**Did God Really Command Genocide? (Paul Copan)**[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Part I: Preliminary Considerations**

1. *Presumption of war: War was a given* in the ancient Near East. Nations fought or perished.

2. *Grieved heart: God commands reluctantly*—with a *heavy* *heart* (Gen. 6:6: God was grieved; Ezek. 6:9: “how I have been hurt by their adulterous hearts”; cp. Ezek. 18:31; 33:11 stands against the idea that “God wouldn’t have minded if all the Canaanites had been wiped out”).

3. *Hard hearts:* God often issues less-than-ideal commands to *hard-hearted humans* (Mt. 19:8).God is always willing to relent from threatened punishment if people repent (Jonah; Jer. 18:7-8); some did (Rahab; other Canaanites [“strangers”—i.e., Shechemites] in Josh. 8:33-35).

4. *Unique, not universal:* Command to kill the Canaanites (Dt. 7; Dt. 20) was *unique* and *unrepeatable*—a temporary measure, and not a universal ideal or norm (like God’s command to Abram to leave Ur).

5. *Commands with public signs, not private revelations:* These commands were repeatedly *accompanied by public miraculous signs* (ten plagues, exodus from Egypt, manna, pillar of cloud/fire, parting of the Jordan—clear signs of divine validation of Moses/Joshua (unlike the private “revelations” to Joseph Smith and Muhammad). The Canaanites even recognized this (Josh 2:8-11; 5:1; cp. 1 Sam 4:7-8)—a sobering warning! People could have fled.

6. *Waiting patiently:* God had patiently waited over 400 years until the Canaanites would be ripe for judgment (Gen. 15:16)—and Israel’s would be enslaved in Egypt in the meantime.

7. *Criminal acts:* The Canaanites were morally corrupt, engaging in activities that would be considered criminal by any civilized society. War was a means of judging Canaanite religion and morality as a last resort—an emergency measure—to stem the tide of spiritual and moral decay. God had waited over 400 years before Canaanite sin had reached its limit (Gen. 15:16)—sins of infant sacrifice, ritual sex, bestiality, incest.

8. *Absolute vs. general (prima facie) vs. extraordinary duties:* **(a)** “Don’t deceive”/“Don’t take innocent life” are ***general* *duties***; they are not **(b)** ***absolute* *duties*** that ought *never* to be violated (e.g., “worship/love God”; “don’t torture for fun”). **(c)** In *supreme emergencies*, *general* duties may be ***overridden*** (deceiving Nazis, taking unborn human life [ectopic pregnancy] to save the mother). Many ethical systems acknowledge that taking innocent life in supreme emergencies may be morally justifiable.

9. *Difficult vs. impossible:* There are ***difficult*** commands (*rare-case* command to shoot a terrorist-hijacked plane out of the sky moral [morally permissible though innocents killed]) and ***impossible*** commands: *God can’t command* *intrinsic* *evils, which is self-contradictor— like a square circle* [Jer. 7:31; cp. 7:22; 23:32; 29:23: “which I did not command nor did it even enter My mind”]): NOT “God couldn’t command the killing Canaanites because he is necessarily good,” BUT “Because God is necessarily good and wise, he’d have a morally justifiable reason for doing so.” IF A COMMAND INTRINSICALLY EVIL OR IMPOSSIBLE, GOD WON’T COMMAND IT.

(“What if God commanded terrorists to blow up a bus full of children?” (a) Just because people believe this doesn’t mean God actually has commanded this; Jesus states people will attempt to do all kinds of evils in the name of God [Jn. 16:2-3]. (b) An act is obligatory only if God has *actually* commanded it; it’s not obligatory if one *imagines* God commanded this. (c) It would be right *only if* a rational, fully informed, loving, just Being commanded it. Blowing up buses is morally obligatory only if a good God—an intrinsically good, just, rational, all-knowing Being—commands doing so).

10. *Treason:* A life-and-death struggle for Israel’s own national identity was at issue; idolatry and immorality were a real threat to it. To break free of covenant obedience to God (e.g., Num. 25: Midianites) would undermine Israel’s identity and mission; such acts were tantamount to *treason*—like John Walker Lindh's leaving America to join the Afghan Taliban to fight against American soldiers. In both cases, the nation’s primary loyalty is compromised: “Each demands that primary loyalty and threatens with destruction any who prove disloyal to the disadvantage to the rest of the society.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

11. *Promised land*:God had promised Israel this land, which the Canaanites would “forfeit.” But *they could only be evicted when they had become sufficiently wicked—not before* (Gen. 15:16). Even so, Israel itself was rebellious (Dt. 9:6), and they would be vomited out of the land as well (Lev. 18:28): Israel by the Assyrians (722 BC); Judah by the Babylonians (587/6).

12. *Divine concern for Canaanites:* Divine judgment is included in God’s saving purposes, even for the Canaanites and other enemies of Israel (Ps. 87:4-6; Zech.9:7; Mt. 15:22; cp. Gen. 12:1-3).

13. *Destroying Canaanite religion:* The chief object of destruction was not Canaanites per se, but rather false worship (idols, altars, shrines) and idolatrous alliances (Dt. 7:3-6).

14. “Driving out” Canaanites wouldn’t fit modern-day “genocide” definitions (e.g., former Yugoslavia)—totally destroying the whole or most of the people group aimed at their “physical disappearance from the earth” (*Prosecutor v. R. Krstic* [2004]). Expulsion isn’t genocide (cp. *Pros. v. Milomir Stakic* [2003]).

**Part II: Warfare Texts in Scripture**

1. *Driving them out:* The main emphasis of God’s commands—and the first directive—was for Israel’s enemies to be displaced—“dispossessed” or “driven out”—not wiped out (e.g., Ex. 23:27-33). (This was to show that Yahweh was superior to these false gods.) Driving out—like Adam and Eve were “driven out” of the garden (Gen. 3:24)—suggests people survive; this is *displacement*, not *death*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

2. *Hyperbolic language:* The terms “utterly destroy”/“leave alive nothing that breathes” was typically *hyperbolic* or *exaggerated* in ancient Near Eastern war texts. Where Joshua “utterly destroyed” Canaanites, they remain in the land (Jdg. 1-2 speaks of *gradual infiltration*; cp. Josh. 23:7, 12).

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| **“Extermination”** | **“No Extermination”** |
| Josh. 10:20a: “…Joshua and [the Israelites] had finished slaying them with a very great slaughter until they were destroyed...” | Josh. 10:20b: “…and the survivors whoremained of them had entered the fortified cities.” |
| Josh. 10:39 (Debir): all “utterly destroyed.” | Josh. 11:21: Joshua “utterly destroyed” Anakites there. |
| Josh. 11:21: The Anakites in Hebron were “cut off” and “utterly destroyed”; there were “no Anakim left in the land” (v. 22). | Josh. 15:13-14: Caleb “drove out” the Anakites from Hebron; cp. Judg. 1:21, where Caleb “drove out” the Anakites from Hebron. |
| Judg. 1:8: “Then the sons of Judah fought against Jerusalem and captured it and struck it with the edge of the sword and set the city on fire.” | Judg. 1:21: “But [the Benjamites] did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem; so the Jebusites have lived with [them] Jerusalem to this day.” |
| Josh.11:23: “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 divisions by their tribes. Thus the land had rest from war.” | Judg. 2:21, 23: “I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died…. So the Lord allowed those nations to remain, not driving them out quickly; and He did not give them into the hand of Joshua.” |

3. *Disabling raids on military citadels—not utter destruction:* Egyptologist K. Kitchen: Israelite attacks on cities were merely disabling raids, not territorial conquests; Israel headed back to base camp at Gilgal.[[4]](#footnote-4)

4. ***Midianites****:* Num. 25: Midianites seduced the Israelites (treason). God commands retribution, and “[Israel] fought against Midian, *as the Lord* *commanded Moses*, and killed every man” (31:7). Moses actually goes *beyond* this to kill the women and young boys too (vv. 15-17). (This seems to be Moses’ command, not the Lord’s.) And if v. 7 is literally true, whence the innumerable Midianite multitudes (Judg. 6:5)? The language is exaggerated (e.g., every Midianite man killed without one Israelite fatality [Num. 31:50]).

5. ***Amalekites****?* Israel is attacked/plundered by the Amalekites (1 Sam. 14:48); their king was ruthless (making women childless [v. 20]). Saul was commanded to “utterly destroy” (15:3) everything—including women, children, animals. Is this literal? No women/children are mentioned. Saul fought in “a city of Amalek” (15:5). On a literal reading, Saul carried this out: 15:8—“Saul utterly destroyed all the people”—and he later told Samuel that he had done so (15:20). The rest of the conversation focuses on the **animals** (vv. 5, 14-15, 20-23). Only King Agag was kept alive and would meet his doom through the prophet Samuel [vv.7-9, 33]). Yet this “utter destruction” didn’t literally happen; the Amalekites were far from destroyed; David fights an army and 400 escape (27:8-9; 30:1, 7-17). Ancient Near Eastern war texts exaggerate numbers (210,000 soldiers: 15:4)—more massive than Egypt or Assyria if taken literally.

6. *God “utterly destroys” Judah* (Jer. 25:9); this is the same language used of Israel with Canaan. Judah was politically, militarily, nationally, economically disabled—and exiled—but not literally destroyed.

7. *“All that Moses commanded”:* Joshua carried out “all that Moses commanded” (Josh. 11:12, 14-15, 20; etc.). But large numbers of Canaanites still lived in the land. Thus Moses’ command in Dt. 20 to “utterly destroy” should also be understood as exaggerated or hyperbolic language.

**Conclusion:** No, God didn’t command genocide. Total disappearance wasn’t the goal; it was to drive out the Canaanites, and any that remained left themselves in harm’s way—despite obvious signs of God’s presence with Israel. God may command killing in unique (supreme emergency-type situations) for an overriding good.

1. Cp. Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster*; *Did God Really Command Genocide?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011/14). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rob Barrett, “Understanding Yhwh’s Threats Through Modern Politics,” *Political Theology* 11/3 (2010): 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Drive out”: Ex. 23:28; Lev. 18:24; Num. 33:52: Dt. 6:19; 7:1; 9:4; 18:12; Josh. 10:28, 30, 32, 35, 37, 39; 11:11, 14; “dispossess”: Num. 21:32; Dt. 9:1; 11:23; 18:14; 19:1; etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)