

The Doctrine of the Extermination of the Peoples of Canaan

Introduction: the biggest problem that anyone has with the book of Joshua is the extermination of the people in the land of Canaan. Not just soldiers, but men, women and children were all executed and often their cities burned to the ground. We are only told a few times for what crimes they are being executed, and this is not something which is emphasized. We do not actually spend time with a Canaanite family to observe their degeneracy, so we do not fully appreciate what God expects of His people. Rotherham: *It is only when some adequate knowledge is possessed of the really obscene and blood-thirsty nature of idol-worship in Western Asia that the mind is prepared to feel the full force of allusions scattered throughout the Old Testament. Many, indeed, are the allegations against Israel for going unchastely after other gods; but even the needlessly coarse terms of our public versions (in speaking of it as "going-a-whoring" after idols) have probably failed to suggest to the majority of even educated minds the awful and undoubted fact that such worship was accompanied by rites (to use the guarded language of the Oxford Gesenius) "sometimes involving actual prostitution." Hence there would appear to be something like a moral necessity to lift a little the veil which hides from view the true character of the worship of the Baals, the Asherahs and the Ashtaroths of Canaan.*¹

- I. First of all, the Israelites were ordered to destroy all of the peoples from the land.
 - A. Directly from Moses: "When Jehovah your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, you will clear away many nations from before you—the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you. And when Jehovah your God delivers them before you, and you utterly defeat them, then you will completely destroy them. You will make no covenant with them and you will show no grace to them...And you will consume all the peoples whom Jehovah your God delivers to you—your eye will not pity them, neither will you serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you." (Deut. 7:1–2, 16). "Only in the cities of these peoples that Jehovah your god is giving you as an inheritance, you will not leave alive anything that breathes, but you will utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, and Jehovah your God has commanded you, in order that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against Jehovah your God." (Deut. 20:16–18).
 - B. Directly from God:
 1. "Observe, I am going to send an Angel before you, to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Guard yourselves before Him and obey His voice, and do not be rebellious toward Him, for He will not pardon your transgression, since My Name is in Him. But if you truly obey His voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the land of the Amorite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Canaanite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, and I will completely destroy them." (Ex. 23:20–23).
 2. *The Amplified Bible: Infidels say that it seems wholly inconsistent with what we should suppose to be the merciful character of God, that He should thus command whole nations to be destroyed by the sword...(But) when we see juries in our own country bringing in a verdict of guilty, the judge pronouncing sentence of death, and that sentence executed, we do not complain that there is anything unjust in the act. These Canaanites are proved to have polluted and stained the land with [intolerable] crimes; it was merely the holy judge pronouncing sentence on flagrant criminals and [Joshua] the righteous governor executing that sentence to the letter. It was not an act of arbitrary or private revenge, but the execution of the sentence of retributive justice, and much as had perhaps as great mercy to the innocent as justice to the guilty.*²

¹ Joseph Bryant Rotherham's *The Emphasized Bible*; ©1971 by Kregel Publications; p. 259. At the end, he quotes from *The Oxford Gesenius*, p. 275. It was the two page essay at the end of the book of Joshua which inspired this doctrine and from that essay, much of this material was taken.

² *The Amplified Bible*, The Lockman Foundation; ©1965 by Zondervan Publishing House; p. 272; this was a quote from Cumming from *Gray and Adams Commentary*, condensed.

3. One has to realize that God has all of the facts about each and every individual. There was no one who lost his life in this slaughter about whom God was not completely and totally cognizant. Everyone who died in the slaughter was guilty. Those who were too young to make a choice were saved, as their volition was not an issue.
- II. From the standpoint of morality:
- A. Through just the cultic practices of their religion, the Canaanites were immoral. Their religion involved male and female temple prostitutes and those attending the church would have intercourse with these prostitutes. It is likely that young people prior to marriage also became involved with these temple prostitutes. This was completely anti-family, anti-marriage.
- B. We live in a period of time when child-abuse of different kinds is rampant. If these parents went so far as to sacrifice their children to their gods, then who knows how many children were physically and sexually abused and from what age. We know that man is capable of some horrible things. Sexual immorality would come with few concerns about the results of sexual immorality—that is, the children who would be born. Certainly these children were neglected, abused and/or sacrificed. It is likely that many were raised without love, and we have a great many psychological studies testifying that a child can essentially be written off if his first few years are without love. Unbeliever will have a hard time with this, but children who had no hope in adulthood, when slaughtered at the hands of Joshua, dying before they reached accountability, would spend eternity in God's presence.
- C. Will Durant makes mention of the most heinous practice of religion: *Every one knows of the Moloch to whom the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, and occasionally other Semites, offered human victims.*³
- III. From the standpoint of health:
- A. There are certain sexually-transmitted diseases which we have seen a great deal of in our time. In many cases, we have medical treatment for these diseases. Untreated, they can be passed on genetically.
- B. Part of the religious ceremonies of the heathen of that land involved sexual intercourse with priests and priestesses. It is highly likely that sexually-transmitted diseases would flourish under those circumstances.
- C. In Jericho, the house of Rahab, which was, once, at least, a house of prostitution, was built right into the wall of Jericho. It was obviously accessible to all. We do not know all the circumstances surrounding Rahab and her personal life, but it appears that prostitution was an accepted practice of that day.
- D. Given the likelihood of STD's throughout the land, given that they had no particular reason to be moral, and given the tremendous homosexual degeneracy rampant in Sodom in Gen. 19, it is not a stretch to think that this land had reached such a peak of degeneracy once again. Recall that Lot, who was probably the most moral person in all of Sodom, was willing to place his daughters outside to be molested by the homosexual rapists outside his home, would indicate that this land has once before been plagued with great immorality, which would result, as we have seen in our generation, a great spreading of disease. *In view of the sexual perversions listed, it is more than likely that venereal diseases ravaged a large part of the population. Hence, stern measures were required to prevent decimation of the Israelites by the spread of these and other diseases such as malaria and smallpox. Contagion would be possible by sudden fraternization before immunity could develop.*⁴ During our time, when we have methods which would reduce STD's, we are still in an epidemic. During that period of time, there was no protection that we are aware of.
- E. My point in all the above is that probably almost every man, woman and child was infected by one or more sexually transmitted diseases and it would not be a stretch to assume that the same was true of some of their animals. When you allow even their children to live, even if they can be delivered from their heathen ways, they would still carry sexual diseases which they had gotten either directly or genetically.
- IV. From the standpoint of religion:
- A. The major topics obviously overlap a great deal. The sacred worship places for the Canaanite religions were brothels. Representations of genitals were openly displayed. There were male and female prostitutes who were a part of the worship ceremonies.

³ *The Story of Civilization; Volume I Our Oriental Heritage; Will Durant; MJF Books; ©1963; p. 66.*

⁴ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible; ©1976; Vol. 3, p. 707.*

- B. Many of the peoples of the land had come from a Sumerian background. With regards to their religion, Durant writes: *women were attached to every temple, some as domestics, some as concubines for the gods or their duly constituted representatives on earth. To serve the temples in this way did not seem any disgrace to a Sumerian girl; her father was proud to devote her charms to the alleviation of divine monotony, and celebrated the admission of his daughter to these sacred functions with ceremonial sacrifice, and the presentation of the girl's marriage dowry to the temple.*⁵
- C. The gods of the Mesopotamian peoples included Shamash, Marduk, Sin and Ishtar. The Mesopotamians had a pantheon of more than 1500 gods.
- D. The Canaanite gods:
1. El was the creator of the earth and controller of the storms.⁶ You may recognize that this is a general name used for God in Scripture as well.
 2. Ba'al was symbolized by the bull to indicate his procreative powers.
 3. Astarte (called Ashtaroth in the Bible) was the fertility goddess. She was therefore quite popular in Canaanite worship (big surprise here) and prostitution was a part of the worship activity. Both she and Ba'al were associated with drunkenness and fornication during the heathen worship services. We have a likely allusion to a temple prostitute in Amos 2:7, where a man and his father are said to go to the same girl.
 4. Asherah, the mother goddess, the goddess of fruitfulness, was, essentially, the spouse of El.
- E. Human sacrifice:
1. Abraham:
 - a. God called Abram to leave his homeland, his father's house and his relatives (Gen. 12:1). This was to remove Abram from the idolatry of his land and of his own household. His father was an idolater (Joshua 24:3).
 - b. His quick willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, was an indication that he was well-acquainted with the relationship between human sacrifice and religion.
 2. The gods who were worshipped demanded bloody human sacrifices. Molech, the king-idol of the Canaanites, as well as of some of the other nations, demanded and received human sacrifices—sons and daughters were sacrificed to Molech.
 3. Lev. 18:21 Deut. 12:31 Hosea 4:13 confirm the human sacrifice rituals of the heathen.
- F. God's instructions to Israel concerning idolatry:
1. The Israelites were not to pursue other gods (Deut. 7:4).
 2. "You will tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and you will cut down their Asherim, and you will burn their graven images with fire." (Deut. 7:5; also see 12:2–3).
 3. The Israelites were to completely destroy the peoples of Canaan so that they would not participate in their heathen worship (Deut. 20:16–18).
- V. It is important to note that God displaced the Canaanites not because of the great moral character of the Jews, but because of the incredible degeneracy of the Canaanites. "Do not say in your heart when Jehovah your God has driven them out before you, 'Because of my righteousness Jehovah has brought me into the possess this land' It is because of the wickedness of these nations that Jehovah is dispossessing them before you. It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that Jehovah your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which Jehovah swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and to Jacob." (Deut. 9:4). McGee: *Remember that these kings and their people were given 420 years to make up their minds as to whether or not they would turn to God. Also God had made it known that He was giving the land to Israel and that He would save anyone who would turn to Him. Israel had to stay out of the land 420 years until the iniquity of the Amorites was full. That time had now come. God brought the children of Israel across the Red Sea not only for their sake, but also to demonstrate His redemption through power, as He had by blood that last night in Egypt when the angel of death passed over the homes one which the blood was on the doorposts. This was not only to convince the Egyptians that there was the living and true God amidst all the*

⁵ *The Story of Civilization; Volume I Our Oriental Heritage; Will Durant; MJF Books; ©1963; p. 129. Durant quotes as his source Herodotus, II, 95.*

⁶ *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible; ©1976; Vol. 3, p. 245. Much of the information found in this doctrine came from ZPEB.*

idols of Egypt, but also to convince these people in the land. Remember that the harlot Rahab had said, "We have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Red Sea for you." She believed. Now if that woman believed, anybody could have believed God. However, these folk who are losing their lives did not believe. They had rejected God's mercy, and judgment is coming upon them. Friends, the message has never changed. God loves the world. God loves you, and gave His Son. If you will believe on Him, you will not perish. Will you perish if you don't believe? Yes. That is what is happening to these folk. They just don't believe God. Now that may not sound nice to you, and you'd like to have it otherwise, but this is the way it is written in the Word of God.⁷

- VI. The analogy: the way to combat cancer, when it is possible, is to completely cut the cancer out of a person's body. So it was with the Canaanites. Had they been allowed to live and to intermingle with the Israelites, they would have infected the Israelites with disease, with distorted morality and with a bloody, evil religion.
- VII. The common law of the land: we execute many of our murderers and we ought to execute them all. We ought to execute those who commit forcible rape on women and other men. These Canaanites were guilty of murder, of reckless endangerment which resulted in death, and of rape. They were executed for these crimes against humanity.
- VIII. Exceptions: we don't realize this fully, but God is able to spare those whom He chooses to spare and He spares those with good reason. God allowed the sparing of the Gibeonites, as well as supporting their defense. God allowed for the preservation of Rahab and her family. There were dozens of cities which the Israelites did not conquer and in those cities were certainly men whom God had chosen to preserve. The Gibeonites, who gained a treaty with Israel through guile, were protected from thereon by God (we will see that in Joshua 9–10).
- IX. The time frame: God had given the Canaanites a great deal of time prior to the invasion of the land and the destruction of the degenerate cities. Recall the phrase, *the evil of the Amorite is not yet full* (Gen. 15:16). God waited hundreds of years before removing these peoples from the earth, giving them ample time to repent and to turn to Him. They were all aware of who and what the Jews were and that their God was the God of the Universe.
- X. The limitations of the destruction of the Canaanites: God drew careful boundaries around those who had to be destroyed and He offered mercy for those who fell outside those boundaries (Deut. 20:10–18).
- XI.

What is not included in this doctrine is the influence of idolatry of Israel in later periods of time.

⁷ J. Vernon McGee, *Joshua Judges*, ©1976 by Thru the Bible Books; p. 65.