

The violence of God

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Introduction: God? Is that you?

What's with God being so violent in the Old Testament?

Josh. 11:6 The LORD said to Joshua, “Do not be afraid of them, for at this time tomorrow I will cause all of them to be killed before Israel. You are to hamstring their horses and burn up their chariots.” 7 So Joshua and his whole military force surprised them at the waters of Merom and attacked them. 8 The LORD handed them over to Israel, and they struck them down, pursuing them as far as Great Sidon and Misrephoth-maim, and to the east as far as the Valley of Mizpeh. They struck them down, leaving no survivors.

Josh. 23:9 “The LORD has driven out great and powerful nations before you, and no one is able to stand against you to this day. 10 One of you routed a thousand because the LORD your God was fighting for you, as He promised.

It's not just that he helps Israel win some battles; he also *commands* Israel to destroy their enemies.

Deut. 7:1 “When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess, and He drives out many nations before you—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and powerful than you— 2 and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you and you defeat them, you must completely destroy them. Make no treaty with them and show them no mercy.

Deut. 20:16 However, you must not let any living thing survive among the cities of these people the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance. 17 You must completely destroy them—the Hittite, Amorite, Canaanite, Perizzite, Hivite, and Jebusite—as the LORD your God has commanded you, 18 so that they won't teach you to do all the detestable things they do for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God.

Josh. 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 every living being, as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded.

Passages like this can make us feel very uncomfortable. In fact, they have caused critics of Christianity to respond like this:

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The Jewish God is the most ruthless, sadistic monster ever invented.¹

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all 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.²

Even Christians question how God could be implicated in these actions:

Such a comprehensive command raises serious questions about the nature of God. If this text reflects "What really happened", as many Christians believe, what does it suggest about God's character? What kind of God commissions genocide? Such questions are particularly unsettling in light of the many atrocities committed in the twentieth century during the holocaust, and more recently, in places like Rwanda, Kosovo, and Darfur. Moreover, narratives depicting God as Genocidal become increasingly challenging to understand when views in light of other biblical stories in which God appears ready and eager to forgive those who repent of their wicked ways.³

Maybe the New Testament God is different from the Old Testament God...

The question for most Christians when confronted with this issue is, 'Is this the same God I worship? The God of the New Testament? The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?' In the past, some have answered 'No'. Most (in)famously, Marcion excised much of the Old Testament and even parts of the New Testament, because he did not think they matched with the God revealed to us through Jesus Christ. More recently, self-confessing evangelical scholars such as C.S. Cowles and Eric Seibert have argued that the God of the Old Testament is not the same as the God of the New. Cowles, for example, argues that the Old Testament is an early stage in a 'progressive understanding of God's self-disclosure', whereby sin corrupted the human mediators of God's revelation before the more complete revelation in Christ.⁴ In Christ, we see a 'full, balanced, and undistorted view of God's loving heart and gracious purposes'.⁵ This then leads him to dismiss parts of the Old Testament as 'pre-Christ, sub-Christ

¹ Madalyn Murray O'Hair in Eric Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behaviour: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2009), 48.

² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006), 51.

³ Seibert, 25-26

⁴ C. S. Cowles in C. S. Cowles, Eugene Merrill, Daniel Gard and Tremper Longman III, *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and the Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 38.

⁵ Cowles, 22.

and anti-Christ',⁶ and to conclude that 'God is not like the first Joshua, a warrior, but like the second, the Prince of Peace'.⁷

The New Testament, however, never shies away from upholding the testimony of the Old Testament. For example: Jesus unashamedly explains how the entirety of 'the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms' are fulfilled in him (Luke 24:44-45); Stephen is enthusiastic over the conquest (Acts 7:45); Hebrews 3-4 recognises Joshua's limited achievements, but never denies them; and Hebrews 11:30-34 enthuses over the fall of Jericho and Old Testament war heroes. Beginning with Jesus, New Testament revelation acknowledges the truth, inspiration, and authority of all of the Old Testament.

It should come as no surprise, then, that when we look at the New Testament, we see similar 'problem' texts or issues. Hell, most obviously, is not exactly the most palatable of Christian doctrines. The violence in the pictures of the final judgment in Revelation makes Joshua's slaughter pale in comparison. The biggest issue with the conquest, then, is being confronted by a God who is violent – in both Testaments!

The reality of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is that he is a righteous God who exercises violence in judgment against the wicked. Indeed, the testimony of the New Testament is that all are wicked and fall short of the glory of God, and so all face God's judgment. To put it bluntly, without God's mercy, we would all be going to hell. This is an uncomfortable thought to say the least. It is certainly not the end of the issue, and it does leave many unanswered questions about the conquest of Canaan, but any Christian who wants to take the Bible, and Jesus himself, seriously needs to ponder it.

Maybe there's no problem at all...

We cannot dismiss the Old Testament so easily, so maybe we just need to accept that there is no problem after all. Many people say just this: we are all wicked, God gives us all life, and it's only by his mercy that we're all still alive. God could just take away our lives at any time. In fact, God takes lives every day. Meredith Kline has presented this in terms of an intrusion ethic. That is, it is only by God's common grace that he withholds his final judgement. Instances like the conquest are simply God pulling back the curtain of his common grace and allowing the final judgement to intrude into the present.⁸

There is a great deal of truth to this claim. Kline rightly highlights that God is sovereign and free, and it is his prerogative to exercise his judgement as he wills. He is in no way obligated to extend his mercy to humankind at all. But the big problem here is that this is not quite how the bible puts it and it is not how God normally

⁶ Cowles, 36.

⁷ Cowles, 22.

⁸ Meredith G. Kline, 'The Intrusion and the Decalogue' *WTJ* 16 (1953): 15-16.

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operates. Yes, Jesus does threaten hell and the unrepentant wicked will be judged, but God does not normally command his people to just slaughter others. Jesus even tells his disciples to love their enemies, and rebukes Peter for resisting arrest. Yes, even God in the New Testament strikes people down, but there is always a good reason. God is not arbitrary or capricious.

And it is the same in the Old Testament. God is not arbitrary – he is righteous and holy, as well as compassionate, merciful, and loving. Just look at the way God himself puts it in the climax of his self-revelation on Mt. Sinai.

Ex. 34:5 The LORD came down in a cloud, stood with him there, and proclaimed His name Yahweh. 6 Then the LORD passed in front of him and proclaimed:

Yahweh—Yahweh is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in faithful love and truth, 7 maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin. But He will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers' wrongdoing on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation.

Without wanting to question God's prerogative to do his own will, it is still pertinent to ask what conditions may have led God to act in this particular way. So, the question is, what is God doing in the conquest of Canaan? How do these violent, incomprehensible actions square with his character as a good, loving, yet righteous and holy God?

1. The context: God's bigger plan

One problem that faces us when we read about these brutal battles is that they can seem so random and senseless. Why does God decide that his people should just go through and destroy city after city like this – when they have never had to do it before, and they won't do the same thing again (much). Wasn't the conquest of Canaan random and senseless violence?

When we read the accounts of the conquest, I think the answer has to be 'no', this violence is not random nor senseless. Rather, it has a particular purpose and goal in mind. We need to remember that the conquest is a part of the big story of the Bible, as God moves from creation, through the fall, to redeeming the world. The conquest fits within this story, and isn't just a random, senseless act of a capricious and unpredictable God.

Before exploring this, however, it needs to be said that I do not think this point completely 'justifies' the conquest. If it did, it would be a simple case of the end justifying the means – which is not how God operates. God never acts against his goodness and righteousness to achieve a 'greater good'. In fact, I think the conquest is completely in line with God's character as being righteous and holy – but that is something that needs a lot more teasing out, which we will come to later. What this point does answer is the specific question of whether the conquest was random and senseless. As long as we keep that in mind, we won't be in danger of falling into consequentialism, or allowing the ends to justify the means.

1.1. God's plan to bless the earth through Abraham and Israel

The story of the nation of ancient Israel begins with Abraham. After the fall in Genesis 3, Genesis 4-11 recounts cycles of disobedience and judgement: first Cain slaughtering his brother, then the violence and wickedness of the whole earth before the flood, then the pride of the tower of Babel. Then, in Genesis 12:1-3, God appears to Abraham and promises him a few key things: that he will make him into a great nation, that he will bring him into a new land, and that he will bless Abraham, and through him bless all the people of the world.

This theme develops through the Pentateuch, with Exodus 19:5-6 reframing this blessing within the context of Israel. That is, as a holy nation and a kingdom of priests Israel is to be the recipient of God's blessings with a view to representing Yahweh to the nations and the nations to Yahweh, and so bringing blessings to the nations.

1.2. Israel's blessing is a covenant relationship with God in the promised land

If Israel's story is all about receiving God's blessings, for the grand purpose of bringing blessings to all the nations, what was the shape of Israel's blessing? What was it to look like? For Israel, blessing meant being in covenant relationship with Yahweh. He is their God, they are his people and he provides for them. Beginning with Abraham, and confirmed especially at Sinai, Yahweh had joined himself to Israel in a covenant relationship. As Paul Williamson has shown, this covenant relationship is reflected in a number of actual covenants, which all express an agreement between Yahweh and his people, and guarantee promises or obligations between them.⁹ In Deuteronomy and Joshua, the prominent elements of agreement were Israel's loyalty to Yahweh and Yahweh's promise of blessing – and in particular, blessing in the land.¹⁰

For Israel, then, their whole existence was about being God's people (in covenant relationship), in God's place (the land), under God's rule (under covenant obligations). Now, this shape of blessing seems very exclusive – and it is! We can see more of this exclusivity and how it relates to the nations in Exodus 19:5-6 mentioned above. Israel could only be a mediator of God's blessings to the nations if they were a 'holy nation'. This meant worshipping Yahweh alone, and expressing this through obeying the Law.

So, in summary so far, Israel were to be a holy nation, belonging to, worshipping, and obeying Yahweh alone, for the greater purpose of mediating Yahweh to the nations and the nations to God, and so eventually bring blessing to the whole world.

1.3. To stay in covenant relationship with God, Israel needed to be holy

Now, when it comes to the conquest, the most common reason given for it is to preserve Israel's holiness. Deuteronomy 7 is most clear on this.

Deut. 7:1 “When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess, and He drives out many nations before you—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and powerful than you— 2 and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you and you defeat them, you must completely destroy them. Make no treaty with them and show them no mercy. 3 Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, 4 *because they will turn your sons away from Me to worship other gods.* Then the LORD's anger will burn against you, and He will swiftly destroy you.

⁹ Paul Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (NSBT; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 40-43.

¹⁰ Williamson, 111-17.

5 Instead, this is what you are to do to them: tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, cut down their Asherah poles, and burn up their carved images. 6 For you are a holy people belonging to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be His own possession out of all the peoples on the face of the earth.

Also, Deuteronomy 12 emphasises the need for Israel not to fall into the idolatry of the nation's previous inhabitants:

Deut. 12:29 “When the LORD your God annihilates the nations before you, which you are entering to take possession of, and you drive them out and live in their land, *30* be careful not to be ensnared by their ways after they have been destroyed before you. Do not inquire about their gods, asking, ‘How did these nations worship their gods? I’ll also do the same.’ *31* You must not do the same to the LORD your God, because they practice every detestable thing, which the LORD hates, for their gods. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.

Israel's holiness is the most important thing for Israel. Without it, they will (and do) face the consequences of a broken covenant, potentially undermining God's plans for the salvation of the world. So, God commands and carries out the conquest for the purpose of maintaining Israel's holiness, for the sake of the salvation of all nations.

As a side note, Deuteronomy 9 seems to offer a different reason of the conquest:

Deut. 9:4 When the LORD your God drives them out before you, do not say to yourself, ‘The LORD brought me in to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.’ Instead, *the LORD will drive out these nations before you because of their wickedness. 5 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, in order to keep the promise He swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 6* Understand that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people.

It is often argued that this passage is saying that the conquest is simply a means of judgement of wickedness. Many apologies for the conquest frame it in these terms. Chris Wright says ‘the conquest is consistently and repeatedly set within the framework of God's international justice and punishment [...] God acting in judgment on a wicked and degraded society and culture’.¹¹ Even though the Canaanites are wicked, and the conquest does function as a means of judgement, I don't think this is its primary purpose. If it was it would be fair to ask why God chose to judge the

¹¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 92.

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Canaanites out of all the nations of the earth and no one else. Yes, Yahweh is driving them out because of their wickedness, but this is primarily as a way of distancing that wickedness from Israel to maintain her holiness, as per Deuteronomy 7. This is why verse 5 links the driving out of wickedness to fulfilling the Abrahamic promises, and why they are reminded of their own wickedness (and so their need for holiness). Judgement occurs because it is also a function of what happens when a wicked and unholy nation comes face to face with the unmediated presence of a holy God – a point to which I will return.¹² For now, it is enough to say that the conquest is about God's and Israel's holiness, rather than righteous judgment *per se*. Of course, I do not want to draw too fine a distinction here, since the conquest is indeed in line with God's righteousness, as all God's actions are in line with all his character, but righteous judgment is not the point here. It is holiness.

I'll be returning to this holiness idea later, but in the meantime I'll summarise: The conquest is carried out in order to secure Israel's holiness as God's chosen covenant people, under God's rule, in his land. The goal of this is the blessing of Israel and the eventual blessing of all the nations.

Also, to reiterate, placing the conquest in this salvation-historical context does not explain everything about the conquest. As Christians, we don't believe that the end justifies the means. We cannot say that any course of action is good as long as it has a good outcome. God would not act against his goodness and love by sacrificing a nation of people for the sake of the greater good. This is why we need to consider how the conquest is also an expression of God's holy character - a question we will return to.

¹² As far as I can tell, Leviticus 18:25 is the only place that refers to punishment for sins. This, however, is again in the context of Israel not carrying out Canaanite practices, and in in doing so become defiled – a cultic (holiness), rather than forensic (justice) term.

2. The story: Joshua

It is about time that we turned to consider the conquest itself. We will look at the conquest as told in Joshua, and try to give it a fair hearing, to work out exactly what Joshua is saying: what the text says happened and why.

Now, when you first read some of these passages, it can come across like God commanded and Joshua carried out a complete extermination of every Canaanite person: that every Canaanite man, woman, and child was chased down and killed. But when you read Joshua, as well as other books that talk about the conquest – like Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy – this is not quite the picture you get. The conquest is not about Israel hunting down every last Canaanite and slaughtering them.

2.1. The purpose of the conquest.

So, what is it about? Well, first I think we need to understand the purpose of the conquest:

The purpose of the conquest was not to slaughter every last man, woman and child. The purpose of the conquest was *to demolish the infrastructure of a society with its gods and detestable practices, and replace it with a society that worshipped God in his land in covenant relationship to him, following his acceptable practices.*¹³

We have already touched on this, but I just want to explore it a bit more and offer three reasons why I think this is the purpose of the conquest.

First, the purpose given for the commands for destruction is always to avoid idolatry – not killing for killing's sake. Whenever complete destruction is commanded, its purpose is to avoid idolatry. In Deuteronomy 7, the people are to destroy the Canaanites and not intermarry with them, 'because they will turn your sons away from Me to worship other gods' (v. 4). Rather, they are to 'tear down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, cut down their Asherah poles, and burn up their carved images' (v. 5). Likewise, in Deuteronomy 20, the people are to destroy all in the cities 'so that they won't teach you to do all the detestable things they do for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God' (v. 18).

This point alone does not minimize the violence of the commands to destroy, but it does help to understand the purpose as being to demolish an idolatrous infrastructure, rather than to simply slaughter a whole population.

¹³ George Athas, personal correspondence, 2014

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Second, some Canaanites are allowed to join Israel. In Joshua 2, when the spies enter Jericho, they meet Rahab, who says that she saw Israel coming, saw the mighty acts of God, and wants to follow him – and so she survives. She is allowed to ‘convert’ to an Israelite.

Later, in Joshua 9, the Gibeonites (who are a Canaanite people) are included into Israel through making a treaty with Israel. Of course, this is not expressed as an ideal, but it is allowed.

Both of these examples tell us that the conquest was not ethnically driven, but about idolatry and the need to worship Yahweh alone. When the Canaanites did that they were spared.

Third, the emphasis throughout Joshua is on God giving Israel the land of promise, as opposed to an emphasis on wiping out the Canaanite population. The background to the conquest is all about fulfilling promises of land to Abraham. The *land* is Israel’s *inheritance*, given to them by Yahweh. They are to *take* the *land* as a promised gift. This is the wider purpose of the conquest which the driving out and killing of the Canaanites serves. The purpose of the conquest is not simply to wipe out a population, but to secure the land for Israel.

In summary, the purpose of the conquest was *to demolish the infrastructure of a society with its gods and detestable practices, and replace it with a society that worshipped God in his land in covenant relationship to him, following his acceptable practices.*

2.2. The commands and actions of the conquest

So what actually happened in the conquest? What did God command, and what actions did God, through Joshua, take in carrying it out? What happened in the conquest was *a convincing subjugation of the promised land, involving the destruction of key military strongholds, armies, and leadership, along with the driving out of much of the population. Civilians were probably not the targets of the conquest.*

There are a few reasons for coming to this conclusion. First, alongside accounts of ‘total destruction’ are accounts of God ‘driving out’ the inhabitants of the land. Before the conquest, God talks to Israel about how he will drive the people out of the land, or that the people will be driven out before them (Ex 23:27-29, Deut 12:29-31). Then, in Joshua, the Israelites repeatedly ‘drive out’ (or fail to drive out) the inhabitants (Josh 13:6; 15:4; 15:63; 16:10; 17:13; 17:18; 23:9; 24:12, 18). What we have here is God taking action to drive the nations out as opposed to destroying the populations. This would have happened before and alongside the conquest. What this driving out looked like was probably simply the threat of an invading army. Rahab tells the Israelite spies that she has heard of the approaching Israelite army and turns to them and their God for rescue. Others would plausibly see the army and flee.

Second, following Joshua's *subjugation* of the land, there is a need for ongoing *occupation* of the land, which is both commanded in Joshua and described in Judges.¹⁴ This point is the interpretive key to understanding the conquest as told in Joshua. Joshua recounts a convincing *subjugation* of the land, and finishes with the need for a continued occupation of the land. By the end of Joshua, the land has been given, it lies subdued, but Israel must take possession and occupy it. This is not simply a matter of Joshua failing to obey the commands of Deuteronomy 7 and 20. Late in Joshua, Joshua juxtaposes without embarrassment assertions of the success of the conquest with clear admissions that work remains to be done. All of this suggests that what God commands Joshua to carry out and what Joshua successfully achieves is a convincing subjugation of the promised land, rather than a wholesale slaughter of the Canaanite people.

Third, the descriptions of the Israelites taking *all* the land seem to be exaggerated figures of speech. You can see an example of this in Joshua 11.

Josh. 11:21 At that time Joshua proceeded to exterminate the Anakim from the hill country—*Hebron, Debir, Anab*—all the hill country of Judah and of Israel. Joshua completely destroyed them with their cities.
22 No Anakim were left in the land of the Israelites, except for some remaining in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod.

But again, later in Joshua, Caleb takes Hebron (Josh 15:13-14), and Othniel takes Debir (15:15-17). More broadly Joshua 9-12 is full of bold summaries of complete annihilation, and the end of Joshua assures the people that 'all the promises of God have been fulfilled' (Josh 23:14). At the same time Joshua emphasises that there is still plenty of work to be done and warns the people not to get tangled up with the Canaanites remaining in the land (Josh 23:12-13).

So within the book of Joshua itself, you have these expressions of complete subjugation, followed by accounts that would contradict the expressions of complete subjugation, if they were not exaggerations. What we have here is a way of expressing a convincing subjugation of those regions using exaggerated language. The point of this is not to deceive (or the author would be contradicting himself) but to use the hyperbolic language used in other Ancient Near East (ANE) war accounts to express that Joshua *subjugated* the land, even if complete *occupation* still had to take place.

Fourth, the descriptions of the Israelites completely destroying populations seem to be exaggerated. This is the same point as above, but applied to particular cities. I think it's possible to extend the hyperbolic/exaggerated language used to describe the conquest as a whole to the language when used of particular cities like Jericho.

¹⁴ This point and the following two are mostly taken from Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 152-56; and Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 170-74.

Fifth, the emphasis throughout Joshua is on overcoming the kings, armies and land. References to absolute destruction of all that lives appear a handful of times throughout Joshua. The focus throughout Joshua is on the subjugation of cities, their kings, and land. See for example the way Yahweh speaks to Joshua specifically about Jericho – that he has ‘handed Jericho, its king, and its fighting men over to you’ (Josh 6:2). As terrible as the description of the southern campaign in Joshua 10 is, it is about overcoming the kings and taking the cities. While it does describe not leaving survivors, it doesn’t dwell on ‘those nasty Canaanites’, but rather the subjugation of the land and its rulers. Joshua 12 is a list of the kings and their land that Israel took over. The whole second half of the book is about dividing up and distributing land to Israel.

2.3. The external evidence

Each of the above claims about the conquest is also supported by external evidence. I do not really want to go into detail on this, mostly because such evidence lies out of my area of expertise, but here are a few points to consider.

First, it seems from archaeological studies that the major cities that were sacked – Jericho, Ai, and others – were military strongholds, rather than places where noncombatants lived. This supports the claim that the use of ‘women’ and ‘young and old’ were figures of speech, a ‘stereotypical expression for the destruction of all human life in the fort, presumably composed entirely of combatants’.¹⁵ It also supports the claim that the conquest was about a military subjugation of armies, leadership, and infrastructure. Personally, however, I find it a little unlikely that an ancient military stronghold would have zero women or children there – though I could be wrong.

Secondly, other ANE military/war accounts include similar exaggerated language. This would support the idea that the author of Joshua was using figures of speech that were understood to be hyperbole.¹⁶

Thirdly, some of these parallel ANE war accounts (particularly from Assyria) are extremely graphic in their depictions of bloodthirsty slaughter – in contrast to the very brief descriptions of actual killing in Joshua. The point here isn’t that there was less killing, but that the ideal in Joshua is not the slaughter of people, but rather the taking of the land by Yahweh’s promise.

To summarise the purpose and actions of the conquest: Joshua narrates a convincing subjugation of the promised land, involving the destruction of key military strongholds, armies, and leadership, along with the driving out of much of the

¹⁵ Richard Hess, ‘The Jericho and Ai in the Book of Joshua’, in *Critical Issues in Early Israelite History*, ed. Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, And Paul J. Ray Jr. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 39.

¹⁶ See K Lawson Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 227-28, 245.

population. The purpose of this is *to demolish the infrastructure of a society with its gods and detestable practices, and replace it with a society that worshipped Yahweh as the deity of the land in covenant relationship to him, following his acceptable practices.*

All of this is a long way from the idea of a wholesale slaughter of the Canaanite population, commanded by an excessively bloodthirsty God. We still might not like it, but it is not simply a random act committed by a bloodthirsty and capricious God.

Before moving on it is worth saying that while this might mitigate the horrors of the conquest it does not make them go away. War is still terrible and God still exercised violent judgment against the Canaanites through the instrument of Israel's warfare. The question is, why did the Canaanites meet this fate? Why did God have to destroy them? This is what we will consider in the following section.

3. The theology: a holy God, his land, and an unclean people

So far we have looked at the wider salvation-historical context and looked closely at the commands and the nature of the conquest. Now I want to focus on what is happening theologically. That is, what is it about God and the way he operates in his creation that precipitates the particular destruction of the Canaanites in the conquest? This will be presented by looking at three aspects: God's holiness, the place of the land in God's and Israel's holiness, and the interaction of this holiness with the unclean people of Canaan.¹⁷

3.1. God is holy

First, we need to see how all of this is shaped by God's holiness. Throughout the Bible, God's holiness is fundamentally about his incomparability and difference: 'There is no one holy like the Lord. There is no one besides You!' (1 Sam 2:2). God's holiness means that he is separate from his creation. Theologians like to say that God is "ontologically distinct" – as our creator he is completely different from creatures like us. God's holiness also means that he is completely morally pure and can have nothing to do with evil. The implication of this second aspect of God's holiness is that because of our sin, if we were to come into contact with God we would be destroyed.

Earlier we considered Israel as the focus of God's blessing to the world, which was expressed in a covenant relationship. Because of God's holiness, Israel's status and role as God's holy nation met a barrier in human wickedness. The covenant with Moses, however, allowed Israel to be God's holy nation despite moral imperfection. This covenant allowed sinful people to come into contact with a holy God. God says, 'I promise I will not destroy you, in fact, I will live with you, in my land, and I will bless you, as long as you remain holy' – through obeying the law and offering sacrifices.

So the covenant is like a bubble, or sphere of holiness. God is holy, he makes his people holy through sacrifices, they are to live holy lives by obeying him, and God lives together with his people in his holy land. This is the only way that a holy God could have anything to do with sinful people.

3.2. The land belongs to God

The second thing we need to see is that the land doesn't belong to the Canaanites, or to Israel. The land belongs to God alone (Lev 25:23). It is his land. In the conquest, we have a holy God, with his holy people, coming into a land that he owns, and that he is making holy – in this sphere or bubble of holiness.

¹⁷ I've been influenced heavily by one of my teachers, George Athas, in this section.

We can see this paradigm of God's holy presence expressed in several ways: First, Israel symbolised God's presence by ensuring that the ark of the covenant went out ahead of her, albeit at a safe distance (Josh 3:11). Second, Israel maintained cultic purity: the warriors themselves were consecrated before going out to war (Josh 3:5); and the entire camp community had to be ritually pure (Deut 23:9-14), not because that was a day-to-day necessity, but because Yahweh was present in the camp to protect and deliver Israel from her enemies (v. 14). Indeed, Joshua leads his army in circumcision and passover rituals as soon as they enter the land (Josh 3-5). Third, Joshua's encounter with the commander of Yahweh's armies make it clear that this is about God's presence in his own land. When Joshua asks "Are You for us or for our enemies?", the angel replies "Neither ... I have now come as commander of the Lord's army", and then tells Joshua to remove his sandals because the ground is holy (Josh 5:13-15).

The land belongs to a holy God.

3.3. Unclean people

The third thing we need to recognise is that the conquest involves this holy God, entering his holy land, and coming into contact with an unclean people. The background to this is Leviticus, where all people, things, and places were divided into three spheres: unclean, clean, and holy. Things moved from holy to unclean through sin or through other things that symbolised sin. Things moved from unclean to clean or holy through sacrifice. Now, if things that were unclean came into contact with things that were holy, they either made the holy thing unclean, or the unclean thing was destroyed. The whole system was a way of acknowledging and symbolising God's holiness and Israel's sinfulness, or uncleanness.

When it came to the Canaanites, they were an unclean people in God's holy land. This meant that they became *herem*, or 'devoted to destruction'. The meaning of *herem* is to devote something to a deity, which in war usually means complete destruction. In Joshua, Israel 'completely destroys' (*haram* - the verb form of the noun *herem*) people of other nations: the kings Sihon and Og of the Amorites (Josh 2:10), Jericho (6:21), Ai (8:26), and the whole north and south of Canaan (Josh 10:28-43; 11:11-21); 'every man and woman, both young and old, and every ox, sheep, and donkey' (Josh 6:21). The key thing about *herem* is that it's not about war *per se*, but about holiness. Richard Nelson says this:

Properly understood, the fundamental locus of *herem* in Israel's culture and language was not really the context of divine war, either as the result of a vow or as an expected standard practice. Rather, the word operates more generally as part of Israel's attempt to categorize the various states or qualities that entities could take on or participate in, such as holiness or impurity. Entering into these states or qualities

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affected the relationship of a person or thing to Yahweh, the cult, and human society'.¹⁸

More specifically, *herem* denotes 'the notion that something or someone belongs exclusively to Yahweh as an inalienable possession'.¹⁹ The result is removal from secular use, denying any human the right to redeem or emancipate it. This usually implies destruction, but not necessarily (cf. Lev 27:28).

All of this means that the Canaanite's status as *herem* is a function of their unholiness. They became God's own, exclusive property. No human was allowed to interact with them or their possessions. It is because the idolatrous Canaanites come in contact with the holy Yahweh that they are declared *herem* and destroyed. Leviticus 18:24-27 explains that it was because the Canaanites became *unclean* through their sin that Yahweh punished them by driving them out of the land.

And when we see this, what we have with the conquest is the Holy God, fighting his own enemies on his own patch of land in protection of his own holiness. He is venting his anger against the evils of idolatry, and purging the land of uncleanness so he can make a holy dwelling with his people. What this affirms is the often uncomfortable truth that the conquest is in line with God's holy character.

Pastorally and apologetically, I think the most important thing to see here is that the conquest is framed as being completely in line with God's holy character. It is right that he judges evil. This means that God isn't being capricious or randomly bloodthirsty. Rather, he is dealing with evil from the perspective of his good character. Some will raise questions about the rightness of God's holiness and his reaction against sin. Others will question the 'guilt' of the Canaanites, or point to the apparent killing of children and other 'innocents'. These are hard issues and others have said plenty about them, sometimes for the better and other times for the worse. For our purposes here, however, seeing how the conquest is within God's good purposes for the world and broadly in line with his good holy character is a good starting place for Christians to get a hold on how the conquest fits with God as we know him to be revealed in Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Richard D. Nelson, 'Herem and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience' in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature: Festschrift C. H. W Brekelmans* (ed. Marc. Vervenne and Johan Lust; BETL 133; Leuven: University Press, 1997), 41.

¹⁹ Nelson, 'Herem and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience', 44; see also J. P. U. Lilley, 'Understanding the Herem' *TynB* 44 (1993): 176.

4. Can violence ever be justified?

The 20th Century has taught us that war is a terrible phenomenon. Particularly since World War II, critics of the Bible and orthodox Christianity have questioned the place of violence in the Bible and theology. The conquest raises the question of how God could use the violence of war to accomplish his purposes. Even if it is right to judge evil, why did God use this kind of violence to do it? Why war? Why command his people to destroy a whole nation? Sure, not every single person was killed – but many were, and the rest were dispossessed and left without their cultural and national home as they knew it. Can the use of violence, even to achieve a good objective, ever be okay?

4.1. Gratuitous versus purposeful violence

To get at this question we first need to examine what the problem is with violence. Why don't we like violence? What's wrong with it? In general, we think of violence as some kind of force used to inflict damage or injury. We can think of it as very concrete – like a brawl, or shooting in war – or as more figurative – like emotional abuse. What troubles us most about violence is that it is so often gratuitous, meaningless, or is done with evil intent – to just be cruel or malicious, like a schoolyard bully, or to receive gain, like an armed robber. We hate the idea of random brawlers who just want to show their strength and power over others, or war mongers who just want power, or architects of genocide who hate other races, or want power for their own race. We hate this violence, and with good reason.

The flipside of our strong response to violence is that it is very difficult for us to think of violence without this malice involved. But there is such a thing as violence without malice that actually has a good purpose. There is such a thing as *purposeful violence*. Violence with a purpose. When a police officer uses force to arrest a violent criminal, he hopefully does it without malice, and for the good purpose of preventing further violence. When a judge sentences that person to jail for 10 years, she inflicts that hurt on the perpetrator for the good purpose of upholding justice for his victims and to prevent further violence.

When it comes to God, I think we ought to accept the possibility that God is violent with good reason. That his violence is *purposeful violence*.

So, what could God's purpose in using the violence of the conquest be?

The first thing to say is that we are getting into mystery territory here. I do not think that the Bible clearly spells this out, but what I am about to present is more of a suggestion, or 'best guess'.

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What I think might be going on with the conquest is a sort of counter-violence. Perhaps God is using violence as a way of undermining and destabilising the violence in our world, bringing justice against the violence of the Canaanites and the rest of the world. God's violence in the conquest isn't blind or unbridled. Instead, he uses violence to bring justice against the evil violence of the world.²⁰

In a way, we could think of it as a bit like a punishment that fits the crime. We know from the Bible that the Canaanites were evil. They were guilty of temple prostitution, bestiality, and child sacrifice. And we know from archaeology that the Canaanite gods were extremely violent and full of bloodlust – indicating that the Canaanites were like that themselves. If all of this is true, then I think we can see the conquest as something along the lines of punishment fitting the crime – counter-violence against a particularly violent society.

It is not just that God uses violence for justice, but he uses the violence to bring about peace. He does it to bring about his plans for creation – life and peace – in the face of the evil, sinful, demonic powers that aim to undermine his creation.

In all of this you could think of it as a way that God condescends to work in our world, like how he deals with Abraham, Moses, David, and then Mary and Joseph to become one of us. In the Bible, God's pattern of working in the world is through unlikely, worldly means. And so I think this is what is happening in the conquest. God is condescending and working within our violent world to bring about his good purposes. He uses violence to undermine the violence of world and bring peace – for Israel, and then eventually to the whole world. God did not have to do this. He could have left us to our own violent devices, but instead he condescends and works in our world for our good. Terence Fretheim puts it like this: 'God does not simply give people up to experience violence. God chooses to become involved in violence so that evil will not have the last word. In everything, including violence, God seeks to accomplish loving purposes'.²¹

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 244-45.

²¹ Terence E. Fretheim, 'God and Violence in the Old Testament', *W & W* 24.1 (2004): 28.

5. Some conclusions

This still doesn't tie up every unknown for me. The conquest raises all sorts of other questions which I have not tried to answer. This is mostly for lack of time and space to do those questions justice.

The conquest still makes me feel uncomfortable. This is probably a function of three things: my sin, which affects my mind and makes me call evil good and good evil; my creaturely finitude, which makes it impossible for me to see every variable in the situation and have a 'God's-eye view' of things; and the fact that the Old Testament does not show the character of God in all the fulness that the New Testament does. What I have provided here is not a neat and tidy answer, and I do not think we should pretend that it is.

Related to this, for the Christian, Jesus' affirmation of the Old Testament along with his own vindication in his resurrection should be what gives us ultimate confidence in Joshua being the authoritative word of God. Regardless of whatever discomfort we might feel we can be confident that we can trust God and that all our questions and puzzles will be answered in glory.

Given all of these disclaimers, we can still make some conclusions:

- 1) We can see how, broadly speaking, the conquest is not random and senseless – it has a purpose: God bringing blessing to Israel, making her a holy nation, in order to bring blessing to the rest of the world. This purpose is eventually and finally brought about in Jesus' death, resurrection, and sending of His Spirit.
- 2) The conquest is not a case of God doing evil things for the greater good. Again, broadly speaking, the conquest is in line with God's holiness and justice against evil.
- 3) The conquest is not something that is to be repeated. The conquest was at a very particular staging post in salvation history and was carried out for a very particular purpose. Apart from 1 Samuel 15, the Bible never presents conquest as a model to follow or as something to be repeated. This means that it is not to be used to justify Christian violence.
- 4) At the same time, in the last days, God will finally and definitively judge and destroy sin and sinners. Instead of holy War completely disappearing, it will appear again on the last day. Then, Jesus, the true warrior, will make war with justice and destroy evil (Rev 19:11-15). If the conquest of Canaan makes us feel uncomfortable, then the Christian doctrine of hell should make us feel far worse - or better yet, drive us to urgent mission.
- 5) The conquest should actually highlight God's grace towards humanity. God's working in the world to bring about salvation for Israel, and then through Jesus, is all

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in the face of our incredibly offensive sin. Meredith Kline is right – without God's mercy and common grace, we would all be destroyed. But in the actions of the conquest we see God working to bring salvation to the world, even if that meant the particular judgement of the Canaanites.

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