



# is God a genocidal monster? (part 2)

a special correspondent examines a common apologetic question

In the first part of this series on the Canaanite wars, I argued that a God worthy of that name must take wrongdoing seriously. In fact, his anger is a sign that he cares for his creation. The real flesh and blood judgments we see in the Old Testament are grisly, but serve as reminders of what we have been spared. Perhaps the biggest reason we struggle with this question more than any generation previously is that we no longer believe that God has any right to judge his world. But it is sobering to remember that Jesus looked back to Noah to describe the future 'days of the Son of Man'.<sup>1</sup> The Bible describes a God who rings the alarm bell so we might turn back before it is too late. He delays judgment out of patient mercy, as he gathers a worldwide family for eternity. This article will look in more detail at two other related questions:

- What about noncombatants, women and children in Canaan?
- Do the 'holy wars' of the Old Testament legitimise violence in the name of religion?

## what about noncombatants, women and children in Canaan?

Today we take it for granted that all parties will respect the Geneva Conventions,<sup>2</sup> and that only professional, usually male, combatants are targets in war. So how could God, the highest moral authority, sanction the wholesale slaughter of women and children?

## WAR CODE 1: seek peace where possible

Firstly, note that Israel had two codes of war. Let's start with the easy one! When Israel went to war with enemies outside of Canaan (the promised land), peace treaties were offered,

and women and children were spared.<sup>3</sup> They were also commanded to abstain from the widespread practices of rape and pillage that accompanies war to this day:

*If you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife...If you are not pleased with her, let her go wherever she wishes. You must not sell her or treat her as a slave, since you have dishonoured her.*<sup>4</sup>

However, the Bible does not treat women as passive doormats. Domestic life and teaching children was vital for Israel's future.<sup>5</sup> Numbers 25 tells the chilling tale of the Israelite men conspiring with Midianite women in idolatry. Phinehas, Aaron the priest's grandson drives a spear through one such couple at the tent of worship to end a plague of judgment. It's a graphic illustration of equal moral culpability, male and female together. So the battle for hearts and minds was not limited to soldiers on a battlefield.

## relentless anti-Semitism



Sadly, the Israelites were frequently forced into battle. Their mission to launch a new start for humanity under the liberating God of the Exodus

was opposed violently by several God-hating regimes, and the spiritual powers allied to them. For instance, the Amalekites, descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother, were arch enemies. They attacked Israel in the wilderness, whenever they planted crops in the land, and centuries later in the book of Esther.<sup>6</sup> They were (perhaps literally) hell-bent on Jewish genocide.

What if nations like the Amalekites, generation after generation, would stop at nothing until they had seen the utter destruction of the Israelites? What if this had to be stopped? It's a dilemma that godly pastors like Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrestled with in the Second World War and as a result resolved to assassinate Hitler. But suppose that the future of the entire human race depended on Israel's survival in Canaan at that one moment in history, and God's rescue plan through them. Then perhaps it would be justified for God (not man) to command Israel to destroy whole anti-Semitic families, children included, who were determined to sever God's pipeline of blessing to the world. Only God himself can know, and the rest of us are somewhat under-qualified to judge.

Even here, there are signs of God's mercy and faithfulness. Saul warned the Kenites, distant relatives of Israel via Jethro, to flee the coming judgment: "'Go away, leave the Amalekites so that I do not destroy you along with them' ... So the Kenites moved away from the Amalekites.'<sup>7</sup>

Astute commentator John Allister notes that the Amalekites were not slaughtered indiscriminately. It wasn't race that was offensive to God:

'Now, that makes it look very much as if the Kenites are mingling with the Amalekites fairly freely. Suppose an Amalekite decided that they didn't want to fight against Israel. There doesn't seem to have been anything stopping them from deciding to be a Kenite – dressing themselves up as a Kenite and just slipping off. The Amalekites had a way out, if only they were willing to deny their identity as Amalekites. You see, the Amalekites' national identity is set up

against Israel and against God's plan to bless the world. But there is a way out – they just have to renounce that identity and join in with the people who worshipped and served God. They have to get rid of the thing that means they will be going against God. Maybe some of them did. But many of them didn't.<sup>8</sup>

### suffer not the children

What about the children? There is no easy way to square this command with the God who sides with the weak. And a God who took particular offence at child sacrifice to the god Molek.<sup>9</sup> But perhaps there was no other way to separate out children from the nations hostile to Israel and their God. Perhaps it was even a mercy to be rescued from the kind of society that would burn its children in exchange for some favour from their god Molek. We are so used to thinking that this life is all there is, and that death is the worst possible outcome. But that is a massive assumption! If God did command the killing of children, only he would know the relative merits of life under Molek compared with an eternity with a God who said children are 'the Kingdom's pride and joy'.<sup>10</sup> That's the God's-eye perspective we don't have. The man's-eye perspective is always going to be more limited and fragmented.<sup>11</sup> So we have to trust on the totality of what we know, and take each piece in proportion.

Imagine you are waiting for your childhood sweetheart to turn up for an expensive show. They are usually pretty punctual and considerate. You could jump to the conclusion that they have deliberately snubbed you, and gone off with someone else. Alternatively, from years of observing their outstanding character, you judge that something really major has come up to threaten your date. No need to

panic. You trust them. Likewise, our God can be trusted. We've observed him over centuries and know his good character, which is far better than ours. Even when we read things that at first glance, without knowing all the facts, might seem difficult.

### WAR CODE 2: a unique act of divine judgment

The second code of warfare applied uniquely to the seven nations of Canaan, which were to be 'given over' to God as *herem*, in judgment.<sup>12</sup> My previous article addressed the reasons why Canaan attracted God's particular wrath after 400 years of patient delay. Here we cannot avoid the unpalatable conclusion that God ordered warfare, potentially including women and children. But whilst the language is strong to modern ears, this is not genocide. My last article explored why God wants to cleanse our hearts, not our ethnicity. Here is some evidence that ethnic cleansing was never intended or practiced.

### rhetoric, military targets and gradual displacement

A headline reads 'Arsenal totally annihilated Liverpool!' but we don't take it literally. We understand that Liverpool were comprehensively beaten. Similarly, some stock phrases in the Ancient Near East were conventions. For instance, Moses told Joshua to 'utterly destroy' and not to 'leave alive anything that breathes'. Joshua 'left nothing undone of all that the Lord had commanded Moses'.<sup>13</sup> Yet the same book states that Canaanites were very much around at the end of the wars.<sup>14</sup> Many of the battlegrounds such as Jericho or Ai are likely to have been small military installments guarding strategic routes. Civilians probably lived in the surrounding countryside. Although famous,

Jericho may only have held 100 soldiers.<sup>15</sup> The fact that Rahab was spared and became an ancestor of Christ suggests that literal annihilation was not demanded or anticipated. There are also more references to gradual displacement than destruction, such as:

*I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land.* (Exodus 23:28-30)

Archaeology corroborates gradual displacement from 1400BC, until 1000BC when Canaanites were no longer an identifiable entity, and town shrines had been abandoned.<sup>16</sup>

## do the 'holy wars' of the Old Testament legitimise violence in the name of religion?



The New Atheists claim that religions like Christianity or Islam breed intolerance and violence, because they are too exclusive and coercive.

Isn't the Canaanite destruction just an earlier version of Crusade or Islamic Jihad? The key question here is who our role model is. Is he exclusive? Is he coercive?

But first, a bit of history. It's crucial to see that biblical Israel's military was incredibly restricted. The Canaanite wars were a one-off, never to be repeated event. So after Joshua's generation, Israel was to demilitarize, and her sanctioned wars were defensive, and they were banned from land grabbing from their neighbours Moab, Ammon and Edom.<sup>17</sup> There was no standing army,<sup>18</sup> no conscription, and in

fact Israelites were encouraged not to sign up if they had domestic responsibilities.<sup>19</sup> God punished David for taking a census of potential fighting men, who were not at his disposal even as king! The army could not co-opt God like a lucky talisman, such as when they brought the Ark of the Covenant to battle. It soon backfired and they were routed.

Secondly, whilst the Crusades are a terrible stain on the history of the church, the comparison with Jihad is a mistaken one. The concept of Crusade was a late and aberrant development in Christendom. The Crusades were a reaction to the loss of limited lands of symbolic value, and were relatively brief. In contrast, Jihad started with Mohammed, who preached violence against non-believers and engaged in over 100 military campaigns.<sup>20</sup>

## FOLLOW THE LEADER: 'put your sword away!'

Let's summarise the biblical story of war, and put it in context. Initially God fights Israel's flesh and blood enemies, partly as a sign to the fake and detestable 'heavenly powers' such as Molek and Baal. Next, when Israel is faithless, God fights Israel and expels her from Canaan.<sup>21</sup> He shows no favouritism, and judges Israel perhaps more harshly than the Canaanites. But he promises that he will fight to establish his everlasting kingdom for his people, who would be gathered from every tribe and tongue.<sup>22</sup>

The next episode is a bit of a surprise, when Jesus defeats the spiritual powers by healing, preaching, exorcisms...and then dying, not killing! Calvary is the greatest battlefield, and the greatest victory described in the Bible:

*'He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has*

*taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.'* (Colossians 2:13b-15)

So Jesus' example to all his genuine followers is to put down our swords and love our enemies.<sup>23</sup> Today when the church follows its leader's example it is generous to outsiders and non-coercive as he was. He showed us that his new kingdom cannot be built by force.<sup>24</sup> You cannot win hearts and minds, or defeat spiritual powers<sup>25</sup> with sword or Semtex! And Jesus taught his family not to be territorial, as the new kingdom extends beyond Canaan<sup>26</sup> to the whole world.

Now we look forward to the day when Jesus will return not meek and mild but sleek and wild! He is a mighty warrior who will overthrow all opposing powers, human and spiritual, utterly, comprehensively, finally. Then there will be one kingdom under one king. And he will reign with his faithful family forever.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

At the heart of this issue is God's way of dealings with our willful rebellion against him. We may not build physical fortresses against him like Jericho, but our hearts are like stone to the Lordship of Jesus. The Canaanites summed

## summary:

- The Canaanite wars were for one generation only in one place only
- They were God's judgment on Canaan and part of a rescue plan for all humanity
- They were likely small scale military clashes followed by gradual displacement
- After Joshua Israel was to be a demilitarised state
- Jesus models non-coercive love of his enemies: even us!
- Jesus is returning as a mighty warrior to defeat all opposing powers: sign up now!

up humanity's hostility to God and those who worship him. Their destruction is a wake up call to the seriousness of sin in God's eyes. However, Jesus became the personification of all opposition to God. In a sense, God made him a Canaanite in our place:

*'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'* (2 Corinthians 5:21)

So Jesus became the person whom God destroys so that in him we can become the people whom God defends. He did that for us, for those who reject him and oppose him, so that we can know what it means to be part of God's true people. What a gracious and generous God! ■

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5. Deuteronomy 11:19
6. Numbers 14:45, Judges 3:13, 6:3, Esther 3:1-6
7. 1 Samuel 15:6
8. See: [bit.ly/1NLXbO](http://bit.ly/1NLXbO) We know that some were spared because although 'utterly destroyed' the Amalekites appear three chapters later to raid Israel and even 250 years later (1 Samuel 15:3, 27:8, 30:1; 1 Chronicles 4:43)
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