?

1. The Sunday School answer, and the secular version, is “uneducatingly” (sic) over-simplified.
2. The difference between perception and reality can sometimes be astounding. The Sunday School version, and atheists’ version is a total conquest, the wiping out of every man, woman, child, and animal. The reality is far different from that. The book of Judges records two plot lines that may seem to be at odds with each other but are both true, in the text.
 - a. First, there were some large and stunning victories in some of the battles.
 - b. Second, there were some defeats, and some marginal victories which did not displace many Canaanites. On multiple occasions, the text describes descendants of the Canaanites still living in the Promised Land. Ten of the twelve tribes failed to drive out all the enemies of the land.
3. What God is accused of is “ethnic cleansing.” But the text, over and over again, states that many of the people lived in the land even after the Hebrew people “took the land.”
4. And those people lived, not only during their lifetimes, but for generations, some for as long as a millennium!
5. And, true to God’s warnings, the Canaanites became a horrific thorn in the side of Israel, much like we see in the middle east today.
6. In summary, though the Hebrew people did “conquer” the land, it was not done through ethnic cleansing or genocide. It involved a combination of war (both as attacker and “attacked”), infiltration and an on-going, long-term struggle.

How am I to understand the rhetoric that was used?

7. Part of what’s confusing is the language the writer of Judges uses. Warfare rhetoric sounds proud and is often **exaggerated**. This is not just done in wartime, but in many other arenas of life. When your favorite football team soundly defeats the opponent, you hear things like, “We annihilated them! We obliterated them. We steamrolled them.” I have said, “It was such a blowout that the ushers escorted the women and children out of the stadium at halftime!” Clearly, none of those things were *literally* true. The language is hyperbolic, exaggerated language to make a point.
8. Notice, below the exaggerated, hyperbolic language in the first verse, and the more exact language in the second verse:

Joshua 10:40-42 “Joshua took the whole land ... and gave ... it for an inheritance to Israel.”

Joshua 14:12 (Caleb) Now give me this hill country that the LORD promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the LORD helping me, I will drive them out just as he said.”
9. Some had survived. Joshua wasn’t being deceptive in the first section. He was speaking with hyperbole. Caleb realized there was more to do; there were some of the Anakites still in the land.

DAY 5: “Driving them out” and a summary for the week.

1. The language the O.T. used to describe what Israel was to do was “driving them out,” and “dispossessing the land.” This language is quite different from to “wipe out,” or “exterminate.”

*Exodus 23:27 "I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. ²⁸ I will send the hornet ahead of you **to drive** the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites **out of your way**.*

*Exodus 23:29 But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. ³⁰ **Little by little I will drive them out** before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land.*

a. The Hebrew words are translated into English and have several different usages than just what’s translated. For example, the phrase “**driven out**” is the same word used to describe that Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden of Eden after their sin. They were “driven out” of the Garden of Eden.

b. God had at one time threatened to **destroy** the nation of Israel. How was that to be done? By **removing** Israel from the Promised Land to another place.

3. So, how what would “dispossessing” or “driving out” look like?

Jeremiah 4:29 At the sound of horsemen and archers every town takes to flight. Some go into the thickets; some climb up among the rocks. All the towns are deserted; no one lives in them.

4. When an army showed up to attack a city, what would you imagine the city would do? First, send the women and children away from danger. Second, all those who could not draw a sword due to age or health would also flee to safety. Third, the defending army could surrender or seek terms of peace.

Summary from the week.

1. The language of driving them out uses typical exaggerated language of the day. It is hyperbolic in nature: “all,” “young and old,” and “men and women.” Joshua could have fulfilled his role in taking the land even if everyone had fled before each battle.

2. The battles in Joshua were carried out in military settings.

3. The hope was that some of the people would repent, like Rahab and her family.

4. Middle Eastern warfare language was consistently exaggerated. Some of those who were “totally destroyed” did survive and continued to live in the Promised Land.

5. The greatest force of destruction was the Canaanite religion, which was the driver of the moral evils of the day. It was not the Canaanites per se.