

UNDERSTANDING GOD IN THE ANNIHILATION OF THE CANAANITES

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Most Christians believe God is merciful and forgives. “The God of Jesus is a God of nonviolence.... The God of the Christian scriptures emerges as a God of love, a God of compassion, a God of forgiveness, a God of justice, and a God of peace,” says John Dear.¹ Biblical texts, such as Matt 5:39, 44 depict clearly God’s identity and character: “But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.... Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.” Along with this, there is a comprehensible rationale to see that God desires his people to be like him—to love others, neighbors, even enemies.

However, the issue of the annihilation of the Canaanites puzzled some people’s understanding of God and his character in the OT. John Bright, for example, emphasizes that some texts of the OT tell “a bloody tale of battle, violence, and wholesale slaughter, a slaughter in which God assists with his mighty acts; the smoke of burning towns and the stench of rotting flesh hangs over its pages.”² Besides Christian scholars, non-Christians are also shocked by certain texts of cruel wars and hardly see in them God and his love. Richard Dawkins, an ethologist and evolutionary biologist, offers a radical statement. He says:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.³

¹ John Dear, *The God of Peace: Toward a Theology of Nonviolence* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 30.

² John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 8–9.

³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 31.

Besides this frustrating disagreement on the so-called God in OT, some have a hard time seeing the relationship between the two testaments in the context of God's OT behavior compared to Jesus's that is depicted impressively in the NT. In the early Christian era, a radical discontinuity between the testaments became an issue, in which the distinction of God seemed to be supported by both testaments.⁴ The claim was that the God in the OT was not the same as the so-called Jesus in the NT.⁵ The arguments, of course, were raised to question not only the continuity of the Bible but also the consistency of God. As a result, many Christians tend to stand only on the NT and repudiate the authority of the OT⁶ which obviously undermines the principle of *tota Scriptura*.⁷ For this reason, it is a fallacious argument to base the Christian faith only on the NT and disregard the OT.

In biblical research, the terms "holy war" and "Canaanite genocide" are used in scholarly publications.⁸ This has resulted in the misinterpretation of the Hebrew Scripture. C. S. Cowles, for example, states that "*jihad* (holy war) is not a Muslim invention. Its origins and justification are to be found

4 Philip Jenkins, *Laying Down the Word: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 171.

5 Cerdo was one who took his system from the followers of Simon and came to live at Rome in the time of Hyginus, who held the ninth place in the episcopal succession from the apostles downwards. He taught that the God proclaimed by the Law and the Prophets was not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the former was known, but the latter unknown; one also was righteous, but the other benevolent. Later on, Marcion of Pontus succeeded Cerdo and developed his doctrine. See A. Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers: Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (ANF 1:252).

6 Tremper Longman III, "The Case for Spiritual Continuity," in *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 163.

7 This principle states that all parts of the Bible are inspired by God. It shows that both the OT and the NT share the same truthfulness and authority at the same level.

8 Generally, the concept of holy war has to do with spreading a religion or faith by the slaughter of men, women, and children. It was introduced by Friederich Schwally into biblical research in his 1901-volume, *Der heiligen Krieg im alten Israel*, which is still being used by many scholars. Schwally was an associate professor of Semitic languages in Strasbourg from 1898 to his death in 1919. See Karl William Weyde, "Holy War, Divine War, YHWH War—and Ethics: On a Central Issue in Recent Research on the Hebrew Bible," in *Encountering Violence in the Bible*, ed. Markus Philipp Zehnder and Hallvard Hagelia, *The Bible in the Modern World* 55 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 236; Stephen B. Chapman, "Martial Memory, Peaceable Vision: Divine War in the Old Testament," in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and an Old Testament Problem*, ed. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 47.

in the Hebrew Scriptures.”⁹ This perspective does not seem to be based on biblical account. Stephen B. Chapman argues that “although it has become customary to refer to ‘holy war’ in the Old Testament, the expression is a misnomer. The Old Testament never once calls war ‘holy.’”¹⁰ The term “holy war” never occurs in the Hebrew Scripture. The concept is not based on biblical account. As a result, the term holy war used in discussing warfare in the Bible needs to be clarified. In conjunction with this, Markus Zehnder also suggests that “the use of the term ‘genocide’ is inappropriate with regard to the biblical concepts of the conquest of the Promised Land.”¹¹ There is nothing in Scripture, particularly in the OT, that legitimates God as the originator of the “Canaanite genocide” or validates the “holy war.” God has never commanded Israel to kill people because of their religion or for spreading their faith, demanding the slaughter of men, women, and children. Hence, this present article refuses to use such terms in the discussion.

The central matter of this article is about understanding why God used the people of Israel for the annihilation of the Canaanites. To possess the promised land, as the chosen people desired, meant to deal with the issues of conquest and military force. The instruction “show no mercy to them” (Deut 7:2, Josh 11:20) raised questions about God’s compassion. The article also addresses this concern. Thus, it is necessary to consider the wars in the OT, God’s role in those wars, and the role he planned for his people in those wars.

2. God and Israel

2.1. The Canaanites and the Promised Land

The Bible locates the land of Canaan in the “Western Palestine’s valleys and coastal areas.”¹² According to the discoveries at Tell Mardikh, “there is no doubt that both Amorite and Canaanite people were firmly settled in Syria and Palestine.”¹³ Genesis 10:15–19 lists the eleven tribes that lived in the

⁹ C. S. Cowles, “The Case for Radical Discontinuity,” in *Show Them No Mercy*, 16.

¹⁰ Chapman, “Martial Memory, Peaceable Vision,” 47.

¹¹ Markus Philipp Zehnder, “The Annihilation of the Canaanites: Reassessing the Brutality of the Biblical Witnesses,” in *Encountering Violence in the Bible*, 263.

¹² *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Canaan, Canaanite.”

¹³ *BEB 2*, s.v. “Canaan, Canaanites.”

area of Syria and Palestine: the Sidonites, Hethites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zamrites, and Hamathites. Hence, it can be concluded that the people of Canaan were diverse. Yehezkel Kaufmann supports this by saying that “the population of ‘the land of Canaan’ was ethnologically very mixed. Twenty peoples are listed in it, in various combinations.”¹⁴ Since there are seven groups of nations that are frequently mentioned as the object of the annihilation (Gen 15:19–21; Exod 3:8, 17; 33:2; 34:11; Deut 20:16–18; Josh 3:10), it is safe to consider that the battles were only against these nations and not all the people living in those days.

The land of Canaan had been “promised to Israel from the days of the Patriarchs.”¹⁵ The land was promised to Abraham as part of the covenant between him and God. Abraham eventually entered the land by faith, thus fulfilling his part of the covenant (Gen 15:18–21, 17:8). Consequently, the land became part of the inheritance of his family and his descendants as well.¹⁶ During the period of the patriarchs, however, the land was not possessed entirely. Therefore, after returning from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites considered the land of Canaan very important. The land was considered a “promise of freedom from bondage.”¹⁷ In other words, by possessing the land, they were able to establish their identity as a nation. Nevertheless, Israel could appropriate the land in view of the fact that it was indeed “given to them as an inheritance.”¹⁸ The land was not the patriarchs’ inheritance but, indeed, God’s inheritance. This crucial point confirms that the take-over of the land was prominently due to the “promise of God and not to any feelings on national superiority.”¹⁹ God was the owner of the land. Accordingly, God played an important role in giving the land to his chosen people even if it involved warfare.

¹⁴ Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Biblical Account of the Conquest of Canaan*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985), 74–75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 15–25.

¹⁷ Barna Magyarosi, *Holy War and Cosmic Conflict in the Old Testament: From the Exodus to the Exile*, *Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventist Theological Society, 2010), 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁹ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 93.

2.2. The Ideal Plan of God

God himself does not legitimate war in Scripture. There is no statement in the Bible to justify such view. What Yahweh did was to adapt to the sinful circumstances of the people and give some guidelines as presented below.

A. F. Holmes states that “war is evil.... Its consequences are evil, for it produces ghastly loss of life and limb.”²⁰ This, of course, is in contrast to the character of God who is love and the source of life. In some cases, however, war activities are associated with divine judgment. Robert M. Good, for example, writes that “war is a form of divine judgment.... In ancient Israel war was conceived as a judicial activity. By this we mean that war was interpreted as the expression of a legal judgment of Yahweh made for the purpose of resolving a dispute between Israel and neighboring states.”²¹ Nevertheless, it should be underlined that not all wars in the Bible were made under divine instruction. Most of the battles in the OT were products of the international and current political condition and failure of Israel in their relationship with God. “Some were clearly condemned as the actions of proud and greedy kings or military rival.”²² The war against the Amalekites (Num 13:39–45), for example, was a result of rebellion and disobedience. The war between Israel and the tribe of Benjamin (Judg 20) denotes the failure of Israel in keeping God’s commandment which resulted in contention among them. Despite their sin and iniquity, however, the Lord still guided and blessed them many times. Those wars fought under the divine command were a special case. The exception, however, reinforces the rule. God never contradicts himself. The conquest of Canaan portrays just another agenda of God – the agenda of justice.

The Bible is clear about God’s ideal plan when the Israelites had to confront an enemy. This was shown to them in as early as their departure from Egypt. “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” (Exod 14:13–14).²³ “The Lord your God, who goes before you, He will fight for you, according to all He did for you in Egypt” (Deut 1:30). “Do not be afraid of them, for the LORD your God is with you” (Deut 20:1). God’s ideal plan was to not involve Israel directly in the war. Israel did not

²⁰ Arthur F. Holmes, “The Just War,” in *War: Four Christians Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Winona Lake, IN: BHM Books, 1981), 117.

²¹ Robert M. Good, “The Just War in Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 104.3 (1985): 385, 387.

²² Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 90.

²³ All Bible quotations in this article are from the NKJV.

fight for God but God himself fought for Israel.²⁴ For instance, when Israel was crossing the Red Sea, the Creator promised that he would fight for them (Exod 14:13-14). He did. Israel did not do anything but trust him. Gideon and his three hundred-men army (Judg 7:16-22) and Jehoshaphat and the choir ahead of the army (2 Chr 20:20-23) are examples that the Lord would fight the wars for them, so they did not have to kill people. This shows that Yahweh was ready to defend his people and they did not need to wage war. White writes that "the Lord had never commanded them to 'go up and fight.' It was not His purpose that they should gain the land by warfare, but by strict obedience to His commands."²⁵ By this, Israel just needed to allow "God to take charge of their adversaries, the only action required of God's people would be to trust and obey."²⁶

In Deut 20, God gives the rules of warfare to the Israelites. The tactics of war show God's desire for human life—to bring peace and forgiveness. "When you go near a city to fight against it, then proclaim an offer of peace to it" (Deut 20:10). If the city responds peaceably then the city and its inhabitants will become part of the Israelites' labor force. Therefore, it is obvious that war is prominently not God's ideal plan. But if the city rejects the offer, then they "should strike every male in it with the edges of the sword. But the women and the little ones, the livestock, and all that is in the city, you plunder for yourself" (Deut 20:14). However, "Israel was instructed to limit the destruction and violence involved in its conquest of Canaan (Deut 2)."²⁷ Thereafter, instruction is given for exceptional cases in which Israel "shall let nothing that breathes remain alive but you should utterly destroy" certain nations (Deut 20:16-17). These particular wars are mainly directed toward the "fortified cities as centers of pagan worship."²⁸ However, there are also unfortified villages that are related to corruption and wickedness. Magyarosi points out that, "the population that lived outside the fortified cities basically had two possibilities: to immigrate and be assimilated into a foreign culture or to seek refuge in the city and fight. Those who chose the latter option were liable to utter destruction."²⁹ The reason why

²⁴ Magyarosi, *Holy War*, 121.

²⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 392.

²⁶ Pierre Winandy, "God and War in the Old Testament," *Perspective Digest* 11 (2006): 27.

²⁷ Holmes, "The Just War," 123.

²⁸ Magyarosi, *Holy War*, 120.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

these nations are the object of annihilation will be discussed in the succeeding section.

Barna Magyarosi provides a background that adds an extra concept to the understanding of the issue of the war in the OT. He invites us to consider the cosmic background of Yahweh's participation in the war on behalf of Israel. "Egypt, through an attitude of defiance towards the authority of Yahweh and through maintaining a world order based on the exploitation of the poor and weak, coalesces with the rebellious, chaotic forces of evil and becomes their exponent."³⁰ This model can be found in the Pentateuch, and later it is repeated in the rest of the OT. It is the conflict between good and evil, between the character of God and the defiance against the authority of the Creator. "The involvement of Israel in this conflict should have been only spiritual in nature, the battle belonging to God. However, as a result of their unbelief in the divine guidance and of divine accommodation, the Israelites are required to fight."³¹

2.3. God's Involvement

The book of Joshua narrates the four wars which took place in three zones—the battle of Jericho and Ai in the Central West, the Gibeonites against the confederation of five kings in the South, and the conquest of Northern Canaan.³² Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid argue that most of these wars were initiated by God himself and never by Israel,³³ "but by no means are all the wars in the Old Testament portrayed in the same way as the conquest of Canaan."³⁴ The battle of Jericho, for example, began with the assurance of victory which God had given even before the war took place. The city of Jericho was the gate to Canaan. In fact, "Jericho was not only the first, but the strongest town of Canaan."³⁵ The city of Jericho represents the firstfruits of Canaan reinforcing the promise that God will give them the

³⁰ Magyarosi, *Holy War*, 121–122.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

³² Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 137.

³³ Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 33.

³⁴ Wright, *God I Don't Understand*, 90.

³⁵ Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel*, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 68.

whole land. "The city's fall was symbolical of what would happen to Canaan as a whole."³⁶ Magyarosi concludes that "the overthrow of Jericho is paradigmatic for the whole conquest. What happened to Jericho foreshadowed the fate of the entire land of Canaan."³⁷ Accordingly, the battle of Jericho presented the pattern of how Israel was to engage in war.

In the battle of Jericho, the evidence of God's participation in the wars could be seen before the war, during the war, and after the war. Before engaging in warfare, Israel "had to be spiritually prepared."³⁸ They had to seek God's will and to obey the command of the Lord. Before getting involved in warfare, the Israelite males had to be circumcised and to celebrate the Passover (Josh 5). Despite giving them a military strategy, God also taught them a ritual order. Such ritual cleansing signified the imminent presence of God in war. This meaning is clearer when the ark of the covenant as the symbol of God's presence was also in the battlefield.³⁹ It becomes obvious that "with the presence of the ark we can see how the march into battle is a religious procession."⁴⁰ The march's arrangements, including the priests with seven trumpets before the ark (Josh 6:4–6), show that God was participating in that battle. Finally, after the battle, Israel holds a celebration to praise Yahweh who gave them victory. These elements show God's presence in warfare. One can conclude that Israel won the battle because they depended on God and his involvement.⁴¹ Throughout history, the Israelites preserved this tradition that they won the battles "when God fought for them and not when their kings relied on military might and foreign alliances."⁴² Nevertheless, if Israel did not obey God's command and did not seek His will, then they would not succeed in the battle. The battle of Ai was one example that without God, they were not victorious. The wars of Israel are not about Israel but about God.

The battles against the northern coalition subsequently provided evidence of God's involvement in the battle. The war began with the Israelites

³⁶ Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 116.

³⁷ Magyarosi, *Holy War*, 152.

³⁸ Longman, "Case for Spiritual Continuity," 165.

³⁹ Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*, 49.

⁴⁰ Longman, "Case For Spiritual Continuity," 168.

⁴¹ Lois Barrett, *The Way God Fights: War and Peace in the Old Testament* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1987), 22.

⁴² John C. Nugent, "The Politics of YHWH: John Howard Yoder's Old Testament Narration and Its Implications for Social Ethics," *JRE* 39.1 (2011): 84.

consulting God's will, and "only after receiving the assurance of divine help" did they proceed to the battlefield.⁴³ In this scene, God manifested himself miraculously in the confusion, in the large hailstones falling down from heaven, and when the sun and the moon stood still in the valley of Aijalon. These miraculous providences, of course, became factors in Israel's victory. In connection to this, the Bible states clearly that those who died by the hailstones were more than those who died on the battlefield. These miraculous acts showed God's agenda of punishing the Canaanites and not of displaying Israel's superiority. These particular wars were to teach the Israelites of their faithfulness and obedience to God which were the key to their success.

3. Compassion and Justice

It is clear that God did not institute war in order to annihilate other nations.⁴⁴ Thus, what situation made the Canaanites the object of annihilation? Although the destruction of Canaan was to create peace in the land, so Israel could dwell in the land peacefully,⁴⁵ Deut 9:4–5 offers the main reason why God drove the Canaanites out of the land — their wickedness. The wars in the book of Joshua were particularly against the corrupt culture and religion of Canaan. Deuteronomy 7:1–4 states that pollution occurred in the land when people turned away from God and committed idolatry. In connection to this, the Bible states that the Israelites "shall devote them to complete destruction ... as the LORD your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God" (Deut 20:17–18). Alberto R. Treiyeer reinforces this idea by saying that "condemnation will not only fall upon the initial guilty one, but also those who, yielding to his influence, allow do [sic] the same thing (Lev 20:2-5)."⁴⁶ Thus, Israel had to destroy them all in order to avoid contamination.⁴⁷ Israel would also run the risk of sharing in the guilt if they did not remove the

⁴³ Magyarosi, *Holy War*, 19.

⁴⁴ David M. Howard Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 82.

⁴⁵ Adolph L. Harstad, *Joshua*, ConcC (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2004), 268.

⁴⁶ Alberto R. Treiyeer, *The Day of Atonement and the Heavenly Judgment: From the Pentateuch to Revelation* (Siloam Springs, AR: Creation Enterprises, 1992), 222.

⁴⁷ Magyarosi, *Holy War*, 120.

sinners. Israel's and Judah's later failure proved God's wisdom in destroying the Canaanites.

Understanding the moral situation of the Canaanites is helping one to make sense of their annihilation, because "without knowing something of its cultic background would be absurd."⁴⁸ The Bible reveals Canaan's iniquity. Cultic practices such as child sacrifice, divination, sorcery, witchcraft, necromancy, spiritualism, incest, homosexuality, and bestiality (Deut 18:9-12; Lev 18) are obvious signs of immorality in history.⁴⁹ John Bright confirms that the "Canaanite religion was 'no pretty picture'; it embodied an 'extraordinarily debasing form of paganism.'"⁵⁰ The morality of the Canaanites was entrenched into their culture, religion, and society. Merrill Frederick Unger concludes based on archaeological observations that the "brutality, lust and perversion of Canaanite mythology are far worse than elsewhere in the Near East."⁵¹ The destruction of the Canaanites came "because of these detestable manifestations of unbelief, now fully blown."⁵² The destruction of the Canaanites was not arbitrary but happened because of their resistance to God.

The destruction of the Canaanites obviously implied the judgment of God toward their wickedness.⁵³ This had been the main reason for wiping them out. During the time of Abraham, a preview of their moral condition emerged when God promised the land. The fulfillment of the covenant would be delayed for "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen 15:16). For centuries, the Canaanites' immorality would not "justify annihilation. But that time would arrive, and it did arrive by the time of Joshua."⁵⁴ The judgment toward the Canaanites strongly suggests that the time of their probation and God's mercy had reached its limit.⁵⁵ However, the issue of the massacre has been debated among Christians. The same pattern of judgment can be seen in the narrative of Noah and the cities of

⁴⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 56.

⁴⁹ Magyarosi, *Holy War*, 33–34.

⁵⁰ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2000), 8–9.

⁵¹ Merrill Frederick Unger, *Archaeology and the Old Testament: A Companion Volume to Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 175.

⁵² Harstad, *Joshua*, 176.

⁵³ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 159.

⁵⁴ Howard, *Old Testament Historical Books*, 82.

⁵⁵ Francis D. Nichol, ed., "Utterly Destroyed" [Josh 6:21], *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1980), 2:198.

Sodom and Gomorrah when their sin reached its limit and God had to punish them—including women and infants. In the case of the global flood, the Creator even announced that the days of mercy would be 120 years (Gen 6:3). When Abraham bargained with the Lord, he started from fifty righteous people until he reached ten. Actually, not even five were righteous (Gen 18:26–33). These examples show that God’s mercy was extended until all people made up their minds and there was no more chance to save another. Judgment was called for.

When mercy reaches its limit, God “uses Israel as the means of exercising his justice.”⁵⁶ This leads to the question, “Why does God use Israel as the instrument of execution and does not do it Himself?” Some have entertained the idea of Israel as being God’s warrior, but this is not the case here. This article notes that not all the Canaanites died by the sword of the Israelites. Many died by the miraculous intervention of God. We propose that the best explanation for the annihilation of the Canaanites is the *prophylactic* argument. Even if the argument is not complete, and it may create some contra-arguments, it answers logically this thorny question. The best explanation is that prophylaxis is the most effective way to show Israel the great sinfulness of sin. By participating in the wars, killing people including women and infants, they would see the direct consequences of sin. Moreover, the sixth commandment emphatically expresses that God wants humans to live.⁵⁷ It made sense that the sixth commandment in their heart conflicted with their act of killing. This is simply to show the Israelites that suffering and death are a product of sin. This concept of judgment has occurred eventually to Israel when they rejected God’s love. God used his chosen people to punish the Canaanites “as he was later to use foreign nations to bring judgment on his own people.”⁵⁸

As God commanded Israel “thou shall not kill” (Exod 20:13), he did not provide them license for Israel to kill. They did not have any right to take human life. The annihilation of the Canaanites was an exception provided by God so that they could understand the “sinfulness of sin.” The Canaanites brought God’s judgment upon them by their own sin and choice. The problematic commandment of God, in this case, does not make God an unpleasant character, as Dawkins incriminates, but simply says that human “suffering as divine punishment presumes the metaphor of God as a judge,

⁵⁶ Magyarosi, *Holy War*, 33–34.

⁵⁷ Treiyeer, *The Day of Atonement*, 221.

⁵⁸ Holmes, “The Just War,” 10.

not a sadist."⁵⁹ Under such circumstances, "God must act in order to be true to His character, which includes justice as well as mercy."⁶⁰ In *Crossing Jordan: Joshua, Holy War, and God's Unfailing Promise*, Roy Adams notes that "it was eminently legal for Yahweh, as supreme owner of the land, to expel the Canaanites who defied Him and expropriate their land."⁶¹ God is the creator. Thus, "human life is not so sacred that even God Himself cannot take it or order that it be forfeited."⁶² David J. Neville concludes that "in the absence of divine judgment, injustice not only reigns but threatens to become normative."⁶³ For this reason, the annihilation of the Canaanites becomes clear and reasonable.

God is not against gentiles. The Bible reveals God's mercy upon the pagan people. The story of Rahab the prostitute, for instance, is one of the many biblical cases that show God's willingness to save sinners. Rahab's story proves that God wants the peoples of Canaan to be part of his plan even though the judgment has been proclaimed upon their behavior and attitude. Ruth was accepted in the community of Israel even though she was a Moabite who, by law, was not allowed to join them until the tenth generation (Deut 23:3). Naaman, the proud general of the Assyrian army, the enemy of Israel, received healing and salvation (2 Kgs 5:1–18). The story of the Amalekites in 1 Sam 15 depicts the same picture of God's judgment to eliminate a nation. However, the command to exterminate the Amalekites was fulfilled only after centuries of grace—since the Israelites left Egypt.⁶⁴ Later, the people of Nineveh similarly received God's mercy. All these examples show God's desire to see the nations return to him. In the context of the Canaanites, Rahab is a vivid and direct example of how God loves them and wants them to be part of his redemptive plan.

God never punishes without reason. He always provides mercy before sending judgment. As discussed above, since the time of Abraham, these nations had been known for their sins. This indicates that the compassion of God was offered to them for a long time. However, this may also tell us

⁵⁹ Christopher G. Frechette, "The Old Testament as Controlled Substance: How Insights from Trauma Studies Reveal Healing Capacities in Potentially Harmful Text," *Int* 69.1 (2015): 27.

⁶⁰ Nichol, "Utterly Destroyed," 198.

⁶¹ Roy Adams, *Crossing Jordan: Joshua, Holy War, and God's Unfailing Promise* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2004), 153.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶³ David J. Neville, "Justice and Divine Judgement: Scriptural Perspectives for Public Theology," *International Journal of Public Theology* 3.3 (2009): 356.

⁶⁴ Richard S. Hess, *The Old Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 243.

that the sin of these nations reached its limit and their choice was sealed in God's eyes in the time of Joshua.⁶⁵ God was willing to wait for about 430 years for their repentance, but it never happened. In patience, God gave centuries of grace for the Canaanites to repent. However, they answered his grace with iniquity and wickedness.⁶⁶ In spite of the outcome, God also suffered in executing the transgressors. He loves those people who have been created according to his own image. "God had given them an adequate opportunity for repentance, just as he gives to every person in this world."⁶⁷ For this reason, he gives a generous period of time and opportunity for the transgressors to turn away from sin.

4. Conclusion

In summary, not all the wars in the Bible are made under God's command. The wars of the annihilation of the Canaanites should be considered a special case. The ideal plan of God is to not involve Israel in war but to simply make them dependent on and trust in Him. The miraculous elements in wars depict the role assumed by God alone to fight for the Israelites. The annihilation of the Canaanites is a result of their immorality that has been practiced for centuries and it requires the Lord to intervene. In such circumstances, God must act in order to be true to his character, which includes justice as well as mercy. Although judgment is the visible issue in the destruction of the sinners, God's mercy always precedes it. Centuries of grace have proved God's compassion and mercy and the opportunity to repent but, unfortunately, repentance never happened.

To conclude, the picture of God as described in the Bible has never changed. Both the OT and the NT describe the same God who is loving, merciful, gracious, slow to anger, and shows loving kindness (Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Pss 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Eph 2:4-5; 1 John 4:8), One who is both mercy and justice (Ps 33:5, 85:10, 89:14; Isa 30:18; Matt 23:23; Luke 11:42). Such behavior has been demonstrated both to his people and to the other nations throughout history. God does not hate sinners or desire their annihilation. His compassion provided to the sinners indicates both his mercy and need for justice. He has proven eventually his love by sending his only Son for all nations. Centuries and millennia of grace are followed by his return to implement justice based on peoples' choice. God has no dark side. God is love.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Harstad, *Joshua*, 175.

⁶⁷ Nichol, "Utterly Destroyed," 198.