

Did God Command Genocide? A Challenge to the Biblical Inerrantist

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Do not try to believe anything that affects you as darkness. Even if you mistake and refuse something true thereby, you will do less wrong to Christ by such a refusal than you would by accepting as His what you can see only as darkness. . . .

George McDonald, “Light,” in *Creation in Christ*

At some point, any thoughtful Christian who believes the Bible to be “inerrant” must come to terms with the harsh and sometimes shocking behavior of the God of the Old Testament (OT).¹ In the present paper I will consider just one sort of case—those instances in which Yahweh commands the Israelites to exterminate entire nations.

The prelude to the Israelite conquest of Canaan provides a salient example. In the following passage, Moses speaks to the people on behalf of Yahweh.

When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Gir’gashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Per’izzites, the Hivites, and the Jeb’usites, seven nations greater and mightier than yourselves, and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them; then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them. (Deut. 7:1–2)²

ABSTRACT: Thoughtful Christians who hold the Old Testament in high regard must at some point come to terms with those passages in which God is said to command what appear (to us) to be moral atrocities. In the present paper, I argue that the genocide passages in the Old Testament provide us with a strong *prima facie* reason to reject biblical inerrancy—that in the absence of better reasons for thinking that the Bible is inerrant, a Christian should conclude that God did not in fact command genocide. I shall also consider and reject the attempts of two prominent Christian philosophers to show that God had morally sufficient reasons for commanding the Israelites to engage in genocidal attacks against foreign peoples.

1. I count as a “biblical inerrantist” anyone who thinks that there are no serious mistakes in any book of the Bible.

2. All biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

Lest they should be in any doubt about what is meant by “utterly destroy” and “show no mercy,” Moses later says this:

... in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes. . . . (Deut. 20:16)³

In passages like these, some Christians are able to see only “darkness.”⁴ If, therefore, they continue to believe that God is perfectly good, they must consider the possibility that there are serious mistakes in the OT.

If the President of the United States were to announce that God had told him to use the vast military power at his disposal to obliterate, say, the nation of Iran, “saving alive nothing that breathes,” people would assume that he was mad and he would speedily be dismissed from office. No one—well, almost no one—would take seriously the idea that God had instructed him to do this terrible thing. Why not? Because, apart from the obvious fact that such an attack would be contrary to our national self-interest, a genocidal attack on another nation is a moral outrage, and God is generally assumed to be perfectly good in a sense that is incompatible with commanding moral outrages.

Why then, should we not react to the Deuteronomy passages quoted above in a similar way? No doubt the author(s) of Deuteronomy *believed* that God had commanded a genocidal attack on the inhabitants of the Promised Land. But that is not what a perfectly good God would do. So if we believe that God is, and has always been, perfectly good, why shouldn’t we simply conclude that the human author(s) of Deuteronomy were mistaken?

Here is a more careful formulation of the argument that I wish to discuss.

- (1) God exists and is morally perfect.
- (2) So God would not command one nation to exterminate the people of another *unless He had a morally sufficient reason for doing so*.
- (3) According to various OT texts, God sometimes commanded the Israelites to exterminate the people of other nations.
- (4) It is highly *unlikely* that God had a morally sufficient reason for issuing these alleged commands.
- (5) So it is highly *unlikely* that everything every book of the OT says about God is true.

I believe that this argument constitutes quite a strong *prima facie* case against inerrancy. Unless a better argument can be found for rejecting its conclusion, then anyone who thinks that God is perfectly good should acknowledge that there are mistakes in some of the books of the OT.

3. See also Exod. 23:32–3 and 34:11–16.

4. See 1 John 1:5b. “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.”

Few Christians would have any doubt about premise (1), and I think nearly all would accept the move from (1) to (2). If God is morally perfect, then He must be perfectly just in His dealings with all created persons. He must also love them, desiring what is best for each of them. We can be sure that He would not command a genocidal attack unless He had overriding reasons for doing so—reasons that are compatible with His perfect justice and love.

If the claim that God is perfectly good is taken as a nonnegotiable given, then (4) is the controversial premise. Biblical inerrantists can be expected to reject it, insisting that God had morally sufficient reasons for commanding genocide whenever the Bible says He commanded it. In what follows, I will consider some of their typical strategies and claims. But first, we need to get the dialectical situation right.

It is important to see that the issue is not whether it is *logically possible* that God had morally sufficient reasons for commanding genocide, but whether it is at all *likely* that He did. It is also important to see that the issue is not whether God might have morally sufficient reasons for commanding genocide on some occasion or other, but whether—in the circumstances that *actually obtained* at the time that the genocidal commands described in the OT texts were supposedly given—it is at all likely that God had satisfactory reasons issuing *those* commands. If, on the basis of the best evidence at our disposal, we are forced to conclude that this is unlikely, then there is a strong *prima facie* reason for rejecting the inerrancy of the OT.

In tackling this problem, biblical inerrantists must operate under an important constraint. The OT texts themselves have quite a bit to say about what God's reasons were. So it will not be sufficient to make a blanket appeal to the transcendence of God and the cognitive limitations of human beings, arguing that—for all we know—God may have had reasons for issuing these commands that are too complicated or mysterious for us to understand. *The reasons actually given in the relevant OT texts* are not all that complicated or mysterious, and *they* will have to be defended. If, relative to everything else we know, the reasons given in the OT are implausible and morally suspect, that will add strength to the *prima facie* case against the inerrancy of the OT.

In what follows, I will not be investigating the historical accuracy of the OT narratives in other respects. The objection to inerrancy under consideration is exclusively concerned with *God's* supposed role in these events, and my argument is entirely moral and philosophical in character.

Paul Copan's Account of the Canaanite Genocide

Let us begin our investigation by taking a close look at a prominent Christian philosopher's attempt to make sense of some of the most mor-

ally problematic passages in the OT.⁵ In a recent paper, provocatively titled, “Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics,” Paul Copan defends the God of the OT against the harsh charges made by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens.

Copan places heavy emphasis on the obvious fact that the world of the ancient Near East (ANE) was quite unlike our own. In that setting, practices that offend our contemporary moral sensibility—practices such as slavery, polygamy, and patriarchy—were the norm. Against this background, Copan thinks we can see, even in some of the harsher provisions of the Mosaic Law, incremental changes and improvements. For example, although slavery is not eliminated, the conditions of slaves are improved in various ways (19–20). Through the Mosaic legislation, Copan suggests that God was taking “incremental ‘humanizing’ steps rather than a total overhaul of the ANE cultural givens” (16).

Why would God do things this way? Copan suggests that God wanted to work with the raw material presented by the fallen world of the ANE in a way that respected human freedom while gradually leading human beings toward the ideal that is (ultimately) represented in the life of Jesus Christ, but is also anticipated in the “loftier moral ideals of Genesis 1 and 2 and even 12” (16).

Here I will not challenge Copan’s way of defending the Mosaic Law. I will assume, for the sake of argument, that the context of the ANE was relevantly different from our own, and that the main features of the Mosaic Law were appropriate to that time and place. What I do wish to challenge is the claim that God had good reasons for commanding the Israelites to annihilate other peoples and cultures. Here, at any rate, there seems to be no “softening” of standard ANE practices. As we have already seen, the Israelites were explicitly instructed to “show no mercy.”

Nevertheless, as we are about to see, Copan insists that God had a morally sufficient reason for issuing these shocking commands. Here, quoted at some length, is the heart of his explanation.

First, Israel would not have been justified to attack the Canaanites without Yahweh’s explicit command. Yahweh issued his command in light of a morally-sufficient reason—the incorrigible wickedness of Canaanite culture. Second, the language of Deuteronomy 7:2–5 assumes that, despite Yahweh’s command to bring punishment to the Canaanites, they would not be obliterated—hence the warnings not to make political alliances or intermarry with them. We see from this passage too that wiping out Canaanite *religion* was far more significant

5. Paul Copan, “Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics,” *Philosophia Christi* 10 (2008): 7–37. All in-text citations are to this paper. At a later stage I will also consider the views of William Lane Craig—another prominent evangelical philosopher whose treatment of the Canaanite genocide goes beyond that of Copan in certain respects and raises additional issues.

than wiping out the Canaanites themselves. Third, the “obliteration language” in Joshua (for example, “he left no survivor” and “utterly destroyed all who breathed” [10:40]) is clearly hyperbolic. Consider how, despite such language, the text of Joshua itself assumes Canaanites still inhabit the land . . .

Fourth, the crux of the issue is this: if God exists, does he have any prerogatives over human life? The new atheists seem to think that if God existed, he should have a status no higher than any human being. Thus, he has no right to take life as he determines. Yet we should press home the monumental difference between God and ordinary human beings. If God is the author of life, he is not obligated to give us seventy or eight years of life . . . That being the case, he can take the lives of the Canaanites *indirectly* through Israel’s armies (or directly, as he did when Sodom was destroyed in Genesis 19) according to his good purposes and morally sufficient reasons. What then of “innocent women and children”? Keep in mind that when God destroyed Sodom, he was willing to spare the city if there were even ten innocent persons. Not even ten could be found. Given the moral depravity of the Canaanites, the women were far from innocent. (Compare seduction of Israelite males by Midianite women in Numbers 25.) (25–6)

In this passage, Copan does what he can to minimize the size and scope of the divinely instigated genocide. He claims that the “obliteration language” in the book of Joshua is “clearly hyperbolic.” The text may say things like “he utterly destroyed all who breathed,” but it also warns against intermarriage with the remaining Canaanites, clearly implying that some will remain. Copan thinks this shows that individual Canaanites were not the primary targets of the attack. Wiping out their religion, he says, “was far more significant than wiping out the Canaanites themselves.”

The “crux” of the issue, however, is said to lie elsewhere. As the author of human life, Copan thinks God has the “right” to determine when—and, apparently, how and by whom—any human life will be terminated. Of course, this should not be taken to mean that God is capable of acting capriciously. In the case we are concerned with, Copan plainly thinks that God had a “morally sufficient reason” for wanting a lot of Canaanites dead. For one thing, Copan says, the Canaanites, both men and women, were “incorrigibly wicked” and “morally depraved.” From the famous conversation with Abraham in which God agrees to spare Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of ten righteous persons, Copan appears to deduce that there were not even ten righteous Canaanites.

Perhaps, then, Copan thinks that one of God’s motives was to punish this wicked people. Another motive, clearly, is to separate the “holy” people of Israel from the Canaanites and their religion. The danger of intermarriage, which Copan mentions explicitly, and the consequent danger of mixing the worship of alien gods with the worship of Yahweh were major issues—ones

that God chose to deal with by destroying the Canaanite religion.⁶ One way to do that is to annihilate very many (if not all) of *the Canaanites*. Though Copan alludes to it only briefly, another rather obvious motive was God's desire to provide a place for the Israelites to establish their own nation state.⁷

Even if it is granted that all (or nearly all) of the Canaanites in the relevant historical period were "incorrigibly wicked," that they deserved to be wiped out, and that drastic methods were required to separate God's Chosen People from them, many people will still recoil at the brutal treatment of the Canaanite children. Copan responds in two ways. First, he invokes a "war analogy," speaking of the deaths of the children as "collateral damage" in a just war against an evil power. Second, he postulates a glorious afterlife for these children—one in which they come to know the true God, to recognize the justice of his purposes, and to see Him as having rescued them from a corrupt and "morally decadent" culture.

What then of the children? Death would be a mercy, as they would be ushered into the presence of God and spared the corrupting influences of a morally decadent culture. But what of terrorized mothers trying to protect their innocent children while Israelite armies invade? Here, perhaps a just war analogy might help. A cause might be morally justified (for example, stopping the aggression of Hitler and Japan), even if innocent civilians might be killed—an unfortunate "collateral damage" that comes with such scenarios. Furthermore, the infants and children who were killed by the Israelites would, in the afterlife, *come to recognize* God's just purposes, despite the horrors and terrors of war. They would side with God in the rightness of his purposes—even if it had meant temporary terror. (26)

Critical Evaluation

If Copan's account is correct, then God had morally sufficient reasons for commanding the extermination of the Canaanites—reasons that were wholly consistent with His perfect goodness. But how adequate is Copan's account? How morally satisfying are his explanations?

Let us begin with Copan's attempt to minimize the size and scope of the genocide. It is not easy to see how this is supposed to help his case. It is quite a stretch to suppose that the God who ordered that *all* be destroyed would have been displeased if all had been destroyed.⁸ After all, it was precisely the failure to destroy *all* the targets of the genocide that prevented one of the very things that God was supposed to be trying to do—namely, destroy

6. This is confirmed in Deut. 7:3–4 and Deut. 17–18.

7. Copan writes: "God delivered them out of slavery and provided a place for them to live as a nation" ("Is Yahweh a Moral Monster?" 24).

8. Cf. 1 Sam. 15:10ff.

the Canaanite religion. This left the Israelites in the exact situation that God was allegedly trying to change—namely, one in which they were continually tempted to intermarry with the surrounding people and to join them in the worship of their gods. According to the biblical record, the Israelites repeatedly succumbed to this temptation and were repeatedly punished for it. Indeed, ten of the twelve tribes were eventually lost—assimilated, presumably, to the surrounding culture.

This raises another potentially embarrassing question. Assuming that God's desire to destroy the Canaanite religion by destroying Canaanites was a legitimate one, why would He choose such an inefficient means of accomplishing this aim? It is only too easy to imagine more effective ways for the Almighty to remove the Canaanites from the picture. More to the point, it is clear that if this was God's plan, it was spectacularly unsuccessful.

But in the present context the more important questions are (i) whether the destruction of the Canaanites (however incomplete) is a morally acceptable aim, and (ii) whether the means employed are morally acceptable. With regard to (i), we must consider the allegation that the Canaanites were "incorrigibly wicked." Copan says that God was "bringing just judgment upon a Canaanite culture that had sunk hopelessly below any hope of moral return (with the rare exception of Rahab and her family) . . ." (24–5).

The reference to Rahab is odd, to say the least. Rahab was the prostitute who hid Joshua's spies in Jericho and enabled them to escape (Josh. 2). Rahab's motive, as she explains it, is fear of the Israelite army whose god (Yahweh) had led them through the Red Sea and had enabled them to conquer so much territory so easily. This had led her to conclude that Yahweh is "God in heaven above and on earth beneath." So she made a deal with the spies, and Joshua honored their promise to allow Rahab and her family to live after the walls of Jericho fell (Josh. 6:17, 23).

I will set aside the question of what Joshua's spies might have been doing besides spying while lodging in the house of a prostitute. This prostitute and her family, were obviously motivated by fear of an invading army. It is hard to tell whether Rahab had been converted to monotheism, though it is clear that she and her family were convinced that the Israelites were backed by the most powerful of all the gods. Moreover, nothing in the text suggests that Rahab saw prostitution as a sin, or that she had come to see the other inhabitants of the city as evil beyond any possible redemption, or as deserving the fate that was certain to befall them.

Copan says that "Rahab embraces Yahweh as her own" (13n31). Well, maybe. But it is important not to read more into the text than is plainly there. It is obvious—isn't it?—that Rahab is prudent, not pious. Her "fear of Yahweh" is the most ordinary kind of fear, and she is willing to betray her entire city in order to save her own skin, and that of the rest of her family.

It is hard to see how anything in this story supports the claim that all the *other* inhabitants of Jericho were more evil than Rahab, much less Copan's broader claim that the entire Canaanite culture was "sunk hopelessly below any hope of moral return." If a fearful prostitute who is willing to sell out her own city in order to save her own skin is worth saving, one might be excused for thinking that the standard for "those worth saving" was low enough to include other Canaanites in the city. Were they not also afraid? As Rahab herself says, "there was no courage left in any man" (Josh. 2:11b).

Canaanite "Wickedness"

I return to the question, In what did the wickedness of the Canaanites consist? Copan provides few details. For answers, we have to turn to the OT itself. For example, Leviticus 18:19–25 seems to imply that the Canaanites were guilty of: (i) having sexual intercourse with a woman during her menstrual period, (ii) having sexual relations with the wife of a kinsman, (iii) sacrificing some of their children to Molech, (iv) homosexual behavior, and (v) bestiality. It is not clear how these "crimes" are ranked in degree of seriousness. But because of them, Leviticus says that Yahweh is driving the inhabitants out of the land. (It also says that the land itself became "defiled" and "vomited them out.")

Another point on which Leviticus is unclear is whether it is child sacrifice *per se*, or whether it is merely sacrificing a child to *Molech* (or perhaps to any god other than Yahweh) that is an abomination.

It will be worth spending a bit of time on the subject of child sacrifice, since the charge that the Canaanites engaged in this practice is often cited as one of the principal reasons for their destruction. For example, William Lane Craig asserts that by the time God commanded its destruction "Canaanite culture" was "debauched and cruel, embracing such practices as ritual prostitution and even child sacrifice."⁹

I will return to the "ritual prostitution" charge presently. But the charge relating to child sacrifice is particularly interesting since there is evidence for thinking that during this same period, child sacrifice had a place in the repertoire of *Israelite* religious practices. This matters in the present context because it casts doubt on the claim that the Israelites were instructed to destroy the Canaanites partly in order to stamp out child sacrifice.

One piece of evidence for thinking that the Israelites did not believe that Yahweh disapproved of child sacrifice can be found in Exodus 22:29c–30,

9. See William Lane Craig, "Slaughter of the Canaanites," *Reasonable Faith with William Lane Craig*, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5767>. This is not, to be sure, a "scholarly venue," but there can be no doubt of Craig's own scholarly credentials, and what he wrote here is a serious attempt by a serious philosopher to answer a serious question.

which is most naturally interpreted as a prescription for sacrificing one's firstborn son.

The first-born of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do *likewise* with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its dam; on the eighth day you shall give it to me (emphasis added).

Admittedly, Exodus 13:2 merely says the first-born should be “consecrated” to God without specifying the method of “consecration.” On the other hand, Exodus 34:20 says that the firstborn son is to be “redeemed”—apparently by the substitute sacrifice of an animal.

The firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the first-born of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before me empty.

Redeemed from what? The most straightforward answer is not “redeemed from service to Yahweh,” but rather “redeemed from having to be sacrificed in the same manner as the oxen and sheep mentioned in 22:30.”¹⁰ The natural conclusion to draw is that Israelite attitudes toward child sacrifice were evolving during this period in their history. But nothing in these texts suggests that they saw child sacrifice as an “abomination” on account of which God wanted the Canaanites destroyed.

Further evidence for thinking that during this early period the Israelites thought that the sacrifice of a child might win them favor with Yahweh is provided by the notorious case of Jephtha's foolish vow. Jephtha promises that if Yahweh will “deliver the Ammonites into his hand,” he will sacrifice as a “burnt offering” whoever first comes out to meet him after the battle (Judg. 11:30–40). Yahweh honors Jephtha's request, and he returns victorious. Alas, the first person to meet Jephtha after the battle is his own daughter. After two months in which his daughter is permitted to “bewail her virginity,” Jephtha—who is not at all happy about this—“did with her according to his vow which he had made.”

The implications of this sad little story are often missed. Jephtha was the Judge of Israel. If Yahweh had already made it clear to the Israelites that child sacrifice was one of the abominations on account of which the Canaanites were being driven from the land, Jephtha would surely have known this. It would not have occurred to him that a human sacrifice would be pleasing to Yahweh, or that it would help him defeat the Ammonites in battle. The story has a tragic ending because Yahweh does not see fit to intervene, and because Jephtha is obviously afraid of what might happen if he were to break a sacred vow to Yahweh.

10. For a persuasive case that in the earlier stages of their history, the ancient Hebrews approved of child sacrifice, see Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), chap. 1.

In a much later period of Israelite history, we encounter another odd case of child sacrifice. The King of Moab actually succeeds in defeating the Israelites by sacrificing his own son and heir—presumably to Chemosh.

When the king of Moab saw that the battle was going against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through, opposite the king of Edom; but they could not. Then he took his eldest son who was to reign in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall. And there came great wrath upon Israel; and they withdrew from him and returned to their own land. (2 Kings 3:26–7)

Here the very practice inveighed against by the great Hebrew prophets appears to work. It seems that in an extreme situation, the sacrifice of one's son and heir may turn the trick when nothing else will. It is, after all, the best thing you can offer your god. (Recall that it is partly for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac to Yahweh that Abraham is praised in Genesis 22:16!)

Of course, *we* may speculate that the Israelite army was merely frightened by the spectacle of a human sacrifice—that they ran away because they were afraid that Yahweh (or Chemosh?) would give the battle to the Moabites. But that merely underscores the point that I am trying to make. If the Canaanites had been “driven out” partly because they practiced human sacrifice, and their land had been given to a people set apart for the service of a God who abhorred and forbade human sacrifice, it is odd that at this late date the Israelites themselves still did not know that such sacrifices could not possibly be efficacious.

So much for human sacrifice. The other abominations mentioned in Leviticus 18 are all of a sexual nature. It is striking that there is nothing uniquely “Canaanite” about them. All, or nearly all, of these practices—from sexual intercourse during a woman's menstrual period to homosexual behavior to bestiality—are still common. Is there any real reason to believe that these things were *more* common among the Canaanites in the ancient world? A few notorious religious figures have suggested that AIDS or the 9/11 attacks were a divine judgment on America provoked by its tolerance of homosexual behavior, but I see no evidence that Copan (or any other Christian philosopher that I know of) shares this view.

So what did the Canaanites do that made them especially deserving of a genocidal attack? One common charge is that they engaged in temple prostitution. It is not mentioned in the official list of practices on account of which the Canaanites were being driven out of the land (Lev. 18). But at one point Copan mentions it. “We are familiar,” he says, “with the Canaanite *qedeshot*—the female and male cult prostitutes” (20). Copan cites three passages: Genesis 38:15, 22–23; Deuteronomy 23:18–19; and Hosea 4:14.

I am not sure whether Copan thinks temple prostitution figured prominently in the wickedness on account of which the Canaanites were “judged.” But it will seem plausible to many to regard prostitution of any sort as wick-

ed, and as noted earlier, William Lane Craig explicitly includes “ritual prostitution” in his indictment of Canaanite culture.

Let us take a quick look at the three passages mentioned by Copan. The first of these is Genesis 38, which tells a remarkable story in which Jacob’s son, Judah, mistakes Tamar, his twice-widowed daughter-in-law, for a temple prostitute and has sexual intercourse with her. The relevance of this strange little story in the present context is merely the implication that there were temple prostitutes in the region during the time of the patriarchs. So perhaps this practice still existed when the Israelites invaded Canaan.

On the other hand, as Copan recounts the history of this period, the mere existence of temple prostitution at the time of the patriarchs cannot have been sufficient reason for “judging” the Canaanites. For Copan emphasizes that “Israel had to wait over four hundred years in bondage in Egypt while the sin of the Amorites was building to full measure (Gen. 15:16)” before “God delivered them out of slavery and provided a place for them to live as a nation” by judging the Canaanites and giving their land to the Israelites. The implication would appear to be that at the time of the patriarchs the peoples in the region promised to Abraham’s descendents were not yet wicked enough to warrant a genocidal war against them.

The other passages Copan refers to in connection with cult prostitution are Deuteronomy 23:18–19 and Hosea 4:14. Here is the relevant part of the Deuteronomy passage:

There shall be no cult prostitute of the daughters of Israel, neither shall there be a cult prostitute of the sons of Israel.

There is no actual mention of the Canaanites in this passage, but it could be argued that there would be no need for such a provision in the Mosaic Law unless the surrounding people engaged in such practices.

The mention of cult prostitution in Hosea 4:14b (“ . . . for the men themselves go aside with harlots, and sacrifice with cult prostitutes . . .”) implies both that the practice existed long after the conquest of Canaan and that Israelite men engaged in it. If so, this aspect of the Canaanite religion was obviously not eliminated by the genocide commanded in Deuteronomy and reported in Joshua.

It is hard to tell how widespread this practice was, and the OT evidence is not abundant. But even if matters were much clearer in the OT, this would not (and should not) be sufficient to convince those who are not already committed to believing that whatever the OT says about the Canaanites must be true. After all, the only historical record of the conquest of Canaan that we have was written by the victorious party in a war of conquest, and it is hardly surprising that they thought that their actions were fully justified, and that they were sanctioned by the God they worshiped.

If we want to know what the Canaanites had to say about their own religious practices, the best we can do is to pay close attention to the most recent scholarly work on the tablets unearthed at Ras Shamra (an archaeological site on the northwest Syrian coast). These tablets, which come from the Bronze Age Canaanite city of Ugarit, give lists of divinities and describe the details of various ritual practices. Ugarit seems to have been at its cultural and economic height at approximately 1200 BC, corresponding roughly to the time at which the Israelites are supposed to have settled in Canaan. So an examination of these Ugaritic texts will take us as close as we are likely to get to the Canaanites' own understanding of their religious practices at that time.

Perusal of the most accurate and up-to-date translations of the Ugaritic texts does not provide evidence of a particularly “debauched” or “cruel” culture—unless you count animal sacrifice as “cruel”! The texts do make it clear that the people of Ugarit worshiped numerous gods—including several whose names parallel some of the Hebrew names for God. (For example, “El,” the creator of all, heads up the Ugaritic pantheon.) The texts contain prescriptions for many different kinds of animal sacrifice to these gods—sacrifices not unlike those practiced by the Israelites. What the Ugaritic texts do *not* contain is any mention of child sacrifice or ritual prostitution, or, for that matter, any of the abominations mentioned in Leviticus 18.¹¹

Were the Canaanites Incurably Wicked?

Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that the Canaanites did indeed regularly use temple prostitutes as part of a fertility cult, and that in an extremity they occasionally sacrificed a child in a desperate attempt to win a god's favor. Let us further grant that they engaged in all the sexual practices listed in Leviticus 18, and that these practices are extremely evil—worse, even, than a genocidal attack on a neighboring people. It still does not follow that the Canaanites were *incurably* wicked—that there was nothing the Almighty could have done to turn them from their wicked ways.

Here we cannot even appeal to scriptural authority. The relevant books of the OT say nothing about what opportunities for salvation might have been offered to the Canaanites during the period of Israel's sojourn in Egypt. Had God sent a “Jonah” to preach to the Canaanites? Had they refused to

11. For a representative sample of what the Ugaritic texts contain, see Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit*, ed. Theodore J. Lewis (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2002). Pardee can find neither human sacrifice nor temple prostitution in those texts (see 233–4.). See also Delbert R. Hillers, “Analyzing the Abominable: Our Understanding of Canaanite Religion,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 75 (1985): 253–69. Hillers is particularly good at exposing the mistakes of an earlier generation of scholars who were predisposed to find debauched and wicked Canaanite practices described in the Ugaritic texts.

listen? If so, there is no record of it. On these matters, the OT is silent. One is left with the impression that the authors knew very little about the history of these people, and certainly had no knowledge of what God had done with them or for them. Deuteronomy tells us that the land of Canaan was being given to the Israelites, not because they were especially good or deserving, but because its inhabitants were “wicked” (Deut. 9:4). Elsewhere (for example, in the Leviticus passage cited above) a few details of the Canaanites’ supposedly “abominable” practices emerge. But that is all we have to go on.

So why think that the Canaanites were *incorrigibly* wicked? Copan’s article provides no argument for this part of his claim, and given the paucity of evidence concerning the practices of the Canaanites of the period in question, it is hard to see what argument could be given.

Let us turn next to what Copan describes as the “crux” of the issue—to his claim that, as the author of human life, God has a right to take it when He pleases. This may be so, but by itself it does nothing to demonstrate that God had a morally sufficient reason for *commanding the Israelites to practice genocide*. And *that*, surely, is the true “crux” of the issue.

On the face of it, there is quite a lot to be said *against* commanding the Israelites to engage in such brutal behavior. Slaughtering countless women and children would surely be bad for their moral development. By commanding them to practice genocide God would, in one very important respect, be encouraging them to stay on the same moral level as their “brutal” neighbors in the ANE.

Craig’s Proposal

As far as I can see, Copan does not address this precise issue. But others do. For example, William Lane Craig writes:

. . . [T]he problem isn’t that God ended the Canaanites’ lives. The problem is that He commanded the Israeli [*sic*] soldiers to end them . . .¹²

Craig explains the problem this way.

Ironically, I think the most difficult part of this whole debate is the apparent wrong done to the Israelite soldiers themselves. Can you imagine what it would be like to have to break into some house and kill a terrified woman and her children? The brutalizing effect on these Israelite soldiers is disturbing.

12. Craig, “Slaughter of the Canaanites.” Craig systematically refers to the Israelites as “Israelis.” Elsewhere I have taken the liberty of simply substituting the more appropriate “Israelite” for “Israeli” in the quotations from Craig.

But he is quick with an answer.

But then, again, we're thinking of this from a Christianized, Western standpoint. For people in the ancient world, life was already brutal. Violence and war were a fact of life for people living in the ancient Near East. Evidence of this fact is that the people who told these stories apparently thought nothing of what the Israelite soldiers were commanded to do (especially if these are founding legends of the nation). No one was wringing his hands over the soldiers' having to kill the Canaanites; those who did so were national heroes.

From this Craig concludes that the Israelites were not "harmed" by their participation in the genocide. But he has a further point to make as well.

Nothing could so illustrate to the Israelites the seriousness of their calling as a people set apart for God alone. Yahweh is not to be trifled with. He means business, and if Israel apostasizes the same could happen to her. As C. S. Lewis puts it, "Aslan is not a tame lion."¹³

Craig is making two claims here. The first is that life in the ANE was "brutal." I take it that he means to remind us that in the wars of this period of history, no distinction was made between combatants and noncombatants. Women and children were killed or enslaved. Genocidal attacks were not uncommon, and the concept of corporate guilt was unproblematic. Whole nations/cities/tribes were held responsible for the behavior of individuals.

This is plainly correct. *In their historical/cultural context*, the ancient Israelites were not *more brutal* than their neighbors. Israelite warriors who slaughtered women and children would not have been doing anything especially unusual or morally suspect. Certainly, they would not have been "wringing their hands" in remorse! Perhaps the more Canaanites they succeeded in killing, the greater their reputation back home. In the context of the ANE (and of ancient Israel), there was no special moral issue about killing "a terrified [Canaanite] woman and her children." She—and they—were part of a *nation* and were implicated in its guilt. As such, they were enemies of God and of His people, and this was a perfectly "normal" way to treat such an enemy. No surprise or dismay at a divine command to launch such a genocidal attack would therefore have been felt.

Craig is almost certainly correct in thinking that the moral sensibilities of the Israelites were not violated by their participation in the genocide. But what he fails to see is that the point about the moral sensibility of the ANE (and of ancient Israel) does not speak to the principal issue, which concerns *God's* behavior. God is not stuck with an ANE moral sensibility. *He* is supposed to be *perfectly* good. As such, he must surely be opposed to the "brutality" that Craig openly acknowledges. A just and loving God could hardly

13. *Ibid.*

want His Chosen People to be cruel or to be indifferent to the sufferings of other peoples.

To see this we do not have to appeal merely to the “individualistic” moral standards of the modern world. Loving God and neighbor is the heart and soul of *biblical* morality. If the Israelites feel nothing for their Canaanite neighbors, then their level of moral development must be very low indeed. The fact that genocidal warfare was standard practice in the ANE may excuse those who engaged in it, but it does nothing to exculpate God, or to suggest that He had a morally sufficient reason for commanding such atrocities.

A perfectly good God—a God who wants the nation of Israel to be “a light to the nations” (Isa. 42:6)—would surely want to push the Israelites in the direction of greater love and compassion. He would want His people to extend the title “neighbor” to *all* persons, and not merely to members of twelve chosen tribes. Surely one of the worst things God could do for the moral development of the Israelites would be to command them to engage in wholesale slaughter!

However, if I may return briefly to Craig’s pronouncements on this subject, it is apparent that he thinks that God wants to teach the Israelites a rather different lesson. On Craig’s understanding of the situation, God wants to send two messages: (i) that He is “not to be trifled with,” and (ii) that Israel is to be a people “set apart” for the service of God and God alone. What better way (Craig supposes) to make these points than to have the Israelites slaughter idolaters? What better way to “illustrate to the Israelites the seriousness of their calling?”

There are several problems with this understanding of God’s intentions. In the first place, communicating the importance of worshiping the right God in the right way would hardly be the only consequence of using the Israelites in this way. God’s command to deal with an idolatrous nation by obliterating it from the face of the earth would surely tend to reinforce a “brutal” approach to warfare. It would make it harder for the Israelites to learn that killing noncombatants in warfare is (at least *prima facie*) wrong.

In the second place, isn’t it obvious that this way of influencing the Israelites would give them altogether the wrong motive for obeying God? It would make them “afraid” of God in just the way that Rahab was “afraid,” and they would be inclined to obey from the basest sort of fear rather than from gratitude and love.

In the third place, it is not obvious that slaughtering Canaanites is the only way—or even the *best* way—to communicate the message that Craig singles out for attention. God could, if He so chose, simply write that message on the heart of every Israelite. (See Jer. 31:33.)

What about the Children?

I turn at last to the case of the innocent Canaanite children. They, at any rate, did not deserve to be “devoted to destruction”! How could a just and loving God have commanded such a thing?

Even if one accepts some version of the doctrine of double effect, Copan’s initial suggestion that the death of the Canaanite children should be considered “collateral damage” in a “just war” cannot be accepted. “Collateral damage” is brought about when the means used to attain a just end have consequences that are unintended (though they may be foreseen). If the only way to destroy a band of extremely dangerous terrorists is to bomb a village in which they are hiding, and you are convinced that it is morally necessary to kill them, then the death of children in the village may be a sad but unintended consequence of the means that must be used to achieve a just end.

Whatever one thinks of this line of reasoning, it is not compatible with the OT accounts of genocide. The Israelites are explicitly commanded to exterminate the children along with their allegedly wicked parents. It is not a matter of charging into a village and having some child get in the way. The extermination of the children is part of the original divine intention, and not mere “collateral damage.”

We cannot therefore avoid the question, What was the point of killing the Canaanite children? Some readers of the OT reply by suggesting that the Canaanite children posed a threat to the future of Israel as a people set apart for God. William Lane Craig, for instance, claims both that allowing the children to live would be dangerous, and that slaughtering them would have beneficial effects.

God knew that if these Canaanite children were allowed to live, they would spell the undoing of Israel. The killing of the Canaanite children not only served to prevent assimilation to Canaanite identity but also served as a shattering, tangible illustration of Israel’s being set exclusively apart for God.¹⁴

The first claim here is that if the Canaanite children had been allowed to live, they would have perpetuated the “wicked” Canaanite culture, which would have continued to be a source of temptation for the Israelites. But this explanation is extremely implausible. In the first place, it is not clear that the Canaanite culture would have been perpetuated by the children. Had the Israelites spared at least the younger ones, and raised them as members of their own community, those children would likely have been assimilated to the *Israelite* culture. In the second place, as we have already seen, the extermination plan did not in fact succeed in removing the twin temptations of intermarriage and apostasy. The biblical record makes it abundantly clear that

14. Ibid.

there were always plenty of foreigners in the neighborhood, worshiping gods other than Yahweh. The Israelites repeatedly succumbed to temptation, marrying foreign women and mixing the worship of their gods with the worship of Yahweh. So if the divine intent was to eliminate this particular temptation, the means employed were remarkably inefficacious.

With regard to Craig's claim that killing the children "served as a shattering, tangible, illustration of Israel's being set apart for God," we must ask, What exactly does it mean to be set apart for God? Can we give a positive meaning to this aim, when the means by which it is to be achieved are so vile? If slaughtering innocent children is a "tangible illustration" of what it means to be "set exclusively apart for God," must we not wonder about the value of such "setting apart"? A better way to distinguish the Israelites from their neighbors would surely be to encourage them to be less brutal, more compassionate, and more loving. But if this were the kind of "setting apart" God had in mind, it would be decidedly counterproductive to command them to slaughter innocent children.

Even if it is granted that the slaughter of innocents is an effective way to achieve the two purposes singled out by Craig, the means used to achieve those ends remain morally objectionable. God—and the people of God—would be treating the Canaanite children in a way that is both unjust and unloving. Unjust, because they do not deserve to be punished in this way. Unloving, because of the obvious cruelty of the way they are treated.

Craig is sensitive to this issue, but his view about it is very much in line with the one so vividly described by Copan in the passage quoted above. Like Copan, Craig seems to think the problem is easily dealt with by postulating a glorious afterlife for these children. They were, so to speak, "saved" by being killed and thereby transported into another, better world.

Moreover, if we believe, as I do, that God's grace is extended to those who die in infancy or as small children, the death of these children was actually their salvation. We are so wedded to an earthly, naturalistic perspective that we forget that those who die are happy to quit this earth for heaven's incomparable joy. Therefore, God does these children no wrong in taking their lives.¹⁵

Several points require attention. First, the reader must be struck by the *ad hoc* character of this proposal, and by its complete lack of biblical support. The reasons for the Canaanite genocide are largely drawn from the earlier OT texts. But *those* texts say nothing about a glorious afterlife for anyone—much less for Canaanite children. Insofar as they say anything about the fate of the children of wicked people, they merely announce a terrible one in which the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children.

The ancient Hebrews did not have a very lively notion of the afterlife. There is no discussion of heaven and hell in the Pentateuch. It presents a

15. Ibid.

Covenant between Yahweh and the people of Israel in which “earthly” success (good crops, healthy livestock, military success, long life, and numerous children) is promised to the obedient, and in which the disobedient are threatened with the opposites of these same earthly goods. The ancient Hebrews knew nothing of “heaven’s incomparable joy” and their perspective on life, while obviously not “naturalistic” in the contemporary sense, is certainly an “earthly” one.

In response to this point, I suppose that it could fairly be pointed out that we are not limited to considering information that was available to the Israelites of the period. Since the issue is how *God* could be justified in having the Israelites slaughter innocent Canaanite children, we are entitled to appeal to any relevant fact that would have been known to *Him*. With regard to the present issue, it is highly relevant to consider whether God planned to do something wonderful for those children in the next world.

But why think that God dealt with the Canaanite children in the manner suggested both by Copan and by Craig? Neither author gives an explicit argument for this claim, but I suspect that they have something like the following in mind. *God is perfectly good. So God would not harm the Canaanite children. Given the necessity of killing them (or having them killed) the only way for God to avoid harming them would be to do something wonderful for them in the afterlife.* If this is the argument, then I am inclined to say that there is a better one for a rather different conclusion—namely, *God is perfectly good. Such brutal treatment would be bad both for the Canaanite children and for their attackers. So God would not command anyone to kill those children.*

Another important issue concerns the ultimate fate of the children’s parents. If we are going to work with assumptions about the afterlife that are typical of evangelical thinkers like Copan or Craig, then we need to be equally concerned with what happens to them in the next world. If they were all terribly wicked, then I suppose it must be concluded that the adult Canaanites were sent straight to an eternal hell. But this raises another question about their children. Will they know of their parents’ miserable fate? I assume so. Recall Copan’s remarkable claim:

Furthermore, the infants and children who were killed by the Israelites would, in the afterlife, *come to recognize* God’s just purposes, despite the horrors and terrors of war. They would side with God in the rightness of his purposes—even if it had meant temporary terror. (26)

If the children know that their own parents are languishing in hell, I wonder how Copan can be so sure that the Canaanite children would “side with God,” rejoicing in their blessed state, and thanking Him for saving them from their wicked parents and the debauched Canaanite culture.

A related worry concerns the degree to which the Canaanite adults were morally responsible for their alleged wickedness. You might think that wick-

edness entails moral responsibility. But if all that the Canaanite wickedness consists in is practices that Yahweh finds repugnant—temple prostitution or child sacrifice or (above all) the worship of other gods—they may have adopted those practices simply *because they did not know any better*. Recall Craig’s claim that if Yahweh had allowed the children to live, they *would have* perpetuated the culture and religious practices of their parents. Why think so? Presumably because, having grown up in that culture, they would not know any better. They would have no way of knowing that Yahweh is the one true God, and the exclusive worship of Yahweh would have seemed to them to be a dangerous foreign practice. But if this is true of the Canaanite children, surely it is also true of their parents. They, too, were once children. They were taught to worship the wrong gods by *their* parents. I simply cannot see any reason to assume that practicing the religion of their parents makes them morally culpable, or that they deserve to be punished for this. What they do deserve, I would say, is enlightenment about the true nature of God and about His requirements for human beings. Once that is granted, we can begin talking about moral culpability. But it is far from sufficient merely to point to odious religious practices (temple prostitution or human sacrifice, for instance).

Conclusion

I have explored in some detail the reasons given by Paul Copan, supplemented by some of the reasons given by William Lane Craig, for thinking that God was morally justified in commanding the Canaanite genocide. As I see it, the evidence of Canaanite “wickedness” relies entirely on the OT texts and even there is sometimes quite problematic. As far as I can see, the evidence of *incorrigible* wickedness is nonexistent. But even if God were justified in destroying this people by the need to protect His Chosen People from the danger of apostasy, the means actually employed were both ineffective and immoral. Ineffective, because they did not in fact insulate the Israelites from this danger. Immoral, because they could only reinforce the Israelites’ cruel and brutal approach to warfare, and because of the innocence of so many of the victims. Fantastic scenarios in which Canaanite children are grateful to God for having rescued them from a wicked culture by killing them and their parents are not supported by anything in the OT, and are intrinsically implausible.

The proper conclusion, then, is that Christians should take seriously the possibility that God did not in fact command the genocidal attacks reported in various OT books. His perfect goodness, when combined with the weakness of the case for the morality of these commands, thus yields a very strong *prima facie* reason for rejecting biblical inerrancy.

I cannot here consider all the issues that are relevant to the question of biblical inerrancy. But I do think that the difficulty of reconciling belief in God's perfect goodness with the biblical passages in which God commands genocide constitutes quite a strong *prima facie* reason for Christians to adopt a more flexible view of the OT—one on which the most problematic passages reflect the (comparatively low) level of moral development of the human authors, and not the acts of a perfectly good God.

As we saw earlier, Craig reminds us that "Aslan" is not a "tame lion." But neither, I think Craig would agree, is He vicious or amoral or indifferent to the welfare of any of His creatures—be they Israelite or Canaanite. It is appropriate, then, to conclude this essay with some wise words about the OT from none other than the author of *The Narnia Chronicles*:

The human qualities of the raw materials show through. Naivety, error, contradiction, even . . . wickedness are not removed. The total result is not "the Word of God" in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history

. . . [T]he value of the Old Testament may be dependent on what seems to be its imperfection. It may repel one use in order that we may be forced to use it in another way—to find the Word in it, not without repeated and leisurely readings nor without discriminations made by our conscience and our critical faculties, to re-live, while we read, the whole Jewish experience of God's gradual and graded self-revelation, to feel the very material through which it works.¹⁶

If Lewis is right, the Old Testament is not, and is not meant to be, error free. Our task is to find God's "Word" within it. To do that, we must, at least in part, rely on the "discriminations made by our conscience and our critical faculties." The proper use of those faculties suggests an answer to my title question. No, God did *not* command genocide.¹⁷

16. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958), 114–5.

17. I wish to thank the editor and several anonymous reviewers for *Philosophia Christi* for perceptive comments and criticisms that helped me shape this into a much better paper than it would otherwise have been. I would also like to thank Evan Fales, Jim Cook, Jeff Brower, and Robert Pasnau for reading earlier versions of this paper and making valuable suggestions.