

Old Testament Massacres

The problem

There are a number of cases of the mass annihilation of people in the Old Testament:

1. The Flood (Genesis 6-8)
2. The Cities of the Plain, including Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18-19)
3. The Egyptian firstborn sons during the Passover (Exodus 11-12)
4. The Canaanites under Moses and Joshua (Numbers 21:2-3; Deuteronomy 20:17; Joshua 6:17, 21)
5. The Amalekites annihilated by Saul (I Samuel 15)

The first three examples are similar in that there was no human agent involved – in each case it was God, or an angel of God, who carried out the massacres directly. The massacre of the Canaanites is the first of two cases in which Scripture records that God's people, the nation of Israel, were commanded by Him to massacre other nations. For this reason, this case will be the focus of this study.

The problem many people have with these stories of massacres is that they do not seem to fit the popular conception of God. In particular, the question is asked how a God of love could allow or even command such brutality. Furthermore, it is suggested that the God described in these books of the Old Testament is a different character from the God described in the New Testament. The former is supposedly angry, vindictive and ruthless, the latter loving, patient and forgiving. Even for people who are convinced that the Bible is true and represents God's revelation of Himself, these accounts can be deeply troubling, especially when one thinks about the death of innocent children.

Did God command the massacre of the Canaanites?

Two main lines of argument have been presented in attempts to resolve the problem of the massacre of the Canaanites by suggesting that God never commanded it:

- a. That the Israelites carried out the massacre but were mistaken in believing God had commanded them to do it** – This argument suggests that the massacres were a carryover from a pagan way of understanding God. It was not uncommon for kings in the Near East of Old Testament times to annihilate the populations of whole cities as an offering to their gods. For example, the 9th Century BC Moabite Stone records King Mesha's boast that he had destroyed all the inhabitants of Ataroth as a sacrifice to his god. The suggestion is made that Israel at this time had a limited understanding of God and that they wrongly thought that their God, Yahweh, expected the same kind of sacrifice. This raises serious questions about the nature of God, in particular whether or not He is able to make Himself clearly understood and whether or not He would allow such blatant disobedience to go unchallenged. One attempt to overcome this difficulty is the suggestion made by some writers that God allowed His name to be associated with these massacres because His love for Israel was so great that He was willing to have His reputation dented for the sake of His relationship with them. This view, however, does not find any support in the Old Testament, which clearly states that God commanded the massacres (Joshua 6:17, 21; Deut 20:16-17) and later criticises the Israelites for their failure to obey the command (Psalm 106:34-42). The only way to reconcile the Old Testament accounts with this view is to regard the Old Testament as simply Israel's record of their perception of their unfolding relationship with Yahweh.
- b. That the massacres never really happened** – This view depends on the suggestion that the accounts of massacres were written later in the history of Israel, during the period of the kings, by scribes who were witnessing the ill effects on the nation of idolatry involving Canaanite deities. These scribes supposedly concluded that it would have been better if Israel had eradicated the Canaanites when they first settled among them and so included commands from God in the "official history" of Israel. This view also necessitates a view of Scripture as the opinion of human beings rather than the authoritative, true word of God. In addition, it says little for the honesty of the authors of the Old Testament and raises the question how God's people could have been so mistaken in their view of God.

Therefore, the issue boils down to our view of the authority of Scripture. We cannot examine here the different views of Scripture or the arguments for my view, which is that Scripture is the authoritative word of

God, free from error as originally given and useful in its entirety to teach and challenge us. I simply want to say that the only way to explain the problem away is to have a low view of Scriptural authority, whereas this study assumes a high view. II Timothy 3:16-17 says that all Scripture is inspired by God and useful to us. This includes Joshua. This author is not content to try to explain the problem away, but will attempt to take Scripture at face value and consider exactly how the massacre of the Canaanites fits with our understanding of God as love.

Why did God command the massacre of the Canaanites?

1. **God's judgement on a culture that was utterly pervaded by detestable religious practices** – Passages like Deuteronomy 9:4-6 (“it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you”), Deuteronomy 18:12 (“because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you”) and Leviticus 18:24-25 (“Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants”) make it clear that God was judging the Canaanites. The wrath of God against sin and His righteous judgement of sinners are important biblical truths. Without understanding that God must judge sin we cannot understand the wonder of God's forgiveness and grace or the amazing truth of the cross, where Christ endured the wrath of God for our sin. Although the greatest judgement of God against human sin is reserved for the future day “when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed” (Acts 17:31), there are instances in Scripture where God intervenes in judgement during the lifetime of individuals (e.g. Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5), groups of people (e.g. Korah and his followers in Numbers 16) and even, as in the case of the Canaanites, against nations. We need to trust in Abraham's statement when he contemplated God's judgement on Sodom and Gomorrah – “will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25). God is fair in His judgements, as Paul explains in Romans 2:1-16. The culture of the Canaanites was deeply sinful, to a degree that God decided to act in judgement against them. We must be careful to say that no individual or church today has the right to condemn an entire culture, although it is important in an age where the prevailing view is that all cultures are equally valid that we learn to be discerning about the differing values inherent in different cultures (including our own) and to be able to see their deficiencies when judged against the standard of God's righteousness. The extreme sin of the Canaanites was connected with their religious practices. Deuteronomy 12:31 says: “*You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates*”. Leviticus 18 gives details of many of the sinful religious practices of the Canaanites, which included: child sacrifice to the god Molech, incest, bestiality, homosexuality and cultic prostitution.
2. **God's desire to preserve Israel from the religions of the Canaanites** – In Deuteronomy 20:16-18, when God commands the Israelites to kill everyone in the cities of the Canaanites, the reason He gives is that “Otherwise they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God”. The religious purity of Israel was not only important for their own sake, but because of God's intention that they would function as a witness to His power and goodness to other nations (see Genesis 18:18). This is why it was so vital to God that Israel start off their life in the Land without distraction from Him. Sadly, because of the failure of the Israelites to obey God's command they were indeed influenced to follow the false religions of the Canaanites. This involvement in Canaanite religions is already evident in the book of Judges, but reaches its peak in the period of the Kings. Although there were times when Israel was successful as a witness to God's power and goodness (examples include Rahab in Joshua 2 and the Queen of Sheba in the time of Solomon in I Kings 10), they ultimately failed in this responsibility for two reasons:
 - a. Because of their lack of faithfulness to God which meant they lost their distinctiveness
 - b. Because they developed a nationalistic sense of their own superiority, which led them to be disinterested in mission to other cultures on the basis that God and His blessings should belong only to them. Jonah is a classic example of this.

Perhaps the church today can learn a lesson from these twin dangers that may lead to a failure to be effective in mission. We must ensure that we are distinctive but also that we do not retreat into a “holy huddle” in which we are isolated from those who need to know about Christ.

Did the Canaanites have a chance?

An obvious objection to the idea that God was judging the Canaanites is that it would be unfair for Him to do so if they had no opportunity to repent and be saved. Based on the Biblical evidence, however, this objection dissolves away for two reasons:

- 1. God was patient with the Canaanites** – This was no “spur of the moment” decision by God. In Genesis 15:13-16, God tells Abraham that his descendants will be slaves in a foreign country for 400 years but that they will return to the land of Canaan after “four generations”. The reason given for this delay is because “the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure”. At the time of Abraham there is evidence that the Canaanites had some knowledge of the true God:
 - The judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah and the deliverance of Lot was evidence of God’s judgement against sin (Genesis 18-19)
 - Abraham lived among them and was a wealthy and powerful man (he was even able to rescue Lot from the united forces of four kings – Genesis 14). His faith in God should have been a witness to the Canaanites.
 - The mysterious Melchizedek was king of Jerusalem and also “priest of God Most High” (Genesis 14:18). He must surely have taught his people about the true Creator God (Genesis 14:19).It seems that over the 600 year period from Abraham to Joshua the Canaanites had gradually rejected what they knew about God and moved deeper into sin. It was only when their sin reached a certain level of severity that God decided to use the Israelites to bring judgement on them. However, even at the time of Joshua the Canaanites had heard about what God had done for the Israelites in delivering them from Egypt and giving them victory over the Amorite kings east of the Jordan (Joshua 2:8-12).
- 2. There was salvation for those who converted to faith in God** – Rahab the prostitute (Joshua 2) was able to discern from what she and other Canaanites had heard about Israel’s deliverance from Egypt and victories over other Amorite kings, that God was giving the land of Canaan to the Israelites and, because of her faith in God demonstrated in her statement and her rescue of the Israelite spies, she was saved from destruction, included in the nation and even became an ancestor of Christ! Sadly, she is the only Canaanite we read of coming to faith in God, although surely others had the opportunity.

What exactly did God command?

This question comes to the heart of the matter by asking exactly what God commanded. Often the massacre of the Canaanites is described as “genocide”, and critics of the Old Testament describe the Israelites as blood-thirsty, jingoistic psychopaths who were completely out of control. The Biblical accounts are quite different, however, both in terms of how God’s command is framed and exactly what happened.

1. The command to annihilate was limited only to inhabitants of Canaan

In Deuteronomy 20 God makes it very clear that annihilation is only to be used in the case of inhabitants of the Promised Land of Canaan. God gave the Israelites strict rules about proper conduct in war against other enemies who did not live in Canaan, including:

- That the priests were to bless the army before the battle (v3)
- That they were to trust God for victory (v4)
- That soldiers were to be excused for personal reasons if they had new land, a new house or a new fiancée or if they were afraid (v5-8)
- That enemy cities must be offered the chance to make peace before being besieged (v10-12)
- That when a city was captured only the men were to be executed – the women and children were to be absorbed into Israel and the possessions to be kept (v13-15)
- That they were not to use a “scorched earth” policy in siege warfare. They must leave the trees belonging to the city standing (v19-20)

The restraint embodied in this code of conduct is remarkable for that period of history, and against this background the command to massacre the Canaanites stands out as a special case. It was a focused, targeted campaign, not an uncontrolled rampage.

2. The judgement was expulsion from the land rather than genocide

There is a range of verbs used in the commands to Israel concerning how they should treat the Canaanites. Some of these clearly speak of extermination, but others speak of driving them out (see

Deuteronomy 7). Deuteronomy 9:3 brings these two ideas together succinctly: “you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the LORD has promised you”. It seems from a careful reading of the related passages that God’s intention was that the Canaanites would have a possibility of fleeing the land as the Israelites advanced. In the case of those kings and cities that refused to do so, there was no option but annihilation. There is no suggestion that Canaanites who left the land must be pursued, rather the commands to annihilation are connected with people in the cities of the land. Presumably if Canaanites had left Canaan they would then have been treated like all other nations and the Israelites could have made treaties with them and would have been bound by their codes of conduct in warfare. So, this was not so much a case of *genocide* (the extermination of an ethnic group) but rather forced removal from the land of Canaan. God’s judgement was primarily that the Canaanites would lose the land because of their detestable religious practices and in order to preserve the purity of Israel’s worship of Him. As we read through Joshua and Judges this appears to be born out, as the extermination of the Canaanites is never fully implemented. This understanding that the primary nature of the judgement was expulsion from the land helps us to understand Leviticus 18:24-29, where God says that “the land vomited out its inhabitants” and that if the Israelites copy the religions of Canaan, the land “will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you”. The judgement against Israel when it came was not annihilation but Exile from the land. In Joshua 12 we have a list of the 31 kings who were defeated by Joshua and whose cities were therefore wiped out (at this time the Canaanites lived largely in independent walled city-states). The average population of each walled city at the time was probably around 1000-3000, with many cities having no more than around 700 people. The 31 cities conquered by Joshua probably had a combined population of around 70,000. Many of these people may have fled before the Israelites attacked, but even if we assume they were all killed, this is only around 3.5% of the likely population of Canaan (the Canaanites were more populous than Israel according to Deuteronomy 7:1-7, and the Israelites numbered around 1.6 million, so we can assume that there must have been around 2 million Canaanites). The remaining 96.5% either fled or were conquered after the time Joshua 12.

3. God is not “racist” – he later judged Israel by removing them from the land

As already mentioned, when the Israelites adopted the religious practices of the Canaanites, God judged them just as He had done the Canaanites. He exiled them from the land to purify them, so that those who returned under Ezra and Nehemiah would be a remnant of people who would worship only Him. God’s judgement was not based on the ethnicity of the Canaanites, but on their religion.

Why in this case did God use the Israelites as agents of His judgement?

In the cases of the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah and the Egyptian firstborns, God acted directly or through the agency of an angel to bring judgement. Some people struggle with how He could have used sinful people to judge other sinful people and with how he could have expected people to be able to carry out an act of brutality, especially against innocent children. The passage in Deuteronomy 9 where God commands the annihilation is helpful in this regard. There God makes it absolutely clear that the Israelites are not being used because they are better than the Canaanites or morally superior, but simply as agents of His judgement. In fact, He repeats twice that it is “not because of your righteousness”. Perhaps God wanted to use the Israelites in this way so that they would learn the seriousness of sin, the detestability to God of the Canaanite religions and the reality of God’s judgement. These truths would be burned deeply on their consciousness as they remembered the annihilation they had been involved in. This problem of how God could use sinful people as agents of judgement of other sinful people arises again later in the Old Testament. In fact, the book of Habakkuk focuses on this concern in the context of the impending invasion of Judah by the Babylonians. The prophet struggles with the fact that God’s people, sinful as they were, are about to be defeated by an even more sinful nation. The book details God’s response as He vindicates Himself and ends with the prophet’s faith as he praises God and expresses his trust in Him.

What about the innocent Canaanites?

Even if we accept that God was judging the Canaanites through the Israelites, the objection may be raised that some of the Canaanites were innocent victims since they were not involved in the detestable practices

of the Canaanite religions. In particular, the thought of young children being killed is troubling. There are two things to say about this:

1. **The means of judgement was merciful to the weak and young** – Although the killing of children by the sword seems brutal to us, it was relatively merciful compared with the alternatives of abandonment and starvation. The sword is actually a quick and relatively painless means of execution.
2. **Death is not the final judgement or destiny of people** – It is always important to remember that death is not the end. In fact, the judgement faced after death (Hebrews 9:27) is much more serious than any judgement resulting in physical death because it determines the eternal destiny of the person. We can trust God to deal fairly with the innocent children who died in the Canaanite massacres, who could not be held responsible for the sin of their culture or religion.

Lessons from the Old Testament massacres about God’s judgement

The massacres recorded in the Old Testament are exceptional cases, and have certain factors in common:

1. **Divine judgement** – they are all judgements for extreme sin
2. **Time to repent** – they are all preceded by long periods of opportunity to repent
3. **Witness to God** – during the time of opportunity there was knowledge available to the people that enabled them to know about God
4. **Salvation through faith** – People who have faith in God and are innocent before Him are always provided with a means of salvation. Their families are saved with them just as the children of those who are judged die with them. Someone is saved in each case except the Amalekites.

	Judgement (agent)	Time to repent	God’s witness	Salvation through faith
Flood	Genesis 6:5-7 (the Flood)	While the ark was being built (I Peter 3:20)	Noah	Noah and family built & entered the ark (Genesis 6:9; 7:8)
Sodom & Gomorrah	Genesis 18:20-21 (fire from heaven)	Abraham pleads with God (Genesis 18)	Righteous Lot (II Peter 2:7) / Abraham	Lot and family fled Sodom (Genesis 19:12-13)
Egyptian firstborn	Exodus 12:12 (angel)	Previous plagues, Moses speaking to Pharaoh (Exodus 7-10)	Moses & Aaron	Israelites marked by the lamb’s blood (Exodus 12:12-13)
Canaanites	Deuteronomy 9:4-6, 18:12; Leviticus 18:24-25 (Israelite armies under Joshua)	Israel’s 40 years in the desert (news reached Canaanites – Joshua 2:10)	Israel led by Moses & Joshua	Rahab and family – tied scarlet thread outside window (Joshua 2)
Amalekites	I Samuel 15:2-3 (Saul’s armies)	c.350 years since their wrong against Israel (Exodus 17)	Israel	NONE RECORDED

Is the God of the New Testament the same as the God of the Old Testament?

Having considered the various questions above and seen what the Old Testament massacres teach us about God’s judgement we can now turn to the fundamental question of whether it is possible to reconcile the picture of God in the Old Testament with what the New Testament reveals about Him. I believe that there is no conflict whatsoever between the Old and New Testaments in terms of their understanding of God, and that the suggestion that there is reflects a bad reading of both Testaments. It is true that the revelation of God in the Bible is progressive. In other words, our understanding of the nature of God becomes clearer as we read through the Bible. This is particularly obvious when we look at the concept of the trinity. In the Old Testament the idea that God is three persons yet one is merely hinted at. In the New Testament, however, it becomes clear. It was only with the coming of Christ that a profound truth like this could finally be made clear and that God’s character and the extent of His love could fully be revealed. To suggest that God’s love is unknown in the Old Testament would be completely false. Likewise, it would be equally wrong to suggest that the God of the New Testament is not capable of righteous judgement. The Old Testament

presents God as the One who is both just and loving (see Exodus 34:6, Psalm 85:10 and Psalm 86:15 for example), and this perfect balance is also seen in the character of God as revealed in Christ (John 1:14). Even in the accounts of massacres in the Old Testament we see both the justice and grace of God as His judgement falls on the rebellious but those who have faith are saved. This same pattern is continued in the teaching of Jesus, who spoke both of salvation and of judgement (see the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 for example). Throughout the New Testament epistles this perfect unity of justice and love in the character of God is consistently seen, so that John could say in his first epistle that God is both light (meaning truth) and love (see I John 1:5 and 4:16). Neither Christ nor His apostles seemed to have any concerns about the veracity of the Old Testament accounts of massacres, showing that they firmly believed that the God of the Old Testament was the same God in whom they trusted.

Until we understand the wrath of God against sin (Romans 1:18) and the fact that this wrath must find expression in judgement (Romans 2:5), we cannot appreciate the wonder of God's love displayed in the cross of Christ (Romans 5:8) or why His death was necessary to demonstrate God's justice and avert God's wrath from us (Romans 3:25). Without an understanding of God's wrath the cross becomes meaningless and grace becomes a weak and insipid thing. The massacres of the Old Testament can teach us much about God's judgement, and the pattern presented in the table above can be applied to the great judgement that is coming at the end of time. In the final judgement:

- a. **God will judge fairly** – however, in this case the outcome will be more than physical death. The consequences will be either eternal punishment or eternal blessing (Revelation 20)
- b. **Time to repent** – God is now patiently waiting, giving people an opportunity to repent (II Peter 3:9). When Christ returns God's judgement will come, and no one will be able to escape from it.
- c. **God's witness** – Christians are present now in the world as witnesses to God's truth and love (II Corinthians 2:14-16).
- d. **Salvation through faith** – There is salvation for any who will repent and trust in Christ for salvation (Acts 2:21)

Why are we troubled?

Despite all that is said in this article I suspect that many readers remain troubled. This author confesses that he is deeply uneasy about the thought of the massacre of whole cities. The very thought seems so foreign to our experience of life in Western Europe in the early 21st Century, and reports of massacres in recent decades in Sudan and Bosnia are abhorrent to us. Is it wrong for us to feel this way? Does it reflect a lack of faith in God? It seems to me that there are two possible origins of the concern that we feel, and that these two origins will lead to very different results:

- a) **Faith in God** – for some the struggle comes from a deep conviction that God is good and that He loves all people. For those who have come to know Him and to trust in Him through Jesus Christ this is an indisputable fact. If this is the origin of our disquiet then it will lead us to a deep concern for those who do not know God and a commitment to evangelism and world mission. As we reflect on the judgement of God against the Canaanites in the time of Joshua we will realise that a greater judgement is yet to come and that those who have not come to faith in God will face a worse fate than the Canaanites. How can we rest easy in our confidence in God's salvation while others have never heard of Christ?
- b) **Rebellion against God** – for others, the struggle arises from a fundamental objection to the very idea that God can or should judge sinful people. According to Scripture, all sin must be judged and every person deserves death and eternal punishment. If we refuse to accept this truth then we are in grave danger because we too are rejecting God and we will face His judgement. We must repent of our stubbornness and pride and call out to God for mercy. If we do, we will find it because of Christ.

So, then, the ultimate challenge of the Old Testament massacres is to realise that God's judgement on sin is a reality, and that we are now in a period where the opportunity to repent and be saved is open to us. God's salvation has been made ready – Christ accomplished it on the cross and lives to save. As the writer of Hebrews warns:

How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? (Hebrews 2:3)

Dr Paul B Coulter, October 2008