

Was God Immoral When He Commanded Israel To Destroy Canaan?

Skeptics get a lot of mileage in criticizing the Bible regarding the commands in the Old Testament to kill all the people of Canaan. God told Joshua to utterly destroy all the inhabitants of Canaan, including men, women, young children, and the elderly. In Jericho, God even told Joshua to kill all the livestock. The skeptics claim this is genocide, racially-motivated hatred and the killing of innocents, and claim it makes the God of the Bible unworthy of worship.

A few responses:

- The people of Canaan were not innocent. They practiced many forms of evil, including child sacrifice to their idols. They would heat the iron hands of the idol Molech and fry their children alive.
- Ritualistic sex worship was part of the pagan practices, so the venereal disease of the Canaanites would have provided a possible source of death if it had not been eradicated.
- The land of Canaan actually belonged to the descendants of Jacob, who owned it back in Genesis when they left for Egypt due to a famine. So the ownership of the land of Canaan was at best in legal dispute, and the Israelites had a legal claim to the land.
- God had given the Canaanites many years to repent and change their ways. We do not have a detailed record of all of God's communication but based on the other passages in the Bible about how God communicates to pagan lands, it is safe to conclude that God gave the Canaanites plenty of advanced warning, which they rejected. For example, the book of Jonah tells us of God's message to the people of Nineveh, Nineveh's repentance, and God's mercy. One book, Isaiah, presents God's messages to at least eight countries or regions outside of Israel.
- Joshua failed to carry out God's commands to kill all the inhabitants of Canaan. As a result, Israel was plagued for centuries with idol worship, pagan religious rituals, and the resultant murders and judgment. If Israel would have killed all of Canaan, it would have saved lives later and would have resulted in the good of God's message being lived out to many peoples.
- Another question that often arises is 'Why does God allow evil?' God is therefore often criticized for not destroying evil. In the instance of Canaan, God is criticized for ordering the destruction of evil. It is illogical to criticize God for both allowing and destroying evil. In actuality, God patiently waited for Canaan to stop its evil, probably sending them prophets with a message of warning, then when they refused to repent, God sent Israel as a judgement. Later in the Old Testament, when Israel adopted the pagan practices of Canaan, God sent Babylon to administer justice to Israel.
- In the end, God is supreme sovereign, has the right to provide life, which He has done, and has the right to take it back again, which He has also done. God never asks permission, makes excuses, or explains Himself. As supreme sovereign, He is not required to explain Himself to anyone, nor is He held to answering to human criticism.

Four logical options existed for God and the people of Israel:

1. Allow people the freedom to make moral decisions then punish them for it. This is what is presented in the Old Testament book of Joshua.
2. Allow people the freedom to make moral decisions but not punish them for it. God showed patience for 400 prior to ordering their destruction. If God would have allowed this permanently, He would be an unrighteous judge, for which skeptics also criticize Him. In actuality, God showed patience and allowed evil temporarily giving the people of Canaan a chance to repent from the evil ways they tenaciously held. Further, this option is in actuality what happened when Israel failed to destroy the people of Canaan, resulting in greater evil than if Canaan were destroyed.
3. God could stop evil before it occurs. This would allow people to mature to the age of moral accountability but prevent them from making free will decisions for evil. T
 - First, how do you know God is not doing this already? We can all think of evil that could have been worse: the holocaust could have killed more people, suffering people could have died more slowly and painfully. God very well may be stopping some evil now, and people still accuse God of not stopping all evil.
 - Stopping all evil would turn people into robots or computer programs, would not be loving, and would violate humans made in His image. People would then be tools and playthings for God, which would not be loving.
4. Take children to a glorious state of heaven before the age of accountability so they do not commit evil. This is what God does in the destruction of Canaan. The skeptic criticizes God for this act as well.

The skeptics are actually trying to put God in a paradox in which He would be guilty of any choice He made.

While the destruction of the people of the land of Canaan was awful and ugly, it was indeed a necessary act. At the very least, the people of Canaan were not innocent, and the claims of modern people about God's actions are unfounded. God is always holy, righteous, and good, but does not always do things that we find pleasant.