

Ancient Evidence for Jesus from Non-Christian Sources

Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines evidence from ancient non-Christian sources for the life of Jesus, demonstrating that such sources help confirm the historical reliability of the Gospels.

Evidence from Tacitus

Although there is overwhelming evidence that the New Testament is an accurate and trustworthy historical document, many people are still reluctant to believe what it says unless there is also some independent, non-biblical testimony that corroborates its statements. In the introduction to one of his books, F.F. Bruce tells about a Christian correspondent who was told by an agnostic friend that “apart from obscure references in Josephus and the like,” there was no historical evidence for the life of Jesus outside the Bible.^{1} This, he wrote to Bruce, had caused him “great concern and some little upset in [his] spiritual life.”^{2} He concludes his letter by asking, “Is such collateral proof available, and if not, are there reasons for the lack of it?”^{3} The answer to this question is, “Yes, such collateral proof is available,” and we will be looking at some of it in this article.

Let’s begin our inquiry with a passage that historian Edwin Yamauchi calls “probably the most important reference to Jesus outside the New Testament.”^{4} Reporting on Emperor Nero’s decision to blame the Christians for the fire that had destroyed Rome in A.D. 64, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote:

Nero fastened the guilt . . . on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of . . .

Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome. . . .{5}

What all can we learn from this ancient (and rather unsympathetic) reference to Jesus and the early Christians? Notice, first, that Tacitus reports Christians derived their name from a historical person called Christus (from the Latin), or Christ. He is said to have “suffered the extreme penalty,” obviously alluding to the Roman method of execution known as crucifixion. This is said to have occurred during the reign of Tiberius and by the sentence of Pontius Pilatus. This confirms much of what the Gospels tell us about the death of Jesus.

But what are we to make of Tacitus’ rather enigmatic statement that Christ’s death briefly checked “a most mischievous superstition,” which subsequently arose not only in Judaea, but also in Rome? One historian suggests that Tacitus is here “bearing indirect . . . testimony to the conviction of the early church that the Christ who had been crucified had risen from the grave.”{6} While this interpretation is admittedly speculative, it does help explain the otherwise bizarre occurrence of a rapidly growing religion based on the worship of a man who had been crucified as a criminal.{7} How else might one explain *that*?

Evidence from Pliny the Younger

Another important source of evidence about Jesus and early Christianity can be found in the letters of Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan. Pliny was the Roman governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. In one of his letters, dated around A.D. 112, he asks Trajan’s advice about the appropriate way to conduct legal proceedings against those accused of being Christians.{8} Pliny says that he needed to consult the emperor about this issue because a great multitude of every age, class, and sex stood accused of Christianity.{9}

At one point in his letter, Pliny relates some of the information he has learned about these Christians:

They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.[{10}](#)

This passage provides us with a number of interesting insights into the beliefs and practices of early Christians. First, we see that Christians regularly met on a certain fixed day for worship. Second, their worship was directed to Christ, demonstrating that they firmly believed in His divinity. Furthermore, one scholar interprets Pliny's statement that hymns were sung to Christ, *as to a god*, as a reference to the rather distinctive fact that, "unlike other gods who were worshipped, Christ was a person who had lived on earth."[{11}](#) If this interpretation is correct, Pliny understood that Christians were worshipping an actual historical person as God! Of course, this agrees perfectly with the New Testament doctrine that Jesus was both God and man.

Not only does Pliny's letter help us understand what early Christians believed about Jesus' *person*, it also reveals the high esteem to which they held His *teachings*. For instance, Pliny notes that Christians *bound themselves by a solemn oath* not to violate various moral standards, which find their source in the ethical teachings of Jesus. In addition, Pliny's reference to the Christian custom of sharing a common meal likely alludes to their observance of communion and the "love feast."[{12}](#) This interpretation helps explain the Christian claim that the meal was merely *food of an ordinary and innocent kind*. They were attempting to counter the charge,

sometimes made by non-Christians, of practicing “ritual cannibalism.”[{13}](#) The Christians of that day humbly repudiated such slanderous attacks on Jesus’ teachings. We must sometimes do the same today.

Evidence from Josephus

Perhaps the most remarkable reference to Jesus outside the Bible can be found in the writings of Josephus, a first century Jewish historian. On two occasions, in his *Jewish Antiquities*, he mentions Jesus. The second, less revealing, reference describes the condemnation of one “James” by the Jewish Sanhedrin. This James, says Josephus, was “the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ.”[{14}](#) F.F. Bruce points out how this agrees with Paul’s description of James in Galatians 1:19 as “the Lord’s brother.”[{15}](#) And Edwin Yamauchi informs us that “few scholars have questioned” that Josephus actually penned this passage.[{16}](#)

As interesting as this brief reference is, there is an earlier one, which is truly astonishing. Called the “Testimonium Flavianum,” the relevant portion declares:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he . . . wrought surprising feats. . . . He was the Christ. When Pilate . . . condemned him to be crucified, those who had . . . come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared . . . restored to life. . . . And the tribe of Christians . . . has . . . not disappeared.[{17}](#)

Did Josephus really write this? Most scholars think the core of the passage originated with Josephus, but that it was later altered by a Christian editor, possibly between the third and fourth century A.D.[{18}](#) But why do they think it was altered? Josephus was not a Christian, and it is difficult to believe that anyone but a Christian would have made some of these statements.[{19}](#)

For instance, the claim that Jesus was a wise man seems authentic, but the qualifying phrase, "*if indeed one ought to call him a man,*" is suspect. It implies that Jesus was more than human, and it is quite unlikely that Josephus would have said *that!* It is also difficult to believe he would have flatly asserted that Jesus was the Christ, especially when he later refers to Jesus as "the so-called" Christ. Finally, the claim that on the third day Jesus appeared to His disciples restored to life, inasmuch as it affirms Jesus' resurrection, is quite unlikely to come from a non-Christian!

But even if we disregard the questionable parts of this passage, we are still left with a good deal of corroborating information about the biblical Jesus. We read that he was a wise man who performed surprising feats. And although He was crucified under Pilate, His followers continued their discipleship and became known as Christians. When we combine these statements with Josephus' later reference to Jesus as "the so-called Christ," a rather detailed picture emerges which harmonizes quite well with the biblical record. It increasingly appears that the "biblical Jesus" and the "historical Jesus" are one and the same!

Evidence from the Babylonian Talmud

There are only a few clear references to Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of Jewish rabbinical writings compiled between approximately A.D. 70-500. Given this time frame, it is naturally supposed that earlier references to Jesus are more likely to be historically reliable than later ones. In the case of the Talmud, the earliest period of compilation occurred between A.D. 70-200.^{20} The most significant reference to Jesus from this period states:

On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald . . . cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery

and enticed Israel to apostasy.”{21}

Let’s examine this passage. You may have noticed that it refers to someone named “Yeshu.” So why do we think this is Jesus? Actually, “Yeshu” (or “Yeshua”) is how Jesus’ name is pronounced in Hebrew. But what does the passage mean by saying that Jesus “was hanged”? Doesn’t the New Testament say he was crucified? Indeed it does. But the term “hanged” can function as a synonym for “crucified.” For instance, Galatians 3:13 declares that Christ was “hanged”, and Luke 23:39 applies this term to the criminals who were crucified with Jesus.{22} So the Talmud declares that Jesus was crucified on the eve of Passover. But what of the cry of the herald that Jesus was to be stoned? This may simply indicate what the Jewish leaders were *planning* to do.{23} If so, Roman involvement changed their plans!{24}

The passage also tells us *why* Jesus was crucified. It claims He practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy! Since this accusation comes from a rather hostile source, we should not be too surprised if Jesus is described somewhat differently than in the New Testament. But if we make allowances for this, what might such charges *imply* about Jesus?

Interestingly, both accusations have close parallels in the canonical gospels. For instance, the charge of sorcery is similar to the Pharisees’ accusation that Jesus cast out demons “by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons.”{25} But notice this: such a charge actually tends to confirm the New Testament claim that Jesus performed miraculous feats. Apparently Jesus’ miracles were too well attested to deny. The only alternative was to ascribe them to sorcery! Likewise, the charge of enticing Israel to apostasy parallels Luke’s account of the Jewish leaders who accused Jesus of misleading the nation with his teaching.{26} Such a charge tends to corroborate the New Testament record of Jesus’ powerful teaching ministry. Thus, if read carefully, this passage from

the Talmud confirms much of our knowledge about Jesus from the New Testament.

Evidence from Lucian

Lucian of Samosata was a second century Greek satirist. In one of his works, he wrote of the early Christians as follows:

The Christians . . . worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. . . . [It] was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws.[{27}](#)

Although Lucian is jesting here at the early Christians, he does make some significant comments about their founder. For instance, he says the Christians worshipped a *man*, “who introduced their novel rites.” And though this *man’s* followers clearly thought quite highly of Him, He so angered many of His contemporaries with His teaching that He “was crucified on that account.”

Although Lucian does not mention his name, he is clearly referring to Jesus. But what did Jesus teach to arouse such wrath? According to Lucian, he taught that all men are brothers from the moment of their conversion. That’s harmless enough. But what did this conversion involve? It involved denying the Greek gods, worshipping Jesus, and living according to His teachings. It’s not *too* difficult to imagine someone being killed for teaching *that*. Though Lucian doesn’t say so explicitly, the Christian denial of other gods combined with their worship of Jesus implies the belief that Jesus was more than human. Since they denied other gods in order to worship Him, they apparently thought Jesus a greater God than any that Greece had to offer!

Let's summarize what we've learned about Jesus from this examination of ancient non-Christian sources. First, both Josephus and Lucian indicate that Jesus was regarded as wise. Second, Pliny, the Talmud, and Lucian imply He was a powerful and revered teacher. Third, both Josephus and the Talmud indicate He performed miraculous feats. Fourth, Tacitus, Josephus, the Talmud, and Lucian all mention that He was crucified. Tacitus and Josephus say this occurred under Pontius Pilate. And the Talmud declares it happened on the eve of Passover. Fifth, there are possible references to the Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection in both Tacitus and Josephus. Sixth, Josephus records that Jesus' followers believed He was the Christ, or Messiah. And finally, both Pliny and Lucian indicate that Christians worshipped Jesus as God!

I hope you see how this small selection of ancient *non-Christian* sources helps corroborate our knowledge of Jesus from the gospels. Of course, there are many ancient *Christian* sources of information about Jesus as well. But since the historical reliability of the canonical gospels is so well established, I invite you to read *those* for an authoritative "life of Jesus!"

Notes

1. F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 13.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Edwin Yamauchi, quoted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 82.
5. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, cited in Strobel, *The Case for*

Christ, 82.

6. N.D. Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History* (London: Tyndale, 1969), 19, cited in Gary R. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1996), 189-190.

7. Edwin Yamauchi, cited in Strobel, *The Case for Christ*, 82.

8. Pliny, *Epistles* x. 96, cited in Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 25; Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 198.

9. *Ibid.*, 27.

10. Pliny, *Letters*, transl. by William Melmoth, rev. by W.M.L. Hutchinson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935), vol. II, X:96, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.

11. M. Harris, "References to Jesus in Early Classical Authors," in *Gospel Perspectives V*, 354-55, cited in E. Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament: What is the Evidence?", in *Jesus Under Fire*, ed. by Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), p. 227, note 66.

12. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 199.

13. Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 28.

14. Josephus, *Antiquities* xx. 200, cited in Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 36.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament", 212.

17. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.63-64, cited in Yamauchi, "Jesus Outside the New Testament", 212.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Although time would not permit me to mention it on the radio, another version of Josephus' "Testimonium Flavianum" survives in a tenth-century Arabic version (Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 41). In 1971, Professor Schlomo Pines published a study on this passage. The passage is interesting because it lacks most of the questionable elements that many scholars believe to be Christian interpolations. Indeed, "as Schlomo Pines and David Flusser...stated, it is quite plausible that none of the arguments against Josephus writing the original words even applies to the Arabic text, especially since the latter would have had less chance of being censored by the church" (Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 194). The passage reads as follows: "At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and (he) was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders." (Quoted in James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1988), 95, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 194).

20. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 202-03.

21. *The Babylonian Talmud*, transl. by I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935), vol. III, Sanhedrin 43a, 281, cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 203.

22. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 203.

23. See John 8:58-59 and 10:31-33.

24. Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 204. See also John 18:31-32.

25. Matt. 12:24. I gleaned this observation from Bruce, *Christian Origins*, 56.

26. Luke 23:2, 5.

27. Lucian, *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13, in *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, transl. by H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), vol. 4., cited in Habermas, *The Historical Jesus*, 206.

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Tactics for an Ambassador: Defending the Christian Faith

Most Christians equate evangelism with conflict: an all-out assault on the beliefs and values of others. In our relativistic, live-and-let-live culture, even the most

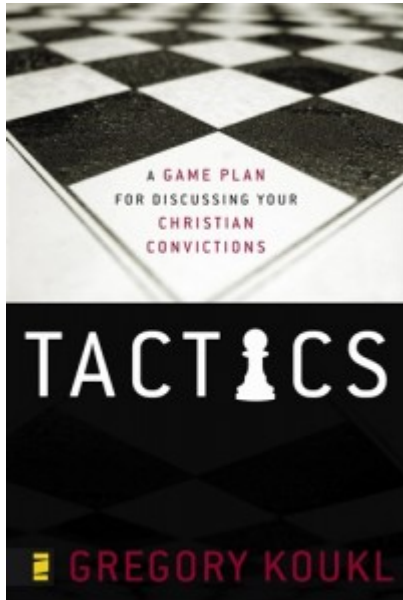
motivated believer feels like he's committing a crime by entering into a spiritual discussion. Are there ways to take the anxiety out of evangelism?

The idea of doing Christian apologetics, a fancy word for defending the Christian faith, has lost some luster among church goers. The word conjures up images of conflict, anxiety, and even anger. But most of all, it generates thoughts of inadequacy and lack of confidence among those called to "give an answer" (1 Pet. 3:15) for the hope we have in Christ. Most people are trying to avoid conflict and the emotional fatigue that comes with defending a controversial set of beliefs that are often ridiculed in our culture.

We live in an era that values diversity and tolerance above all other virtues. Anyone claiming to have true knowledge about important things like the nature of God, good and evil, or the purpose of human existence will be accused of intolerance and a mean spirited attempt to impose their beliefs on their neighbors. You are allowed to believe almost anything today, as long as you don't claim that it is true in any universal sense.



Part of the reason that Christians in American churches do so little evangelism is that they are convinced that it constitutes a spiritual invasion, an attack on the beliefs of a friend or neighbor who will resist this apologetic assault with everything he or she has to offer. They also believe that they will have failed miserably unless every encounter ends with someone trusting in Christ. It's either total victory or utter defeat, and there are no innocent bystanders.



Gregory Koukl's book *Tactics* helps to give Christians the right perspective on evangelism and apologetics.^[1] He argues that the D-day invasion model for evangelism is counterproductive, and that seeing oneself as an ambassador for Christ makes more sense. We need fewer frontal assaults and more embassy meetings. The skills necessary to be a successful ambassador are quite different from those of an infantryman. Persuasion rather than conquest motivate the ambassador, and

one's style of communication can be as important as the content being conveyed.

According to Koukl, an effective ambassador for Christ must master three skill-sets. First, a Christian ambassador should possess a clear understanding of the message being offered by his sovereign King. Second, he needs to exhibit a personal character that reinforces the message he's been charged with, not distract from it. Finally, an ambassador needs sufficient wisdom to know how to communicate his message in a manner that draws people into dialogue and then to keep the conversation going. This kind of wisdom translates into specific tactics for communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ to a culture that has been preconditioned against the message.

Why Do We Need Tactics?

In his second letter to the church in Corinth, Paul says that we are Christ's ambassadors and that God has entrusted us with a message of reconciliation to a lost world (2 Cor. 5:20). But, although we have good news to share, Christians often don't feel capable or confident to share it.

Being tactical has to do with the way one arranges his or her resources. The effective tactician knows when to be aggressive

and when to hold back and gather information. Commanders on a battlefield don't unleash every weapon available at the beginning of a conflict, nor do ambassadors immediately unveil all of their arguments.

Apologists know that one of their most important tactics is the well placed question. Picking up important personal information about someone's background and worldview provides critical insight into the best way to steer the conversation. The ability to ask good questions, combined with good listening skills, helps to avoid stereotyping people in ways that can cause the conversation to end suddenly. It also shows that you care about someone as an individual, not just as, for example, a Mormon or a Muslim. Even when someone labels oneself, let's say as a Hindu, it's important to discover what that term means to them. Hinduism contains a wide variety of possible beliefs and it would be counterproductive to argue against something that this person doesn't adhere to. As you can imagine, being a good listener and shaping your comments to fit the individual will most likely have a greater impact on them than just memorizing a tract and delivering it regardless of the setting.

Employing wise tactics implies a thoughtful rather than emotional approach to conversations. Emotions can quickly get the best of us, especially if we are unprepared to respond to the questions and challenges that we may encounter. Good planning helps us to accomplish our goal of guiding people to the truth about Jesus. It can also help us to avoid provoking someone to anger. Once people get angry they rarely hear our defense of the gospel. It's even worse if we get angry.

Some might respond to this call for wise tactics in sharing Christ by saying that you cannot argue someone into heaven. I would respond that you cannot love someone into heaven either. Neither arguments, or love, or a simple telling of the gospel alone will win someone to heaven. Only the Holy Spirit can change someone's heart, but it doesn't follow that God doesn't

use these methods to build His kingdom.

Becoming Sherlock Holmes

Sometimes we Christians are tempted to dump our entire theological systems on anyone willing stay put long enough to listen. This doctrinal dump might be a light load for some but a train load for others. The problem is that we are often trying to answer questions that people haven't even thought up yet and we can add confusion and distractions to the gospel message without even being aware of it. How can we avoid making this mistake?

When we sense that a conversation is headed toward spiritual territory, perhaps our first inclination should be to ask good questions so that we better understand the person we desire to share Christ with. Good questions protect us from jumping to conclusions and to deal with the actual beliefs a person holds rather than some straw man position that we might prefer to attack. They also have the tendency to naturally promote further dialogue and shape the discussion.

Once a person makes a statement regarding what they believe to be true, good questions can be particularly helpful. If someone tells you that it is irrational to believe in God because there is no proof that He exists, you now have an opportunity to ask key questions that will make your eventual responses far more effective. The first category of questions seeks further information and clarification. For instance, you might ask "What do you mean by God?" or "What evidence would you count as proof towards His existence?" You might ask if he knows anyone who believes in God and whether or not they might have good reasons for doing so. Asking someone how they arrived at a conclusion or how they know something to be the case helps to differentiate between simple assertions of belief and reasons for holding that belief. People often make statements of belief without much forethought, and when

challenged they find that they have little more than an emotional attachment to their view.

Don't panic if you run into someone who is prepared to defend his or her views. Even if they have an extensive argument supporting their position, good questions can get you out of the hot seat and provide time to build a stronger case for your next encounter. You might ask them to slow down and present their case in detail so that you can understand it better. You can also tell them that you want time to consider their position and will get back to them with a response. Giving someone the podium to clearly present their beliefs is usually well received. Listen carefully to what is said and then do your homework.

Suicidal Arguments

One of the more interesting parts of *Tactics* are Koukl's chapters on ideas that commit suicide. These are commonly called self-refuting ideas or ideas that defeat themselves. A fancier description is that they are self-referentially incoherent. It doesn't take long to encounter one of these arguments when talking to people about religion.

A simple example of a suicidal view is expressed by the comment, "There is no truth," or the more humble version, "It is impossible to know something that is true for everyone, everywhere." This statement fails its own criteria for validity by denying universal truth claims and then making a truth claim implied to be universal. If what the statement professes is true, then it is false. It commits suicide because it violates the law of non-contradiction which prohibits something from being both true and false at the same time.

Christians who are highly influenced by a postmodern view of truth often make self-defeating arguments as well. Koukl gives

the example of a teacher in a Christian college classroom asking her students if they are God. When no hands went up she proclaimed that since they are not God they only have access to truth with a small t; only God knows Truth with a capital T. The implication is that small t truth is personal and limited. A student might ask the teacher if what she just offered is truth with a small t; if so, why should the students accept the teacher's limited personal view of reality over the student's perceptions?

Another argument that's quite popular and self-defeating is, "People should never impose their values on someone else." A quick response might be, "Does that express your values?" Of course it does. Then ask the person why he is imposing his values on you. His statement violates the criteria of validity that it tries to establish.

Even comments that seem to make sense at first suffer from suicidal tendencies. For instance, some have argued that since men wrote the Bible, and given that people are imperfect, the Bible is flawed and not inspired by God. The problem is that although people are imperfect it does not follow that everything they say or write is flawed. In fact, if everything a human says or writes is flawed, then this comment about the Bible is flawed. Just because people are capable of error, it doesn't mean that they will always commit error.

Helping people to see that their truth claims might be contradictory must be done gently. The point is not to merely defeat their position, but to help them to become open to other ways of thinking about an issue. It is in this context of gentle persuasion that the Holy Spirit can change a heart.

Sharpening Your Skills

The list of self-defeating truth claims can get rather long. For instance, it is common to hear people say something like

“science is the only source for truth.” The problem with this statement is that it is not scientific. There are no scientific experiments that one can perform which establish that science is the only source of truth. It is a self-defeating statement.

It is also quite popular to assume that all religions are basically the same and equally true. If this is the case, then Christianity is true. However, a basic teaching of Christianity is that the core teachings of other religions are false and that Jesus is the only source of salvation. Again, the statement defeats itself.

Ideas that commit practical suicide include the notion that it's wrong to ever condemn someone, and that God doesn't take sides. The first comment is a condemnation of all who condemn others. The second assumes that God is on their side, even though God doesn't take sides. If you think through these ideas you can be ready to gently point out their self-contradictory nature and move on to subjects more profitable.

When dealing with difficult ethical issues like abortion or homosexuality, it is always helpful to have a preplanned set of tactics. Koukl gives the example of a Christian who is asked his views about homosexuality by a lesbian boss. He begins his response by asking if the boss is tolerant of diverse points of view. Does she respect convictions different from her own? Of course, true tolerance means putting up with someone you disagree with. Since very few people want to label themselves as intolerant, they will usually affirm their support of the practice, protecting you from being attacked for giving your viewpoint.

Gregory Koukl's book contains many more great ideas about responding to attacks on Christian belief. At the end of the book he leaves us with what he calls the ambassador's creed. An ambassador should be ready to represent Christ. He should be patient with those who disagree. He should be reasonable in

his defense. And, finally, he should be tactical, adapting his approach to each unique person that God brings into his path. Our wise use of tactics should improve the “acoustics” in a conversation so that people can hear the gospel well.

Note

1. Gregory Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

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God and the Canaanites: A Biblical Perspective

Rick Wade provides a biblically informed perspective of these Old Testament events, looking back at them with a Christian view of history and its significance.

The Charge of Genocide

A common attack today on Christianity has to do with the character of the God of the Old Testament^{[\[1\]](#)}. Moses' instructions to the Israelites as they were about to move into Canaan included this:

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 (Deut. 20:16-17).

Because of such things, biologist and prominent atheist Richard Dawkins describes God as “a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser . . . genocidal . . . [a] capriciously malevolent bully.”[{2}](#)



Can the actions of the Israelites legitimately be called genocide?

The term “genocide” means a major action “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.” [{3}](#) Some twentieth-century examples are the extermination of six million Jews by the Nazis and the slaughter of 800,000 Tutsis by the Hutus in Rwanda in 1994. Going by this definition alone, the destruction of the Canaanites would seem to have been genocide.

But there is a major difference. These twentieth-century examples were basically people killing people simply because they hated them and/or wanted their land. The Canaanites, by contrast, were destroyed at the direction of God and primarily because of their sin. Because of this, I think the term should be avoided. The completely negative connotations of “genocide” make it hard to look at the biblical events without a jaundiced eye.

One’s background theological beliefs make a big difference in how one sees this. If God was not behind the conquest of Canaan, then the Israelites were no different than the Nazis and the Hutus. However, once the biblical doctrines of God and of sin are taken into consideration, the background scenery changes and the picture looks very different. There is only one true God, and that God deserves all honor and worship. Furthermore, justice must respond to the moral failure of sin. The Canaanites were grossly sinful people who were given plenty of time by God to change their ways. They had passed the point of redeemability, and were ripe for judgment.

Yahweh War

To understand what God was doing in Canaan, one must see it within the larger context of redemptive history.

The category scholars use for such events as the battles in the conquest of Canaan is *Yahweh war*. Yahweh wars are battles recorded in Scripture that are prompted by God for His purposes and won by His power.[{4}](#)

Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman sees five phases of Yahweh war in the Bible. In phase one, God fought the flesh-and-blood enemies of Israel. In phase two, God fought against Israel when it broke its side of its covenant with God (cf. Dt. 28:7, 25). In phase three, when Israel and Judah were in exile, God promised to come in the future as a warrior to rescue them from their oppressors (cf. Dan. 7).

In phase four there was a major change. When Jesus came, He shifted the battle to the *spiritual* realm; He fought spiritual powers and authorities. Jesus' power was shown in His healings and exorcisms and preeminently in His victory in the heavenlies by His death and resurrection (see Col. 2:13-15). Christians today are engaged in warfare on this level. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against . . . the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (6:12).

Phase five of Yahweh war will be the final battle of history when Jesus returns and will once again be military in nature.

Thus, Longman says, "The war against the Canaanites was simply an earlier phase of the battle that comes to its climax on the cross and its completion at the final judgment."[{5}](#)

There are several aspects of Yahweh war. The part that concerns us here—the real culmination of Yahweh war—is called *herem*. *Herem* literally means "ban" or "banned." It means to ban from human use and to give over completely to God. The ESV

and NIV give a fuller understanding of the term by translating it “devote to destruction” (the NASB renders it “set apart”).

Old Testament scholars Keil and Delitsch write that “there can be no doubt that the idea which lay at the foundation of the ban was that of a compulsory dedication of something which resisted or impeded sanctification; . . . it was an act of the judicial holiness of God manifesting itself in righteousness and judgment.”[\[6\]](#)

Canaan, because of its sin, was to be *herem*—devoted to destruction.

The Conquest of Canaan

In the conquest of Canaan, three goals were being accomplished.

First, the movement of the Israelites into Canaan was the fruition of God’s promise to Abram that He would give that land to his children (Gen. 12:7). When Joshua led the people across the Jordan River into Canaan, he was fulfilling this promise. Since the land wasn’t empty, this could only be accomplished by driving the Canaanites out.

The second goal of the conquest was the judgment of the Canaanites. Driving them out wasn’t simply a way of making room for Israel. The Canaanites were an evil, depraved people who had to be judged to fulfill the demands of justice. What about these people prompted such a harsh judgment?

For one thing, the Canaanites worshipped other gods. In our pluralistic age, it’s easy to forget what an offense that is to the true God.

In the worship of their gods, the Canaanites committed other evils. They engaged in temple prostitution which was thought to be a re-enactment of the sexual unions of the gods and goddesses.

An even more detestable practice was that of child sacrifice. Under the sanctuary in the ancient city of Gezer, urns containing the burnt bones of children have been found. They are dated to somewhere between 2000 and 1500 BC, between the time of Abraham and the Exodus.[{7}](#)

The third goal of the conquest was the protection of Israel. God was concerned that, if the Canaanites remained in the land, they would draw the Israelites into their evil practices.

How could the Canaanites have that much influence over the Israelites? For one thing, the Israelites would intermarry with them, and their spouses would bring their gods into the marriage with all that entailed.[{8}](#) In addition, the Israelites would be tempted to imitate Canaanite religious rituals because of their close connection to agricultural rhythms. The fertility of the land was believed to be directly connected to the sexual relations of the gods and goddesses. The people believed that re-enacting these unions themselves played a part in the fertility of the land.[{9}](#)

At first, the Israelites tried to compromise and worship God the way the Canaanites worshiped their gods. God had warned them against that (Deut. 12:4, 30, 31). Then they would simply abandon worship of the true God. As a result, they eventually received the same judgment the Canaanites experienced (Deut. 4:26; 7:4).

The Dispossession and Destruction of the Canaanites

In Deuteronomy 20:16, Moses said the Israelites were to “save alive nothing that breathes” in the cities in their new land. The question has been raised whether God really intended the Israelites to kill *all* the people. It has been suggested that such “obliteration language” was “hyperbolic.”[{10}](#) Commands to destroy everyone are sometimes followed by commands not to

intermarry, such as in Deut. 7:2-3. How could the Israelites intermarry with the Canaanites if they killed them all? Maybe this was just an example of Ancient Near Eastern military language.[{11}](#)

I think God meant it quite literally. Here's why. Leviticus 27:29 says very plainly that every person devoted to destruction was to be killed. Further, in Deuteronomy 20, Moses said they were only to kill the adult males in far away cities (vv. 13-14), but in nearby cities they were to "save nothing alive that breathes" (v. 16). If God *didn't* mean to kill everyone in nearby cities, then what distinction was being made? And how else would God have said it if He *did* mean that? That being said, I do not think God had the Israelites comb the land to find and destroy every person; they were to devote to destruction the people who remained in the cities when they attacked.

Another observation is that the instruction is frequently to *dispossess* the Canaanites or move them out rather than to *destroy* them. Scholar Glen Miller points out that "dispossession" words are used by a three-to-one margin over "destruction" words.[{12}](#)

Can these be put together? With Miller, I think they can. The people of the land had heard about all that had happened with the Israelites from the time they escaped Egypt. "As soon as we heard it," Rahab of Jericho said, "our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath" (Josh. 2:11). Because of that advance warning, it is possible that some people abandoned their cities. Thus, the Israelites could possibly have married people who weren't in the cities when they were attacked.

A more obvious reason for the possibility of intermarriage is the fact that the Israelites didn't fully obey God's commands. In Jdg. 1:27-2:5, we read that tribe after tribe of Israelites

did not drive out all the inhabitants of the cities they conquered. The Israelites intermarried with them which eventually drew God's judgment on them as well.

Final Comments

The most disturbing part of the conquest of Canaan for most people is the killing of children. After the defeats of both Heshbon and Bashan, Moses noted that they had "devoted to destruction every city, men, women, and children" (Deut. 2:34; 3:3, 6).

No matter what explanation of the death of children is given, no one except the most cold hearted will find joy in it. God didn't. He gets no pleasure in the death of anyone. In Ezekiel 18:23 we read, "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (see also Ezek. 33:11). When God told Abraham He was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham pleaded for them, and God agreed in his mercy that if but only ten righteous people were found, He wouldn't do it. Long after the conquest of the land, when God decided He would have to destroy Moab, according to Isaiah God "wept bitterly" over her cities (Isa. 16:9; cf. 15:5).

But what about Deuteronomy 24:16 which says that children shall not be put to death because of their fathers' sins? Isn't there an inconsistency here?

The law given in Deuteronomy provided regulations for the people of Israel. On an individual basis, when a father sinned, his son wasn't to be punished for it. The situation with Canaan was different. Generation after generation of Canaanites continued in the same evil practices. What was to stop it? God knew it would take the destruction of the nations.

Here are a few factors to take into consideration:

First, the sins of parents, *just like their successes*, have an impact on their children.

Second, if the Canaanite children were allowed to live and remain in the land, they could very well act to avenge their parents when they grew up, or at least to pick up again the practices of their parents.

Third, if one holds that there is an age of accountability for children, and that those younger than that are received into heaven with God at their death, although the means of death were frightful and harsh, the Canaanite children's experience after death would be better than if they'd continued to live among such a sinful people.^{13} How persuasive this thought is will depend on how seriously we take biblical teaching about our future after the grave. [Ed. note: please see Probe's article "[Do Babies Go to Hell?](#)" by Probe's founder Jimmy Williams.]

These ideas may provide little consolation. But we must keep in mind that God is not subject to our contemporary sensibilities.^{14} The only test we can put to God is consistency with His own nature and word. Yahweh is a God of justice as well as mercy. He is also a God who takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

Notes

1. This article is a slightly adapted version of the program that aired on the Probe radio program. A more detailed version is also available on our Web site with the title "[Yahweh War and the Conquest of Canaan.](#)"
2. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008), 51.
3. "Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide," Article II, University of the West of England, at: www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/.
4. The phrase "the Lord's battles" or "battles of the Lord" are found in 1 Sam. 18:17 and 25:28.

5. Tremper Longman III, "The Case for Spiritual Continuity," in C. S. Cowles, Eugene H. Merrill, Daniel L. Gard, and Tremper Longman III, *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 185.

6. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, trans., James Martin, *Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1: The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 484-485. Emphasis added.

7. M.G. Kyle, "Canaan," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, James Orr, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 550. 8. The atheism of today wasn't an option. If the Israelites started to get a little slack in their obligations to Yahweh, they would turn to other gods.

9. Bernhard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1957), 93-94; 96-103.

10. Paul Copan, "Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?," *Philosophia Christi* 10, no. 1 (2008): 7-37; www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=45. In his article "Yahweh Wars" which was written after "Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?," Copan presents two scenarios, one in which everyone was put to death, and the other in which the targets were military leaders and soldiers. He believes the latter is the correct interpretation. See Paul Copan, "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites," *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 1 (2009): 73-92; www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=63.

In his discussion in "Moral Monster," Copan refers specifically to Deut. 23:12-13 where Joshua also warns the people against intermarrying. One should note that Joshua's commands in Deuteronomy 23 are given before the Israelites have completed their sweep through the land, so of course there are Canaanites there to marry. The Deut. 7 passage provides better support for his position.

11. Copan, "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites."

12. Glenn M. Miller, "How could a God of Love order the massacre/annihilation of the Canaanites?" on the web site A Christian Thinktank,

13. Cf. Paul Copan, "How Could a Loving God Command Genocide," in *That's Just Your Interpretation* (Grand Rapid: Baker, 2001),

165.

14. And I say “contemporary” because children weren’t regarded as highly in the Ancient Near East as they are today.

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Yahweh War and the Conquest of Canaan – A Biblical Worldview Perspective

Rick Wade provides an expanded discussion of the issues around the Israelites battles against the Canaanites. He points out how Yahweh Wars, i.e. wars instituted by and fought with the direct help of Yahweh, have a specific, God-designed purpose and are not a call to genocide against non-Christians. He considers the events and differing views of those events before summarizing a biblical worldview perception of them.

The Charge of Genocide

A common attack today on Christianity has to do with the character of the God of the Old Testament.[\[1\]](#) Especially singled out for censure by critics is the conquest of Canaan, the land promised to Abraham, by Joshua and the Israelites. Through Moses, God gave these instructions:

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” (Deut. 20:16-17).

In obedience to this command, when the Israelites took Jericho, their first conquest after crossing the Jordan River, “they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword” (Josh. 6:21).

Because of such things, biologist and prominent atheist Richard Dawkins describes God as, among other things, “a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”[{2}](#)

Dawkins also complains about God’s jealous rage over the worship of other gods. “One cannot help,” he says, “marveling at the extraordinarily draconian view taken of the sin of flirting with rival gods. To our modern sense of values and justice it seems a trifling sin compared to, say, offering your daughter for a gang rape” (referring to Lot offering his daughters in exchange for the angels). “It is yet another example,” he continues, “of the disconnect between scriptural and modern (one is tempted to say civilized) morals. . . . The tragi-farce of God’s maniacal jealousy against alternative gods recurs continually through the Old Testament.”[{3}](#)

For an atheist, of course, there is no supernatural, so the gods of all the many religions were, of course, made up; they are merely mythologies devised to give meaning to life. The God invented by the Israelites (and still believed in by Christians) was given a very jealous and mean-spirited personality. What atheists truly dislike is not only that people actually *believe* in this God but that they think *other* people should, too!

Of course, it would be illogical to try to argue against the existence of God on the basis of the conquest of Canaan. In fact, the moral values that make what the Israelites did seem so objectionable to atheists are *grounded* in God. As William

Lane Craig notes, "The Bible itself inculcates the values which these stories seem to violate."[\[4\]](#) But atheists come to the matter already confident that there is no God. They then condemn belief in such a made-up God.

But some Christians also have doubts about the matter. Some believe that a more accurate exegesis reveals that the command to destroy everyone doesn't mean what it appears to on the surface. Some believe the command wasn't given by God at all, but was the product of an Ancient Near Eastern mentality; that the people *thought* they were doing God's will and put those words in His mouth. Some take the command to be authentic but hyperbolic. I'll return to this later.

The actions of the Israelites are often called *genocide*. Is this a legitimate use of the term?

The word *genocide* was coined in 1944 by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew.[\[5\]](#) According to Article II of the United Nation's Genocide Convention of 1948, the term genocide means a major action "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group."[\[6\]](#) Some twentieth-century examples are the massacre of Armenian Christians by Turks in 1915 and 1916, the extermination of six million Jews by the Nazis in the 1940s, and the slaughter of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda in 1994. Going by this definition alone, the destruction of the Canaanites was genocide.

But there is a major difference between these events and the Israelite conquest of Canaan. The twentieth-century examples were basically people killing people simply because they hated them and/or wanted their land. The Canaanites, by contrast, were destroyed at the direction of God and primarily because of their sin.[\[7\]](#) Because the Canaanites' destruction was believed to be directed by *God*, obviously atheists will not find anything acceptable in what happened. If the atheists are correct in their naturalistic understanding of the world—that

there is no God, no supernatural; that religion is just a human institution; that all there is is nature; and that people are the products of random evolution—then the Israelites were no different than Hitler or other Ancient Near Eastern people who slaughtered people simply to take their lands.

However, once the biblical doctrines of God and of sin are taken into consideration, the background scenery changes and the picture looks very different. There is only one true God, and that God deserves all honor and worship. Furthermore, justice must respond to the moral failure of sin. The Canaanites were grossly sinful people who were given plenty of time by God to change their ways. They had passed the point of redeemability, and were ripe for judgment. The doctrines of God and of sin put this in a different light.

Because of this, I think the term *genocide* should be avoided. The completely negative connotations of the word make it hard to look at the biblical events without a jaundiced eye.

Dawkins accuses the biblical God of jealousy as well. If the God of the Bible really *does* exist, why might He be so jealous? For one thing, being the creator and Lord of all, He ought to be the only one worshiped and served. He has the right to claim that. Second, people worshiping other gods are indeed worshiping gods of their own (or their forebears') invention. Even Dr. Dawkins should understand why worshiping a god that isn't real is a problem! Third, since God made the world and the people in it, He knows best how they function. To go against the true God is to lose sight of one's own nature and of what makes for the good life.

Furthermore, being the creator of the world, God has the authority to move people as He wills. As Paul said much later to the Athenians, God "made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their

dwelling place” (Acts 17:26). If God wanted the Israelites in that land, He had every right to put them there.

One more note about the complaints of atheists. Not only do they leave out the key factors of the reality of God and sin, but they think that their own ideas about ethics should have ruled in Joshua’s day and even for all time since clearly their own modern liberal ethical sensibilities are the height of moral evolution! Never mind that such critics, while castigating Israel for killing children, will support a woman’s right to have her unborn child cut to pieces in her womb (an odd ethical system, to my mind). Never mind, too, that the best of modern liberal ethical beliefs were built upon Judeo-Christian ethics.

Yahweh War

To understand what God was doing in Canaan, in addition to having a correct understanding of God’s existence and authority and of the consequences of sin, one must see it within the larger context of redemptive history.

One of the categories scholars use for such events as the battles in the conquest of Canaan is *Yahweh war*. Yahweh wars are battles recorded in Scripture that are prompted by God for His purposes and won by His power.^{8} Old Testament scholar Eugene Merrill describes Yahweh war this way: “God initiated the process by singling out those destined to destruction, empowering an agent (usually his chosen people Israel) to accomplish it, and guaranteeing its successful conclusion once the proper conditions were met.”^{9} These wars were “a constituent part of the covenant relationship” between Yahweh and Israel. “Israel . . . would not just witness God’s mighty deeds as heavenly warrior but would be engaged in bringing them to pass.”^{10}

There are numerous examples of Yahweh war in Scripture. In some of them, God fights the battle alone. Think of the

Israelites caught between the Egyptian army behind them and the sea in front. God told them, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. . . . The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent" (Exodus 14:13-14). They walked through the parted waters and watched them close down around the Egyptians behind them.

Another example is found in 2 Kings 18 and 19. When the Assyrians were about to attack Judah, King Sennacherib's representative threw down a challenge to Judah's God:

Do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, The LORD will deliver us. Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand (2 Kings 18:32-35)?

Unfortunately for the Assyrians, Yahweh decided to take them up on that challenge. Hezekiah prayed, and God answered through Isaiah:

"I will defend this city to save it," He said, "for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David." And that night the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies (2 Kings 19:34, 35).

Most of the time God had the Israelites help in the battle. So at Jericho, for example, God made the wall fall, and then the Israelites moved in and took the city. Numerous examples are given in Joshua and Numbers of the Israelites fighting the battle, with God making them victorious.

The involvement of God is a key point in the whole matter of

the conquest of Canaan. It wasn't just the Israelites moving in to take over like any other tribal people. It was commanded by God and accomplished by God. Merrill says this:

It is clear that the land was considered Israel's by divine right and that the nations who occupied it were little better than squatters. Yahweh, as owner of the land, would therefore undertake measures to destroy and/or expel the illegitimate inhabitants, and he would do so largely through his people Israel and by means of Yahweh war.[\[11\]](#)

The Israelites were not at heart a warrior tribe. There was no way they could have conquered the land of Canaan if they didn't have divine help. They escaped the Egyptians and moved into their new land by the power of Yahweh (Judges 6:9; Joshua 24:13).

Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman sees five phases of Yahweh war in the Bible. In phase one, God fought the flesh-and-blood enemies of Israel. In phase two, God fought against *Israel* when it broke its side of its covenant with God (cf. Deuteronomy 28:7, 25). In phase three, when Israel and Judah were in exile, God promised to come in the future as a warrior to rescue them from their oppressors (cf. Daniel 7).

In phase four there was a major change. When Jesus came, he shifted the battle to the *spiritual* realm; He fought spiritual powers and authorities, not earthly ones.

This change might explain a rather odd question asked by John the Baptist. When he was in prison, John had his disciples go and ask Jesus if he was the expected one (Matthew 11:2). Why would John have asked that? Didn't he baptize Jesus and understand then who he was? He did, but it could be that John was still looking for a *conquering* Messiah. Matthew 3 records John's harsh words to the Pharisees: "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matthew

3:10). Was he thinking this was imminent? Perhaps later when he was in prison John was still looking for an exercise of power against earthly rulers on Jesus' part. Notice how Jesus responded to John's disciples in Matthew 11. He told them about his miracles, his exercises of power in the spiritual realm. Then he made this curious comment: "And blessed is the one who is not offended by me" or does not "stumble over" me (v.6). He may simply have been thinking of people stumbling over him saying the he was the one who fulfilled Old Testament prophecies (see Isaiah 29:18; think also of Nichodemus' comment: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" [John 3:2].). It could be, however, that Jesus was urging John (and others) not to fall away on account of His *actual* program of fighting the battle at *that time* in the *spiritual* realm rather than militarily. Jesus conducted Yahweh war on spiritual powers in His healings and exorcisms and preeminently in His victory in the heavenlies by His death and resurrection (see Colossians 2:13-15).

Christians today are engaged in warfare on this level. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against . . . the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). We do not (or ought not!) advance the kingdom by the sword.

Phase five of Yahweh war will be the final battle of history when Jesus returns and will once again be military in nature. In Mark 13:26 and Revelation 1:7 we're presented with the imagery of Christ coming on a cloud, an imagery seen in the prophecy of Daniel: "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him" (Daniel 7:13). The cloud represents a war chariot.[\[12\]](#)

Summing up, Longman writes, "The war against the Canaanites was simply an earlier phase of the battle that comes to its climax on the cross and its completion at the final

judgment.” {13}

There are several aspects of Yahweh war, not all of which are seen in every battle narrative. Merrill names, among other aspects, the mustering of the people, the consecration of the soldiers, an oracle of God, and, at the end, the return to their homes or tents. {14}

The part that concerns us here—the real culmination of Yahweh war—is called *herem*. *Herem* literally means “ban” or “banned.” It means to ban from human use and to give over completely to God. The ESV and NIV give a fuller understanding of the term by translating it “devote to destruction” (the NASB renders it “set apart”). Exodus 22:20 reads, “Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction.” Deuteronomy 7:2, speaking of the conquest of the land, says, “and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them.” Tremper Longman writes that “*herem* refers to the climactic aspect of divine warfare: the offering of the conquered people and their possessions to the Lord.” {15}

Old Testament scholars Keil and Delitsch give a fuller understanding of the meaning of *herem* in their discussion of Lev. 27:29. They write,

Nothing put under the ban, nothing that a man had devoted (banned) to the Lord of his property, of man, beast, or the field of his possession, was to be sold or redeemed, because it was most holy. . . . [*Herem*], judging from the cognate words in Arabic . . . , has the primary signification ‘to cut off,’ and denotes that which is taken away from use and abuse on the part of men, and surrendered to God in an irrevocable and unredeemable manner, viz. human beings by being put to death, cattle and inanimate objects by being either given up to the sanctuary for ever or destroyed for

the glory of the Lord. . . . [T]here can be no doubt that the idea which lay at the foundation of the ban was that of a compulsory dedication of something which resisted or impeded sanctification; . . . it was an act of the judicial holiness of God manifesting itself in righteousness and judgment. [{16}](#)

The word used to translate *herem* in the Greek translation of the Old Testament—the Septuagint—is *anathema*, a word we encounter in the New Testament as well. There it is translated “accursed”. The same underlying meaning is seen in Gal. 1:8 and 9 where Paul says that anyone who preaches a gospel contrary to what he preaches is to be accursed. About this the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* says:

He who preaches a false gospel is delivered to destruction by God. . . . The curse exposes the culprits to the judicial wrath of God.

In this act of being handed over to God lies the theological meaning of the . . . ban curse. . . . [T]he person sentenced by the *anathema* is immediately delivered up to the judgment of God. [{17}](#)

A major difference, of course, is that, in the New Testament, the “sentence” isn’t carried out by people but by God.

Canaan, because of its sin, was to be devoted to destruction. And Israel was to be the instrument of God for the carrying out of judgment.

The Conquest of Canaan

Let’s turn now to look at the goals of the conquest of Canaan by Israel.

In this conquest, three things were being accomplished: the fulfillment of the promise of land, the judgment of the Canaanites, and the protection of the Israelites.

Possession of the Land

First, the movement of the Israelites into Canaan was the fruition of God's promises to Abram. We read in Genesis 12 where God promised Abram that He would produce a great nation through him (vv. 1, 2). When Abraham and his family reached Canaan, Yahweh appeared to him and said, "To your offspring I will give this land" (v.7). This promise was repeated to the people of Israel in the years following (cf. Exodus 33:1; Numbers 32:1). When Joshua led the people across the Jordan River into Canaan, he was fulfilling the promise. Since the land wasn't empty, they could only take possession of it by driving the Canaanites out.

Judgment of the Canaanites

The second goal of the conquest was the judgment of the Canaanites. Driving them out wasn't simply a way of making room for Israel. The Canaanites were an evil, depraved people who had to be judged to fulfill the demands of justice. What about these people prompted such a harsh judgment?

For one thing, the Canaanites worshiped other gods. In our pluralistic age, it's easy to forget what an offense that is to the true God. This sounds almost trivial today. As noted previously, Richard Dawkins mocks this "jealous" God. But since Yahweh is the true God who created us, He is the one who ought to be worshiped.

In the worship of their gods, the Canaanites committed other evils. They engaged in temple prostitution which was thought to be a re-enactment of the sexual unions of the gods and goddesses. Writes Bernhard Anderson:

The cooperation with the powers of fertility involved the dramatization in the temples of the story of Baal's loves and wars. Besides the rehearsal of this mythology, a prominent feature of the Canaanite cult was sacred prostitution (see Deut. 23:18). In the act of temple

prostitution the man identified himself with Baal, the woman with Ashtart [or Ashtoreth, the mother goddess]. It was believed that human pairs, by imitating the action of Baal and his partner, could bring the divine pair together in fertilizing union.[{18}](#)

Although the worship of other gods and temple prostitution might not be sufficient grounds for the overthrow of the Canaanites in the eyes of contemporary atheists, another of their practices should be. In their worship of their gods, Canaanites engaged in the detestable practice of child sacrifice.

The people of Canaan were viciously cruel. Christopher Hitchens speaks of the “Hivites, Canaanites, and Hittites” who were “pitilessly driven out of their homes to make room for the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel.”[{19}](#) (“Ungrateful” and “mutinous” are silly charges in themselves. Ungrateful to whom? I don’t recall the Canaanites issuing an open invitation for the Israelites to move in. And mutinous? Did the Canaanites have some kind of inherent rights to the land? They had taken it from other peoples earlier.) One might get the impression from Hitchens that these were good people (maybe in the mold of good modern Westerners of liberal persuasion) who were just minding their business when out of the blue came this ferocious band of peace-hating Israelites who murdered them and robbed them of their just possession! To speak of the Israelites being “pitiless” with respect to the Canaanites is worse than the pot calling the kettle black. Apparently Mr. Hitchens hasn’t bothered to read up on these people! If he had, he wouldn’t feel so sentimental about their demise. Writes Paul Copan,

The aftermath of Joshua’s victories are featherweight descriptions in comparison to those found in the annals of the major empires of the ANE [Ancient Near East]—whether Hittite and Egyptian (second millennium), Aramaean, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, or Greek (first millennium).

Unlike Joshua's brief, four-verse description of the treatment of the five kings (10:24–27), the Neo-Assyrian annals of Assurnasirpal (tenth century) take pleasure in describing the atrocities which gruesomely describe the flaying of live victims, the impaling of others on poles, and the heaping up of bodies for display.[{20}](#)

In addition to the Old Testament claims about child sacrifice by the Canaanites, there is extra-biblical evidence found by archaeologists as well.

Under the sanctuary in the ancient city of Gezer, urns containing the burnt bones of children have been found that are dated to somewhere between 2000 and 1500 BC, between the time of Abraham and the Exodus.[{21}](#) The practice continued among the Canaanites (and sometimes even among the Israelites) even up to the time Israel was deported to Assyria in the late eighth century BC. Jon D. Levenson, professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard, reports that thousands of urns containing human and animal bones were found in Carthage. "These human bones are invariably of children, and almost all of them contain the remains of not one but two children, usually from the same family, one often a newborn and the other 2-4 years of age." It is highly doubtful the urns represent a funerary custom, he says. "The frequency with which the urns were deposited makes it unlikely that natural death could account for all such double deaths in families in a city of such size."[{22}](#)

The Canaanites were so evil that God wanted their very name to perish from the earth. Moses said, "But the LORD your God will give them over to you and throw them into great confusion, until they are destroyed. And he will give their kings into your hand, and you shall make their name perish from under heaven. No one shall be able to stand against you until you have destroyed them" (Deuteronomy 7:23-24; see also 9:3).

Now, a critic today might be happier with a God who simply

showed Himself to the Canaanites and invited them to discuss the situation with Him, to negotiate. Wouldn't that be a more civilized way to deal with them? Of course, any criticism from an atheist will have behind it the belief that there is no God behind such events at all. But just to play along, we have to try to put ourselves in the mindset of people in the Ancient Near East to understand God's way of dealing with them. Philosophical reasoning wasn't the order of the day. God showed Himself to the Canaanites in a way they understood, just as He did earlier with the Egyptians. It might better suit the sensibilities of twentieth-century people for Yahweh to have convinced the Canaanites by rational argument of His existence and rightful place as Lord of the land, but it would have accomplished nothing then (and it doesn't work very well with a lot of people today, either!).

It was typical in ancient times for nations to see the power of gods in military victories. Recall the Rabshakeh's taunt in 2 Kings 18 that the gods of the other peoples they'd conquered hadn't done them any good. There is evidence of this understanding outside Scripture as well. For example, an ancient document with the title "Hymn of Victory of Mer-ne-Ptah" is from a thirteenth-century BC Egyptian ruler who gives praise to Ba-en-Re Meri-Amon, son of the god Re, for victory over Ashkelon, Gezer, and other lands.[{23}](#) In the ninth century BC, Mesha, a king of Moab, built a high place for the god Chemosh, "because he saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries."[{24}](#)

When the Israelites were about to attack Jericho, the prostitute Rahab helped the Israelite spies and offered this explanation for her help:

I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the

Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath" (Joshua 2:9-11).

God showed Himself through acts of power, and some people recognized it.

The Protection of Israel

The third goal of removing the Canaanites was the protection of Israel. God said that the Canaanites had grown so evil that "the land vomited out its inhabitants" (Leviticus 18:25). And He was concerned that, if they remained in the land, they would draw the Israelites into their evil practices and they, too, would be vomited out (v. 28).

How could the Canaanites have that much influence over the Israelites?

It might be thought that simply being the dominant power in the land would be sufficient to prevent a strong influence by inferior powers. However, the shift from the life of the nomad to the life of the farmer marked a major change in the life of the Israelites. The people of Israel hadn't been settled in one place for over forty years. The generation that entered the promised land knew only a nomadic life. They might easily have become enamored with the established cultural practices of the Canaanites. This happened with other nations in history. Anderson points out that the Akkadians who overcame the Sumerians were strongly influenced by Sumerian culture. Centuries later, Rome conquered the Greeks, but was greatly influenced by Greek culture. [\[25\]](#)

The most important danger for the Israelites was turning to the Canaanite gods. Today the way people have of dropping religion from their lives in favor of no religion isn't a model that would have been understood in the Ancient Near

East. The option of atheism or secularism was unknown then. People would serve one god or another or even many gods. If the Israelites turned away from Yahweh, they wouldn't slip into the complacent secular attitude that is so common today; they would transfer their allegiance to another god or gods.

God knew that, unless they kept the boundaries drawn very clearly, the Israelites would intermarry with the Canaanites who would bring their gods into the marriage and set the stage for compromise.

In Exodus 34, we see this connection:

Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods (vv. 12-16).

In addition, the Israelites would be tempted to imitate Canaanite religious rituals because of their close connection to Canaanite agricultural rhythms. Whether or not each year's crop was successful was of major importance to the Israelites. It would have been very tempting to act out Canaanite religious rituals as a way of insuring a good harvest. To do this didn't necessarily mean abandoning Yahweh. They tried to merge the two religions by adopting Canaanite methods in their worship of Yahweh. God had warned them not to do that (Deuteronomy 12:4, 30, 31). They couldn't straddle the fence for long.

The Israelites had much earlier shown how quickly they would

look for a substitute for the true God when Moses went up on the mountain to hear from God, recorded in Exodus 20-31. Moses took too long to come down for the people, so they demanded that Aaron make them some new gods to go before them. Aaron made a golden calf that the people could see and worship (Exodus 32:1-4). Worshiping gods that were visible in the form of statues was a central part of the religions of their day. It was what everyone did, so the Israelites fell into that way of thinking, too.

The book of Judges is witness to what happened by being in such close proximity to people who worshiped other gods. Repeatedly the Israelites turned away from Yahweh to other gods and were given over by God to their enemies.

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress (Jdg. 2:11-15).

Thus, God's judgment wasn't reserved just for the Canaanites. This was the second phase of Yahweh war. The Israelites had been warned (Deuteronomy 4:26; 7:4). By disobeying God, the Israelites experienced the same judgment meted out through them on the Canaanites.

“Save nothing alive that breathes” – Part 1

In Deuteronomy 20:16, Moses said the Israelites were to “save alive nothing that breathes” in the cities in their new land. The question has been raised whether God really intended the Israelites to kill *all* the people in the land. I’ll address three views on this which deny that the commands and/or reports about the battles are to be taken literally. The first is that the presence of such commands and reports are evidence that the Bible isn’t inerrant. The second is that the commands are clearly antithetical to the character of Jesus and so couldn’t have come from God. The third is that the commands are authentic but not intended to be taken literally. These three views are ones that are held by people who believe in God and take the Bible seriously.

Untrustworthy Records

Wesley Morrison, a Christian philosopher, believes the conquest narratives which tell of the slaughter of children are strong evidence against the inerrancy of Scripture. I won’t go into a defense of [inerrancy](#) here, nor will I present a detailed rebuttal, but it might be helpful to take a brief look at the basic framework of Morrison’s argument. [\[26\]](#) He writes:

Here is a more careful formulation of the argument that I wish to discuss.

1. God exists and is morally perfect.
2. So God would not command one nation to exterminate the people of another *unless He had a morally sufficient reason for doing so.*
3. According to various OT texts, God sometimes commanded the Israelites to exterminate the people of other nations.

4. It is highly *unlikely* that God had a morally sufficient reason for issuing these alleged commands.

5. So it is highly *unlikely* that everything every book of the OT says about God is true.

I believe that this argument constitutes quite a strong *prima facie* case against inerrancy. Unless a better argument can be found for rejecting its conclusion, then anyone who thinks that God is perfectly good should acknowledge that there are mistakes in some of the books of the OT. [{27}](#)

In response, I wonder how the argument might look if we *presuppose* inerrancy on *other* bases. Let premises 1 to 3 stand. Then add these premises:

4. Everything the OT says about God is true.

5. God, being perfectly holy, always has morally sufficient reasons for everything He does (acting in keeping with His morally perfect nature).

6. Therefore, God must have had morally sufficient reasons for exterminating the people.

When it has been decided on *other* bases that the Bible is without error, that itself becomes a foundational part of our consideration of the conquest narratives. We might not understand *why* God does some things, but we don't always need to. There are secret things that belong only to God (Deuteronomy 29:29).

A second view which casts doubt on the reliability of the conquest narratives is based on the character of Jesus. Theologian C. S. Cowles, for example, believes that, since Jesus is the best and fullest revelation of God, any characterizations of God that run counter to the character of Christ are wrong. "Jesus made it crystal clear," he writes, "that the 'kind of spirit' that would exterminate" [{28}](#) To show

Jesus' attitude toward children, Cowles points to Matt. 18:5,6: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." When the disciples tried to send people away who were bringing their children to Jesus to be blessed by him, he said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14). Surely Jesus would have nothing to do with the wholesale slaughter of innocent children, and thus it couldn't have been commanded by God.

As Eugene Merrill points out, in his insistence on separating God from violence, Cowles doesn't take seriously descriptions of God as a warrior elsewhere in Scripture.[{29}](#) Tremper Longman notes the connection of Jesus as divine warrior in the book of the Revelation with God as warrior in the book of Isaiah. In Revelation Jesus is described as wearing a robe dipped in blood (Revelation 19:13 / Isaiah 63:2, 3); he has a rod in his mouth (Revelation 19:15 / Isaiah 11:4b); he treads the winepress of his wrath (Revelation 19:15 / Isaiah 63:3).

To distance God from the stories of slaughter in the Old Testament, Cowles calls for a distinction between the parts of the Old Testament that Jesus endorsed and all the rest which must be rejected as an authentic witness of God.[{30}](#) As with Morrison, the recognition of both Testaments as equally inspired (and true) prior to an examination of particular parts will mean that such a distinction cannot be maintained.[{31}](#)

A Non-Literal Interpretation

Philosopher and apologist Paul Copan offers a detailed discussion of this issue in his article "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites." He sets forth two scenarios, one of which takes the commands as being typical of Ancient Near Eastern warfare

hyperbole (Scenario 1), and the other of which takes the commands at face value (Scenario 2). He says “we have excellent reason for thinking that Scenario 1 is correct and that we do not need to resort to the default position [Scenario 2].”[\[32\]](#) He believes that God didn’t really intend the Israelites to literally kill *everyone* in the cities they attacked. In his article “Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?” Copan writes,

The “obliteration language” in Joshua (for example, “he left no survivor” and “utterly destroyed all who breathed” [10:40]) is clearly hyperbolic. Consider how, despite such language, the text of Joshua itself assumes Canaanites still inhabit the land: “For if you ever go back and cling to the rest of these nations, these which remain among you, and intermarry with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know with certainty that the Lord your God will not continue to drive these nations out from before you” (23:12-13). Joshua 9-12 utilizes the typical ANE [Ancient Near Eastern] literary conventions of warfare.[\[33\]](#)

How could there be anyone left to marry if everyone was put to death?

In addition to this, drawing on the work of Richard Hess, Copan thinks that the cities which were attacked were primarily military fortresses occupied by soldiers and military leaders, Rahab of Jericho being an exception. Thus, the targets of the Israelites’ attacks were soldiers, not the citizens of the land.[\[34\]](#)

Hess makes the curious comment that “there is no indication in the text of any specific noncombatants who were put to death.”[\[35\]](#) This is so with respect to the accounts of the battles following the crossing of the Jordan. But one wonders what he makes of the vengeance taken on the Midianites recorded in Numbers 31. When the soldiers returned from defeating the Midianites, Moses was angry because they had

allowed the women to live. He commanded them, “Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him” (v. 17).

In addition, consider the instructions given in Deuteronomy 20 about warfare. Regarding cities far away, only the males were to be put to the sword; “the women and little ones” were to be taken as plunder (along with everything else; v.14). However, in the cities in the areas they would inhabit, the instruction was to “save alive nothing that breathes, but [to] devote them to complete devotion” (vv. 16, 17). If the distinction isn’t between sparing women and children and killing them, what is it? Hess says that Rahab and her family were the exceptions, but, given the instructions in Deuteronomy 20, perhaps she should be seen as further evidence that there were indeed civilians in these cities.

The distinction just noted along with what Israel did with the Midianites and the clear statement in Leviticus 27:29 that every person devoted to destruction was to be killed lead me to conclude that women and children were indeed put to death as Israel cleared the land of the Canaanites. If God *didn't* mean to kill everyone when it was commanded to “save alive nothing that breathes” (Dt. 20:16), how would He have said it if He *did*?

One further note. Even if we should conclude that the treatment of the Midianites was a unique event and that the army of Israel didn’t kill women and children in their battles, God still won’t be off the hook with critics. Women and children were surely killed in the Flood and in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“Save nothing alive that breathes” Pt. 2

Intermarriage

But this still leaves unanswered the matter of intermarriage.

Who would be left to marry if everyone was put to death?

Glen Miller explains how some would have remained. As he observes, the Israelites didn't sneak up on the Canaanites.^{36} People had heard about the Israelites and their God Yahweh, and they had plenty of time to get out of town. Before ever crossing the Jordan River, the Israelites took a whole swath of land from the middle of the Salt Sea on the east side up to the Sea of Chennerith, or the Sea of Galilee as it came to be known later (accounts can be read from Numbers 21 through 31). Recall Rahab's claim that the people of Jericho had heard about the victories given the Israelites by Yahweh. Likewise, Amorite kings heard about the Jordan River drying up for the Israelites to cross over and "their hearts melted and there was no longer any spirit in them because of the people of Israel" (Joshua 5:1). The inhabitants of Gibeon heard about what happened at Jericho and Ai and were so afraid they devised a deceptive scheme to protect themselves (Joshua 9).

Because of that advance warning, it is quite possible that some people abandoned their cities. Copan agrees:

When a foreign army might pose a threat in the ANE, women and children would be the first to remove themselves from harm's way—not to mention the population at large: "When a city is in danger of falling," observes Goldingay, "people do not simply wait there to be killed; they get out. . . . Only people who do not get out, such as the city's defenders, get killed."^{37}

There is no indication that the Israelites pursued people who escaped. Those who stayed, however, showed their obstinate determination to continue in their ways, and they were to be destroyed. (Joshua 2:9-11). Goldingay supposes that only the cities' defenders remained and were killed, but Moses clearly believed those who remained could include women and children.

Why wouldn't the Israelites have pursued those who escaped? To answer that we must determine what God's main purpose was in this series of events. Earlier I gave three reasons for the destruction of the Canaanites: possession of the land by the Israelites, judgment on the Canaanites, and the protection of Israel. All these worked together. Yahweh wanted to move the Israelites into a land of their own, but knew that for them to thrive and remain faithful to Him, they would have to be free of the influence of the Canaanites. The Canaanites were also ripe for judgment. Clearing the land, by whatever means, seems to have been the foremost goal.

Glen Miller points out that two kinds of words are used to describe what was to be done with the Canaanites: "dispossession" words and "destruction" words. He notes that the former are used by a three-to-one margin over the latter.[{38}](#) Here's an example of the former:

I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. . . . I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you" (Exodus 23:27, 28, 31).

Unlike the people in Ninevah who repented at the preaching of Jonah (Jonah 3:6-10), the people of Canaan resisted. Because of that, they had to be moved out by force. But their *presence* wasn't the only problem. Theirs was a debased culture, and it had to be destroyed. Thus, the Old Testament also speaks of the destruction of the Canaanites. Miller believes it was the *nations* that God intended to destroy more than the individual persons.[{39}](#) The cities represented the real power centers of the land, so to move the inhabitants out by terror or by destruction would have seriously weakened the nations.

If it's true that people escaped before the Israelites attacked, then it is possible that the Israelites would marry some of them.

Secondly (and more obviously), the Israelites could marry Canaanites who were not removed from the cities because of their (the Israelites') disobedience. As it turned out, Moses' warning in Deutonomy 4:25-28 became prophetic. Starting in Judges 1:27 we read that tribe after tribe of Israelites did not drive out all the inhabitants of the cities they inhabited. Verse 28, for example, tells us that "it came about when Israel became strong, that they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but they did not drive them out completely."

With all this as background, I think we can understand why Moses both commanded that literally everyone was to be destroyed in the cities taken *and* warned the Israelites against intermarriage. The cities, the power centers of Canaanite wicked and idolatrous culture, were to be destroyed along with everyone who obstinately refused to leave. People who escaped could possibly have intermarried with the Israelites. And when the various tribes failed to deal appropriately with the Canaanites, they eventually mixed with them in marriage and in the broader society as well.

The Children

The most disturbing part of the conquest of Canaan for most people is the killing of children. After the defeats of both Heshbon and Bashan, Moses noted that they had "devoted to destruction every city, men, women, and children" (Deuteronomy 2:34; 3:3, 6). Why would God have ordered that?

No matter what explanation of the death of children is given, no one except the most cold hearted will find joy in it. God didn't. He gets no pleasure in the death of anyone. In Ezekiel 18:23 we read, "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should

turn from his way and live?" (see also Ezekiel 33:11). When God told Abraham He was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham pleaded for them, and God agreed in His mercy that if but only ten righteous people were found, He wouldn't do it. Long after the conquest of the land, when God decided He would have to destroy Moab, according to Isaiah God "wept bitterly" over her cities (Isaiah 16:9; cf. 15:5).

But what about Deuteronomy 24:16 which says that children shall not be put to death because of their fathers' sins? Isn't there an inconsistency here?

The law given in Deuteronomy provided regulations for the people of Israel. In the course of normal life, children weren't to be punished for the sins of their fathers. The situation in Canaan was different. Generation after generation of Canaanites continued in the same evil practices. What was to stop it? God knew it would take the destruction of those nations.

Here are a few factors to take into consideration.

First, the sins of parents, *just like their successes*, have an impact on their children.

Second, if the Canaanite children were allowed to live and remain in the land, they could very well act to avenge their parents when they grew up, or at least to pick up again the practices of their parents.

Third, if one holds that there is an age of accountability for children, and that those younger than that are received into heaven with God when they die, although the means of death were frightful and harsh, the Canaanite children's experience after death would be better than if they'd continued to live among such a sinful people. [{40}](#) How persuasive this thought is will depend on how seriously we take biblical teaching about our future after the grave.

These ideas may provide little consolation. But we must keep in mind that God is not subject to our contemporary sensibilities.^{41} If we're going to find peace with much of the Bible, we will have to accept that. There is much to offend in Scripture: the burden of original sin; that the Israelites were permitted to keep slaves; the gospel itself (1 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 5:11); the headship of the husband. How about commands about servanthood, suffering for the gospel, and dying to oneself? Such things may still not be as offensive to us as the killing of children, but our sensibilities—especially those of modern individualistic Westerners who haven't grasped the seriousness of sin and of worshiping other gods—do not raise us to the level of judging God. We cannot evaluate this on the basis of contemporary secular ethical thought.

The only test we can put to God is consistency with His own nature and word. Yahweh is a God of justice as well as mercy. He is also a God who takes no more pleasure in the death of adults than in those of children.

This doesn't resolve the issue, but I'll just point out (again) that it's hard to swallow the revulsion people feel at this who themselves support abortion rights. It's well known that the unborn feel pain, and that late term abortion methods are abominable practices, ones pro-choicers wouldn't tolerate if performed on animals. A critic might hastily claim that I am employing a *tu quoque* argument here, but I'm not (that is the fallacy of defending something on the basis that the other person does it, too). I'm not offering it as a defense of the killing of children in the Old Testament. The purpose of the observation is intended simply to make critics stop and think about the charge they are making. It's rather like the adage, "One who lives in a glass house shouldn't throw stones."

Final Comments

Another term used in place of *Yahweh war* is *holy war*. We think of holy war primarily in the context of Islam. Critics may try to paint with a broad brush and claim that what the Israelites did to their neighbors was no different than modern day Islamic *jihad*. How might we respond?

I noted early in this article that the conquest of Canaan presupposed a particular theological background. The one true God was moving His people into their new home and meting out judgment to the Canaanites at the same time. Such warfare could only be conducted at the command of God. After the Israelites rebelled at the news of the spies that the inhabitants of the land were strong and their cities were large and fortified, God pronounced judgment on them. To try to make it up, the Israelites took it on themselves to go up into the land and fight. Moses pled with them not to, but they did anyway, and they were defeated (Numbers 14). Even having the ark of the covenant with them wasn't sufficient when they fought against the Philistines apart from the will of God in the time of Samuel (1 Samuel 4:1-11). As Eugene Merrill says, *God* was the protagonist in *Yahweh war*. If He was not behind it, it would fail. Since today the battle has shifted to the spiritual level, there is no place for military warfare in the service of the advance of God's kingdom. Muslims who engage in *jihad* are not fighting on the side of the true God. Furthermore, for the atheist to criticize Christianity today for what God did a very long time ago is to show a lack of understanding of the progress of revelation and the development of God's plan. What has Jesus called us to do? That is what matters today.

Apologists have the task of answering challenges to biblical faith. We talk about Christianity being "reasonable," and we want to show it to be so. But reasonable by whose standards? The laws of logic are valid no matter one's religious beliefs.

But we aren't here talking about the laws of logic. We're talking about moral issues. By whose moral standard will we judge God? We can clarify the conflict between the Canaanites and Israelites to non-believers. We can also appeal to the ethical principles we know Western secularists accept (e.g., prohibitions against child sacrifice). But, bottom line, the only way we can appease modern Westerners in this matter is to deny the inspiration of the text or to re-interpret the text and so to distance ourselves from what the Israelites did. We certainly shouldn't do the former, and we have to be careful with the latter.

One final note. Our own circumstances will weigh heavily in how we read such texts. Not being oppressed ourselves, we view apparent oppressors (in this case the Israelites) with a jaundiced view. What about people who *are* oppressed?

Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim quotes Walter Brueggemann, another OT scholar. "'It is likely that the violence assigned to Yahweh is to be understood as counterviolence, which functions primarily as a critical principle in order to undermine and destabilize other violence.' And so," Fretheim continues, "God's violence is 'not blind or unbridled violence,' but purposeful in the service of a nonviolent end. In other words, God's violence, whether in judgment or salvation, is never an end in itself, but is always exercised in the service of God's more comprehensive salvific purposes for creation: the deliverance of slaves from oppression (Exodus 15:7; Psalm 78:49–50), the righteous from their antagonists (Psalm 7:6–11), the poor and needy from their abusers (Exodus 22:21–24; Isaiah 1:23–24; Jeremiah 21:12), and Israel from its enemies (Isaiah 30:27–33; 34:2; Habakkuk 3:12–13)." Quoting Abraham Heschel, he continues, "'This is one of the meanings of the anger of God: the end of indifference' with respect to those who have suffered human cruelty. In so stating the matter, the divine exercise of wrath, which may include violence, is finally a

word of good news (for those oppressed) and bad news (for oppressors).”[\[42\]](#)

Notes

1. This article is a more detailed version of my “[God and the Canaanites](#)” which aired on Probe. That version is available on our Web site as well.

2. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008), 51.

3. Ibid., 278-79.

3. William Lane Craig, “Slaughter of the Canaanites,” Reasonablefaith.org,

www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5767.

5. Seymour Rossel, *The Holocaust: An End to Innocence*, chap. 15, “Genocide,” www.rossel.net/Holocaust15.htm.

From “Convention on the Punishment and Prevention of the Crime of Genocide,” University of the West of England, at: <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/>.

6. Later I’ll mention the goal of fulfilling the promise of land to Abraham. To fulfill that promise, God needed only to move the Canaanites out.

7. Here I’m talking specifically about the command to destroy them.

8. The phrases “the Lord’s battles” or “battles of the Lord” which make this clear are found in 1 Sam. 18:17 and 25:28. In Deut. 20 one can find the most succinct biblical description of Yahweh war.

9. Eugene H. Merrill, “The Case for Moderate Discontinuity,” in C. S. Cowles, Eugene H. Merrill, Daniel L. Gard, and Tremper Longman III, *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 65.

10. Ibid., 66.

11. Ibid., 67.

12. Tremper Longman III, “The Case for Spiritual Continuity,” in Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy*, 182.

13. Ibid., 185.

14. Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity," 69.
15. Longman, "The Case for Spiritual Continuity," 172.
16. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, trans., James Martin, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1: The Pentateuch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 484-485.
17. Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978); s.v. "Curse" by H. Aust and D. Müller, I:415.

18. Bernhard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1957), 98. See also Jack Finegan, *Myth and Mystery* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 133.
19. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 101; quoted in Copan "Is God a Moral Monster?"
20. Paul Copan, "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites," *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 1 (2009): 73-92; www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=63.
21. M.G. Kyle, "Canaan," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, James Orr, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 550.
22. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 20-21.
23. "Hymn of Victory of Mer-ne-Ptah," in James B. Pritchard, ed. *The Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, *An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1958), 231.
24. "The Moabite Stone," in Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East*, 209.
25. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 93-94; 96-103.
26. Paul Copan offers an response to Morrision's argument in his "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites."
27. Wesley Morrision, "Did God Command Genocide? A Challenge to the Biblical Inerrantist," *Philosophia Christi*, 11, no. 1 (2009): 7-26.
28. C. S. Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," in Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy*, 26.

29. Merrill, "A Response to C. S. Cowles," in C. S. Cowles, et al, *Show Them No Mercy*, 49.
30. Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," 33.
31. More detailed responses to this argument are found in the responses to C. S. Cowles in *Show Them No Mercy*, 47-60.
32. Paul Copan, "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites," *Philosophia Christi* 11, no. 1 (2009): 73-92; www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=63.
33. Paul Copan, "Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?", *Philosophia Christi* 10, no. 1 (2008): 7-37; www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=45. Copan also refers to Deut. 7:2-3 as evidence of this. See also his discussion in "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites."
34. See Copan, "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites."
35. Richard S. Hess, "War in the Hebrew Bible: An Overview," in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 25; quoted in Copan, "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites."
36. Glenn M. Miller, "How could a God of Love order the massacre/annihilation of the Canaanites?" on the web site A Christian Thinktank, christianthinktank.com/qamorite.html.
37. Copan, "Yahweh Wars and the Canaanites," quoting John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), chap. 5.
38. Miller, "How could a God of Love order the massacre/annihilation of the Canaanites?"
39. Copan says similarly that "wiping out Canaanite religion was far more significant than wiping out the Canaanites themselves." See his "Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?"
40. Cf. Paul Copan, "How Could a Loving God Command Genocide," in *That's Just Your Interpretation* (Grand Rapid: Baker, 2001), 165.
41. And I say "contemporary" because children weren't regarded as highly in the Ancient Near East as they are today. People may not have found this as appalling as we do today (because it so out of keeping with our experience).

[42. Terence Fretheim, "God and Violence in the Old Testament," *Word and World*, 24, no. 1 \(Winter 2004\); accessed online at \[www2.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/24-1_Violence/24-1_Fretheim.pdf\]\(http://www2.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/24-1_Violence/24-1_Fretheim.pdf\); quoting Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* \(Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997\), 244, and Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* \(New York: Harper&Row, 1962\), 284.](#)

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A Trial in Athens – Apologetics in the New Testament

Acts 17 provides one of the best examples of Paul engaging in apologetics in the New Testament. Rick Wade shows how Paul finds a point of contact with people to get a hearing.

The Apologist Paul

When we think of a biblical basis for apologetics, we typically think of Peter's brief comments about defending the faith in 1 Pet. 3:15. We don't typically think of *Paul* as an apologist. But in his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul said that they were "partakers with [him] in the defense and confirmation of the faith" (1:7; see also v.16). Apologetics was a significant aspect of Paul's ministry.

An event that has received a great amount of attention in the study of Paul's ministry is his address to the Areopagus in Athens, recorded in Acts 17: 16-34. That address will be my topic in this article. Maybe we can be encouraged by Paul's

example to speak out for Christ the way he did.

Athens was still a significant city in Paul's day. Although not so much a major political power, it retained its prestige for its cultural and intellectual achievements.^{1} What we see today as the art treasures of the ancient world, however, Paul saw as images of gods and places for their worship. And there were a lot of them.

Being provoked by this in his spirit, Paul began telling people about Jesus. He made his way to the synagogue as he had done in various cities before.^{2} There he bore witness to Jews and to God-fearing Gentiles.

He also went to the Agora—the marketplace—to talk with the citizens of Athens.^{3} Among them were Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. After hearing him for a bit, the philosophers started calling Paul a “babblers,” a term of derision that meant literally “seed picker.” F. F. Bruce wrote that “[this word] was used of one who picked up scraps of learning here and there and purveyed them where he could.”^{4}

Peddlers of strange new religious beliefs were fairly common in those days. But this was a risky thing to do. It was unlawful to teach the worship of gods that hadn't been officially authorized.^{5} Not long before this event, Paul was dragged into the marketplace in Philippi for “advocating customs unlawful for . . . Romans to accept or practice” (Acts 16:19-21). Eventually the people of Athens took Paul to the Areopagus, a powerful court which had authority in matters of religion and philosophy.^{6} They wanted to know about these strange new ideas he was presenting.

Paul had the opportunity to tell the highest religious and philosophical body in Athens about the true God.

Greek Religion

As Paul looked around the city of Athens, his spirit was provoked within him. The people of Athens had surrounded themselves with idols that obscured the reality of the one true God.

Other historical writings affirm the prominence of religion in Athens. For example, a second century writer named Pausanias claimed that “the Athenians are far more devoted to religion than other men.”[{7}](#) His description of Athens names statue after statue, temple after temple. There were statues of gods everywhere, even on the mountains. There were temples built to Athena, Poseidon, Hephaestus, Zeus, Artemis, Ares, and more.

Paul spoke of the altar to the unknown god (Acts 17:23). There were quite a few such altars in those days. The late New Testament scholar, Bertil Gärtner, wrote that these altars were erected “either because an unknown god was considered the author of tribulations or good fortune, or because men feared to pass over some deity.”[{8}](#)

Greco-Roman religion was mainly about myth and ritual. Myths were the religious explanations of life and the world, and rituals were reenactments of them. Religion was mostly about appeasing the gods with the proper sacrifices to gain their favor and avoid their wrath.

Although morality wasn't closely associated with religion, that isn't to say that the way one lived was irrelevant.[{9}](#) As described in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the souls of the dead were led by the god Hermes to the depths of the earth to await the decision about their eternal place. The guilty were sent to “dark Tartarus.” The pious went to the Elysian Fields.[{10}](#) In later years, the place of the blessed souls was said to be in the celestial realm. The afterlife, however, was still one of a shadowy existence.

There was no sacred/profane distinction in the Greco-Roman world; religion was not only a part of everyday life, it was integral to all the rest. Because of that, Christianity was not just a threat to religious belief; it threatened to upset all of culture. This is why Paul ran into such harsh opposition not only in Athens but also in Lystra and Philippi and Ephesus.

We live in a pluralistic society today. So did the apostles. But this did not stop the spread of the gospel. As we see at the end of Acts 17, some people did abandon their pluralism for faith in the one true God.

Epicureanism

When Paul went to the Agora in Athens to tell people about Jesus, he encountered some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

Epicureanism and Stoicism had “an influence that eclipsed that of all rival [philosophical] schools.”[{11}](#) The late British scholar Christopher Stead wrote that they “offered a practical policy for ordering one’s life which could appeal to the ordinary man. It has been argued that this was especially needed in the disorientation caused by the decline of the Greek city-states in the face of Alexander’s empire.”[{12}](#)

The school of Epicureanism was founded by Epicurus in the fourth century BC. His primary goal was to help people find happiness and peace of mind. He taught that a happy life is one in which pleasure predominates. These pleasures shouldn’t, however, cause any harm or discomfort. They aren’t found in a life of debauchery. Drinking and revelry just bring pain and confusion.[{13}](#) Pleasure was to be found in living a peaceful life in the company of like-minded friends. The intellectual pleasures of contemplation were the highest, because they could be experienced even if the body suffered.

There was more to Epicureanism than simply a lifestyle,

however. Epicureans held two basic beliefs which stand in stark contrast to the message Paul preached to the Areopagus. These beliefs were thought to provide the basis for a tranquil life.

First, although Epicureans believed in the existence of the gods, they believed the gods had no interest in the affairs of people. Epicurus taught that the gods were very much like the Epicureans; they were examples of the ideal tranquil life. Although Epicureans might participate in religious ceremonies and “honour the gods for their excellence,”[{14}](#) they didn’t seek the gods’ favor through sacrifice.

A second key belief was the denial of the afterlife. Epicurus taught that after death comes extinction. According to their cosmogony, the world was created when atoms, falling through space, began to collide and form bodies. Like the heavenly bodies, we also are merely material beings. When we die, our material bodies decay and we no longer exist.[{15}](#) Thus, there was no fear of judgment in an afterlife.

Stoicism

As Paul mingled with the people in the Athenian Agora, he spoke not only with Epicureans, but with Stoics as well.

Stoicism was a school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Cyprus who lived from 335 to 263 BC. During a time of political instability, Stoicism “provided a means for maintaining tranquility amid the struggles of life.”[{16}](#) As with Epicurus, freedom from fear was a motivating force in Zeno’s thought.[{17}](#)

What did the Stoics believe that released them from fear? Stoicism changed over the centuries, but this is a good general description.

While the Epicureans believed the gods didn’t get involved in

the affairs of people on earth, Stoics denied the existence of personal gods altogether.

Stoics believed the—universe began with fire that differentiated itself into the other basic elements of water, air, and earth. The universe was composed purely of matter. The coarser matter made up the physical bodies we see. The finer matter was defused throughout everything and held everything together. This they called *logos* (reason) or sometimes breath or spirit or even fire. The idea of *logos* meant there was a rational principle operating in the universe.

Because the universe was thought to be ordered by an inbuilt *principle* and not by a *mind*, Stoics were deterministic. This raises a question, though. If everything was determined, what would that mean for ethics? Virtue was of supreme importance for Stoics. How could one choose the good if one's actions are determined? One answer given was this: while *people* had the freedom to choose, the universe would do what it was determined to do. But if one wanted to live well, one had to live rationally in keeping with the rational order of the universe. To do otherwise was to make oneself miserable.

Some Stoics believed that the universe would one day erupt in a great fire from which would come another universe. Others thought the universe was eternal. Some believed that in future universes, people would repeat their lives over and over. Others believed that death was the end of a person's existence. In either case, there was no immortality as we understand it.

Thus, Stoics sought peace in their troubled times by denying the existence of meddling gods and an afterlife that would bring judgment.

Paul's Speech

When Paul was allowed to speak before the Areopagus, he made a strategic move. By pointing to the altar to the unknown god, and later referring to the comments of the Greeks' own poets, he averted the charge of introducing new gods. At least on the surface!

Having brought their admitted ignorance to light, Paul told them about the true God. His declaration that a personal God made the heavens and the earth was a direct challenge to the Epicureans and Stoics. His announcement that God didn't live in temples or need the service of people was a challenge to the practices of the religious Greeks.

Paul told them that God wasn't far off and unknown. The phrase "in him we live, and move, and have our being," which refers to Zeus, likely comes from Epimenides of Crete. The line, "we are his offspring," is found in a poem by Aratus.[{18}](#) Paul wasn't equating Zeus with God, but was telling them *which* God they were really near to.

Then Paul delivered a charge to the people. God was overlooking their time of ignorance and calling them to repent.[{19}](#) This was more than simply a call to a virtuous life as with the philosophers or a call to perform the required sacrifices to the gods. This repentance was necessary, Paul said, for God has set a time to judge the world through His appointed man, and that judgment is assured by the raising of that man from the dead. (2:26)

This was too much for the people of Athens for a few reasons. First, Paul presented an entirely different cosmology. History, he told them, was bound by the creation of God on one end and the judgment of God on the other. Second, there was no room for a historical resurrection in Greek thought. The dyings and risings of their gods didn't occur in space-time history.

By attacking the Greeks' religion, Paul attacked the foundations of their whole cultural structure. New Testament scholar Kavin Rowe writes that, because religion was so interwoven with the rest of life, Paul's visit to Athens –and to Lystra, Philippi, and Ephesus as well– “[displays] . . . the collision between two different ways of life.”^{20}

The gospel we proclaim doesn't just lay claim to our religious beliefs. It affects our entire lives. Paul knew what was central to the Greeks, what was the core issue that had to be addressed. Likewise, we need to know the fundamental worldview beliefs of our neighbors and how to address them with an approach that will get us a hearing.

Notes

1. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 349.
2. Acts 13 gives a good picture of how Paul presented the gospel to his fellow Jews.
3. The Web site Ancient Athens 3D gives an interesting visual representation of the Agora, the marketplace, as it looked in Paul's day. ancientathens3d.com/romagoralEn.htm.
4. Bruce, *Acts*, 351, n. 20.
5. Charles Carter and Ralph Earle, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 256, and Richard N. Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostle,” *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed., J.D. Douglas, assoc. ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976-1992), CD.
6. See C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 31.
7. Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, “Attica”, 1:24:1, written c. AD 160, www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/pausanias-bk1.html
8. Bertil Edgar Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis, vol. 21 (Uppsala, 1955), 245, quoted in Everett Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 270. See also

the discussion in Carter and Earle, *Acts*, 259.

9. This may seem inconsistent. But one must keep in mind that religion wasn't one aspect of life that was clearly distinguishable from the rest. Life was all of a piece in the ancient world.

10. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 233.

11. Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge, 1998), 40.

12. Ibid.

13. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, quoted in Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, bk. 1, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1985), 407-08.

14. Copleston, *History*, 406.

15. Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, 42.

16. Kelly James Clark, Richard Lints, and James K.A. Smith, *101 Key Terms in Philosophy and Their Importance for Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), s.v. "Stoicism."

17. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 333.

18. Carter and Earle note that this line also appears in Cleanthes' Hymn to Zeus. I credited Aratus with the line because F. F. Bruce notes that Kirsopp Lake "points out that the immediately following lines of Aratus's poem have 'a strong general resemblance to v. 26 of the Areopagitica'" (Bruce, *Acts*, 360, n. 50). It could be that Aratus got it from Cleanthes (cf. Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 37-38).

19. Some Christians hold that the Greek word for "repent," *metanoēō*, means merely to change one's mind. This sometimes comes up in Lordship salvation debates. The basic meanings of the two parts of the word aren't sufficient for understanding its use. *Metanoēō*, in the New Testament, denotes conversion. "The predominantly intellectual understanding of *metanoēō* as change of mind plays very little part in the NT. Rather the decision by the whole man to turn round is stressed. It is clear that we are concerned neither with a purely outward turning nor with a merely intellectual change of ideas." Colin

Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1975), s.v., "Conversion, 358).

20. Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 50, 51.

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Teaching at Word of Life in Romania & Hungary

Editor's Note: The vision of Probe Ministries—to free 50 million captives and build them into confident ambassadors for Christ by 2020—promises to involve some 20 million believers overseas. Trips by Probe staff members near the time of this writing include destinations like Burundi, the Philippines, Belarus and—the topic of this report featuring Don and Deanne Closson, two of our staff veterans—Hungary and Romania. We hope you'll feel you have an insider's view of helping people think biblically and prepare to pass on a Christian worldview.

One of the things I enjoy about working at Probe is our tradition of partnering with churches and other ministry organizations. An example is Probe's partnership with Word of Life Fellowship (WOL) both here in the U.S. and overseas. The relationship began when our National Director Kerby Anderson taught at WOL in New York, and later at some of their international campuses. Additional Probe staff members began teaching other courses. In January, 2010, my wife Deanne and I had the privilege of traveling to WOL schools in Romania and Hungary.



Actually, our invitation to Romania came about during our first trip to Hungary in 2008. Deanne and I became friends with students Alin and Iuliana Muntean and their 4-year-old daughter, Ruthie. Alin and Iuliana were mature beyond their years, serious students, and active evangelists in the various WOL outreaches. When we let them know that we were returning to Hungary this year, they invited us to Romania to teach as well! WOL Bible Training and Discipleship Center is only two years old but already has fourteen students. Needless to say, we were thrilled to accept their invitation.



Our four-day stay in Romania was a busy one. My class was made up of seven second-year students. I taught five hours a day on Apologetics and Worldviews as well as a one hour chapel that challenged our very capable translator, Wanna. She had an amazing ability to translate difficult abstract ideas from English into Romanian. Her skills became evident as the students asked pertinent questions that demonstrated their grasp of the topics. They

were eager to receive the apologetics information on the reliability of the Bible, the deity of Christ, answers to the problem of evil and other topics. I also spent one evening helping them to think through a response to the local Jehovah's Witnesses whom most had encountered. It was a lively discussion particularly when they realized they now have biblical answers to those false claims. Deanne sat in on the classes to interact with the students too. She prayed with the girls during a devotion and is continuing friendships with them via email.



Although we only had a few days to spend with Alin and his family, we sensed the considerable burden they were carrying as temporary leaders of the ministry. The director of WOL Romania is in the U.S. until May on a fundraising trip, leaving Alin and Iuliana in charge. Alin was not only overseeing the large building project but was also teaching classes, leading the other staff members, and serving with the various ministry outreaches into the local community.





On top of that, Alin, Iuliana, and Ruthie (now almost seven) live humbly in two of the small student dorm rooms because there isn't enough money yet to finish the construction of their WOL house (shown here). We were touched by Alin's love for the Lord, his family, and a desire to maintain a healthy team atmosphere in light of a demanding work schedule. Please join us in praying for this new outpost for the gospel in Romania and for Alin, Iuliana, and little Ruthie as they depend on God for their needs.

As Iuliana wrote in a recent email:

Thank you so much for praying for us. We need it so much! Thank you for your sensitivity for us and the students as well. God is faithful and will do even more we can ask or think. Thank you for your care!

From Bucharest we were on to Budapest. Fog made it impossible to land in Budapest or at a secondary airport so we circled back to our starting point and the airline put us up in a nice hotel. One benefit to our detour was getting to know Andrassy, a 29-year-old Romanian businessman who lives in Budapest who translated for us. When he found out that I was teaching apologetics at a Bible institute in Budapest, he mentioned that he had grown up going to Bible camps similar to those of WOL. Andrassy told us that he was recently engaged to be married and had yet to find a church to attend in Budapest. We

offered to ask our friends in Hungary for recommendations and to send them to him, which we did.



Our time in Hungary was also extremely rewarding. I had thirty students from nine different countries for a course on the cults covering the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology, Kabala, the Unification Church, and others. Thanks to the expertise of our translator Chris, the students seemed to enjoy the class and always had great questions. In an hour-long chapel I offered a response to the accusations by the so-called "New Atheists" that there is not enough evidence for God's existence and that religion is the major source of wars in the world. I could tell that this information was new to the students. Afterwards, one student asked if he could meet with me. We ended up discussing for hours a variety of topics over two separate days. Since his list of questions about the Bible and Christianity was long, I agreed to work through the ones we didn't cover and email my replies to him. It was encouraging to me that this young man is serious enough about his faith that he wants answers to important questions.



The WOL ministry in Hungary is having a significant impact both in the Bible Institute and with evangelistic teams. While we were there, a team was invited to present a drama in Czech schools. Eleven boys met with one of the WOL staff members to talk about Christ after seeing the play, "Born to a Living Hope." WOL is very serious about evangelism and has effective tools to share Christ in schools, prisons, and in open-air settings. The ministry also has ambitious plans for the 100-year-old historic structure on their property. They have just rebuilt the roof of the building and hope to build new classroom and office space on the third floor.

Our time in Romania and Hungary was a great blessing. Now that we are home, I am meeting with a young man studying as an intern with Probe. I met John Nienaber, an Indiana native, when he was a student at WOL Hungary in 2008. He caught the "apologetics bug" and has wanted to learn more ever since.





WOL has ministry in sixty countries around the world and certainly could benefit from our prayers and support. Please pray for Alin and Iuliana Muntean in Romania as well as their students and staff. Pray too for Director Alex Konya, the students, and the rest of the staff in Toalmas, Hungary, that they will be able to continue their renovations for improved classrooms and as they witness to those in the surrounding eastern European nations. Pray for John Nienaber as he gains new tools for his apologetics toolbelt. Finally, pray for the Probe staff (Pat Zukeran was in Hungary last November and Michael Gleghorn taught there in March) as we link arms with partners such as Word of Life and other great ministries.

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Lessons from Camp Quest

In August of this year, the North Texas Church of Freethought (NTCOF) hosted Camp Quest Texas on a farm outside of Dallas. This eight-hour event for children of atheists, agnostics and other “free thinkers” included nearly 40 children between the ages of five and 15. According to a published report^{[\[1\]](#)}, the

day began with an exercise in making up creation myths based on the Apache story of fire before leading into activities with exotic animals, fossils and staged UFO sightings. The primary purposes of the event were twofold:

- *Encourage the children to have open minds and embrace scientific skepticism*
- *Provide a fun experience for the children where they could make friends among the community of non-believers. This objective was partially motivated by a desire to counter negative experiences some of the children had experienced with schoolmates who believed in God.*

Let me begin by stating that I applaud the organizers and parents for taking positive steps to encourage their children to ask good questions and look for good answers. Even though I suspect that the event was slanted towards promoting an atheistic worldview, I believe all parents should assume an obligation to steer their children toward the truth as they see it. At the very least, they should equip their children to see through the illogical arguments of some enthusiastic proponent of a cultic religion (even if they think that I am just such a proponent!).

The newspaper account of this event and an accompanying interview with the executive director of NTCOF can teach us several lessons as we evangelicals take on the task of raising younger generations.

Background

Before looking for takeaway lessons, let's investigate a little more background. Zachary Moore, the executive director for NTCOF, described their church this way:

"We're a church of freethinkers, which means that we try to understand the natural world by relying on reason and

evidence. Like most people, we enjoy spending time with others who share our values and have similar interests. Forming a church just seemed like the natural thing to do, since many of us thought the only thing wrong with churches were the strange things they told you to believe in.”[\[2\]](#)

At one time, Zachary considered himself a believer in Christianity. At some point, he came to the conclusion that the evidence did not support his belief in God. As he said,

“If Christianity were true, then I would want at least what Doubting Thomas got. If another theistic worldview were true, then I’d need something equivalent. I don’t think it’s too much to ask to be able to talk to a deity personally before I’m asked to worship it.”[\[3\]](#)

This question, “If God wants me to believe in Him, why doesn’t He present me personally with overwhelming evidence?” is one of the classic hard questions raised against our faith. The purpose of this article is not to answer this question, but if you want more information you can find it at Probe.org (see related articles).

Zachary and the NTCOF represent a point of view that is heavily in the minority among Americans, but is growing more vocal as it grows numerically. Recent Pew Institute surveys indicate that the number of atheists, agnostics and others who claim no faith is less than 10% of the population. However, a 2007 Barna survey provides a revealing look inside that statistic.

The table below shows the number of people with “no faith” in each age demographic based on surveys taken in 1992 and 2007. The data reveals two important trends. First, the number of people claiming no faith in God in 2007 grows markedly higher with each younger generation, more than tripling from the 6% for those over 61 to 19% for those from 18–22. Second, the percentages for each generation have not changed significantly

in the last fifteen years. We don't see more people turning to faith as they grow older. It appears that the skeptics remain skeptics as each generation ages.

Percent of Americans who are atheist or agnostic^{4}:

<u>Generation</u>	<u>Ages in 2007</u>	<u>1992 Survey</u>	<u>2007 Survey</u>
Adult Mosaics	18-22	–	19%
Boomers	23-41	16%	14%
Busters	42-60	8%	9%
Elders	61+	4%	6%

Could it be that our secular schools, culture and public square are creating their expected result—generations that are becoming more and more secular? It also appears that on average, once people reach the age of 18, their belief in God is pretty much set for life.

How should we respond to this trend of succeeding generations turning away from God? I believe the report on Camp Quest reveals some lessons we can take away and apply to this question. I want to consider three possible lessons:

- *Respect those who express doubts*
- *Understand that the Truth is not afraid of skepticism (or scientific inquiry)*
- *Don't be intimidated by an unfriendly world.*

Respect Those Who Express Doubts

Many of the children attending Camp Quest felt like they are living in a culture where it is taboo to ask the question, "Why should I believe in God?"

One fourteen year old boy “was at camp hoping to meet some nonbelievers his age. All his friends in Allen believe in God, he said, and he tries to keep his atheism a secret from them. ‘They’d probably avoid me if they knew,’ he said.”{5}

“Another boy, 14, whose stepfather requested his anonymity, started home-schooling this year after enduring years of bullying for his open atheism.”{6}

In my opinion, looking at the experience of the Quest campers gives startling insight into the issue of teenagers from Christian homes turning away from the church in their college years.

Consider a teenager from a Christian family who has questions about the God they learned about in Sunday school. Where can they get some answers to the tough questions? They look around and see how their peers and parents react to other children who question the party line. They realize they may risk status with their peers if they ask these questions. So, at a time when they are around Christian adults on a regular basis who could help them deal with the tough questions and the evidence for God, they are intimidated into keeping silent. Once they leave the home for college or other vocations, they enter an environment where the primary people that claim to have answers to these questions are belittling Christianity as a crutch for people who believe in myths.

In other words, if the children of atheists are afraid to bring up their doubts in public, how much more do many children from Christian families feel forced to go through the motions while hiding their major doubts and concerns?

If we teach our children to respect those with genuine questions about God, we receive a double benefit:

- *Our children will be more willing to bring up questions that cause them to struggle.*

- *Our children will have opportunities to hear the questions of others who need to know Christ. If we model for our children a gentle and respectful response to peoples' questions/beliefs, their friends are more likely to be willing to share their questions with them.*

Understand That the Truth Is Not Afraid of Skepticism (or Scientific Inquiry)

Most parents at Camp Quest indicated that they did not want to dictate their children's beliefs, but clearly they wanted to impact the thought process. As one mother stated:

"Our job isn't to tell children what to think," she said. "It's about opening up their minds and learning how to ask good questions." [\[7\]](#)

Just as we hope that the children at Camp Quest will ultimately ask the right questions about the purpose of life and their eternal destinies, we should encourage our children to examine the truth claims of Christianity. After all, Jesus told Pilate:

'For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.'" John 18:37-38 (*NASU or New American Standard Updated.*)

Lies and hoaxes are afraid of skeptics. The Truth welcomes skeptics because it shines in the light of examination. If we are willing to examine the truth with our children, it will build their confidence in their faith.

Many teenagers in Sunday School and youth meetings learn the things that Christians do (and don't do) and some things that Christians believe, but never learn about why we believe that the evidence for Christianity is strong and a biblical worldview answers the hard questions better than any other

worldview. I suspect that many teenagers get the impression that their pastors and teachers are afraid of hard questions and want to avoid them. Perhaps in too many cases this suspicion is reality.

This reinforces what we have stated in prior articles on the subject of youth retention (see *The Last Christian Generation*, related articles). We need to:

- *Encourage students to ask tough questions and respect them for doing so.*
- *Equip parents and student leaders with solid answers for the tough questions.*
- *Take the initiative and address these topics in Sunday school and youth meetings even before the students ask the questions.*
- *Point them to resources like Probe for those that want to go deeper into these topics.*
- *Expose them to Christian adults who are living out a mature biblical worldview*

Don't Be Intimidated By An Unfriendly World.

How many of us can identify with the following statement:

Just as evangelical adults need social support from their church, our children need it even more. Many of our kids are ostracized at school because their parents are evangelicals, or because they're sharing their own faith at school. It can also be challenging to be an evangelical parent when most people assume that you're intolerant and ignorant if you teach your children to believe in hell and in Jesus as the only way to heaven. Christian camps provide a valuable

resource for parents, plus they are full of fun activities for kids that reinforce our values—faith in Christ, love for God and our neighbors, good morals, and a desire for others to receive eternal life.

It rings true, doesn't it? It is interesting to consider that the statement above is a slight modification of a statement made by Zachary Moore:

Just as freethinking adults need social support from groups like the NTCOF, our children need it even more. Many of our kids are ostracized at school or in their neighborhoods because their parents are freethinkers, or because they're developing their own freethinking perspective. It can also be challenging to be a freethinking parent when most people assume that you're immoral if you don't teach your children to believe in a god. Camp Quest Texas provides a valuable resource for parents, plus it's full of fun activities for kids that reinforce our freethinking values – science, critical thinking, ethics and religious tolerance.[{8}](#)

American society as a whole does not have a high regard for atheism. However, in many ways, our public sector and public schools are more supportive of the NTCOF than they are of evangelicals. This is the reality our children will become adults within. We need to encourage them through a community of like-minded believers while at the same time preparing them to stand up in an unsympathetic and sometimes hostile public square.

Youth groups and Christian camps are not refugee camps to protect our children from the world. They need to focus on equipping them and encouraging them to stand for the Truth in whatever cultural setting they encounter.

You may not be excited about the prospect of a Church of Freethought. However, their experience and reactions may help

expose some our inadequacies in preparing our children to stand firm in their faith in this world. Let's make sure that our children know that we are open to their hard questions and are prepared with real answers.

"For he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" Heb 11:6-7 (NASU).

Notes

1. Avi Selk, "Secular kids' camp in Collin County aims to provide questions, not answers," *Dallas Morning News*, August 31, 2009.

2. Rod Dreher, "A church for skeptics," *Dallas Morning News*, August 31, 2009.

3. Ibid.

4. Barna Group, "Atheists and Agnostics Take Aim at Christians", June 11, 2007, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/102-at-heists-and-agnostics-take-aim-at-christians.

5. Selk.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Dreher.

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Related Articles:

- [The Answer is the Resurrection](#)
- [The Last Christian Generation](#)

Advocacy Apologetics: Finding Common Ground as a Way to the Gospel

As you examine your life, can you think of any lessons you wish you had learned earlier than you did?

I'm really glad I learned *this* lesson very early in my career as a Christian communicator. It's made a world of difference.

God has graciously sent me presenting Christ and biblical truth on six continents before university students and professors, on mainstream TV and radio talk shows, with executives, diplomats and professional athletes.

He's put me speaking in university classrooms and auditoriums, in embassies, boardrooms, and locker rooms. He's had me writing for mainstream newspapers, magazines, and on the Internet about controversial subjects like sex, abortion, the afterlife, and reasons for faith.

As you might imagine, I've encountered many skeptics and objections to faith. I've learned much from my critics, the unpaid guardians of my soul.

But if I hadn't learned this crucial lesson at the outset, would all those outreach doors have opened?

The Lesson

I learned it on an island in a river in Seoul, Korea. Over a million believers were gathered for Explo 74. One speaker that day was a prominent church leader from India who discussed how to best communicate the message of Jesus to the types of Buddhists in India. Here's my paraphrase of his advice.

We could use two methods, he said. One was to begin by stressing the differences between Buddhism and Christianity. But that often gets people mad and turns them off.

A second way involved agreeing with the Buddhist where we could. We could say something like this: "I know that you as a Buddhist believe in Four Noble Truths." (This is foundational to many strains of Buddhism.) "First you believe suffering is universal. As a follower of Jesus, I also believe suffering is everywhere. It needs a solution.

Second, you believe that suffering is caused by evil desire or craving. I believe something very similar; I call this evil desire sin."

Third, you believe that the way to eliminate suffering is to eliminate craving. I feel selfishness needs to be eliminated, too. And fourth, you feel we eliminate craving by following the Eightfold Path: right understanding, right aspiration, right behavior, etc.

Here's where I would suggest an alternative. For many years I, too, tried to eliminate my selfishness by seeking to think and do the right thing. But you know what happened? I became very frustrated because I lacked the power to do it. I realized that if I relied on God, He could give me the inner power I needed."

Do you see the contrast between those two methods of approaching someone who differs with you? The first emphasizes differences and has the emotional effect of holding up your

hands as if to say “Stop!” or “Go away!” The second begins by agreeing where you can. Your emotional hands are extended as if to welcome your listeners. If you were the listener, which approach would you prefer?

Start by Agreeing where You Can

In communicating with skeptics, start by agreeing where you can. You’ll get many more to listen.

I call this approach Advocacy Apologetics. You’re approaching the person as an advocate rather than an adversary. You believe in some of the same things they do. Expressing agreement can penetrate emotional barriers and communicate that you are *for* that person rather than *against* them. It can make them more willing to consider areas of disagreement.

Don’t compromise biblical truth; but agree at the start where you can.

Paul used this approach. He wrote ([1 Corinthians. 9:19-23 NLT](#), emphasis mine):

I have become a servant of everyone so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Jews, I become one of them so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Gentiles who do not have the Jewish law, I fit in with them as much as I can.

Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone so that I might bring them to Christ. I do all this to spread the Good News.

Here’s an experiment: The next time you encounter someone who differs with you, take a deep breath. Pray. Ask God to help you identify three areas of agreement. Can’t find three? How about one? Discuss that first. Become an advocate for them.

Maybe you'll oil some stuck emotional and intellectual gears
and nudge someone in His direction.