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DESTRUCTION AND DISPOSSESSION OF THE CANAANITES IN THE BOOK OF JOSHUA[1]

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ABSRTACT: In Joshua 6:17–21, we encounter the first significant discussion in the book of the related concepts of setting the Canaanites apart for destruction and driving them out of the land. The supposed "genocide" of the Canaanites is one of the most vexing questions in the entire Old Testament and a leading reason that many people dismiss the Old Testament as hopelessly barbaric, so an examination of the issues here is in order.

We will discuss this in five discrete sections: (1) the idea of setting people or things apart to the Lord for destruction; (2) the idea of driving out the Canaanites from the land; (3) the concept of "Yahweh war" (also known as "holy war"); (4) the ethics of Yahweh war; and (5) the New Testament and violence.

KEY WORDS: The Canaanites, inheriting the land, dispossession, holy war, violence.

1 This paper was first presented at the International Theology Conference at the Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania on November 21, 2023. It is modified from the section "Destruction and Dispossession in Joshua" in David M. Howard, Jr, *Joshua*, Christian Standard Commentary 6 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, forthcoming); it is also appearing in a forthcoming issue of *Themelios* journal, and is used with permission from both publishing entities.

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1 Setting the Canaanites Apart for Destruction (*hāram/hērem*)

In 6:17, Joshua instructed the people that Jericho and everything in it was "to be set apart to the LORD for destruction," and then in v. 18 he elaborated: "But keep yourselves from *the things set apart*, or you will be *set apart for destruction*. If you take any of those things, you will *set apart* the camp of Israel *for destruction* and make trouble for it."

The common element behind the italicized words is the Hebrew root *hrm:* it occurs in the Old Testament both as a verb (*hāram:* fifty-one times) and as a noun (*hērem:* twenty-nine times).[3] This is the term behind many people's calling God's instructions and Israel's actions *vis-à-vis* the Canaanite as "genocide."

The verb can be rendered "to set apart for destruction" or "to completely destroy," and the noun can be rendered as "things set apart" or "destruction."[4] The importance of this concept in Joshua is apparent from the number of times the root occurs, more than in any other Old Testament book. Of the forty-eight times the verb occurs in the Old Testament, fourteen times are in Joshua.[5] Of the twenty-nine occurrences of the noun, thirteen are in Joshua.[6]

Norbert Lohfink provides the following definitions for *hrm.* The verbal form (*hiphil*, the "causative" stem) means to "consecrate something or someone as a permanent and definitive offering for the sanctuary; in war, consecrate a city and its inhabitants to destruction; carry out this destruction; totally annihilate a population in war; kill." The noun form means

3 Introductions to the concept may be found in the following works: N. Lohfink, "חָרַם *hāram*; חֵרֶם *hērem*," *TDOT* 5:180–99; C. Brekelmans, "חֵרֶם *hērem* ban," *TLOT,* 474–77; J. A. Naudé, "חרם," *NIDOTTE* 2:276–77. See also P. D. Stern, *The Biblical Hērem: A Window on Israel's Religious Experience,* BJS 211 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991); J. P. U. Lilley, "Understanding the *Hērem*," *TynBul* 44 (1993): 169–77; Yair Hoffman, "The Deuteronomistic Concept of the Herem," *ZAW* 111 (1999): 196–210.

4 So CSB; versions such as the NIV use terms like "devoted to destruction" or "devoted things."

5 Josh 2:10; 6:18, 21; 8:26; 10:1, 28, 35, 37–38, 40; 11:11–12, 20–21.

6 Josh 6:17, 18(3x); 7:1(2x), 11, 12(2x), 13(2x), 15; 22:20.

"the object or person consecrated in the sense of the *hiphil* or condemned in the sense of the *hophal* [passive of the *hiphil*] or contaminated by entering into their deadly sphere; the act of consecration or of extermination and killing."[7] A common rendering of *hrm* as "ban" or "to place under the ban" is inappropriate, because *hrm* does not carry the ideas of secular lawlessness or ecclesiastical excommunication that the "ban" carries.[8] Lilley stresses that the essence of *hrm* "is an irrevocable renunciation of any interest in the object 'devoted'" and that it denotes "uncompromising consecration without possibility of recall or redemption."[9]

The concept of *hrm* is often found in sacred contexts, in which it has a strong connection with the idea of holiness. As such, these things were forbidden for common use, but rather were to be an "offering" to the Lord. Leviticus 27:28-29 illustrates this well:

> Nothing that a man permanently sets apart (*hrm*, twice)[10] to the LORD from all he owns, whether a person, an animal, or his inherited landholding, can be sold or redeemed; everything set apart *(hrm)* is especially holy to the LORD. No person who has been set apart for destruction (*hrm*, twice)[11] is to be ransomed; he must be put to death.

If something is dedicated or devoted to the Lord, it is *especially* holy. We find this idea in Joshua as well. In 6:18–19, the devoted things are holy (sacred):

> But keep yourselves from the things set apart *(hrm)*, or you will be set apart for destruction *(hrm)*. If you take any of those things *(hrm)*, you will set apart the

7 Lohfink, *TDOT* 5:188.

8 Lohfink, *TDOT* 5:188.

9 Lilley, "Understanding the *Herem*," 176, 177.

10 A "wooden" rendering here would be "every devoted thing *(hēr̄em)* which a man devotes *(hār̄am)* to the Lord."

11 Here again, *hrm* occurs twice: "every devoted thing *(hēr̄em)* which is devoted *(hār̄am)* to the Lord that is human."

> camp of Israel for destruction *(hrm)* and make trouble for it. For all the silver and gold, and the articles of bronze and iron, are dedicated to the LORD and must go into the LORD's treasury.

In 7:13, the people were to consecrate themselves (i.e., make themselves holy) and remove the devoted things from them: "Go and consecrate the people. Tell them to consecrate themselves for tomorrow, for this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: There are things that are set apart *(hrm)* among you, Israel. You will not be able to stand against your enemies until you remove what is set apart *(hrm)*."

More commonly, the idea of *hrm* is found in contexts of war. Numbers 21:2– 3 illustrates this well: "Then Israel made a vow to the LORD, 'If you will hand this people over to us, we will completely destroy *(hrm)* their cities.' The LORD listened to Israel's request and handed the Canaanites over to them, and Israel completely destroyed *(hrm)* them and their cities. So they named the place Hormah" (*hormāh*, i.e., something completely destroyed).

In Joshua, the war context is also clearly represented. In most of the cities mentioned in the campaigns in chaps. 10 and 11, the Israelites completely destroyed the inhabitants who remained in these cities (10:28, 35, 37, 39–40; 11:11, 12, 20–21). And, in the case of cities such as Hazor, the destruction was of everything, including the city itself: "They struck down everyone in it with the sword, completely destroying them; he left no one alive. Then he burned Hazor. Joshua captured all these kings and their cities and struck them down with the sword. He completely destroyed *(hrm)* them, as Moses the LORD's servant had commanded (11:11-12).

We should not make too hard and fast a distinction, however, between the sacred and the war contexts. The context of the destruction of Jericho, for example, makes it clear that the destruction was not a secular activity, but a deeply sacred one: most of chap. 6 is devoted to the sacred ceremonial rituals of marching around the city, and only briefly is the actual conflict told. Thus, things would be offered to God by being utterly de-

stroyed. This could happen with respect to material wealth,[12] people,[13] or even entire cities.[14]

Dispossessing the Canaanites (*yrš*)

Equally important to our understanding of God's commands and Israel's actions *vis-à-vis* the Canaanites is the verb *yrš*. Understanding the nature and place of this root's meanings should dramatically revise many people's thinking about supposed "genocide" in Joshua, since it has nothing to do with killing, but rather inheriting the land or driving the Canaanites out of that land (i.e., displacing the Canaanites, not annihilating them).

The primary meanings of *yrš* are "to inherit" (*qal* stem) and "to drive out, dispossess" *(hiphil* stem). The verb occurs 232 times in the Old Testament; of these, almost half of the occurrences are found in Deuteronomy and Joshua: seventy times in Deuteronomy and twenty-nine times in Joshua. On *yrš* meaning "to inherit" (*qal* stem), see the Excursus entitled "Israel's Inheritance of the Land in Joshua." Here, we are concerned with the meaning "to drive out, dispossess" (*hiphil* stem). In this stem, the verb occurs sixty-six times in the Old Testament, more than a third of the occurrences being in Deuteronomy and Joshua: seven times in Deuteronomy, seventeen times in Joshua.

2.1 *yrš* as "to drive out, dispossess"

In the *hiphil* verb stem, the meaning of *yrš* primarily involves displacing or ejecting someone from his property or territory in order to be able to possess it for oneself (e.g., Num 32:21; Deut 4:38a; Judg 2:21). In almost every case, God is the subject of the verb, indicating that *he* would do the driving out. Deut 9:4–5 is a key text showing this:

> When the LORD your God drives them out (*hdp*, a synonym of *yrš)* before you, do not say to yourself, 'The LORD brought me in *to take possession (yrš, qal)* of this

12 .E.g., Josh 6:18–19; 7:1, 11

13 E.g., Josh 10:28, 35, 39–41; 11:11, 20.

14 E.g., Josh 6:21; 8:26; 10:1, 37; 11:12, 21.

> land because of my righteousness.' Instead, the LORD *will drive out (yrš, hiphil)* these nations before you because of their wickedness. You are not going *to take possession (yrš, qal)* of their land because of your righteousness or your integrity. Instead, the LORD your God *will drive out (yrš, hiphil)* these nations before you because of their wickedness, in order to fulfill the promise he swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In Joshua, several references show God working in exactly this way, driving out Israel's enemies (3:10, 10; 13:6; 23:5a; 23:9). In other passages, Moses (13:12), Caleb (14:12; 15:14), and the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (17:18) drove out peoples and possessed their land, with God's help. Joshua instructed those lying in wait to ambush Ai that they should rise up and take possession of the city (8:7).[15] In a negative sense, several times in Joshua we read that the Israelites did *not*—or could not—drive out the Canaanites from various parts of the land (13:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12, 13(2x)), and once, Israel was warned that God would not drive out the nations before them unless they kept themselves pure and did not intermarry with the Canaanites and worship their gods (23:13).

A number of passages in the Old Testament include a wordplay that uses both the major stems of *yrš* (*qal* and *hiphil*). This wordplay illustrates both sides of the idea that God *drove out* the Canaanite peoples (*yrš, hiphil*) so that his own people could *take possession* (*yrš, qal*) of God's gift of the land.[16] Good examples of this are Deut 9:4–5 (quoted above), and Judg 11:23–24: "So then the LORD, the God of Israel, *dispossessed (yrš, hiphil)* the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you *to take possession (yrš, qal)* of them? Will you not *possess (yrš, qal)* what Chemosh

15 *yrš* is *hiphil* here; see Phyllis Bird, *YRŠ and the Deuteronomic Theology of the Conquest* (Th.D. Diss., Harvard Divinity School, 1971), 267–68 on this anomalous meaning of *yrš, hiphil*.

16 The list includes Num 21:32; 33:53; Deut 9:4–5; 11:23; Josh 23:5; Judg 11:23–24(2x). Cf. also Deut 18:12, 14 and Ps 44:2–3(Hb. 3–4), where the wordplays are in separate verses.

your god *gives you to possess* (*yrš, hiphil*)? And all that the LORD our God *has dispossessed (yrš, hiphil)* before us, we *will possess (yrš, qal*)" (RSV).

In Joshua, this wordplay is found once: "The LORD your God will force them back on your account and *drive them out (yrš, hiphil)* before you so that you *can take possession (yrš, qal) of* their land, as the LORD your God promised you" (Josh 23:5).[17]

The distribution of usage of *yrš* in the book of Joshua is instructive as well. *yrš* is found primarily in the second half of the book (twenty-one of twenty-nine occurrences). This should not be surprising, given that the primary focus in the second half of the book is the land distribution.

2.2 Further Dispossession Language

For all the discussion of the complete destruction of the Canaanites, what is too often overlooked is that the Bible has more language about driving them out of the land (*yrš* or *grš)*[18] than it does about completely destroying them (*hrm).*[19] Consider this: In Exod 23:23, God promises to "wipe them out"—the root here is *khd,* a close synonym of *hrm*—but then goes on to say that God himself would drive the Canaanites out:

17 The continuity of meaning between *qal* and *hiphil* is explained well by Bird: "The idea represented by this *hiphil* is simply the corollary or counterpart of that found in the extended use of the *qal* to speak of 'inheriting' by conquest. It is 'inheriting' by dispossessing. The *hiphil* makes essentially the same statement as the *qal,* only it focuses on the former owners rather than their possessions" (Bird, *YRŠ*, 277). The essential idea of the *hiphil*, then, is not "to drive out" per se and certainly not "to destroy"; rather, it is "'dispossess' (with the aim of claiming the property of the dispossessed as an 'inheritance')" (p. 283).

18 *grš* is a close synonym of *yrš.* See the more detailed discussion of *grš* in the "Excursus: Israel's Inheritance of the Land in Joshua," after chap. 13. Some rarer but related terms are indicated here and below.

19 For the argument here, see also Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), chap. 6: "Thrusting Out, Driving Out, and Dispossessing the Canaanites—Not Annihilating Them," 76-83.

> I will cause the people ahead of you to feel terror and will throw into confusion all the nations you come to. I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you in retreat. I will send hornets in front of you, and they *will drive* (*grš)* the Hivites, Canaanites, and Hethites *away* from you. I will not *drive them out* (*grš)* ahead of you in a single year; otherwise, the land would become desolate, and wild animals would multiply against you. I will *drive them out* (*grš)* little by little ahead of you until you have become numerous and *take possession* (*nhl)* of the land. I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates River. For I will place the inhabitants of the land under your control, and you will *drive them out* (*grš)* ahead of you" (Exod 23:27–31).

Notice that God does not promise to do this in one fell swoop; it would be a gradual process: "I will not *drive them out* (*grš)* ahead of you in a single year.… I will *drive them out* (*grš)* little by little ahead of you until you have become numerous and *take possession* (*nhl)* of the land" (Exod 23:29–30). And later: "The LORD your God will *drive out* (*nšl)*[20] these nations before you little by little. You will not be able to *destroy* (*klh*)[21] them all at once" (Deut 7:22).

The book of Joshua itself echoes such an emphasis on the process of dispossession taking a long time: "and the LORD said to (Joshua), 'You have become old, advanced in age, but a great deal of the land remains *to be possessed* (*yrš, qal)*. This is the land that remains…. *I will drive them out* (*yrš, hiphil)* before the Israelites, only distribute the land as an inheritance for Israel, as I have commanded you'" (Josh 13:1–6).

Note that the Lord's comment here comes *after* the supposedly "clean sweep" of destruction mentioned in chaps. 10-11. That is, in chap. 13, we see many inhabitants of Canaan still alive, despite the seemingly comprehensive statements in chaps. 10-11 about complete destruction. This echoes the thought in Deuteronomy 7: There, the language of dispossession *precedes* the language of destruction: "When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess, and he drives out

20 This usage of *nšl* means "clear away, drive away," referring to nations.

21 This usage of *klh* means "finish (off), destroy."

(*nšl*; cf. ESV: "clears away") many nations before you…you must completely destroy (*hrm*, 2x) them" (Deut 7:1–2). That is, presumably the first set of actions drove away the majority of the inhabitants, and the complete destruction mentioned after that involved those who refused to leave. Thus, the destruction was *not* a scorched-earth operation that left no living souls anywhere in the land.[22]

Was this "genocide"? No. If anything, it might be called "ethnic cleansing,"[23] whereby anyone not committed to Yahweh was driven out, so as to render the land "clean" for Israelite religion to take root (see below), though even here the terminology is misleading. The "cleansing" is not *ethnic*, it is *religious*. The examples of Rahab (and the Gibeonites) show that simply to be a Canaanite *per se* was not a death sentence. What God was "cleansing" was false religious beliefs and practices. Any kings, military leadership, armies, and any average citizens who refused to leave, were subjected to the complete destruction of the *hērem, not simply any Canaanite per se*.

Another term related to *yrš* and *grš* is *šlh,* "to send away." See, e.g., Lev 18:24–25:

> "Do not defile yourselves by any of these practices, for the nations I am *driving out* (*šlh)* before you have defiled themselves by all these things. The land has become defiled, so I am punishing it for its iniquity, and the land will *vomit out* (*qy'*) its inhabitants." Or, Lev 20:23: "You must not follow the statutes of the nations I am *driving out* (*šlh)* before you, for they did all these things, and I abhorred them."

In a survey of "dispossession" and "destruction" language in the Pentateuch, Glenn M. Miller notes that "**The "Dispossession" words**

22 See also Copan and Flannagan here: *Did God Really Command Genocide?*, 78–80.

23 Joe M. Sprinkle, "Just War in Deuteronomy 20 and 2 Kings 3," in his *Biblical Law and Its Relevance: A Christian Understanding and Ethical Application for Today of the Mosaic Regulations* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 180.

outnumber the "Destruction" words by 3-to-1!. This would indicate that the dominant 'intended effect' was for the peoples in the Land *to migrate somewhere else*."[24] He cites Deut 12:29–30: "When the LORD your God annihilates (*krt*) the nations before you, which you are entering to take possession (*yrš, qal)* of, and you drive them out (*yrš, qal*[25]*)* and live in their land, be careful not to be ensnared by their ways after they have been destroyed (*šmd)* before you." Notice that the language of destruction occurs *alongside of* the language of dispossession, i.e., total annihilation is not the complete picture.

Along these same lines, an interesting perspective is found in the story of Israel's defeat of the Amorites, before they entered Canaan (Num 21:31–35):

> So Israel lived in the Amorites' land. After Moses sent spies to Jazer, Israel captured its surrounding villages and *drove out* (*yrš, hiphil*) the Amorites who were there. Then they turned and went up the road to Bashan, and King Og of Bashan came out against them with his whole army to do battle at Edrei. But the LORD said to Moses, 'Do not fear him, for I have handed him over to you along with his whole army and his land. Do to him as you did to King Sihon of the Amorites, who lived in Heshbon.' So they struck (**nkd*) him, his sons, and his whole army until no one was left, and they *took possession* (*yrš, qal)* of his land.

Note the sequence here: First, the Israelites *drove out* the "regular" people (Amorites) who were living in Jazer and its villages; they did not annihilate them (v. 32). But then, when they turned to King Og and his

24 Glenn M. Miller, "How could a God of Love order the massacre/annihilation of the Canaanites?" https://christianthinktank.com/qamorite.html (accessed 4/12/23); emphasis Miller. Miller is not a biblical scholar (by his own admission), but his blog posting nonetheless offers much helpful data in layman's terms (despite his occasional lapses into overly "cutesy" language; for example, his preferred term for Melchizedek is "Melky" (!)).

25 This is one of the few cases where *yrš, qal* means "to dispossess." See *HALOT*, *s.v.* ירש.

army, they struck him and his army until no one was left, just as they had previously done to King Sihon (vv. 34–35).

This is a strong indicator that the focus of the annihilation was any king and army opposing God's people, *not* a generalized, sweeping mandate to annihilate every last, living being. The majority of those people in Jazer and its villages were driven out, not annihilated.

Richard Hess has advanced a separate (and novel) argument that tends to support the point just made. He argues that when texts such as Deut 20:16–18 refer to "cities" to be destroyed, these cities were not large metropolises as we know them today; they were not even places where large numbers of average people lived. The word in question is *ʿîr* (usually translated "city") and, as Hess notes, "this term can describe a village Bethlehem (1 Sam 20:6)), tent encampments (Judg 10:4) and a citadel (2 Sam 12:26), or a fortress such as Zion in Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:7, 9)."[26] He references many Late Bronze Age and Iron Age sites where walled fortresses "were not habitations in which average persons lived. The masses lived in hamlets and other places nearby these forts. The forts themselves contained the palace, royal storehouses for the taxes 'in kind,' temples" and more. "These 'cities' were not the home of nonelites or of noncombatants. Rather, they represented the leadership, the military, and those most involved with the oppression and rulership of the land."[27]

Summary: The Interplay Between *yrš* ("to drive out, dispossess") and *hrm* ("to set apart for destruction")

Thus, as we've noted, too often unnoticed in discussions of the *hrm* is the Bible's equal emphasis—if not larger emphasis—on the dispossession of the Canaanites out of the land, not their complete annihilation. To the

26 Richard S. Hess, "Appendix 2: Apologetic Issues in the Old Testament," in Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Second edition; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022), 728 (the full essay is on pp. 717–31). See also his more technical treatment: "The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua," in R. S. Hess, G. A. Klingbeil, and P. J. Ray, Jr., eds., *Critical Issues in Israel's History* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 33–46.

27 Hess, "Apologetic Issues," 729.

contrary, the use of *yrš* and related terms shows that the supposed "genocidal" destruction of every last, living person (*hrm*) is not literally true in most cases: the texts affirm over and over again that God drove out the Canaanites from the land, so that, in most cases, they were not completely destroyed. Only those who remained in the "cities" after the expulsion of most of their non-military inhabitants (and those in surrounding villages) were "completely destroyed." Both perspectives accomplished God's purposes in giving Israel the land that he had promised to their forebears.

The Concept of Yahweh War

Scholars have spoken of the idea of "holy war" to describe a large complex of motifs in the Old Testament, in which the Lord fights for his people and gives them the victory.[28] A more precise term for this would be "Yahweh war," using the Bible's own term, *milḥāmôt yhwh*, "Yahweh's wars" (see Num 21:14; 1 Sam 18:17; 25:28; cf. also Exod 17:16; 1 Sam 17:47).[29] In these passages, the Bible presents the battles as Yahweh's alone (see also Deut 20:1–4). The model for what Israel's kings should be, laid out in Deut 17:14-20, is profoundly counter-cultural: Rather than rely on the military (horses, chariots) or foreign alliances, the king was to immerse himself in study of Torah and leave the battles to the Lord. More often than not, the Israelites flipped that model on its head and looked to its human leader for military

28 The foundational study on so-called holy war is G. von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991 (1952 original)). See also P. D. Miller, Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1973); M. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1980); S.-M. Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East*, BZAW 177 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989); T. Longman, III and D. G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). More recent and extensive bibliographic data may be found in Trent C. Butler, *Joshua 1–12* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 175–78, 353.

29 The key publication on this is Gwilym H. Jones, "'Holy War' or 'Yahweh War'?" *VT* 25 (1975): 642–58. See also Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015), 34–45.

deliverance (e.g., Judg 8:22-23; 1 Sam 8:5, 20).[30] Even when such warriors as Samson, Gideon, or David engaged in battle, the text makes it clear that Yahweh gave them their victories (e.g., 2 Sam 5:10, 19; 8:6, 14).

Essential in the idea of Yahweh wars is that the people be properly prepared and consecrated to receive this gift of victory from Yahweh's hands. This idea is much broader than the idea of *hērem*, but the *hērem* is sometimes a component part of the Yahweh war.[31]

The practice of *hērem*, while referred to extensively in the Old Testament, is not commonly seen in surrounding cultures. This is somewhat remarkable, given the bellicose nature of so many of these cultures and also given their developed religious systems. The most well-known extrabiblical text with this meaning of the root is from the so-called Mesha Inscription, where Mesha, king of Moab, states that he had devoted Nebo and its inhabitants for destruction (*hrm*) to Ashtar-Chemosh, the national god of the Moabites.[32] Another is an Old South Arabic Sabaean text, where Karib-ilu, king of Sab*ā* (biblical Sheba) "devoted the city of Nashan to the *hērem by burning*"[33] *as an offering to the moon god ʿAlmaqah.*[34]

30 See David M. Howard, Jr., "The Case for Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets," *WTJ* 52 (1990): 101-15.

31 Kyle Dunham helpfully shows that the two concepts may overlap but are not synonymous. See Kyle C. Dunham, "Yahweh War and *herem*: The Role of Covenant, Land, and Purity in the Conquest of Canaan," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 21 (2016): 7–30.

32 This is written on the so-called Moabite Stone (see *ANET*, 320). Mesha was a contemporary of the Israelite kings Omri and Ahab; indeed, he mentions both as enemies in his inscription.

33 Lauren A. S. Monroe, "Israelite, Moabite and Sabaean War-*hērem* Traditions and the Forging of National Identity: Reconsidering the Sabaean Text RES 3945 in Light of Biblical and Moabite Evidence," *VT* 57 (2007): 318–41; quote from p. 333. Karib-ilu was a contemporary of the Judahite kings Hezekiah and Manasseh.

34 A *hērem*-type practice has also been identified in a Hittite text—though the root *hrm* is not used. See the discussion and bibliography in Dunham, "Yahweh War and *herem,*" 24–25. For other possible related ideas in the ancient Near East, see Theodore J. Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God: Ancient Israelite*

Second Kings 19:11 mentions the Assyrian kings "utterly destroying" (*hrm*) lands they conquered, but it is not in the context of religious destruction. Some parallels between biblical "Yahweh war" and ancient Near East warfare do exist,[35] but the specific idea of *hērem* and parallels to it are rare.[36]

4 The Ethics of Yahweh War

4.1 The Problem

The most burning question for many people in this connection is, How can a holy, just, loving God have commanded such harsh actions (labeled as "genocide" by many)?[37] As mentioned above, this is probably the most vexing question in the Old Testament for many people, Christians and

Religion Through the Lens of Divinity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 831, n. 142 and bibliography there.

35 See J. J. Niehaus, "Joshua and Ancient Near Eastern Warfare," *JETS* 31 (1988): 37–50.

36 See also Lohfink, *TDOT* 5:189–93.

37 Other treatments of the ethical issues raised by the *hēr̄em* or Yahweh war that parallel the arguments herein are the following (only a small sample of the extensive literature on the subject): Eugene H. Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity" in C. S. Cowles *et al., Show them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 61–94; Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 158–206; Kaiser, *Tough Questions about God and His Actions in the Old Testament*, 27–45; Kaiser, "The God of Love and His Command to Annihilate (herem) the Canaanites," in R. Dodson, ed., *The Old Testament Yesterday and Today: Essays in Honor of Michael P. V. Barrett* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 245–55; Tremper Longman III, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies: Pressing Questions about Evolution, Sexuality, History, and Violence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 123–205; Paul Copan, *Is God a Vindictive Bully? Reconciling Portrayals of God in the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2022), 187–236. A helpful summary of the four major positions is Charlie Trimm, *The Destruction of the Canaanites: God, Genocide, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022). An excellent, full-length treatment of the issues is Copan and Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?*

non-Christians alike. They are troubled (at best) and repelled (at worst) by what they see as a bloodthirstiness displayed by the Israelites and the God who had demanded the annihilations of the *hērem.*[38]

R. Goetz is representative when he states that "the book of Joshua is embarrassment enough, with its ferocity and its religious advocacy of mass murder." He speaks of Calvin's "cold-blooded acceptance of the Deuteronomic theology of the *hērem*."[39] He goes on to speak of "the guilt of the living God" because of activities that, were they not committed or commanded by God, we would condemn as unspeakable and unjustifiable atrocities.[40] Or, see Carolyn Sharp's discussion of "Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence," which begins "Joshua is a genocidal and colonizing text."[41]

In recent years, the "New Atheists" have pressed the argument even more strongly, represented by the famous quote from Richard Dawkins:

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.[42]

38 See esp. Josh 6:21; 8:22; 10:26, 28, 30, 32–33, 35, 37, 39–40; 11:8, 10–14.

39 R. Goetz, "Joshua, Calvin, and Genocide," *TToday* 32 (1975): 263–74; quotes from p. 264.

40 Goetz, "Joshua, Calvin, and Genocide," 273. See also D. F. Wright, "Accommodation and Barbarity in John Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries," in A. G. Auld, ed., *Understanding Poets and Prophets* (JSOTSup 152; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 413–27.

41 Carolyn J. Sharp, *Joshua* (Smith and Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2019), 44–53 (quote from p. 44); her next section is entitled "Postcolonial Resistance" (pp. 53–57).

42 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 51.

4.2 Toward a Solution, Part A: First Principles

By way of response, we must first reiterate the point made above, namely, that a careful reading of the biblical texts reveals that God's commands were more focused on driving the Canaanites out of the land than they were on killing every last, living person. This point is too often misunderstood or ignored, whether by Christian apologists trying to justify the "total" exterminations or by non-Christians accusing Israel and the God of the Bible of barbaric "genocide." But, as we've seen, there was no genocide in the sense commonly understood.

Having said this, hard questions nevertheless remain, whether there was indeed a total extermination of almost all of the Canaanites (as is commonly supposed by many) or whether the killings were only partial, focusing on Canaanite leadership and militaries. Even if the main results were that most Canaanites were displaced from their lands (and not killed), the question still remains as to whether this was fair and just or not; after all, massive displacements still would have been extremely upsetting to people's lives and livelihoods. This also raises the question as to what claim Israel had at all to what many regard as the Canaanites' own land. What right did Israel have to displace the Canaanites from "their" lands?[43]

To address this last concern first, we must note that *no* peoples ever in history have had inalienable rights to "their" lands. The earth and all its lands were created by God himself and are owned by him, not by any peoples or nations. After all, the Bible asserts that "The earth and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants, belong to the LORD" (Ps 24:1) and "the earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it" (1 Cor 10:26). Furthermore, God rebukes the Israelites in Ps 50:10–12 by stating that "every animal

43 Today, this also raises the controversial question as to whether the modern-day state of Israel and the Jews there have any right at all to live in lands where many regard them as "occupiers," even "genocidal." For a good example of such anti-Israel animus today, see Rachel Havrelock, *The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). For a more moderating view, see Pitkänen, "Joshua, Israel, and the Palestinians," *Joshua*, 89–99.

of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird of the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and everything in it is mine."

We should be very clear that God's own people Israel were not inheriting Canaan because of any merit of their own. Deuteronomy 9:5 states that "You are not going to take possession of their land because of your righteousness or your integrity. Instead, the LORD your God will drive out these nations before you because of their wickedness." Nor did they have any permanent claim of "ownership" on it. Before they even crossed into the land of Canaan, God warned Israel that if they turned away from him, "you will quickly perish from the land you are about to cross the Jordan to possess. You will not live long there, but you will certainly be destroyed. The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be reduced to a few survivors among the nations where the LORD your God will drive you" (Deut 4:26–27). And we also see that God is not open to a charge of having a double standard, favoring only his own people, since he did follow through on this by exiling his own people into Assyria and Babylon because of their sins in 2 Kings 17 (Israel) and in 2 Kings 24–25 (Judah).

The earth and its lands have always been God's, and their apportionment to different peoples and nations—"on loan," so to speak—never has given any of them permanent, inalienable claim to them. Lands have been his alone to give or take away, so attempts to characterize the Canaanites as "victims," wrongly expelled from "their" lands, is to misconstrue or misunderstand the biblical picture.

Nevertheless, concerning the destructions of the *hērem,* the biblical record is stark and unblinking when it speaks of these things, which are indeed horrible and should cause all of us as human beings to cringe when considering them, even if the destructions were only partial. However, the human perspective is not always the divine perspective. God had commanded Moses that Israel was to carry out this destruction and/or displacement in Canaan (Deut 7:2; 20:16–17; Josh 11:15, 20), and Moses had so instructed Joshua (11:12, 15; cf. 10:40). God also commanded this

to Joshua himself (6:17, with reference to Jericho). Thus, the question remains concerning God's basic justice.

The Bible does not address the question directly in this way, but we can discern the outlines of an answer in the points below.

4.3 Toward a Solution, Part B: Purity of Israel's Worship

The special emphasis at the time of Joshua was that Israel was to keep itself holy, undefiled, and the land itself was to be undefiled. In the particular circumstances of the Israelites entering the long-promised land as a newly constituted nation, it was vitally important that they do so uncontaminated by pagan worship. Already they had yielded to temptation in connection with the Baal of Peor in the wilderness (Numbers 25; 31:1–4). In Deuteronomy, the Lord had made his intentions clear: "You shall utterly destroy them . . . *precisely so that* they might not teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done on behalf of their gods" (20:17–18; author translation).

When Israel did not obey the command to utterly destroy things, this did indeed contaminate its religion. This is most visible in the story of Achan's and Israel's faithlessness concerning things set apart to the Lord (Joshua 7). When Israel was defeated at Ai as a result of this, Joshua and the elders of the people went into mourning (7:7–9).

God's response to Israel's faithlessness was couched in terms of holiness (7:10– 15). *Israel* (not just Achan) had sinned, and he would not tolerate it. This passage shows that God is not open to the charge of a double standard with reference to his treatment of Israel and the Canaanites, as we've also noted above. Earlier, God had ordered Israel to drive out and /or exterminate the Canaanites because of their sin, but now he also held all Israel responsible for the sin of one man. The overriding concern in *all* such episodes was his demand for holiness and obedience and the concern for purity of worship.

Thus, Josh 7:11 underlines the seriousness of the offense attributed to the nation: Israel had (1) "sinned," (2) "violated" the Lord's covenant, (3) "taken" some of what was set apart, (4) "stolen," (5) "deceived," and (6)

"put" those things among their own belongings. The quick, staccato accumulation of these verbs in v. 11 accentuates the severity of the action, since it was essentially one act, but it is described in these various ways. Verse 12 shows that the people of Israel themselves now were, literally, a thing "set apart for destruction" as a result of this (as Jericho had already been). God would no longer be with Israel, until the sin was removed from the camp. Verse 13 again emphasizes the importance of holiness in God's eyes: the people were to consecrate themselves, since they had been defiled by the presence of the things set apart.

Achan was found out, and he and his family were stoned and burned (7:16– 26). Because he had violated God's command concerning the loot from Jericho, Achan found himself in the position of the inhabitants of Jericho: he himself was set apart for destruction. He in effect had become a Canaanite by his actions.

Another illustration of the effects of not completely destroying pagan influences comes in the book of Judges. Despite the indications in Joshua 10–11 that Israel completely carried out the requirements of complete annihilation, Judges 1 indicates that the various tribes did not fully obey.[44] Judges 2—and indeed the rest of the book of Judges—shows the effects this had on Israel's life: the people turned to the Baals, the gods of the Canaanites who were still living among them, and they forsook the Lord. Israel's worship did not remain pure.

Complete, total destruction of every last, living Canaanite was not necessary for accomplishing God's purposes in giving Israel a clean start in an uncontaminated land, spiritually speaking. This is why God's main emphasis was on driving the Canaanites out of this land, and exterminating only those who remained, whether religious, political, administrative, or military personnel—or simply "average" citizens who refused to leave.

And, related to this, we can hardly imagine that the average Canaanite, upon hearing of what Israel's God had done to the Egyptians and to Sihon and Og (Josh 2:9–11)—let alone what he was doing in an organized, se-

44 See esp. Judg 1:19, 21, 28–34. See the comments on 10:40–43 for a discussion of the different perspectives in Joshua 10–11 and Judges 1.

quential fashion to places like Jericho (chap. 6), Ai (chap. 8), and the southern and northern coalitions of kings (chaps. 10–11)—would simply stay put, waiting to be annihilated. Israel's reputation continually preceded it (2:10; 5:1; 9:2, 3; 10:1; 11:1), so there would have been no excuse for the average Canaanite citizen not to take some action to avoid destruction. The example of Rahab (and even the Gibeonites) shows that destruction was not inevitable. Those who embraced Israel's God would be spared. Sadly, it appears that most Canaanites did not.

4.4 Toward a Solution, Part C: The Canaanites' Sins in General

Concerning sin, we should first note that, from God's perspective, *all* peoples have sinned and fallen short of his standards (Rom 3:23) and thus are deserving of the severest punishment (Rom 6:23). Thus, on this level, the Canaanites only received what all peoples—then and now—deserve, and any peoples who have been spared are so spared only by God's grace. Sin is a harsh reality, but its absolute affront to the holy God is clearly taught in the Scriptures and too often ignored in the modern day.

While it is entirely true that the Canaanites only received what all people deserve, and therefore this could conceivably stand as a sufficient answer to the question, this answer is somewhat incomplete, since it is clear that God did not choose to annihilate other peoples in biblical times (or since) who also were sinful. What was distinctive about the Canaanite situation that triggered the unprecedented injunctions to drive out or destroy everyone and everything?

While we cannot answer this question definitively, we *can* say that biblical and extrabiblical evidence alike portrays the Canaanites as wicked in the extreme, more so than almost any other nation. Early on, a preview of the Canaanites' sin was presented to Abraham, where he was told that the fulfillment of the promise to him would be delayed, in part because "the sin of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen 15:16; see also Deut 9:4–5). That is, the return of Abraham's descendants finally to inherit the land would have as part of its mission the punishing of the Canaanites for

their sin.[45] For many years, the Canaanites' sins would not justify the annihilation that would come when the Israelites took the land. Indeed, here we see God's grace and long-suffering in full view, since he did not exact punishment immediately, but rather waited for centuries until their sins had reached a tipping point, so to speak. That point came in the time of Joshua.

In the Bible itself, the sins of the Canaanites are condemned in several places. In the most detailed passage (Lev 18:24–30), Israel is solemnly warned to abstain from the many abominations that the Canaanites had practiced (see also v. 3). The larger context makes it clear that the entire list of sins in 18:6–23 were ones that the Canaanites practiced. These included engaging in incest, adultery, child sacrifice, homosexual activity, and bestiality. Furthermore, in Deut 9:4–5, the wickedness of the nations in the land of Canaan is given as a major reason why the Lord would drive them out before Israel. So again the Israelites' displacement of the Canaanites was in part a punishment for their wickedness. Even further, we should note that the promise to Abraham included the provision that God would curse anyone who cursed Israel (Gen 12:3), and the Canaanites sought to destroy Israel on at least three occasions (Josh 9:1–2; 10:1–5; 11:1– 5).

The evidence outside the Bible confirms the biblical picture of a particularly debased culture in Canaan. Archaeological excavation has shown that the practice of child sacrifice was particularly the province of the Canaanites (=Phoenicians) and their descendants who migrated westward to Carthage.[46] As one scholar notes, "The most famous—or noto-

45 The term "Amorite" in Gen 15:16 is synonymous with "Canaanite" here. See the commentary on 3:10.

46 See Paul G. Mosca, "Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1975), esp. chaps. I-II. Mosca also showed that child sacrifice was practiced in Israel and Judah (chap. III). But, significantly, its practice in Israel was strongly condemned by God (e.g., Lev 18:21; Deut 18:10); it was the practice of those who turned away from God, such as Ahaz (2 Kgs 16:3). See also L. E. Stager and S. R. Wolff, "Child Sacrifice at Carthage: Religious Rite and Population Control?" *BARev* 10.1 (1984): 30–51.

rious—example of Phoenician religious practice is infant sacrifice. It is… abundantly attested archaeologically, although virtually all such attestations come from the colonies. In Carthage as many as 20,000 urns with infant and animal bones were buried in the tophet (the biblical word for such sanctuaries) over 600 years."[47] Or this, from another scholar: "Child sacrifice was an essential element of Phoenician religion. Although this ancient rite seems to have been obsolete in the Phoenician motherland, it continued to be practiced vigorously by the Western Phoenicians well into the Late Roman period."[48] Despite the lack of clear evidence for this practice in Canaan/Phoenicia proper, nevertheless "the Phoenician origin of the rite stands starkly revealed in the antiquity and geographical distribution of the western precincts. By the seventh century B.C., we find such precincts firmly entrenched in North Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, and…Malta. The only plausible conclusion is that these sacrificial enclosures were founded by Phoenician colonists and modeled on mainland prototypes."[49]

Canaanite religion was also highly sexualized, including incest, adultery, homosexual activity, and bestiality, as noted in Leviticus 18. For example, Deuteronomy 23:17 (Hb 23:18) mentions both male and female cult prostitutes: "No Israelite woman is to be a cult prostitute (*qədēšāh*), and no Israelite man is to be a cult prostitute (*qādēš*)." These were not the type of prostitute known the world over—like Rahab (*zônāh*). Rather, they were "sacred" or "cult" prostitutes; they were attached to shrines of false worship imported from Canaan into Israel and Judah. Most tragically (and ironically!), these terms are related to the Hebrew word for

47 Richard J. Clifford, "Phoenician Religion," *BASOR* 279 (1990): 58; the full essay is on pp. 55-64.

48 Charles R. Krahmalkov, "Phoenicia," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. D. N. Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1056. See also Krahmalkov, *Phoenician-Punic Dictionary* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 90; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 39-40 (*s.v.* "ZRM" (the term for "infant sacrifice victim")) and p. 286 (*s.v.* "MLK VI" (the term for "human (child) sacrifice")).

49 Mosca, "Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion," 98.

holiness: *qādôš*. This represented a complete and utter debasement of the idea of holiness.[50]

By the time of King Josiah, male cult prostitutes had even set up shop in the temple itself: "He also tore down the houses of the male cult prostitutes that were in the LORD's temple, in which the women were weaving tapestries for Asherah" (2 Kgs 23:7). The reference to Asherah here—the wife of the high god El in Canaanite mythology—adds to the debased picture. Josiah also "brought out the Asherah pole from the LORD's temple to the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem. He burned it at the Kidron Valley, beat it to dust, and threw its dust on the graves of the common people" (2 Kgs 23:6).[51]

50 Richard Hess downplays this idea (Richard S. Hess, "'Because of the Wickedness of These Nations' (Deut 9:4-5): The Canaanites – Ethical or Not?" pp. 17-38 in J. S. DeRouchie, J. Gile, and K. J. Turner eds., *For Our Good Always: Studies on the Message and Influence of Deuteronomy in Honor of Daniel I. Block* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), arguing that Canaanite literature shows a higher ethics in some areas: "attempts to generalize regarding 'Canaanite ethics,' whether positive or negative, are over-simplified and not productive of a more accurate and nuanced understanding of these cultures using the available literary sources native to or at least copied by these peoples" (p. 36). He states that Christians' "own moral character and practice often appears very comparable to that of the Canaanites" and that we too have fallen short of the glory of God (p. 37). While it is of course true that "all have sinned" (Rom 3:23), Hess's attempts to draw moral equivalences between the Canaanites and other ancient (or modern) cultures seem somewhat of a stretch.

51 For more on Canaanite cultic practices, see J. Day, "Canaanite Religion," *ABD* 1:831–37; Keith N. Schoville, "Canaanites and Amorites," in A. J. Hoerth, G. L. Mattingly, and E. M. Yamauchi, eds., *Peoples of the Old Testament World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 157–82; William A. Ward, "Phoenicians," in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, 183–206; Christopher A. Rollston, "Phoenicia and the Phoenicians," in B. T. Arnold and B. A. Strawn, eds., *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 267–308.

4.5 Toward a Solution, Part D: The Canaanites' Sins Against God's People Israel

Another perspective on the sins of the Canaanites is provided in the book of Joshua. Beyond being a punishment for their sins in general—which were especially heinous, judged against those of nations around them—the dispossession or destruction of the Canaanites was also due to their rebellion against God and his people. This harkens all the way back to God's promise to Abraham that "I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt" (Gen 12:3). Here in Joshua, we see that almost every battle that Israel engaged in was defensive in nature, as Canaanite coalitions repeatedly arrayed themselves against Israel to attack them (see 9:1–2; 10:1–5; 11:1–5).

According to Josh 11:19–20, "No city made peace with the Israelites except the Hivites who inhabited Gibeon; all of them were taken in battle. For it was the LORD's intention to harden their hearts, so that they would engage Israel in battle, be completely destroyed without mercy, and be annihilated, just as the LORD had commanded Moses." This passage shows that the destruction of the Canaanites in chaps. 10–11 was orchestrated by God himself: he hardened their hearts so that he could completely destroy those opposing him.

Thus, the text is stark and harsh: the idea and activity of hardening originated from God himself, and it was for the purpose of destroying the Canaanite resistance through battle, with no mercy.

The reference to God's hardening the Canaanites' hearts obviously recalls the same idea in the events of the exodus, where God hardened the pharaoh's heart (e.g., Exod 9:12; 10:1, 27; 11:10) and sent the plagues. A careful reading of the Exodus passages, however, shows that God's actions in Egypt were tied to the pharaoh's defiance. His hardening of the pharaoh's heart must be seen in the context of the pharaoh's own stubbornness and resistance to God. Ultimately, he was not doing to the pharaoh anything that his heart was not already predisposed to do.[52]

52 On this, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 252–56.

The Canaanites' resistance to the Lord can be seen in a similar light. They heard about Israel's victories (2:9–11; 5:1; 9:1, 3; 10:1; 11:1), and most of them made war against Israel and its God; as a result, they were shown no mercy and were annihilated. God's hardening of their hearts (11:20) must be seen in the same way as the hardening of the pharaoh's heart: in the context of their own stubbornness and resistance of Israel's God. Had they been willing to react as Rahab (or even the Gibeonites) had done, or had they left the land on their own before the oncoming Israelites, the results would have been different for them.[53]

4.6 Toward a Solution, Part E: Hyperbolic Language in Joshua

Finally, we must also note, as hinted above, that some of the language in Joshua has to be read hyperbolically, not literally, based on internal evidence in the book. This helps to explain such verses as 13:1 ("a great deal of the land remains to be possessed") or the many places where we see people remaining in areas supposedly conquered and destroyed completely by the Israelites (see 11:22; 13:2–6; 14:12; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12–13; 18:2–3; 19:47; 23:4–5,7,12–13; and Judges 1)—all coming *after* such "total annihilation" passages such as 10:40: "So Joshua conquered the whole region—the hill country, the Negev, the Judean foothills, and the slopes—with all their kings, *leaving no survivors*. He *completely destroyed* (*hrm)* every living being, as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded."[54] So here, too, there is no "genocide" as it is commonly understood.

53 See the commentary on 11:19–20 for further discussion of this perspective.

54 See further the introductory comments on 10:40–43, as well as such resources as Copan and Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide*, 84–93; Copan, *Is God a Vindictive Bully?*, 200–6; James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 38–43; and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (JSOTSup 98; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 190–92, 227–28, 241–47.

5 The New Testament and Violence

The New Testament is usually thought of as the testament of peace and non-violence, and it does indeed affirm these many times. See, for example, Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matt 5:9), or "if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matt 5:39), or "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44).

Yet, the New Testament does not reject violence or harsh judgment in absolute terms. For example, Jesus himself did not hesitate to display righteous anger, most dramatically in his excoriation of the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. Or note when he forcibly cleansed the temple of the moneychangers: "Jesus went into the temple and threw out all those buying and selling. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves" (Matt 21:12). Note that the gospel of John tells us that this was more than a fit of passion, because Jesus took time to fashion a whip before driving them out: "After making a whip out of cords, he drove everyone out of the temple with their sheep and oxen. He also poured out the money changers' coins and overturned the tables" (John 2:15). The book of Jude even reminds us of Jesus' destructive actions against those who did not believe in Old Testament times: "Now I want to remind you…that Jesus saved a people out of Egypt and later destroyed those who did not believe" (Jude 5).

Note also the harsh fate of Ananias and Sapphira, who were struck dead at the apostle Peter's feet when they lied about their sale of land (Acts 5:1–11).

The apostle Paul certainly did not shrink from speaking of harsh retribution. Speaking to the high priest Ananias, after Ananias had ordered his men to strike Paul on the mouth, he responded, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!" (Acts 23:3). Or this: "Alexander the coppersmith did great harm to me. The Lord will repay him according to his works" (2 Tim 4:14).

The book of Revelation is replete with harsh judgment and retribution against evildoers. See, e.g., the voice of the martyrs in Rev 6:9–10:

"When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the word of God and the testimony they had given. They cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, the one who is holy and true, how long until you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?'" Lest it be countered that this refers to eschatological, not earthly, judgment, consider this *temporal* judgment that Jesus pronounced against the church at Thyatira: "Look, I will throw (the false prophetess Jezebel) into a sickbed and those who commit adultery with her into great affliction. Unless they repent of her works, I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am the one who examines minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you according to your works" (Rev 2:22–23).

And, significantly, the New Testament does not condemn the violence in the Old Testament, but rather assumes or even affirms it in many instances.[55] Even limiting ourselves to New Testament references to the violence in Joshua, we see Stephen affirming that *God* drove out the Canaanites before Joshua (Acts 7:45), Paul affirming the same thing (Acts 13:19), and the author of Hebrews *praising* Old Testament violent characters "who by faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the raging of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, gained strength in weakness, became mighty in battle, and put foreign armies to flight" (Heb 11:33–34). In none of these instances do New Testament characters or authors condemn the violence in the Old Testament.

6 Concluding Thoughts

What of the *hērem* and Christians today? Should we derive some imperatives for our own—or our nations's—behavior? In one sense, yes: The book of Joshua should remind us of the terrible affront that any type of sin is to a holy God. We should hate evil just as God does. But, should we

55 My argument in this paragraph follows Copan and Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?* chap. 3: "The God of the Old Testament versus the God of the New?", 37–47, esp. 42–46.

take the types of actions we find in Joshua against the Canaanites? The answer here is "no."

We need to remember that the instructions to Israel to drive out or annihilate the Canaanites were specific in time, intent, and geography. That is, Israel was not given a blanket permission to do the same to *any* peoples they encountered, at any time or in any place. It was limited to the crucial time when Israel was just establishing itself as a theocracy under God, to protect Israel's worship, as well as to punish these specific peoples.[56] Thus, harsh as it is to our sensibilities, we should remember that it was for very clearly stated reasons, and that it was very carefully circumscribed.[57]

This should caution us in attempting to apply the principles of *the mass displacements or* the *hērem* to the modern day. While God abhors evil of every kind and Christians are to oppose it vigorously, the extremes of the *hērem* are not enjoined upon Christians to practice today.[58] Even

56 Arie Versluis also makes this point: "in Genesis to Kings the root חרם is used almost exclusively in connection with the conquest of the land of Canaan and the associated elimination of (the practices of) the nations of Canaan," i.e., it was not an unlimited command to practice חרם against any nation at any time. See Versluis, "Devotion and/or Destruction? The Meaning and Function of חרם in the Old Testament," *ZAW* 128 (2016): 244 (the full essay is on pp. 233–46).

57 God commanded Saul to annihilate the Amalekites (an order he did not carry out; 1 Samuel 15) and Ahab to do the same to Ben-hadad (1 Kgs 20:42), but these again were circumscribed and limited orders. See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 106–9, on the Amalekite situation.

58 In today's post-9/11 world, many people wonder what similarities between the biblical *hēr̄em* and Islamic *jihad* there might be (if any). We cannot address this in any depth here except to say that there are many significant differences. For in-depth engagement with this question (and bibliographies), see Paul Copan, "Aren't the Bible's 'Holy Wars' Just Like Islamic Jihad? Parts One, Two, Three" in *When God Goes to Starbucks* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), chaps. 12-14, esp. chap. 14; and Copan and Flannagan, "Are Yahweh Wars in the Old Testament Just like Islamic Jihad?" in *Did God Really Command Genocide?*, chap. 21. More briefly, see Kaiser, "The Christian and Jihad," in *Tough Questions about God and His Actions*, 44.

in what some people see as "barbaric" Old Testament times, the *hērem* was limited. God worked against evil during most of the Old Testament period, as he does today, in less drastic ways.