

The Reasons for the Expulsion of the Canaanite Tribes and their Implications for Contemporary Times

Philemon Ibrahim

ABSTRACT

The biblical narrative concerning the conquest of Canaan has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate, particularly in relation to its ethical implications and historical applications. Critics contend that this narrative has been historically appropriated by certain Christian groups to rationalize acts of oppression and dehumanization against individuals who are, according to Christian doctrine, created in the image of God. The directive for the Israelites to "utterly destroy" the Canaanites raises significant ethical and theological concerns, particularly when analyzed through a contemporary lens that emphasizes principles of justice and compassion. This paper adopts a theological framework, positing that the concept of "utterly destroying" one's enemies within the context of these conquests may symbolize a heightened form of religious devotion. It is suggested that such actions are interpreted as offerings of the souls of the vanquished to God, who is perceived as requiring such expressions of devotion due to His intrinsic holiness and the imperative of maintaining purity among the Israelite people. Employing a synthetic analysis, this study seeks to elucidate several concrete reasons articulated within biblical traditions that account for Joshua's conquests and the subsequent expulsion of the Canaanites from the land. The five reasons delineated in this discourse encompass themes identified as Salvific, moral, land-related,

the perception of threat, and cautionary warnings, each providing critical insight into the theological and socio-political motivations that underpin these complex biblical narratives.

Key Words: Conquest, Expulsion, God's command, sin, and Land

INTRODUCTION

The misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the biblical conquest narratives have contributed to a distorted image of God's character, leading to the perception of the Bible as a text that endorses war and genocidal actions. Such readings have resulted in some scholars characterizing God as racist, genocidal, and heartless among other negative traits. The divine commands and Israel's fulfillment of these directives as depicted in the Book of Joshua represent some of the most challenging ethical dilemmas faced by readers of the Bible. Engagement with these contentious passages is essential for a nuanced understanding and should not be dismissed. Eryl Davies, in his work, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics*, asserts, "Clearly, there is nothing to be gained from minimizing the problems presented by the ethically unpalatable passages of the Hebrew Bible, or by closing our eyes and pretending that they do not exist. The fact is that these passages do exist, and the problems which they cause must be faced head-on." ¹This perspective is particularly relevant to the accounts of Joshua's conquests and other Pentateuchal narratives, which describe God commanding the total expulsion of the Canaanites. Many individuals struggle to reconcile the notion that God would command such actions against an entire people group. An example of a scholar who has misinterpreted the biblical rationale for conquest is

¹ Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 21

Thomas Paine. In his work, *The Age of Reason*, Paine raises several probing questions regarding the nature and justification of the Conquest, illustrating his struggle to understand the ethical implications of these biblical accounts:

.....When we read in the books ascribed to Moses, Joshua, etc., that they (the Israelites) came by stealth upon whole nations of people, who, as history itself shows, had given them no offence; that they put all those nations to the sword; that they spared neither age nor infancy; that they utterly destroyed men, women, and children; that they left not a soul to breathe — expressions that are repeated over and over again in those books, and that, too, with exulting ferocity—are we sure these things are facts? Are we sure that the Creator of man commissioned these things to be done? Are we sure that the books that tell us so were written by his authority?.... To charge the commission of acts upon the Almighty, which in their nature, and by every rule of moral justice, are crimes, as all assassination is, and more especially the assassination of infants is [a] matter of serious concern. The Bible tells us, that those assassinations were done by the express command of God. To believe therefore the Bible to be true, we must unbelieve all our belief in the moral justice of God; for wherein could crying or smiling infants offend? And to read the Bible without horror, we must undo everything tender, sympathizing, and benevolent in the heart of man. Speaking for myself, if I had no other evidence that the Bible is fabulous than the sacrifice I must make to believe it to be true, that alone would be sufficient to determine my choice.²

This assertion by Paine reflects a profound misunderstanding of the underlying reasons for the conquest and the divine purpose behind the herem regarding the Canaanites. Such

² Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (London: R. Carlile, 1818), 2.1–2.

misconceptions have led him to perceive the Bible as more of a compendium of malevolent narratives than as the Word of God, particularly in light of the conquest accounts. Paine emphatically states, “Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon, than the Word of God. It is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind; and, for my part, I sincerely detest it, as I detest everything cruel.”³ Similarly, Richard Dawkins encapsulates the sentiments of New Atheism in *The God Delusion*, asserting, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”⁴ Dawkins' critique emerges from a flawed interpretation of God's character, commands, and expectations as presented in biblical texts. Such readings fail to account for the complexities of the narrative and the theological context that informs these difficult passages, ultimately resulting in a skewed understanding of the divine nature as depicted in the biblical tradition.

One of the scholars who echoes the criticisms of the Old Testament God as articulated by Richard Dawkins is Christopher Hitchens. In his work *God Is Not Great*, Hitchens remarks, “The Bible may, indeed does, contain a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre, but we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude,

³ Paine, *The Age of Reason*, 7.

⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God's Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008),31

uncultured human mammals.”⁵ This criticism underscores that it is not only Dawkins who challenges the ethical implications of the Old Testament; others, too, perpetuate similar accusations, primarily stemming from a misunderstanding of the fundamental reasons behind God’s command for the Israelites to practice *herem*. Stephen De Young, in his book *God Is a Man of War: The Problem of Violence in the Old Testament*, contends that critics such as Dawkins and Hitchens misinterpret the character of God presented in the Old Testament. He argues for the necessity of situating the instances of purported divine violence within their appropriate theological and cultural contexts.⁶ Additionally, evangelical scholar Paul Copan, in his recent work *Is God a Vindictive Bully? Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old Testament and New Testament*, posits that critics of the Old Testament often neglect nuance and context, displaying a reluctance to engage in reasoned discourse.⁷ This paper aims to delve into the reasons behind the conquest narratives to facilitate a more accurate interpretation and application within contemporary relationships. Furthermore, it seeks to address the allegations of genocide within the context of the Israelite conquests and to illuminate how prevailing interpretations may overlook the broader narrative of the divine as presented in the Old Testament.

⁵ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York:Twelve Publishers, 2009), 10

⁶ Stephen De Young, *God Is a Man of War: The Problem of Violence in the Old Testament*(Ancient Faith Publishing,2021)

⁷ Paul Copan, *Is God a Vindictive Bully? Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old Testament And New Testament* (Grand Rapids,Michigan: Baker Academic, 2022), 4.

YAHWEH'S ROLE IN THE EXPULSION

The evaluation of the war from its inception to conclusion reveals that Yahweh was the prime mover—initiating, preparing, and executing the conflict while employing Israel as His instrument. A closer look shows that the Lord provided Joshua with a strategic plan for the conquest of Jericho (Joshua 6:1-5) and intervened, causing confusion among the Canaanites during Gideon's battle (Joshua 10:10). These instances highlight that the Lord was deeply involved in the battles, which were never truly Israel's to own.⁸ At the end of the Canaanite confrontations, Joshua explicitly acknowledged that it was YHWH who expelled the Canaanites, fighting on behalf of Israel (Joshua 23:9-10).

The Old Testament further supports the notion of Yahweh as the central reason for these wars, as seen in references to the “Book of the Wars of the LORD” (Num 21:14) and “the battles of the LORD” (1 Sam 18:17; 25:28; cf. 17:47). The perpetual conflict with the Amalekites (Exod 17:16) illustrates Yahweh's significant role as the warrior for Israel (Exod 15:3). It's crucial to note that it is not Yahweh who stands alongside Israel; rather, Israel stands alongside Yahweh. The mission given to the Israelites was not to fight for themselves but to serve Yahweh, allowing Him to fight His battles through them for His glory and for the salvation of both Israel and the world. In his work “*Holy War*” or “*Yahweh's War*,” Gwilym H. Jones reinforces the idea that these conflicts are not Israel's wars but Yahweh's. This leads us to reject the notion of “Holy War” as people fighting for God.⁹ In the Old Testament context, particularly during the conquests led by Joshua, it is the Lord

⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, trans. and ed. by Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 41-45

⁹ Gwilym H. Jones, “‘Holy War’ or ‘Yahweh War?’” *Vetus Testamentum* 25, no. 3 (1975): 642-58.

who fights for His glory and purpose through the chosen people of Israel, selected for His divine plan.

THE CONQUEST AND THE TERM *HEREM*

There is no concrete sense to discuss the issue of expulsion of the seven tribes without the proper understanding of the term *herem*. The word appears 78 times in the Old Testament, with 50 occurrences in verb form in the following chapters and verses; 1 Exod 22:20; Lev 27:28, 29; Num 21:2, 3; Deut 2:34; 3:6 (2); 7:2 (2); 13:15; 20:17 (2); Josh 2:10; 6:21; 8:26; 10:1, 28, 35, 37, 39, 40; 11:11, 12, 20, 21; Judg 1:17; 21:11; 1 Sam 15:3, 8, 9 (2), 15, 18, 20; 1 Kgs 9:21; 2 Kgs 19:11; 1 Chron 4:41; 2 Chron 20:23; 32:14; Ezra 10:8; Isa 11:15; 34:2; 37:11; Jer 25:9; 50:21, 26; 51:3; Dan 11:44; Mic 4:13.¹⁰ And in these appearances, the verb does not appear in Qal form but only in Hiphil or Hophal form. In this verb form of the appearances of the term; it has often been translated as “ban, devote, exterminate” (verb) and in the noun form, it has been translated as “devoted thing, devotion, ban”.¹¹

In the LXX, the term has been translated as *anathema*, which is referring to a votive offering in the temple, and it later connotes curse and destruction, but it was not so originally. This means that the primary idea is not necessarily destruction, though. The etymology of *herem* suggests the idea of consecration or separation.¹² For if an Israelite could devote common things to the Lord such as a field, a man, an animal, or family land (Lev 27:21, 28), and everything in Israel that was devoted to the Lord was given to the priests for their consumption and use (Num 18:14; Eze 44:29). One’s property could even be “devoted” (confiscated) for failure to assemble in certain situations (e.g., Ezra 10:8). It is a notable reality in the

¹⁰ Alexander Jones, ed., *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 281; J. P. U. Lilley, “Understanding the Herem,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993): 169–77

¹¹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Edward Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 355–56; Ludwig Köhler & Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1:354.

¹² George F. Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895), 36 n17.

ancient Israel that “devotion” was permanent and immutable; when a thing is consecrated to the Lord could not be bought back and that means no one can bring it back. On this ground, we have to ascertain the fact that objects could be devoted to God, in which case they would be holy to the Lord (Lev 27:28), or objects could be devoted to God to be destroyed if they were unholy and opposed to God’s plan and demand.¹³ And the major problem that led to the destruction of the unholy objects is that the objects were “contagious” in the sense that they could make others unholy and liable to death, as in the case of Achan (Josh 7).¹⁴

In this sense and connection to the conquest; this means that God’s command is on the sense of Israelites to devote the tribes back to Him. This means that God demands the lives of the tribes be given back to him as a devoted sacrifice for destruction to keep the covenant people out of impurity and contamination. This means that the Canaanites were not destroyed in our modern sense, but they were destroyed in the sense of devoting them to God as a demanded sacrifice. This means that God used Israel to take the lives of Canaanites back to Himself as a devoted sacrifice for the sake of His holiness and the purity of His Holy People Israel. The failure to devote all the cities to the Lord is a sin and is punishable by God. This connotes that Israel is not to spare any person; infants, children, women and men because all of them belong to God and all of them are demanded to be devoted to God. Exodus 22:20 reads, “Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction.” Deuteronomy 7:2, speaking of the conquest of the land, says, “And when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them.” Old Testament scholars Keil and Delitsch give a fuller understanding of the meaning of *herem* in their discussion of Lev. 27:29.

¹³ Leon J. Wood, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 324

¹⁴ Richard D. Nelson, “Herem and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience,” in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature: Festschrift C.H.W. Brekelmans*, eds. M. Vervenne and J. Lust (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1997), 46.

They write,

Nothing put under the ban, nothing that a man had devoted (banned) to the Lord of his property, of man, beast, or the field of his possession, was to be sold or redeemed because it was most holy. . . . [Ḥerem], judging from the cognate words in Arabic . . . , has the primary signification ‘to cut off,’ and denotes that which is taken away from use and abuse on the part of men, and surrendered to God in an irrevocable and unredeemable manner, viz. human beings by being put to death, cattle and inanimate objects by being either given up to the sanctuary forever or destroyed for the glory of the Lord. . . . [T]here can be no doubt that the idea which lay at the foundation of the ban was that of a compulsory dedication of something which resisted or impeded sanctification; . . . it was an act of the judicial holiness of God manifesting itself in righteousness and judgment.¹⁵

Tremper Longman writes that “ḥerem” refers to the climactic aspect of divine warfare: the offering of the conquered people and their possessions to the Lord.”¹⁶ For such reason, Canaanites, because of their sins, were to be devoted to destruction. And Israel was to be the instrument and weapon of God for the carrying out of judgment against the tribes of Canaanites.

THE REASONS FOR THE EXPULSION OF CANAANITES

The researchers discovered five objective reasons which are reflected in the scripture that God demand or command the destruction of the Canaanites. These reasons are discussed below in the sequential pattern for proper reflection and articulation. These reasons are:

¹⁵ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, trans., *James Martin, Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1: The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 484-485.

¹⁶ Tremper Longman III, “The Case for Spiritual Continuity,” in C. S. Cowles, et al., *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 172.

Salvific Reasons

One of the primary reasons scholars cite for the expulsion of the Canaanites is rooted in the salvific view that emerges from God's promises to Abraham.¹⁷ This foundational promise is presented in Genesis 12, where God instructs Abraham to leave his homeland and promises him a new land, which is central to the covenant. The promise of this land, particularly the land of Canaan, is explicitly reaffirmed in Genesis 12:7. At this point, the land is already inhabited by the Canaanites, raising questions about how God would fulfill His promise amidst the presence of these people. The challenge lies in the apparent contradiction: how can God bestow a land already occupied by others? To reconcile this, it seems that the only path Yahweh could take to transfer ownership of this land to the Israelites involved the elimination of its current inhabitants—the Canaanites.

The destruction of these peoples is closely linked to Yahweh's broader plan of salvation through Abraham. While this promise of salvation is intended for Abraham's descendants and, by extension, for the world, it appears that the Canaanites must face the opposite outcome: destruction and curse. This dynamic indicates that, for the promise to be realized—where the descendants of Abraham can inherit the land and fulfill their role in God's redemptive plan—the Canaanites must be removed. Thus, their destruction is viewed not just as an act of judgment but as a necessary step for God's ultimate purpose, where the lineage of Abraham can bring forth blessings to the world. In this context, the fate of the Canaanites becomes intertwined with the larger narrative of divine promise and salvation history.¹⁸

¹⁷ William Ford, "The Challenge of The Canaanites", *Tyndale Bulletin* 68. 2(2017): 161, 161-184

¹⁸ Ford, "The Challenge of The Canaanites", 162-163

Moral reasons

This argument presents a perspective on the expulsion of the Canaanites that focuses on their immorality and the inherent evil of their practices. Scholars contend that the abhorrent behaviors of the Canaanites were a significant factor in Yahweh's decision to command their removal from the land, facilitating the occupation by the covenant people of Israel.

This line of reasoning can be traced back to the very beginning of Israel's journey post-emancipation from Egypt. After God liberated Israel from Egyptian oppression, they faced hostility from various Canaanite groups, such as the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8–13), the king of Arad (Num. 21:1), the Amorites (Num. 21:21–26; Deut. 2:26–37), and Bashan (Num. 21:33–35; Deut. 3:1–22). Even Balak, the king of Moab, sought to attack Israel, albeit thwarted by divine intervention through Balaam (Num. 22–24). These encounters illustrate that the Israelites, newly freed and vulnerable in the wilderness, found themselves under assault from the very people whose land they were destined to inherit. Proponents of this view assert that Israel was essentially an innocent nation, having done nothing to provoke these attacks from the Canaanite tribes. This notion reinforces the idea that God intervened to defend the weak and vulnerable, judging nations for their oppression, as seen in the prophetic books (e.g., Amos 1–2; Jeremiah 48:7; 2 Kings 17, 24–25). In this light, Yahweh's judgment against the Canaanites can be interpreted as a response to their aggression towards Israel, a nation that was still finding its footing after emancipation.¹⁹

Further arguments suggest that God granted the Amorites and other Canaanite tribes a substantial period—four hundred

¹⁹ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Downers' Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 183 – 184

years—to repent, reinforcing the concept of divine patience before judgment. Moses urged Israel to conquer the Canaanites to prevent the adoption of their detestable practices, thus preserving the moral laws instituted by God (Deut. 20:18). The intent was clear: by destroying Canaanite religious symbols and practices, Israel would maintain their loyalty to God. Notably, archaeological findings, as highlighted by experts like William F. Albright, support the narrative of Canaanite moral corruption. He described the Canaanites' religious practices, characterized by orgiastic nature worship and deep-rooted sexual immorality, as starkly opposed to the ethical and monotheistic values of Israel.²⁰ Albright pointed out the moral imbalance of Canaanite culture, which he deemed deserving of divine retribution. The Canaanites' offenses included serious sexual transgressions and child sacrifice, which were explicitly condemned in the Law (Lev. 18). Although some scholars dispute the prevalence of child sacrifice among the Canaanites, Jon D. Levenson's research into the archaeological remains of Carthage indicates a historical precedent for these practices, suggesting a continuity of immoral behavior originating from the Canaanite motherland.²¹ Verses such as Deuteronomy 9:4-5 further reinforce this viewpoint, depicting the Canaanites as sinful and thereby justifying their removal by a holy God. The text in Deuteronomy emphasizes that their wickedness was cause for dispossession, linking it back to the covenant promise in Genesis 15:26. Notably, Deuteronomy 12:31 provides a particularly severe condemnation, stating that the Canaanites engaged in every abominable act that God abhors. This framework raises questions about the dual nature of their expulsion—it is not solely related to their actions against

²⁰ William F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: An Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), 56.

²¹ 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), 21.

Israel but perhaps also intertwined with their broader relationship with Yahweh.²² Ultimately, while Canaanite violence toward Israel contributes to the arguments for their expulsion, the discussions surrounding their behavior point to a deeper moral and theological context regarding their relationship with God and the covenant community.

The Land Reason

The argument regarding the expulsion of the Canaanites centers on the necessity for the Israelites to have a land of their own in order to fulfill their identity as the holy nation of Yahweh. This concept is deeply rooted in the promise made by God to Abram, which emphasizes that the Israelites could only achieve their status as a holy nation by occupying the land that God designated for them. From the beginning, the directive was clear: Abram was instructed to leave his homeland and journey to the land that God would reveal to him (Genesis 12:1). Furthermore, God reassured Abram of the promise by telling him to look at the land surrounding him, promising to give it to him and his descendants forever (Genesis 13:14-17).²³ This promise not only points to a multitude of descendants who would become a "great nation" (Genesis 12:2) but also implies that such a nation would require a substantial land to thrive.

The idea that God would "give" the land indicates His ownership, marking anyone residing in it—whether Canaanite or Israelite—as merely a tenant. God clearly outlined the boundaries of this promised land to Abram, stating that it extends from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates, encompassing several nations (Genesis 15:18-20). It is evident that a nation cannot sustain its holiness without a specific

²² Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1518-1519.

²³ Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 78.

land. ²⁴The focus is not solely on the sins of the Canaanites but rather on the need for the Israelites to inhabit the land to maintain their holiness in the presence of Yahweh. The land of the Canaanites was deemed suitable for this purpose, enabling God's chosen people to be distinct for His holy intentions. The notion that the Canaanites must be considered sinful serves to justify the transfer of the land, aligning with the understanding that all land ultimately belongs to Yahweh.

The significance of this is further magnified by the Israelites' unique status as the firstborn son of God and as "the people of his inheritance" (Exodus 4:22-23; Deuteronomy 4:20). Although the Israelites had experienced God's blessings in Egypt and understood the importance of revering God, they had limited knowledge of how to fully embody their role as His chosen people. Throughout their time in Egypt, they learned to cry out to the Lord in their suffering and held on to the promises made to the patriarchs. Yet, God had grander plans to reveal His true nature, character, and power, which required a land where these attributes could be manifested and understood. Through the Israelites' relationship with Him, God aimed to demonstrate His glory and provision, culminating in the need for a physical space in which His laws and decrees could be put into practice. In selecting the land of the Canaanites, God ensured that His holiness and the sanctity of His people would be upheld, benefiting not only Israel but all nations as He had promised to Abram.

Canaanites as a Threat's Reason

The text presents a perspective on the destruction of the Canaanites by YHWH, emphasizing their role as a danger to Israel rather than simply as sinners. It argues that YHWH's

²⁴ Emmanuel Twumasi Ankrah, "Yahweh, Israel And The Neighboring Nations: An Analysis Of Land Redistribution", *ERATS Vol.1* (2017): 125

command to expel the Canaanites stems from a desire to protect His covenant people from both physical threat and spiritual compromise.²⁵ Unlike the notion of Canaanites as merely sinners, this view underlines a more complex relationship involving YHWH, Israel, and the Canaanites, suggesting that the true danger lies in the potential for fear and influence that the Canaanites could impose on Israel. It references Numbers 14:42-45 and Joshua 7:1-12 to illustrate that Israel's success is contingent upon the presence of YHWH, highlighting that fear should be directed towards Him rather than the Canaanites.

The expulsion of the Canaanites is framed as essential for Israel to understand that they must rely solely on YHWH, avoiding any temptation to worship foreign gods or intermarry with Canaanite people. Furthermore, the text notes that the Canaanites are not necessarily worse idolaters than those of other nations but pose a greater risk due to their proximity to the Israelites.²⁶ Thus, the expulsion is portrayed not merely as a punishment for sin but as a preventive measure against the corrupting influence of the Canaanites on Israel's covenantal relationship with YHWH. This intentional act of destruction is characterized as vital for maintaining Israel's holiness and identity as God's chosen people, liberated and redeemed for a purpose.

Canaanites are Warning to Israel and Other Nations

This fourth hypothesis suggests that God used Israel to destroy the Canaanites as a warning for both Israel and other nations, urging them to avoid the sins prevalent among the Canaanites.²⁷ It emphasizes that the land truly belongs to Yahweh, and everyone, including the Israelites, are merely

²⁵ Ford, *The Danger Of Canaanites*, 34.

²⁶ Ford, "The Challenges Of The Canaanites", 168.

²⁷ Ankrah, "Yahweh, Israel And The Neighboring Nations", 130.

tenants required to adhere to the Most High's guidelines (Lev. 25:23). This transfer of land is reinforced by the covenant Yahweh made with Abraham, which is fulfilled through Israel receiving the land. Leviticus 18 illustrates this point clearly by stating that the Canaanites defiled the land through their immoral actions, leading Yahweh to reject them as the land "vomited" them out for their iniquity. Verses 24-25 and 27 reflect this removal, with verse 28 explicitly warning Israel: "lest the land vomits you out if you defile it, just as it vomited out the nation that was before you." This serves as a stark reminder to the Israelites to adhere to Yahweh's statutes rather than mimic the Canaanites (Lev. 18:3-5, 26). The expulsion acts as a cautionary tale for Israel and surrounding tribes, illustrating that Yahweh can just as easily expel any nation practicing the same sins as the Canaanites. The theme of warning is reiterated in Deuteronomy 8:19-20, which states that Israel will be destroyed like the Canaanites if they turn to other gods. Verse 20 specifically warns that if they do not listen to Yahweh, they will suffer a fate similar to that of the nations He is driving out before them. A careful reading of chapters 6, 7, and 8 reveals that the Canaanites were removed due to their wickedness, while Israel was brought in not because of their own righteousness, but to fulfill Yahweh's promise to the patriarchs. The consequence of turning to sin, emphasized in verses 19-20, highlights the universal warning that every nation must heed to avoid the same destructive fate that befell the Canaanites.²⁸

THE APPLICATION TO CONTEMPORARY TIMES

This perspective argues that labeling the conquest of Canaan as genocide imposes a modern framework that risks misrepresenting the historical and theological context.

²⁸ Clay Jones, "We Don't Hate Sin So We Don't Understand What Happened to the Canaanites: An Addendum to "Divine Genocide" Arguments" *Philosophia Christi*, V. 11. No. 1 (2009): 55-57.

Contemporary scholars often attempt to frame the actions of God and Israel as tantamount to terrorism, suggesting that the expulsion of the Canaanites was an act of genocide that warrants condemnation rather than reverence. However, we must critically assess the appropriateness of categorizing these events as genocide. At first glance, the term "genocide" carries a heavy and negative weight, largely influenced by the horrors of the twentieth century, such as the Holocaust, where six million Jews were systematically murdered.²⁹

The idea of categorizing the conquest within the narrative of genocide raises pressing questions about intent and definitions. The term itself, coined in 1943, refers to acts aimed at the destruction of particular groups. Following World War II, the United Nations' definition of genocide further solidified the context of systematic extermination based on national, ethnic, racial, or religious identity.³⁰ One core issue in applying the label of genocide to the conquest of the Canaanites is the lack of evidence suggesting that Israel viewed the Canaanites as subhuman and acted out of hatred.³¹ The scripture does not indicate a dehumanizing attitude; rather, it presents a clear narrative where Yahweh condemns the practices of the Canaanites—such as idolatry, promiscuity, and child sacrifice (Lev. 18:1-30; 20:22-24). Notably, after the campaigns led by Joshua, the Israelites intermarried with the Canaanites and adopted some of their practices (Judges 2:7-3:6), which further hints at a different relational dynamic than one characterized by genocide.

²⁹ Norman M. Naimark, *Genocide: A World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1.

³⁰ "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," accessed August 1, 2025, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf>.

³¹ David Livingstone Smith, *Less than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), 142.

Additionally, we can draw a critical distinction between the Israelite conquest and modern instances of violence undertaken in the name of God. Historical examples, like the Crusades or contemporary acts of terrorism, often stem from hatred and a desire for land, reflecting broad violence against perceived enemies. Conversely, the narrative of the conquest frames the destruction of the Canaanites as an act commanded by God in response to their sins, rather than an impulsive act of hatred or desire for territorial gain. Thus, while the discussions around genocide are essential for understanding historical atrocities, the conquest of Canaan operates within a theological narrative that emphasizes divine justice and the consequences of sin, setting it apart from modern interpretations of genocide and violence committed in the name of religion.³²

CONCLUSION

This paper presents five comprehensive biblical reasons for the destruction of the Canaanites and the subsequent occupation of the land by Israel. It argues that the actions taken by the Israelites, while harsh, should not be viewed through the lens of brutality or genocide, but rather as acts of divine punishment and a means of maintaining the holiness of Israel in the land of the Canaanites. The reasons provided are grounded in scripture and reflect the promise made to Abraham, highlighting God's ongoing covenant across generations. The concept of "*herem*" (often translated as "devotion" or "destruction") is emphasized as central to understanding Israel's actions, distinguishing it from modern notions of genocide. The paper suggests that these acts were carried out as an expression of God's sovereignty over life, reinforcing that all lives belong to Him, and He has the authority to take them as He sees fit. Additionally, it

³² Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978). I:415.

addresses a contemporary dilemma where humans assume the role of judges over God's actions, particularly regarding the contentious issues surrounding the destruction of the Canaanites. C. S. Lewis poignantly notes this reversal of roles, where modern man sits in judgment over God rather than recognizing God's ultimate authority. This shift in perspective underscores the complexities of interpreting biblical narratives in today's context.³³

Sources

- Albright, William F. *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: An Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1968
- Ankrah, Emmanuel Twumasi. "Yahweh, Israel and the Neighboring Nations: An Analysis Of Land Redistribution", *ERATS Vol.1* (2017): 125
- Brown, Colin., ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978
- Brown, Francis., S. R. Driver, & Briggs, Charles A. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Edward Robinson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962
- Copan, Paul. *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011
- Copan, Paul. *Is God a Vindictive Bully? Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old Testament And New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2022.
- Davies, Eryl W. *The Immoral Bible: Approaches to Biblical Ethics*. New York: T&T Clark, 2010
- Dawkins, Richard. *The God's Delusion*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2008
- Ford, William. "The Challenge of The Canaanites", *Tyndale Bulletin* 68. 2(2017): 161-180
- Hitchen, Christopher. *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve Publishers, 2009 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*. New York: Doubleday, 2000
- Jones, Alexander (ed)., *The Jerusalem Bible*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966
- Jones, Gwilym H. "Holy War' or 'Yahweh War?'" *Vetus Testamentum* 25, no. 3 (1975): 640-658
- Jones, Clay. "We Don't Hate Sin So We Don't Understand What Happened to the Canaanites: An Addendum to "Divine Genocide" Arguments" *Philosophia Christi*, V. 11. No. 1 (2009): 55-57.

³³ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers,1979), 100

Philemon Ibrahim

- Keil, C.F. & Delitzsch, F. trans., *James Martin, Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1: The Pentateuch*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.
- Köhler, Ludwig & Baumgartner, Walter. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. by M. E. J. Richardson. Leiden: Brill, 1994
- Levenson, Jon D. *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993
- Lewis, C.S. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1979
- Lilley, J. P. U. "Understanding the Herem," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993): 169–677
- Longman III, Tremper. "The Case for Spiritual Continuity," in C. S. Cowles, et al. *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003
- Moore, George F. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895
- Naimark, Norman M. *Genocide: A World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017
- Nelson, Richard D. "Herem and the Deuteronomistic Social Conscience," in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic Literature: Festschrift C.H.W. Brekelmans*, eds. M. Vervenne and J. Lust. Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1997
- Paine, Thomas. *The Age of Reason*. London: R. Carlile, 1818
- Smith, David Livingstone. *Less than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011
- Von Rad, Gerhard. *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, trans. and ed. by Marva J. Dawn. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991
- Wood, Leon J. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke. Chicago: Moody Press, 1980
- Young, Stephen De. *God Is a Man of War: The Problem of Violence in the Old Testament*. North America: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2021