

God's Goodness and the Extermination of the Canaanites

Intro: When we read the Scriptures we can clearly see that God is presented as morally perfect.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Thy throne; lovingkindness and truth go before Thee. (Psalm 89:14)

For the Lord is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting, and His faithfulness to all generations. (Psalm 100:5)

And because God is morally perfect, all that God does, commands, and approves must of necessity be good.

In view of this, the beginning Bible student may be troubled when he encounters certain divinely directed situations in Old Testament history that involve death and destruction (even of the innocent). This week in our reading we were confronted with such a command from the Lord. When the Israelites were commissioned to take the land of Canaan, the Lord instructed them to smite completely the peoples, and to show no mercy upon them.

"When the Lord your God shall bring you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and shall clear away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, and when the Lord your God shall deliver them before you, and you shall defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them. Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will quickly destroy you. But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire.

(Deuteronomy 7:1-5)

And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, both young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword (Joshua 6:21).

How does the sincere Bible student come to grips with this seeming breach of the goodness of God? How can these things be reconciled with the character of a loving God?

God, because of who He is, has the right to render judgment upon evil at any time.

If I sharpen My flashing sword, and My hand takes hold on justice, I will render vengeance on My adversaries, and I will repay those who hate Me.

(Deuteronomy 32:41)

The conquest of Canaan should be seen as an act of God's justice and a temporal judgment upon a wicked people.

One should not erroneously conclude that the Canaanites were a friendly peaceable people who were just minding their own

business when they came under the attack of Israel. Nor are we to imagine that God was arbitrarily taking land away from one group nations to give it to another.

The Israelites were agents of God's judgment, acting in His behalf in their conquest of Canaan.

There is no reason why God's judgments cannot be temporal rather than be postponed to the final judgment.

What if God had chosen to delay all judgment? Can we imagine how evil this world might have become?

The societies of Canaan were extremely corrupt!

Archaeological discoveries, such as those at Ugarit, have revealed the moral degradation of the Canaanite nations..

For example, in the Canaanite religion El was the chief god and Baal was his son. These were "gods" who had absolutely no concept of morality.

In a poem known as "The Birth of the Gods," El is said to have seduced two women, and horrible sexual perversions are associated with his name. He married three of his own sisters—who also were married to Baal. He is represented as practicing vile sex acts and influencing others to do likewise.

It is little wonder that the evidence indicates that the Canaanites followed their gods in such sexual abominations.

In Leviticus 18 God gives Israel a list of prohibitions of every kind of sexual perversion and even human sacrifice and then comments:

*for the men of the land who have been before you have done all these abominations, and the land has become defiled;
(Leviticus 18:27)*

In the Canaanite religion, homosexuals and prostitutes were employed to raise money for the support of the temples. It is not an exaggeration to say that these pagans elevated sex to the status of a god. Many scholars believe that there are hints of this sordid background in such Old Testament passages as Deuteronomy 23:18-19—where a prohibition is given against bringing the "hire of a harlot, or the wages of a dog" (a male prostitute) into the house of Jehovah."

*"You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the wages of a dog into the house of the Lord your God for any votive offering, for both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God.
(Deuteronomy 23:18)*

The Canaanite religion was a horribly brutal system as well.

For instance, the goddess Anath is pictured as killing humans by the thousands and wading knee-deep in blood.

She cut off heads and hands and wore them as ornaments. And in all of this gruesomeness, the Baal-epic says that her liver was swollen with laughter and her joy was great. In this connection it also must be mentioned that the morally depraved Canaanites also sacrificed their own babies to their gods. Funerary jars have been found with the bodies of young children distorted by suffocation as they struggled for life after having been buried alive as a sacrifice to Canaanite gods. Such young children have been found in the foundation pillars of Canaanite houses, and sometimes religious ceremonies were associated with their sacrifice (Wilson, 1973, p. 85).

Thus the destruction of the Canaanites may be seen as a just repayment upon them for the brutality they had inflicted upon others.

It should be noted that the Lord had been very patient with these grossly immoral pagan tribes for a long, long time.

God's decision to destroy the Canaanites was not made hastily, but with reserve and patience. Insight into God's patience is seen in his promise to Abraham around 1876 BC.

"Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." (Genesis 15:16)

This verse offers insight into the longsuffering of God.

Nearly 476 years had passed since God first uttered this statement and the judgment was executed. There had been centuries for the Canaanites to turn from their wicked ways.

Instead it is as though the sins of those heathen peoples gradually were filling a container; eventually, a point would be reached that God could tolerate no longer. The wicked would have to be destroyed.

Thus, it was not a violation of His goodness; rather it was to preserve it, that He had them destroyed. Even God in His longsuffering could not allow rampant wickedness to go unpunished forever.

The destruction of these wicked people was for the moral preservation of the nation of Israel and the accomplishment of God's redemptive purpose for the whole world.

When they invaded Canaan, the Hebrews were not to allow their enemies to live:

"that they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods; so would ye sin against Jehovah your God" (Deuteronomy 20:18).

But why was this so important? Among other reasons, it was through the Hebrew nation that the Messiah was to make His appearance! Thus, the salvation of mankind ultimately was at stake. The extermination of the

wicked inhabitants of Canaan, therefore, was an example of moral surgery in order to save the life of the patient (the human race).

A final question: But why were children included?

In a world where there is to be freedom of choice, one must be allowed to suffer the consequences of wrong choice making, even when he is not a party to such choices.

Making bad decisions not only affects us, but affects those around us as well. We fall heir to the consequences of evil in others as a part of the price that we pay for our own freedom!

So, children often are victims who suffer because of the evil in their parents.

Second how could the Israelites execute their mission while discriminating between “innocents” and “guilty”?

Where is the dividing line between an innocent child and a not so innocent one?

Even children may early in life be affected by what they have seen around them and prepared for its practice.

However, the question represents a real problem only if it is viewed in terms of the present.

If one sees the matter in terms of eternity, the situation becomes altogether different. Would it not have been infinitely worse, in view of eternity, had these children grown to maturity and adopted the same pagan practices as their parents?

Those who died in innocence were delivered up to God to enjoy the blessings of eternal life.

Conclusion: We certainly do not know all of God’s mind on this important theme (cf. Romans 11:33), but if we study the Old Testament record of the Lord’s dealings with these nations, together with the archaeological findings that illustrate the corruption of these people, surely we ought to be able to see that Jehovah’s wisdom regarding those events should not be disputed.

Thoughts of this lesson taken from an excellent article by Wayne Jackson on this subject (www.christiancourier.com)