

CANAANITE GENOCIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Genocide involves the systematic extermination of an entire national group.¹ Many examples of genocide can be found in the modern world. Such examples include the slaughter of the Jews by the Nazi's, the massacre of the Armenians by the Turks, and the slaughter by the Russians and Chinese of many of their own people. Other examples of ethnic cleansing have been carried out in the Balkans and Central Africa. In Rwanda, for example, the Hutus mass murdered 80,000 Tutsis and Tutsi sympathizers in 100 days. The Western world became acutely aware of divinely sanctioned genocide, or *Jihad*, following the tragic events of September 11, 2001.

While the existence of genocide in our world is disturbing enough, it is even more unsettling to find it taught in the Bible. In the Old Testament, God commanded the annihilation of the Canaanites (Deut 7:1-2). Biblical genocide has proven to be a source of embarrassment for various theologians and commentators. Regarding the decree of God to destroy the children, Calvin acknowledged, "...the decree is dreadful indeed, I confess..."² Wink similarly complains, "Against such an image of God the revolt of atheism is an act of pure religion. By contrast, the God whom Jesus reveals refrains from all forms of reprisal and demands no victims. God does not endorse holy wars or just wars or religions of violence"³

More significant than embarrassment for the theologian, biblical genocide has proven to be a stumbling block preventing people from trusting Christ as savior. Many rationalize that the God of the Bible is no more humane than the God of Islam on account of the fact that divinely sanctioned genocide is found in the major holy books of both religions. Thus, an explanation of biblical genocide has become a key Christian apologetic issue of our day.

¹ *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Desk Dictionary*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), s.v. "genocide."

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 3.23.7.

³ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 149.

To this end, this paper will attempt to offer a balanced perspective on the subject of divinely sanctioned genocide of the Canaanites. To accomplish this goal, the paper will be broken down into four parts. First, the general characteristics of Canaanite genocide will be articulated. Second, the reasons necessitating genocide, as given in Scripture, will be enumerated. Third, factors helping the biblical apologist explain genocide to the critic will be discussed. Finally, the issue of alleged tension between divinely sanctioned genocide and the New Testament portrayal of a loving God will be dealt with.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ISRAEL'S HOLY WAR

Yahweh war calling for genocide was articulated as part of the Mosaic Covenant (Exod 23:20-33; 34:11-16; Deut 7:1-5; 20:16-20). The prosecution of Yahweh war is recorded later on in narrative material mostly surrounding the conquest of Canaan (Josh 6:1-27; 8:1-29; 10-11; 1 Sam 15:1-23). What are the general characteristics of Yahweh's holy war? This section seeks to answer this question by drawing from the work of Gerhard von Rad, defining *chērem*, and by noting Yahweh war's sacred character.

When seeking to identify a unique genre of holy war most scholars seem to rely upon a 1951 study by Gerhard von Rad. In this study, von Rad identified various elements present in Israel's holy war ideology.⁴ Von Rad enumerated the following 13 characteristics. First, a trumpet was blown in order to announce holy war (Judg 3:27; 6:34-35; 1 Sam 13:3). Second, the army was named as the "people of Yahweh" (Judg 5:11, 13; 20:2). Third, the participants in the war were consecrated (Num 21:2; Deut 23:9-14; Josh 3:5; Judg 11:36; 1 Sam 14:24; 21:5; 2 Sam 1:21; 11:11-12). Fourth, there was a sacrifice to Yahweh. In addition to this sacrifice or sometimes as an alternative to the sacrifice, Yahweh was consulted (Judg 20:23, 26, 27; 1 Sam 7:9; 13:9-10, 12; 14:8-9; 2 Sam 5:19, 23). Fifth, the announcement of victory was given. The phrase, "I have given...into your hand," or similar phraseology was used (Josh 2:24; 6:2, 16; 8:1, 18; 10:8, 19; Judg 3:28; 4:7, 14; 7:9, 15; 18:10; 20:28; 1 Sam 14:12; 17:46; 23:4; 24:5; 26:8; 1 Kings 20:28). Sixth,

⁴ Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, ed. and trans. Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 41-51.

the announcement that Yahweh would go out before the army was given (Deut 20:4; Josh 3:11; Judg 4:14; 2 Sam 5:24).

Seventh, a claim was made that the war is “Yahweh’s war.” A further claim was made that the enemy is “Yahweh’s enemy” (Exod 14:4, 14, 18; Deut 1:30; Josh 10:14, 42; 11:6; 23:10; Judg 20:25; 1 Sam 14:23). Eighth, the encouragement “not to fear” was given. The rationale for such encouragement was that the enemy instead will lose courage (Exod 14:13; Deut 20:3; Josh 8:1; 10:8 25; 11:6; Judg 7:3; 1 Sam 23:16-17; 30:6; 2 Sam 10:12). Ninth, the fear of Yahweh amongst the enemy is recorded (Exod 15:14-16; 23:27-28; Lev 26:36; Deut 2:25; 11:25; Josh 2:9, 24; 5:1; 7:5; 10:2; 11:20; 24:12; 1 Sam 4:7-8; 17:11; 28:5). Tenth, the war shout was given (Josh 6:5; Judg 7:20; 1 Sam 17:20, 52). Eleventh, there was the intervention of Yahweh involving the striking of terror into the hearts of the enemy (Exod 23:27; Deut 7:23; Josh 10:10-11; 24:7; Judg 4:15; 7:22; 1 Sam 5:11; 7:10; 14:15, 20). Twelfth, was the practice of the “ban” (*chērem*). This involved the slaughter of all enemy men, women, and children (Num 21:2; Josh 6:18-19; 1 Sam 15). Thirteenth, the troops were dismissed with the cry “to your tents” (2 Sam 20:1; 1 Kings 12:16; 22:36).

The most important item on this list for purposes of genocide is the twelfth item known as *chērem*. The Hebrew root of this word carries with it the notion of destruction and separation or devotion to, depending upon the context in which it is used. Sometimes both nuances occur together in the same passage.⁵ Regarding the meaning of *chērem*, Kaiser observes:

It means “curse,” “that which stood under the ban” or “that which was dedicated to destruction.” The root idea of this term was “separation”: however, this situation was not the positive concept of sanctification in which someone or something was set aside for the service and glory of God. This was the opposite of the same side of the coin: to set aside or separate for destruction. God dedicated these things or persons to destruction because they violently and steadfastly impeded or opposed his work over a long period of time.⁶

⁵ N. Lohfink, “Chērem,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 5:180-99.

⁶ Walter Kaiser et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 206.

Gard similarly notes:

In its purest form, the *chērem* in warfare refers to the devotion of all spoils to Yahweh and the destruction of all life (Josh. 6:17-21; 7:11-15). Inflammable objects were to be burned (Deut. 7:25-26), but noncombustible precious metals were to be taken to the sanctuary treasury (Josh. 6:24). It was forbidden to spare any person that was under the *chērem*. In some cases, the *chērem* was partially eased by the exemption of women and children (Num. 31:7-12; 17-18; Deut. 20:13-14; 21:10-14) and, in particular, the young virgin women (Judg. 21:11-21). A point of tension exists on the issue of cattle; according to Deuteronomy 2:34-35, they could be saved, but 1 Samuel 15:9, 21 demanded their destruction. In the matter of the people of the land, however, there was no equivocation: The Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites were to be utterly destroyed so that nothing that breathed should live (Deut. 20:16-18).⁷

Another important element of the holy war and genocide passages is their sacred character.⁸ They disclose the continual presence of God with the army. Thus, *chērem* warfare is worship on equal par with going to the temple. This can be seen by examining the activities before war. Prior to battle, God informed the nation as to whether it was to go to battle. This information was relayed either from a visitation from the angel of the Lord (Josh 5:13) or through the nation seeking God's will (1 Sam 23:1-6). If the nation did not inquire of the Lord first, it ran the risk of making a rash decision that would come back and haunt them later (Josh 9:14). Spiritual preparedness before battle is also evident in the way the second generation of Jewish males was mass circumcised prior to practicing Canaanite *chērem* (Josh 5:2-9). This generation also observed Passover prior to battle (Josh 5:10-12).⁹ This sacral dimension prior to battle is also seen in the need for ritual purity in the war camp (Deut 23:9-14), which included abstention from sexual activity (2

⁷ Daniel Gard, "The Case for Eschatological Continuity," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 116.

⁸ Tremper Longman III, "The Case for Spiritual Continuity," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 163-74.

⁹ Jeph Holloway, "The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 41 (1998): 50.

Sam 11:11).¹⁰ Also, prior to battle the priest was to administer the appropriate animal sacrifice (1 Sam 7:9-10). The importance of this procedure is evidenced by the fact that Saul was told that his kingdom would not endure when he failed to comply with the procedure (1 Sam 13). Moreover, the placing of the ark representing the presence of God¹¹ at the head of the army also demonstrates Israel's spiritual preparedness prior to battle (Josh 6). It is probably for this reason that the ark is mentioned seven times in Joshua 6.

Equating warfare with worship can also be seen in the events of the battle itself. The march to battle involved a well-arranged religious procession (Num 2). The marchers participated in prayer, religious song, and celebration (2 Chron 20:18-22). The presence of God in the battle is seen in the way He deliberately sends Israel into conflict with inferior manpower and weaponry so He alone will be seen as the sole guarantor of victory (Josh 11:6, 9; Judg 6–8; 1 Sam 17). The fact that God alone is seen as provider of victory is also evidenced in the way that He causes panic and fear to befall the enemy (Josh 5:1; 10:1-2, 10), enlists the elements of creation in battle (Deut 7:20; Josh 10:11-15), and has Israel engage in seemingly irrational battle strategies.¹² These things are designed to teach the nation that the victory comes from God's hand rather than from its own strength.

Events subsequent to the battle portray worship as well. After the battle, the army returned with the ark to the sanctuary (Psalm 24). Songs were sung in celebration of victory (Exod 15:1-4; Judg 11:34; Ps 98). The last act after the battle was the practice of *chērem*, which involved offering the conquered people as well as their possession to Yahweh. As previously explained, this practice usually involved killing every living thing in the conquered territory (Josh 6:21) while offering the possessions that remained to God. Any minor deviation from this practice meant defeat for the nation (Josh 7) while adherence to the practice of *chērem* meant success for the nation (Josh 8). In sum, the direct involvement of God before, during, and after battle equates Israel's holy war and the practice of *chērem* with an act of worship.

¹⁰ Ibid., 50, n.21.

¹¹ Tremper Longman III and Daniel Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 40-41.

¹² Holloway, "The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War," 50-51.

In conclusion, this section of the paper has sought to identify the key characteristics of Israel's holy war. This has been accomplished by observing Gerhard von Rad's list of thirteen characteristics of holy war, by defining *chērem*, and by noting holy war's sacred character.

BIBLICAL NECESSITY OF CANAANITE GENOCIDE

Why was Canaanite genocide necessary? Why did Yahweh impose such a harsh penalty? Scripture provides at least eight answers to this question. First, Canaanite genocide was necessary to prevent Israel from practicing idolatry. In Deuteronomy 7:2, the command is given to utterly destroy the Canaanites and to show them no mercy. Verse 4 explains the rationale for such destruction when it says, "For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods..."¹³ Similarly, Deuteronomy 20:16-17 instructs Israel to utterly destroy the Canaanites and not leave alive anything that breathes. Verse 18 furnishes the reason when it says, "in order that they may not 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."

In addition, Exodus 34:11-13 commands Israel to destroy the religious artifacts of the Canaanites. The subsequent verses again provide the reasoning for such a seemingly harsh command. They say, "—for you shall not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God—lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they play the harlot with their gods, and someone invite you to eat of his sacrifice; and you take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods, and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods. You shall make for yourself no molten gods" (Exod 34:14-17). Interestingly, the same penalty of utter destruction was also to be applied to an idolatrous Israelite city (Deut 13:12-18), an individual Israelite advocating idolatry (Deut 13:6-11), or an individual Israelite personally practicing idolatry (Exod 22:20).¹⁴ These verses make it unmistakably clear that the mere existence of the Canaanites in the land would have enticed the nation into the sin of

¹³ All Scripture citations used throughout are taken from the NASB.

¹⁴ Holloway, "The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War," 57.

idolatry thus causing the nation to violate the first two commandments of the Decalogue.¹⁵ Thus, just as the removal of the nation from Canaan to Egypt during the days of Joseph was necessary to insulate her against the moral pollution from the Canaanites (Gen 45:5-8; 50:20), eradication of the Canaanites would be similarly necessary to preempt national idolatry.¹⁶

This connection between the mere existence of the Canaanites in the land and the propensity of the Jews to become idolatrous is well testified in subsequent biblical revelation. Because Israel did not follow God's command of annihilating the Canaanites (Josh 13:13; 15:63; 16:13; Judges 1:27), the nation would be characterized by idolatry (Josh 23:7, 12-13; Judges 2:3) until the postexilic era. This connection also finds support in the Sodom and Gomorrah story. The dwelling of Lot and his family in Sodom had a deleterious effect on their spiritual lives. Lot was reluctant to leave Sodom even after being warned of Sodom's imminent destruction (Gen 19:16). Lot's wife looked backed and became a pillar of salt (Gen 19:26). Even though Lot's daughters were taken out of the city of Sodom, Sodom was not taken out of them as evidenced through their incestuous unions with their father (Gen 19:30-38). Moses may have included the Sodom story as a means of warning the Jews of the compromise that the nation would similarly experience if they did not eradicate the Canaanites.

Second, God threatened Israel with destruction if she practiced idolatry. This threat would become a reality in spite of the fact that Israel was God's chosen nation. In Deuteronomy 7:6, Moses reminds Israel of her elect status. However, just two verses earlier, he warned the nation that God would quickly destroy her if she involved herself in Canaanite idolatry (Deut 7:4). Such a divine threat of destruction as a consequence of idolatry is repeated numerous times throughout Deuteronomy (8:19-20; 11:16-17; 30:17-18) and Joshua (11:20; 23:13, 15, 16; 24:20). Bush explains:

¹⁵ Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, The Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 84; Reuven Firestone, "Conceptions of Holy War in Biblical and Qur'anic Tradition," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 (1996): 105.

¹⁶ Eugene Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 87.

The Israelites, sickened by slaughter or seduced by sensual religious rites, ceased exterminating the Canaanites, and Canaanite religious practices gradually pervaded Israelite religion. The punishment that this brought upon Israel was terrible. Yahweh inflicted upon them foreign oppression, invasion, destruction of Israelite cities, and the destruction of Jerusalem and exile from the promised land.¹⁷

Thus, to prevent such national destruction, it was necessary for the Israelites to remove the temptation of idolatry in their land by eradicating the Canaanites.¹⁸

Third, God's messianic purpose through the nation could not have been accomplished absent Canaanite destruction. God set aside Israel for the purpose of mediating His messianic blessings to the world (Gen 12:3; 49:10). Yet, as explained above, the existence of the Canaanites would have caused the nation to embrace the Canaanite religion ultimately leading to Israel's destruction. Such destruction would have inhibited God's messianic purposes for the nation. Thus, as explained by Bush, "A surgeon does not hesitate to remove an arm or a leg, or even a vital organ, when life is at stake. The very existence of Israel—and ultimately the salvation of the world—depended upon [it]."¹⁹ Elsewhere he notes:

Likewise, the *chērem*...must be viewed within the context of Israel's prophetic outlook. Yahweh acted for Israel and against Israel's enemies because of his covenant promises with the fathers. In fact, this makes the idea of total destruction an understandable item in biblical religion, for the covenant's ultimate purpose is to provide for all the nations of the earth the knowledge of Yahweh and the covenant blessings. Anything or any person that would prevent the working out of this redemptive purpose for all peoples must be removed as an enemy of Yahweh.²⁰

¹⁷ William LaSor, David Hubbard, and Frederic Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 148.

¹⁸ Firestone, "Conceptions of Holy War in Biblical and Qur'ānic Tradition," 105, 107.

¹⁹ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 148.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

Kaiser similarly notes, “Just as surgeons do not hesitate to amputate a gangrenous limb, even if they cannot help cutting off some healthy flesh, so God must do the same. This is not doing evil that good may come; it is removing the cancer that could effect all of society and eventually destroy the remaining good.”²¹

Fourth, the mere existence of the Canaanites in the land stood in opposition to God’s land promises given to the patriarchs. God gave the patriarchs and their descendants an unconditional, divine right to possession of the land (Gen 12:7; 13:14-15; 15:18-21; 17:8). In the verse immediately before the command to utterly destroy the Canaanites (Deut 7:2), Moses enumerates the seven Canaanite nations that occupied the land at the time Deuteronomy was written (Deut 7:1). Most of these names are found in the original land grant given to Abraham (Gen 15:18-21). Moreover, passages in Deuteronomy repeatedly reiterate God’s patriarchal land promises (Deut 1:6-8; 2:25-37; 3:1-22; 6:10-12; 7:1; 9:1-3; 11:23-25; 20:1-18; 29:6-8; 31:3-6). Thus, a nexus can be established between the command to destroy the Canaanites and the patriarchal land promises.²² Had the Canaanites not been eradicated, God’s land promises could not have been fulfilled.

Fifth, a related purpose involves the fulfillment of prophecy. Not only did God predict that Israel would ultimately possess the land, but He also specified the timetable as to when this was to occur. Gen 15:16 says, “Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete.” In other words, Israel was to return, take possession of the land, and execute judgment upon the Canaanites after 400 years (Gen 15:13). Had this not happened, prophecy would have failed. God would not have allowed prophecy to fail since the Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35).

Sixth, God used the conquest of Canaan as a pedagogical device for the education of Israel and the nations.²³ Yahweh used the events of the Exodus to convince the nation that He was God (Exod 6:6-7; 7:17; 16:12). Yahweh also used the plagues and miracles to lead Pharaoh and the Egyptians (Exod 7:5; 14:4, 18) as well as the surrounding nations (Josh 2:10) to a similar conclusion. The events surrounding the conquest of Canaan,

²¹ Kaiser et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, 207.

²² Firestone, “Conceptions of Holy War in Biblical and Qur’ānic Tradition,” 105.

²³ Merrill, “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” 87-88.

including the genocide of the Canaanites would also have the effect of teaching the same truth to the nations. For example, Rahab understood Yahweh's true identity because she had heard of Israel's utter destruction of Sihon and Og (Josh 2:10). Moreover, the miracle of the drying up of the Jordan taught Israel as well as all the peoples of the earth to reverence Yahweh (Josh 4:23-24).

Seventh, the Canaanite conquest was a divine reenactment of creation. The building of the Tabernacle might be seen as a reenactment of creation. The Spirit's involvement is evident in both the creation of the cosmos and the Tabernacle (Gen 1:2; Exod 31:1-5). Moreover, both were created according to the specific command of God. This is seen through the repetition of the phrase "and it was so" in Gen 1 and the repetition of the phrase "just as the Lord commanded" in Exod 39-40. A similar recreation motif is also evident in the conquest narratives through the repetition of the phrase "just as the Lord had commanded" (Josh 10:40; 11:12, 15, 20, 23). The Canaanite priestly caste system allowed land to be controlled by a powerful few. God's system was the opposite because land distribution and control was egalitarian (Josh 13-21). Thus, God's purpose through the reenactment of creation in the conquest was to juxtapose His egalitarian system against the oligarchical Canaanite system. Such juxtaposition could only occur if God's system was allowed to stand on its own. This could only occur through a complete eradication of the Canaanites and their system.²⁴

Eighth, the battle must be understood as not merely taking place on the physical plane but on the cosmic or spiritual plane as well. In other words, the conflict was not just between God and the Canaanites but also between God and Satan and his minions. The fact that wicked powers in heavenly places influence governments of this world finds ample illustration in Daniel 10. Here, Daniel pulls back the veil thus giving the reader insight into the spiritual powers behind the nations of Persia, Greece, and Israel.²⁵ Merrill explains why such a spiritual perspective makes it easier to understand the call for Canaanite destruction. He observes:

²⁴ Holloway, "The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War," 58-61.

²⁵ Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 244-66.

Once it is recognized that the battle is ultimately cosmic and that what is at stake is God's reputation and sovereignty, it is easier to see why radical destruction of those who oppose him is an absolute necessity. The matter cannot be left on the spiritual plane. Human agents in the employ of supernatural handlers must also suffer the same fate if they remain unrepentant.²⁶

In other words, because God's sovereignty mandates defeat of all of His foes at a spiritual level and because God's spiritual enemies use human instruments in their rebellion against God, these human instruments must also be completely eradicated. In conclusion, this section has sought to set forth the biblical reasons as to why Canaanite genocide was necessary.

EXPLAINING BIBLICAL GENOCIDE

The previous sections examined the characteristics of biblical genocide as well as the scriptural reasons for its existence. This section focuses upon surfacing twelve factors that help the biblicist better explain divinely sanctioned genocide to the critic. Many of these factors, when considered by themselves, do not necessarily exonerate Israel's genocidal actions. Rather, they merely furnish an appropriate historical context for viewing Israel's annihilation of the Canaanites. However, when these factors are considered in their totality, they make biblical genocide more understandable and explainable.

First, it must be understood that Israel was not the only nation in the ancient Near East to practice divinely sanctioned genocide. The term *chērem* is used by at least one other nation, Moab. The Moabite Mesha Stela records the words of the king of Moab in the ninth century B.C. boasting about placing *chērem* upon the Israelites. The pertinent portions says:

And Chemosh said to me: Go, take Nebo from Israel! So I went by night and fought...against it from the break of dawn until noon, taking it and slaying all, seven thousand men, boys, women, girls, and maidservants; for I had devoted them to

²⁶ Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity," 82.

destruction for (the god) Ashtar-Chemosh. And I took from there the [...] of Yahweh, dragging them before Chemosh.²⁷

Another text from Mesha's campaign might also be alluding to the employment of *chērem* against the Israelites. It says, "I killed all the people from...the city as a *ryt* (delight, satisfaction, propitiatory sacrifice) for Chemosh and for Moab."²⁸ Hittite material also contains the idea of total destruction. In addition, some sites connected with the Later Bronze period, such as Gezer, manifest a distinct burn layer. This evidences the practice of burning everything after the defeat of a city.²⁹

Although this historical background does not in and of itself exonerate Israel's genocidal practices, it does give us a frame of reference from which to view Israel's actions. For example, sometimes Israel's war practices seem more humane when compared with the war practices of its neighbors. Upon comparing Israel's practice of burning conquered cities with the same practice as employed by the Assyrians, Niehaus makes the following observation: "It is worth mentioning that this practice assumed a more humane aspect in Israelite hands than in Assyrian: The Israelites killed the rebels by stoning them before burning them, whereas Tukulti-Ninurta boasts that he burned a city full of rebels alive."³⁰ Furthermore, sometimes the practice of a certain group does not seem quite as bleak when it is understood that many other nations were involved in the same questionable behavior. By way of analogy, the existence of slavery in colonial America does not seem quite as offensive when it is understood that this same practice existed in other parts of the world of the time and still persists in some parts of the world today.³¹

²⁷ James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 320.

²⁸ Lohfink, "Chērem," 5:190.

²⁹ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 179.

³⁰ Jeffrey Niehaus, "Joshua and Ancient Near Eastern Warfare," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31 (March 1988): 45.

³¹ David Barton, *Original Intent* (Aledo, TX: Wall Builder Press, 1996), 279.

Second, Israel never engaged in holy war beyond the land that God had given them in the Abrahamic Covenant. Genocide was to be limited only to the consecrated land (Deut 20:16).³² According to Lohfink, “The war of Deuteronomy 20:1-18...limits the *chērem* strictly to the situation of occupation and the inhabitants of the promised land.”³³ In fact, Israel was specifically forbidden to conquer adjacent territories since God had already given them to other peoples (Deut 2:4-5, 18-23).³⁴

Holy war as expressed in Deuteronomy, therefore, would not have been intended to “propagate the faith,” the commonly assumed purpose of holy war envisioned in the West. It was not outward looking and had no interest in seeking converts, either through physical force or through persuasion...The concept of deuteronomic holy war, then, was quite limited geographically and could only exist in relation to a particular locale consecrated to the survival of its own religio-cultural expression.”³⁵

“To repeat, Yahweh did not order the Israelites to exterminate all Gentiles but only the Canaanites.”³⁶ This geographical limitation is to be distinguished from the expansionistic teachings of Islam. Its universally applicable holy war dictums exhibit a “manifest destiny” mentality that caused the Islamic religion to spread far beyond Arabia.³⁷

Third, divinely sanctioned genocide was to be imposed not only upon the Canaanites but also upon Israelite cities and individual Israelites if they became involved in idolatry (Deut 13).³⁸ Thus, genocide cannot be framed in terms of a racist issue since God ordered for it to be imposed upon both Canaanites and Israelites. Fourth, God could have used any naturalistic method to dispose of the Canaanites, such as a hailstorm, earthquake, pestilence, famine, disease, or hurricane. The reason He chose Israel to

³² Firestone, “Conceptions of Holy War in Biblical and Qur’ānic Tradition,” 105-6.

³³ Lohfink, “Chērem,” 5:197.

³⁴ Firestone, “Conceptions of Holy War in Biblical and Qur’ānic Tradition,” 105.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁶ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 148.

³⁷ Firestone, “Conceptions of Holy War in Biblical and Qur’ānic Tradition,”: 115, 18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

eliminate the Canaanites is because she was His elect nation. Thus, "...the charge of cruelty against God is no more deserved in this case than it is in the general order of things in the world where all of these same calamities happen."³⁹

Fifth, the Canaanites should not be portrayed as innocent victims. Cowles presupposes the innocence of the Canaanites in his reaction to Gard's justification for Canaanite slaughter. Cowles notes:

No one will be "thrown into the lake of fire" (20:15) because of their race, nationality, or religious affiliation. No one will hear, "Depart from me" (Matt 7:23 KJV), just because of the accident of having been born in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nor will any one suffer the eternal torments of being eternally separated from God because of the sins of their ancestors.⁴⁰

Thus, in Cowles' view, Canaanite sin had nothing to do with their punishment. Rather, the Canaanites were slaughtered simply because of their nationality and religious affiliation, being born at the wrong time and place, and the sins of their fathers. On the contrary, Scripture describes the Canaanites as morally culpable and thus deserving of such harsh treatment. Chisholm explains, "Israel's invasion of Canaan was not an imperialistic 'land grab' directed against morally neutral people."⁴¹

According to Genesis 9:25, the Canaanites were cursed because of the sin of their ancestor Ham who uncovered Noah's nakedness (Gen 9:20-27). Presumably, Ham's descendants were cursed because they would inevitably learn from and imitate Ham's deficient character.⁴² Similarly, Genesis 15:16 says, "...for the iniquity of the Amorite is not

³⁹ Kaiser et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, 207.

⁴⁰ C.S. Cowles, "A Response to Daniel L. Gard," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 148.

⁴¹ Robert Chisholm, "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (October-December 1996): 430.

⁴² Allen Ross, *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 218.

yet complete.” The word “iniquity” speaks of guilt.⁴³ Moreover, chapters 34 and 38 of the Book of Genesis both depict the wickedness of the Canaanites. Gen 34 discusses the Canaanite rape of Dinah and Genesis 38 discusses the Judah’s gravitation toward Canaanite sexual immorality. In an attempt to protect Israel from such Canaanite immorality, God saw fit to transplant Israel from Canaan to Egypt during the days of Joseph.

Furthermore, the Book of Leviticus indicates that the Canaanites were involved in the sins of child sacrifice (Lev 18:21), homosexuality (Lev 18:22), and bestiality (Lev 18:23). In fact, the Canaanites were involved in such gross perversity that the land is depicted as being on the verge of vomiting them out (Lev 18:24-30). The Book of Kings also mentions the involvement of the Canaanites in the sins of idolatry (1 Kings 21:26) and child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3). In addition, Moses explains that God gave the Israelites permission to conquer the land not because of Israelite righteousness but rather on account of Canaanite wickedness (Deut 9:4-5).⁴⁴ Similarly, the divine decree to destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:18) needs to also be understood against the backdrop of Amalekite sin. “When the Israelites were struggling through the desert toward Canaan, the Amalekites picked off the weak, sick and elderly at the end of the line of marchers and brutally murdered these stragglers” (Deut 25:17-19).⁴⁵ The Canaanites were even more wicked than their neighbors of the ancient Near East. Albright observes:

We are as yet in no position to say that the Northwestern Semites were more ‘depraved’ (from a Yahwist point of view) than the Egyptians, Mesopotamians and Hittites, but it is certainly true that human sacrifice lasted much longer among the Canaanites and their cogeners than in either Egypt or Mesopotamia. The same situation seems to hold true for sexual abuses in the service of religion, for both

⁴³ Earl Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen, and H. Wayne House, eds., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 31.

⁴⁴ Chisholm, “Divine Hardening in the Old Testament,” 430.

⁴⁵ Kaiser et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, 207.

Egypt and—on the whole—Mesopotamia seemed to have raised the standards in this area at a much earlier date than was true in Canaan.⁴⁶

By way of analogy, focusing upon the guilt of the Nazis makes their subjugation by the allies at the end of World War II more understandable. Similarly, these verses depicting Canaanite culpability help the Bible reader grasp that while it is true that the Canaanites were punished, they were deserving of such punishment. Those seeking to use Canaanite genocide as a way of disparaging God's character have a tendency to emphasize only one side of the equation. The reality of divinely sanctioned genocide is emphasized while the sins of the Canaanites are down played. By way of analogy, those seeking to use the subjugation of the natives on this continent as a way to undermine the foundation of America employ a similar tactic. While emphasis is placed upon the sins of the European colonists, scant attention is given to the tribal warfare, cannibalism, and child sacrifice rampant among the natives.⁴⁷ Such a selective and one sided historical analysis allows for the advancement of a theological or ideological point of view. However, giving more balanced attention to the sins of the Canaanites preempts such an agenda.

Sixth, even the Canaanite children deserved to be slaughtered. Many balk at the command of God to utterly destroy the Canaanite children along with the rest of the population (Josh 6:21). The rationale for this command lies in the old adage "the apple does not fall far from the tree." The children simply would have imitated the sin and character of their parents. Kaiser asks, "If the women and children had been spared in those profane Canaanite nations, how long would it have been before a fresh crop of adults would emerge just like their pagan predecessors?"⁴⁸ This imitation by children of their parents explains why God placed a curse on Ham's descendants because of Ham's sin (Gen 9:20-25). "These descendants were not cursed because of what Ham did: they were cursed because they acted as their ancestor had."⁴⁹ Cowles attempts to show how this principle violates other portions of Scripture by appealing to Deuteronomy 24:16,

⁴⁶ W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (London: Athlone, 1968), 152.

⁴⁷ John Eidesmoe, *Columbus & Cortez, Conquerors for Christ* (Green Forest: AR: New Leaf, 1992).

⁴⁸ Kaiser et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, 207.

⁴⁹ Ross, *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 218.

which says that children cannot be punished for the sins of their parents.⁵⁰ However, the Canaanite children were not being annihilated merely because of the sin of their parents. Rather, they were eradicated because of their potential for imitating the sins of their parents.

Seventh, by the time of the conquest the Canaanites were incapable of repentance or spiritual receptivity. Such inability is communicated in Joshua 11:20, which teaches that the Lord hardened the Canaanites so that Israel might utterly destroy them. Sihon experienced a similar hardening before he was delivered into Israel's hands (Deut 2:30). Such a hardening conveys the idea of being completely impervious to God's grace.⁵¹ God's instructions to Jeremiah not to pray any longer for the nation illustrates such a state of spiritual obtuseness (Jer 7:16). While it may be objected that God is the one who hardened the Canaanites, the reality is that they were responsible for their own condition. A parallel can be found in the life of Pharaoh. Although God ultimately hardened his heart (Exod 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8), Pharaoh invited this end result through his own self-hardening, rejection, and stubbornness (Exod 7:13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34).⁵² Such hardness left no alternative for the Canaanites other than their destruction.⁵³

Eighth, God waited many centuries for the Canaanites to repent before He sent judgment. Merrill observes, "That Yahweh war was to be employed against the Canaanites was not an ad hoc decision that arose on the eve of the conquest."⁵⁴ The key text is Genesis 15:16, which says, "Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." In other words, God postponed Canaanite genocide for 400 years (Gen 15:13) in hopes that they would repent. According to Kaiser, "...God waited for centuries while the Amalekites and those other Canaanite groups slowly

⁵⁰ Cowles, "A Response to Daniel L. Gard," 147.

⁵¹ Chisholm, "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament," 429.

⁵² Ibid., 410-29.

⁵³ Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 436; Richard Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1996), 218.

⁵⁴ Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity," 83.

filled up their own cups of condemnation by their sinful behavior. God never acted precipitously against them; his grace and mercy waited to see if they would repent and turn from their headlong plummet into destruction.”⁵⁵ Interestingly, the Book of Joshua records numerous instances where the Canaanites prior to battle were aware of Israel’s recent military victories (Josh 9:1-3, 9-10, 24-25; 10:1-2). Such awareness may constitute a final opportunity to avoid judgment by submitting to Israel as Rahab had done (Josh 2:9-11).

Scripture records other instances where God delays judgment for prolonged periods of time in hopes that those under the sentence of judgment would change their ways and thus avoid judgment all together. In Genesis 6:3, God says, “...My spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” In other words, God postponed the flood for 120 years while His Spirit strove with man during the days of Noah trying to get that generation to repent so judgment could be averted.⁵⁶ Thus, Peter explains that, “...the patience of God kept waiting in the Days of Noah...” (1 Pet 3:20). Such a window of opportunity before judgment is often present in Scripture because God desires none to perish (2 Pet 3:9). He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked but rather is pleased when the wicked turn from their wickedness and live (Ezek 18:23; 33:11). God’s reluctance to judge also seems reflected in extra-biblical tradition. Niditch speaks of a rabbinic tradition where the angels sought to sing after the Red Sea had closed upon the pursuing Egyptian army. However, God stopped their song and said, “The work of my hands has drowned in the sea and shall you chant songs?” God does not “rejoice in the downfall of the wicked.”⁵⁷ Because God’s heart is to save rather than to destroy, we can be sure that He “...grieved for the loss of the Canaanite children, as well as their parents.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Kaiser et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, 206.

⁵⁶ Although this verse is capable of several different interpretations, this seems to be the preferred reading. See Ross, *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 183.

⁵⁷ Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 150; b. Meg. 10b; b. San. 39b.

⁵⁸ Holloway, “The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War,” 62.

Ninth, God's command to execute the Canaanites is perfect because it emanates from a perfect God. "At the risk of cliché, all that can be said is that if God is all the Bible says he is, all that he does must be good—and that includes his authorization of genocide."⁵⁹ Thus, the perfection of God furnishes the proper prism through which to view and evaluate all of His actions. In his commentary on Joshua, Calvin seems to view biblical genocide through this prism. He notes:

[God] was pleased to purge the land of Canaan of the foul and loathsome defilements by which it had long been polluted...indiscriminate and promiscuous slaughter [of the Canaanites], making no distinction of age or sex, but including alike women and children, the aged and decrepit, might seem an inhumane massacre, had it not been executed by the command of God. But as he, in whose hands are life and death, had justly doomed those nations to destruction, this puts an end to all discussion.⁶⁰

If we ever reach a point where God's actions seem unjust, the problem does not reside with God since He is perfect. Rather, the problem emanates from our limitations as creatures. While He is perfect, we are limited by virtue of our status as creatures. As the heavens are higher than the earth, His ways are higher than our ways (Isa 55:8-9). We are but the lump of clay while He is the potter (Rom 9). Because of this creature/creator distinction, He has the prerogative to reveal truths that are beyond our ability to grasp (Dan 8:27; 12:8-9; 1 Peter 1:10-11). In those instances where we are tempted to challenge His goodness, we, like Job, must humbly trust in His status as perfect creator.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity," 94.

⁶⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Joshua*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1855), 97.

⁶¹ Daniel Gard, "A Response to C.S. Cowles," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 55; Daniel Gard, "A Response to Tremper Longman III," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 202; Tremper Longman III, "A Response to C.S. Cowles," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 58; Tremper Longman III, "A Response to Eugene H. Merrill," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 108, n. 1.

Tenth, not only is the capacity of the modern Bible interpreter diminished as a consequence of the finitudes associated with being a mere creature in the creature/creator relationship, but also his capacity is often hindered through cultural myopia. When reading the Bible, people have a tendency to judge the actions that took place in an ancient culture by the standard of their own culture. Such a pre-understanding can lead to a faulty interpretation. This is particularly true with western interpreters who have been conditioned to accept the diminished status of religion. Holloway explains:

Islamic and Old Testament traditions share something that the modern west has consciously rejected. Both ancient Israel and Islamic cultures believe that there can be no neat division between sacred and secular spheres in life. Specifically, they do not share the modern western concept of a state where religious and political concerns are not blended...

...Our description of the conquest of Canaan as a moral dilemma often reveals our acceptance of the diminished status of religion in the modern world; at the same time many Christians in America are willing to support the bombing of cities and the burning of children for purposes far less significant than God's redemptive purposes for creation.⁶²

Eleventh, given the holiness of God (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8) and the depravity of man (Jer 17:9), the real question is not why did God destroy the Canaanites? Rather it is why everyone else has not been similarly destroyed? Meredith Kline brings to the discussion of *chērem* warfare a concept that he calls "intrusion and ethics." By this he means that the very standard that God will use to judge the world in the last day, He brought to bear on the inhabitants of Canaan.⁶³ If God will use this same standard of judgment in the eschaton, we should be thankful that He has not yet employed it to judge all of Adam's descendants. Thus, studying the destruction of the Canaanites should not cause us to complain about God's unfairness. Rather, it should cause us to marvel at His grace. We

⁶² Holloway, "The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War," 64-65.

⁶³ Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 162-64.

should be thankful that the same divine standard imposed upon the Canaanites has not been universally applied to all of humanity.⁶⁴

Twelfth, the command to commit genocide is descriptive in nature rather than prescriptive. In other words, it should be understood in terms of describing something that took place in ancient history rather than as a command that believers are to follow today. “It was intended for an immediate situation, when the Israelites were occupying the land God had promised their fathers.”⁶⁵ Sadly, divinely sanctioned genocide has been used throughout church history as a justification for acts of violence and persecution in the name of God.⁶⁶ It has been invoked in order to justify the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem Witch hunts, Klu Klux Klan racist terrorism, and the shooting of abortion providers. However, using the genocide command in this way emanates from a flawed theology.

This command is a one-time command given to a specific people in a specific historical context and is not an open-ended command for all to follow. Thus, biblical genocide is distinct from genocide taught in the Islamic tradition, which contains genocidal commands the Islamic fundamentalists are to impose even to this day. For example, Sura 9:5 of the Qur’ān says, “And when the sacred months are past, kill those who join other gods with God wherever ye shall find them; and seize them, besiege them, and lay wait for them with every kind of ambush; but if they shall convert, and observe prayer, and pay the obligatory alms, then let them go their way, for God is gracious, merciful.”⁶⁷ Thus, it would seem that when Christians commit genocide they are violating their holy book and when Islamic fundamentalists commit genocide they are following their holy book.

Israel represented a unique unification of church and state in God’s redemptive purposes that no nation has been privileged with since.⁶⁸ God’s law and covenant were given only to Israel (Ps 147:19-20). By contrast the church is a non-political entity with no

⁶⁴ Gard, “A Response to Tremper Longman III,” 201.

⁶⁵ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 149.

⁶⁶ Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence*, 4.

⁶⁷ *The Koran*, trans. J.M. Rodwell (New York: Ivy Books, 1993), 112.

⁶⁸ Gard, “A Response to Tremper Longman III,” 201; Merrill, “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” 84.

similar geographical or military distinctives.⁶⁹ The church's battle is spiritual rather than political (Eph 6:10-18). Her weaponry is spiritual rather than physical (2 Cor 10:4).⁷⁰ Despite the 73 uses of the word "Israel" in the New Testament, never is this word used of the church.⁷¹ Because of these dispensational distinctives, making adherence to holy war texts as normative in this age could only stem from a flawed hermeneutical and theological system. Ford and Deasley nicely summarize the matter while commenting on Deuteronomy 7:1-2:

To apply these [genocidal] commands to warfare today would be a gross misapplication of scripture. There can be no doubt that, armed with the Christian gospel and endued with the Holy Spirit, Paul would have entered Canaan as he entered Corinth to show God's triumph over evil in transformed lives.⁷²

In sum, this section has sought to surface twelve factors that help the biblical apologist explain Canaanite genocide to the critic.

ALLEGED TENSION WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT

The previous sections have dealt with the characteristics of Canaanite genocide, provided a biblical justification for such genocide, and also provided tools to help the biblicist explain Canaanite genocide to the skeptic. This final section deals with the alleged tension between the seemingly harsh command regarding Canaanite genocide as given in the Old Testament and the New Testament portrayal of God as a God of love. If interpreters approach Scripture with the presupposition that the genocidal command violates God's loving New Testament nature, they have two primary alternatives for

⁶⁹ Gard, "The Case for Eschatological Continuity," 136-38.

⁷⁰ Ross, *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 297.

⁷¹ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Tustin: Ariel Ministries, 1994), 684-90. For a thorough exegetical refutation of the application of the phrase the "Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16 to the church see S. Lewis Johnson, "Paul and the 'Israel of God': An Exegetical and Eschatological Case-Study," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 181-96.

⁷² Jack Ford and A. Deasley, *Beacon Bible Commentary*, 10 vols. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1969), 1:539-40.

alleviating this tension. The first method is to follow Marcion in postulating that the Old Testament God is a God of hate and the New Testament God is a God of love. The second alternative is to radically reinterpret the Old Testament genocidal texts so that they end up not saying what they actually say.⁷³

Old Testament = Wrath and New Testament = Grace

Allen captures this Macionite mentality through his reporting of a recent *Law and Order* program. In this episode, an officer saw a copy of the Bible open to Numbers 25:33. After reading the verse, he retorted, “Oh yes. The Old Testament. Blood and guts!”⁷⁴ The idea here is that the Old Testament God is somehow inferior to the New Testament God. Because the genocide commands emanate from an inferior God, they can be dismissed. But driving such a wedge in between the Old and New Testaments is invalid. The Old Testament shows God’s mercy just as it shows his wrath.

As previously indicated God postponed judgment for 120 years in the days of Noah (Gen 6:3; 1 Peter 3:20). He similarly postponed Canaanite genocide for 400 hundred years in spite of repeated Canaanite wickedness (Gen 15:13, 16). He told Abraham that He would spare the wicked city of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 13:13; 18:20) if He found just ten righteous men within the city (Gen 18:32). The Old Testament reveals that God is “...compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness...” (Exod 34:6; cf. Ps 89:14).⁷⁵ He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Rather what pleases Him is if the wicked turn from their wicked way and live (Ezek 18:23; 33:11). Jesus summed up the Old Testament in terms of a person loving God and their neighbor (Matt 22:37). He also observed that God in the Old Testament desired mercy rather than sacrifice (Matt 9:13; 12:7).⁷⁶

⁷³ Eugene Merrill, “A Response to C.S. Cowles,” in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 49.

⁷⁴ Ronald Allen, “Affirming Right of Way on Ancient Paths,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (January-March 1996): 5-6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 9, n.14.

⁷⁶ Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Answers to Tough Questions Skeptics Ask About the Christian Faith* (San Bernardino: Here's Life, 1980), 69-70.

An unfortunate misconception is that grace did not begin until the New Testament. But how can such a distinction hold true if Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord (Gen 6:8)? Some of this confusion stems from a wrong interpretation of John 1:17, which says, “For the Law was given through Moses; but grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.” Many emphasize the “but” in John 1:17 while neglecting that truth is contrasted with the law just as grace is contrasted with the law. Thus, grace and law cannot be contrasted in this verse anymore than truth and law can be contrasted. What John 1:17 is actually teaching is that grace came through the law and more grace came through Christ. This may be the meaning of “grace upon grace” or “one grace after another” in the preceding verse (John 1:16).⁷⁷ Similarly, the writer of Hebrews contrast the New Covenant with the old in terms of good versus better rather than no grace versus grace (Heb 8:6). In sum, it seems that the Old Testament features God’s grace just as the New Testament does.

Similarly, the New Testament features God’s wrath just as the Old Testament does. The wrathful side of Christ is evident in the gospels.⁷⁸ For example, He is portrayed as angrily driving out the moneychangers from the temple (John 2:12-22). He proclaims that He came to cause division rather than unity (Matt 10:34-35). He pronounces judgment upon Christ-rejecting cities (Matt 10:15; 11:22-24) and utters condemnatory woes against the Pharisees (Matt 23). He pronounces coming judgment upon Israel (Matt 23:34-36) that resulted in over 1 million deaths.⁷⁹ He is also depicted as the righteous judge who will execute holy judgment in the eschaton (Matt 13:40-43; 25:31-46; John 5:22; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 14:7).

The wrathful side of God in the New Testament comes into sharp focus upon examining the Book of Revelation. This book vividly portrays the destruction of half of the world’s population (Rev 6:8; 9:15) as well as the awful fate those who do not know Christ (Rev 14:10-11; 20:11-15). Canaanite genocide pales in comparison to such descriptions of

⁷⁷ Allen, “Affirming Right of Way on Ancient Paths,” 10.

⁷⁸ McDowell and Stewart, *Answers to Tough Questions Skeptics Ask About the Christian Faith*, 69-70.

⁷⁹ Flavius Josephus, “Wars of the Jews,” in *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Edinburgh, Scotland: William P. Nimmo, 1867; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997).

global, eternal judgment. Gard explains, “The final judgment with its utter destruction of the heavens and the earth and all those at enmity with God makes the most bloody warfare narratives of the Old Testament seem like children’s bedtime stories.”⁸⁰ That the New Testament Jesus is intimately associated with these judgments is established by the fact that the full title of the book is “The Revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:1) and He is the one portrayed as opening the seals that brings forth these horrific judgments (Rev 6:1). Some have attempted to mitigate the severity of these apocalyptic judgments by arguing that the Book of Revelation is not meant to be construed literally. Weaver notes:

The slain lamb indicates a nonviolent confrontation between reign of God and reign of evil, and a nonviolent victory via death and resurrection for the reign of God...The God of dispensationalism is a violent and vengeful God who overcomes evil and violence through greater violence. The God of Revelation is a God who overcomes nonviolently through the Word, which is in Jesus Christ.⁸¹

However, such an interpretation can only be sustained by adopting a wildly allegorical hermeneutic that fails to do justice to the details of the text.

The continuity of the wrathful side of God in both the Old and New Testaments becomes even more compelling upon recognizing that the divine warrior motif developed in the Old Testament (Exod 15:3; Josh 23:3) is evident in the New Testament as well. Revelation describes numerous scenes that are similar to the way God waged war in Old Testament times.⁸² Longman notes the evidence of the divine warrior motif in John’s description of Christ in Revelation 19:11-16. He observes, “This description of Jesus is built in large part out of passages from Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Isaiah, passages that describe Yahweh as the divine warrior.”⁸³ Holloway similarly observes the continuity introduced by the divine warrior motif in both the Old and New Testament when he says,

⁸⁰ Gard, “A Response to C.S. Cowles,” 56.

⁸¹ Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 32-33, and n. 29.

⁸² Adela Collins, “The Political Perspective to the Revelation of John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 241-56; Merrill, “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” 89; Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*, 180-92.

⁸³ Longman, “The Case for Spiritual Continuity,” 183.

“Indeed, it serves as a key to understanding the unity of the Bible as a whole.”⁸⁴ Thus, “...the New Testament, when taken as a whole, is just as violent and bloody as—actually, probably more than—the Old Testament.”⁸⁵ In sum, the existence of the grace of God in the Old Testament and divine wrath in the New Testament puts to rest the Marcionite assertion that the genocidal commands should be dismissed because they emanate from a different and inferior God.

Reinterpretation of Genocide Texts

Not only is following a Marcionite theology an inadequate way of handling genocidal texts, but posing a radical reinterpretation of them is similarly inadequate. There are at least four basic ways that theologians attempt to do this. The first way is to dehistoricize the texts by simply saying that Canaanite genocide never took place. This approach has been labeled *socio-historical dehistoricization*. According to this view the Book of Joshua had a mere symbolic purpose to teach people to separate from idolatry during the days of Josiah. Therefore, the Book of Joshua is not meant to be understood as literal history.⁸⁶

However, Niehaus rebuts this assertion by pointing to the numerous aspects of warfare common to Joshua and ancient Near East kings and kingdoms of the second millennium. They include the following: direct commands from a deity regarding conquest, a repetitive command fulfillment formula whereby the deity gives the command for conquest and more details are added as the conquest is reviewed, the portrayal of the conquest as inevitable as it emanates from an immutable command of a deity, the deity psychologically overwhelming the opponent, the deity’s personal involvement in the battle, the following of various war practices (erecting war memorials, utterly destroying a city as an object lesson for future generations, burning the rebellious, publicly exhibiting corpses), using a servant nation as an instrument, the command to be strong and courageous prior

⁸⁴ Holloway, “The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War,” 53, n.34.

⁸⁵ Longman, “A Response to C.S. Cowles,” 60.

⁸⁶ Holloway, “The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War,” 47-48.

to battle, emphasis upon the sacred and military aspects of battle, and the recording of battles that are instantaneous as well as prolonged.⁸⁷

Moreover, there are few parallels between the book of Joshua and the days of Josiah. For example, Joshua was not a monarch. In fact, he established no centralized governmental structure. Rather, he followed a decentralized land policy. Also, Josiah did not implement the type of land reform that we find in the Book of Joshua.⁸⁸

The second approach is to employ allegorization. Here, the literal reading of the text is seen only as a vehicle for importing a higher spiritual truth that comes from outside the immediate context. Thus, the genocidal commands are not meant to be taken at face value but rather were designed to convey some sort of higher truth about Christ.⁸⁹ However, the allegorization method of Origen and Augustine is fraught with so many problems⁹⁰ that most modern scholars have rejected it.⁹¹

The third approach is to argue that the Israelites committed Canaanite genocide because that is only what they thought the Lord wanted them to do. God nowhere specifically told Israel to annihilate the Canaanites. The Israelites were simply mistaken as to what God's will was.⁹² However this contention is without merit. Numerous times it is expressly stated that Joshua acted "as the Lord God of Israel had commanded" (Josh 10:40). It is further said, "as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded" (Josh 11:12).⁹³ Similarly, in Numbers 21:34, the Lord said to Moses, "...do to him (Og) as you did to Sihon..." Since Israel had previously annihilated Sihon, the Lord was directly telling

⁸⁷ Niehaus, "Joshua and Ancient Near Eastern Warfare," 37-50.

⁸⁸ Holloway, "The Ethical Dilemma of Holy War," 48.

⁸⁹ C.S. Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," in *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 36-37.

⁹⁰ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Findley, OH: Dunham Publishing Company, 1958), 5-6.

⁹¹ Merrill, "A Response to C.S. Cowles," 51.

⁹² Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," 38-40.

⁹³ LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 147.

Moses to similarly eradicate Og. Such direct commands make it implausible that genocide resulted from misunderstanding what God wanted.

The fourth approach is to erect interpretive centers or controlling metaphors. An interpretive center is the establishment of one portion of Scripture as a basis for interpreting other sections of Scripture.⁹⁴ In other words, one key verse or concept is used as a filter for viewing and understanding the rest of biblical data. One of the interpretive centers used by those seeking to reinterpret the genocide texts is 1 John 4:8, which says, “God is love.” Applying this interpretive center to the genocide texts, Cowles concludes, “The God revealed in Jesus never has been and never will be party to genocide of any sort, for ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8).⁹⁵ Another interpretive center is “Cristocentric hermeneutics.”⁹⁶ The idea here is that because the coming of Christ introduced such a “sea change”⁹⁷ in God’s redemptive plan, all biblical data needs to be filtered through Christ. Cowles explains, “Since Jesus has come, we are under no obligation to justify that which cannot be justified, but can only be described as pre-Christ, sub-Christ, and anti-Christ.”⁹⁸

However, such a hermeneutical approach is problematic. To begin with, it is debatable that love is the dominant attribute of God. While love is certainly one of His features, theologians remain divided concerning whether love is His dominant attribute. After all, the angelic beings continually surrounding the throne of God are continuously drawing attention to God’s holiness (Isa 6:3; Rev 4:8) rather than His love.⁹⁹ Thus, God’s dominant attribute may be holiness rather than love. For that matter, using interpretive center logic, it could be argued that spirit is God’s dominant attribute since an identical

⁹⁴ Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 482-85.

⁹⁵ Cowles, “The Case for Radical Discontinuity,” 26.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁹⁹ Millard Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?: The Current Controversy over Divine Foreknowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 215.

grammatical structure is used to describe God as spirit in John 4:24 that is used to describe God as love in 1 John 4:8.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, Christ's coming did not introduce such a radical "sea change" in God's program so as to introduce great discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. Jesus called Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt 22:32). Evangelists in Acts introduced God by the same title (Acts 3:13; 7:32).¹⁰¹ In addition, Paul explains to New Testament believers that the Old Testament is to be studied because it serves as a source of encouragement (Rom 15:4). He also told Timothy to preach the entire Old Testament (2 Tim 3:16; 4:2). Thus, there is far too much continuity between the Old and New Testaments to justify a radical reinterpretation of the genocide texts.

Moreover, interpretive centers should not be used in constructing a doctrine. When building any doctrine, all texts on a certain subject should be included and each text should be allowed to have its "distinctive input." One group of texts should not be used for the purpose of redefining another set of texts.¹⁰² Scripture should not be pitted against Scripture. Merrill notes the subjectivity associated with applying the concept of interpretive centers to genocide texts. He says, "In effect, ordinary historical-grammatical exegesis of the Old Testament must be suspended where offensive texts are concerned. If they fall short of our perception as to God's love, they must be radically reinterpreted. Such subjectivism of method is most disquieting and dangerous."¹⁰³ If this method is consistently followed, one wonders what would happen to other biblical doctrines such as the flood and eternal retribution. "It must be said that those who have moral difficulties with genocide in the conquest of Canaan should have even more serious difficulties with the final judgment."¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, "Christological hermeneutics" should never be used to discount plain statements of the Old Testament because Christ exhibited a high view of the Old

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 214.

¹⁰¹ Merrill, "A Response to C.S. Cowles," 49.

¹⁰² Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*, 485.

¹⁰³ Merrill, "A Response to C.S. Cowles," 50.

¹⁰⁴ Longman, "The Case for Spiritual Continuity," 185.

Testament. Jesus believed that the entire canon (Luke 11:51; 24:27, 44), every word (Matt 4:4), and even the smallest punctuation mark (Matt 5:18) of the Old Testament were given by God. He validated the historicity of numerous Old Testament stories that have been dismissed by higher critics by quoting from them and even connecting them to crucial Christian doctrine. For example, He based His view of marriage on the story of Adam and Eve in the garden (Matt 19:3-6). He based His teaching of the Second Advent upon the stories of Noah and the flood and Sodom Gomorrah (Luke 17:26-32). He even based His own bodily resurrection upon the story of Jonah and the great fish (Matt 12:40).¹⁰⁵ Thus, Jesus believed that Moses' words were just as much God's word as His own words. In sum, dehistoricization, allegorization, postulating a mistake as to God's will, and interpretive centers are inadequate hermeneutical devices for alleviating the alleged tension between genocidal Old Testament texts and God's New Testament love.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to provide a balanced presentation of Canaanite genocide. First, the general characteristics of Israel's holy war were examined. Second, the scriptural justification for Canaanite genocide was provided. Third, several factors helping the biblicalist better explain Canaanite genocide to the skeptic were given. Finally, issues relating to alleged tension between the genocidal texts and the New Testament were dealt with. It was concluded that various hermeneutical methodologies used by theologians to dismiss the genocide texts were inadequate. Genocidal texts remain an important contribution to the biblical canon and should not be rewritten by today's theologians.

¹⁰⁵ Steven Lawson, *Faith Under Fire* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1995), 80-91. For other works demonstrating Christ's high view of the Old Testament see R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon in the New Testament Church* (London: SPCK, 1985); Robert Lightner, *A Biblical Case for Total Inerrancy: How Jesus Viewed the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998).

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