

## Killing Canaanites: The Issue of War in Joshua

### Two Background Passages

#### 1. Genesis 15:7-21

<sup>7</sup> He also said to him (Abram), 'I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.....'

<sup>13</sup> Then the Lord said to him, 'Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and ill-treated there. <sup>14</sup> But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. <sup>15</sup> You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup> In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure....'

<sup>18</sup> On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates – <sup>19</sup> the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, <sup>20</sup> Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, <sup>21</sup> Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.'

#### 2. Deuteronomy 20:16-18

<sup>16</sup> However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. <sup>17</sup> Completely destroy them – the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites – as the Lord your God has commanded you. <sup>18</sup> 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 Conquest of Canaan:

1. results from a promise of God to Abram
2. is part of God's covenant with Abram
3. includes God's judgment on the wickedness of the Canaanites
4. involves the defeat and destruction of the Canaanites at God's command
5. is meant to ensure the Israelites worship God and not Canaanite idols

#1 & #2 emphasise God's GRACE; #3 & #4 emphasise God's JUSTICE; #5 emphasises WORSHIP

It is clear from the Biblical accounts that God is the initiator. God makes the covenant with Abraham which includes the promise of land. God re-affirms this promise to Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Joshua. Although Joshua's generation takes the land, this only happens because God keeps his promise, showing himself faithful to his covenant with Israel.

### A Short Biblical Overview

If the promised land can be thought of as a form of "Garden of Eden" (a land created by God for his people to live in peace with one another under his rule) then the Canaanites can be seen as a form of serpent (a personification of evil who will tempt God's people away from God).

The conquest and destruction of the Canaanites can be seen as an example of the continuous battle between God and evil throughout the Bible. This is a battle that takes many forms throughout the Bible and culminates in Christ's victorious death on the cross. We see the ultimate conquest in the pages of Revelation with the defeat of all the forces of anti-Christ, the dragon and Babylon. God's righteous judgement is displayed throughout the pages of the Bible.

Questions: What questions does the conquest of Canaan raise for you? Discuss with someone.

Summary of Chris Wright *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* 76-108

### **A. Three Dead Ends (ie ways of thinking that don't actually help)**

#### **1. It's an Old Testament Problem Which the New Testament Puts Right**

The God of the OT was all fire and brimstone, war and vengeance but the God of the NT is much nicer, a God of love and forgiveness. In other words, there is not one God in the Bible, but two. And they are quite different. Just focus on the NT God and forget the other one.

But:

a) The OT has as much to say about God's love and compassion as the NT.

eg Ex 34:6-7, Ps 103:8-14, Jer 31:3, Hos 3:1, Ezek 33:11

b) The NT has as much to say about God's anger and judgement as the OT.

eg Mt 10:15, 13:40-42, 18:34, 22:13, 25:41; Ro 1:18-2:16, Jas 2:13, Heb 10:26-31, Rev

c) Jesus and the NT writers are not embarrassed by the OT stories, nor do they reject or even correct them.

eg Mt 24:36-41, 2 Pet 3:3-7, Jude 11, 1 Cor 10:6-10, Heb 11:31, Ro 12:19, 1 Cor 10:22

#### **2. The Israelites Thought It Was What God Commanded, But They Were Wrong**

The Israelites did the killing then rationalized it or mistakenly thought this is what God wanted when in fact there was no command from God. In other words, the Israelites are to blame, not God.

But:

a) if the conquest of Canaan had been a mistake you would expect Scripture to include some sort of correction; but in fact it is the failure to conquer which is condemned (Ps 106:24-35)

b) the conquest is seen to accomplish God's will – it's never seen as a mistake (Gen 15:18-21, Josh 23:3-5, 9-10, Ps 44:1-3, Amos 2:9, Acts 7:45 & 13:19); the conquest is part of God's plan and part of his covenant with Israel

#### **3. It Is All Meant as an Allegory of Spiritual Warfare**

The conquest is not historical; rather it is a picture or allegory of our battle with Satan and the powers of darkness. But:

The conquest is not written as allegory; it is written as historical narrative. It was not allegorical Israelites who attacked nor allegorical Canaanites who died.

Questions?

## B. Three Frameworks (ie. not “solutions” as such but helpful perspectives)

The way forward is to put Joshua in the wider framework of the whole Bible; not to read it in isolation.

### 1. The Framework of the Old Testament Story

Two Important Terms

#### a) “Yahweh war”

The conquest is an example of a war of Yahweh or “Yahweh war.” It should not be called “holy war” (a term never used in the Bible).

“The main feature of Yahweh war was that it was sanctioned by Yahweh, who functioned as commander-in-chief .. and the result was guaranteed by Yahweh, regardless of the size of the opposing human forces... The enemies were enemies of Yahweh, not just Israel.” p.87

When Israel thinks about the conquest & the land they describe it as God’s gift, not their own achievement. (Dt 26:3, Josh 23:3)

<sup>1</sup>We have heard it with our ears, O God;

our ancestors have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago.

<sup>2</sup>With your hand you drove out the nations and planted our ancestors;  
you crushed the peoples and made our ancestors flourish.

<sup>3</sup>It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory;  
it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them. (Ps 44:1-3)

#### b) “Herem”

“Herem” (literally “ban”) meant “the total dedication of all that was being attacked – human, animal, or material – to God himself.” (p.87) No plunder was to be taken by the Israelites. Things under *herem* were dedicated to Yahweh. Sometimes everything is destroyed, but not always. It is God who decided what was under *herem*.

This was practiced in other ancient cultures; it was not unique to Israel.

However, take note of the use of hyperbole and the rhetoric of victory. It reads better to say we defeated “all” our enemies and put them “all” to death than to say “most” or “some.”

eg Josh 10:40-42, 11:16-20 describe how Joshua killed “all” the kings and destroyed “all who breathed.”

But the book of Judges begins with continued war against Canaanite tribes and the inability of the Israelites to defeat them. Clearly not “all” the Canaanites were destroyed by Joshua.

This is not to accuse the biblical writers of falsehood, but to recognize a literary convention of writing about warfare.

## Limited Application

The conquest was a special war, (a “Yahweh war”) limited to a particular phase of Israelite history. It was never meant as a model for how future generations were to behave towards their enemies. It is wrong to portray God constantly on the warpath.

It is important to note that Jesus condemns violence (see Lk 9:51-56 Jesus condemns James and John who wanted to destroy a Samaritan village) but doesn't condemn the OT itself.

There is nothing from Jesus to suggest Joshua got it wrong, even though Jesus now commands his followers to love their enemies and pray for them (Mt 5:43-44).

Questions?

## 2. The Framework of God's Sovereign Justice

In the OT God uses various nations at certain times to be the agents of his justice against collective human wickedness. Israel is such an agent in the conquest. Later Israel will be on the receiving end of God's justice via nations like the Assyrians and Babylonians.

### The Conquest as Judgement on the Canaanites

Then the Lord said to Abraham, “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here [Canaan], for *the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.*” (Gen 15:16)

From the time of Abraham the moral character of Amorite/Canaanite society grew worse.

- sexual immorality (see Lev 18)
  - “You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices.” (Lev 18:3)
  - <sup>24</sup>“Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. <sup>25</sup>Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.” (Lev 18:24-25)
  - also Lev 20:22-24; Dt 9:5
- fertility cults
- child sacrifice associated with religious practices (Dt 12:29-31, 2 Kings 16:3)
- male shrine prostitutes (1 Kings 14:24)

“The conquest was not human genocide. It was divine judgement.” (p.93)

- seeing the conquest as divine punishment on a wicked culture does not make it “nice” or “ok”; but it does change how we view it morally
  - for example, there is a moral difference in punishing a child for wrongdoing and in cruel child abuse
  - there is a moral difference in putting someone in prison for a crime and holding someone hostage for personal gain

## The Conquest Did Not Mean the Israelites Were Righteous

Deuteronomy 9:4-6

<sup>4</sup>After the Lord your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, 'The Lord has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.' No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is going to drive them out before you. <sup>5</sup>It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. <sup>6</sup>Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. (Dt 9:4-6)

- God would later use Assyria and Babylon as agents of his judgement on *Israel's* wickedness; but that did not make those nations righteous
- God warned Israel he would punish them if they sinned like the Canaanites (Lev 18:28, Dt 28:25-68)
- "the conquest was not some charade of cosy favouritism. Israel stood under the same threat of judgement from the same God for the same sins, if they chose to commit them." (p.95)
- God can be seen to be morally consistent in judging nations, Israel included
- there are also other nations that are "driven out" by different nations either as an outworking of God's command or permission eg Dt 2:10-12, 18-23
  - this shows all nations are subject to God's justice

Questions

### 3. The Framework of God's Plan of Salvation

#### The Vision of Peace

- war, violence, revenge, bloodshed are often portrayed in the OT; this is the reality of life outside Eden and a result of the Fall
- but there is also a critique of such violence (eg Pss 10, 59, 37:12-15, 68:30, 33:16-19, 120:6-7; eg the refusal of God to let David build the Temple because he has been a man of war 1 Chron 28:3)
- Ps 46 looks forward to a time when God brings a halt to war
  - "He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth."
- Isaiah 2:1-5 is a vision of universal peace under God's rule
  - "Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more."
- peace, not war, is the mark of the reign of God
  - think how the Bible starts and ends – the Garden of Eden, New Heaven and New Earth, creation and new creation – the reign of God brings peace & justice

#### Blessing the Nations

- despite the sin and violence of Gen 3-11, God's plan in choosing Abraham is to bless the nations (Gen 12:3)
- "the overall thrust of the OT is not Israel *against* the nations, but *Israel for the sake of* the nations" (p.100)
  - eg the conversion and inclusion of foreigners in Israel (eg Rahab Josh 2, Gibeonites Josh 9, Jebusites Josh 15:63; cf Zech 9:7 – even Philistines)
  - eg the care for foreigners expressed in Israel's law (many egs in Ex-Dt; esp Dt 10:18-19 & Lev 19:34 love the foreigners)

- but what about the Canaanites?
  - the Bible sees no contradiction in the ultimate goal of universal blessing and particular judgments on certain nations at certain times
  - this includes the Canaanites; and even includes the Israelites
  - the Canaanites are not judged for their ethnicity but for their idolatry and wickedness (hence the conquest is not “genocide” or “ethnic cleansing” in our modern senses of those terms)
  - the conquest was a limited historical necessity not a paradigm for how to treat foreigners in general; the paradigm of how to treat foreigners is to *love* them
    - this is what Paul picks up in Rom 12:13 which literally means “practise the love of strangers” *philoxenia* = love of the stranger, the outsider, the direct opposite of xenophobia
    - Heb 13:2 “Do not forget to *show hospitality to strangers (philoxenia)* , for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”

### The Praise of the Nations

- God promised Abraham that through his descendants *all nations* would be blessed and that promise is what drives the entire Biblical story through to its end in Revelation
- “Ultimately the history of Israel, including even the conquest, will be the subject of praise among the nations, for whose saving benefit it happened.” (p.106)
  - Ps 47:1-4; Dt 32:43; Rom 15:7-12

### Conclusion

- I may not fully understand everything in the Bible but as a Christian I must humbly accept that the conquest is part of God’s overall plan of saving people through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ
- the road to Canaan is part of the road to Calvary
- if I read the conquest in light of the cross, I get another perspective:

**“ at the conquest, God poured out his judgment on a wicked society who deserved it, [whereas] at the cross God bore on himself the judgment of God on human wickedness, through the person of his own sinless Son – who deserved it not one bit.” (p.107)**

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Summarise the main things you want to remember from tonight.

Prayer – pray about anything this seminar has raised for you.

God bless and thanks for coming.

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