

The Extermination of the Canaanites

The extermination of the Canaanites was commanded by Yahweh in Deut. 7:1-6, where Israel was to kill everyone who was part of these nations. The question at the heart of this topic is how an all-loving God could command the extermination of the Canaanites and have Israel carry it out in Joshua through Judges. The reality is that this topic is perhaps one of the most difficult issues in the Bible to understand, justify, and digest. The point of this paper is not to exhaustively argue the subject or attempt to provide a complete, airtight, satisfactory answer. I do not know if sinners—who do not fully understand the righteousness, justice, and greater all-encompassing will of Yahweh—will ever be able to comprehend fully or accept the answer the Bible gives for this issue. The point, however, is to give insight on the topic that those who attack Christianity for this issue never discuss.

The Reason

First it must be understood that the extermination of the Canaanites had nothing to do with race, religion, or land. It had everything to do with the judgment of a people for their sins. Yahweh did not command Israel to exterminate the Canaanites because they were a different race. In fact, the Canaanite people were Semitic just like the Israelites. Nor did Yahweh command Israel to exterminate everyone who did not convert to Judaism. There were only ten nations specifically marked for destruction (Deut. 7:1). Three of the ten were dealt with before Israel entered the land of Canaan, leaving seven after they entered the land. The Canaanites were a specific group of people, but their name was also used in a general way to refer to these ten nations. (Sometimes the Amorites were named in the same way.) Yahweh made it clear that Israel was not allowed to attack any of the other nations unless the other nation attacked first (Deut. 20). Israel was never commanded in the Bible to merely kill the Canaanites just to take control of the land itself. Rather Yahweh made it clear that the Canaanite people were being destroyed for their sin and only their sin (Gen. 18:20-21; 15:16; Deut. 7:3-4). The land that was then vacant after the conquest was to be given to Israel as a blessing for their obedience but if they sinned as Canaan had then they too would lose the land.

For whatever reason, Yahweh chose to use Israel as His tool of judgment in the same way that He had used the flood (Gen. 6), plagues (Ex. 7-14), and other empires (2 Kgs. 17:7-23; 24:20-25:30). Yahweh gave Israel the land of Canaan as a reward for their obedience to Him but not because He was playing favorites. In fact, he made it clear that Israel, too, would be judged and lose the land if they committed the same sins (Deut. 7:4, 7-11; 9:4-6; 29:16-29). Later Israel did commit the same sins, and Yahweh took them into exile as judgment as He said He would. He used another nation to do it just as He had used Israel to judge the Canaanites (2 Kgs. 17:7-23; 24:20-25:30). It is this fact that makes it very clear that the extermination of the Canaanites had everything to do with the righteous justice of Yahweh and nothing else. So what were the Canaanites doing that was so sinful that it warranted their destruction?

The Nature of the Canaanites' Sin

One must understand when we talk about the sin and practices of the Canaanites that we are not talking about a small group of people in these nations; we are talking about everyone. Everyone, including women and, in some cases, children, were involved in the following practices. The Canaanite people were an extremely violent people involved in and promoting idolatry, gang rape, bestiality, child sacrifice, and many other evil and grotesque practices.¹

Idolatry

The idolatry and the worship of pagan gods would not seem like a sin to most people other than Jews and Christians. But in order to understand why they lived the way they did, one must understand the gods that the people of the ancient Near East worshiped. Anyone who has ever studied the mythology or religions of ancient people knows that their gods were not moral beings, according to anyone's standard in the western world. The gods were always betraying and fighting against each other. Ba'al, the Canaanite storm god, became the high god by defeating Yamm, the sea god. Later, Mot, the god of the grave, attacked Ba'al in order to gain power. Anat, Ba'al's wife and goddess of war and love, fought her way into the grave to rescue her husband. Ugaritic Ba'al myth describes Anat as taking joy in slaughtering her enemies, cutting off their heads and hands and wearing them as a necklace and belt. She is described as killing so many that she was wading through their blood. The death of Yamm and Mot involved cutting them in half, grinding them up, and sifting them in the wind.

Incest and adultery were also part of the gods' lives. El, the father of the gods, was married to Asherah, by whom he had seventy children. Ba'al, one of his sons, was married to his sister Anat. One day Ba'al reported to his father that his mother had tried to seduce him. El told him to go ahead and have sex with her in order to humiliate her, which Ba'al did.² One of Ba'al's wives was his daughter Pidray.³ These are just a few examples, none of which are portrayed with contempt. If these are the beings that you worship, then you will not be any different or better.

Incest and Adultery

The earliest Canaanite laws did prescribe the death penalty for those caught in incest or adultery, but by the fourteenth century BC the penalty had been reduced to a financial fine. However, incestuous fantasies were looked upon with favor and seen as a good omen. The Egyptian Dream book has a section for men that begins with:

“If a man sees himself in a dream...

... having intercourse with his mother: Good. His companions will stick to him.

... having intercourse with his sister: Good. It means that he will inherit something.

... having intercourse with a woman: Bad. It means mourning.”⁴

¹ For a discussion of how the Roman Empire by the Second Testament was just as bad as the Canaanites, see Sarah Ruden, *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*, 2010.

² See “El, Ashertu and the Storm-god,” trans. Albrecht Goetze, ed. James B. Pritchard, in *The Ancient Near East: Supplementary Texts and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*, p. 519.

³ See W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths*, p. 145.

⁴ Papyrus Chester Beatty III recto (BM10683) from about 1175 BC, quoted in Lise Manniche, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt*, p. 100.

Remember, the gods themselves were involved in incestuous relationships. This was so prevalent in the Canaanite culture that Lot's daughters, after growing up in and being influenced by Sodom, both slept with their father and thought nothing of it (Gen. 19:30–8).

Adultery was forbidden by law but only for a married woman. There were no restrictions on the man.⁵ In fact, temple prostitution was a large part of worship in the Canaanite culture. Asherah or Ishtar, also known as the *Queen of Heaven*, was a female fertility goddess who was worshiped through sexual acts, including orgies. Temple prostitutes were male and female priests who had dedicated their bodies to the gods and were considered holy priests. People would go to the temples and have sex with these prostitutes as an act of worship. The people of the ancient Near East viewed a sexual act with these priests as sexual union with the goddess herself.⁶

Homosexuality

Just as fantasies of incest were seen as good omens, so was homosexuality. Some statements in the Babylonian magical text (pre-seventh-century B.C.) say:

“If a man has intercourse with the hindquarters of his equal [male], that man will be foremost among his brothers and colleagues. If a man yearns to express his manhood while in prison and thus, like a male cult-prostitute, mating with men becomes his desire, he will experience evil. If a man has intercourse with a cult prostitute, care [troubles] will leave him.”⁷

There was also a form of homosexuality that was far more violent and subjugating than what we know today. It was not uncommon for a man who wanted to demonstrate his authority and power to rape another man. This act of dominance was seen as a sign of power, and other men looked at this with high regard. The way that one proved his worth to lead others in politics or in the military was through dominating rape. To be the rape victim was so humiliating that no one would ever show respect to that person. The closest thing to this that exists today is when a group of prisoners corner a newcomer in the showers and the alpha male rapes him in order to put him in his place (Gen. 19:4-9; Judg. 19:22).

Bestiality

Not only was bestiality practiced and dreams about it seen as good omens, but it was also practiced as a form of worship. Remember, if the gods did it, then certainly the people who worship them would do it.

“Mightiest Baal hears; He makes love with a heifer in the outback, A cow in the field of Death's Realm. He lies with her seventy times seven, Mounts eighty times eight; [She conceiv]es and bears a boy.”⁸

There were laws against bestiality but only for certain animals. The Hittite law states:

“If anyone has intercourse with a pig or a dog, he shall die. If a man has intercourse with a horse or a mule, there is no punishment.”⁹

⁵ Godfrey Rolles Driver and John C. Miles, *The Assyrian Laws*, p. 38.

⁶ Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna, p. 33.

⁷ Text in brackets is provided because it was missing in the original document. A. Kirk Grayson and Donald Redford, *Papyrus and Tablet*, p. 152:149.

⁸ Mark S. Smith, trans., in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker, p. 148.

⁹ Hoffner, “Incest, Sodomy and Bestiality in the Ancient Near East,” p. 82.

There were even ritualistic practices involving animals tied to the bed of a woman in order to bring some kind of blessing. The ritual describes the woman not only doing grotesque things with the animal but enjoying it.¹⁰

The Egyptian dream book also describes which animals bring good omens when you have a dream about having sex with them. What is most interesting is that it goes on and states that if a woman has a dream where she embraces her own husband, she is doomed.¹¹

Child Sacrifice

Molech was a Canaanite underworld deity¹² that required child sacrifice in order to prove devotion to him (Lev. 18:21; 20:5; 2 Kgs. 16:3; 21:6; 23:10; 2 Chr. 33:6; Ezk. 16:21; 20:31; 23:37; Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35; Isa. 30:33; 57:9). Molech was portrayed as a man with the head of a bull standing upright with his arms outstretched. Inside his stomach was a fire, and children would be placed in his arms for burning. Molech required that you sacrifice your firstborn son to him in order to ensure the blessings of the gods. Infants and children as old as four were offered up to him. If you built a house, you were to lay one of your sacrificed children as the cornerstone to the building to ensure that the gods blessed the house and family all of its days. If someone wanted to guarantee a victory in battle, they could sacrifice one of their children to ensure the gods fought on their behalf (Judg. 11:30-40; 2 Kgs. 3: 26-27).

“In fact, we have independent evidence that child sacrifice was practiced in the Canaanite (Carthaginian and Phoenician) world from many classical sources, Punic inscriptions and archaeological evidence, as well as Egyptian depictions of the ritual occurring in Syria-Palestine, and from a recently discovered Phoenician inscription in Turkey. There is therefore no reason to doubt the biblical testimony to Canaanite child sacrifice.”¹³

“No other ancient people, however, regularly chose their own children as sacrificial victims, or equated them with animals which could sometimes be substituted for them. The Phoenician practice indicates a definition of the ‘family’ and the boundaries belonging to it and alienation from it that was incomprehensible to others in the ancient Mediterranean.”¹⁴

Is Yahweh’s Judgment Just?

It is obvious that no one today would want to live in a culture where everyone was doing this and more, let alone raise their children in this culture. But the question is were they bad enough that it warranted their *total* destruction? Was Yahweh just in having them *all* killed? First, one must understand that there were no police force or prisons in the ancient Near East. Even in our culture we would imprison these people for their crimes. But where do you put them if there are not enough prisons to hold these hundreds of thousands of people and no police to keep the order if they live among you? There is a point at which humans can become so wicked that they will never change.

¹⁰ Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature*, p. 205.

¹¹ Manniche, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt*, p. 100–01.

¹² See Day, John. *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament*, p. 62.

¹³ John Day. *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, p. 211–12.

¹⁴ Shelby Brown. *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice*, p. 75.

Animals, Women, and Children

Most people can understand the men being killed, but for Yahweh to command the death of the animals, women, and children is much harder to understand.

In the wild, most animals fear humans and stay away. However, if an entire culture has practiced bestiality and has trained its animals to have sex with humans, then the animals would have not only lost their fear of humans but would expect to have sex with them. Now imagine that animal in the backyard with your children while it is in heat.

The women were killed because they participated in the violence, child sacrifices, bestiality, and sexual immorality just as much as the men did. The women would often fight in battles and participate in the cutting off of the heads and hands along with the men. They would often seduce men from other villages so that their men could kill them (Judg. 16:4-22). They also willingly offered their own child as a burnt sacrifice.

The destruction of the children is much harder to understand. There is a concept known as generational sin, wherein not only will a child become like his parents because he was raised under their instruction and example but also because he came genetically from those parents. There are certainly exceptions, but they are the exceptions. We already know that people are more genetically disposed to alcoholism and other tendencies; scientists are even trying to find the gay gene. Ultimately, this question can only be answered when one comes to understand that Yahweh is good and that a God who is willing to die for us—even for the Canaanites—is a God who can be trusted with where babies go when they die.

Yahweh's Patience and Desire for Repentance

Yahweh did not just fly off the handle and punish people when they first did something wicked. Yahweh was extremely patient, waiting for hundreds of years for them to reach a certain point of immorality before He judged them. Yahweh is “slow to anger” (Ex. 34:6,7; Ps. 103:8). At the time of the flood, Yahweh told the world that they would be judged, and Noah preached to them for 120 years to bring them to repentance before God judged them (Gen. 6:3, 5-8; 1 Pet. 3:19-20). In Gen. 15:16 Yahweh stated that Abraham’s descendants could not take the land of Canaan because the people there were not bad enough to be destroyed yet. This implies that Yahweh waits until nations or people have become wicked enough before He judges them. Yahweh only destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because they had become bad enough for His judgment.

Yet that destruction served as a warning to the rest of the Canaanites that if they did not change, they would be judged as well. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (2000 B.C.) came 600 years before Israel destroyed the Canaanite nation. We also know that Yahweh placed Abraham and his family in the land in order to witness to the Canaanites, as Noah had previously. From historical records, pre-Abraham, we know that the Canaanites were decent people who became worse and worse and that by the time Israel entered the land everyone was doing the things described above. The Canaanites did not heed the warnings and change.

Yahweh showed this same patience with Israel when He warned them in 1406 B.C. that if they lived like the Canaanites, He would, through another nation, send them into exile (Deut. 7:4, 7-11; 9:4-6; 29:16-29). Yahweh did not punish Israel (the northern kingdom) until 722 B.C. with the Assyrians (2 Kgs. 17:7-23) and Judah (the southern kingdom) in 586 B.C. with the Babylonians (2 Kgs. 24:20-25:30).

When Israel first entered the land, Yahweh did not send warriors to kill people; rather he sent two witnesses to give the people in Jericho a chance to repent and escape the judgment (Josh. 2; Jam. 2:25). Rahab and her family repented, and they not only escaped the judgment but also became a part of Israel. Jericho should have served as an example to the rest of the cities, but, unfortunately, it did not. The Canaanites' unwillingness to repent and change even to escape judgment shows how bad they really were.

Yahweh has made it clear that He is willing to relent in His judgment if a nation repents of its sins and changes its ways (Jer. 18:7-8). He demonstrated this willingness in his dealings with Nineveh (Jonah 3:4-10).

The biggest reason the extermination of the Canaanites bothers us so much is that we do not really appreciate how horrible sin is, nor do we hate it enough. We—being sinners and having sin as an everyday part of our lives, woven into the fabric of our beings—will never be able to understand how a holy and righteous God can be so offended by and justified in His punishment of sin. If we truly understood this, then not only would we understand the extermination of the Canaanites, we would truly be blown away and appreciate the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf. The minute we sinned we forfeited the right to judge a righteous and perfect God.

How Does This Apply to the Church Today?

Today the church is not called to execute justice on the wicked in the same way. This does not mean that Yahweh has changed His mind on what He considers wickedness or how to execute justice. Rather, for the same reason that only ten nations were marked for destruction and the others (even though they were unbelievers) were left alone in the First Testament, so today, in a post-Second Testament world, not every nation or people group is marked for destruction though they are unbelievers as well. Likewise, Yahweh did not choose Israel alone to execute justice in every case throughout history. He also used the flood to judge the world, the plagues and the Red Sea to judge Egypt, fire to judge Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Assyrians and Babylonians to judge Israel. Today He is still judging people by many means we do not always recognize because we do not have divine revelation.

Furthermore, Israel and the Church have purposes that are different from each other. Israel was called to be a distinct and holy nation with their own government and to remain separate from the rest of the nations. They were to enter the land of Canaan, wipe out those ten nations, deal with sin in a just way within their own borders, establish a godly nation under Yahweh, and receive His blessings and protection. They were not to go out to the other nations but were to live so righteously within their own borders that they would become a better and more blessed nation; in doing so, the people from the other nations would be so attracted to this difference that they would want to leave their old lives behind and join Israel. However, Israel failed to do this and so become like all the other nations and was judged by Yahweh for their sins.

The Church, on the other hand, has not been called to be a nation with its own government but instead to be a people who are holy and distinct from the world within their nations and governments. Because we have the Holy Spirit, we have been called to go into the world and be a righteous light among the nations, making disciples of all people (Matt. 5:13-15; 28:19; Acts 1:8). We are to live such righteous lives through the power of the Holy Spirit that those around us, like those living around Israel, will want to leave behind their old ways and worldviews and join the fellowship of Christians. Just as Israel was not to judge the sins of the surrounding

nations, we are not called to judge the sin of the unbelievers around us. And just as they were to deal with their own sin in a just way, so is the Church. We, as the Church, are not called to kill lawbreakers since we are not a government; rather, we are called to dis-fellowship believers who refuse to repent in the hopes that they will want to repent and come back (1 Cor. 5). As with unbelievers, this principle requires that we are living such righteous and blessed lives that those outside the fellowship will recognize what they are missing (Jn. 13:34-35).

What Deut. 7:1-6 teaches us is how much Yahweh hates sin and thus so should we. And just as He desires that sin be removed from Israel, so should we desire that sin be removed from the Church. We are to live so righteously and love each other in such a unique way that the world cannot help but want to be a part of the Church. The First Testament also teaches that just as Israel failed to do this because they did not have Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, we, too, will fail if we do not submit to the will of Jesus Christ and depend on the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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