

# Canaanite Culture

We know from the Bible and from experience that God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. The Bible tells us that again and again.

A question I've been asked is, "How could a good God command the Israelites to slaughter every man, woman, child, and even animal in the cities of the Canaanite nations? Isn't this the same God that listed 'Thou shalt not kill?' in the 10 Commandments?"

In Deuteronomy 20:16-17, God gives these instructions to Israel:

In the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them — the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites — as the LORD your God has commanded you.

I think it's important to be able to answer this question for our neighbors. As most of you know, the sixth commandment is actually, "Thou shalt not murder" rather than "Thou shalt not kill." There is a difference. God does not call all killing "murder".

But what about infants and tiny babies? The command says to kill everything that breathes. This is a *judgment* on the people of Canaan, similar to the Flood or Sodom and Gomorrah. What was going on in Canaan that was so bad that God ordered even children killed? People who want reasons to reject the Bible often point to this as an immoral command. But we know God is perfectly righteous. How do you explain it?

First of all, we need to remember that God created us. He gave life and it is His right to take it back. He is not accountable to us for what He chooses to do. We are accountable to Him.

Second, recall that the Canaanites had seen Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed completely. This was a warning that God would judge wickedness. So many horrible things were happening in Sodom that the angel of the Lord said in Genesis 18:20-21,

...the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin is so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me.

It was.

Ancient stories give hints about the evil in Sodom. Strangers and travelers who came into the city would be robbed, stripped, and held captive within the city. They would wander the streets slowly starving to death, to the great amusement of the citizenry. One account relates that visitors to Sodom were offered a bed according to the Middle Eastern laws of hospitality, but it was a bed of torture. Short people were stretched. Tall people had their legs cut off. If a traveler had no money, he would be given bricks of gold and silver with his name on them! But nobody would sell him bread and water, even for all that gold and silver, so the traveler slowly died of starvation. The Sodomites gathered around the corpse and took back the gold and silver. The people in Sodom were not just evil, they were *proud* of being evil. Imagine being a child in a place like that!

These stories give us a hint of how bad things had gotten in Sodom. It was probably worse than our imaginations can conceive. The Canaanites knew about the destruction of Sodom. They knew that God would judge evil. They also knew about Melchizedek and Abraham. They had access to truth. They weren't ignorant or innocent. Egypt and other nations, despite their great sin, were not completely destroyed, so the sin of the Canaanites must have been more serious. God restricted Israel from attacking Edom, Moab and Ammon, so despite their sins, they must not have deserved such a severe judgment.

Leviticus 18 and 20 list some of the detestable religious practices of the Canaanites and say that these acts caused the land to become defiled, so that its inhabitants were "vomited out." This comes with the warning that if the Israelites copy those practices, the land will also vomit them out. That is exactly what happened after the Israelites adopted the practices of Canaan.

Archeology gives some hints about what the Canaanites did. On one High Place, archeologists found several stone pillars and great numbers of jars containing remains of newborn babies. When a new house was built, a child would be sacrificed and its body built into the wall to bring good luck to the rest of the family. Firstborn children were often sacrificed to Molech, a giant hollow bronze image in which a fire was built. Parents placed their children in its red hot hands and the babies would roll down into the fire. The sacrifice was invalid if a parent displayed grief. Mothers were supposed to dance and sing. The Israelites later copied this practice in a valley near Jerusalem called Gehenna. Hundreds of jars containing infant bones have been found there.

This seems horrible. But is our culture superior? I was shocked to learn that in the United States, there are more than 3600 abortions every *day*, day after day. The number of legal abortions every year far exceeds the number of U.S. soldiers killed in every war since the nation began!

There was a great deal of sexual sin among the Canaanites. They believed that cultic prostitution was important to encourage their gods, Baal and Ashtoreth to mate so that the land would be fertile and rain would come. VD may have been rampant. Many young people forced into prostitution were abused to the point of death. Even the surrounding pagan nations were appalled by Canaanite religious practices.

Yet God did not hurry to judge the Canaanites. In Genesis 15:16, God tells Abraham:

*In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.*

God gave the Canaanites 400 years while Israel was in Egypt. After Israel passed through the Red Sea, He waited 40 more years while Israel wandered in the wilderness. The people of Canaan knew Israel was coming, and that God had given the land to them, according to the Rahab, a Canaanite, in Joshua 2:9:

*"I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you."*

Jericho had six additional days to repent while Israel did laps around it. The day judgment finally came to Jericho, Israel marched around the city seven times. God judges *swiftly* when He finally acts, but He patiently warns and allows time for repentance.

Families who wished could have migrated out of the land and settled in nearby areas. God said repeatedly that he would drive out the inhabitants of the land before Israel. Those who wished to leave had time and opportunity. The point was to destroy the evil Canaanite *culture* rather than the individual Canaanite *people*. Only individuals who stubbornly refused to leave were destroyed with military force, along with their children, who could not have survived without parents. God gave no instructions to hunt down and kill Canaanites who left the land peacefully. Later in the Bible, Canaanite individuals like Uriah the Hittite show up as righteous characters. Rahab herself was a Canaanite harlot who repented before Jericho was destroyed. She is an ancestor of Jesus Himself. God's judgment was not based on racism or favoritism.

God is never arbitrary or unjust, despite how some events appear at first glance. The same people who are angry because God doesn't do anything about all the evil in the world are the first to cry foul when He exacts judgment. But those of us who know Him trust that His perfect justice. He knows all the aggravating and mitigating circumstances. We do not. His patience and forgiveness are immense. He *waits* for repentance. He gives people an opportunity to choose between salvation and judgment. He won't wait forever. Judgment, at some point, is certain.

Note: This talk was presented by my husband Dennis at our small church.

Source: [www.SusanCAnthony.com](http://www.SusanCAnthony.com)