

Yahweh's Holy War
Dr. Steven R. Cook

I'm teaching through the book of Deuteronomy and the subject of *Holy War* came up in our discussion. The phrase *Holy War* is used by many to describe Israel's conquest on the land of Canaan. I prefer the phrase *Yahweh's Holy War*, since the Lord is the One who directed and empowered His people to military action. In Scripture, God is described as "a warrior" (Ex 15:3), and "the one who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you" (Deut 20:4), who is "mighty in battle" (Psa 24:8). He is, without question, "the God of the armies of Israel" (1 Sam 17:45).¹ In the book of Deuteronomy, God focuses His attention on the destruction of the Canaanites.² The Canaanites were a people who had become extremely corrupt by the time God brought Israel to their doorstep, and He required their total destruction, lest they become a corrupting influence in Israel and lead them to practice their abominations, which included idolatry and child sacrifice (I'll discuss Canaanite evil later in this article).

To be sure, there are some who are troubled by the accounts of military conquest in the Old Testament. Dr. Tommy Lane, Professor of Sacred Scripture at Mount St. Mary's Seminary views these military actions as a "problem of innocent people suffering violent deaths by the Israelites acting under God's orders."³ Dr. Lynn Jost, Professor of Old Testament at Fresno Pacific University asks, "How can Christians accept the Old Testament as authoritative Scripture when it commands such atrocities as slaughter of nonbelligerents (Deut 20:16-18), accumulation of spoil (Deut 20:14), enslavement of defeated nations (Deut 20:11), and forced marriages (Deut 21:10-14)?"⁴ And Dr. Mark Bredin, former professor at Cambridge University states, "Biblical traditions often look for the violent end of their enemies. God, for example, commands Israel to seize another's land and destroy all that is in it. The

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotes are taken from the New American Standard Bible, The Lockman Foundation, 1995.

² Canaanite was a general term that referred to all the residents of the land of Canaan, which primarily consisted of "the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites" (Deut 7:1).

³ Tommy Lane, "The Concept of Holy War", *Bible, Prayer, and Homily Resources Blog*, (ND, https://www.frtommylane.com/bible/ot/holy_war.htm).

⁴ Lynn Jost, "Warfare in the Old Testament: An Argument for Peacemaking in the New Millennium" *Direction*: Vol. 27 No. 2 (Fall 1998): 177-188.

most conspicuous biblical war texts refer to *herem* in which all defeated peoples are committed to destruction...Such often embarrass our modern sensibilities.”⁵

Though I disagree with the above comments by liberal scholars, I appreciate the candor with which they express their understanding of God and Israel in the Old Testament; especially as it relates to Yahweh’s leading Israel into war and conquest. Though one can clearly see God’s sovereignty, righteousness and justice on display in the Old Testament passages pertaining to war and conquest, this does not mean His love, grace and faithfulness were absent. In fact, there is much material surrounding these events to adequately refute the liberal arguments.

Biblically, God had promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants, saying, “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15:18; cf. 17:7-8). The same promise was made to Isaac (Gen 26:1-3) and Jacob (28:13-14). Because God owns everything (Psa 24:1; 50:12; 89:11; 1 Chron 29:11), any land He promises to give to a person is theirs by divine right. This is important to understand from the divine perspective, for any unauthorized occupants would be regarded as illegals, squatting on land that belongs to another. But God would not give the land to Abraham’s descendants right away. Rather, the Lord informed Abraham that his descendants would be “strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years” (Gen 15:13). This was the time of their sojourn in Egypt. Then, after the four hundred years, God told Abraham that his descendants “will return here” (Gen 15:16a). Because God is gracious and kind, He permitted the Canaanites to live on the promised land for four hundred years before calling Abraham’s descendants to take possession it. However, there is the pregnant phrase, “for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete” (Gen 15:16b). The word *iniquity* translates the Hebrew אָוֹן *avon* which connotes “guilt caused by sin and the consequences thereof.”⁶ The Amorites were representative of all the occupiers of Canaan prior to Israel’s conquest. And the phrase “not yet complete” implies the Canaanites were filling their cup with sin and, when it reached its full, judgment would come.

After four hundred years, circa 1445 BC, the first generation of Israelites came out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. The Lord told His people, “I will

⁵ Mark Bredin, *Jesus, Revolutionary of Peace: A Nonviolent Christology in the Book of Revelation* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003), 40.

⁶ Ludwig Koehler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 800.

bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession; I am the LORD” (Ex 6:8). God was willing to fulfill His promise to His people. However, the first generation of Israelites failed to walk with God, and because of their rebellion in the wilderness, they forfeited their right to take possession of Canaan (Num 14:1-39). God said of that generation, they “shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it” (Num 14:23). Though saved, this generation of believers failed to walk with God and were described as an “evil generation” (Deut 1:35). The exceptions were Caleb and Joshua (Num 14:30), and the children of the Israelites (Num 14:31), who, under the leadership of Joshua, would take the land (cf. Deut 1:36-39). That is, the second generation of Israelites would obey and succeed where their parents had disobeyed and failed.

When the first generation of Israelites had died off, God directed their children to “**drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you**, and destroy all their figured stones, and destroy all their molten images and demolish all their high places; and **you shall take possession of the land and live in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it**” (Num 33:51-53). And this they did. In the Deuteronomic account, God Himself was personally involved in leading His people into Canaan, saying, “Know therefore today that it is **the LORD your God who is crossing over before you** as a consuming fire. **He will destroy them and He will subdue them before you, so that you may drive them out and destroy them quickly**, just as the LORD has spoken to you” (Deut 9:3). This was a joint effort with God leading and His people following and doing what He said. This is important to note, for one cannot separate the obedient actions of Israel from God who led and empowered them to military victory over their enemies. In this regard, the warfare and conquest were both a divine and human enterprise in which God’s people went forth according His command and power in order to defeat His enemies. And part of the biblical reason for driving out the Canaanites by military force was “**because of the wickedness of these nations**” (Deut 9:5a).

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.⁷

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 *hāram* 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.”⁸ 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 *hērem*. This noun, derived from the verb *hāram*, “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.⁹

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

⁷ Merrill F. Unger, “Canaan, Canaanites,” ed. R.K. Harrison, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 202.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 102.

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 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.”¹⁰ 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 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

¹⁰ 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.

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).

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