

Why Did God Command the Destruction of the Canaanites?

I. Divine Authority Over Life and Death: Why God's Killing Is Not Murder

The Bible consistently distinguishes between killing that violates the sixth commandment (Hebrew- ratsach - unauthorized, illegitimate killing) and killing that is authorized, whether by God directly or by delegated civil authority. The commandment "You shall not murder" (**Exodus 20:13**) has never been read by Jewish or Christian interpreters as an absolute prohibition on all killing — the same Torah that gives this command also prescribes capital punishment for certain crimes (**Exodus 21:12-14**) and permits killing in defensive war and self-defense (**Exodus 22:2**).

The reason this is not a double standard is rooted in who God is:

"The LORD brings death and gives life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up." - 1 Samuel 2:6

"See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal." - Deuteronomy 32:39

"The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." - Psalm 24:1

God is not a creature killing a fellow creature outside his jurisdiction. He is the Creator and sustainer of every life in question (**Acts 17:25, 28; Job 1:21**). A landlord who repossesses a house he owns is doing something categorically different from a stranger who burns it down. Human beings do not have this authority over one another's lives because we are neither the source of life nor omniscient nor perfectly just, which is precisely why unauthorized human killing is murder, while God exercising judgment as Creator and Judge of all the earth (**Genesis 18:25**) is not.

Even the strongest statement of Israel's civil penal code affirms this logic from the other direction: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (**Genesis 9:6**). Capital punishment, when authorized, is explicitly grounded in God's own prerogative over life being delegated for a specific purpose - not equated with private, unauthorized killing.

II. The Key Texts at Issue

The Canaanite Conquest

"When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you... seven nations more numerous and mightier than you... you shall devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them." - Deuteronomy 7:1-2

"But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to

*complete destruction... that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices." - **Deuteronomy 20:16-18***

Jericho

*"And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction..." (Joshua 6:17) "Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old..." - **Joshua 6:21***

The Amalekites

*"Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." - **1 Samuel 15:3***

The Philistines

It's worth clarifying a category confusion up front: unlike the Canaanites and Amalekites, the Philistines were never the object of a herem ("devotion to destruction") command. The Philistines were Sea Peoples who settled the coastal plain after the conquest period and are not among the seven nations listed in **Deuteronomy 7:1**. The extensive warfare between Israel and the Philistines throughout Judges and Samuel - Samson's raids (**Judges 13-16**), David and Goliath (**1 Samuel 17**), Saul's and David's wars - is ordinary ancient state warfare between rival nations, not a divine command to exterminate a people. This matters because it means the "genocide" charge really applies narrowly to a small set of specific herem texts - it is not the Bible's general model for how Israel treated neighboring nations, nor is it an accurate charge.

The Death of the Egyptian Firstborn

*"About midnight I will go out in the midst of Egypt, and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the slave girl who is behind the handmill..." - **Exodus 11:4-5***

This judgment falls after nine prior plagues and Pharaoh's repeated, hardened refusals (**Exodus 7-10**), and it directly mirrors Pharaoh's own decree, a generation earlier, to drown every Hebrew infant son in the Nile (**Exodus 1:22**) - the judgment is measure-for-measure, not arbitrary. It is also worth noting the Passover provision was not narrowly ethnic: any household, including Egyptians, that applied the blood to their doorposts would be spared (**Exodus 12:13**), and Scripture explicitly notes a "mixed multitude" left Egypt with Israel (**Exodus 12:38**), with provision made for any outsider who wished to keep the Passover and join the covenant community (**Exodus 12:48-49**). **The line drawn was covenantal, not racial.**

Noah's Flood

"The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually... The earth was filled with violence... I have determined to make an end of all flesh." - Genesis 6:5, 11, 13

As with Canaan, judgment came only after long patience - **2 Peter 2:5** calls Noah "a herald of righteousness," implying a sustained period of warning during the ark's construction (widely estimated at up to a century) before the judgment fell (**1 Peter 3:20**). Flooding the earth was a corporate judgment for corporate sins, it was not a punishment for each individual's personal sins.

III. Historical and Cultural Context: Why These Judgments Came

Scripture presents Canaanite society as marked by sinful practices as gravely serious: child sacrifice to Molech (**Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 12:31; 2 Kings 3:27** records the Moabite king Mesha sacrificing his own son), incest, bestiality, and cultic prostitution (**Leviticus 18:6-23**).

"Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants." - Leviticus 18:24-25

The reasons for command to destroy these nation/tribes are two-fold:

- 1) It is punishment for their sin,
- 2) It is to prevent Israel from being influenced by them.

Crucially, the judgment was not sudden. God tells Abraham centuries in advance that the land will not yet be given to his offspring, "for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (**Genesis 15:16**). Language that explicitly frames the eventual conquest as a delayed judicial act, contingent on a measure of accumulated wickedness being reached, not an ethnic grudge held from the start.

IV. Why This Was Not Genocide

The modern legal definition of genocide (1948 UN Genocide Convention) is the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group as such - that is, targeting a group's identity itself, regardless of the conduct of its individual members. Several features of the biblical text run directly against this definition:

The stated basis was moral, not ethnic

"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

The text is explicit that Israel itself would face the same judgment for the same sins (**Deuteronomy 9:4-6; Leviticus 18:28**, warning Israel the land will "vomit you out" too if they

follow the same practices) - this is framed throughout as a transferable moral/judicial standard applied to whoever commits the offense, not a fixed ethnic verdict. God judged and punished Israel as well as other nations.

Exceptions existed for those who changed allegiance

Rahab, a Canaanite living in Jericho, hid the Israelite spies and confessed faith in Israel's God (*"the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath,"* - **Joshua 2:11**). She and her family were spared in the very destruction of Jericho (**Joshua 6:25**) and she is later named in the lineage of Christ (**Matthew 1:5**) and held up as an example of faith (**Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25**). The Gibeonites (**Joshua 9**), through deception, secured a covenant of peace and were spared, becoming permanent temple servants rather than being destroyed.

If the criterion had been ethnicity or bloodline as such, no amount of confession or covenant-seeking could have changed the outcome for a Canaanite. The fact that it did is strong internal evidence the reason was covenant loyalty, not genetic or national identity - which is the essential distinction between corporate judicial judgment and genocide as the term is used today.

Herem was the exception, not the rule, of Israelite warfare

"When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if its answer to you is peace... then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you... [only for] the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance" is total destruction commanded. - Deuteronomy 20:10-11, 16, condensed

The default instruction for warfare generally, even in the same chapter, was to offer terms of peace and surrender first. "Total destruction" was reserved, by the text's own framing, for a specific, bounded, one-time situation: the seven nations occupying the land promised to Israel, tied to the reasons given above. It is not a general biblical model for how Israel (or believers today) should treat outsiders or enemies.

V. Military Hyperbole: What "Utterly Destroy" Actually Meant

Ancient Near Eastern royal military accounts routinely used totalizing, absolute language to describe campaigns whose actual outcomes were considerably more limited - this is well documented as a recognized genre convention, not a biblical peculiarity.

- Egypt's Merneptah Stele (c. 1207 BC) boasts, "Israel is laid waste, his seed is not" - yet Israel obviously continued to exist and is the earliest extrabiblical reference to Israel in Canaan.
- The Moabite Stone (Mesha Stele, c. 840 BC) has King Mesha declare Israel had "utterly perished for always" after a campaign - again, hyperbolic victory rhetoric, not literal fact.

The book of Joshua shows the same pattern of totalizing summary followed by qualification. **Joshua 10:40** says Joshua *"left none remaining"* in the conquered region — yet **Joshua 13:1** immediately follows with God telling Joshua *"very much land remains to be possessed,"* and **Judges 1** lists numerous Canaanite population groups still very much present after Joshua's

death, including in Jerusalem, Gezer, and several other cities (**Judges 1:21, 27-33**). **Joshua 11:22** explicitly notes Anakim remained in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod even after the campaign said to have wiped them out.

"These are the nations that the LORD left, to test Israel by them... in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before." - Judges 3:1-2

The text's stating that many Canaanites remained is the strongest evidence that "utterly destroy" and "left none remaining" functioned as conventional total-victory idiom describing decisive military defeat, not a literal claim that every last person was hunted down and killed - the same way a modern account might say a team "annihilated" or "destroyed" their opponent without anyone taking that as a claim of literal death.

VI. Jericho and the Question of Civilian Casualties

Some scholars argue Jericho and comparable Late Bronze Age Canaanite "cities" were considerably smaller than the term suggests - often fortified military/administrative garrisons of only a few acres, housing soldiers and officials rather than large civilian populations, with the bulk of the region's actual population living in unwallled agricultural villages nearby that are not mentioned as conquest targets. On that reading, the women and children present at a site like Jericho would have been comparatively few. Claiming there would have been only a few children or women does not lessen the moral issues, but it does help to put them into proper perspective.

VII. Answering the Charge That Scripture Condones War Rape

This charge usually rests on two texts, and they need to be treated separately.

Deuteronomy 21:10-14

*"When you go out to war against your enemies... and you see among the captives a beautiful woman, and you desire to take her to be your wife... she shall shave her head and pare her nails... and after that you may go in to her and be her husband, and **she shall be your wife**. But if you no longer delight in her, you shall let her go where she wants. But you shall not sell her for money; **you shall not treat her as a slave**, since you have humiliated her." (condensed)*

Read carefully, this text is a **RESTRAINT** on existing practice, not a license. In the wider ancient world, captive women were routinely treated as spoils of war with no legal standing at all. This law instead requires: a full month of mourning before any sexual relationship (v. 13) - explicitly preventing the kind of immediate seizure the objection assumes; **full legal wife status if the relationship proceeds, not concubine or slave status**; and if the man later loses interest, an explicit prohibition on selling her or treating her as property - she must go free. The text does not authorize sexual assault; it addresses a subsequent marriage and constrains what could otherwise have been unrestrained exploitation. Rape itself is separately and severely criminalized

in Israelite law (**Deuteronomy 22:25-27**, prescribing death for the rapist). The “humiliation” the text speaks of is not “rape” but the woman being divorced or abandoned.

Numbers 31:17-18

"Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him. But all the young girls who have not known man by lying with him keep alive for yourselves."

The phrase "keep alive for yourselves" does not necessarily entail sexual use - that surviving girls were to be absorbed into Israelite households as wards or slaves/servants, and if any were later taken as wives, the **Deuteronomy 21:10-14** protections above would apply. The killing of the non-virgin women was specifically due to their role in the Baal of Peor incident (**Numbers 25**), where Moabite and Midianite women drew Israelite men into idolatrous and sexual sin.

VIII. The Imprecatory Psalms: Psalm 137 and "Dashing the Little Ones"

"O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" - Psalm 137:8-9

This verse is frequently cited as a command to commit violence. It does not, and the distinction matters.

- Genre: Psalm 137 is a lament, written by an exile grieving the destruction of Jerusalem and Babylon's brutality toward it. **It is a prayer addressed to God, not a command issued by God** to an army. No Israelite is ever recorded acting on this verse. It is rather an imprecatory psalm expressing real anguish and lament and a crying out to God for help – not a command from God to destroy.
- It describes rather than prescribes: the psalmist is invoking against Babylon the very fate ancient conquerors, including Babylon itself, inflicted on defeated populations - this is standard ANE imagery for total dynastic/civic destruction (compare **2 Kings 8:12**, where Elisha weeps foreseeing Hazael will do this to Israel's children; **Isaiah 13:16**, prophesying this exact fate for Babylon as God's own judgment; **Hosea 13:16**; **Nahum 3:10** of Thebes). The psalmist is not inventing a new atrocity to wish on Babylon — **he is asking God to bring down on Babylon the same measure Babylon dealt out, framed in the era's conventional idiom for a city's total fall.**
- It is an act of restraint, not incitement: Scripture elsewhere insists vengeance belongs to God alone - *"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" - Romans 12:19 (quoting Deuteronomy 32:35)*. Bringing this raw desire to God in prayer, rather than acting on it with a sword, is precisely what the psalmist does. Scripture recording an honest, anguished emotion is not the same thing as Scripture endorsing that a reader act on it - the same is true of Job's bitter accusations against God (**Job 3; 10**) or Jeremiah's complaints (**Jeremiah 20:14-18**), which are preserved as honest prayer, not modeled behavior.

IX. Why Were Corporate Judgments, Even of Women and Children, Sometimes Necessary?

Israel's survival in the land of promise was never guaranteed by human strength alone — it depended on the nation remaining spiritually and morally distinct from the peoples around it.

- **Scripture treats this threat as existential, not incidental:** intermarriage and cultural absorption with nations practicing child sacrifice, ritual prostitution, and violent hostility toward Israel (**Deuteronomy 20:18; Exodus 34:15-16**) was understood as a danger capable of unraveling the entire covenant people - their worship, their descendants, and ultimately the messianic line through which God intended to bless "*all the families of the earth*" (**Genesis 12:3**). When a threat is judged capable of destroying not just individuals but the future of the whole community, Scripture treats it with a severity proportional to what's at stake, not to the age or individual guilt of every person caught up in it.
- An analogy may help illustrate the logic: If you found a black rat snake in your yard, you'd likely leave it alone - it's harmless, even beneficial, keeping down rodents. But if you found a venomous snake, you would very likely kill it, including a juvenile one, even though the young snake hasn't yet bitten anyone and isn't, in itself, "guilty" of anything. You wouldn't be punishing the snake for a crime; you'd be eliminating a source of lethal danger to your children, your pets, and anyone else who might later cross its path - a danger inherent to what it is and what it would grow to do, not to any choice it had made. The Canaanite nations and Amalek are treated in the text less like individual moral agents being tried and sentenced one by one, and more like this kind of embedded, generational threat — one that **Deuteronomy 20:18** explicitly says would "teach" the next generation of Israelites the same practices if left intact. The concern wasn't retribution against children for their parents' sins; it was removing a threat whose danger was understood to persist across generations by nature, not by individual choice.

Corporate Temporal Judgment vs. Final Individual Judgment

- This is the crucial distinction: **the herem judgments were temporal and corporate, while final judgment is eternal and individual.** Physical death in this life is not, in biblical theology, the last word on a person's eternal standing before God. **Ezekiel 18** develops this at length precisely to correct the assumption that guilt or judgment is simply inherited: "*The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son*" - **Ezekiel 18:20**. Paul affirms that **ultimate judgment is rendered "according to what he has done" - Romans 2:6** - a strictly individual accounting, not a corporate one. And Abraham's own question to God before Sodom's judgment - "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?*" - **Genesis 18:25** - is left standing in the text as a premise Scripture never disowns: whatever happens in temporal, corporate judgment, the final reckoning of every individual soul, including every child caught up in Canaan's destruction, remains in the hands of a perfectly just Judge who is not bound by the same limits of information, patience, or corporate strategy that a nation-state's temporal survival required. The herem judgments answer a this-world question about Israel's survival and mission; they do not

answer, and Scripture does not claim they answer, the eternal question of any individual soul's final destiny - that is reserved to God alone, and Scripture consistently insists He gets it right.

X. Why Would God Command the Killing of Women and Children?

This is an issue that most people struggle with. We can rationalize why it would be necessary to kill men who were enemy combatants who were trying to kill you, but it is harder to understand why it would sometimes be necessary to kill women and children.

- Corporate identity in the ancient world: households and clans were treated far more as unified corporate entities than in modern individualist thought (see also Joshua 7, where Achan's household bears the consequence of his sin) - a framework genuinely foreign to, and uncomfortable for, us today. The tribe's identity was a strong and powerful force.
- The principle of "Blood vengeance" in ANE cultures dictated that a boy, when old enough, avenge the death of a family or tribe member. This was a strong cultural influence. The Bible alludes to this when it talks about cities of refuge and revenge. This was a serious threat to Israel's well-being and survival and must be understood to understand why such actions would be taken.
- Preventing cultural/religious continuity: *"that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices"* - **Deuteronomy 20:18**. This frames the concern as preventing the specific corrupting practices (child sacrifice, ritual prostitution) from being passed to the next generation of Canaanite children and, through intermarriage, into Israel itself.

Some will argue that the killing of women and children mentioned in the bible is war hyperbole and was not to be taken literally. However, assuming that the commands are to be taken literally, in some instances concerns for Israel's future physical and spiritual safety were serious enough that God commanded the killing of women and children for those reasons.

- Amalek's specific history: **1 Samuel 15**'s command is not against a distant, uninvolved population - **Deuteronomy 25:17-18** recalls Amalek specifically attacked Israel's rear ranks, where the weak, elderly, and children walked, during the exodus, "and did not fear God." The text frames this as long-standing, deliberate aggression against Israel's vulnerable, not an unprovoked assault by Israel on a neutral people.

Note: An eternal framework for the youngest victims: passages elsewhere in Scripture treat those without capacity for moral responsibility as under God's mercy rather than judgment — David's confidence that his deceased infant son was with God (**2 Samuel 12:23**), and **Isaiah 7:16**'s reference to a child *"before he knows to refuse the evil and choose the good."* On this view, physical death in these judgments is not equivalent to final, eternal condemnation for those too young to have committed the sins being judged.

XI. Why Do These Commands Not Apply Today

Can't people use these same arguments today to justify wiping out other people groups? No. Here's why:

- These were unique, bounded, direct-revelation commands: each instance in question required explicit, verbal, unmistakable divine command to a specific leader for a specific, one-time campaign tied to Israel's unique redemptive-historical role as the covenant nation receiving a specific promised inheritance (**Genesis 15:18-21**) - not a standing policy or general principle available for anyone to apply by analogy.
- The canon is closed: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (**Hebrews 1:1-2**). Christian theology holds that this mode of direct, authoritative command through prophets for specific military action ended with the completed canon of Scripture. Anyone claiming a new revelation commanding violence today fails the biblical test for even a true prophet (**Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:20-22**) and should be rejected outright.
- Jesus reverses the posture toward enemies: "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*" - **Matthew 5:43-44**. When Peter draws a sword in Jesus's defense, Jesus rebukes him: "*Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword*" - **Matthew 26:52**.
- The church is not a nation-state: "*My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting...*" - **John 18:36**. Israel under Moses and Joshua was a unique covenant nation combining civil and religious identity in a way the New Testament church explicitly is not (**2 Corinthians 10:3-4** - "*the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh*"; **Romans 12:19** - vengeance is reserved to God, not the individual believer or the church).

Put simply: there is no entity today standing in the structural position ancient Israel occupied, no living prophetic office authorized to issue such commands, and an explicit New Testament reversal of the posture toward enemies. The conquest narratives are historical and theological, not a template.