

Joshua 11:1-23

Campaign Against Canaanites in the North

Previously, Adonizedek, the king of Jerusalem, had summoned the five kings of southern Canaan. So now Jabin, the king of Hazor, summons the chiefs of the north against the Israelites.

Remember that Joshua's campaign against the Canaanites takes him through the whole of the Promised Land. Spiritually, that means God is able to reclaim and dispossess all enemies residing within us - anything that comes against God's purpose in our lives.

But there is also a fulfillment historically in Jesus and his ministry. He also went throughout Israel and Samaria. The travels of Jesus and the disciples roughly re-enact the conquest of Canaan. This time, though, it is through the preaching of the kingdom of God.

- **Matthew 4:13-16** - "And leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephtholim: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, The land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephtholim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles; The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up."

- **Matthew 4:25** - "And there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judaea, and from beyond Jordan."

Decapolis and Perea included the transjordan area where Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh had originally settled.

The mount of transfiguration was probably Mt. Hermon in the far north. Caesarea Philippi is also in the north as were Galilee, Tyre and Sidon.

Samaria was in the central part of the Promised Land.

Bethlehem and Hebron are south of Jerusalem.

Beersheba is the southernmost city. "From Dan to Beersheba" outlined the north-south extent of Israel. (Strangely, Beersheba is not mentioned in the New Testament)

- **Matthew 10:23** - "But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come."

To "go over the cities of Israel" is a spiritual campaign, and re-enacts Joshua's campaign "going over" all the cities of Canaan.

For instance, **Joshua 11:2** mentions the kings in "the plains south of Chinneroth" This is Gennesaret in the New Testament:

- **Matthew 14:34-36** - "When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding region. People brought all the sick to Him and begged Him just to let them touch the fringe of His cloak. And all who touched Him were healed"

Jesus, like Joshua, also overthrew "kings," but they were spiritual "principalities and powers" resisting the kingdom of God.

Jesus Heals a Canaanite Woman's Daughter

Canaanites who fled the invasion of Joshua and the Israelites ended up in exile in Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia, another Canaanite nation. Jesus (shockingly) leaves Israel, travels to Tyre, and heals the daughter of a Canaanite woman.

- **Matthew 15:21-28** - "And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us. But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me. But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour."

Like Rahab and the Gibeonites, this Canaanite woman becomes a picture of grace, pointing to the expanded invitation of grace to include the Gentiles, who would be ingrafted into Israel.

Jesus' strange, curt reply to the woman initially is to clarify her status as part of the people who had been implacable enemies to Israel. Her ability to accept her position (like the Gibeonites did) and still "worship" Him and express her faith in Jesus, caused Him to call her faith "great" and to heal her daughter.

Like with the Samaritan woman, this was a remarkable outreach across rigid ethnic boundaries. Samaritans and Canaanites were despised by the Jews.

A Northern Alliance Against Joshua

Joshua 11:4 - "And they went out, they and all their hosts with them, much people, even as the sand that is upon the sea shore in multitude, with horses and chariots very many."

This was supposed to be the promise to Abraham about his offspring!

- **Genesis 22:17** - "...indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies"

(See also **Isaiah 10:22**, **Hosea 1:10** and **Romans 9:27**)

The armies arrayed against them seemed insurmountable. So God reassures Joshua again:

Joshua 11:6 - "And the LORD said unto Joshua, Be not afraid because of them: for to morrow about this time will I deliver them up all slain before Israel: thou shalt hough their horses, and burn their chariots with fire."

Joshua beat them, and then captured the city of Hazor:

Joshua 11:10-11 - "And Joshua at that time turned back, and took Hazor, and smote the king thereof with the sword: for Hazor beforetime was the head of all those kingdoms. And they smote all the souls that were therein with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying them: there was not any left to breathe: and he burnt Hazor with fire."

'Not Any Left to Breathe' - The Language of Military Hyperbole

To interpret the Bible accurately you have to note what kind of literature it is. Although it's all inspired by God, the human authors were trying to communicate with people of their own time. Some is poetic and uses allegory and metaphor; other books are historical. Some are legal or covenant documents. All are written in the style of the time, and use rhetorical devices common of the period.

This chapter uses a lot of extreme language - "utterly destroying" them, not any "left to breathe," destroy them "utterly," until they left them "none remaining."

It's probable that this language was taken from the common forms used to describe military campaigns at this time in the Ancient Near East.

Let's look again at why the Canaanites/Amorites were being driven out of their land.

- **Genesis 15:16** - "But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full."

Specifically, the Canaanites had broken the seven Noachide laws given to humans after the flood.

Jews trace the Noachide laws, a sort of natural law meant to govern human relations, to **Genesis 9:9**, when God speaks to Noah and his children as they exit the ark: "Behold, I

establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you."

Their "seed" would become all the peoples of the earth. Humans were to establish laws to govern their societies, and are prohibited from cursing God, worshipping false gods (idolatry), keep themselves from adultery and sexual immorality, murder, robbery and eating the flesh of a living animal.

(The Apostolic Decree for Gentile believers recorded in **Acts 15** is commonly seen as a parallel to these Noachide Laws)

The scriptures seem to indicate the Amorites (Canaanites) were especially grievous breakers of these universal moral laws.

The Canaanites were morally bankrupt and incorrigible in their wickedness. They engaged in acts that would be considered criminal in any civilized society - incest, child sacrifice, ritual prostitution, bestiality. Also, God waited more than 400 years for Canaan to hit moral rock-bottom before commanding they be driven out:

- **Genesis 15:16** - "But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full."

Like Sodom, the Canaanites were iniquitous not because they were breaking God's law given at Sinai (they didn't know about that). They were breaking the Noachide laws that all peoples were obliged to obey.

Canaanite government represented a city-state system based on ruthless exploitation of outsiders and the poor living on the social periphery. With idolatry came the denigration and downfall of human dignity. Canaanite kings imitated Egyptian and Babylonian practices and claimed to be gods or pretended special relationships to the gods, and treated their subjects as inferior beings.

Spiritually, the historical judgment on the Canaanites was a picture for us of the end of time - "judgment day" - when God will bring a final reckoning and judgment on all who do not turn to him.

Did God command Israelites to "exterminate" the Canaanites? Was this a genocide?

God meets us where we are.

Where the Israelites "were" at this point was in the middle of the Ancient Near East, a time and place of savage warfare and rampant oppression.

The Canaanites seemed especially cruel.

Cruel Rulers

One war-mongering Canaanite ruler, Adonibezek, had conquered a total of 70 other kings in his lifetime. Instead of killing these enemy kings, he chopped off their thumbs and big toes and turned them into beggars "under his table" (**Judges 1:4-7**).

Another, later ruler - Nahash, king of the Ammonites - was not a Canaanite but is representative of the practices of military campaigns in the Ancient Near East. Nahash liked to gouge out the eyes of his enemies. According to Josephus and an introduction to 1 Samuel discovered in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Nahash had attacked the tribes of Reuben and Gad in the transjordan, and "there was not left anyone among the children of Israel in the Tr(ans Jordan) whose right eye Nahash the king of Ammonites did not gouge out."

When he attacked the Israelite town of Jabesh-Gilead, he gave them the choice of death by the sword or having their eyes gouged out. They appealed to the other tribes of Israel to help. Saul, a herdsman at this time, responded by raising an army which decisively defeated Nahash and his cohorts (**1 Samuel 11**).

In comparison to such cruelty, the military practices of Israel appear restrained. In fact, even in the time of David, after he had captured the Jebusite upper city of Jerusalem, we find Araunah, a Jebusite king, peacefully living and farming just north of David's palace in Jerusalem, practically next door. Apparently he had been allowed to live, and had submitted himself to David as king. David bought his threshing floor to be used as the location of the Temple (**2 Samuel 24:18-25**).

Remember also that most of the battles Joshua fought were defensive - Canaanite armies had gathered together to attack *them*.

God's Moral Arc Bends Toward Justice

Israel had been singled out to become God's own people. So far, they had only 40 years experience in understanding his Law.

The Bible has hints of how God's process works - He leads gently, so as not to "overdrive."

When Jacob met Esau in **Genesis 33**, he was wary of Esau's tendencies to force things.

- **Genesis 33:13-14** - "My lord knoweth that the children are tender, and the flocks and herds with young are with me: and if men should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die. Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant: and I will lead on softly, according as the cattle that goeth before me and the children be able to endure, until I come unto my lord unto Seir."

This is also the way God works - He "leads on gently." Just as God promised to give the

Promised Land to Israel little by little and slowly over time, historically He was changing their world view, their concepts of good and evil, and pushing them toward being a vessel to bring the Messiah into the world. But this would be a centuries-long project, full of ups and downs.

When Moses was on Sinai to receive the Law, God told him that if Moses saw His face and full glory, he would die.

“...for man shall not see me and live...you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” (**Exodus 33:19–23**).

Moses was only allowed a glimpse. (God’s full glory would be seen by men only in the face of Jesus Christ.)

- **Deuteronomy 7:22** - "And the LORD thy God will put out those nations before thee by little and little: thou mayest not consume them at once, lest the beasts of the field increase upon thee."

In other words, for God to instantly reveal His glory, His ultimate plan completely, and transform the Israelites suddenly into the promised "nation of priests" that was their destiny, would be to, as Jesus said, sweep the house clean, but then to allow in seven more demons "and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first..." (**Matthew 12:45**)

The Lord would indeed in the future "suddenly come to His temple" (Malachi 3:1), but it would be only after the Israelites had created a great kingdom, had sinned and seen that kingdom broken in two, had been chastised in exile, had realized their sin and weakness, had repented, and were longing for Messiah to come. Because only His presence can truly transform us. God was incubating the concept of Messiah within Israel, waiting for the right time and historical context before revealing His Son to the world.

We have to read Joshua as history written under the literary conventions, style of narration and level of precision used by the Ancient Near Eastern writer. We need to ask how phrases such as “they completely destroyed everyone in it” or “he left no survivors” or “not sparing anyone who breathed” or “until they exterminated them” functioned in this sort of literature.

The Israelites were commanded to “drive out” or “dispossess” the Canaanites, but this assumes Canaanites would be alive — not killed — if driven out. In fact, God says He will do this "out slowly over time." Second, the “utterly destroy” or “leave alive nothing that breathes” language is hyperbolic in Scripture’s war texts as in other ancient Near Eastern war texts. It typically stands alongside mention of many survivors.

You could say it's similar to when sports teams use the language of “totally slaughtering” their opponents.

Tensions exist within the biblical text itself: The land has “rest from war” (**Joshua 21:44**), yet Joshua says Canaanite nations still remain in Israel’s midst (**23:12**); **Judges 1-2** regularly repeats “they could not drive them out.”

- **Judges 1:28** - "And it came to pass, when Israel was strong, that they put the Canaanites to tribute, and did not utterly drive them out."

When biblical authors use phrases such as “They totally destroyed them, not sparing anyone that breathed” (**Joshua 11:11**), which are later followed by passages that presuppose that the same areas are still inhabited by the same peoples, they cannot be affirming that literally every man, woman and child was killed at God’s command. It is a mistake to take them as affirming that Israel literally engaged in complete annihilation at God’s command. They are more than likely stock military phrases exaggerating for rhetorical effect.

Herem

A related concern is to unravel the meaning of '*Herem*'

John H. Walton (PhD, Hebrew Union College), professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College and Graduate School, argues that the Hebrew verb *herem* - "devote, consecrate" is often translated "utterly destroy," but probably means something closer to "to remove from use," or "put beyond use" not "to annihilate." *Herem* is "a mode of secluding, and rendering harmless, anything imperiling the religious life of the nation." Its application to human communities "is intended to destroy identity, not to kill people." The aim of *hērem* was for removing “the identity of a conquered people” which was “a standard procedure of ancient warfare.” And so Canaanite identity “needs to be removed so that Israel cannot make use of it.”

Israel was to "destroy their *name* (i.e. their identity) from under heaven" (**Deuteronomy 7:24**).

Herem includes also an "irrevocable renunciation of any interest" in the object "devoted."

Similar language is found among the Moabites. The Mesha Stele contains a statement by King Mesha of Moab that he captured the town of Nebo and killed all seven thousand people there, "for I had devoted them to destruction for (the god) Ashtar-Chemosh."

Different words are used by God in relation to the Canaanites in the Torah.

On the one hand, God expels (*grs*), dispossesses (*hwrys*), sends away (*slh*), thrusts out (*hdp*), drives out (*nsl*) the Canaanites. But he also annihilates (*klh*), destroys (*h'byd*), exterminates (*hsmyd*), and cuts off (*hkryt*) the Canaanites.

Elsewhere, God sends his angel to expel the Canaanites and bring the Israelites into the land of Canaan (**Exodus 23:20–23; 33:2**); or God sends the hornet, which expels

the Canaanites (**Exodus 23:28; Deuteronomy 7:20; cf. Joshua 24:12**).

So, were they to be expelled, or destroyed?

In an effort to reconcile these ambiguities, Maimonides and Talmudic commentary say that Joshua gave the Canaanites three options: to flee, to remain and make peace with the Israelites, or to fight. Examples of making peace are Rahab and her family and the Gibeonites.

The Mennonite scholar John Howard Yoder suggests that the concept of *herem* was unique in relation to the morality of the time in ensuring that "war does not become a source of immediate enrichment through plunder," and hence was the beginning of a trajectory that would lead ultimately to Jesus' teaching of nonviolence.

As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." and he understood it was God doing the bending.

The danger the Canaanites posed to Israel was that they would "learn their ways," be contaminated and slide into idolatry:

- **Deuteronomy 20:18** - "...that they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods, and so ye sin against the LORD your God."

- **Exodus 34:11–16** - "I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Guard yourself lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land . . . lest it be a snare in your midst. But their altars you shall dismantle, and their monuments you shall smash and their sacred trees you shall cut down . . . lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and lust (*znh*) after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and he call you, and you eat his sacrifice; and you take his daughters for your sons, and your daughters lust after their gods and they make your sons lust after their gods."

- **Numbers 33:50–55** - "When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall dispossess (*hwrys*) all the inhabitants of the land, you shall destroy all their figured objects, you shall destroy all their molten images and all their high places you shall demolish. You shall inherit the land and take possession of it. And you shall apportion the land by lot among your families . . . clan by clan. And if you do not dispossess the inhabitants of the land, those whom you allow to remain shall be stings in your eyes and thorns in your side, and they shall harass you in the land in which you live."

The word *hwrys* originally meant "dispossess" but gradually later came to mean "exterminate." In fact, the word can mean simultaneously both expulsion and extermination.

Anything contaminated - altars and temples, idols, animals that may have participated in temple prostitution or cultic practices - were placed under the ban, the *herem*.

Interestingly, the word *herem* is the last word of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible: "...lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction (*herem*)" (**Malachi 4:6**)

The Old Testament template of *hērem* has a counterpart in the spiritual warfare within believers.

The command to dispossess the Canaanites "tells us, then, ...that in order to serve God's purpose we are supposed to purge ourselves – our personal allotment of 'land' – of all identities other than 'in Christ,' just as the Israelite tribes were supposed to purge their allotted territory of all identities other than the people of the covenant..."

And "those whom you allow to remain shall be stings in your eyes and thorns in your side, and they shall harass you in the land in which you live" (**Numbers 33:55**)

In a view similar to Origen's, Christian theologian John Cassian (360-435 A.D.), when speaking about the command in **Deuteronomy 7** to drive out the seven nations in the land, saw it as a metaphor for the seven deadly sins that have to be conquered and exterminated in the spiritual life.

Rabbinical scholar Joshua ben Hananiah (circa 100 A.D.), said that the seven Canaanite tribes were no longer identifiable, so literal obedience to the command to war against them could not serve as a model for further aggression.

Sadly, the biblical concept of *herem* was later used as justification by Christian armies and Islamic conquerors, by European colonial expansions, and by Americans in their push westward encountering resistance from Native Americans.

But there is always a chance for repentance, even for nations:

- **Jeremiah 18:8** - "If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them."

But the Canaanites were stubborn and did not repent - apart from the Gibeonites, and individuals like Rahab.

Joshua 11:19 - "There was not a city that made peace with the children of Israel, save the Hivites the inhabitants of Gibeon: all other they took in battle."

This indicates that, despite the language of utter destruction, there was always a chance for peace offered to the Canaanites who repented, surrendered and "made peace."

The conquest of the Promised Land wasn't a wholesale massacre, it was a dismantling of a dark cultural regime. In fact, only three fortresses were totally destroyed: Jericho, Ai, and Hazor (**Joshua 6:24, 8:28, 11:13**).

But mysteriously, the scriptures say God "hardened" the hearts of the Canaanites, as He did with Pharaoh.

Joshua 11:20 - "For it was of the LORD to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle, that he might destroy them utterly, and that they might have no favor, but that he might destroy them, as the LORD commanded Moses."

Paul in **Romans 9** discusses the fairness of this in relation to Pharaoh:

- **Romans 9:14** - "...Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid."

- **Romans 9:17-18** - "For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth."

and Paul concludes:

- **Romans 9:20** - "O man, who art thou that repliest against God?"

When God hardens hearts to reveal His power, we can only stand back in awe and confess that our finite existence blinds us to God's greater purposes. It's another of those "treasures" unexplainable by man.

The Giants

With the south and now the north of the country under Israelite control, there was just one unfinished task for Joshua.

More than 40 years previously, Joshua and Caleb opposed the evil report of the other spies who said, "And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight." (**Numbers 13:33**)

Joshua and Caleb had said then: "Only rebel not ye against the LORD, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defense is departed from them, and the LORD is with us: fear them not." (**Numbers 14:9**)

The sons of Anak were giants, the mysterious offspring of the Nephelim ("fallen ones"), the fallen angels. The giants were the offspring of these "sons of God" and the "daughters of men" before the Deluge, according to **Genesis 6:1-4** - degenerated from their original strength but still warriors of great stature like Goliath.

Joshua 11:21 - "And at that time came Joshua, and cut off the Anakims from the mountains, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, and from all the mountains of Judah, and from all the mountains of Israel: Joshua destroyed them utterly with their cities."

The Giants in our life - representing trouble, temptation, seemingly insurmountable problems - are there to feed our souls, giving us spiritual nourishment, our faith strengthened as we see God triumph over them.

Joshua 11:22 - "There was none of the Anakims left in the land of the children of Israel: only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod, there remained."

These leftover giants - like Goliath of Gath - would still trouble Israel until the days of King David (**1 Samuel 17**).

Joshua 11:23 - "So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD said unto Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance unto Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. And the land rested from war."

As we will see, Joshua and the Israelites actually left a lot undone. This is because Joshua is only a type of Christ, and the type is only an imperfect shadow of the original. Christ would completely and perfectly drive out spiritual enemies, give us our spiritual inheritance, and bring true rest to Israel.

See "The Promise of the Land"

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