

Can We Defend Israel's "Holy War" in Canaan?

Larry Yeager February 2018

An Emotional Issue

The books of Joshua and Judges present us with a challenging issue. God sent his people into the land of Canaan as a home for them in partial fulfillment of a promise made to Abraham. I say partial, in that it could only be fulfilled perfectly in the Lord's heavenly kingdom. When they entered the land they were told to "... drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places" (Numbers 33:52). In this conquest the Lord would go before his people as a consuming fire as he proclaimed, "Know therefore today that he who goes over before you as a consuming fire is the LORD your God. He will destroy them and subdue them before you. So you shall drive them out and make them perish quickly, as the LORD has promised you" (Deuteronomy 9:3)¹.

In the conquest of Canaan and the possession of the land, God commanded Israel to do what he forbade anyone else to do: forcefully clean the land of idolatry and idolaters. Israel, however, was never commanded or permitted to act in this capacity outside of its own borders.

By the time Israel was ready to enter the promised land they had the tablets from the Lord with the Ten Commandments; they had the law of God. The sixth commandment declares, "You shall not murder." In it God forbids the unjust, indiscriminate taking of life. They knew the eighth commandment forbidding theft as well; they could not simply take what was not rightfully theirs. This was God's law for his people. It is his law for *all* people (but that is another discussion.)

Now we are certainly permitted to defend ourselves or our nation, but attacking a people or nation to eliminate a race or people (cleansing), or to steal goods or property, or to subjugate and enslave is always understood to be wrong. It is always seen as a violation of the law of God – and, usually, the laws of mankind. But Israel's taking the land of Canaan was *not* defensive. They were the aggressors in the conflicts with the occupants of the territory they were taking. They would *dispossess* the peoples who were there.

When claims of "Holy War" are made by nations or religious sects to justify slaughter, conquest, and expansion we are rightly appalled. Should we be appalled or ashamed of the actions of ancient Israel as well? I believe we can honestly answer no.

Understanding God's Purpose

At the heart of God's command to drive out the Canaanites are two issues rooted in the nature and character of God.

1. God's Promise

First of all we see that God's command to Israel rests in his promise to Abraham. In Genesis 12:1-7 we read of the promise made to Abraham regarding the home to which he was called. God brought him from his own land to this new land. As he stood in that new land at Shechem

the Lord told him to look out over the land, for this would be the home of his posterity. God would give to them all that his eyes could see.

The promise was expanded in Genesis 15:5-7. There we learn that Abraham's inheritance would not only be a homeland, but it would be a great people as well, numbering more than the sands of the sea. A great multitude would come from Abraham. God confirmed this promise by taking an oath. (See Genesis 15:8-21.)

The promise was made to Abraham and his posterity, not just his physical, biological heirs, but particularly to his spiritual heirs (cf. Romans 4:9-16; 9:6-8; Galatians 3:7-9).

That promise was not made to Abraham and his posterity because they *were* a great nation or a righteous people - for they were not. It would be in submission to God that they would see his blessing in their numerical and spiritual growth. It was not their size, strength, or prowess that caused God to take them to himself as his own people. It was his love (Deuteronomy 7:6-9)!

And it was not because they were a people of superior moral character. They were to be a people set apart by the evidence of his grace at work in them. He tells them very pointedly, "Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you" (Deuteronomy 9:5). In other words, the land would be given to Israel not because they were so much better than the people in the land, but because those people were so very wicked, as we will see in just a moment.

So when Israel entered the "promised land" to take possession of it, it was in fulfillment of the promise of God. It would be a place where they could flourish without the snares and thorns of the idol worshippers around them. But that land of promise would also present a picture of the eternal "land" that belongs to those who worship the one true and living God. From that land the light of the gospel was to shine forth to the nations (cf. Isaiah 42:6; 60:3). In a sense, God was establishing a "beachhead" with a people who worshipped the true and living God in the midst of a world darkened by idolatry and sin. From there his glory would be proclaimed, his justice would rule, and his blessings would flow outward.

2. God's Judgment

The second element we must consider is the righteous judgment of God against sin. In pouring out his wrath on the inhabitants of Canaan God reveals his will and power to judge the wicked. Israel would be God's instrument in that judgment. As we read the history of Israel we see that God used the nations around Israel to judge them for their idolatry and sin as well. (We see this over and over again in Judges.) But in the conquest God used Israel to judge the nations inhabiting the promised land.

This was not a capricious act on the part of God nor on the part of the Israelites who waged this war of judgment. It was "because of the wickedness of these nations" (Deuteronomy 9:4)! And it was an exceeding wickedness both culturally and spiritually. Leviticus 18:6-30 catalogs the perverse sexual practices of the land. Their behavior was such that the land "vomited out

its inhabitants.” In Deuteronomy 18:9-14 the wicked and deadly worship practices are set before us, including child sacrifice and necromancy.

God ordered Israel to act *in judgment* against these wicked tribes. In the conquest of the land God’s perfect and final judgment breaks into the broken, fallen world in the instrument of Israel. Meredith Kline says his perfect justice and judgment, ordinarily exercised at the end of the age, “intrudes” into the present in the conquest. It comes early to these wicked peoples.² It is not unmerited as both Leviticus and Deuteronomy make clear.³

As God’s instrument of judgment they would see God *drive out* the people of the land and *destroy* those who wouldn’t flee. They were to tear down the altars and destroy every trace of their false gods. Any traces of idol worship and pagan practices would surely become a snare to them. “They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you” (Exodus 23:33; cf. Deuteronomy 7:16; Joshua 23:16; Judges 2:2).

They were to tear down the idols of the land so that the land would be cleansed of idolatry and God’s people would have a land in which to flourish in true worship and blessing.

Accepting God’s Limits

1. Defined Boundaries

The boundaries of their land and conquest were clearly defined (cf. Joshua 1:4; Genesis 15:18; 17:8; Judges 20:1). God’s people never sought to take possession of lands that were not promised to them. God’s command did not include subduing the earth through physical conquest. In this, they were radically different from the nations around them who constantly sought to take territory and resources beyond their borders.

God’s command to Israel was limited or bounded in scope and time. When the people who entered the land with Joshua failed to walk in obedience and faith to drive the people out and cleanse the land of the idols, God declared that he would no longer drive out the nations before them (Judges 2:3).

2. Rejecting Imperialistic Expansion

The Israelites were given a land where they would work (and often work *hard*) to make a living. They would not live off the spoils of the nations they would expand to conquer. They were generally forbidden to plunder the land (cf. Joshua 7 and the story of Achan) and they had no instruction or mandate to invade the nations around them to acquire the resources of those lands. They could not raid the harvests of the nations around them to supply their needs; that would violate the eighth commandment. They would rely on the Lord to meet their needs.

3. Not a Racial Conflict

Again, this war was one of *judgment* against a very wicked people. Their fight was not a racial conflict. In reality, the land they would establish would ultimately be the means by which God would reach “all the nations of the earth” (Genesis 18:18; Isaiah 49:6; Revelation 5:9). Even in the conquest itself the Lord was ready to receive those who put their trust in the God of Israel.

Rahab trusted the Lord, assisted the Israelites, and was received along with her household, into the new covenant community (cf. Joshua 2; 6:20ff). The Kenites, who were descendants of Moses' father-in-law, came with God's people into the promised land (Judges 4:11). Though there would be animosity between Israel and the surrounding nations throughout her history, they were never called to, nor did they pursue the extermination of a particular people because of their race or ethnicity. Indeed, they welcomed those who freely embraced Israel's God.

4. They Acted on Direct Revelation From God

Clearly, no such command was ever repeated. They were never directed in such a manner again.⁴ Because of the sacrifice, resurrection, and reign of Christ it should be obvious that no such command will ever be given again.

As we have already seen, the role of Israel's judgment against the people of Canaan was limited geographically and morally. It was not to force the people to convert to Judaism or die. It was not to conquer the world by force and "convert" them. They weren't permitted to plunder the land.

NOTE: Even the original command differs radically from the "mandate" of the various Muslim groups we see claiming to be waging "Holy War" today. God's command established the place *from which* his name would be proclaimed. The morality of the conquest was governed by the law of God, specifically adherence to the Ten Commandments. The moral atrocities of the Jihadists are shockingly, and sometimes gleefully set before us. They are not seeking to drive out the "unbelievers" from a defined new promised land; they claim the whole world as that land.

We believe that no nation has a command from God to "drive out" the unbelievers. Instead, we look to the power of the Holy Spirit to bring them to repentance and transforming faith. We believe and understand that the Muslim claim to holy war is extra-biblical and is not analogous to God's judgment on Canaan. God did not use Israel's warfare as a means of converting people. Israel could not claim God's command for every war they fought. Sadly, many were fought between the tribes of Israel. Most of their wars were defensive, including many they had to fight just to get to the land.

But more importantly, as we consider a command to conduct such wars, we understand,

5. The Need is Removed

God's purpose in the establishment of a land of promise and rest *has been fulfilled!* The Lord has claimed and purified a people for his own possession. He is at work, even now, receiving and purifying that inheritance. He has established, not in a geographical territory but in his church, a light for the nations. The Kingdom of the Lord is come. That Kingdom is growing, spreading to the ends of the earth. The perfect Kingdom in his presence is being readied even now by the risen Christ who is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Mark 14:62). From there he is preparing a place for us (John 14:2).

6. The Battle Is the Lord's

His revealed Word gives us clear, unambiguous direction: take the gospel to the whole world (Matthew 28:20)! The Battle we wage is against principalities and powers in the heavenly realm (Ephesians 6:12). “We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). It is the sword of the Spirit that we take up to advance his kingdom, not a physical sword of justice. That belongs to the Judge of All “... because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Act 17:31).

Conclusion

Israel never saw the command fulfilled. Their failure to trust the Lord and to cleanse the land plagued them to the exile when they themselves were forcefully purged from the land. Their return did not include the power or the authority, either politically or biblically, to fulfill the conquest.

God surely gives us a picture of his power of judgment in the conquest of the promised land. But the picture also shows us how desperately we need a savior, for the people that God chose to plant in that land proved to be no better than those on whom God’s vengeance fell. Without God acting to save them and us we all face that same eternal destruction for the idolatry of our own hearts.

As those who have been delivered from the same sentence of destruction, we must both consider and present these matters with great humility, devoid of any judgmental superiority.

Endnotes

¹ NOTE: These are hard verses indeed, for those who want to think of God as “nice.”

² “It will only be with the frank acknowledgment that the ordinary standards were suspended and the ethical principles of the last Judgment intruded that the divine promises and commands to Israel concerning Canaan and the Canaanites come into their own and the Conquest can be justified and seen as it was in truth — not murder, but the hosts of the Almighty visiting upon the rebels against His righteous throne their just deserts — not robbery, but the meek inheriting the earth.”

The Intrusion and the Decalogue, p. 15,16, Dr. Meredith Kline, *Westminster Theological Journal* Volume: WTJ 16:1 (Nov 1953)

³ We should note that God’s eternal mercy and love also “intrudes” upon the created, temporal order in Christ. This is mercy, grace, and love that is totally unmerited and undeserved. This, too, is without precedent.

⁴ Israel of today cannot invoke Joshua 1 as a call to drive out the Palestinians by divine right. Israel’s true prophet, priest, and king has been established by a new and better commandment (Hebrews 7) and his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). To do so would be in violation of the Ten Commandments and it would serve to negate the person and work of

Christ, as well as the entire New Testament. Through the work of Christ Jew and Gentile alike have access to the good news and the Kingdom of God.

For an excellent treatment and background for understanding our relationship to Israel today, and to grasp the impact of the priesthood of Christ as the high priest of a new and better covenant, see *The Israel of God*, by O. Palmer Robertson, P&R Publishing.