

# Questioning Christianity

## “Why should I worship a God who commanded genocide?”

Deuteronomy 20:16-18

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on November 9, 2015

### INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bible’s to Deuteronomy 20.
- It was the attacks of September 11, 2001 that really showed us the connection between religion and violence. In a post 9/11 world, the connection between religion and violence has led to questions about Christianity that were not as common 20 years ago.
  - Where people used to disagree with Christianity, but still spoke with general respect about the God of the Bible, many are now saying that God is a monster who must not be respected at all.
    - They say this because of the connection between religion and violence in the Bible. The primary example people use comes from the time when God commanded his people Israel to destroy the Canaanite nations and empowered them to do so. This, people say, is genocide. Such a God is unjust. He should not be respected. He should be rejected as a moral monster.
- There are many scriptures we could look at but here in Deuteronomy 20 we have a good summary of God’s instructions to Israel. Look at verse 16.
  - **READ 16-18** – *But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God.*
    - The entire book of Joshua goes on to describe how Israel, at the command of God, invades the land of Canaan.
- Richard Dawkins, today’s most famous atheist, minces no words when he writes,
  - *“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... megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”*<sup>1</sup>
- When people consider the role of religion in violence and then they read about the conquest of Canaan the question then becomes this: why should I worship a God who commanded genocide?
  - I am going to work through this question by dividing our time into three parts. Part 1: the Bible’s backstory for the violence of God. Part 2: the Bible’s justification for the violence of God. And Part 3: the Bible’s shocking twist concerning the violence of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 31.

## THE BIBLE'S BACKSTORY FOR THE VIOLENCE OF GOD

- Let's begin then by talking about (**SHOW SLIDE**) the Bible's backstory for the violence of God.
  - Have you ever started watching a movie when it is almost over? It is a very frustrating experience. Why in the world did that angry man shoot the other man who seemed to be so nice? If you are watching it on T.V. you usually just turn the channel.
    - Your problem is that you don't know the whole story. If you had watched from the beginning it would have made perfect sense because the angry man was an undercover police officer and the seemingly nice man had abducted a child. Knowing the whole story changes everything. So it is with our question today.
- The Bible gives its own answer for why God ordered the destruction of the Canaanites but it is given much earlier in the Bible's story. So turn back in your Bible's to Genesis 15.
  - In Genesis 1-14 we read that humanity rebels against their Creator. Despite this rebellion God does not destroy the planet.
    - In fact, in Genesis 12 God promises a man named Abraham that his descendants will become a nation and through that nation God will bless all the peoples of the earth.
- As we arrive at Genesis 15, God promises Abraham that he will give his descendants the very land he is standing on, which is the land of Canaan. Look at verse 7. **READ 7 – And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.”**
  - But how and when will this take place? Skip down to verse 13. **READ 13-14 – Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.**
- So notice three things: First, God promises to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation called “Israel”. Second, the nation of Israel will be given the land of Canaan. But in the third place notice clearly that this will not happen until they have been slaves in Egypt for 400 years.
  - From the moment God made this promise in Genesis 15 it will still be about 300 more years before they become a nation and then are enslaved for four hundred years. So from the moment of this promise, God will not actually give Israel the land of Canaan for about 700 more years.
    - So now here is the million-dollar question: why won't God give Israel the land of Canaan for 700 more years? Why wait such a ridiculously long time?
- Now we come to the critical verse. Look at verse 16. **READ 16a – And they shall come back here in the fourth generation.** That is, after 400 years in Egypt, Israel will come back to this land of Canaan that Abraham is living in. And now comes the reason why it will take so long. **READ 16a - for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.**

- In Abraham's day the Amorites were the major people group in the land of Canaan. So God says Abraham and his descendants cannot have the land for 700 years because the sins of the Amorites have not yet reached their full measure.
- So the conquest of Canaan is set within the patience and the justice of God. First, God is extremely patient. He does not bring the sword of justice down on the Amorites for just one sin or even 100 years of sin. He waits and waits and waits for the Canaanite nations to turn away from their wickedness.
  - But secondly, God is also just. In our society we work patiently with criminals to rehabilitate them. But if they flaunt the laws over and over and over and over again we eventually bring firm justice.
    - In like manner, God is extremely patient with the wickedness of the Canaanites. He waits 700 years. But eventually these sins crossed a moral threshold.
- So do you see then that it is extremely inaccurate to say that this is an act of genocide? Genocide is fueled by racial hatred but the conquest of Canaan has nothing to do with race. God did not destroy the Canaanites because of their ethnicity; he destroyed them because of their sin. This is not a case of ethnic cleansing. This is a case of judicial punishment.
  - So we could put the Bible's answer like this: **(SHOW SLIDE)** The conquest of Canaan was not a racially motivated genocide but a command of God against a specific people living in a specific time whose sins had reached a tipping point.
    - In Deuteronomy 9:5 God says the same thing: **(SHOW SLIDE)** *"It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."*
- The Bible's answer does not make this any less violent but it does put the violence into a different category. We all know there is a major difference between violence that is random or racially motivated and violence that is punishment for wrongdoing.
  - As we celebrate Remembrance Day this week we recognize that there is a major difference between the Nazi violence that systematically murdered 6 million Jews and the violence of the Allied nations in defeating Hitler's forces.
    - We reject the Nazi violence against the Jews but accept the Allied violence as a just act. This does not make violence nice but it does show us that there are different types of violence.
- In summary, the Bible's backstory for God's violence shows us that this is not genocide but rather a just punishment for a culture whose sins had reached a tipping point.

## THE BIBLE'S JUSTIFICATION FOR THE VIOLENCE OF GOD

- But we may now react and say, *“Isn’t this rather harsh of God?”* Having shown the Bible’s backstory for the violence of God, let’s turn now to talk about **(SHOW SLIDE)** the Bible’s justification for the violence of God.
  - Verse 18 in our passage summarizes the evidence. **READ 18** - Israel is to wipe them out so *that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God.*
    - The Bible and archeology document for us the *“abominable practices that they have done for their gods.”*
- In this second point I want to give you a sampling of the evidence that you may act as a jury in the case of the Canaanites. Like any jury, you will hear some things that are very graphic. I will try to limit this but we cannot see why God would punish them unless we feel the force of their crimes.
  - In this point I relying heavily on an article by Dr. Clay Jones that documents the archeological evidence.<sup>2</sup>

### **CANAANITE IDOLATRY**

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, the Canaanites practiced idolatry.
  - You may say, *“Why is that so bad?”* Consider this: if God is our Creator and Ruler then it is an act of treason to live in his world and yet reject him and worship other gods.
    - This is important place to start because as Deuteronomy 20 says, and as we will see, all the detestable things they did were the result of worshipping and serving their man-made gods.

### **CANAANITE INCEST**

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second, the Canaanites practiced incest.
  - The gods they worshipped were incestuous. The god El, who was the father of the Canaanite gods, had seventy children by Asherah. Two of those children were Baal and Anat. Baal tells his father El that his mother Asherah had tried to seduce him to. El tells him to have sex with her to humiliate her, which Baal does. Baal also has sex with his own daughter.
    - All of this was considered acceptable in Canaanite culture.
- Since the gods were incestuous the people followed the gods. Canaanite culture originally criminalized incest but then decriminalized it during these 700 years of God’s patience.
  - We see this in the Bible as well. Sodom was a Canaanite city. We read that after it was destroyed Lot’s daughters get him drunk and have sex with their own father.
    - So the Canaanite culture accepted and practiced incest.

### **CANAANITE TEMPLE SEX**

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Third, the Canaanites practiced temple sex.

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<sup>2</sup> Clay Jones, “We don’t hate sin so we don’t understand what happened to the Canaanites” in *Philosophia Christi*, Vol 11, No. 1, 2009.

- Baal was represented by a phallic symbol - an upright stone. The goddess Astarte was represented by carved female figurines with exaggerated breasts and prominent genitals.
  - In Canaanite thinking the productivity of the land depended upon the sexual relationship between Baal and his female companion. It was believed that when Mr. and Mrs. Baal had sex the rains would fall and the crops would flourish.
- But the gods needed encouragement so a Canaanite man, married or unmarried, would go to a Baal shrine and have sex with one of the sacred prostitutes serving there. The man would play Baal's role and the prostitute Astarte's role. Often the worshippers would engage in a massive orgy trying to coax the gods into having sex.
  - One story tells of El, the father of the gods, having sex with two goddesses and ends with these directions for those worshipping at the temple: ***"To be repeated five times by the company and the singers of the assembly."***<sup>3</sup>

### CANAANITE CHILD SACRIFICE

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Fourth, the Canaanites practiced child sacrifice.
  - Leviticus 18:22 commands Israel saying, ***"Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech."*** Molech was a Canaanite god from the underworld. He was a man with a bull's head. The statues of him always had him standing up, with his arms outstretched and a cauldron of fire burning under the arms.
    - Children were then placed in his arms where they would burn to death. These were not just unwanted newborns. They were infants and children up to age four.
  - Whenever the people wanted to succeed in some big thing in life they ***"would vow by one of their children if they achieve the things they longed for, to sacrifice him to a god. A bronze image of Kronos (another name for Molech) was set up among them, stretching out its cupped hands above a bronze cauldron, which would burn the child. As the flame burning the child surrounded the body, the limbs would shrivel up and the mouth would appear to grin as if laughing, until it was shrunk enough to slip into the cauldron."***<sup>4</sup>
    - Plutarch, the ancient historian, reports that during the Canaanite sacrifices ***"the whole area before the statue was filled with a loud noise of flutes and drums so that the cries of the wailing should not reach the ears of the people."***<sup>5</sup>

### CANAANITE BESTIALITY

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Finally, the Canaanites practiced bestiality.
  - Again, the people practiced this because their gods did. In a poem about Baal we read this:
    - ***"Mightiest Baal hears; He makes love with a heifer in the outback, a cow in the field of Death's realm, He lies with her***

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<sup>3</sup> Jones, 60.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, 61.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, 61.

*seventy times seven, Mounts eighty times eight; she conceives and bears a boy.*"<sup>6</sup>

- Within culture there were absolutely no prohibitions against bestiality. In fact, if a man was unable to achieve or sustain an erection it was believed that he was bewitched. And so he would have to perform certain rituals to remove the curse. Some of these involved getting a woman to have sex with an animal.
  - One such ritual proscribes that an actual animal be tied to the bed. A woman is then to speak to the animal saying, *"At my head a buck is tied. At my feet [a ram is tied! Buck caress me! [Ram, copulate with me!]"*<sup>7</sup>
    - Dr. Jones writes, *"How this continues is so disgusting that I cannot relate it."*<sup>8</sup>

## GOD'S JUSTICE

- Well, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, that is a small sampling of evidence. What do you think? Did God have any grounds for punishing the Canaanites? The Bible argues that Canaanite culture degenerated like this for 700 years before God finally stopped it.
  - You see **(SHOW SLIDE)** the Bible never tells us to think of the destruction of the Canaanites as a nice thing. Punishment is never nice. The Bible does however tell us that God was just in what he did.
- But still we may say, *"I don't like what God did."* Well what do you want God to do? Last week we talked about the problem of evil. In the face of evil people say, *"I can't believe in a God who doesn't stop evil. Why doesn't God stop those who rape women, enslave children, or shoot Canadian soldiers at Parliament Hill?"*
  - But then today we suddenly reverse our statement. When God stops the evil of the Canaanites we say, *"I can't believe in a God stops evil. That's not fair. Why is God so harsh in punishing people?"*
    - So what do you want? Do you want God to stop evil or don't you? You can't have it both ways. You can't say, *"God, I won't worship you because you don't stop evil"* and then say, *"God I won't worship you because you do stop evil."*
- Still, many will say, *"I cannot accept all this talk of God's wrath and punishment. I believe in a God of love and tolerance, not a God of anger and judgement."* But is a non-wrathful, non-judgemental God truly a loving God? As Miroslav Volf writes, *"God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love."*<sup>9</sup>
  - So that is a sampling of the evidence for the violence of God against the Canaanites. It is meant to show you that God was just in punishing them.

## THE BIBLE'S SHOCKING TWIST CONCERNING THE VIOLENCE OF GOD

- Now in the final place let's look at **(SHOW SLIDE)** the Bible's shocking twist concerning the violence of God.

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<sup>6</sup> Jones, 64.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, 65.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, 65.

<sup>9</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, 139.

- This is where it gets practical for us. You see the Bible teaches that **(SHOW SLIDE)** the punishment of the Canaanites is a preview of the final judgement God will bring on the world.
  - The Canaanites are a picture of all humanity for, like them, we have all turned away from our Creator.
- Our sins may not be exactly the same as the Canaanites but are we really so different?
  - Like the Canaanites we are idolatrous – we have turned away from worshipping our Creator to worship other gods. The chief god of our culture is our own selves. This is why the Bible says that every one of us has sinned. Everyone of us is guilty of treason against God.
  - Like the Canaanites we are a sexually obsessed culture – God’s good rules on sexuality are ridiculed as we experiment with and pursue every conceivable type of sexual gratification.
  - Like the Canaanites we sacrifice our children – not to Molech but we sacrifice our unborn children by the millions to the gods of career, a woman’s choice, our own convenience, or because we simply want a boy and not a girl.
- But this is where the justness of God is a big problem for us because we are in the same position as the Canaanites.
  - As God was extremely patient with the Canaanites, he is extremely patient with all the ways we sin against him.
  - But as a day finally came when justice required the judgement of the Canaanites so a day is coming when God will send Jesus to judge the whole earth.
  - As the armies of Israel invaded Canaan so the Bible declares that a day is coming when the armies of heaven will invade the earth.
  - As the armies of Israel were led by Joshua, so the armies of heaven will be led by a greater Joshua – Jesus’ name is simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew name Joshua.
  - And like Joshua destroyed the Canaanites, so Jesus will destroy all those who live in opposition to God.
    - That is why we read that on that day all the people of the earth will call on the mountains saying, ***“Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”*** Who can stand indeed? Everything in us should cry out, ***“Is there no way to escape the wrath to come?”***
- It does not seem like because if God is just then he must punish sin. If he simply sweeps our sins under the rug it would mean he doesn’t care about evil. But on the other hand God is loving and merciful and does not delight in punishment.
  - So is there any way that God can both be just and be merciful? It is right here that the bad news becomes good news. The entire story of the Bible is the story of how God has worked out a way to be just and to be merciful.
- That way is through Jesus Christ. On the cross Jesus stood in our place. He voluntarily took the punishment that is due to us upon himself. He took the judgment we deserve. He died our death.

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** In the death of Jesus, God’s justice is satisfied because sin has been fully punished so that everyone who trusts in Jesus is saved from God’s wrath and experiences grace and mercy.
  - This is why Romans 5:9 says, ***“Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!”***
    - This is why we sing, ***“Because the sinless Savior died, My sinful soul is counted free; For God the just is satisfied, To look on Him and pardon me.”***

## **A BURNT PATCH OF GROUND**

- In the old pioneer days people were always in danger of prairie fires. Prairie fires burn hot and fast. They can reach up to 700 degrees Fahrenheit and travel at speeds of 600 feet per minute – far too fast to outrun on a horse.
  - When a family saw a prairie fire coming they would run out into their fields, take a match and light their own field on fire, turning their own livelihood into a large patch of burnt ground. Then the whole family would go and stand in the middle of the patch of burnt ground.
    - The fire would race towards them and then stop at the edge of the burnt ground. The fire would turn aside to the left and the right but it would not come towards the family because the ground had already been burnt.
- The cross is the burnt patch of ground. It was there that God’s just wrath burned. Therefore, on that future day when God’s wrath comes against the whole world, there is a way to escape the wrath to come. That way is to stand on the burnt patch of ground.
  - This is why John 3:36 says, ***“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”***
- Even in the conquest of Canaan there was a way of escape.
  - Think of the prostitute named Rahab who lived in Jericho. She turned away from the gods of her people and joined herself to Israel by hiding the spies. For this she escaped the destruction that came on Jericho.
    - So also, anyone who turns from sin to Jesus who is the true Israel, will escape the wrath to come.
- You see God’s plan is to bless the nations. This includes the Canaanites for Rahab was saved. Rahab had a son named Boaz who married Ruth. Ruth was another Moabite who turned to the God of Israel.
  - Ruth becomes one of the great grandmothers of King David and it is through King David’s line that Jesus is born. So Jesus, the one man who could choose his genealogy, chose to have two Canaanite women in his line.
    - God’s plan is to bless the nations. Anyone who turns from sin to Jesus escapes the wrath to come. Will you come to him today?