

## **The Troubling Acts of God in the Old Testament: The Destruction of the Canaanites**

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### **The Question**

Among the many questions we ask when we read the Old Testament is, 'What is the character of God?' Especially when we read about the Israelites' conquest of the land of Canaan, we have to ask some hard questions. This is what we read:

Josh.6:21 They utterly destroyed everything in the city [of Jericho], both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword.

Josh.8:25 All who fell that day, both men and women, were 12,000 – all the people of Ai. <sup>26</sup> For Joshua did not withdraw his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai.

The minds of today's readers go to the Nazi Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide. Is this ethnic cleansing? Did God really authorize this destruction of Jericho and Ai like this? 'Both man and woman, young and old'? Even children? What are we to make of this?

### **Jericho, Ai, and Hazor Were Military Fortresses, Not Civilian Cities**

Based on archaeological evidence from the late Bronze Age, the period in question, Jericho and Ai were not cities where civilians lived. They were military fortresses.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Jericho was the fortress that guarded the junction of three roads that went to Jerusalem, Bethel, and Orpah. Those were government and military centers which did not have civilians living there. The Amarna Letters – letters exchanged between Egyptian pharaohs and Canaanite leaders and others – show that citadel cities or fortresses like Jerusalem and Shechem were separate from the general population. 'Again, all the archaeological evidence indicates that no civilian populations existed at Jericho, Ai, and other cities mentioned in Joshua... According to the best calculations from Canaanite inscriptions and other archaeological evidence (i.e. no artifacts or 'prestige' ceramics indicating wealth/social status, as one would expect in general population centers), Jericho was a small settlement of probably one hundred or fewer soldiers. This is why all of Israel could circle it seven times and then do battle against it on the same day.'<sup>2</sup>

If this is true, then why were the now-famous Rahab and her household (Josh.2) there in a fortress? Rahab was an innkeeper (not necessarily a prostitute as is commonly thought, though that is also possible). Messengers and travelers needed a place to stay, and these fortress cities had inns to house them. The Code of Hammurabi refers to these inns as vulnerable to spies and conspirators: 'If conspirators meet in the house of a [female] tavern-keeper, and these conspirators are not captured and delivered to the court, the tavern-keeper shall be put to death.'<sup>3</sup> These inns were so notorious for being used by spies and conspirators that the Hittites of Turkey and northern Syria prohibited the building of an inn or tavern near city walls.<sup>4</sup> This fits the biblical record, where two Israelite spies take refuge in Rahab's inn, and climb down the city wall.

### **What About the Women and Children, Young and Old?**

Yet, doesn't the biblical narrator encourage us to believe that even Canaanite children were killed by the advancing Israelite army? After all, Joshua 6:21 reads, 'Both man and woman, young and old.' Actually, this is hyperbolic language used to describe military victory, and it was very common in the Ancient Near East. We should be able to appreciate this today because of how often we use heightened, hyperbolic language. When we today watch sporting events, we use very exaggerated language: 'We killed them; we crushed them; we annihilated them; there is no

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<sup>1</sup> Richard S. Hess, 'The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua' in *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, ed. Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray Jr. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), p.29 – 30.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Downers' Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), p.176.

<sup>3</sup> Richard S. Hess, *Joshua*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary 6 (Downers' Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p.91 – 92.

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land: The Inheritance of the Land of Canaan by the Israelites* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p.141 – 143

coming back from that defeat.’ But of course, we do not mean that we literally took their lives or made any kind of comeback totally impossible. If we use this language for sports, how much more would we expect earlier people to use it for military victory? In military records all over the Ancient Near East, the same type of language prevails. Here is a sampling<sup>5</sup>:

- Egypt’s Tuthmosis III (later fifteenth century) boasted that ‘the numerous army of Mitanni was overthrown within the hour, *annihilated totally* like those (now) not existent.’ In fact, Mitanni’s forces lived on to fight in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BC.
- Hittite king Mursilli II (who ruled from 1322 – 1295 BC) recorded making ‘Mt. Asharpaya *empty* (of humanity)’ and the ‘mountains of Tarikarimu *empty* (of humanity).’
- The ‘Bulletin’ of Ramses II tells of Egypt’s less-than-spectacular victories in Syria (around 1274 BC). Nevertheless, he announces that he slew ‘*the entire force*’ of the Hittites, indeed ‘*all the chiefs of all the countries*’, disregarding the ‘millions of foreigners,’ which he considered ‘chaff.’
- In the Merneptah Stele (ca. 1230 BC), Rameses II’s son Merneptah announced, ‘Israel is wasted, *his seed is not*,’ another premature declaration.
- Ashurnasirpal of Assyria (1050 – 1031 BC) detailed in stone, in one of his temple reliefs, his burning, mutilating, and hanging of captives, including boys and girls.
- Moab’s king Mesha (840/830 BC) bragged that the Northern Kingdom of ‘Israel has *utterly perished for always*,’ which was over a century premature. The Assyrians devastated Israel in 722 BC. Also, when Mesha described his victory over two Israelite towns, he boasted of killing women and girls.
- The Assyrian ruler Sennacherib (701 – 681 BC) used similar hyperbole: ‘The soldiers of Hirimme, dangerous enemies, I cut down with the sword; and *not one escaped*.’

Scholars believe that the language of the Old Testament conforms to this pattern. Saying ‘both man and woman, young and old’ is a hyperbolic way of talking about victory even when women and children were nowhere in sight and were never involved. All of the other evidence we have strongly suggests that Joshua actually killed only fighting men.

As was standard rhetorical practice in their cultural context, the biblical narrators used these exaggerated military victory sayings. Below are some examples. Notice that in the left hand column, the hyperbolic language is used to describe what, to a modern day reader who is unaware of past cultural idioms, reads like total, show-no-mercy, take-no-prisoners victories over the Canaanites. However, notice that in the right hand column, the very same biblical narrators refer to the ongoing presence of Canaanites. This shows that even the human authors of Scripture understood their own language in a hyperbolic way.

<i>Exaggerated Military Victory Language</i>	<i>Evidence of Ongoing Canaanite Presence</i>
Josh.11:22 There were <i>no Anakim left</i> in the land of the sons of Israel; only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod some remained.	Josh.14:12 Now then, give me this hill country about which the LORD spoke on that day, for you heard on that day that Anakim were there, with great fortified cities; perhaps the LORD will be with me, and I will drive them out as the LORD has spoken.’ (see also Josh.15:13 – 15)
Josh.10:40 Thus Joshua struck all the land, the hill country and the Negev and the lowland and the slopes and all their kings. He left no survivor, but he utterly destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded. <sup>41</sup> Joshua struck them from Kadesh-barnea even as far as Gaza, and all the country of	Josh.23:12 For if you ever go back and cling to the rest of these nations, these which remain among you, and intermarry with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, <sup>13</sup> know with certainty that the LORD your God will not continue to drive these nations out from before you; but they will be a snare and a trap

<sup>5</sup> Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Downers’ Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), p.172 quoting from K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p.173 – 174. David T. Lamb, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist, and Racist?* (Downers’ Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), p.77 quoting from A.K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millenium BC I (1114 – 859 BC)* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p.201 and William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, *The Context of Scripture*, vol.2 (Leiden, U.K.: Brill, 2003), p.137 – 8.

Goshen even as far as Gibeon. <sup>42</sup> Joshua captured all these kings and their lands at one time, because the LORD, the God of Israel, fought for Israel.	to you, and a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good land which the LORD your God has given you.
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What is true for Joshua is true for Moses. It's important to consider Moses I've drawn up another parallel, this time from the very same passage, Deuteronomy 7:1 – 5! Notice how, in v.1 – 2, Moses says, in hyperbolic language, 'You shall utterly destroy them.' However, in the next breath, in v.3 – 5, he speaks of the ongoing presence of Canaanites, warning them about intermarriage, etc.

<i>Exaggerated Military Victory Language</i>	<i>Evidence of Ongoing Canaanite Presence</i>
Deut.7:1 When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, <sup>2</sup> and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them.	Deut.7:3 Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. <sup>4</sup> For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you. <sup>5</sup> But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire.

From the outset, Moses envisioned a slow, gradual process of driving out the Canaanites from their land. He did not give a command to engage in total, 'genocidal' war to eradicate the whole population of Canaanites:

Ex.23:27 I will send My terror ahead of you, and throw into confusion all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. <sup>28</sup> I will send hornets ahead of you so that they will drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites before you. <sup>29</sup> I will not drive them out before you in a single year, that the land may not become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. <sup>30</sup> I will drive them out before you little by little, until you become fruitful and take possession of the land.

In fact, Moses envisioned the Canaanites leaving houses, vineyards, cisterns, trees, and lands strangely intact:

Deut.6:10 Then it shall come about when the LORD your God brings you into the land which He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you, great and splendid cities which you did not build, <sup>11</sup> and houses full of all good things which you did not fill, and hewn cisterns which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant, and you eat and are satisfied...

The only way this would have happened is if the Canaanite civilian population abandoned their dwellings. So Joshua's action reflects Moses' intention, and Joshua is at pains to point this out. Four times in a very dense summary passage of Joshua's military victories, the phrase 'just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded' (or a phrase communicating that same thing) occurs (Josh.11:12, 15, 20, 23). Joshua never engaged in actual 'complete annihilation' because that is never what Moses intended. Notice that Joshua's enemies are not civilians, but military enemies led by 'kings' stationed in cities:

<sup>11:5</sup> So all of these kings having agreed to meet, came and encamped together at the waters of Merom, to fight against Israel... <sup>10</sup> Then Joshua turned back at that time, and captured Hazor and struck its king with the sword; for Hazor formerly was the head of all these kingdoms... <sup>12</sup> Joshua captured all the cities of these kings, and all their kings, and he struck them with the edge of the sword, and utterly destroyed them; just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded.

<sup>13</sup> However, Israel did not burn any cities that stood on their mounds, except Hazor alone, which Joshua burned... <sup>15</sup> Just as the LORD had commanded Moses his servant, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses.

<sup>16</sup> Thus Joshua took all that land: the hill country and all the Negev, all that land of Goshen, the lowland, the Arabah, the hill country of Israel and its lowland <sup>17</sup> from Mount Halak, that rises toward Seir, even as far as Baal-gad in the valley of Lebanon at the foot of Mount Hermon. And he captured all their kings and struck them down and put them to death. <sup>18</sup> Joshua waged war a long time with all these kings... <sup>20</sup> that he might destroy them, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.

<sup>21</sup> Then Joshua came at that time and cut off the Anakim from the hill country... Joshua utterly destroyed them with their cities... <sup>23</sup> So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. Thus the land had rest from war.

### **Israel Accepted Defection and Surrender**

In addition, a significant factor in Israel's warfare with the Canaanites is the offer they extended to convert, defect, or surrender and flee. Some Canaanites did convert to Judaism and joined Israel. In the biblical record, Caleb the Kennizite became one of Moses' two most trusted aides, along with Joshua, and the Kennizites were Canaanites (Numbers 32:12; Genesis 15:19). Rahab and her household defected from Jericho and joined Israel (Josh.2 – 6).

<sup>Josh.6:25</sup> However, Rahab the harlot and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

In addition, in keeping with military convention at the time, Israel appears to have offered terms of peace and surrender to the cities they attacked. Although the Book of Joshua does not record an explicit record of Israel making a peace offer before attacking a city, the Book implicitly states it. The Hivites of Gibeon accepted such peace terms:

<sup>Josh.11:19</sup> There was not a city which made peace with the sons of Israel except the Hivites living in Gibeon; they took them all in battle.

Hence, we can say, given all these factors, that this is not 'ethnic cleansing.' It is a kind of moral or cultural judgment on their *behavior*, yes. I will explain that below. But ultimately, it was not even primarily a judgment on their persons, because the Canaanites were invited to desist from their *behavior*. Because Rahab the Canaanite defected from Jericho and came over to Israel, along with her household, and was welcomed, even to the point of marrying an Israelite man and becoming an ancestor of Jesus (Mt.1), and Caleb the Kenizzite had also been welcomed in Israel as a major leader, we cannot call the destruction of the Canaanites 'ethnic cleansing.' Even these Canaanite men had the chance to defect from their culture and morality once Israel got to their doorstep. In fact, they had decades to think about it, because they had heard about the God of Israel delivering Israel out of Egypt in a mighty act. Rahab and her household switched sides. The rest chose not to.

### **The Goal of the Conquest of Canaan: Gradual Infiltration, Minimum Loss of Life**

From both the biblical and archaeological data, the most accurate picture we get of Joshua's conquests is a strategic engagement with key Canaanite fortresses and strongholds manned by trained warriors. The Israelites did not actually take civilian lives. It is probable that Canaanite women, children and elderly, who would have lived in the countryside, had moved or fled by the time Israel advanced on these strongholds. Once Israel neutralized and destroyed these Canaanite cities, they settled down in the vacant homes already left roundabout. The subsequent settling of the land involved some skirmishes, to be sure, and resistance from the Amalekites and others.

Moses envisioned a minimum of fighting and destruction (Dt.6:10 – 11), so that the Canaanites would be given the chance to convert or escape. In the biblical record, aside from the hyperbolic language of victory used, Joshua conquered only some of the military strongholds of the Canaanites:

<sup>Josh.13:1</sup> Now Joshua was old and advanced in years when the LORD said to him, 'You are old and advanced in years, and very much of the land remains to be possessed...

<sup>Josh.16:10</sup> But they did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer, so the Canaanites live in the midst of Ephraim to this day...

Josh.17:12 But the sons of Manasseh could not take possession of these cities, because the Canaanites persisted in living in that land.

Archaeology confirms this gradual infiltration. ‘Archaeologists have discovered that by 1000 BC (during the Iron Age), Canaanites were no longer an identifiable entity in Israel... [Israel] had gradually occupied the territory, and had eventually become dominant... The same kind of gradual infiltration took place by the Amorites, who had moved in Babylonia decades before 2000 BC. (Hammurabi himself was an Amorite who ruled Babylon.) They eventually occupied and controlled key cities and exerted political influence, which is attested by changes in many personal names in the literature and inscriptions. Babylonia’s culture didn’t change in its buildings, clothing, and ceramics, but a significant social shift took place. Likewise, we see the same gradual transition taking place in Canaan based on the same kinds of evidence archaeologists typically utilize.’<sup>6</sup>

### **What Was the Canaanites’ Sin?**

After God delivered Israel out of Egypt, Israel was attacked by various Canaanite groups: the Amalekites (Ex.17:8 – 13), Arad (Num.21:1), the Amorites (Num.21:21 – 26; Dt. 2:26 – 37), and Bashan (Num.21:33 – 35; Dt.3:1 – 22). Balak the king of Moab also wanted to attack Israel but was stopped by God through Balaam and a donkey (Num.22 – 24). Israel did nothing to provoke these peoples. These Canaanite groups took the initiative to harass and attack Israel when the Hebrews were a wandering group of refugees. Given that the God of Israel stepped in to defend the weak and defenseless at other times, judging other nations and even His own people Israel for oppression and injustice (Am.1 – 2; Jer.48:7; 2 Ki.17; 24 – 25), it is almost certain that His judgment fell on the Canaanites in part for attacking innocent Israel.

Partially, the issue was religious and moral. God had told Abraham that the sin of the Amorite was ‘not yet complete’ (Gen.15:16). Between that time and God’s leading Israel into the promised land, four hundred years passed. This means God gave the Amorites and other Canaanite groups four hundred years to repent. Then, Moses explained to Israel so they were to defeat the Canaanites so ‘that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the LORD your God’ (Dt.20:18). They were to observe the statutes and laws of the God of Israel, and physically destroy the altars, idols, pillars, and shrines of the Canaanites (Dt.12:1 – 3).

Why? What was Canaanite religion like, and what behavior did it inspire?<sup>7</sup> The late archaeologist William F. Albright wrote of the Late Bronze Age Canaanites and their descendants the Carthaginians:

‘The Canaanites, with their orgiastic nature-worship, their cult of fertility in the form of serpent symbols and sensuous nudity, and their gross mythology, were replaced by Israel, with its nomadic simplicity and purity of life, its lofty monotheism, and its severe code of ethics. In a not altogether dissimilar way, a millennium later, the African Canaanites, as they still called themselves, or the Carthaginians, as we call

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Downers’ Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), p.183 – 184

<sup>7</sup> We have knowledge about Canaanite religion from two sources. The first is Philo of Byblos, the Greek name of the ancient city of Gebal on the Mediterranean (referenced in Josh. 13:5 and 1 Ki.5:18), forty-two miles north of Sidon. Philo lived around 100 AD. He was a native Phoenician scholar and gathered data for a historical work called *Phoenikika*, called ‘Phoenician History’ by later Greek scholars. According to Porphyry and Eusebius, Philo translated the writings of an early Phoenician named Sanchuniathon, who was supposed to have lived at a very remote age, whom W. F. Albright placed between 700 and 500 BC. Sanchuniathon in turn supposedly got his material from one Hierombalus under Abibal, king of Berytus, who is said to have flourished before the Trojan War. The second source is Ugaritic religious epic literature on clay tablets recovered from the ancient city of Ras Shamra on the north Syrian coast from 1927 – 1937. These significant poetical texts discovered by D.F.A. Schaefer in a series of campaigns have shown that the gods of Philo bear names in large part now well-known from Ugarit as well as from other sources. The Philo myths are characterized by the same moral abandon and primitive barbarity with fondness for descriptive names and personifications that are found at Ugarit. The new sources of knowledge indicate little change in the content of Canaanite mythology between 1400 BC and 700 BC. Many details of Philo’s account, not only in the matter of the names of deities, but in the mythological atmosphere as well are in complete agreement with the Ugaritic myths and late Phoenician inscriptions. Scholars are therefore justified in accepting, at least provisionally, all data preserved by Philo that do not involve subjective interpretation on his part.

them, with the gross Phoenician mythology which we know from Ugarit and Philo Byblius, with human sacrifices and the cult of sex, were crushed by the immensely superior Romans...<sup>8</sup>

From the standpoint of Israel's monotheistic worship and life, Canaanite civilization and culture had several significant problems related to sex and violence. They had orgies to ask their gods to fertilize the earth with rain. The residents of Sodom and Gomorrah used rape as a way to express their dominance over conquered people or strangers (Gen.19:5), the very opposite of hospitality. It is possible that a significant portion of the population were children born of incest. Moses told Israel that the Canaanites practiced all kinds of activities for which the land was spewing them out (Lev.18:3, 24 – 30). Most of those activities were sexual activities: incest of all different types (Lev.18:4 – 14), sex with an in-law (Lev.18:15 – 19), adultery (Lev.18:20), homosexuality (Lev.18:22), bestiality (Lev.18:23).

But my guess is that the more important issue was that they practiced child sacrifice (Lev.18:21). There is some debate among archaeologists about this, but that's because some of them are not sure how to interpret the physical evidence (6,000 jars, filled with baby bones), because they're unsure about the literary evidence. Jewish scholar of the Hebrew Bible Jon D. Levenson concludes:

'The remains of Carthage amply demonstrate the importance of child sacrifice to its religion and culture and thus indirectly speak to the same institution on the Canaanite motherland. The archaeologists Lawrence E. Stager and Samuel R. Wolff have excavated an area in Carthage that is so full of urns containing the charred remains of children that they term it the "Carthaginian Tophet." This area occupies a minimum of 54,000 – 64,000 square feet (that is, between 1 ¼ and 1 ½ acres). On the basis of the density of those urns in the excavated area, Stager and Wolff estimate "that as many as 20,000 urns may have been deposited there between 400 and 200 B.C.," "average[ing] out at 100 urn deposits per year or slightly fewer than one every three days." Against this, some argue that these mute remains suggest that the children in these urns died of natural causes and that the urns testify to Carthaginian funerary practices rather than to a cult of child sacrifice. But Stager and Wolff correctly counter that the actual contents of the urns tell a different and more horrific story. For in them they found usually not one but two children, one a newborn and the other of two or four years of age. "It seems unlikely," Stager and Wolff write, "that disease or some other disaster would have affected only the two youngest children...from the same family in such a regular fashion." Moreover, in the same area that they call the Tophet, Stager and Wolff also found urns containing the charred bones of animals. "Should we conclude," they ask, "that the Tophet was also a 'pet cemetery' with cremated lambs and kids?" Instead, they opt for what is surely the more likely reconstruction, "that the burned animals were intended as substitute sacrifices for children."<sup>9</sup>

The literary evidence is also significant, coming from biblical sources,<sup>10</sup> Jewish rabbinical sources outside the Bible,<sup>11</sup> and Greek literary sources,<sup>12</sup> which says that the Canaanites and cultures related to them practiced child

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<sup>8</sup> William F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: An Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (1968)

<sup>9</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p.21

<sup>10</sup> The story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) is commonly understood to be a comment on the practice of child sacrifice more common at the time. The king of Moab sacrifices a child in 2 Kings 3:27. An Israelite adopted this practice, showing Canaanite influence, earlier in 1 Kings 16:34. Similarly, Micah records the question, 'Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' and appears to be refuting child sacrifice in his response, 'He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' (Micah 6:7 – 8).

<sup>11</sup> The Jewish scholar Rashi (12<sup>th</sup> century), commented on Jeremiah 7:31, 'Tophet is Moloch, which was made of brass; and they heated him from his lower parts; and his hands being stretched out, and made hot, they put the child between his hands, and it was burnt; when it vehemently cried out; but the priests beat a drum, that the father might not hear the voice of his son, and his heart might not be moved.'

<sup>12</sup> Carthaginians were related to the Canaanites. Diodorus Siculus (wrote between 60 – 30 BC) mentions the practice in Carthage, as do Plutarch (c.46 – 20 AD), Tertullian (160 – 225 AD), and Orosius (c.375 – 423 AD). Some of these sources suggest that babies were roasted to death on a heated bronze statue. According to Diodorus Siculus, 'There was in their city a bronze image of Cronus extending its hands, palms up and sloping toward the ground, so that each of the children when placed thereon rolled down and fell into a sort of gaping pit filled with fire.' Some modern historians and archaeologists dispute this evidence, but several large statues ('Tophets') have been identified, including a large one in Carthage. Archaeological sites within Carthage and other Phoenician centers have unearthed large numbers of infants and children.

sacrifice. What this represents is an evolution in the idolatry of children. All traditional, communal cultures that I know of – like the Japanese culture that I’m most familiar with from personal experience – idolize children to some degree. Children represent status, security, prestige, success. So, parents always felt like they needed to control their children. But child sacrifice takes that to another level. It means that people literally and physically suck the life out of children to keep their civilization going. *If they suffered a setback, they would sacrifice more children; this is self-destructive.* It was the development of something that began in Genesis 4, with the fairly villainous characters Cain and Lamech, who perverted both sexuality and justice. So God’s judgment on the Canaanites is not arbitrary.

### **God Was Protecting Israel and Revealing What Human Beings Were Already Doing to Themselves**

But why did God not also bring a judgment against the Shang Dynasty in China, since they too committed human sacrifice, as did the Aztec Empire in the Americas? The answer is that only the Canaanites were specifically opposed to Israel. While Israel was in the wilderness and vulnerable, the Canaanite king of Arad attacked them (Num.21:1). Sihon, king of the Amorites, refused to grant Israel passage through his land and instead attacked them (Num.21:21 – 23). Og, king of Bashan, similarly attacked Israel (Num.21:33). Then when Israel entered the land of promise, the Canaanites continued to oppose them.

Fundamentally, we must see that *the broader pattern in Scripture is that when God says that He’s making a judgment, He is revealing and naming what is already there; He is calling out a self-destructive outcome that has become certain because of human choices* (e.g. Rom.1:24, 26, 28). I believe this is the case with those killed by the Flood, the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Canaanites. People before the flood were very violent, as indicated by the type of human culture that started with Cain in his city (Gen.4:17 – 24), suggested by God’s label of ‘mighty men’ who were ‘wicked’ whose heart-level thoughts were ‘only evil continually’ (Gen.6:4 – 5), and indicated by God’s warning against human bloodshed after the flood and His permission of and limitation on human vigilante justice (Gen.9:6). The flood was necessary to wipe the blood of humanity off the earth, since human blood polluted the land. Thus, human beings before the flood, with their violence, might have destroyed themselves. In particular, they would have killed Noah and his family, cutting off the lineage of Jesus and their own hope for redemption. God’s judgment on their violence merely makes apparent what was happening already. If there was no family of faith, there would be no Israel. If there were no Israel, there would be no Jesus. If there were no Jesus, there would be no healing of human nature. And that would be unacceptable from God’s perspective, and wholly incompatible with God’s love.

Similarly, when God took the lives of the Egyptian firstborn in the Passover, He was also revealing what Egypt was doing to itself. When the Egyptian Pharaoh tried to kill the firstborn males in Israel, and then throughout all Egypt (Ex.1:22), they were destroying their own future. In particular, Jesus’ lineage would pass through Israel, and to endanger Jesus’ future was to endanger the future of all humanity. Thus, eighty years later, when Moses confronted a new Pharaoh who was stubbornly set on keeping Israel enslaved and oppressed, God took the firstborn of Egypt (Ex.12:30) as a symmetrical expression of both judgment and revelation. What Egypt did previously to Israel was revealed for what it was.

Consider also Sodom and Gomorrah and the other Canaanites: In a highly communitarian culture, when the entire culture goes bad, it is almost impossible for any individual to step out of it. It’s like an urban youth trying to step out of a gang when no one else is doing so. Is it likely that they would do it? It’s almost impossible. Only Rahab did so, in Joshua 2. And sometime while Israel was in Egypt, Caleb the Kennizzite, a Canaanite, joined Israel (Num.32:12; cf. Gen.15:19), probably because there were Canaanite peoples in the Egyptian Nile delta region; this demonstrates that the destruction of the Canaanites was not ethnic or racial. But would any more Canaanites have come over to join Israel? The strong suggestion of the text is NO. Thus, God is bringing an end to the timeframe because more time would have made no difference. They have made a choice that prevents them from making certain other choices. That’s a deeper reality which I don’t have time to elaborate on now, unfortunately, but it is profound. And at that point, I suggest that they were entrenched, locked in, and self-destructive. God could have given them all the time in the world, and they would not have received Him. That is what fundamentally brings on the judgment of God. In that sense, God is bringing them straight to Jesus, because they need to meet Jesus before they reject God so thoroughly that they will reject Jesus as well.

Ultimately, God required a family and community into which Jesus could be born, so He had to protect those who had faith in Him from those who did not in those extreme cases. Noah and his family had to be preserved from all

the bloodshed and violence that came from the civilization of Cain's family (Gen.4:1 – 26) and its influence (Gen.6:1 – 6). If Noah had died, the line of faith would have perished. Abraham and Sarah and their future children had to be protected from the violence of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.18:16 – 19:38). Note that Abraham had even rescued the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, along with his nephew Lot, from the kings of the north (Gen.14); yet they, despite surely *knowing* that Lot was the cause of their deliverance, were hostile to Lot, and by extension, to other representatives of the God of Abraham and Sarah! The Egyptian Pharaoh had to be stopped before he kept slaughtering Hebrew boys to control the Hebrew population (Ex.1:1 – 22). The military structure of the Canaanites needed to be defeated for Israel – which would not have a standing army in the first few centuries of its settlement of the garden land – to live peacefully and safely. In order to preserve the community from which Jesus would take human nature to offer back a new human nature to every human person, that community needed to be safeguarded. If at any time the community of faith to which God had pledged Himself, to work in them and through them to bring about the birth of Jesus, had been eliminated, then God's word would have been broken. There would have been no Mary of Nazareth who would say 'yes' to the word of God and receive him into herself on behalf of the world. There would have been no Jewish disciples to say 'yes' to Jesus and receive him into themselves on behalf of the world. Human being would have languished in their corrupt state. There would have been no hope for any Canaanites whatsoever. The God of love could not and would not tolerate that condition.

Furthermore, the entrance of Israel into Canaan was not 'ethnic cleansing' or genocide in any sense. It was a strike against three fortresses which served as the Canaanites' military nervous system, based on a kind of moral or cultural judgment, yes. But sometime while Israel was in Egypt, Caleb the Kennizzite, a Canaanite, joined Israel (Num.32:12; cf. Gen.15:19), probably because there were Canaanite peoples in the Egyptian Nile delta region. He was probably not the only Canaanite to do so. For at least as early as when Jacob's twelve sons had to find largely Canaanite women to marry, Canaanites were incorporated into the family of Israel. The tale of Judah and Tamar highlights this (Gen.38) and almost certainly served as a warning to the Israelites against excluding the Canaanite women in their families. In addition, a 'mixed multitude' left from Egypt with Israel (Ex.12:38). This demonstrates that the destruction of the Canaanites was not ethnic or racial, because the composition of 'Israel' was not actually ethnic or racial, but confessional. Rahab the Canaanite defected from Jericho and came over to Israel, along with her household, and was welcomed, even to the point of marrying an Israelite man and becoming an ancestor of Jesus (Mt.1).

This means that God's acts of destruction in the Old Testament were meant to protect Israel before Jesus, and absolutely cannot be generalized. Even when God would later claim for His own use the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions for the purpose of disciplining and purifying Israel, those events were absolutely unique and not to be generalized. Now that Jesus has come, and his apostles were vindicated, God does not protect His people using those supernaturally destructive means. He will not take human life. He does not claim for His own use the political activities of the nation-states. That era is over. Jesus brought it to an end. I say this not because I feel a need to apologize for the Old Testament. I say this because I am tracing the biblical story, respecting the decisions that a truly loving God had to make given a sinful humanity *en masse*. On this issue, the Old Testament needs explanation, but not apology.

### **When God Took Human Life, Did He End Human Choice?**

Although the scope of this essay does not cover the nature of hell and the nature of the human heart, those questions must be examined more closely, for the view of hell as 'locked from the inside' as articulated by C.S. Lewis and the entire Eastern Orthodox communion is different from the view of hell among Western Catholics and Protestants, where God throws people into hell against their will to punish them eternally for offending his honor and justice. So the question must be phrased rather precisely: In the Old Testament, did God's sudden taking of human life remove all possibility of those people choosing Jesus/God? I do not believe so. I believe God pushed a pause button on their lives, and took them into His care until the time of Jesus. I do not believe that when God took human life in the Old Testament, that He was also taking away their ability to choose Jesus. In fact, He was preserving their last possible real free choice.

An examination of 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6 helps us understand at least one such incident in a way that the original Old Testament text does not explain to us.

<sup>3:17</sup> For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong. <sup>18</sup> For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to

God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit;<sup>19</sup> in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison,<sup>20</sup> who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.

Some exegetes argue that Jesus' self-presentation before the dead was only to condemn them and not to offer them salvation. To support this idea, the case is made that the phrase 'made proclamation' carries a different meaning from 'preached.' However, Peter is clearly capable in this very letter of using a variety of words and phrases to communicate the same concept (e.g. announced, preached, proclaimed), thus strongly suggesting that the semantic distinction is meaningless. Furthermore, Luke uses the two words synonymously, sometimes in the same sentence or two (cf. Acts 4:2; 8:4; 9:19 – 20; 10:37; 13:5; 13:24; 13:38), and Paul uses the verb form 'proclaim' synonymously with 'preach' (Col.1:23; 1 Th.2:9; 1 Tim.3:16) and the noun form 'the proclamation' synonymously with 'the preaching' (2 Tim.4:7; Ti.1:3), which supports the idea that Peter can do the same. Finally, it must also be noted that Peter refers a second time to the same event:

<sup>4:6</sup> For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God.

In 4:6, the intended result of Jesus' descent into 'Hades,' as it were, is explained: that those human beings who died in the flood, might nevertheless choose spiritual life upon meeting Christ. In other words, Jesus' proclamation to the dead was not simply to condemn them. He offered them a real choice to respond to him, and to 'live in the Spirit.' While we should not assume that all did, for reasons I offer below, the fact that Jesus did appear to them and preach to them is important for understanding the character of God.

The thematic and conceptual ties are important to the overall argument of 1 Peter. Peter parallels the proclamation that happened among the dead and the proclamation that happens among the living. He makes this parallel because he is reminding the suffering Christians that their proclamation must continue. Holding Jesus up as the example of one who proclaimed his gospel even unto his death means that God can certainly call Christians to do the same. Interestingly, Peter also has in mind the parallel between the effective ministry of the dying Christ and that of the Christians. Christ's suffering led to death, but his death only enhanced his ability to preach, this time to a new audience: the dead! Similarly, the Christians' suffering could lead to their death as well, but if they die virtuously, their death will further advance their proclamation among the living. Christians fearful of death might have argued that their removal from the world of the living would eliminate their testimony, thus making death a potential weakness in Peter's argument. Rather, virtuous death strengthens the argument. This is a challenging perspective for the suffering Christian, but a useful one if we ask God for the courage and strength to live in it!

The insight in 1 Peter serves a secondary and weaker role – though still significant – in our ability to extrapolate further about other incidents and indeed, the character of God. The answer to the primary question of those killed by the flood is: No, God did not immediately consign them to hell. No, God was not taking away all possibility of choice. Yes, they still had a choice to receive Jesus, which was offered when Jesus descended into Hades after his death to make his proclamation there to them. I believe this idea can be extended to others who were slain by God in the Old Testament time period. This direction is suggested, but by no means settled, by 1 Peter 3:19 and 4:6. When God took away people's lives in the Old Testament generally, He did so punitively, yes, but also in part to *preserve* their ultimate choice. Perhaps He took their lives before they were fully hardened against Him.

Why would any Old Testament person held in this 'holding tank' reject Jesus? Only for irrational reasons of their own, because they resisted God so much in life that they conditioned themselves to reject Him in eternal life. As God loves us, He loves the true self that He created and knows. This frustrates those who want to deny their need for Jesus. If C.S. Lewis and the Eastern Orthodox understanding of the human heart is correct, then human beings are capable of experiencing torment in the very love of God because we choose lies, sin and false selves. So God cannot be other than Who He is. He cannot help but continue to love the unbeliever and call to them continually, even in hell. But to the unrepentant, the very love of God has become an annoyance, a repugnant presence, and a terror. God Himself will be an unwanted stalker. This view preserves the possibility of asserting that God is love at the core of His character, as opposed to God being meritocratic justice at the core of His character, but only loving by an arbitrary and unnecessary choice.

### **God's Attempts to Call the Canaanites**

Finally, we must consider all the ways that God tried to get the Canaanites' attention and recall them to Himself. There are many. First, Noah recognized that his grandson Canaan, the youngest son of Ham, was the farthest away from him relationally and would therefore be cursed (Gen.9:18 – 27). This was not a prescriptive declaration, but a descriptive one. When Ham committed incest with his mother, Noah's wife (for this is what the phrase 'uncover the nakedness of your father' in Genesis 9:21 – 23 means according to Leviticus 18:7), Noah knew that this utter disregard for God's boundaries would result in chaos in Ham's family. Canaan in particular, as Ham's youngest son, would suffer for this chaos. He would also suffer for being furthest away relationally from his grandfather Noah, the authoritative interpreter of the flood and the only link between Canaan and the theological and historical reality of God's creation order. Thus, Noah spoke of a curse on Canaan, not as an arbitrary prescription of vengeance against Ham and his line, but as a description of what was already happening in Ham's line. 'Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants he shall be to his brothers.' Noah's pronouncement suggests that he wanted the family of Ham and, especially, Canaan to be aware of this estrangement and alienation. The term 'servant of servants' spoken of by Noah does not necessarily imply inferiority or enslavement, but probably a posture of receiving discipleship from the other branches of Noah's family. After all, as I have said above, Caleb was ethnically a Kenizzite (Num.32:12) and become one of Moses' top two lieutenants, with Joshua being the other. This fact reflects the reality that Israel did welcome ethnic Canaanites into their community from before the conquest of the land. It also suggests that more Canaanites did become part of Israel, for it is doubtful that Caleb and his father Jephunneh were alone in their conversion.

Second, God called out to the Canaanites through the scattering of Babel (Gen.11:1 – 9). The founder of this city was Nimrod, grandson (or descendant) of Ham through Cush, and possibly the nephew of Canaan. Nimrod was the first to become 'mighty' on the earth. He expanded the authority of the city-state, an order of oppression, sexism, and injustice which Cain built in Gen.4:16 – 25, and creates the nation-state. He was the first man to whom the Scriptures ascribe not just a city, but a kingdom (Gen.10:10). Nimrod was evidently determined never to become a servant to his brothers because he demonstrated his will to power. He founded city-states: Babel, Erech, Accad, Calneh, Nineveh, Rohoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen. He tried to erase the memory of God from the earth by creating another source of identity. 'Come, let us build for ourselves a city...a tower...and a name.' Although we tend to think of the physical tower as being the locus of humanity's sin, it was not. The tower was simply a symbol. In reality, naming themselves was of primary importance. People desired to use the power of naming given to them by God and they used it for a purpose God did not ordain. They wanted no other authority but themselves and they refused to hearken unto the name that God had given them. So God confused their word. Although this seems like a strange judgment, we see God's mercy in this act. God confused their communication, their word. Whether God scrambled their language so as to create many, or drained their words of power and meaning, is a secondary question. The most important issue for our purposes here is that God cursed their communication whenever their words referred to something or someone else as the basis for life. Rather than destroy humanity, God drained our words of ultimate meaning. And God caused human beings to resume His intended spreading across the earth. This was another invitation to the Canaanites, who were certainly involved in Nimrod's family error, to turn aside from their political orders of oppression, sexism, and injustice, to put aside their city-state-building and turn back to the living God.

Third, God sent Abraham and Sarah to live in the midst of the Canaanites (Gen.11:27 – 25:11). For long decades, as God was cultivating Abraham and Sarah's faith, they and their household bore witness to God. Abraham even rescued, along with his nephew Lot and his household, the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah from military captivity (Gen.14:16), and restored their freedom! Abraham's nephew Lot was also a reminder of that deliverance and a witness of sorts, albeit a compromised one, to Sodom and Gomorrah, which makes their utter disrespect for Lot, and by extension, Abraham, rather inexcusable. And by providing the miraculous birth of Isaac in the midst of the Canaanites, God was bearing witness to His power to bring life out of death, and love for humanity. In the binding of Isaac (Gen.22), God repudiated Canaanite child sacrifice. This lengthy sojourn of Abraham and Sarah in the land of Canaan in the midst of the Canaanites is not usually regarded as for the benefit of the Canaanites, but this was an intrinsic part of the story of Israel's inauspicious beginning. Into the heart of the most corrupt society on earth at the time, God sent His chosen couple, to start a chosen family. God would say, in fact, that He was bearing with the Amorites and other Canaanites for four hundred years (Gen.15:16); this reflects God's long patience.

Fourth, God established a place of worship in the midst of Canaan through a Canaanite priest-king, Melchizedek (Gen.14:18 – 20). A mysterious figure, Melchizedek was a priest of God and king of Salem, which was the

precursor city to Jerusalem. Melchizedek was acquainted with Abraham, although we know very little about the nature of their friendship or shared understanding of God. It was apparently enough for later biblical writers to see in Melchizedek a precursor of the Messiah (Ps.110; Heb.7 – 10), who would be both priest and king in an ultimate, final sense. Whatever Melchizedek knew, embodied, or represented, he administered a proto-communion meal of bread and wine to Abraham.

Fifth, God called out to the Canaanites through the destruction of only Sodom and Gomorrah among all the cities of the Canaanites (Gen.19). Although this was certainly an act of judgment upon those two cities akin to the flood of Noah, the remainder of the Canaanites could receive this as a warning and caution to not follow in the same path. The presence of Abraham and Sarah, Lot, and Melchizedek to serve as interpreters of the firestorm is also significant.

Sixth, God continued to call out to the Canaanites through Isaac and Rebekah (Gen.21:1 – 35:29) and their household. The presence of Isaac in the land of Canaan was an ongoing object lesson hearkening back to God's original promise to Abraham and supernatural fulfillment of Isaac's birth despite Abraham and Sarah's extremely old age. The fact that God forbade Isaac from leaving the land might be typologically significant insofar as Isaac is a foreshadowing of Jesus of Nazareth. But in the immediate context, God's command to Isaac is significant as a sign of witness and testimony to the Canaanites of God's power to bring life out of personal deadness.

Seventh, God called out to the Canaanites through Jacob and his family (Gen.33:18 – Gen.45:28). The witness of Jacob was not as clear as that of his grandfather Abraham. Nevertheless, the limping Jacob reflected the work of God in his life. This man who manipulated people and then ran away was no longer able to run away. After a life of mischief, Jacob returned to the promised land to be reunited with his family and reconciled with his brother Esau. God's work in Jacob's life took the form of the healing and transforming touch which judged Jacob's sin.

The eighth way God called out to the Canaanites was the marriage of Judah (Gen.38). Previously, Isaac had forbade his son Jacob to marry one of the daughters of the Canaanites. But the twelve sons of Jacob had to seek marriages among the Canaanite women, who presumably gave their spiritual allegiance to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The suggestion of the Genesis narrative from a literary standpoint is that Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, did.

The ninth way God called out to the Canaanites was by saving them from famine by Joseph in Egypt (Gen.41:57). The narrator says using an idiom that 'the whole world' went to Joseph to buy grain. That would include many peoples, the Canaanites included. They would not have known at the time that their benefactor was the Hebrew man Joseph, son of Jacob. However, once Joseph revealed his true identity, word would have surely spread among all the migrant peoples who settled in the region of northern Egypt.

The tenth way God called out to the Canaanites was by inviting a 'mixed multitude' (Ex.12:38) to accompany Israel out of Egypt. Israel became a confessional community of faith. Since much of northern Egypt was devastated by God's ten plagues, there would have been a strong incentive for any of Israel's neighbors to leave with them, Egyptians and Canaanites included, for many migrant peoples populated northern Egypt.

The eleventh way God called out to the Canaanites was by broadcasting His power for forty years between the Exodus from Egypt and the entrance of Israel into Canaan (Ex.15:15; Josh.2:10).

The twelfth way God called out to the Canaanites was by calling for surrender and accepting defectors like Rahab into Israel (Josh.2, 6).

The thirteenth way God called out to the Canaanites was by admitting the Hivites into the service of God's tabernacle sanctuary (Josh.9). The Hivites of Gibeah, slated in Dt.20:17 to be 'utterly destroyed', in Joshua 9 made peace with the Israelites partially on a false pretense but also truly by the name of God, and Joshua honored that agreement. The Hivites served as woodcutters and drawers of water for the tabernacle sanctuary of God. After all, they did swear by the God of Israel, so they became His servants. In the book of Joshua, Israel is not portrayed as disobedient for doing this, despite the fact that, on a superficial and modern anachronistic reading of ancient victory language, Israel was supposed to slaughter them all. Other Canaanites came to attack the Gibeonite Hivites, but God told Israel to protect them! This continued a pattern of *incorporation* of Gentiles into Israel by faith. I find it very

important that Joshua 9 – 11 is the high point of the first half of the book of Joshua. The remainder of the book, Joshua 12 – 24, is a recounting of the land being apportioned, and Joshua’s closing words. This event also meant that conversion counted as ‘destruction,’ though not vice versa. Please see Appendix A for how I expanded on this with a friend, in a Facebook conversation.

In the New Testament, we can add two more ways. Fourteenth: Jesus called to Canaanites, like this woman:

- And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed’ ... Then Jesus said to her, ‘O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed at once. (Mt.15:22 – 28)

Fifteenth: Jesus went to all the deceased Canaanites after his death and resurrection.

- For Christ...went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient... For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God. (1 Pet.3:19; 4:6)

### **What Kind of God Do We Expect?**

Any time we see human injustice and evil, we must ask, ‘What kind of god do we expect?’ What are the alternatives? There are three main options:

1. A god who does nothing and looks the other way
2. A god who is actually part of the evil and mischief, like Zeus stirring up the Trojan War
3. A god who responds to human evil and injustice by stopping it and judging it

In general, I would rather have a god who responds to human evil by judging it and stopping it in some way. In our therapeutic culture, we tend to identify goodness with being sympathetic, sweet, and not spanking. But earlier time periods saw goodness as fierce and powerful in addition to being loving. It was an earlier age in which C.S. Lewis wrote about Aslan the lion as the analogy for Jesus, and Tolkien portrayed Aragorn and Gandalf as aspects of Jesus. So we need to also question our culture. The God revealed by Jesus of Nazareth is fierce and powerful in His goodness, all the while respecting human choices. But that opens up more questions about how and why this particular God stopped and judged human evil in the Old Testament narratives.

Many readers of the biblical record respond to God’s acts of destruction with confusion, hesitation, and outright rejection of a God who would act this way. Skeptics claim that the portrayal of God in the Old Testament is inconsistent with the portrayal of God in the New. Some Christians – primarily those who believe that God is a western lawgiver – claim that this portrayal reveals a God of meritocratic and punitive justice, whose mercy becomes all the more merciful when understood against the backdrop of God’s absolute right to act this way. To them, the resolution to this issue is quite straightforward.

Other Christians, including myself, believe that there is an underlying unity in God’s character from Old Testament to New, but struggle to understand how these acts of God align with the claim that Jesus reveals the full character of a loving God. For if God is at the fundamental level a God of meritocratic-punitive justice, then there is a certain consistency in that explanation. After all, God did not have to show love, mercy, and grace at all; He could have wiped out humanity and creation at the fall. But if strict meritocratic justice is the core characteristic of God, then love, mercy, and grace are *accidental* to who God is. How then is it possible to say that God is *love*? The challenge arises when we as Christians say that love is the core characteristic of God, that love is not accidental to God but *fundamental*. From my experience, skeptics and non-Christians object to these because they sense an inconsistency between the apparent portrayal of God in the Old Testament and the Christian claim that God is love. If we say *that* about God, how can we make sense of these Old Testament episodes? Only by stating that God ultimately had to protect an Israel, in order to bring about Jesus.

### **Conclusions**

It is difficult to read about God’s acts of destruction in the Old Testament. But it is even more difficult for us today to fully grasp the violence and corruption of humanity in ancient times. We must do so, however, when we read the Old Testament, because that helps us to understand the historical and cultural context in which God took those actions.

Furthermore, a theological choice is important to make. Given that we would probably not prefer to have a god who sits by and does nothing, and certainly not a god who participates and instigates the evil to begin with, we are left with the third category: Is there a god who judges and stops human evil when it is directed against the people who were necessary to bring forth Jesus? The biblical portrayal of this God is that He certainly does intervene in some ways to judge and stop human evil when it reaches that point. If this is disturbing to us, perhaps it is because we live in a therapeutic culture that has difficulty imagining how this could be. Meanwhile, many of the world's poor and oppressed look in hope to a God who will overturn and overrule the great evils that afflict them, and raise them up to vindicate their hope in His goodness.

However, God's ultimate, deepest, and highest response to human evil is found in the human person of Jesus of Nazareth. In the human man Jesus, God took to Himself a human body of the same self-centered flesh we are made out of (Jn.1:14; cf. Rom.7:18) from which He also judged and condemned the corruption in human nature. He absolutely condemned sin through the human choices of Jesus to never sin (Rom.8:3). Jesus forced his 'flesh' to yield to the other-centered love of God. Then he destroyed the corruption in human nature through his death (Rom.6:6). He emerged in his resurrection as a new kind of human being, a God-soaked, God-drenched human being. And by his Spirit, Jesus offers us a deep, vital, spiritual connection to him in his new humanity. This was God's way of judging the ultimate source of human evil at its source: in every single one of us. This was also God's way of healing humanity by respecting our free will. This God not only stops human evil; He seeks to undo it, redeem it, and transform it.

For those interested in the role of Israel, both in terms of the necessity of Israel in God's plan, the duration of Israel's history, and God's judgments on Israel, I have explored those questions in considerable depth in other papers: *Why Choose a Chosen People?* and *Suffering and the Roles of Job, Israel, and Jesus*. Suffice to say here that God's judgments on Israel were unique to Israel. They foreshadowed God's judgment on the flesh of Jesus. Thus, I repeat: all the other incidents in the Old Testament pertaining to the chastisement of Israel or protection of Israel are not generalizable to anyone else.

Finally, other biblical passages tell us that God will not repeat those specific actions which He took in the Old Testament. So natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis cannot be interpreted now as 'acts of God' as our insurance companies might still say, or 'God's wrath,' but simply the natural results of a creation that is not what it was meant to be (Rom.8:18 – 25). Nor will fire from heaven fall again in the sense of Sodom and Gomorrah. But there will be a final judgment on human evil and revealing of its true nature when Jesus comes again to earth to consummate his kingdom. He will defeat evil when he comes, bringing with him a purifying fire the likes of which this world has not yet seen, seeking to burn away the contamination of sin within each person, to become as pure as Jesus. How we will experience that is completely up to us and how much we desire Jesus himself. That subject is covered in this paper: *Hell as the Love of the Triune God*.

## Appendix A: God Will Destroy His Enemies – Destruction Prophecied in the Old Testament

The following was a Facebook post exchange. I offer it as an example of how to understand other passages predicting God 'destroying His enemies' later in the Old Testament.

### *Friend*

Mako, I really like how you break down the problems as we read through these texts: historicity, biblical studies, theodicy/theology. And, I think it is a step in the right direction to realize that the stories of Israel's military conquest are exaggerations and cannot be viewed as accurate historical events. I'm also familiar with the author Paul Copan, and the similar conclusions that you make in your article linked above. It is not enough for me though, and I think it comes down to the idea of "inerrancy", or reading the Bible as infallible or perfect. I think we have to honestly say that it was written by people, imperfect people, who were certainly inspired by God and had powerful experiences with God. But, each author of the many books in the Bible knew God in their particular culture, time and place. They record both their revelations about God, and also their assumptions about God. So, we can't read it like a rulebook, or like an instruction manual.

Here's my problem with the your explanation of "hyperbolic language": there are so many, many other occasions when Israel is directly told by God, as they assume, to do such atrocities. For example, in Deuteronomy chapter 20:

"When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labour. If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; and when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you. Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here....But as for the towns of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the LORD your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God."

And, in just about all the books of the prophets, it is very clear that God is assumed to literally and actually kill and destroy people.

For me, if we read the Bible as being perfect, without human error and wrong assumptions about what God is really like, then we fall into real problems. Unbelievers are not just being skeptical when they share criticism about the Bible. There are real problems, and we need to face them head on.

### *My Response*

I share your concerns but find a different course through them. I do think when we look at isolated events of God taking life in the OT, that they are historically plausible in this sense: If God needed to have an Israel as a human partner in the first place, in the midst of enemies who were committed to destroying them, could He really have done it without taking the lives of \*any\* of those enemies? And by that I mean hitting a pause button on their lives until Jesus could visit them (because of 1 Peter 3 and 4). I think He would have had to do so at some point. So the historicity question, for me, is relatively straightforward.

But the next question is: How did Israel interpret those incidents? If we place Deuteronomy 20 alongside other passages in the Pentateuch which, on the surface, present a different picture of the infiltration of the land of Canaan, then we have to figure out how to work with all the biblical data. Take Exodus 23:27 – 30. "27 I will send My terror ahead of you, and throw into confusion all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. 28 I will send hornets ahead of you so that they will drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites before you. 29 I will not drive them out before you in a single year, that the land may not become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you. 30 I will drive them out before you little by little, until you become fruitful and take possession of the land." That does \*sound\* different than Dt.20.

I don't think I'm favoring Ex.23 and just dismissing Dt.20. What Paul Copan and I are doing is first treating each passage on its own terms. Dt.20 does use the hyperbolic language of victory. So as a passage, it doesn't stand

outside a solid literary-historical explanation. Further developments in the Pentateuch and in the book of Joshua also contribute to understanding what Dt.20 meant. The Hivites of Gibeah, slated in Dt.20:17 to be 'utterly destroyed', in Joshua 9 make peace with the Israelites partially on a false pretense but also truly by the name of God, and Joshua honors that agreement. Yes it's true that the Hivites became woodcutters and drawers of water for the tabernacle sanctuary of God. But then again, they were also farmers and herders and were not reduced to being \*merely\* woodcutters and drawers of water. And most importantly, they did swear by the God of Israel, so they became His servants. In the book of Joshua, Israel is not portrayed as disobedient for doing this, despite the fact that, on a superficial and modern anachronistic reading of ancient victory language, Israel was supposed to slaughter them all. The same principle goes for Rahab and her household.

And that is important on a deeper level. For the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua are already portraying 'defeat/destruction of enemies' and 'conversion' as related to each other – conversion counts as destruction, but – just as importantly – not vice versa. From a spiritual allegiance standpoint, Israel \*did\* destroy the Hivites. They do not exist any longer as "Hivites." They exist as servants of God, and part of Israel. The same principle is applied in 1 Corinthians. Paul says to the Gentiles that they are "no longer Gentiles" (1 Cor.12:2) but that they have become part of "Israel" and Israel's story (1 Cor.10:1 – 13). Yes, God has destroyed His enemies, quite "literally." By turning His enemies into His children.

So yes, the Old Testament prophets absolutely anticipate God defeating and even destroying His enemies. But the same dynamic is present explicitly in most books of the OT. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel most of all. They say that God will destroy the enemies of Israel, of course. But they also say that He will also circumcise them and make them into priests and Levites of the sanctuary (Isa.66:21) and give them a share of the land inheritance (Ezk.47:21 – 23)!! Which means that their old identity is destroyed. Their new identity is to be part of God's people. That counts as "destruction." Not only can I make that argument within each of the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. But I can make the argument because there is already this literary and theological development in the Pentateuch and Joshua, so that \*\*every book that attaches itself canonically to Moses and Joshua must be read in the same double-meaning-filled, open-ended way\*\*.

Here's another example. John Sailhamer, an OT scholar who specializes in literary-canonical study of Scripture, argues that the same dynamic is seen in placing Amos and Obadiah together. On the face of it, Obadiah simply announces God's destruction of the Edomites. But at the very end of the book of Amos (Am.9:12), Amos says that Israel will possess the remnant of Edom through the messiah and in the messianic age. How can both be true? How can Israel possess the remnant of Edom, and yet God destroy all of Edom? By placing Amos and Obadiah together, side by side, in a canonical order, the Jewish sages were saying something. They were anticipating that authentic conversion in the messiah would count as the destruction that God intended, even to the extent that the meaning of Amos governs the meaning of Obadiah. What is implicit in Obadiah is made explicit by Amos.

And hasn't God found a way \*to kill us\* in Christ and by the Spirit? Romans 6:1 – 11, Colossians 2:11 – 3:4? I think this is why authentic, freely given conversion to Christ is seen as a genuine type of death and destruction, arguably the deepest type. Of course there is resurrection and rebirth with Jesus. But the latter doesn't take away the former.

I want to be clear about my methodology, because this is something that has come up in discussions with other people. I am not reading the Old Testament through a Christocentric hermeneutical lens. I understand where that comes from, why people do that, and why people have the mistaken impression that I'm doing that. But for me, this is not a backward-looking hermeneutics that only Christians can do, and Jews cannot. That approach can and does raise insurmountable problems if we were to also engage in evangelism towards Jewish people, because how could we discuss and honor the Hebrew Bible that way? I am actually reading the Scriptures in a forward-moving fashion, finding through rational practices of reading that, on this particular issue of destroying enemies, there is a deliberate openness and strategically ambiguous double-meaning in the OT texts which only the messiah would resolve. And I am arguing that the OT authors \*knew and understood that.\* So to repeat, my approach is to do exegesis in a literary-historical mode. It is about treating words as part of a historical context, and each passage as part of a literary theme in each book because a book is a literary unit. Then it is also about integrating each subsequent book into the foundation of the Pentateuch, fundamentally. That is how the literary-canonical part comes in, and why Jesus is the fulfillment of \*all\* the Scriptures – and as I see it, even the stuff about the messiah who destroys his enemies.

## Appendix B: The Canaanite Pantheon

As our sources, Philo and the ancient Ugarit myths, indicate, the religion of the Canaanite peoples was an unusually crude form of ritual polytheism. It was associated with sensuous fertility-cult worship of a particularly orgiastic kind, which proved to be more influential than any other nature religion in the Ancient Near East.

Canaanite deities present remarkable fluidity of personality and function, so that it is often extremely difficult to fix the particular domain of different gods or to define their kinship to one another. Physical relationship, and even sex, seem to change with disconcerting ease. This is one of the irrational aspects of Canaanite religion.

Miscellaneous epigraphic and literary sources reveal the names of the chief gods and goddesses of numerous Canaanite cities in various periods. The Ugaritic deities are now best known because of the hundreds of religious texts dating from the fifteenth and early fourteenth century BC which were found in a library housed in a building situated between Ugarit's two great temples, one dedicated to Baal and the other to Dagon. The divinities which figure in the mythological texts from Ugarit were evidently not peculiar to the city, but were current among all Canaanites, since they bear only a vague relationship to the most popular deities worshipped in the city itself.

El is the name by which the supreme Canaanite deity was known. The word El is a generic name for 'god' in Northwest Semitic (Hebrew and Ugaritic) and as such it is also used in the Old Testament for heathen deities or idols (Ex. 34:14; Ps. 81:10; Is. 44:10) or sometimes a generic designator for the God of Israel. In Canaanite paganism, the El was the head of the pantheon. As the supreme god, El was a shadowy figure who, Philo says, had three wives; these wives who were also his sisters. El could also become the human hero of various Ugaritic epic crimes and stories. Philo portrays El as a bloody tyrant, whose acts terrified all the other gods, and who dethroned his own father, murdered his favorite son, and decapitated his own daughter. The Ugaritic poems add the crime of uncontrolled lust to his morbid character and the description of his seduction of two unnamed women is the most sensuous in ANE literature. Like Homer's Zeus, he was 'the father of men and gods.'

Baal was the son of El, and the reigning king of the gods, dominating the Canaanite pantheon. As El's successor he was enthroned on a lofty mountain in the far northern heavens. Often he was considered to be 'the Lord of Heaven' (Baal-shamem); but sometimes distinguished from the latter, as in Philo, Baal was the god of the rain and storm, whose voice could be heard reverberating through the heavens in the thunder.

In Ugaritic literature Baal is given the epithet Aliyan, 'the one who prevails'. As the giver of rain and all fertility, he figures prominently in Canaanite mythology in his struggle with Mot (Death), the god of drought and adversity. In his grapple with Mot, he is slain. As a consequence, a seven year cycle of scarcity ensues. Thereupon the goddess Anath, the sister and lover of Baal Aliyan, goes in search of him, recovers his body and slays his enemy, Mot. Baal is then brought back to life and placed on Mot's throne so that he may insure the revival of vegetation for seven years. This is the central theme of the great Baal Epic of Ugarit.

Besides the king of the gods and the storm god, Baal was the god of justice, the terror of evildoers. He was also called 'the son of Dagon', the grain god, who was the chief deity of Ashdod (1 Sam. 5:1-7) and who had temples at Ugarit and Gaza (Judges 16:23).

At Ugarit Baal's consort was his sister Anath, but at Samaria in the ninth century BC Ashera appears in that role (1 Kings 18:19). Different places at different periods arranged the pantheon somewhat differently, but the picture by and large was fairly stable. The name ba'al itself in Northwest Semitic (Hebrew, Phoenician and Ugaritic) is the common noun for 'master' or 'lord' and accordingly, like 'el, 'strong one', could be applied to various gods. Actually, however, from an early period (by at least the 15th century BC) the ancient Semitic storm-god Hadad (Akkadian Adad) became 'the lord' par excellence.

Anath was a combination of the sister and spouse of Baal, was one of a galaxy of three Canaanite goddesses whose character gives a hint of the depths of the moral depravity to which the Canaanite cults sank. The other two are Astarte and Asherah. All three were patronesses of sex and war -- sex mainly in its sensuous aspect as lust, and war in its aspects of violence and murder. The depraved character of Canaanite religion is indicated by the character of Anath. An Egyptian text of the New Kingdom period described Anath and Astarte as 'the great goddesses who conceive but do not bear.'

Another equally vicious characteristic of Anath worship was the fiendish savagery of the composite goddess. A fragment of the Baal Epic (II.7ff) shows her indulging in a massacre of old and young alike:

She smites the people of the seashore  
Destroys mankind of the sunrise....  
She piles up heads on her back  
She ties up hands in her bundle....  
Anath gluts her liver with laughter  
Her heart is filled with joy.

Egyptian texts represented Astarte and Anath as goddesses of violence and war, showing them naked astride a galloping horse, waving weapons of battle.

Interestingly enough, Anath was given the epithet of 'virgin' and 'the Holy One' (qudshu) in her invariable role of a sacred prostitute. This term qudshu, 'the Holy One' is related to the biblical term translated 'holy'. It is important to recognize that among Semitic peoples the idea of 'holiness' was applied to anything that had been dedicated to the service of a deity. The moral connotation of the term is a later, derived, concept. Even in the OT, its usage is often just in the sense of 'separated' to God.

Anath is represented often as a naked woman astride a lion with a lily in one hand and a serpent in the other. The lily represented sex appeal and the serpent represented fertility.

The male prostitutes consecrated to her honor were called qadesh (Deut. 23:18, 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:46). The feminine qedesha is also found (Deut. 23:18, Hosea 4:14)

Astarte was the goddess of the evening star, was like Anath and Asherah concerned with sex and war and was not always clearly distinguished from them. In Egypt Anath and Astarte were even fused into one deity called Antart, while in later Syria their cult was displaced by that of a composite deity: Anat-Ashtart (Atargatis). Like Anath, Astarte was both a mother goddess and a divine courtesan, and she shares all the latter's moral turpitude. (She was also known as Ishtar in Persia, and the name Esther is a form of this word. Additionally, the English word 'star' comes from this name).

Asherah was the wife of El in Ugaritic mythology, and is the goddess who is also called Athirau-Yammi: 'She Who Walks on (or in) the Sea'. She was the chief goddess of Tyre in the 15th century BC, and bore the appellation qudshu, 'holiness.' In the OT Asherah appears as a goddess by the side of Baal, whose consort she evidently became, at least among the Canaanites of the south. However, most biblical references to the name point obviously to some cult object of wood, which might be cut down and burned, possibly the goddesses' image (1 Kings 15:13, 2 Kings 21:7). Her prophets are mentioned (1 Kings 18:19), and the vessels used in her service referred to (2 Kings 23:4). The existence of numerous symbols, in each of which the goddess was believed to be immanent, led to the creation of numerous forms of her person, which were described as Asherim. The cult object itself, whatever it was, was utterly detestible to faithful worshippers of Yahweh (1 Kings 15:13), and was set up on the high places beside the 'altars of incense' (hammanim) and the 'stone pillars' (masseloth). The translation of asherah by 'grove' in some translations follows a singular tradition preserved in the LXX and the Vulgate which apparently connects the goddess' image with the usual place of its adoration.

#### The General Character of Canaanite Cults

The Ugaritic literature has helped reveal the depth of depravity which characterized Canaanite religion. Being a polytheism of an extremely debased type, Canaanite cultic practice was barbarous and thoroughly licentious. It inevitably had a most serious retarding and debilitating effect on every phase of Canaanite cultural and community life. It was inescapable that people should gravitate to the moral level of the sordid gods they worshipped, or rather that the gods were a reflection of their society. 'Like gods, like priest; like priest, like people' expresses a law that operates unfailingly.

#### Canaanite Cults Utterly Immoral

The brutality, lust and abandon of Canaanite mythology is far worse than elsewhere in the ANE at this time. And the astounding characteristic of Canaanite deities, that they had no moral character whatsoever, must have brought out the worst traits in their devotees and entailed many of the most demoralizing practices of the time, such as sacred prostitution, child sacrifice and snake worship.

#### Canaanite Cults Effete and Corrupt

Such an effete and corrupt religion could have no other than a devitalizing effect on the population. So vile had the practices of the Canaanites become that the land was said to 'vomit out its inhabitants' (Lev. 18:25) and the Israelites were warned by Yahweh to keep all his statutes and ordinances 'that the land,' into which he was about to bring them, would not 'vomit' them out (Lev. 20:22). The character of the Canaanite religion as portrayed in the Ugaritic literature furnishes ample background to illustrate the accuracy of these biblical statements in their characterization of the utter moral and religious degeneracy of the inhabitants of Canaan, who were accordingly to be decimated and dispossessed.