

Dr. David Howard, Joshua-Ruth, Session 13, Destruction of the Canaanites

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This is Dr. David Howard in his teaching on the books of Joshua through Ruth. This is session 13, Destruction of the Canaanites Excursus.

Hello again. In this segment, I want to address the thorny, stickling kind of question about the Israelite destruction of the Canaanites. It's a problem that is one of the first questions that usually is asked when I was writing my commentary on the book of Joshua. People that I knew I was working on it.

I usually get one of two questions. One was, what's going on with that long day and the sun standing still? And then the other question was, what about the mass destruction genocide of the Canaanites here? And so, I want to address that second question here. And I think there's some things that should disturb us and should make us uncomfortable.

We should never take delight in the death of the wicked. God himself doesn't take delight in the death of the wicked. But God also is a holy God and has certain standards.

And the Canaanites fell far short of that, much far short of this kind of going through the problem. We're sort of, many Christians are sort of basically generally aware of that. But let's look at some specific texts that show this in stark detail.

So, the first one I want to look at is in Deuteronomy chapter 7. So, if you please take your Bibles and open to that, we will see the first statement of this. So, Moses is speaking to the Israelites before they enter the promised land. And he is giving them instructions for when they do that because he himself will not be there.

So, Deuteronomy 7, verse 1, when the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it and clears away the many nations before you. And there's a mention of six nations here now, Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and the Jebusites. That's actually seven.

Seven nations are more numerous and mightier than you. We've looked at that passage in other contexts. But now verse 2, when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction.

You shall make no covenant with them, show no mercy to them. You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons, taking their daughters for your sons. Why? The reason is in verse 4, because they would turn away your sons

from following me to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you. He would destroy you quickly. But thus shall you deal with them. Break down their altars, dash in pieces their pillars, chop down their asherim, [the pillars in honor of Asherah, the wife of Baal] and burn their own carved images with fire.

So right there we see the statement of the problem. We see also one of the threads of the argument about the justification for that.

But the statement of the problem is a real statement there to just wipe these people out, devote them to complete destruction. Verse 2, don't make any covenant with them, don't intermarry. Similar instructions come in Deuteronomy chapter 20.

So please turn there to Deuteronomy 20 starting in verse 16. And jumping into the middle of a paragraph here, it just says, in the cities of these people that the Lord is giving you for inheritance. In other words, all the cities of the Canaanites.

You shall save nothing alive that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction. That kind of echoes Deuteronomy 7. Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not, and again, the reason that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God. So, it's again, to do this in order that their own worship should not be contaminated, which we'll talk about in a few minutes.

It's also reiterated in the book of Joshua itself. So, turn to Joshua chapter 6, and as they are preparing to go into Jericho and take this city, looking at verse 17, for example, Joshua says, again, in the middle of a paragraph, Joshua says, in the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction. Only save Rahab, and so on.

So we can't get around the fact that this complete destruction of the Canaanites is commanded by God, and so how do we justify that? Now, there are many answers, and some, of course, would just say, well, this just shows the abominable nature of the Israelite God or the Israelite religion. This is inexcusable, and we need to reject those kinds of practices. We need to reject any God that would command those things, and it's a rejection either of the Bible as a whole, or certainly the Old Testament.

Even many Christians would argue that this shows the sub-Christian nature of the Old Testament, that the Old Testament God has got a wrath like this. Certainly, the New Testament God would never do that. Those arguments, by the way, ignore the fact that Jesus himself got angry and even violent on occasion.

He certainly, you know, threw out the money changers in the temple, and one of the Gospels even says he went and prepared a whip. So, this wasn't a fit of rage that he is uncontrollable, but he consciously went and prepared for an act of violence of his own. It was righteous anger, obviously.

We learn about hell much more in the New Testament than in the Old. God is a God of wrath there so that dichotomy is a false dichotomy. We see God as a God of love, certainly in the Old Testament as well, even already in the book of Joshua.

We've seen God's grace extended to someone like Rahab, and so that's not a valid argument, I would say. But we still have lingering unease, it seems to me. We have to have that.

So, let's try to understand this in a larger context, and I have several points that I'd like to make that kind of help us through that, and the first one is just a reminder that when God commanded the Israelites to drive out the Canaanites, to destroy them or either drive them out, it was not God sort of privileging Israel over the poor Canaanites who had the rights to the land. The first thing we can say is that even the Canaanites did not own that land. Even the Israelites later did not own the land themselves.

The land always forever has been and will be God's. The psalmist says, in Psalm 24, verse 1, the earth is the Lord and all that is in it. Psalm 50 talks about how he owns the cattle on a thousand hills.

And so, it's not God wrenching away the Canaanites from land that is theirs by right. It's God saying, this is my land. I'm going to graciously allow the Canaanites to live there for a time, but the time's going to come when I'm going to do something with them, against them, bring my people in.

And just the fact that we can also say that God does not show favorites. So yes, he was driving out the Canaanites because of their sin, and we'll develop that a little more in a minute, but also, he did the same to the Israelites when they deserved it. In the book of Judges, whenever they turned away from the Lord, he brought some foreign oppressor to them and put them under their submission to them.

A big example is years later, when their sin had reached a certain point, God allowed the kingdom of Israel, the Northern kingdom, to be taken away captive by the Assyrians. And they were scattered throughout such that they lost any sense of ethnic identity. We hear about the 10 lost tribes of Israel.

Later in Judah, the Babylonians came and destroyed the city precisely, again, because of Israel's sin. So God was not playing favorites, even though Israel obviously was his chosen people. He wanted the Canaanites themselves to come to him if they would.

Again, Rahab is an example of one who did. But anyway, the first point is that the earth is the Lord's, not the Canaanites, not the Israelites. A second point we can say, we've already seen hints of this in the Deuteronomy passages, and that is that God commanded this complete destruction of the Canaanites because of their sin.

Now, on one level, we can say that, as Paul says, all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God. So, you know, nobody deserves life. We all deserve punishment and death.

But obviously, God, in his grace, has allowed us a way of salvation. But even in the ancient world, the Canaanite sins kind of rose to a level above and beyond those around them. So, let's kind of talk through some of that.

Let's go back to Genesis and look at the first reference to, in this context, in the words of God to Abraham in Genesis chapter 15. So, in Genesis 15 is part of the great passages that give us the elements of what we might call the Abrahamic covenant, chapter 12, chapter 15, chapter 17. And in this chapter, we'll just jump into the middle of a section here when Abraham is having this vision.

He's asleep in a dream, and God tells him that he's going to give him this land and the land for his descendants. But his descendants are going to be exiles in a different land for 400 years. And we see that around verse 13.

And verse 14 says, I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve. And afterward, they will come out with great possessions. And that's looking ahead to the time when they're in Egypt.

Then God brings the plagues on Egypt and then destroys the Pharaoh in the Red Sea. Remember at that time also that when the Israelites left, they laden down the Israelites with their possessions and said, get out of here, take our stuff. And so, that kind of fulfills this.

But then continuing, verse 15 says, as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace, be buried at a good old age. So, that's a wonderful part of the blessing on Abraham. And then it says, they will come back here.

God is speaking to Abraham in Canaan, and his descendants will be in Egypt for a time. But he says that they will come back. And then the reason for that at the end of verse 16 says, because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.

The term Amorite is used in different ways here, also outside the Bible. But here, it's essentially a synonym for the Canaanites. Not one specific people group, but representative of the whole cluster of nations in Canaan.

So, it's basically saying the iniquity of the Canaanites is not yet complete. And that implies that there's going to become a time when the iniquity of the Amorites has reached a tipping point, has filled up the pot, and is overflowing now to a point where God is now saying, I'm not going to tolerate this any further. That seems to be the point here.

And when that happens, God's going to bring Israel back to this land from Egypt. And Israel is going to be God's instrument of punishment against the Canaanites. Again, God doesn't play favors, because God uses later other nations to punish Israel.

But in this case, Israel is seen as God's instrument to punish the Canaanites for their sin. Now, there's other passages that also show the sin of the Canaanites. And one of them is a very dramatic passage in Leviticus chapter 18.

So, if you turn, please turn to that. And this passage is a terrible passage in terms of the listing of all the abominable things that people do.

So, let's begin by looking at the beginning of the chapter, Leviticus 18, starting in verse 2. God speaking to Moses says, Save the people of Israel. I am the Lord your God. I am Yahweh your God. Verse 3, Do not do, you shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived.

So, in other words, don't maintain the practices of the place where you've come from. And you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I'm bringing you. In other words, don't do as they did where you came from, and don't adopt the practices of those where you're going.

Don't walk in their statutes. Under the subtext, the unspoken part is, walk in my statutes. That's the same word used to talk about the law, the God's word.

So, don't walk in the statutes of the Egyptians or the Canaanites, but rather walk in mine. You shall follow my rules. Verse 4, Keep my statutes, walk in them.

I am Lord your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and rules, etc. Now, verses 6 to 23 are a whole listing of all manner imaginable of sexual perversion.

We won't go into all the details, but I always feel like I need to wash my hands or take a shower when I finish reading this section. It's just, there's incest, there's adultery, there's bestiality, there's homosexuality, there's everything there. And so, you can look at that on your own.

But now, verse 24 is kind of comments on that. Verse 24 says, Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things. Namely, don't adopt any of these

practices for by all these nations I am driving out before you, they have been become unclean.

So, the point is that the nations I'm driving out before you, in other words, the Canaanites as a group, have become unclean by doing the things that are mentioned in verses 6 to 23. So, these are not just generalized sins that anybody and everybody is doing. God is saying, these are the sins of the Canaanites.

That's the reason I'm going to drive them out. You're going to be my instrument for that. Don't adopt those practices.

And the land became unclean so that I punished its iniquity and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and commandments, etc. Again, verse 30, so keep my charge never to practice any of these abominable customs that were practiced before you, never to make yourselves unclean by them, etc.

So, this is a very impressive list. It's a depressing list of the specific kinds of perversions of the Canaanites. Let's look at one more verse, one more passage, and then we'll kind of try to wrap this part of it up.

Turn to Deuteronomy chapter 9, Deuteronomy 9, starting in verse 4, and we'll look at verses 4 and 5. Deuteronomy 9, verse 4 says that Moses is speaking to Israel now, looking ahead to when they're going to go into the land. He said, don't say in your heart after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, the Canaanites, don't say it is because of my righteousness that the Lord is driving them out of this land. Rather, it's because of the wickedness of those nations that the Lord is driving them out.

It's not because, verse 5, not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going to possess the land, but because of the wickedness of those nations that God is driving them out, etc. So, all these passages show us that the second point we're making, the first point is that all the land belongs to God, not any specific people. The second point is because of Canaanite sin that God is commanding this, the sin of the Canaanites is spectacularly abominable, I guess we can say.

Now, that's the biblical evidence that we see, and it's pretty impressive, but we also can see this in extra-biblical evidence. In the last 100 plus years, the Near East has been excavated archaeologically, and the land of Canaanite sin has been uncovered in places in Canaan itself, these mounds where they've dug down and found cities and so on, and they found lots of artifacts that the Canaanites have used in the shrines that they had, and there have been little idols that people, images and idols that people worship. There's some that are metal pictures of the metal sculptures of

Baal and his wife Asherah and others, and Asherah, interestingly enough, is always portrayed as very sexually charged.

The figurines of Asherah are obnoxious with all the right curves in her and so on. There's also a special kind of practice that we might call sacred prostitution or cultic prostitution. In the lecture on Joshua 2, when he talked about a couple of different words for prostitute in Hebrew, one is the term referring to Rahab, which is the normal term for prostitute, which is zonah.

That's the term that Rahab is called. That's the term of the kind of prostitute you find in most cultures, most societies, but there's a special word that's referred to. It's kedashah, and this is usually translated as sacred prostitute, cultic prostitute or temple prostitute, and the irony here is that this word is related to the word kadosh, and kadosh is the word for holy.

This is a very important word in the book of Leviticus about keeping holiness in Israel's life and so on, and the perversion of that is that in Canaan, and sometimes sadly it was adopted in Israel, that there arose this kind of class of persons that were called temple prostitutes, cult prostitutes, and there was, this is a feminine form, but there was also a masculine form, kedosh, referring to a male cult prostitute. That occurred a couple of different times, and the idea here was that in the sanctuaries of Baal or Asherah, people would bring their grain offerings or their animal sacrifices or whatever to offer to Baal. There would be priests and priestesses attending the shrine there, and you remember I've said in another context that Baal was the god of the storm, and he was the god that sent the rain, supposedly, and watered the earth and the crops, and he was the god of fertility.

So you could come bring your offerings to the sanctuary, and then you could, because of this, you would have the privilege of being with a prostitute, a priest or a priestess, who is associated with the shrine of Baal or Asherah, and you could have your own little time of pleasure with the prostitute here, and hopefully then by enacting this, what we might call a human fertility rite, you would be encouraging Baal to make your land fertile. So, I kind of, you know, whimsically imagine the Israelites trying to relate to their Canaanite neighbors and saying, you know, come worship Yahweh. He's the true god, and the Canaanites are responding, you're kidding.

Look what we can do in church. We have a good time. But anyway, obviously this is a great perversion, and the sexuality of it, we see that in the archaeological remains from Canaan, and another thing is that it is the Canaanites who were the great practitioners of child sacrifice.

Not really the Egyptians or the Canaanites, and the Canaanites eventually, in later times, they were the ones that also were in present-day Lebanon, and they had the

ships that sailed across the Mediterranean, and the Canaanites ultimately eventually settled in North Africa, and they established a great base there at Carthage, and that was a great city for the Canaanites in later years, and in Carthage has been found at least one very significant room called a charnel house, in which there was piles of dozens and dozens of infant skulls in the corner of this thing, and obviously it's a place of, it was a place of infant sacrifice, and so yes, all nations were wicked in God's sight, but the sin of the Canaanites seemed to rise above and beyond the outrages of the Philistines or the Egyptians or the Moabites or others, so if anybody deserved punishment among the pagan nations, it was certainly the Canaanites, so we can't say, well, you know, God is being unfair to these poor Canaanites, he could have punished the Moabites or the Ammonites or whoever else. Well, yes, all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, but the Canaanites were especially adept at outraging God and sinning and so on. So that's the second reason.

The first reason, all the land belongs to God. Second, the Canaanites themselves, of course, were great sinners. The third reason for God commanding the Israelites to drive out the Canaanites was for their own sake, namely for the sake of the purity of their worship, and associated with this is a word that we'll give you.

It's the word haram, and that H is pronounced like you're clearing your throat, haram, and it means complete destruction or annihilation. Older versions call it the ban. The verb that goes, with this is the noun, the verb that goes with this is haram, and this means to devote to destruction, to place under the ban, something to that effect, and that's found many times in Deuteronomy and Joshua.

It's in many of the verses we've already looked at here. We also can think of this word, it's the word, it's translated sometimes as devoting something to the Lord, and so we've seen in Jericho, for example, that remember the whole idea of the ceremony surrounding and circling Jericho for seven days. He's placing it in kind of a liturgical context, and it's as if the city itself was going to be Israel's sacrifice to the Lord.

They were not able to keep any of the things. It was devoted to the destruction, and the things were forbidden for common use. They were to be gods, not their own.

It was to be kind of an offering. Interesting that this practice seems to be pretty much exclusively limited to Israel. The Hebrew language is similar to many languages in the cultures around it, the larger family of what we call Semitic languages, and there are many words in Hebrew that are found in other languages, but this word, haram, is not found anywhere outside of Israel except once.

It's found in a famous stela called the Moabite stone. The king of the Moabites at that time was a king named Mesha, and he was the king at the time of Ahab and his father, Mesha talks about devoting one of his enemies to destruction. The Moabite

language is very similar to Hebrew, and they were close neighbors, but beyond that, this is a practice that seems to be unique to the Old Testament, and for better or for worse, it has not just a military significance, but it has kind of a religious significance and context to it.

Now think about Israel for a minute. They had spent 400 years in slavery in Egypt, and they had come into Egypt as a small band of 70-75 people, descendants of Abraham, at the end of the book of Genesis. In the meantime, they had grown to tens of thousands, if not more, in Egypt, and when Exodus begins, it's more of a nation, but there's not a sense of their own self-awareness as a nation.

They're under the thumb of the Egyptians. Moses, when God calls him, you can remember that he kind of feels insecure about his own identity as the leader. Will they accept him or not? Will they identify as Israelites, as a nation that needs to get out, and so on?

So, Israel has a very fragile sense of national identity coming out of Egypt. When they get out of Egypt, how do they survive? Basically, they cannot. They're a very fragile nation in terms of just survival, and God has to provide for them the water in the desert, and the manna, and the quail, and so on.

So, they're coming into Canaan very shakily. They've just received the law. It's a huge amount to assimilate that they got at Mount Sinai.

They've been wandering for 40 years, and so, in a sense, the command to cleanse the land, to drive out the Canaanites, to let Israel settle in a place to start from ground zero is a way to say Israel's faith needs to grow. Israel's sense of identity as a nation, but also as a spiritual community needs to be able to grow in a soil that is uncontaminated by any other practices, and that's behind some of the verses we've already read in Deuteronomy, where drive out the nations. Why? So that they will not take you away.

So, you will remain faithful. A third reason for God's command to destroy and drive out the Canaanites is for the integrity, for the protection of Israel's sense of worship for themselves, now remember that when Israel neglected to do that, they suffered consequences, and so when Israel violated this by taking some of the devoted things in Jericho, Achan chapter 7, they suffered consequences, a defeat at Ai. We think of years later in the book of Judges, just to back up, in Joshua, in the chapters that are still to come, chapters 13 to 21, over and over again, six or eight times, we're told that such and such a tribe, as they were settling in their land, were unable to drive the Canaanites out of their territory, and so the command to completely exterminate or completely drive out the people so that their religion would be uncontaminated was not followed by a good number of the tribes, and those are, nothing more is said about that in Joshua, but those in a sense are little ticking time bombs that explode

when you get to the book of Judges, and the book of Judges says that this tribe, that tribe, and the other tribe, because they couldn't drive out the Canaanites, then this happens, and the trajectory in the book of Judges is a downward trajectory of moral bankruptcy, essentially, and part of it is because Israel did not preserve its integrity of worship.

They continued the action. So that's a third reason for Israel's driving out the Canaanites. A fourth reason, not a major one, but a fourth reason would be to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant, and if we've looked at the segment on the covenants we reviewed in Genesis 12, it says that God said to Abraham, I will bless those who bless you, the flip side, I will curse those who dishonor you, and through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

So, in a sense, we find in the book of Joshua, chapter 9 specifically, and chapter 11, we have, in the beginning of both those chapters, we have coalitions of Canaanite kings coming against Israel as aggressors. They are attacking Israel. So, in a sense, the response of annihilating them is fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham, saying if people oppose you, I will take care of them, and that certainly applies to the coalitions in chapter 9 and chapter 11.

Now obviously, before that, in Jericho, we don't have the Canaanites opposing him in that same way, but that idea of the Canaanites being opposed to God is there. Rahab is really the only one who responds, along with chapter 9, the Gibeonites, in a different way. So we have the point being all the land belongs to God.

It's not really the Canaanites' birthright. Second point, the sin of the Canaanites is the seed of their own destruction. The third is, protection of Israel's worship.

Fourth, fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. And then a fifth point, I would say that this is a command, we think from the New Testament perspective, or from the post-New Testament perspective, from our perspective in the 21st century, it's easy to look back thousands of years into the New Testament and the Old Testament and think of everything that's sort of flattened, and we don't have a sense of the time gap, the time progression through the Old Testament. The Old Testament history, from Abraham, at least, down to Ezra and Nehemiah, is a good 1,500, 1,600 years, and it's a long time.

And in all, there are many battles, there are many conflicts, but the commands to utterly destroy the enemy are limited in time and place. God did not give the Israelites free reign to say, every time you meet a foreigner, run them through with a sword. And that's sometimes the perspective Christians have about the Old Testament, is that the Old Testament's a testament full of battles and wars, and they're always killing their enemies and so on.

The answer's no. This is a command limited in time and place, namely to the specific time when they'd entered Canaan for the first time under Joshua and the people. The default mode, I would say, in how God wanted Israel to relate to the enemies or to the foreigners is rooted in the Abrahamic covenant.

Through you, all the families of the earth will be blessed. We've talked in another segment about the stranger, the foreigner, the alien, the ger, foreigners who were not born in Israel, but took up residence in Israel, they adopted the God of Israel. How would they be able to adopt the God of Israel if Israel was always confronting them and running them through with a sword? So, what God really wanted was for the Gentiles, for the nations to embrace him, not to reject him.

So, this command to annihilate the Canaanites was limited to this time and this place for the reasons that we've already talked about. It's not a blanket command that they should do this anytime and any place. And then finally, point six, I would say that implicit in the stories we see in the Bible, including Joshua, there is always a sort of a condition behind these things.

So over and over again, we have in the prophets, God's saying, I'm going to punish you, Israel. I'm going to punish Assyria. I'm going to punish Moab, whoever unless they repent.

And if there's repentance, then God backs off and is a blessing. So, the idea is stated first in Deuteronomy, those who, if you obey me, I will bless you. If you disobey, I'll curse.

Again, rooted in the Abrahamic covenant, those who bless you, I will bless. Those who curse, I will curse, et cetera. That's even found here.

And so, when we started this discussion, we looked at some passages in Deuteronomy that sounded like they're unconditional. Just destroy all the Gideonites and don't leave anybody alive. Sounds very, very absolute.

And yet, we find that Rahab is one that is spared. We find, again, from a different angle, the Gideonites are spared, but there's a positive footnote to the Gideonites story that we'll talk about when we talk about chapter nine in the text. So my view is that if, remember also the story of Jonah and Nineveh.

Nineveh was the great city that God said, I'm going to destroy. Sounded like a very unconditional, absolute statement. Yet 40 days, Nineveh will be destroyed.

That's what Jonah says. And then Nineveh was not destroyed. Why? Because they repented.

So, my view is that if the inhabitants of Jericho, let's say, or more broadly, other cities in Canaan if they had responded in the same way that Rahab did, or if they'd responded the same way that the Ninevites did years later, they would not have been that destruction. They would have been a happy resolution to this. Even in spite of the seemingly harsh commands to destroy them, if they had truly repented, not in a false way, but if there was true repentance, those commands would have been withdrawn.

So, it's a complex problem. It's a hard problem, especially in the modern day, because we do find the issue kind of seeming to overlap with some things we see in the Islamist extremists, the Islamic jihad. And many people wonder, is the jihad similar to the haram here in the Bible? And I would say there are superficial elements that look similar, but there are profound differences.

And I hope these six things that we've talked about will help you work through that.

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