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Jordan P Ballard

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Introduction

The conquest of the Canaanites as recorded in the Old Testament has become the favorite barb for atheists and critics to hurl at Christian apologists in order to cast Christianity in a bad light, morally speaking. For example, atheist Richard Dawkins is famous for his portrayal of the God of the Old Testament as “a vindictive bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser,”¹ and atheist Lawrence Krauss painted Christianity as a repulsive, immoral religion for sanctioning the Canaanite conquest in his famous 2013 debate with apologist William Lane Craig.² The attacks from skeptics are supplemented by attacks within the Christian fold, as seen in a spate of recent books on the subject matter in which the conquest is characterized as horrific and unholy.³ What is at stake here is both biblical


inerrancy and biblical morality, and Christian apologists, led chiefly by Paul Copan, have responded to both friend and foe alike with a number of books and articles on the subject. With the lines now drawn, there appear to be four ways to handle the problem of the Canaanite conquest. Two approaches condemn the conquest as evil, and two approaches defend the conquest as morally justified. It is this author’s contention that the conquest of the Canaanites happened as depicted in the Old Testament texts, without exaggeration or hyperbole, and that the cornerstone in a strong apologetic for the conquest is God’s prerogative to give and take life as He pleases.

Four Apologetic Approaches to the Canaanite Conquest

Historical Fiction

In the first apologetic, the commandment to slaughter the Canaanite men, women, and children is perceived as primitive, barbaric, and immoral, but it was not actually carried out as depicted in the Old Testament. This view adopts the higher-critical approach to the Old Testament, which states the Deuteronomistic history (Joshua-2 Kings) was written during the sixth century BC and contains stories and legends meant to bolster Israel’s national history. In short, there was no conquest of Canaan as recounted in the book of Joshua. Rather, the Israelites slowly migrated into the land of Canaan, and

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the commandment of such passages as Deuteronomy 7:1-6 were ideological but were never applied. The apologetic value here is that the problem of the Canaanite conquest simply disappears, but the hefty price of forfeiting inerrancy and the fact that this view merely skirts the issue of violence in Scripture make this interpretation unsatisfactory.

**Mistaken Command/DIVINE ACCOMMODATION**

The second apologetic, like the first, condemns the conquest of the Canaanites as morally reprehensible but considers it to be historical nonetheless. The conquest actually happened, but it was not sanctioned by the loving God of Jesus Christ. This interpretation has its roots in the teachings of the ancient heretic, Marcion, who rejected the violent Old Testament God in favor of the loving God of the New Testament, and in Origen, who interpreted the conquest passages allegorically. This view posits that Moses and Joshua were mistaken in thinking that God had issued such commands, or it denies God’s moral perfection because it posits that God accommodated the evil action of genocide. The first move denigrates a high view of Scripture, and the second move denigrates the character of God. As this paper will demonstrate below, neither is warranted.

**Military Conquest Only (No Noncombatants Killed)**

The third approach states that the Canaanite conquest happened and that it was morally justified but that it was not as bad as the critics make it seem. According to Old

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6 See Tertullian *Adversus Marcionem*.

7 Origen *De Principiis* 4.8-9.

8 See, for example, Eric Seibert’s differentiation between the “textual God” and the “actual God” (Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 169-ff.).

9 For example, “An evil act is allowed in order to prevent a worse evil. From a human point of view, the argument is certainly understandable, though the follow-through is painful” (Elmer A. Martens, “Toward Shalom: Absorbing the Violence,” in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008], 47).
Testament scholar, Richard Hess, the conquest entailed disabling military raids rather than the slaughter of innocent women and children.

In fact, a careful reading of Joshua 1-12 indicates that no specific noncombatants are ever named among the Canaanites; except for Rahab and her family, who are spared. This is because the Israelites did not target nor did they kill noncombatants…. Neither the biblical text of Joshua nor that of Judges supports any genocide. The attacks on Jericho and Ai were assaults on military targets. The major wars that Israel fought were defensive.10

The assumption here is that there were no civilians living in the cities/forts attacked by Joshua. A similar interpretation has been popularized by Paul Copan, who agrees with Hess’ point about the nature of the military campaigns, and who adds the notion that the Bible uses exaggeration and hyperbole in the commands to utterly destroy the Canaanites (e.g., Deut 7:1-6) and in the accounts of the conquest (e.g., Josh 10). This view seeks to ease the tension between the “utterly destroy” texts and the subsequent texts which state that there were still Canaanites living in the land afterwards. This apologetic is very popular today because it softens the blow of the conquest. Since God never really intended for Joshua and the Israelites to exterminate the Canaanites, then the conquest does not run against modern sensibilities. This view sounds nice to skeptical readers, but it runs to problems explaining away the numerous biblical texts that seem to state that the Israelites killed all of the Canaanites they encountered, including noncombatants.11


11 It is the contention of this author that the Canaanite conquest happened as recorded, without exaggeration or hyperbole, for the following reasons. 1) Although hyperbole was common in other ANE war records, Joshua did not have the egocentric motive to exaggerate his victories. 2) Attempts to downplay the severity of the herem passages are unsatisfactory upon close examination. For example, Hess (“Appendix 2,” 674) claims that the phrase “men and women” in Joshua 8:25 is stereotypical and could include anyone, whether men or women. However, 1 Samuel 22:18-23 provides an exception to the rule,
The Conquest Happened as Depicted

The fourth approach is the more traditional apologetic and has much in common with the previous view except that it takes the conquest texts at face value. The Israelites were commanded to slaughter the Canaanites, and that is exactly what happened. The major point in this approach is that God has the right to give and take life as He sees fit.

and the fact that Rahab was living with her father, mother, brothers, and all who belonged to her (Josh 6:23) indicates that there were civilians in the cities. In addition, Deuteronomy 2:34 states that Sihon and the Amorites were completely destroyed (herem), including men, women, and children (see Num 21:21-35). There is no stereotypical construction in that text (cf. Deut 3:6). Finally, the fact that the herem was even carried out against the animals (see Josh 7; 1 Sam 15) argues against the idea of stereotypical language.

3) There is no contradiction between the commands to “drive out” and the commands to “utterly destroy” that would lead to a non-literal reading of the conquest in Joshua. The initial battles were most likely disabling raids where the Israelite army conquered the military fortresses of the Canaanite nations. The text of Joshua is clear that the Israelites set up their base at Gilgal (Josh 4:19; 5:9-10; 9:6; 10:6-7) and that they returned to Gilgal after their battles (10:15, 43; cf. 14:6). It was not until after the military campaigns that the Israelites attempted to settle in the land (Kenneth A. Kitchen, On the Reliability of the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]), 161-63. The Israelites completely destroyed (i.e., killed) the Canaanites in battle and spared no one in the cities and fortresses they conquered (e.g., Josh 10-11). The Canaanites who were left over had either left the cities and returned after the battles (when the Israelites returned to Gilgal) or lived outside the cities and remained for the Israelites to drive out. This eliminates the tension between the commands to “drive out” the Canaanites (Exod 23:28-31; 33:2; 34:11; Num 32:21; 33:52-55; Deut 4:38; 7:1; 9:3-6; 11:23; 18:12; 33:27; Josh 3:10; 14:12; 17:18; 23:5) and the commands to exterminate them (e.g., Deut 7:1-6; cf. Deut 33:27).

4) There is no need for a hyperbolic interpretation of the herem passages simply because there were Canaanites left in the land to expel. The Lord had told Moses that He would not drive out the Canaanites all at once (Deut 7:22), so it is no surprise at all that there were Canaanites scattered here and there after the conquest (Josh 13:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:13; 23:13 [cf. Num 33:55]; Judg 1:19, 21, 27-33; 2:21). Joshua and his armies did totally destroy the Canaanites they encountered in local battles even though there were other Canaanites living in the land that they were to drive out.

An Apologetic for the Canaanite Conquest

Because of the complexity of the matter at hand, it is necessary to lay out a comprehensive, internally consistent, biblical defense of God’s commandment to the Israelites exterminate the Canaanites. Each point assumes, for the sake of argument, an evangelical view of Scripture because the challenge from critics of all stripes is that the Bible is internally inconsistent in presenting a God of love who would command the annihilation of an entire civilization.

The Land Belongs to the Lord

The first point to make is obvious but often overlooked: the Canaanite conquest happened in a specific, biblical context. To get the bigger picture, one has to remember that about four hundred years prior to the conquest, God made a specific covenant with Abraham that included descendents, blessings, and land (Gen 12, 15, 17, 22). God selected the descendents of Abraham – the Israelites – to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:5-6). They were to be unique and set apart for the Lord. God delivered His chosen people from the oppression in Egypt and intended to give them the land promised to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen 12:7; 15:18-21; 17:8; 26:2-3; 28:13-15; 46:1-4; Exod 3:8; 13:5; 23:31-33; 34:11-16). According to the biblical account, the land of Canaan belonged to the Lord (Lev 25:23). In fact, the patriarchs had once occupied the land (Gen 13:12; 16:3; 23:20; 25:10-11; 26:6; 33:18-19; 37:1) and had even purchased some of the land (Gen 23:16-18; 25:10; 33:19; 50:13). Thus, the Israelites were repossessing the land. They were prohibited from taking the land of the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites (Deut 2), and the Israelites were later driven out of their own land because of their wickedness.
Specific Instructions for War

Another important observation about the Canaanite conquest is that the Israelites were given specific instructions for war in the Law of Moses. The Israelites were to target seven specific Canaanite nations: the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. The Israelites were not to intermarry with them or make any treaties with them (Deut 7:1-6). Rather, they were commanded to “drive out” (בָּרֹג) these nations and smash their sacred stones, lest the Canaanites stay in the land and entice the Israelites to false worship (Exod 23:20-33). The Israelites could try to make peace with the distant, non-Canaanite nations before waging war with them, and the Israelites were not allowed to kill the women and children in those instances (Deut 20:10-18), but they were commanded to completely destroy (וְגַם תַּמִּיתם) the Canaanite nations. Nothing was to be left alive anything, or else the Canaanites would surely lead the Israelites into idolatry (Deut 20:16-18). The specific term herem (בָּרֹג), which means “to ban to utter destruction” or “to devote to the Lord,” 13 was applied to the Canaanite nations and was not the normal war practice. No one could invoke the herem without the Lord’s permission (see 2 Sam 21). This brings up the last point about the conquest of the Canaanites – namely, that the conquest was instigated and carried out by the Lord’s own command (Deut 9:3), making the conquest a “holy war.” 14 The motivation behind the conquest was not Israelite brutality but obedience to God’s commands. 15

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14 Tremper Longman III & Daniel G. Reid, God is a Warrior (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 32-33.
15 Lamb, God Behaving Badly, 77-78.
Moral Cleansing

It is clear from the biblical text that the Lord did not command the conquest because of Israel’s military superiority but because of the Canaanites’ wickedness (Deut 9:4-6; Lev 18:24). According to both the Bible and the ANE literature, the Canaanite sins included idolatry (Exod 23:32-33; 34:13-16; Deut 12:2-3; 20:18); sorcery, divination, and witchcraft (Deut 18:9-14); adultery, incest, homosexuality, and bestiality (Lev 18:1-5, 24-30); and worst of all, child immolation (Lev 18:21; Deut 12:30-31). Because God is holy and just (cf. Gen 18:25), He hates sin, and He will not leave the guilty unpunished indefinitely. He does not delight in punishing the wicked (Ezek 18:23; 33:11; cf. Jer 18:7-10), but He knew that if the Canaanites were allowed to stay in the land and live among the Israelites, then they would have spread their spiritual and moral depravity among God’s holy people. This is in fact the very thing that happened when the Israelites did not drive out the Canaanites (see Judg 1-2), and the end result was Canaanite idolatry in Israel throughout the entire Old Testament. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to call the conquest “moral cleansing” than “genocide.”

God’s Mercy in the Midst of Judgment

It is important to remember that before God leveled judgment against the Canaanites, he gave them four hundred years to repent (see Gen 15:16; cf. Exod 12:40). In addition, the Canaanites had heard what God had done to Sihon and Og (Josh 2:11; cf. Num 21). “Thus Canaan had, as it were, a final forty-year countdown as they heard of the events in Egypt, at the crossing of the Reed Sea [sic], and what happened to the kings

16 See Jones, “We Don’t Hate Sin So We Don’t Understand What Happened to the Canaanites,” 53-72.

17 Copan and Flannagan, Did God Really Command Genocide? 277.
who opposed Israel along the way.”\textsuperscript{18} The Canaanites had ample time to repent, and mercy was available to those who defected, such as Rahab and her family (Josh 2; cf. 6:17; Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25), as well as to others (see Josh 9; Judg 1:22-26). The nation of Israel suffered in bondage to Egypt for hundreds of years because of God’s patience with the Canaanite nations, but the sins had finally reached their full measure, and God said, “Enough is enough.”

\textbf{The Divine Prerogative to Take Life}

The last point in this apologetic is the most important point because it differentiates this view from the previous three.\textsuperscript{19} Simply put, the Bible teaches that God has the right to give and take life (Deut 32:39; Job 1:21). God does not owe anyone life. Life is a gift that can be taken away at any time. Additionally, God has the right to take life by whatever means He chooses, including through disease (2 Chr 21:18-19), famine (Deut 32:24), floods (Gen 6-8), plagues (Exod 32:35), fire (Gen 19), earthquakes (Num 16), human government (Rom 13), and through human armies (Josh 2-11). Because God is a morally perfect being, then whatever God commands is right.\textsuperscript{20} Therefore, if God wanted to use the Israelites as His chosen instrument to annihilate the Canaanites (see Deut 4:34), then He has that prerogative.

God has the prerogative to take the lives of both men and women, young and old. There are a number of places in the Bible where the lives of women and children are

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{18} Kaiser, \textit{Toward Old Testament Ethics}, 268.
\textsuperscript{19} There is no doubt that evangelical apologists and scholars who take the third view (Copan, Hess, etc.) would agree that God has the right to give and take life since this is taught in Scripture. But when this point is put at the center of the apologetic, then there is no need to soften the conquest texts because they speak of women and children being killed. When God issues the command, then God is taking the lives.
\textsuperscript{20} For an overview of the divine command theory of ethics, see Copan and Flannagan, \textit{Did God Really Command Genocide?} 139-ff.
\end{footnotes}
presumably taken: in the Flood (Gen 6-8), at Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:25), during the first Passover in Egypt (Exod 11-12), in Korah’s rebellion (Num 16), during Achan’s sin (Josh 7), in the wilderness (Num 16:46-50 [14,700 people]; 25:9 [24,000 people]), during the Assyrian invasion (see Hos 13:16; cf. Isa 10:5), and during the future tribulation (Rev 6-19). In no instance is an innocent victim guilty of another’s sin (Eze 18:20), but in many instances men, women, and children suffer the consequences of someone else’s sins because of their relationship to the guilty person.\textsuperscript{21} However, there is a final judgment where each person will receive his due reward or punishment, so there is no injustice with God in the end. The innocent Canaanite children who died before the age of accountability (Isa 7:16) will still receive eternal life as a gift from God (2 Sam 12:23), so there is no wrong done to the children except that their lives were cut short. But again, no one is promised a long life. God has the right to take a person’s life at any age because He is God.

\textit{Conclusion}

The five-pronged apologetic presented here emphasizes the need to understand the biblical context of the Canaanite conquest, including the lynchpin, that God has the right to take life as He chooses. This last point may be debated by some, but it is biblically supported and theologically sound. After all, who does have the right to take life, if not God? Only after one recognizes that God is the author of life can he delve further into understanding God’s holiness, mercy, and judgment as depicted in the conquest of the Canaanites.

\textsuperscript{21} For more on the concept of corporate solidarity, see Kaiser, \textit{Toward Old Testament Ethics}, 67-70.
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Origen. De Principiis.


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