God's Just Destruction of the Canaanites
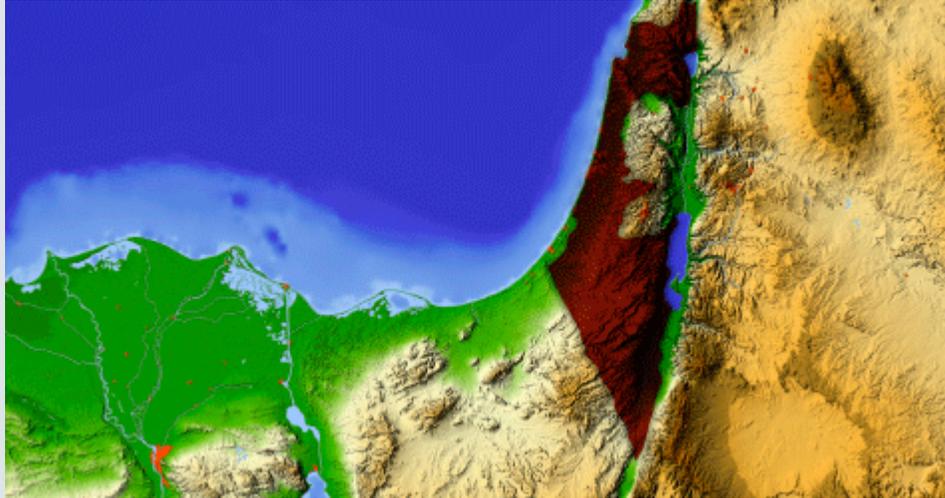
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In the 1930s and 40s, the Nazi regime committed state-sponsored genocide of so-called "inferior races." Of the approximately nine million Jews who lived in Europe at the beginning of the 1930s, some six million of them were exterminated. The Nazis murdered approximately one million Jewish children, two million Jewish women, and three million Jewish men. The Jews were starved, gassed, and experimented on like animals. In addition, Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime slaughtered another three million Poles, Soviets, gypsies, and people with disabilities (see "Holocaust," 2011 for more information). Most sane people, including Christians and many atheists (e.g., Antony Flew, Wallace Matson), have interpreted the Nazis' actions for what they were—cruel, callous, and nefarious.

Some 3,400 years before the Holocaust, the God of the Bible commanded the Israelites to "destroy all the inhabitants of the land" of Canaan (Joshua 9:24). They were to conquer, kill, and cast out the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Exodus 23:23; Deuteronomy 7:1-2; Joshua 3:10). After crossing the Jordan River, we learn in the book of Joshua that the Israelites "utterly destroyed all that was in the city [of Jericho], both man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword…. [T]hey burned the city and all that was in it with fire" (Joshua 6:21,24). They also "utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai" (Joshua

8:26), killing 12,000 men and women and hanging their king (8:25,29). In Makkedah and Libnah, the Israelites "let none remain" (Joshua 10:28,30). They struck Lachish "and all the people who were in it with the edge of the sword" (10:32). The Israelites then conquered Gezer, Eglon, Hebron, Debir, and Hazor (10:33-39; 11:1-1). "So all the cities of those kings, and all their kings, Joshua took and struck with the edge of the sword. He utterly destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded" (Joshua 11:12).

God had the Israelites kill countless thousands, perhaps millions, of people throughout the land of Canaan. It was genocide in the sense that it was a **planned**, **systematic**, limited **extermination** of a number of **nation** states from a relatively small area in the Middle East (cf. "Genocide," 2000; cf. also "Genocide," 2012). But, it was not a war against a particular race (from the Greek *genos*) or ethnic group. Nor were the Israelites commanded to pursue and kill the Canaanite nations if they fled from Israel's Promised Land. The Israelites were to drive out and dispossess the nations of their land (killing all who resisted the dispossession), but they were not instructed to annihilate a particular race or ethnic group from the face of the Earth.

Still, many find God's commands to conquer and destroy the Canaanite nation states problematic. How could a loving God instruct one group of people to kill and conquer another group? America's most well-known critic of Christianity in the late 1700s and early 1800s, Thomas Paine (one of only a handful of America's Founding Fathers who did not claim to be a Christian), called the God of the Old Testament "the Mars of the Jews, the fighting God of Israel," Who was "boisterous, contemptible, and vulgar" (Paine, 1807). Two centuries later, Richard Dawkins (arguably the most famous atheist in the world today), published his book *The God Delusion*, which soon became a *New York Times* bestseller. One of the most oft-quoted phrases from this work comes from page 31, where Dawkins called God, a "racist, infanticidal, genocidal...capriciously malevolent bully" (2006). According to one search engine, this quote (in part or in whole) is found on-line approximately one million times. The fact is, critics of the God of the Bible are fond of repeating the allegation that, because of His instruction to the Israelites to kill millions of people in their conquest of Canaan, the God of the Bible has (allegedly) shown Himself to be an unruly, shameful, offensive, genocidal, "evil monster" (Dawkins, p. 248; cf. Hitchens, 2007, p. 107).

WAS GOD'S CAMPAIGN AGAINST CANAAN IMMORAL?

How could a supremely good (Mark 10:18), all-loving (1 John 4:8), perfectly holy God (Leviticus 11:44-45) order the Israelites to slay with swords myriads of human beings, letting "none remain" in Canaan? Is such a planned, systematic extermination of nations not equivalent to the murderous actions of the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s, as atheists and other critics of Christianity would have us believe? In truth, God's actions in Israel's conquest of Canaan were in perfect harmony with His supremely loving, merciful, righteous, just, and holy nature.

Punishing Evildoers is Not Unloving

Similar to how **merciful** parents, principals, policemen, and judges can **justly** administer punishment to rule-breakers and evildoers, so too can the all-knowing, all-loving Creator of the Universe. Loving parents and principals have administered corporal punishment appropriately to children for years (cf. Proverbs 13:24). Merciful policemen, who are constantly saving he lives of the innocent, have the authority (both from God and the government—Romans 13:1-4) to kill a wicked person who is murdering others. Just judges have the authority to sentence a depraved child rapist to death. Loving-kindness and corporal or capital punishment are not antithetical. Prior to conquering Canaan, God commanded the Israelites, saying,

You shall not hate your brother in your heart.... You shall not take vengeance nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.... And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself (Leviticus 19:17-18,33-34; cf. Romans 13:9).

The faithful Jew was expected, as are Christians, to "not resist an evil person" (Matthew 5:39) but rather "go the extra mile" (Matthew 5:41) and "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39). "Love," after all, "is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10; cf. Matthew 22:36-40). Interestingly, however, the Israelite was commanded to punish (even kill) lawbreakers. Just five chapters after commanding the individual Israelite to "not take vengeance," but "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), God twice said that murderers would receive the death penalty (Leviticus 24:21,17).

The Wickedness of the Inhabitants of Canaan

The Canaanite nations were punished because of their extreme wickedness. God did not cast out the Canaanites for being a particular race or ethnic group. God did not send the Israelites into the land of Canaan to destroy a number of **righteous** nations. On the contrary, the Canaanite nations were horribly depraved. They practiced "abominable customs" (Leviticus 18:30) and did "detestable things" (Deuteronomy 18:9, NASB). They practiced idolatry, witchcraft, soothsaying, and sorcery. They attempted to cast spells upon people and call up the dead (Deuteronomy 18:10-11).

Their "cultic practice was barbarous and thoroughly licentious" (Unger, 1954, p. 175). Their "deities…had no moral character whatever," which "must have brought out the worst traits in their devotees and entailed many of the most demoralizing practices of the time," including sensuous nudity, orgiastic nature-worship, snake worship, and even child sacrifice (Unger, p. 175; cf. Albright, 1940, p. 214). As Moses wrote, the inhabitants of Canaan would "burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods" (Deuteronomy 12:30). The Canaanite nations were anything but "innocent." In truth, "[t]hese Canaanite cults were utterly immoral, decadent, and corrupt, dangerously contaminating and thoroughly justifying the divine command to destroy their devotees" (Unger, 1988). They were so nefarious that God said they defiled the land and the land could stomach them no longer—"the land vomited out its inhabitants" (Leviticus 18:25).

The Longsuffering of God

Unlike the foolish, impulsive, quick-tempered reactions of many men (Proverbs 14:29), the Lord is "slow to anger and great in mercy" (Psalm 145:8). He is "longsuffering…, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Immediately following a reminder to the Christians in Rome that the Old Testament was "written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope," the apostle Paul referred to God as "the God of patience" (Romans 15:4-5). Throughout the Old Testament, the Bible writers portrayed God as longsuffering.

Though in Noah's day, "the wickedness of man was great in the earth" and "ever intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis

6:5), "the Divine longsuffering waited" (1 Peter 3:20). (It seems as though God delayed flooding Earth for 120 years as His Spirit's message of righteousness was preached to a wicked world—Genesis 6:3; 2 Peter 2:5.) In the days of Abraham, God ultimately decided to spare the iniquitous city of Sodom, not if 50 righteous people were found living therein, but only **10** righteous individuals.

And what about prior to God's destruction of the Canaanite nations? Did God quickly decide to cast them out of the land? Did He respond to the peoples' wickedness like an impulsive, reckless mad-man? Or was He, as the Bible repeatedly states and exemplifies, longsuffering? Indeed, God waited. He waited more than four centuries to bring judgment upon the inhabitants of Canaan. Although the Amorites were already a sinful people in Abraham's day, God delayed in giving the descendants of the patriarch the Promised Land. He would wait until the Israelites had been in Egypt for hundreds of years, because at the time that God spoke with Abraham "the iniquity of the Amorites" was "not yet complete" (Genesis 15:16). [NOTE: "The Amorites were so numerous and powerful a tribe in Canaan that they are sometimes named for the whole of the ancient inhabitants, as they are here" (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, 1997).] In Abraham's day, the inhabitants of Canaan were not so degenerate that God would bring judgment upon them. However, by the time of Joshua (more than 400 years later), the Canaanites' iniquity was full, and God used the army of Israel to destroy them.

Yes, God is longsuffering, but His **long**suffering is **not** an "eternal" suffering. His patience with impenitent sinners eventually ends. It ended for a wicked world in the days of Noah. It ended for Sodom and Gomorrah in the days of Abraham. And it eventually ended for the inhabitants of Canaan, whom God justly destroyed.

What About the Innocent Children?

The children of Canaan were not guilty of their parents' sins (cf. Ezekiel 18:20); they were sinless, innocent, precious human beings (cf. Matthew 18:3-5; see Butt, 2003). So how could God justly take the lives of children, any children, "who have no knowledge of good and evil" (Deuteronomy 1:39)? The fact is, as Dave Miller properly noted, "Including the children in the destruction of such populations actually spared them from a worse condition—that of being reared to be as wicked as their parents and thus face

eternal punishment. All persons who die in childhood, according to the Bible, are ushered to Paradise and will ultimately reside in Heaven. Children who have parents who are evil must naturally suffer innocently while on Earth (e.g., Numbers 14:33)" (Miller, 2009). [NOTE: For a superb, extensive discussion on the relationship between (1) the goodness of God, (2) the contradictory, hideousness of atheism, and (3) God bringing about the death of various infants throughout history, see Kyle Butt's article "Is God Immoral for Killing Innocent Children?" (2009).]

CONCLUSION

Though the enemies of the God of the Bible are frequently heard criticizing Israel's conquest of Canaan, the fact is, such a conquest was in complete harmony with God's perfectly loving, holy, and righteous nature. After patiently waiting for hundreds of years, God eventually used the Israelites to bring judgment upon myriads of wicked Canaanites. Simultaneously, He spared their children a fate much worse than physical death—the horror of growing up in a reprehensible culture and becoming like their hedonistic parents—and immediately ushered them into a pain-free, marvelous place called Paradise (Luke 16:19-31; 23:43).

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