



Why was there such cruelty in the Old Testament?

In Deuteronomy 20:16-18 God commanded the Israelites to remove a number of nations and peoples out of the Promised Land, by killing all the men, women, and children living there. The difficulty of vindicating God for commanding this and His people for doing it, was raised in a letter I received. And, as it gives us a clear summary of this difficulty, and the questions it provokes, I will quote a section of it:

I'm still left with the difficult problem of Jericho ... My question would be why were the Israelites so aggressive? I'm sure in those days there was plenty of land for all, was it really necessary to butcher the whole city bar one family? Yes, I know that the penalty for sin was death, but couldn't they have tried to at least convert them? This (murderous attitude) is the attitude the Muslims had when Mohammed was trying desperately to start his religion. This kind of story is one which many people use to preach against Christianity, especially Muslims. How can we call Muslims bloodthirsty? How can we call ourselves peaceful? If we take the (Old Testament) Israelite example of their destruction of Jericho, should we cut the throats of those that don't believe?

The question then is: 'Should we kill our spiritual enemies?' Or, in the context of our letter-writer, 'Should we kill Muslims?' Firstly, some negatives. The Canaanites were not killed because Israel were good. Israel were explicitly forbidden from coming to this conclusion (Deuteronomy 9:4). Neither were the Canaanites killed because God was bad. We must not think that God's actions were arbitrary, capricious, or bad-tempered. As we shall see, there was wise, reasonable, and thoughtful purpose behind the command to kill the Canaanites. Also, we must disagree with those who explain this policy by proposing that God changed between the Old and New Testaments – from angry to loving, from wrathful to gracious. No, God is unchangeable in His being.

What then can we say in defense of God's commands and the Israelites' actions? We would like to make ten points.

1. The Canaanites were some of the most wicked people that ever lived

Over recent years, historians and archaeologists have uncovered numerous clues and artifacts which clearly portray the moral, social, and spiritual depths to which the Canaanites had sunk. They were indescribably, and almost unimaginably, depraved. By some reckonings, they were probably about the third most wicked race that ever lived – after Noah's generation, and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. As such, far from being innocent victims of an unjust and cruel foreign policy, they were a moral cancer endangering the whole human race. The kindest thing that God could do for humanity, then, was to cut out every root and fibre of these wicked people, whose lifestyle invited widespread international divine judgment. Moreover, God had given the Canaanites hundreds of years to repent (Genesis 15:16). God had given them time, but now God gave them up. Their iniquity was now full to overflowing, and so, therefore, was God's anger and judgment.

But, even in this display of God's holy justice, we find mercy in God's offer of peace to the more peripheral Canaanite cities (Deuteronomy 20:10-11). If they surrendered to Israel, they were to be spared. And, even if they didn't, Israel were to spare the women and children in these cities.

Do we not see here a picture of Gospel grace to evil and wicked men and women everywhere? God has announced the sentence of judgment on the whole human race. *'The soul that sinneth it shall die'*. However, in the Gospel, terms of mercy and peace are whispered to those who have ears to hear. Have you taken this opportunity to surrender?

2. It impressed upon the Israelites the exceeding sinfulness of sin

On these killing fields the Israelites learned in a new and unforgettable way that, *'The wages of sin is death.'* They saw the bloody and fatal consequences of sinning against God right in front of their eyes. But, some say, why was it necessary for hand-to-hand killing? Why did God not send a natural disaster – say, a plague or a flood? Well, by being God's personal executioners of wicked people, Israel would best understand God's hatred for sin. Instead of hearing the news of thousands of deaths in distant cities and lands, the deaths of the Canaanites were a daily, depressing, and exhausting experience. Imagine how awful to have awoken every day knowing that the cold-blooded killing of men, women and children was going to fill the day. Imagine what it must have felt like to go to bed after a day of such killing, knowing that many more days of this lay ahead. How fearfully and awfully suited to teach Israel the sinfulness of sin which required such justice!

One reason why people are unable to understand the need for the Canaanite Conquest, is the inability to understand how heinous and punishable sin is. The Canaanite Conquest was caused by their own sinful rebellion against God. Is the Canaanite Conquest a cause of sinful rebellion in you? The more we leave behind our shallow views of sin and understand more and more of sin's true nature, the more we will understand not just the Canaanite Conquest, but the grace that has spared and saved us who also deserved judgment and death.

3. The honour of God's attributes was at stake

One of the results of the Canaanite lifestyle, or should we say deathstyle, was that God's character was being impugned. People were looking at what the Canaanites were doing, without any apparent consequence and concluding, 'God cannot be holy if He does not act against such behaviour'. Or they would say, 'If He is holy, He cannot be powerful, for we would see evident divine action'. God's character was at stake, and the Canaanite Conquest helped restore it in the public eye. After it, onlookers would surely conclude, 'Well, obviously God is holy and God is powerful.'

But, it might be said, 'Does not the killing of women and children put a stain on God's attributes?' Well, Israel's history reveals that it was often the heathen women who were a greater danger than the men. All the powers of Balaam and Balak could not touch Israel in Numbers 22-24, but in the very next chapter we read of the success of the Moabite women in making Israel sin (Numbers 25:1-5; 31:15-16). The virtue of women is often one of the main restraints on immorality in society. But, when this is removed, women become more dangerous than men, and as we can see all around us, the degeneration of society accelerates.

What about the children, though? Was it really necessary for them to die? Well, it has been shown that very young children follow in the habits and morals of their parents, even if removed from them at a very early age. Even today, in parts of the Arab world, we can see the powerful effect of anti-Israel indoctrination at an early age. Any one of these Canaanite children could have grown into a Pharaoh or a Nebuchadnezzar.

God is the potter and we are the clay. We must, therefore, be willing to be used and shaped by Him to show forth His attributes (Romans 9:21-23). God's honour is more important than ours. God's character is more important than our comfort.

4. It may have been God's way of saving the souls of some Canaanites

Terrible though the end of these Canaanite children was in this world, it is worth noting the possibility that some were elect infants. They were perhaps spared something far worse – a lifetime of abuse and depravity followed by an eternity in hell. Canaanite children were often forced into temple prostitution, sodomy, sacrifice to idols, and other unspeakable practices. Early death spared them these traumas.

You have perhaps lived a long and privileged life. Unlike these Canaanite children, you have been blessed with many temporal and spiritual blessings. But what have you done with them?

Remember you will be held accountable. *'Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required'* (Luke 12:48).

5. The physical line of the promised Messiah was under great threat

The Promised Land was required for Israel to be formed into a secure nation, and a secure Israel was required if the promised Messiah was eventually to come forth from it.

This is why only the six or seven nations and peoples which occupied the Promised Land were to be exterminated, and the more distant peoples were offered peace.

Why though, it might be asked, could Israel not live side by side with the Canaanites? As our correspondent put it, was there not plenty of land? Well, Scripture records that the aggressors were often the Canaanites themselves. The Canaanite Conquest was based partly on the premise, 'Kill or be killed. Exterminate or be exterminated'. If Israel did not conquer, they would have been conquered, the Messiah's descent from Israel jeopardised, and with it the salvation of sinners everywhere. Out of love to humanity, physical threats to Israel's security had to be removed. It was *'save none alive'* so that, eventually, many might be saved alive (Deuteronomy 20:18). So, it was better that some lives perish than that God's truth, God's Messiah, and God's church disappear.

The whole of history leads up to, centres upon, and flows from the Messiah. God's plan for this world revolves around Christ. Everything else is secondary. Does your life lead up to, centre upon, flow from and revolve around the Lord Jesus? Is everything else secondary?

6. God commanded other nations to war against Israel at times

Old Testament wars were often judicial. They were God's way of punishing evildoers. As such, Israel was not exempt. There were times when God commanded other nations to go to war against Israel for their sins to teach Israel not to presume upon God's favour (Jeremiah 4:19-31).

'Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall' (1 Corinthians 10:12). Let us beware of presuming upon God's favour. Let us be warned that God will chasten even those whom He loves, if they require it.

7. It was a temporary requirement at a unique time in redemptive history

There are once-for-all and unrepeatable events in the unfolding plan of God (e.g. the Creation, the Exodus, the giving of the Law at Sinai, Christ's death, Pentecost). To this we should also add the conquest of the Promised Land. The aggressive Holy War it required was limited to the seven named nations at that one special period in history when God's people were being formed into a nation.

Let us be careful about turning exceptions into rules. Let us be aware of the danger of making a temporary one-off necessity a pattern for every-day Christian living. By so doing we *'wrest the Scriptures'* to our own destruction (2 Peter 3:16). The Charismatic church's errors in the area of the gifts of the Holy Spirit are the result of failing to see Pentecost as a one-off unrepeatable event which was necessary to *'kick-start'* the New Testament church by giving signs and wonders to confirm the truths the Apostles were preaching.

8. We should marvel at the longsuffering of God today

When we see the just judgment which God visited on the Canaanites for their sins, we should marvel that He is not visiting us more severely today. Many of the evil Canaanite practices are among us. There is the blood-filled tidal wave of abortion sweeping away millions of babies a year. There is the sodomy which is now not only tolerated but promoted in legislation, in our schools and even in some churches. There is the false religion which is being given preferential treatment above the true religion of Christ. There is the blasphemy which fills the TV channels. There is the pornography which is destroying so many marriages.

Oh the longsuffering of God! Oh the patience! Oh the slowness to anger! However, perhaps in Islamic terrorism we are beginning to hear the distant whispers of divine judgment. Perhaps this is the new Babylon which, like the old, results in curtailed personal freedom and a captivity of national fear. Think of the terror which stalks us at home and abroad. Are these whispers of judgment not getting louder? Is the thunder getting closer? Oh that the longsuffering of God would lead you to repentance!

9. An idea of the final judgment is vividly set before us all

God is spoken of in Scripture as a *'man of war'* (Exodus 15:3), and the Lord of hosts ('armies'). This war imagery is continued on into the New Testament when it speaks of the events leading up to and including the final judgment (2 Thessalonians 2:5-10; Revelation 16:16). In other words, the Canaanite Conquest is a foreshadowing of Christ's Final Conquest, armed with His sharp sword, and clothed with His blood-stained vesture (Revelation 19:11-16).

Are you ready for this final battle? Which side will you be on? Will you be with the Conqueror or the conquered? If only souls were more concerned with and interested in Christ's conquest than the Canaanite conquest, how many more souls would be saved and safe. May consideration of the Canaanite Conquest save you from Christ the Conqueror.

10. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but spiritual

As we have already said, this period of conquest was limited in time. The weapons of that time must be sheathed, blunted and broken. The New Testament Church has no right to take the sword to advance the cause of Christ in an aggressive way (John 18:36). But He has not left His people defenseless. He has provided them with both defensive armour and aggressive weapons made not of metal but of truth, peace, faith, etc. (Ephesians 6:13-17).

So, should Christians kill Muslims in order to advance the church of Christ? Of course not. But we should wage spiritual war against them with spiritual weapons (2 Corinthians 10:4-5).

They may come to us with bombs and bullets and terror. We come with the Almighty power of words and love and peace. It may, of course, be necessary for a nation state to take military action to protect the citizens entrusted to its care (Romans 13:4). But this must not be confused with the response of Christians and churches to Islamic hostility. The right response is to love Muslims 'to death' – to love them till they are converted to Christ one by one and Islam dies out. Or, better, we should say, 'love them to life'.

Let the whole world know that Christians are the Muslims' greatest friends, the Roman Catholics' greatest friends, the secular State's greatest friends – even if they treat us as if we were their greatest enemies and wish to even kill us. We come to you, our enemies, with a crucified and risen Christ. We come to you with the Christ who said, *'I am come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly'*. We come to you with the Christ who loved the very enemies who tortured Him to death, *'Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do'*. We set Him before you and say, 'Look and live'. Oh false religions, look to the incomparable and all compelling Christ!

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