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MINISTRIES

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Answering Atheists: Does God Command Genocide in the Bible?

As believers, we view the Bible as the word of God—a source of divine revelation and authority. We believe that God chose the ancient authors of the scriptures to transmit His revelation about who He is, how we relate to Him, and how to are to live.

But since the authors of the Bible lived in a different culture in a completely different time, parts of the Bible might sound strange to us as 21st century westerners. Some parts of the Bible are even criticized as being immoral, which is actually ironic seeing as how our moral values in the West have largely been shaped by the very values expressed in Scripture.

For instance, when we read about God in the Bible, we are amazed to see His abounding grace, mercy, and compassion. We see His utmost concern for the marginalized and the oppressed—the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant. In the New Testament, we see the heart of the Father manifest in the Messiah’s compassion for the sick as He brings healing to a hurting world.

Not only does God have a deep concern for the vulnerable and the oppressed but also the wicked! Because of His compassion for the pagan nation of Nineveh, He sent the prophet Jonah to try to reach them so that they wouldn’t be destroyed. In the Book of Ezekiel, God literally *pleads* with the wicked to repent so that they would not face judgment:

Ezekiel 33:11

Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord [YHWH] God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?

These values of justice, righteousness, compassion, and mercy, are values we’re taught to uphold as believers. Why? Well because we bear God’s image, and God, by His very nature, is just, righteous, compassionate, and merciful.

That’s why some parts of the Scriptures, which appear, on the surface, to present God as inconsistent with these values, are so shocking and troubling to many—believers and unbelievers alike. Perhaps the

most difficult among these troubling passages in Scripture is God’s divine commandment to kill the Canaanites—including, apparently, women and children.

Critics of the Bible often point to these texts as a basis for asserting that God commanded His people to commit murder and genocide. In his book, *The God Delusion*, atheist Richard Dawkins doesn’t mince words as he calls God a bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser and a genocidal bully.

Skeptics will often go further in their criticisms by drawing a comparison between YHWH and Allah. They’ll say that these Israelite soldiers in the Bible are really no different than Islamic extremists who use violence to advance Islam. After all, they say, radical Muslims believe that Allah commands them to murder all infidels, including women and children. How is that different from what YHWH commanded these Israelite soldiers to do?

Here is one passage in Deuteronomy in which God commands Israel to devote entire clans of people “to complete destruction” and to kill everything that breathes:

Deuteronomy 20:16-17

But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord [YHWH] 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 [YHWH] your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord [YHWH] your God.

In the book of Joshua, we actually see Israelite soldiers carrying out this command at Jericho:

Joshua 6:21

Then 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.

Indeed, throughout the entire region, in city after city, we see the carrying out of this divine command:

Joshua 10:28

As for Makkedah, Joshua captured it on that day and struck it, and its king, with the edge of the sword. He devoted to destruction every person in it; he left none remaining. And he did to the king of Makkedah just as he had done to the king of Jericho. Then Joshua and all Israel with him passed on from Makkedah to Libnah and fought against Libnah. And the Lord gave it also and its king into the hand of Israel. And he struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it; he left none remaining in it. And he did to its king as he had done to the king of Jericho.

Joshua 10:40

So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings. He left none remaining, but devoted to destruction all that breathed, just as the Lord [YHWH] God of Israel commanded.

Joshua 11:10-11

And Joshua turned back at that time and captured Hazor and struck its king with the sword, for Hazor formerly was the head of all those kingdoms. And they struck with the sword all who were in it, devoting them to destruction; there was none left that breathed. And he burned Hazor with

fire.

On the basis of these texts, it's easy to see why many would conclude that God commanded the Israelites to commit genocide. And on that premise, the objection is often raised that an all-good, all-loving God could never issue such an "immoral" commandment. Therefore, skeptics insist, believers cannot affirm God's goodness while also affirming the historicity of these stories, as the two are inconsistent.

How do we deal with these difficult passages and objections? Is this divine commandment to wipe out the Canaanite people consistent with God's loving and holy nature?

As believers in both God's goodness *and* the truth of Scripture, how do we make sense of these apparent inconsistencies? Does God have morally sufficient reasons for giving this commandment? This is a challenge for us as believers. If the commandment to wipe out the Canaanites is inconsistent with God's nature, that calls into question the Bible's inspiration and divine authority.

There are several points we might consider that would help us resolve these difficult issues.

It should be stated up front that an atheist, by definition, does not share certain presuppositions that we as believers hold to. For instance, an atheist doesn't believe in God, divine judgment, an afterlife, and so forth. Therefore, some of these points aren't going to be particularly meaningful to an atheist unless they are willing to approach these issues *in the context* of the passages on which they base their objection.

Since the objections are based on biblical passages, certain presuppositions need to be granted in order to fully appreciate how these issues are resolved within a theistic framework. If an atheist isn't willing to engage the issues thoughtfully and honestly, their objection can simply be dismissed. They don't believe the Bible anyway, so what's the point in explaining it? For many atheists, they first need to come to a place where they accept that God exists *before* these issues of biblical ethics can be effectively addressed.

However, if you're an atheist and you're watching this teaching, we assume that you are actually interested in how these difficult passages can be understood in light of what the rest of the Bible teaches regarding God's goodness and mercy. Just understand that we are going to be working with presuppositions that you don't share, so you'll need to entertain certain ideas you don't believe in order to fully grasp where believers are coming from regarding these issues.

Furthermore, whether you are a believer or a skeptic, all we ask is that you hold off making a judgment until you've listened to this entire teaching and heard our case. There are some foundational issues that we need to establish before we get to the heart of this objection.

1) God has sovereignty over all creation, including human life.

God, by definition, is the supreme authority of the universe. Life is in His hands. Therefore, He has complete sovereignty over when someone dies. Let's unpack this.

God's nature *is* the objective standard of moral values. This is the basic concept of Divine Command Theory, a meta-ethical theory of morality, which asserts that for an action to be morally right, God must approve of it since objective moral duties are ultimately grounded in His nature. So in order for a person to do what is morally right, he must obey the will of God. God Himself is the standard.

Christian philosopher and theologian, Dr. William Lane Craig, puts it this way:

According to the version of divine command ethics which I've defended, our moral duties are constituted by the commands of a holy and loving God. **Since God doesn't issue commands to Himself, He has no moral duties to fulfill.** He is certainly not subject to the same moral obligations and prohibitions that we are. For example, I have no right to take an innocent life. For me to do so would be murder. But God has no such prohibition. He can give and take life as He chooses. We all recognize this when we accuse some authority who presumes to take life as "playing God." Human authorities arrogate to themselves rights which belong only to God. God is under no obligation whatsoever to extend my life for another second. If He wanted to strike me dead right now, that's His prerogative. What that implies is that God has the right to take the lives of the Canaanites when He sees fit. How long they live and when they die is up to Him.

-Dr. William Lane Craig, Slaughter of the Canaanites, Q&A #16, www.reasonablefaith.org

In summary, God has ultimate authority over human life. When we die is up to Him. And since God, who is the final arbiter of morality, does not give Himself commands, He has no moral obligation to prolong anyone's life at all; therefore, there is at least no *logical* inconsistency between God's goodness and the taking the lives of the Canaanites.

But let's add to that the fact that the only reason anyone is even alive today is that God is gracious. He didn't have to create us and give us life to begin with, and He certainly isn't obligated to keep us breathing. But He does.

We're alive right now only because of God's grace, especially considering the fact that we *all* deserve to die and face everlasting punishment because of our sins. God is certainly compassionate and merciful, but He's also utterly holy and just. He shows humans incredible mercy, but He does—and He must—execute judgment.

God's goodness actually requires that He not allow evil to go unpunished. Every atheist acknowledges this basic fact when they argue that God cannot exist because there's too much evil in the world. We're created with a deep sense of justice, and we all yearn to see an end to evil and suffering. If God did not judge sin, He would be unjust, which would entail that He is not all good.

Furthermore, without understanding the fact that God must judge sin, we wouldn't be able to really grasp His mercy. Isn't this the very basis of the Gospel? The penalty for our sins is death. But Yeshua the Messiah—Jesus Christ—paid that price for us by dying on the cross. It's often been said that the cross is where justice and mercy have kissed. Because the price was paid, we can now receive mercy.

So, indeed, God judges sin. And as we'll unpack a little later, the killing of the Canaanites was an act of divine judgment, the same as when God sent a flood to judge the people in Noah's day or the time He sent fire upon Sodom and Gomorrah. In the case of the Canaanites, God's means of executing judgment was to send the nation of Israel. This is similar to God later using pagan nations, like Babylon, to execute judgment upon Israel.

Someone might say that it's unjust for God to execute judgment on people by taking their lives—that this is inconsistent with God's goodness and mercy. After all, "mercy triumphs over judgment," right? Wouldn't it be better, therefore, to give the wicked all the time that they needed to repent and turn from

their ways and choose life?

In regard to this objection, there are a few things to consider. First, again, God is the Creator, and He has complete sovereignty over creation. God created man for a purpose, which is to glorify Him. Since He created us, He essentially owns us. So another way to think about it is that God does not take our lives away from us, because technically, our lives are not ours to begin with. Our lives exist for the purpose of glorifying God, and if we do not choose to live according to that purpose, then just as a computer programmer deletes code that does not work according to its intended design, we are deleted.

Ultimately this world has been corrupted by sin and death, and therefore it will be replaced by a new heavens and new earth at the end of the age. All will be judged, and those who have not chosen to receive God's grace and a new life in Messiah will be condemned to eternal punishment—deleted from the program. Until that time, in God's abundant mercy, He gives mankind time to repent and be saved.

The second point worth considering is that we are not in a place to judge, because we don't have infinite knowledge. When God brings judgment by taking a life, who's to say that He *didn't* give them as much time to repent as He could? How could we possibly know?

We'll unpack this more a little later, but if there is a God, then by definition He has maximal greatness, which would entail that He is all-knowing. He can see the future and know the exact time He must intervene. In fact, God's patience and long-suffering can clearly be seen in the fact that He kept His own people in slavery for 400 years before finally declaring that the Canaanites were ripe for judgment:

Genesis 15:13, 16

Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted **for four hundred years** [...] And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, **for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.**"

The bottom line is this: Because God is all-knowing, He is the perfect judge. He can pronounce judgment on whomever He sees fit, whenever He sees fit, given that He knows what they would choose in any possible future. Therefore, the objection that God's judgment is inconsistent with His mercy simply isn't sustainable.

However, we are not out of the woods just yet. There is still a difficulty in the fact that God commanded *people* to carry out this judgment. Therefore, wouldn't this commandment be inconsistent with God's good nature since He would essentially be commanding people to murder?

A few things can be said in response to this. First, the command wasn't to "murder" the Canaanites. Remember, under certain conditions, taking life is not murder but actually upholding justice.

Consider the death penalty, for example. God gave authority to the nation of Israel to administer the death penalty as a means of punishment for certain capital offenses. When the governing authorities of theocratic Israel would execute a rapist or murderer, even though they took his life, by definition, it wasn't murder. Even when nations in the western world today still administer the death penalty from time to time, we acknowledge that it isn't murder—it's justice.

We can see God's divine commandment to Israel in that same light—it wasn't murder but capital punishment.

And this leads to our second point:

2) The Canaanite peoples were deserving of judgment.

Many atheists—if they took a time machine back to ancient Mesopotamia—would gladly pick up a sword and join Israel in attacking Canaan. The Canaanites were not good, innocent people.

According to Leviticus 18:21 and Deuteronomy 12:29-31, the Canaanites routinely sacrificed infants to gods like Molech. According to Dr. Clay Jones:

Molech was a Canaanite underworld deity represented as an upright, bull-headed idol with human body in whose belly a fire was stoked and in whose outstretched arms a child was placed that would be burned to death. It was not just unwanted children who were sacrificed. Plutarch reports that during the Phoenician (Canaanite) sacrifices, “the whole area before the statute was filled with a loud noise of flutes and drums so that the cries of the wailing should not reach the ears of the people.” And it was not just infants; children as old as four were sacrificed.

-Clay Jones, “We Don’t Hate Sin So We Don’t Understand What Happened to the Canaanites: An Addendum to Divine Genocide Arguments” (Philosophia Christi Vol. 11, No. 1), p.61

Archaeology confirms the existence of charred infant bones at ancient Canaanite cult sites where these sacrifices took place. (See Richard Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey*)

In his book, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, Old Testament scholar John Day writes this:

We have independent evidence that child sacrifice was practiced in the Canaanite (Carthaginian and Phoenician) world from many classical sources, Punic inscriptions and archaeological evidence, as well as Egyptian depictions of the ritual occurring in Syria-Palestine, and from a recently discovered Phoenician inscription from Turkey. There is therefore no reason to doubt the biblical testimony to Canaanite child sacrifice.

The Canaanites not only sacrificed their own children, but also would routinely attack towns under other city-states, murder all the men, and take the women and children back as slaves. The children were then often offered as sacrifices and the women and young girls were forced to work as temple prostitutes.

In addition to burning infants and children to death, Leviticus 18 lists sexual molestation and incest as among the many reasons that the Canaanites were being judged. This shouldn’t surprise us seeing as how, according to ancient Canaanite religion, the deity, Baal, regularly raped his sister, daughter, and had sex with his mother to humiliate her. Jones writes:

Like all ancient Near East (ANE) pantheons, the Canaanite pantheon was incestuous. The god El (considered the father of the gods) had seventy children by Asherah. From that union came Baal and his sister Anat with whom Baal had sexual relations. After Baal reported to his father El that Asherah had tried to seduce him, El encouraged Baal to have sex with her to humiliate her, which Baal did. Baal also had as a consort his first daughter Pidray. None of these incestuous acts of the gods is presented pejoratively.

-Clay Jones, "We Don't Hate Sin So We Don't Understand What Happened to the Canaanites: An Addendum to Divine Genocide Arguments" (*Philosophia Christi* Vol. 11, No. 1), p.57

Since the Canaanites worshipped Baal, it's unsurprising that they imitated his behavior. In addition to sexual molestation and incest, the Canaanites regularly engaged in adultery, ritual prostitution, and homosexual acts. We can reasonably assume, also, that these acts weren't always just between consenting adults. The Bible records that in the Canaanite city of Sodom that the inhabitants of the city tried to rape the visitors, for example (Genesis 19:5).

In addition to the depraved sexual activity between humans, the Canaanites also engaged in bestiality. Again, this shouldn't surprise us seeing as how the Canaanite deity Baal was believed to have done the same thing. Here is a passage from the Canaanite epic, *The Baal Cycle*:

Mightiest Baal hears;
He makes love with a heifer in the outback,
A cow in the field of Death's Realm.
He lies with her seventy times seven,
Mounts eighty times eight;
[She conceive]es and bears a boy.

-Mark S. Smith, trans., "Ugaritic Narrative Poetry," p. 148

In summary, many atheists would agree that these Canaanite people were deeply wicked and deserving of capital punishment.

However, the following objection is still raised: Surely not *every* person within these Canaanite tribes engaged in these horrific acts. Therefore, how would it be fair or just for God to command the death of everyone, including, presumably, those that might be innocent—including the children? We'll address these questions in a moment. For now, let's move on to our next point.

3) God's command wasn't for Israel to commit genocide but to expel the Canaanites from the land.

Here is where we really get to the heart of this objection. Skeptics will often characterize God's commandment to Israel as a command to commit "genocide," but this is extremely misleading.

First, God did not command Israel to hunt down and exterminate every last one of the Canaanite peoples. The primary command was to dispossess these Canaanite tribes of the land that God had promised to Abraham's descendants. Presumably, anyone who had seen the Israelite soldiers advancing could have chosen to flee rather than stay and be killed!

After all, according to Rahab, the Canaanites were well aware that the Israelites were coming, that YHWH had given them the land, and that YHWH was giving Israel victory over their enemies:

Joshua 2:9-11

"I know that the Lord [YHWH] 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 [YHWH] your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.”

In summary, God’s commandment to kill the Canaanites applied only to the geographical boundaries of the land that He had given to Israel. The people were warned that Israel was coming, and thus they had the opportunity to flee. **Therefore, this was not a command to commit genocide but a command to forcefully remove the Canaanites from the land.** Only those who chose to remain were to be killed.

There’s one more point to consider:

4) There is evidence that the language in these passages, such as “utterly destroy” and “leave alive nothing that breathes,” is hyperbolic and not meant to be taken strictly literally.

In their book, *Did God Really Command Genocide?*, scholars Paul Copan and Matthew Flanagan have given persuasive arguments that some of the language in these passages is not intended to be understood literally. They point to some tensions within the biblical text, such as God’s commands to Israel to “drive out” or “dispossess” the Canaanites, as we discussed in our previous point. But these commands would assume that the Canaanites would be alive if driven out, not killed.

They also argue that statements such as “they completely destroyed everyone in it” or “he left no survivors,” etc., is hyperbolic language similar to what we find in other ancient near eastern war texts. An analogy they give is like when sports teams use the language of “totally slaughtering” the other team. Obviously, these types of statements aren’t literal. Such exaggerated rhetoric isn’t unique to our own time and culture.

Copan’s and Flanagan’s theory is that the biblical authors were writing in a particular style that was common in their time and culture. So when it comes to these “war texts” in the Bible, not everything is intended to be literal in all its details. The writer uses hyperbole and certain literary expressions for rhetorical effect.

This would explain why the biblical authors use phrases such as “They devoted all in the city to destruction, saving alive nothing that breathed,” which is later followed by passages indicating that these same regions were still inhabited by some of the same peoples that were supposedly all wiped out. Thus, the passages describing the utter destruction of every man, woman, and child simply cannot be taken literally. These passages are exaggerated for rhetorical effect.

This idea could, perhaps, help us understand a related passage—God’s command to Saul to “not spare” the Amalekites, but to “kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” (1 Samuel 15:3). By the end of Chapter 15, Saul apparently kills all the Amalekites except for king Agag, so Samuel had to step in to finish the job. God rejected Saul as king based on the fact that he did not fully obey God in this regard (1 Samuel 15:26).

At first glance, this certainly appears to be a case of genocide. The passage says that Saul “devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword” (1 Samuel 15:8). But that obviously cannot be the case since we later see David raiding the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 27:8. They show up again in 1 Samuel 30. Indeed, they even appear during the time of King Hezekiah, 250 years after these events in 1 Samuel (1 Chronicles 4:43). How is that possible if they had been utterly wiped out?

It's also likely that Saul only engaged combatants rather than noncombatants when he carried out this command. Paul Copan and other scholars say that the "city of Amalek" (1 Samuel 15:5) that Paul attacked was likely a fortified military encampment.

We must take these issues into consideration when we read these passages, rather than assuming that these narratives are literal in every detail. We are dealing with ancient literature, and we need to do our best to get into the mind of the author. There is something more going on here, and we need to be aware of these nuances if we hope to properly understand what the author is saying.

With of this considered, the narrative that "God commands genocide" completely breaks down. It's utterly misleading to characterize these biblical passages in that way. Again, the primary purpose of the command regarding the Canaanites was to drive them out of the land. This represented God's judgment upon the Canaanite peoples. That judgment, again, was not genocide but a dispossessing.

Now that we've established those points, we can move on to answer perhaps the most difficult question: What about those killed who might've been innocent?

First let's talk about the possibility of innocent adult Canaanites being killed. What can we say in response to this? Well, first, there's no reason to assume that there even were any innocent adult Canaanites who were killed!

Let's consider the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. When God informs Abraham about the soon-coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham appeals to God's justice and fairness. Here is what he says:

Genesis 18:23-26

Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" And the Lord [YHWH] said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

You'll notice that God agrees to spare the cities for the sake of the fifty righteous people. Why? Because Abraham's objection is correct! God *is* just and therefore would not sweep away the righteous with the wicked! As the passage continues, Abraham then remarkably argues God all the way down to only ten righteous people. And God says, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it" (Gen. 18:32).

Abraham perhaps thought, "Surely there are *at least* ten righteous people! My nephew Lot and his family make four—so all we need is six others!" But, as we learn from the rest of the story, there were apparently not even ten righteous people in the entire city. Thus, after Lot and his family were told to flee, the entire city was destroyed.

What can we learn from this in light of our study of this command to drive out the Canaanites? Clay Jones gives a great summary:

The evil which seduced the people of Sodom and Gomorrah may have surprised Abraham and may surprise us, but it didn't surprise God. Certainly we learn several things from this passage. One, Sodom and Gomorrah were completely depraved. Two, God knows hearts and therefore

knows who will and who won't repent. Three, God would allow entire cities to live if it meant that a handful of righteous wouldn't die. Four, God was willing to give evidence of Sodom and Gomorrah's wickedness so that He couldn't be accused of killing the righteous with the wicked. And five, **when God destroyed these cities, he only killed the wicked.**

-Clay Jones, "Were There Any Innocent Canaanites?" www.clayjones.net

But even if you reject all the evidence and continue to assume that innocent Canaanites were killed, that still wouldn't prove that God didn't have morally sufficient reasons for commanding their death. Why? Because sometimes, under certain conditions, it is morally permissible to kill those who are innocent of wrongdoing. Scholar and theologian, Dr. Paul Copan, gives a great analogy to demonstrate this:

Take the September 11 terrorist attacks. When four planes were hijacked, putting many more lives at risk than those of the innocent passengers, the president gave orders to shoot down the planes, which had suddenly become weapons. Again, while tragic, such a command was justified in an attempt to stop the killing of many more innocent persons.

-Paul Copan, "Is God a Moral Monster: Making Sense of the Old Testament God," p. 42

Given God's omniscience, He knows when He must intervene before things get worse. He also knew that the Canaanites would lead Israel into the same horrific and evil acts for which they were being judged had they been allowed to stay in the land. God gives the following reason for His command to drive out the Canaanites:

Deuteronomy 20:18

...that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God.

So while the loss of innocent life is certainly tragic, sometimes there are exceptional cases where it is necessary and therefore morally permissible.

In summary, we don't have any reason to assume that there were any innocent adult Canaanites who remained in the land when Israel carried out this command of divine justice. But even if there were, that still wouldn't entail that God did not have morally sufficient reasons for issuing this commandment.

But what about the children? Because the children certainly would have been innocent.

Again, assuming that there even were children that were killed, even the death of the Canaanite children would have been morally permissible, as we've explained. Since God is all-knowing and has all the information about every possible future, He is the perfect judge and knows exactly when divine intervention is necessary. He knows when extremely difficult choices would need to be made, such as the taking of innocent life, before things get worse.

We can even take this further. While God ordered that the Canaanite tribes within the land were to be put to death, we know that nobody is condemned to *eternal punishment* for a lack of information. Here are a couple of passages in which Yeshua expresses this principle:

John 9:41

Jesus [Yeshua] said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say,

‘We see,’ your guilt remains.

John 15:22

If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.

Since the Bible teaches that this life is not all there is, but that there will be a future resurrection, we have good reason to believe that the Canaanite children will be in a better place in the world to come. A few passages can be given to substantiate this belief.

First, in the book of Jeremiah, when idol worshippers were sacrificing their children to Molech, YHWH spoke through Jeremiah and refers to the murdered children as “innocent”:

Jeremiah 19:2-5

Go out to the Valley of the Son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you. You shall say, ‘Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. Because the people have forsaken me and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have **filled this place with the blood of innocents**, and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind.

The significance of God calling these sacrificed children innocent is that it means they were, by definition, “not guilty.” God’s great mercy and compassion appears, therefore, to extend to young children who lack the knowledge required to make the choice to receive salvation. He declares them “not guilty.”

We also see this principle in the book of Deuteronomy. Moses allows the Israelite children to enter the Promised Land on the basis of their lack of knowledge:

Deuteronomy 1:39

And as for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, **who today have no knowledge of good or evil**, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess it.

Finally, we see this idea expressed when we look at Yeshua’s own attitude toward children. This is what He says:

Matthew 19:14

But Jesus [Yeshua] said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”

What can we learn from this? First, Yeshua is clearly *for* children coming to Him and *against* their being hindered from His presence. That’s His heart. In the gospel of Luke, He also pointed to the little children as an illustration of the kind of trust that people of all ages ought to have if they hope to enter the kingdom. That entails that children perfectly represent the heart of those in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Perhaps the best argument in support of this belief is what Abraham said: “[Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?](#)” Since little children lack the capacity to truly grasp right and wrong, they cannot be held morally responsible.

So with that in mind, since the death of the Canaanite children would have ultimately resulted in their salvation, God did them no wrong in issuing this commandment.

Now, based on everything we’ve covered, the objection might still be raised that there’s really no moral difference between biblical faith and the faith of Islamic extremists. After all, Islamic extremists believe that their god tells them to commit violence against all who stand opposed to Islam.

To this, we would simply respond by agreeing with the atheist that the god of these Islamic extremists does not tell them to commit these horrific acts. Their god doesn’t exist. Moreover, the destruction of the Canaanites was an exceptional event in history, not something that was ever to be repeated. This is unlike radical Islam, which uses violence as an ongoing means of spreading their cause.

So this command in the Bible really cannot be compared to radical Islam.

Another objection might go something like this: “Since, in the Bible, God uses His people to execute divine justice on the wicked, you have no basis to condemn the crazed so-called Christian who bombs an abortion clinic and claims that God told him to do it!”

Again, to this we would respond by agreeing with the atheist that God did not command the crazed so-called Christian to bomb the abortion clinic. Unless he can show crystal clear evidence that God spoke to him, such as—for example—parting the Red Sea, turning the Nile River into blood, making water come out of a rock, etc., there’s no reason to believe him.

We take the command spoken through Moses as authoritative because God had already confirmed Moses as His true, chosen prophet. That is, by the way, why we take every command given through Moses as authoritative. It’s also why we should reject as authoritative any commandments from people who have not been clearly evidenced to be a prophet like Moses—especially when it comes to such an extraordinary command as the one to drive the Canaanites from the land.

The bottom line is that God, through Moses, didn’t command all men for all time to kill the Canaanites. That was a unique situation and a unique commandment that he gave to a unique group of people at a certain time in history. Therefore, it’s clearly not something that was intended to be some sort of general rule or example by which we live today.

In conclusion, while these passages are certainly difficult, all the questions and objections that arise from these texts can be resolved once we dig a little deeper and examine them in light of all the data.

The destruction of the Canaanites was an extreme and exceptional situation in Israel’s history. While this event might appear, on the surface, to be in conflict with God’s mercy, goodness, and compassion, we have seen that God had morally sufficient reasons for issuing this commandment at the time that He did, and He did nobody any wrong in doing so.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!

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