

## “The Destruction of the Canaanites!”

**Question:** “How are we to understand God’s command for the Israelites to destroy/drive out the Canaanites? How was that any different than what ISIS is doing now?”

### Introduction

In our modern/postmodern age this is one of the questions that comes up very often when people assess the truth claims of Christianity. The websites of atheists, skeptics, and others opposed to Christianity have this as one of their top questions. Many even go so far as to label this command of God as “ethnic cleansing” and “genocide”. Is Yahweh a “blood-thirsty tribal god”? Do we have a good response to these questions and accusations? I believe we do in the Word of God.

### **I. God gives a land promise to Abraham**

- A. God makes a covenant promise with Abraham (Gen. 15:12-20).
  - 1. He is in Hebron at this time (Gen. 13:18). The location is important to note.
  - 2. The covenant that God makes here is unconditional.
  
- B. God predicts the Israelite exodus in Egypt and their return to the land.
  - 1. The period of time of their exodus is given (13b).
  - 2. “The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (16b).
  - 3. There was a period of 400 years between promise and fulfillment.
  
- C. It is important to note the peoples listed in this promise (18-21). They are the same ones mentioned in Deut. 20 and elsewhere.

### **II. God gave the Law to show what kind of people He wanted**

- A. He gave specific instructions for the people to follow.  
Deut. 4:5-8: “See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?”
  
- B. He gave specific promises to His people.  
Exod. 19:5-6: “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

- C. God calls the People of Israel to NOT be like the peoples of the surrounding countries (Deut. 12:29-31), who were very wicked in their attitude and their actions.

### **III. God does order the destruction of the Canaanites.**

- A. Perhaps the clearest command is given in Deut. 20:16-18. (Though see also Deut. 2:34; 3:6; 1 Sam. 15:2-3; et al.)
1. “But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God.”
  2. It must be clearly stated – God gave this command.
  3. He is the LORD. He is the Giver of life and the Judge of all life.
  4. He is good, righteous, and just in all of His pronouncements.
  5. We must not put ourselves in the position of judging God, thereby thinking that we are more righteous and just than He is.
- B. God gives this command to protect His People from falling into evil.
1. Exod. 34:11-16: “Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no 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 when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.”
  2. The Canaanites who remained in the land continued to cause problems for the Israelites (Judges 10:6; 1 Kings 14:22; 11:5-8; 2 Kings 17:10; etc.). Unless evil is destroyed, it will continue to cause problems for God’s people.
  3. Haman was a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king that Saul did not destroy (1 Sam. 15:20; Esther 3:1). He tried to destroy the Jewish people.
- C. God took the lead in driving out the Canaanites. He did not merely command the Israelites to do something and then stand back and let it happen.
1. Exod. 23:23: “When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces.”
  2. Exod. 23:28 30: “And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites before you . . . Little by little I will drive them from before you, until you have increased to possess the land.”

3. The LORD compares what He did with Pharaoh with what He will do with the Canaanites (Deut. 7:17-26).
  4. The LORD is active in His judgments.
- D. God was patient in His judgment. He was not capricious, neither was there a rash rush to judgment on His part.
1. He gave the Canaanites 400 years to repent (Gen. 15:12, 16).
  2. He allowed the fullness of their iniquity to materialize (Gen. 15:16).
  3. He drove them out of the land little by little (Deut. 7:22).
  4. The LORD will and must punish the guilty (Exod. 34:6-7; Num. 14:18; Nah. 1:3).
  5. He is just and righteous in all His ways.

#### IV. The Evil of the Canaanites

- A. The Canaanites were not innocent people.
1. There are no “innocent” people. All are sinners. (Ps. 51:5; 58:3; 14:1-4; Rom. 3:9-20; Job 15:14).
  2. Do not believe the myth of the “innocent pagan”.
  3. God knew the sins that the Canaanites would commit and He promised that they would be punished for them.
- B. The evil practices of the Canaanites.
1. Idolatry
    - a. Idolatry is anything put in the place of God.
    - b. God detests idolatry (Exod. 20:3; Jer. 1:16; 8:2-5).
    - c. We are all “idol-makers” in our hearts.
  2. Incest
    - a. The Canaanite pantheon of gods was incestuous.
    - b. The Law spells out specific practices that are abominable (Lev. 18 & 20). They were commonplace among the Canaanites.
  3. Adultery
    - a. The Canaanites had temple prostitutes, which brought the worshiper into union with the gods through sexual union.
    - b. Ishtar was the “Queen of Heaven” and one of the highest of the Canaanites gods/goddesses. The way one had “communion” with her was through the temple prostitutes.
  4. Child sacrifice
    - a. Children up to 4 years old were offered as live sacrifices to Molech. They were passed through the fire to try to appease the gods.
    - b. The LORD specifically condemns this in Lev. 20:1-9).
  5. Homosexuality
    - a. This was practiced widely in the ancient near-east. Few cultures condemned it. There were also homosexual temple prostitutes.
    - b. The LORD condemns this practice because it violates not only His creation mandate, but also because it flows from idolatry (Gen. 1:27-28; Lev. 18:22). See the progression of sin and rebellion in Rom. 1:18-32.

6. Bestiality
  - a. The Canaanite gods practiced this.
  - b. The LORD clearly condemns this (Lev. 20:15-16).
  - c. Notice the command to destroy everything that breathes (Deut. 20:16). Both the people and the animals involved in these acts were to be destroyed because boundaries had been broken and violated.
  
- C. This command is not genocide. Neither is it “ethnic cleansing.”
  1. It is capital punishment for crimes and sins already committed and being committed at the time they were punished.
  2. The Canaanites were punished for their sins, not because of their ethnic identity.
  
- D. God was just in His punishment of the Canaanites.
  1. Deut. 9:5: “Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”
  2. Deut. 32:4: “The Rock, his works are perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.”
  3. Psalm. 96:13b: “He will judge the nations in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.”

**V. God promises the same judgment to Israel if they do those same things.**

- A. If Israel does these same things, then the land would “vomit” them out.
  1. Deut. 4:25-28: “When you father children and children's children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a carved image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, so as to provoke him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess. You will not live long in it, but will be utterly destroyed. And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you. And there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of human hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.”
  2. Deut. 8:18-20: “You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day. And if you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the Lord makes to perish before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God.”
  3. Lev. 18:24-28: “Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the

land became unclean), lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.”

- B. In the course of time, the land did vomit them out.
  - 1. The northern Kingdom of Israel was carried into exile by the Assyrians in 722 BC. (See 2 Kings 17:6-18; Is. 8:1-10).
    - a. Notice the reasons why they were “vomited” out.
    - b. They followed the ways of the nations instead of the ways of the LORD.
  - 2. The southern kingdom of Judah was carried into exile in 586 BC. (See Hab. 1:5-11; 2 Kings 24-25; Is. 39:1-8).
  - 3. The people of Israel and Judah did not learn from history, from the prophets, nor from the LORD,
- C. God shows no partiality. He is just in His judgments.
  - 1. Rom. 2:11: “God shows no partiality.”
  - 2. Acts 10:34: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”
  - 3. Rev. 16:5-7 “And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, ‘Just you are, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments’ . . . And I heard the altar saying, ‘Yes, Lord God, the Almighty, true and just are your judgments.’”

## **VI. Limits of the destruction**

- A. It was limited to the Promised Land.
  - 1. It was not universal in scope. Hittites and other peoples who lived outside of the Promised Land were not affected.
  - 2. Israel was not to adopt the customs of the surrounding nations, but they were not called to destroy them.
- B. It was limited to the time it took to take control of the land.
  - 1. Once they were in the land, this command would come to an end.
  - 2. Israel, however, did not utterly destroy the Canaanites. Many were forced into servitude for the Israelites.
  - 3. However, many Canaanites continued to live among them and this caused many problems for the Israelites.
  - 4. It was not valid after that time and it is no longer valid today.

## **VII. The destruction of the Canaanites is far different from the attitude and practice of ISIS.**

- A. The Israelites were slaves escaping from their bondage with no place to go. ISIS is composed of those who leave their own lands to go and create a new territory out of the territories of others.

- B. The Canaanites were thoroughly evil and corrupt and they were punished for their sin. Those areas destroyed by ISIS were not practicing the sins that brought judgment upon the Canaanites.
  - 1. In fact, ISIS does many things that parallel what they Canaanites were doing – prostitution, child brides, sex slaves, child sacrifice through suicide bombing, etc.
  - 2. Thus, if any group merits the same “Canaanite” destruction today, it would be ISIS and similar jihadist Islamic groups.
  
- C. The destruction of the Canaanites was for a particular group of people in a particular area and for a particular period of time.
  - 1. Once that period and objective came to an end, this commandment did as well. It does not continue today.
  - 2. ISIS believes the Qur’an prescribes their barbaric behavior for all peoples for all times. All “infidels” have 3 choices according to Islamic Law.
    - a. Convert to Islam.
    - b. Agree to pay an annual tax (Jizya) and live as second-class citizens.
    - c. Resist and be put to death in “holy” war.
  
- D. The Bible never prescribes Christians to kill others to promote and expand their faith. However, the Qur’an does do so.
  - 1. The Qur’an does so in several places. Most Islamic scholars agree that these commands are still applicable today, even if they disagree as to the exact terms and conditions for applying them.
  - 2. “Both Islam and Christianity were spread by the sword, but the swords were pointing in opposite directions!”
  
- E. Violence committed by Christians against non-Christians (or anyone) is in direct opposition to the model and example of Jesus. Violence committed by Muslims against non-Muslims is in keeping with the command and example of Muhammed.

**Appendix – Recommended Resources**

[www.gotquestions.org](http://www.gotquestions.org)

[www.answering-islam.org](http://www.answering-islam.org)