

“How Can a Just God Order the Slaughter of Men, Women and Children?”

Jimmy Williams

I am a Christian and spend time talking with others often about God, but I have been speechless when they bring up the issue, for example, in I Samuel 15:1-3 where God tells His people to destroy the men and the women and children as well. This is difficult to see that as part of His character. Is that a just God? What was He thinking?? I understand that the Amalekites ambushed them when travelling from Egypt but why the women and children?? I would really appreciate your reply. Thank you.

This is indeed a question often asked by critics of the Bible. It is a legitimate question and one that deserves a comprehensive, complete and, hopefully, acceptable answer. So let me see if I can address it.

One of the most important rules of Hermeneutics (the task of interpretation, meaning of a verse or passage of Scripture) is to observe the *context* of what you are seeking to interpret correctly. This is crucial in seeking to answer this question you have raised. We need to see clearly the historical background and the situation which called for such severe measures to be taken.

Who were the Canaanites?

Canaan, the Bible tells us, was the fourth son of Ham, who was one of the three sons of Noah. The use of the word “Canaan” stems from the fact that Canaan’s descendants populated the land which was later called Palestine, and now is called Israel. Modern Syria is also included and it is roughly the same land which God promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:18-21; Numbers 34:1-12).

The Amalekites which you mentioned were one of several tribes which are often referred to collectively as either Canaanites or Phoenicians. Their language was either Ugaritic or Phoenician, two Semitic dialects close to the Hebrew dialect. Other major “Canaanite” tribes included the Amorites, Jebusites, Hivites, Girgasites, Ammonites, Edomites, and Moabites. The Phoenicians were a seafaring people who lived along the Mediterranean Coast. They also had colonies which included Cypress, Sardinia, and Carthage.

What were their Religious beliefs and practices?

Archaeology has given us substantial material about these people, and particularly from their capital city, Ugarit. Thousands of clay tablets have been recovered from Ras Shamra in northern Syria, including the libraries of two great temples dating from the 15th-14th century B.C. Much of this epic literature has to do with their religious practices and their pantheon of gods. Merrill F. Unger notes that Canaanite cultic practices were more base than any other place in the ancient Near East. (*Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, p.172). Let me list some of the features of their religious beliefs and practices.

The Canaanite Pantheon (of gods)

A full description of the Canaanite gods has been provided by C. R. Driver, who translated the Ras Shamra tablets found in the ancient city of Ugarit.

El

The head of the Canaanite pantheon. El was generally a rather remote and shadowy figure, but sometimes stepped down from his eminence and became the hero of exceedingly “earthy” myths. He is described as living at a great distance (“a thousand plains, ten thousand fields,”) from Canaan, and to this remote spot the gods invariably had to travel when they wished to consult him.

El was called the “father of years,” the “father of man,” and also the “father bull,” i.e. the progenitor of all the gods. He is likened to a bull in the midst of a herd of

cows and calves. According to the text, El had three wives: Astarte (goddess of the evening star), Asherah (goddess of the sea and consort to Baal), and Baaltis—all three his sisters. He is a brutal, bloody tyrant, whose acts caused all the gods to be terrified by his decisions. For example, he dethroned his own father (“Heaven, Uranus”) and castrated him; he killed his own favorite son, “Iadid,” and cut off his daughter’s head. The tablets also portray El as seducing two women, whose names are not mentioned, and he allows them to be driven into the desert after the birth of two children, “Dawn” (shahru) and “Sunset” (shalmu). W. F. Albright in the *American Journal of Semitic Languages*, XXXV, comments that the description of the act of seduction of these two women is one of the frankest and most sensuous in ancient Near-Eastern literature.

Baal and Mot

Baal is the great storm-god. He brings the rain, and announces his present with thunder and lightning and, most important of all, the needed rain which would insure a good harvest. He became the reigning king of the gods, and was enthroned on a lofty mountain in the far northern heavens, but faithfully reappears each year to sustain the people. Mot, whose name means “death,” represents the god of “drought” and “sterility.” In the myth, he is Baal’s chief and continual antagonist. Even Baal must yield to Mot when his time (of the year) comes. When Mot comes, Baal’s time is over and he is ordered to take everything connected with him down into the depths of the earth:

“And you, take your clouds,
Your wind, your storm, your rains!
With you take Padriya daughter of the stream.
With you take Tatalliya daughter of rain.”(67:v:6-11)

The situation could hardly be more clearly described: the season of drought has come, the rain and the clouds have vanished; the streams have dried up and the vegetation languishes. But before Baal descends into the earth, however, he

*“Makes love to a heifer in Debir,
A young cow in the fields of Shimmt.
He lies with her seventy-seven times–
Yea, he copulates eighty-eight times–
So she conceives and bears a child.”(76:v;18-22)*

Anath

The goddess of fertility. She was considered a divine prostitute. She is represented as a naked woman in the prime of life, standing on a lion, with a lily in one hand and a serpent or two in the other. Often two rams are present to portray her sexual vigor. The female organs are always accentuated.

It is important to bear in mind that these “myths” were ritualistically enacted. Therefore we can assume that ritual bestiality was practiced by the priesthood, and temple prostitution was practiced by the adherents (priestesses) of the Anath fertility cult. Cyrus Gordan has written “that it was no crime for men to copulate with animals in Ugarit is indicated by the fact that...Baal impregnated a heifer...a myth...enacted ritually by reputable priests... Moreover, the Bible tells us that the Hebrews’ pagan neighbors practiced bestiality (Lev. 18:24) as we now know to be literally true from the Ugaritic documents” (Ugaritic Literature, p. 8).

With Baal’s seasonal death, his father, El, the chief god, goes into mourning. El descends from his throne and sits in sackcloth and ashes on the ground. He lacerates himself, making cuts on his face, arms chest and back (cf. I Kings 18:28):

“Dead is Baal, the Overcomer

Absent is the Prince, Lord (Baal) of the Earth (67:VI:9,10) He pours the ashes of grief on his head.

The dust of mourning on his pate;

For clothing, he is covered with sackcloth,

He roams the mountain in mourning:

He mutilates his face and beard.
He lacerates his forearms.
He plows his chest like a garden.
He lacerates his back like a valley
He lifts his voice and shouts: 'Baal is dead!'
Woe to the people, Woe to the multitudes of Baal
I shall go down into the earth." (67:VI:15-24)

Anath, Baal's consort, repeats this cry and copies El's self-mutilation.

How does God, the Bible, portray the Canaanites? The clearest and most comprehensive biblical assessment of the Canaanites is found in Leviticus 18:1-5:

"Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, I am the Lord your God. You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do *what is done in the land of Canaan* where I am bringing you; *you shall not walk in their statutes* (ways). You are to perform My judgments and keep my statutes, to live in accord with them. I am the Lord your God. So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord."

By inference, everything forbidden in this chapter is simply a description of what the Canaanites were doing. First on the list of forbidden practices is incest, sexual intercourse with blood relatives and in-laws: your father and mother (v.7,8), your sister (v. 9), your daughter (v. 10), your niece (v. 11), your aunt (v.12, 13), your uncle (v.15), your sister-in-law (v.16), any woman or her children (17), polygamy (two sisters-v.18), adultery (your neighbor's wife-v. 20), ritual child sacrifice (v.21), homosexuality, sodomy (v.22), bestiality (animals-v. 23). God summarizes these prohibitions with:

"Do not defile yourselves by any of these things; for by all these the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled. For the land has become defiled, therefore I have visited its punishment upon it, so the land has spewed out its

inhabitants. But as for you, you are to keep My statutes and my judgments, and shall not do any of these abominations, neither the native, nor the alien who sojourns among you; for the men of the land who have been before you have done ALL these abominations, and the land has become defiled; so that the land may not spew you out should you defile it, as it has spewed out the nation which has been before you. For whoever does any of these abominations, those persons who do so shall be cut off from among their people. Thus you are to keep My charge, that you do not practice any of the abominable customs which have been practiced before you, so as not to defile yourselves with them; I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 18:24-30).

God's Purpose and Intent

What we observe above is in stark contrast to the cultic practices of the Canaanites, the high standards and expectations of conduct laid out by the God of Israel for His people. Why is it so important that the Israelites shun these practices of the indigent population, the Canaanites?

Because God is doing something new, something important. He has redeemed his chosen people from Egyptian bondage and is in the process of fulfilling his ancient promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12. The larger plan involves an earlier promise (Genesis 3:15) that there would come a "Seed of the Woman" who would crush Satan and establish a means to undo the damage done in Eden through their disobedience. This plan of redemption is promised, and the remainder of the Old Testament is a working out in history the unfolding of that plan to provide a Savior, a Redeemer, a Messiah. Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise.

And in Abraham God found a worthy servant who would become the patriarch, the father of a nation through whom Messiah would come, bringing untold blessing and deliverance through his life, death, and resurrection to all those who believe. Redemptive history is a long process. It began in Eden immediately after

Adam and Eve sinned, and it will one day end in the New Jerusalem.

God's peculiar people begin with Abraham and his immediate descendants: first Isaac, then Jacob, and then Joseph. These four were the founders, the patriarchs of this new people God was shaping to be the vehicle through which Messiah would come. The Israelites then spent four hundred years in bondage in Egypt until Moses was raised up to deliver them with "a strong hand." Pharaoh finally let them go. They traveled to Mt. Sinai and stayed there a full year. They arrived at Sinai a disorganized mob; they left there a year later an organized host. During that year God revealed to them the constitutional foundations of their heritage and their mission. He spelled out the rules of their conduct, their worship, and how they would live in community. At the end of this year, they were poised east of the Jordan and ready to go into Canaan and take it by force. But after spying out the land, the fear of the majority with respect to this campaign caused them to shrink back from their task, and God sent them into the wilderness to wander for forty years. The new generation that emerged at the close of this period of divine discipline was finally allowed to go into the Canaan and possess it.

As they prepared themselves for this task, Moses summarized for a second time (the book of Deuteronomy) just what it would take, and what they would have to do. Ironically, the issue of the Canaanites is first spoken of way back in Genesis 15! God is speaking to Abraham and He mentions the problem of the Canaanites. He first speaks of (predicts) the Egyptian bondage which would come, and then He speaks of the deliverance from Egypt, and then He promises the conquest and repossession of the Promised Land. He says:

Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions... And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. Then, in the fourth generation they shall return here (Canaan) *for the iniquity of the Amorite (Canaanites) is*

not yet **complete** (Gen. 15:12-16).

What is interesting about this is that the wickedness of the Canaanites is already recognized as a problem 400+ years before God will give the command that the Canaanites are to be slaughtered—men, women, and children! At the time the Lord spoke these words to Abraham (c. 2,000 B.C.), the Canaanites were already corrupt, but they still had a way to go before God, who is a patient, merciful but Holy God, would finally bring judgment upon them. God gave them 400 years to “shape up,” but we find them even more wicked than ever when the Israelites are about to invade (retake) their land!

What is also interesting is that when Jericho was about to be taken, Rahab the prostitute hid the two Israeli spies in her home, lied to the authorities about it, and then helped the spies escape over the wall. While the spies were in her home she said some remarkable things:

“She came up to them on the roof and said to them, I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted 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 Amorites whom you utterly destroyed beyond the Jordan... And when we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the Lord, your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. Now therefore, please swear to me by the Lord, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with me...and deliver our lives from death.” (Joshua 2:8-13)

Not only Rahab knew of God’s powerful deliverance; she tells us that everyone else knew about these events and were fearful for their lives! The difference between Rahab and the rest of the people of Jericho is that she saw in these mysterious workings none other than the hand of the true God Himself! She repented; she believed! Because of her faith, she is mentioned in Faith’s Hall of

Fame (Hebrews 11:31)! My point is that other Canaanites could have responded as she did. Unfortunately, they continued on in their wicked, rebellious ways. The fullness of the “Amorites” is now complete. National judgment is at hand, with Israel as the instrument God will use to put an end to a totally depraved culture.

Why Such Excessive Slaughter? Why the Women? Why the Children?

God explains this to us in Romans 1:17-2:2:

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an *image* in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to *impurity*, that their bodies might be *dishonored* among them. For they exchanged the *truth of God* for a lie, and worshipped and served the *creature* rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

For this reason God *gave them over* to *degrading* passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is *unnatural*, and in the same way also the men *abandoned* the natural function of the woman and *burned in their desire* towards one another, *men with men* committing *indecent acts* and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God *gave them over to a depraved mind*, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, malice; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, *haters of God*, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, with out understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and though they know the ordinance of God, that *those who practice such things are **worthy of death***, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you...and we know that the judgment of God *rightfully falls upon those who practice such things.*"

The Romans passage above describes for us in vivid detail how this can happen to a culture. And this is exactly the kind of conditions existing in Canaan as the Israelites approached to conquer the land which had been promised them. God makes it very clear to them the reasons for what they must do and how they must do it:

"Hear, O Israel! You are crossing over the Jordan today to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than you... Know therefore today that *it is the Lord your God who is crossing over before you as a consuming fire. He will destroy them and He will subdue them before you*, so that you may drive them out and destroy them quickly, just as the Lord has spoken to you.

Do not say in your heart when the Lord your God has driven them out before you, 'Because of *my* righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' but *it is because of the wickedness of these nations* that the Lord is dispossessing them before you... It is not for *your* righteousness or for the uprightness of *your* heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the *wickedness of these nations* that the Lord your God is driving them out before you, in order *to confirm the oath which the Lord swore to*

your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Know, then, it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn (stiff necked) people!" (Deuteronomy 9:1-6)

God makes it very clear that sometimes things deteriorate so far that a culture or a people reaches a "point of no return." The remedy is like trying to unscramble an egg. There is just no way back; things have gone too far. The story of the Genesis Flood is "Exhibit One"—a demonstration that He has already done this once on this planet. A good surgeon does not amputate a leg if someone has a severely stubbed toe. But a good surgeon will amputate if the infection is so massive that to refuse to do so would mean the loss of the whole body and person.

R.A. Torrey remarks: "It is appalling that any people should be utterly put to the sword, but it is even more appalling that a society of people should have become so corrupt and debased that such treatment is deemed necessary in the interest of humanity. The Canaanites were a moral cancer threatening the very life of the whole human race. The cancer had to be removed in order to save the body, just as a surgeon inflicts pain and suffering in order to remove a malignant growth in the body (*Difficulties in the Bible*. R.A. Torrey, p. 47).

This is exactly the dilemma God faced as the Israelites are brought back to possess their land. To settle them in the midst of these depraved people is asking for disaster. If the cancer remains, Israel will not survive. For Israel's survival, the Canaanites will have to go. Israel will be corrupted by their presence and their influence. She will fall away from the Lord Who has loved her and delivered her. Ironically, this is exactly what happened, because while they disposed of most of the inhabitants of Canaan, *they did not remove all of them*. And Israel's incomplete obedience in this matter actually brought about future, periodic relapses when they *did* cease "following the Lord" and served other gods through the ongoing influence of these pagan tribes.

With respect to the women, the experience of Lot, his wife, and his two daughters dwelling in Sodom is instructive. We are told that if ten righteous men could have been found in the city, God would spare it from judgment. Judgment fell on the city, indicating ten were not found. Lot was “courting disaster” to be a believer and live in such an environment. As the account indicates, Lot survived the judgment because God graciously warned him to flee the city (this was really based upon God’s honoring Abraham’s intercession on Lot’s behalf), but his wife turned around and looked back toward Sodom. This was her home. She liked Sodom. The immorality didn’t bother her. She was still yearning for Sodom when God turned her into a pillar of salt. In some instances, the women are the “prime-movers” in leading the men into sin. Torrey comments: “Though true women are nobler than true men, depraved women are more dangerous than depraved men” (p. 48).

The two daughters were also affected. They had sense enough not to turn around and look at the city, but we find in their immoral, incestuous behavior with their own father later that they were already “damaged goods.” This is a good warning for Christian parents. We may choose to live in or near “Sodom” and we ourselves may survive, but it is more than likely our children will not come away unaffected by their exposure to such an unwholesome environment.

With respect to the command to dispose of the children, there is at least one bright spot, severe as it is. Those who adopt children want to do so at the earliest possible age. Why? Because evidence shows that children are early affected by whatever their family system might be. The emotional and physical abuse and wounds inflicted upon them from birth to age five or six leave permanent scars which often cannot be healed. The scars remain, and even the best of environments cannot overcome the negative influences of those early years of development. Even these Canaanite children would have perpetuated the corrupt influence of the Canaanites among the Hebrew Community, had they been spared.

We have all observed or known of families which are so dysfunctional and corrupt we grieve for their unhappy, confused, and suffering children, and wish to God somehow they could be removed and placed in some loving, caring home where they could feel safe and not suffer at the hands of hostile and even deranged parents. Happily, there are no children in hell. Jesus loves the little children. The one bright spot in this sordid story is that God removed an entire generation of Canaanite children and took them to such a home . . . His home.

Those who struggle the most with the forceful elimination of the Canaanites in this biblical account have a very dim and truncated view of God. We have seen above that God has the right, because of His holiness and His righteousness, to visit judgment upon individuals and nations who have become corrupt and degenerate. The amazing thing is, like with the Canaanites, that He waits so long. Torrey remarks,

“...Those who regard sin lightly and who have no adequate conception of God’s holiness will always find insurmountable difficulty in this command of God, but those who have come to see the awfulness of sin and have learned to hate it with the infinite hate it deserves, and who have caught some glimpses of the infinite holiness of God and have been made in some measure partakers of that holiness, will, after mature reflection, have no difficulty whatever with this command. It is consciousness of sin in our own hearts and lives that makes us rebel against God’s stern dealings with sin (p. 50).”

I hope this in some way helps to address your question, _____.

God Bless.

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