

THE MORALITY OF THE CONQUEST

Judges

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Some aspects of the story in Joshua can be a little disquieting for us. For example, God orders the Israelites to kill all of the Canaanites, every man, woman, and child. This can seem harsh to us, perhaps even unjust. What about the love and grace of God? There are several points to consider as we grapple with this problem. First of all we need to place this story in its proper context within the Bible, and to read the texts carefully. Note that the order to destroy all the inhabitants of a conquered city was not a universal order applying to every city the Israelites conquered, but applied only to cities within the Promised Land, where the Israelites would settle.

Second, remember the Canaanite society Israel is destroying has been portrayed regularly throughout the Pentateuch as one that is especially corrupt and immoral. Genesis 19 (the Sodom and Gomorrah episode) presents a paradigmatic representation of Canaanite society as incredibly immoral. Leviticus 18 echoes this sentiment, connecting perverse sexual behavior to the Canaanites. Back in Genesis 9:25 Noah proclaimed a “prophetic” curse on the Canaanites, a prophecy that finds fulfillment in the conquest.

Third, we learn from Genesis 15:16 that God was apparently offended by the sin of the Canaanites as early as the time of Abraham, but in his grace and perseverance he waited four hundred years before actually judging them. So the Pentateuch stresses that the Canaanites were so corrupt and immoral that they deserved judgment long before Joshua and the Israelites arrive. God delays that judgment, apparently giving the Canaanites time to repent. God then uses the Israelites to carry out his judgment on the Canaanite society, just as he used fire and brimstone to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

Finally, don't miss the huge irony of this discussion. In [Joshua], a book about annihilating the Canaanites, the first major story in the book is about Rahab, a Canaanite who is not destroyed, but rather is included into Israel, becoming a prominent and important woman in the lineage of David (and Christ!). This is an important episode in Joshua. It is placed prominently at the beginning of the book, and a lot of text is devoted to the Rahab episode. Is this story presented as a pattern? Obviously Rahab is a huge exception to the annihilation command, but does her story imply that there were others? Her story (combined with the story of Achan, Joshua 7) qualifies the annihilation command, underscoring that it is those who trust in the Lord who will live, and it is those who don't trust in him who will die. Likewise, just as a woman (Rahab) and her family are spared and included into Israel in Joshua 2–6, so in Joshua 9 an entire city (the Gibeonites) dodges destruction. So the pattern of deliverance set by the individual Canaanite Rahab is repeated by an entire Canaanite city.



¹ This has been slightly adapted from *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*.