

The Conquest of Canaan

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Passage: “You shall not worship the Lord your God in [the way these nations serve their gods], for every abominable thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods (Deuteronomy 12:31, ESV).

Introduction: For Harry Truman, the choice of whether or not to use the atomic bomb against Japan was the most difficult decision of his presidency (and his life). On August 6, 1945, a plane called the Enola Gay dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima, killing around 70,000 Japanese citizens. On August 9, a second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki.¹ About 80,000 Japanese perished. In the months and years that followed, an additional 100,000 perished from burns and radiation sickness. On August 14, 1945, the Japanese surrendered.

Truman stated that his decision to drop the bomb was purely military. A Normandy-type landing would have cost an estimated million casualties. Truman believed that the bombs saved Japanese lives as well. Prolonging the war was not an option for the President. The ethical debate over the decision to drop the atomic bomb will never be resolved, but most people acknowledge there was a need for drastic measures to end the war. Right or wrong, the bombs did bring an end to the most destructive war in history. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the last shots of World War II, but the first of the Cold War.

In February 1945, over 1,200 Allied bombers launched four aerial attacks against Dresden.² It was the final months of the war in Europe. The raids destroyed 75,000 homes and around 25,000 people were killed. On March 11, the Royal Air Force reduced much of the city of Essen³ to rubble when 1,079 British aircraft dropped over 4,700 pounds of bombs on the city. On the morning of March 18, 1,329 bombers and 733 fighters of the US Eighth Air Force set a course for northern Germany. The target for 1,221 of the bombers was Berlin. The unconditional surrender of the German Third Reich was signed in the early morning hours of Monday, May 7, 1945.

In the mid-1940s, the knowledge of the horrific war crimes being committed against the Jewish population in Europe was limited. Even so, most Americans supported the aggressive measures being taken against Germany and Japan. Today we know about the Holocaust and the systematic murder of European Jews during World War II. Between 1941 and 1945, Nazi Germany and its

¹ The Association of Korean Atomic Bomb Victims estimates that there were over 50,000 Koreans living in the city of Hiroshima in 1945, with heavy concentrations in Fukushima-cho and Minami Kannon-cho, areas that were 2 and 3 kilometers from the bomb hypocenter, respectively. Population estimates for Nagasaki are generally less reliable, but it seems that there were probably as many as 30,000 Koreans residing there.

² The bombing of Dresden was a joint British and American aerial bombing attack on the city of Dresden, the capital of the German state of Saxony.

³ Essen is an industrial city in western Germany that was a regular target of the Allied Forces during World War II.

collaborators systematically murdered some six million Jews across German-occupied Europe. Only 6 to 11% of Europe's prewar Jewish population of children survived as compared with 33% of the adults. Among the small number of European Jewish children still alive at the end of the Holocaust, thousands had survived because they were hidden.

God's command for Israel to drive out the Canaanites and inherit their land is a dominant theme in Deuteronomy (7:1-5, 16-26; 12:29-31; 20:10-18). It raises difficult questions for the modern reader: How could a loving God command the extermination of whole populations?

Body:

- I. The conquest of Canaan was commanded because Canaanite society was dominated by a religious system that was both licentious and cruel, not on the basis of ethnic superiority.
 - a. God promised Abraham that he would give the land of Canaan to his descendants (Gen 15:18-21; cf Ex 6:8), but this did not happen in Abraham's day because "*the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete*" (Gen 15:15-16).
 - b. Moses reminded Israel prior to the conquest, "...it is because of *the wickedness of these nations* that the Lord is driving them out before you" (Deut 9:4)
 - c. The reason for the removal of the Canaanites was given, "lest they make you sin against me" (Ex 23:33; Deut 7:16).
 - d. Canaanite gods demanded human sacrifice and more specifically, the sacrifice of children (Deut 12:31; 18:9-10; Lev 18:3, 21, 26, 30; 20:1-5).
 - e. The Psalmist explained why it was necessary for the Canaanites to be driven out (Ps 106:34-43):
 - i. Israel "did not destroy the peoples, as the Lord commanded them, but they mixed with the nations and learned to do as they did."
 - ii. As a result, Israel "served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was polluted with blood."
 - iii. Because Israel would later pollute the land with child sacrifices, God "gave them into the hand of the nations."
 - f. God did not favor Israel above the nations; their continuance in the land depended on faithfulness to God.

- II. The Old Testament storyline is not Israel *against* the nations, but Israel *for the sake of* the nations.
- a. God's purpose for calling Abraham and his descendants was the blessing of the nations (Gen 12:1-3).
 - b. God "loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing..." He commanded Israel therefore to "love the sojourner" because "you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:18-19; Lev 19:34).
 - i. Moses' laws provided immigrants protection from oppression (Ex 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:33-34);
 - ii. They benefitted from Sabbath rest (Ex 20:9-11; 23:12; Deut 5:12-15);
 - iii. They were included in the Passover celebration (Ex 12:45-49), annual feasts (Deut 16:11) and Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29);
 - iv. They were included in the covenant renewal ceremonies (Deut 29:10-13; 31:12);
 - v. They were recipients of the triennial tithes (Deut 14:28-29; 26:12-13) and gleanings (Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:19-22);
 - c. Numerous conversions and inclusion stories of non-Israelites are recorded.
 - i. Rehab of Jericho housed two Israelite spies (Josh 2:1-21); New Testament writers cite her as an example of faith (Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25) and she is included in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5).
 - ii. Ruth was a Moabite woman who left her homeland with her Israelite mother-in-law and became a believer in the God of Abraham (Ruth 1:16-17); like Rahab, she is included in the genealogy of Jesus as David's ancestress (Matt 1:5).
 - iii. Naaman was a Syrian general who was healed of leprosy through the ministry of Elisha; he expressed his faith that "there is no God in all the earth but in Israel" (2 Kgs 5:15).
 - iv. The widow of Zerephath expressed her faith in God, saying to Elijah after he raised her son from the dead, "No I know that you are a man of God, and that ht word of the Lord in your mouth is truth" (1 Kgs 17:24; cf Lk 4:23-26).
- III. The extermination policy of Deuteronomy was not intended to result in the total annihilation of the Canaanites.

- a. The Hebrew term *ḥērem* used in Deuteronomy is often translated as “utter destruction,” which can imply complete annihilation (Deut 2:34; 3:6; 7:2; 13:15; 20:17). Its usage in other contexts call for a more nuanced interpretation, however. It could signify dedication to God, ostracization, or destruction of specific individuals or objects within a group, not necessarily the entire population.
- b. The passages in Deuteronomy calling for *ḥērem* against specific Canaanite groups are not applied to all Canaanites. The text differentiates between groups considered hostile and those who peacefully accept Israelite rule, allowing the latter to coexist. This suggests a potential distinction between military campaigns against hostile groups and complete annihilation of all Canaanites.
- c. Archaeological findings in Canaanite cities dating to the period of Israelite conquest don't consistently support complete annihilation. While some cities show signs of destruction, evidence of continued habitation and cultural continuity in others suggests selective conflict rather than systematic extermination.
- d. Deuteronomy operates within the literary genre of covenant texts, often employing strong rhetoric and hyperbole to emphasize the importance of loyalty to God and adherence to law. The language used regarding the Canaanites might serve a literary purpose of emphasizing the gravity of breaking the covenant rather than outlining a literal policy of total annihilation.

IV. There are hints in the Old Testament that God does not love violence.

- a. God was grieved because of the “evil” and “wickedness” of humans prior to the flood—“the earth was filled with *violence*” (Gen 6:5-11).⁴
- b. Jacob denounced his sons’ violence (Gen 34:30; 49:5-7).
- c. David was not permitted to build the temple because he shed too much blood (1 Chro 28:3).
- d. Isaiah’s vision anticipates the day when God will make wars cease and abolish all weapons of war.
 - i. God’s vision for humans is one of peace, in which “the shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Is 2:4).

⁴ The Hebrew word *ḥāmās* (ḥāmās) is rendered “violence” in most English translations. It usually refers to physical aggression and bloodshed (Judg 9:24; 2 Sam 22:3; Obad 1:10; Hab 1:9; Jer 51:35).

- ii. The coming deliverer is referred to as the “Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6).
 - iii. God will “judge the poor” by striking “the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked” (Is 11:1-5); this will lead to a world in which “the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf with the lion.... They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain” (11:6-9).
 - e. The conquest of Canaan was a unique and limited event in Israel's history. Many of the wars in the Old Testament portray Israel being attacked by other nations as they fight defensively to survive.
- V. The biblical record consistently portrays God as the primary agent in the destruction of the nations that occupied the land of Canaan.
- a. The book of Joshua tells the story of the conquest and finishes by saying that it was God himself who gave Israel the land; it was “God who has fought for you”; he has “driven out before you great and strong nations” (Josh 23:3-5, 9-10).
 - b. The psalmist declared, “O God...you with your own hand drove out the nations...you afflicted the peoples...for not by [Israel's] own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm save them...” (Ps 44:1-3).
 - c. As Stephen told the story of his people, he said concerning the conquest of Canaan that Israel “*dispossessed* the nations that *God drove out* before our fathers (Acts 7:45).
 - d. Paul refers to the conquest as an act of God's sovereignty, “And after destroying the seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance” (Acts 13:19).

Conclusion: The defeat of the Canaanites was part of God's overall mission to rescue and bless the nations. The Psalmist envisions a day when the nations will ultimately praise God for his judgments against wickedness. They will ultimately agree with God for his intervention (Ps 86:9; 67:1-7). A good God intervenes when human oppression reaches its limit.