

# God and the Conquest Narratives

**The Bible may, indeed does, contain a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre, but we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human mammals.**

Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 102

**The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.**

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 31

## Psalm 137

<sup>8</sup> O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,  
blessed shall he be who repays you  
with what you have done to us!

<sup>9</sup> Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones [i.e. babies]  
and dashes them against the rock!

## Deuteronomy 20

<sup>16</sup> But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, <sup>17</sup> but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded ...

## Joshua 6

<sup>17</sup> [Joshua said], And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent.

<sup>20</sup> So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city. <sup>21</sup> Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword.

# Preconceptions

## Hebrews 1

<sup>1</sup>Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. <sup>3</sup>He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

# How should we read the Bible?

- a. Inspired and inerrant
- b. A divine-human word
- c. A variety of genres
- d. Context: culture and idiom
- e. Descriptive and prescriptive

# The Conquest of Canaan

## a. Specific, contextualised commands

### Deuteronomy 20:15

Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here.

### Jonah 4

<sup>1</sup> But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. <sup>2</sup> And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

*God's reply:*

<sup>11</sup> And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

## **b. Covenant promise and legal ownership**

### **Deuteronomy 27**

<sup>2</sup> And on the day you cross over the Jordan to the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster. <sup>3</sup> And you shall write on them all the words of this law, when you cross over to enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you.



## c. Judgment

### Genesis 15

<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. ... <sup>16</sup> And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, **for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.**

### Deuteronomy 5

<sup>5</sup> Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

### Deuteronomy 12

<sup>31</sup> You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, **for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.**

## **d. A corrupting influence**

### **Deuteronomy 12**

<sup>29</sup> “When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land,<sup>30</sup> take care that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not enquire about their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? — that I also may do the same.’

**Total annihilation did not happen even though some verses in Joshua seem to suggest that it did.**

## **Joshua 11**

<sup>21</sup> And Joshua came at that time and cut off the Anakim from the hill country, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anab, and from all the hill country of Judah, and from all the hill country of Israel. **Joshua devoted them to destruction with their cities.** <sup>22</sup> **There was none of the Anakim left in the land of the people of Israel.** Only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod did some remain. <sup>23</sup> So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses. And Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war.

## **Joshua 14**

<sup>12</sup> So now give me this hill country of which the LORD spoke on that day, for you heard on that day how **the Anakim were there**, with great fortified cities. It may be that the LORD will be with me, and I shall drive them out just as the LORD said.

God's principal intention was that the Canaanites be driven out so that they may not corrupt the Israelites.

### Exodus 23

<sup>27</sup> I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. <sup>28</sup> And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. <sup>29</sup> I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. <sup>30</sup> Little by little **I will drive them out** from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. <sup>31</sup> And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and **you shall drive them out before you.**

### Deuteronomy 7

<sup>22</sup> The LORD your God **will clear away** [drive them out] these nations before you little by little. You may not make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you. <sup>23</sup> But the LORD your God will give them over to you and throw them into great confusion, until they are destroyed.

The Canaanite tribal kingdoms which occupied the land were to be destroyed as nation states, not as individuals. The judgment of God upon these tribal groups, which had become so debauched by the time, is that they were being divested of their land. Canaan was being given over to Israel, whom God had now brought out of Egypt. *If the Canaanite tribes, seeing the armies of Israel, had simply chosen to flee, no one would have been killed at all.* There was no command to hunt down the Canaanite peoples.

It is therefore completely misleading to characterize God's command to Israel as a command to commit genocide. Rather it was first and foremost to drive the tribes out of the land and to occupy it. Only those who remained behind were to be utterly exterminated.

William Lane Craig

**The language of destruction is hyperbolic and idiomatic, not literal.**

The Hebrew word mostly commonly used is *herem*. It is found in the phrase 'devoted to destruction'. It refers to something proscribed or banned. It is something that is displeasing to God and that ought to be removed.

*Herem*, the term used in the Hebrew texts to refer to destruction, is almost certainly a formulaic idiomatic expression used to declare victory using exaggerated language. The original authors and readers of the conquest narratives would have known this. If this is so, we no longer need be concerned that the Bible might contradicting itself by saying in one place that everyone was annihilated and then a little later finding that they are still alive and still a threat. Nor need we be concerned that God is a genocidal maniac as suggest by Richard Dawkins.

**As we examine the exodus and conquest through the lens of the New Testament we come to realise that it is a foreshadowing of something far greater to come. The real fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham back in Genesis 12 is not realised in the occupation of a plot of land and the driving out of a deeply sinful people. Rather, it finds its fulfilment in the person and work of Jesus. Jesus is God's chosen one who defeats the real enemy: sin. This is what needs to be driven out, destroyed, for God's people to live under God's rule in God's land.**