



CHRISTIAN ANSWERS TO HARD QUESTIONS

**THE MORALITY
OF GOD
IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

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THE PURPOSE of this booklet is to discuss the problem of how God can be considered to be morally good, while at the same time he does things and commands people in the Old Testament to do things that do not appear to be good. One famous example is God's command to Israel to exterminate every man, woman, and child of the Canaanites (e.g., cf. Deut. 20:12–15 with 20:16–18).¹

Some believe that such a God cannot be good, since this directive of God's is virtually equivalent to his commanding Israel to commit an act of ethnic cleansing, which would not be worthy of the loving and gracious God of the Bible. Though several kinds of problems pertaining to God's morality in the Old Testament could be discussed,² this booklet will deal primarily with the particular problem concerning the killing of the Canaanites and, secondarily, the imprecations (or cursings) in the Psalms, since these pose perhaps the greatest potential challenges to the morality of God. Some of the principles that we find standing behind these two major issues also underlie an approach to some of the other moral problems. Thus, the issue of the Canaanites and that of the imprecations in the Psalms will serve as examples of how to approach other similar kinds of problems in the Old Testament.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ Which parts of the Old Testament may pose the biggest challenges to the morality of God? Why?

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS FOR UPHOLDING GOD'S MORAL GOODNESS DESPITE HIS COMMAND TO ANNIHILATE THE CANAANITES

Those who want to uphold the moral goodness of God have proposed several solutions to this problem.

Wartime Ethic Legitimately Different from Peacetime Ethic

One solution is that what is considered good moral behavior in war is sometimes different from that in peacetime. This is true in ancient as well as modern times. For example, lying and deception are usually an accepted ethic in wartime. An army may ambush another army through deceptive tactics. This is legitimate practice during war. Killing the enemy is also condoned during battle. But the killing of noncombatants, whether they be the elderly, women, or young children, is not condoned in modern wartime practice, though it happens. Such killing was, however, sometimes condoned in World War II, when Britain carpet bombed some German cities and when the United States of America dropped the atom bomb on two Japanese cities to end World War II. Great debate has ensued over the morality of these bombings in the Second World War.

There has been equal debate about God's command to Israel to "annihilate" all the men, women, and children in Canaan. This is different from the debate about the bombings in the Second World War, since those were commanded by humans and not God. The problem is increased in the Old Testament command to Israel, since this is a clear command from God himself and not a mere human. How can God be a morally good being and command such horrific killing?

Since killing of noncombatants is not usually accepted in the modern day, it is even harder to understand how any kind of war ethic could justify God's issuing a command to kill those who are not soldiers.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- + In what ways may war lead to an "accepted ethic" that differs from the ethic of peacetime?
- + What is at least one difference between ancient and most modern wartime ethics?

- ✦ What are some differences between the bombings of World War II and the destruction of the Canaanites?
- ✦ Does this particular defense of God's morality seem reasonable? Why or why not?

The Divine Command to Kill All Women and Children Is Not Meant to Be Taken Literally

Another solution to the problem is that God's command to annihilate all the Canaanites is figurative and merely refers to wiping out only all the *armies* of the Canaanites. In particular, it is a heightened exaggeration (hyperbole) to make the point not that every man, woman, and child is to be wiped out but that there is to be a total and decisive victory over the fighting forces of the enemy Canaanites. Such exaggerated language of describing military defeats was commonplace in the ancient Near East, and it is claimed that the expressions in Joshua and Judges likewise reflect this rhetorical device.³ If this is the case, then the moral problem of killing apparently innocent elderly people, women, and children becomes virtually nonexistent.

While this perspective is plausible, the evidence adduced to prove it is not clear. Since there is not space at this point to summarize and evaluate it, an excursus at the end of this booklet is dedicated to doing that.⁴ Nevertheless, despite this argument, it is not probable that God's command to Israel to annihilate all the men, women, and children of the Canaanite cities and towns is purely figurative and refers only to enemy combatants and not even all of those. Most probably the command is essentially literal, though certainly some Canaanites who repented were spared and others escaped. Furthermore, the literal expression is to be understood as indicating a decisive victory. But even if the expressions are taken to be more figurative than literal, it is unlikely that the references to the annihilation of the women

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and children can be understood as their not being included at all. If this is the case, then the killing of the elderly, women, and children is included to some significant degree.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ⊕ Why might people have reason to believe that the command to kill all the Canaanites is merely figurative? What would the figurative command symbolize?
- ⊕ What reasons does the author give against this view?

A PLAUSIBLE FIVEFOLD APPROACH

There seems to be a better way to look at this problem. We will explore it from five different angles, which will help us to understand it more thoroughly. First, how does the killing of the Canaanites demonstrate God's justice and righteousness? Second, how could Israel's unique commission as a "kingdom of *priests*" (Ex. 19:6) shed light on the extermination of the Canaanites? Third, how does God's sovereignty over all things help us to better understand that he can be considered blameless in all that he does, despite the problems just mentioned above? Fourth, how does the idea of God's judgment of unbelieving humanity at the end of time shed light on this problem? Finally, how does the law of loving one's neighbor now and at the end of time help us to better apprehend the issue about the Canaanites and the psalmist's cursing of his enemies (though this last point has some overlap with the fourth point)?

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ⊕ Did the previous two defenses of God's morality touch on the issues raised by the author's five questions? What does

this show about the approach we should take in understanding God's morality?

God's Command to Annihilate All the Canaanites because of Immorality and Idolatry Was Part of a Unique Redemptive-Historical Circumstance That Demonstrated Divine Justice

One possible solution to the moral problem is that God's command was part of unique and unrepeatable historical circumstances. The inhabitants of the land of Canaan had participated in idolatry and immorality for so long that God planned to judge them for their sin. And Israel was to be God's instrument in punishing the Canaanites for their sin (Gen. 15:16) and was to replace them in the land, which God had reserved for his people to possess and rule over in preparation ultimately for the coming of the Messiah. Accordingly, God's command to Israel to wipe out the people of Canaan was a unique command not to be repeated. This vantage point helps to explain that Israel was not involved in ethnic cleansing but that the basis for the command lay in God's standard of righteousness that demanded judgment for violating this standard and doing great wickedness (see, e.g., Deut. 9:5–6). This goes a good distance toward a better understanding of why God issued the command to wipe out the Canaanites, since it was virtually equivalent to a command to execute guilty people for their wickedness. But does this notion of Israel as God's agent of judgment justify Israel's killing many of the elderly, women, and children of Canaan?

If Israel had gone before a world tribunal for carrying out this mass killing, would she have been accused of war crimes? Probably so, in much the same way that some in Germany were accused and convicted of killing noncombatants, including the elderly, women, and children. Nevertheless, while it is theologically understandable that Israel was executing justice on the Canaanites, this concept

would have been hard to prove in a human court. A similar kind of justice was later executed against Israel for her immorality and idolatry, when she was cast out of her land, which involved the killing of many innocent people.⁵ Yet, one can still ask, how does killing defenseless Canaanite women and children (including infants) demonstrate God's justice? Infants do not even know the difference between right and wrong. The demonstration of divine justice does make sense of God's command to kill the Canaanites, but this notion, as we have so far explained it, still leaves some questions unanswered. It is especially difficult to justify the command to kill the elderly, women, and children.

The following discussion will attempt to flesh out what divine justice means in order to better understand the concept as an explanation of this problem.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ How does God's divine justice make the slaughter of the Canaanites different from ethnic cleansing? What were the two goals of the Canaanites' destruction?
- ✦ Why is this command unrepeatable?
- ✦ What are some questions this view leaves unanswered?
- ✦ What concept do we need to flesh out in order to better understand this view?

God's Command to Annihilate All the Canaanites because of Moral Uncleaness Was Part of a Unique Redemptive-Historical Commission to Purify the Promised Land as a Sanctuary

A number of scholars have established that the garden of Eden was a sanctuary. Adam was commissioned to be a king-priest to keep out uncleanness and then to expand this garden sanctuary into the outer regions of the earth until the Eden

How can God be morally good if he commands apparently evil actions—for example, the extermination of the Canaanites? This booklet explores this important Old Testament topic.

“Navigating questions about morality, especially the morality of God in the Old Testament, requires special care and thoughtful, biblical consideration. In this little booklet, Beale provides readers with just that.”

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PUBLISHING
www.prpbooks.com

Cover design by Trinet Internet Solutions, Inc.

APOLOGETICS

ISBN: 978-1-59638-852-9

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