

Entrust Joshua Excursus: Were the Joshuan Campaigns Unethical? 1/16/25

## Introduction

After the Exodus, God commanded His people to take the land of Canaan. This would involve a large-scale elimination of those living in the land. One passage commanding the task is as follows:

Deuteronomy 20:16–18 “Only in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. <sup>17</sup> But you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the LORD your God has commanded you, <sup>18</sup> so 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 the LORD your God.”

The book of Joshua records the subsequent military campaigns during which Yahweh granted victory to Israel as they proceeded to take the land (cf. Jos 6:21, 8:26, 10:28, 10:30, 10:32, 10:35, 10:37, 10:39-40). Throughout history, skeptics have objected to these campaigns recorded in Joshua. Those who object raise accusations against God and his doings therein. Accusers hold that the commands given to Israel concerning the peoples of Canaan violate ethical standards. Objections to the validity of the God of the Bible surround so-called “genocide” and “murder” of innocent people in the land of Canaan at the commissioning of Yahweh. How should these objections be met?

### **1. Those who accuse God of moral violations are themselves guilty and condemned, while God remains just and holy.**

Those who reject the God of the Bible have an immediate personal dilemma if they condemn Him on the grounds of the so-called dilemma in the book of Joshua. From what objective source do their ethical standards arise such that they propose a violation thereof? By what code of ethics outside of themselves do they judge the God of the Bible? They will not find one, except that contained in Scripture. And therein, the objector to Joshua has a problem. While rejecting the God of the Bible due to supposed ethical violations in the book of Joshua, they use a form of biblical ethics to do so. This will not do.

Those who accuse the God of the Bible place themselves in a catastrophic dilemma of self-condemnation. The apostle Paul speaks of this in Romans against unregenerate, self-righteous Jews who esteemed themselves as morally superior to unregenerate, irreligious Gentiles:

Romans 2:1–3 Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you

who judge practice the same things. <sup>2</sup> And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who those who practice such things and do the same *yourself*, that you will escape the judgment of God? <sup>3</sup> But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same *yourself*, that you will escape the judgment of God?

Those who condemn others simultaneously condemn themselves. Skeptics who attribute murder to the God of the Bible, themselves, are incessant murders (cf. Matt 5:22-23).

**2. As the maker of all things and the ruler of all people, God has absolute rights of ownership over all people and places.<sup>1</sup>**

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1) “and the sea and all that is in them” (Act 14:15). This means that “The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Ps 24:1). As God says, “All the earth is mine” (Ex 19:5) and “every beast of the forest is mine” (Ps. 50:10). God’s ownership of all means that he is also free to do as he wishes over all things. “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Ps. 115:3). Within this free sovereignty God “determined allotted periods and the boundaries of [each nation’s] dwelling place” (Acts 17:26). God has Creator rights, and no one can say to him, “What are you doing?” (Job 9:12).

**3. God is not only the ultimate maker, ruler, and owner, but he is just and righteous in all that he does.**

Abraham asks God the same question that we are asking, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen 18:25). The implied answer is, “By all means!” This is the flip side of Paul’s question in Romans 9:14: “Is there injustice on God’s part?” Paul’s answer: “By no means!” Moses will later proclaim, “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he” (Deut 32:4).

It is commonplace in our culture to ask whether this or that was fair or just for God to do. But if you stop to think about it, the question itself is illegitimate. Merely asking it presupposes that *we* are the judge; *we* will examine God; He must conform to *our* sense of fairness and rightness and justice—if God passes the test, well and good, but if he doesn’t, we’ll be upset and become the accuser. Perish the thought. Again, Deuteronomy 32:4 says, “all God’s ways *are* justice” — by definition. If God does it, it is just. To think otherwise is the ultimate act of

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Justin Taylor, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor>.

arrogance, putting your own mind and opinions and conceptions as the ultimate standard of the universe.

This does *not*, however, forbid humble inquiry in order to gain greater understanding. While it is ultimately illegitimate to ask *if* God's ways are just in securing the Promised Land, it is perfectly appropriate and edifying to seek understanding on *how* God's ways are just – whether in commissioning the destruction of the Canaanites or in any other action. This is the task of theology – seeing how various aspects of God's truth and revelation cohere.

**4. All of us deserve God's justice; none of us deserve God's mercy.**

As noted above, God is absolutely just in all that he does. The only thing that any of us deserve from God is his justice. We have broken his law, rebelling against him and his ways, and divine justice demands that we receive divine punishment in proportion to our traitorous, treasonous rebellion. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). If the Canaanites receive such wages, God has dealt fairly.

Mercy and grace are never obligatory. It is fully within God's rights to give mercy, but he need not give it to all – or to any. It is also helpful to note that in biblical history, an act of judgment on one is often an act of mercy for another (e.g., the flood was judgment on the world but a means of saving Noah; the plagues were judgment on the Pharaoh but a means of liberating Israel). Likewise, the destruction of the Canaanites was an act of mercy for Israel.

**5. Some from Canaan received mercy.**

Though it would have been just for God to give justice to all in the land of Canaan, He extended mercy to some. Joshua 2 records the event when not only Rahab, but her father's entire household was granted mercy from Yahweh (Jos 6:25). This was not due to any inherent righteousness of Rahab (recall her profession). Rather, she was justified by faith alone in Yahweh alone (Heb 11:31), as she beautifully testifies of before the spies in response to hearing of His victory over the Egyptians (Jos 2:9-11). It must be noted that this was not deserved: it went beyond what Yahweh was obligated to do. Further, Rahab's salvation (along with any of her relatives) came at an immense cost, though not to any of them. At the cross, the righteous Lord Jesus would receive the penalty for the unrighteous, so that the unrighteous would be declared righteous. Rahab received mercy, Jesus received justice.

The Gibeonites also received Yahweh's undeserved mercy. Joshua 9 records their deception towards Israel. Even so, they are spared and extended mercy (Jos 9:18-

20). Therefore, Yahweh is deserving of praise and worship to spare even one guilty and condemned sinner from the land of Canaan, much less several.

**6. The Canaanites were enemies of God who deserved to be punished.**

Scripture is clear on the condition of all humanity, including those of Canaan: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” – “None is righteous, no, not one” – and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 3:23; 3:10; 6:23). Therefore, if God destroyed Adam and Eve after the fall he would have been entirely just. When he wiped out the majority of the human race during the time of Noah, he was just.

Sometimes we can mistakenly think that God simply wanted to give his people land and kicked out the innocent who were already there. However, the residents of Canaan were not an upright, exemplary people who were minding their own business and unjustly overtaken. They were full of iniquity and wickedness, and God speaks of the land vomiting them out for this reason (cf. Gen 15:6; Lev 18:24-30; Deut 9:5). They practiced disgusting sexual perversions (Lev 18:24). The land was stained with the blood of their children whom they offered up in sacrifice to Molech (Lev 18:21,24). Therefore, they deserved to be punished. All of this is consistent with the fact that God “avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people’s land” (Deut 32:43).

It’s also important to note Deuteronomy 9:5, which says that Israel’s possession of the land and the Canaanites’ being kicked out would *not* be due to Israel’s righteousness, but would rather be on account of the Canaanites’ wickedness. God very pointedly tells Israel that if they do not follow the Lord and his law, then they will suffer the same fate as the nations being vomited out of their land (cf. Lev 18:28; Deut 28:25-68; cf. also Ex 22:20; Josh 7:11-12; Mal. 4:6). God gave his special electing love to Israel (cf. Deut 7:6-9), but his threats and promises of punishment for unfaithfulness show his fairness and his commitment to justice.

**7. God’s actions were not an example of genocide or ethnic cleansing.**

The Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy) provides laws for two types of warfare: (1) battles fought against cities *outside* the Promise Land (see Deut 20:10–15), and (2) battles fought against cities within the Promised Land (Deut 20:16–18). The first type allowed for Israel to spare people; the second type did not. This *herem* practice (the second type of warfare) meant “devotion/consecration to destruction.” As a sacred act fulfilling divine judgment, it is outside our own categories for thinking about warfare. Even though the destruction is commanded in terms of totality, there seems to have been an exception for those

who repented, turning to the one true and living God (e.g., again, Rahab and her family [Josh 2:9], and the Gibeonites [Josh 11:19]).

What this means is that the reason for the destruction of God's wicked enemies was precisely because of their rebellion and according to God's special purposes – not because of their ethnicity. "Ethnic cleansing" and genocide refer to destruction of a people due to their ethnicity, and therefore this would be an inappropriate category for the destruction of the Canaanites.

Therefore, the invasion of Canaan cannot be categorized as genocide. Ethnicity had nothing to do with the Joshuan campaigns. The destruction came justly from Yahweh due to the depravity and impenitent wickedness of the people.

#### **8. Why was it necessary to remove the Canaanites from the land?**

In America we talk about the separation of "church" and "state." But Israel was a "theocracy," where church and state were inseparably joined and indistinguishable, such that members of God's people had both political and religious obligations. To be a citizen of Israel required being faithful to God's covenant and vice-versa.

The covenant community demanded purity, and egregious violations meant removal (e.g., see Deut 13:5; 17:7, etc.). This also entailed the purity of the land in which they were living as God's people, and failure to remove the unrepentant from the land meant that the entire nation would be pulled down with the rebellious, resulting in idolatry, injustice, and evil (e.g., Deut 7:4; 12:29-31) – which sadly proved to be the case all too often under the old covenant.

Christians today are not in a theocracy. We are "sojourners and exiles" (1 Pet 2:11) with no sacred land in this age. We live in the overlap of the old age and the age to come – "between two places" (in the creation that groans – after the holy-but-temporary Promised Land and awaiting the return of Christ, the Millennial Kingdom, and the New Heavens and the New Earth). In this age and place we are to respect and submit to the governing authorities placed over us by God (Rom 13:1-5) – but they are not, and should not be, a part of the church.

Furthermore, God's gift of specific, special revelation to the whole church has now ended (cf. Heb 1:1-2: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son"). These factors combine to ensure that nothing like the destruction of the Canaanites – required for the theocracy of Israel to possess the physical land – is commissioned by God or is permissible for his people today.

**9. The destruction of the Canaanites is a picture of the final judgment.**

At the end of the age, Christ will come to judge the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 2 Tim 4:1; 1 Pet 4:5), expelling them from the land (the whole earth). That judgment will be just, and it will be complete. That is the day “the Lord Jesus [will be] revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (2 Thess 1:8–9). Amazingly enough, Paul asks the Corinthians something they seem to have forgotten, if they once knew it: “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? (1 Cor 6:2).

How does this work? What will it look like? We do not know exactly. But God’s Word tells us that God’s people will be part of God’s judgment against God’s enemies. In that way, God’s command of the Israelites to carry out his moral judgment against the Canaanites becomes a foreshadowing—a preview, if you will—of the final judgment.

Read in this light, the terrible destruction recorded on the pages of Joshua in God’s Holy Word become not a “problem to solve,” but a wake-up call to all of us—to remain “pure and undefiled before God” (Jas 1:27), seeking him and his ways, and to faithfully share the gospel with our unbelieving neighbors and the unreached nations. Like Job, we must ultimately refrain from calling God’s goodness and justice into question, putting a hand over our mouth (Job 40:4) and marveling instead at the richness and the mystery of God’s great inscrutable mercy (Eph 2:4). We must bow in awe and faith before our holy God, who does as He pleases, and receive Paul’s instruction on matters of justice:

Romans 9:20–21 On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? <sup>21</sup> Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?

At the end of the day, we will join Moses and the Lamb in singing this song of praise:

“Great and amazing are your deeds,  
O Lord God the Almighty!  
Just and true are your ways,  
O King of the nations!  
Who will not fear, O Lord,  
and glorify your name?

For you alone are holy.  
All nations will come  
and worship you,  
for your righteous acts have been revealed." (Rev 15:3-4)