

Deuteronomy 2:24-37

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“Arise, set out, and pass through the valley of Arnon. Look! I have given Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land into your hand [God adds and removes kings; Dan 2:21; 4:17; Pro 8:15-16]; begin to take possession and contend with him in battle [unlike the Edomites, Moabites and Ammonites whom God had given land, the Amorites were not among God’s favored people and needed to be driven out].²⁵ ‘This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under the heavens, who, when they hear the report of you, will tremble and be in anguish because of you [God would instill a divinely inspired fear in the minds of Israel’s enemies; cf. Deut 11:25; 28:10; Josh 2:5-11].’²⁶ “So I sent messengers from the wilderness of Kedemoth to Sihon king of Heshbon with words of peace, saying,²⁷ ‘Let me pass through your land, I will travel only on the highway; I will not turn aside to the right or to the left.²⁸ ‘You will sell me food for money so that I may eat, and give me water for money so that I may drink, only let me pass through on foot,²⁹ just as the sons of Esau who live in Seir and the Moabites who live in Ar did for me, until I cross over the Jordan into the land which the LORD our God is giving to us.’³⁰ “But Sihon king of Heshbon was not willing for us to pass through his land [was hostile toward God’s people]; for the LORD your God hardened [הִשְׁחִיחַ *qashah* – to make hard, obstinate (HALOT, 1152) – hiphil/3rd/sing – caused to be hardened] his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to deliver him into your hand, as *he is* today [God’s hardening was a form of divine judgment; cf. Rom 1:18-32].³¹ “The LORD said to me, ‘See, I have begun to deliver Sihon and his land over to you. Begin to occupy, that you may possess his land.’³² “Then Sihon with all his people came out to meet us in battle at Jahaz.³³ “The LORD our God delivered him over to us, and we defeated him with his sons and all his people [cf. Num 21:21-30].³⁴ “So we captured all his cities at that time and utterly destroyed [חָרַם *charam* – devote to destruction – because of wickedness; see Deut 9:4-5] the men, women and children of every city. We left no survivor.³⁵ “We took only the animals as our booty and the spoil of the cities which we had captured.³⁶ “From Aroer which is on the edge of the valley of Arnon and *from* the city which is in the valley, even to Gilead, there was no city that was too high for us; the LORD our God delivered all over to us.³⁷ “Only you did not go near to the land of the sons of Ammon, all along the river Jabbok and the cities of the hill country, and wherever the LORD our God had commanded us.

Summary:

The main point of this pericope is that God began to deliver Israel’s enemies into their hands to defeat them as they advanced toward the Promised Land. In this section God directed His people to begin to take the land and drive out the residents north of the valley of Arnon, saying, “Look! I have given Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land into your hand; begin to take possession and contend with him in battle” (Deut 2:24). And God would go ahead of His people, informing them, “This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under the heavens, who, when they hear the report of you, will tremble and be in anguish because of you” (Deu 2:25). Originally, Moses offered to travel through the land of Kedemoth peacefully, telling Sihon king of Heshbon, the Israelites would stay on the highway and pay for any food or water his people were willing to sell (Deut 2:26-29), but the text informs

us that “Sihon king of Heshbon was not willing for us to pass through his land” (Deut 2:30a). Sihon’s rejection of peace meant he brought judgment upon himself. Moses then provides the divine side of the reason, saying, “for the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to deliver him into your hand, as he is today” (Deut 2:30b). God, in His omniscience, knew Sihon and his people were hostile and hopelessly unrepentant, and He decided to dispense judgment, first by hardening the king’s already hostile heart, and then by military defeat. Before the military fighting began, the Lord told Moses, “See, I have begun to deliver Sihon and his land over to you. Begin to occupy, that you may possess his land” (Deut 2:31). The Amorites were enemies of God and His people and were “a nation of hopelessly unrepentant squatters who had to be removed from the lands promised to Israel’s forefathers (cf. Gen 15:16; Ex 3:8). Thus, the command was to engage Sihon, king of the Amorites, in battle and liberate the land that he illegitimately occupied.”¹ Moses then reveals what follows, saying, “Then Sihon with all his people came out to meet us in battle at Jahaz. The LORD our God delivered him over to us, and we defeated him with his sons and all his people” (Deut 2:32-33). After defeating them, Moses states, “So we captured all his cities at that time and utterly destroyed the men, women and children of every city. We left no survivor” (Deut 2:34). The Israelites took the cities and animals that remained after the conflict (Deut 2:35). From Aroer to Gilead, “there was no city that was too high for us; the LORD our God delivered all over to us” (Deut 2:36). Victory was considered a sign of God’s blessing. But they could not take land that God had not approved, as Moses said, “Only you did not go near to the land of the sons of Ammon, all along the river Jabbok and the cities of the hill country, and wherever the LORD our God had commanded us” (Deut 2:37).

A Brief Consideration of Holy War:

Though Canaan had become extremely corrupt, it would be wrong to think of its residents as brute barbarians who lacked intelligence and were an unsophisticated. Actually, they were very advanced technologically and culturally in many ways compared with the neighbors. But in spite of all their technological and cultural accomplishments, they were also very immoral. Merrill Unger states:

The Canaanites were talented and developed the arts and sciences early. Stout walled cities have been excavated, and their construction was much superior to that of later Israelite buildings. They excelled in ceramic arts, music, musical instruments, and architecture...The art treasures in ivory, gold, and alabaster recovered from Canaanite Megiddo demonstrate Canaanite architectural elegance. Many of the treasures from Ras Shamra-Ugarit tell the same story. However, by the time of the Israelite conquest, Canaanite civilization had become decadent and was ripe for destruction.²

¹ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 98–99.

² Merrill F. Unger, “Canaan, Canaanites,” ed. R.K. Harrison, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 202.

God was not impressed with their technological and cultural sophistication because evil dominated their nation. Now, God was ready to judge them, and Israel would serve as His agent of justice upon an otherwise corrupt culture that was not reformable. The Lord told His people, “you shall **utterly destroy** them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the LORD your God has commanded you” (Deut 20:17). The words “utterly destroy” translate the Hebrew **חָרַם** *charam*, which is found in a number of passages (Num 21:2-3; Deut 2:34; 3:6; 7:2; 13:15; 20:17; Josh 2:10; 6:21; 8:26; 10:1, 35, 37, 39, 40; 11:11-12, 20-21). Leon Wood states, “Usually *ḥāram* means a ban for utter destruction, the compulsory dedication of something which impedes or resists God’s work, which is considered to be accursed before God.”³ Commenting on the use of **חָרַם** *charam* in Deuteronomy 2:34, Eugene Merrill writes:

Nothing is more integral to the waging of holy war than the placing of conquered lands and their peoples under *ḥērem*. This noun, derived from the verb *ḥāram*, “to exterminate,” refers to a condition in which persons and things became the personal possession of the Lord by virtue of his inherent sovereignty and his appropriation of them by conquest. They could either be left alive and intact (Lev 27:21, 28; Josh 6:19) or eradicated (as here; cf. Num 21:2–3; Josh 6:21). In the passage at hand, it seems that the physical structures of the cities themselves were spared and that only the populations were decimated.⁴

Though the idea of holy war can be difficult for us to digest (which in this context includes putting children to death), several things should be considered. **First**, the command for destruction was from the Lord Himself (Deut 2:34; 7:1-2; 20:17). Because God is omniscient (Psa 139:1-6), He knew the situation completely. Because the Lord is perfectly righteous (Gen 18:25; Psa 7:11), His command was just and fair. And, because God is gracious and patient (Psa 103:8), His command to execute the Canaanites was not reckless. Divine judgment meant God had determined the Canaanite culture was corrupt and not reformable. It would be destroyed. **Second**, the Canaanites were by no means a sweet and lovely people who spent their days painting rainbows on rocks and playing with butterflies. Rather, they were antitheocratic and hostile to God and His people and comprised the most depraved culture in the world at that time. For centuries the Canaanites practiced gross sexual immorality, which included all forms of incest (Lev 18:1-20; 20:10-12, 14, 17, 19-21), homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13), and sex with animals (Lev 18:23; 20:15-16). They also engaged in the occult (Lev 20:6), were hostile toward parents (Lev 20:9), and offered their children as sacrifices to Molech (Lev 18:21; 20:1-5; cf. Deut 12:31; 18:10). God told His people, “you shall not follow the customs of the nation which I will drive out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I have abhorred them” (Lev 20:23). **Third**, God had been gracious to the Canaanite people for four hundred years (Gen 15:14-16), giving them ample time to turn from their sin. Though God is very gracious and slow to anger (Psa

³ Leon J. Wood, “744 **חָרַם**,” ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 324.

⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 102.

145:8-9), this does not last forever and eventually His righteous judgment falls upon those who deserve it (Deut 9:4-5). **Fourth**, as Moses advanced toward Canaan, he encountered some of the Amorites who were governed by Sihon, King of Heshbon. Originally, Moses offered Sihon peaceful terms if he would let the Israelites pass through his land toward Canaan, even offering to pay for whatever food and water they consumed (Deut 2:24-29). However, Moses reveals, “Sihon king of Heshbon was not willing for us to pass through his land” (Deut 2:30a). Grace was offered one last time, but Sihon rejected it, and “God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to deliver him into your hand, as he is today” (Deut 2:30b). In this regard, Sihon brought judgment upon himself and his people (Deut 2:31-36). **Fifth**, the Amorites could have moved out and avoided the conflict by settling in another area. Like other residents of Canaan, they’d no doubt heard about how God had delivered Israel from the Egyptians and provided for them during their forty years in the wilderness. To stand against God and His army was madness. **Sixth**, God could have destroyed the people Himself, like He’d done in the global flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Egypt; however, it was His will the Canaanites be removed by military means and as a test of obedience to His people. **Seventh**, those who turned to God would have been spared, like Rahab and her family (Josh 2:1-14). Again, here is grace and mercy on display. **Eighth**, the killing of the Canaanite children may have spared them from growing up in a corrupt and hostile culture, “For if the child died before reaching the age of accountability it is likely that his or her eternal destiny would have been made secure in heaven.”⁵ Considering how sexually immoral the Canaanite culture had become, one can imagine pedophilia was widespread, not to mention child sacrifice was commonplace. **Ninth**, like the global flood, or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the destruction of the Canaanites was to be a one-time event, not to be repeated by future generations. Furthermore, Israel was specifically called to destroy only the Canaanites who illegitimately occupied the promised land (Deut 20:16-18), and to offer peace to other nations, if they would have it (Deut 20:10-15). In fact, just prior to Israel beginning the conquest of Canaan, God specifically forbid His people from attacking the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites and taking their lands, which the Lord had assigned specifically to them (Deut 2:1-23). This shows God’s judgment was precise and planned, not careless or haphazard. **Tenth**, destroying the Canaanites would prevent them from becoming a corrupting influence upon God’s people who were called to holiness (Lev 11:45; 19:2; 20:26). God warned His people that if they allowed the Canaanites to live, they would “teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the LORD your God” (Deut 20:18; cf. Ex 23:33; Josh 23:12-13). Sadly, we know historically that Israel failed to obey the Lord (see the book of Judges), and the immoral culture spread among God’s people, who themselves began to practice all the evil things God hates (Deut 12:31), including idolatry and child sacrifice (2 Ki 3:27; 16:3; Psa 106:37-38; Isa 57:5; Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:35; Ezek 16:20-21). Because Israel eventually became corrupt, God then destroyed and expelled them from the land by means of military defeat from their enemies. This happened when the ten

⁵ Jack S. Deere, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 276.

northern tribes of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC and the two southern tribes of Judah fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC.

God's command for holy war is not applicable for Christians, for God is not working to establish a theocratic kingdom on earth as He was through Israel. Nowhere does the Bible command the Christian to take up arms in violent revolution and to conquer other lands. In this regard, the Crusades were never justified biblically. Today, in the church age, though I believe [self-defense](#) is absolutely justified biblically and according US law, God has delegated killing solely to the governments of this world (Rom 13:1-6; 1 Pet 2:13-14). Murder is wrong; and killing for self-defense is not murder. Apart from justified self-defense, Christians are commanded to “**pursue peace with all men**, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). The apostle Paul stated, “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, **be at peace with all men**. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath *of God*, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.” (Rom 12:17-19). In fact, rather than persecuting others, believers are told to expect persecution as part of their Christian experience (John 15:18-20). As Christians, we generally live submissive lives in obedience to the government as good citizens of the land (Rom 13:1-5). However, this does not mean blind submission, as we may engage in acts of civil disobedience when necessary (Ex 1:15-17; Dan 3:1-18; 6:1-23; Acts 5:27-29).