

The Ethics of Israel's Conquest of Canaan¹

**A Paper prepared for the people of Blackhawk Church by
Chris Dolson – November 2, 2008**

Few issues in Old Testament interpretation are as difficult or as troubling as the Lord's command to the Israelites to remove the Canaanites and take over their land (Deuteronomy 7). How could a good God command the elimination of a whole race, including men, women and children? Is this not genocide of the worst sort? Many refuse to take the Old Testament seriously because of this single issue, and many refuse the gospel of the New Testament because of its guilt by association: the New Testament is part of Christians' Bible which includes divinely sanctioned and ordered elimination of an entire race of people. How shall we answer the questions regarding this problem that people raise? While none of the points below is satisfying in and of itself, the following represent factors to be considered in coming to grips with the issue:

1. The conquest of Canaan describes a very limited event. Many of the other wars that are in the OT have no divine sanction, and some were clearly condemned as the actions of proud and greedy kings, or military rivals. Sometimes people accuse the whole OT of being so filled with war and feel that these wars are all commanded by a vicious God. But this is a false caricature. The events that happened in Joshua took place largely in one generation. It is placed within the category of *herem* – that specific form of warfare in which YHWH is the chief protagonist and the enemy is renounced or devoted to him. This is a very limited policy. There are seven nations listed. When we get to Deuteronomy 20, we find out that the Israelites have two distinct war philosophies. One governs the treatment of these seven nations. The other governs the treatment of enemies outside the Promised Land – those who are “far off.” For the “far off” nations, you begin by making overtures of peace. This policy, however offensive it is, is a very limited policy. It was not intended to be Israel's general military stance.

2. The conquest should not be portrayed as random genocide or ethnic cleansing. These actions are consistently portrayed as God's moral punishment on a degraded society. The wickedness of Canaanite society is more explicitly described in moral and social terms in Leviticus 18:24-25; 20:22-24; Deut. 9:5; 12:29-31. It includes sexual promiscuity and perversion particularly associated with fertility cults, and also the callousness of child sacrifice. What they were doing was morally offensive. There is a huge difference between arbitrary violence and violence inflicted within the moral framework of punishment. This is true in human society as much as in divine perspective. The conquest of Canaan constituted an act of God's punishment on a wicked society, using Israel as the human agent.

3. God is consistent. He threatened to do the same thing to Israel and did. God warned Israel that if they behaved in the same way as the Canaanites, He would treat them as his enemy and inflict upon them the same punishment (Deut. 28.25-68). God repeated his

¹ In constructing this paper I borrowed heavily from two sources: 1) The unpublished notes of Daniel Block, a professor at Wheaton College; and 2) Christopher Wright *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*.

moral consistency in international injustice. If anything, the OT argues that Israel's status as God's elect people exposed them all the more to God's moral judgment and historical punishment more than any of the surrounding nations; including those they conquered (cf. Amos 3.2). Far more generations of Israelites felt the Lord's anger at the hands of their enemies than the generation of Canaanites that experienced the judgment of the Lord at the hands of the Israelites. It is simply a distortion of teaching to say that God is always for Israel and is against all other nations.

God really does not play favorites. Yes, he chose Abraham and his descendants to be his covenant people, but Deuteronomy warns them over and over that if they ever forget God and live like Canaanites they will experience the same fate as the Canaanites.

4. Is this fair? Were these Canaanites more wicked than any of the other societies that Israel lived around and were not called upon to destroy? Probably not. Then why destroy them and not others? And the Israelites were not much better. Is it fair that a nation that is not much more righteous than the Canaanites should be asked to do such a thing?

These are awkward questions. But in reality God's historical judgment has to fall at sometime on someone if his people are to have a chance to inherit this land. Some people group will be living in that land at that time. Other people groups will not be there. If it is not "fair" then it seems unavoidable- unless God were to suspend all demonstrations of his justice within history. This is one of the reasons why the Bible increasingly points towards a final reckoning when God will act to put all things right in all places regardless of who lives where so that justice prevails and reigns in the cosmos, in a way that will be universally fair (something that cannot be achieved within history and the ambiguities of all historical events). In the meantime, that is before God can be ultimately fair across the board, God harnesses unfairness within the accomplishment of his wider, longer-term purpose of salvation for the entire world.

If God is going to claim this land bridge for His own with His own nation; someone who will be living there at the time is going to have to not live there anymore. There is no way around that. It was these people at this time. Why does God want this land bridge? The answer is so that his greater purposes might be accomplished; the salvation of the world. People who walk into this area from around the world will see Israel and be persuaded to worship this God. That is His plan, until Israel botches it up.

5. In biblical times people had a sense of corporate identity that is difficult for us modern westerners to understand. To us each individual is a separate entity and individual fulfillment is the highest ideal. According to the ancient Near Eastern ideal, one found one's significance and identity in relation to the community. When one member hurt, they all hurt; when one prospered they all prospered (1 Corinthians 12-14). For this reason few of the original readers would have objected to the fact that children would share the fate of their parents.

6. Although the Canaanites as a whole were subject to the judgment of God, they had at least 40 years of advance warning (see Rahab's confession in Joshua 2:8-11). Not only

did the conquest of Canaan not catch them by surprise; any individual who declared faith in Yahweh would be spared. Rahab is a perfect example. Although she was a prostitute (the lowest of the low), her life and the lives of her family were spared because they believed in Yahweh. In fact, so complete was Rahab's incorporation into the community of faith that in the providence of God she became the ancestor of Jesus! (Matthew 1). God can and is willing to save anyone. Rahab is a perfect example.

None of these answers will satisfy everyone, and none of them should be taken in isolation. But when I consider the complexity of this issue I can relax, knowing that God is good and God is always right. The challenge for us is that we treasure God's grace in our own lives, and pray for him to extend his grace to others. Perhaps when they see what God has done for us, people who are not followers of Christ will, like Rahab, confess faith in our God. This is ultimately what God wants since He desires the salvation of everyone (2 Peter 3.9). He take no pleasure in the death of anyone (Ezekiel 18:32).