

The extermination of the Canaanites – Is God a moral monster?

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1 Introduction

One of the common arguments that atheists level against God, particularly the “God of the Old Testament” is that He is a **moral monster**. They claim that the God we read about in the pages of the Old Testament is;

- **A bully**
- **A murderer**
- **An oppressor**
- **Vindictive**
- **Overly harsh / cruel**
- **Mean**
- **Temperamental**

The way many atheists feel is neatly summed up in “*The God Delusion*” written by the scientist and vocal opponent of all religions Richard Dawkins. He states;

“The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction; jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty and ethnic cleanser.” (The God Delusion p.51)

Charles Templeton once an evangelist now agnostic expresses a similar opinion;

“The God of the Old Testament is utterly unlike the God believed in by most practicing Christians ... His justice is, by modern standards, outrageous He is biased, querulous, vindictive, and jealous of his prerogatives.” (Farewell to God p 71)

Because of this they (atheists) feel justified in rejecting God, and questioning why anyone would worship such a being.

Let us consider some examples often cited by atheists that reflect their views of God.

32 Now while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. 33 And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. 34 They put him under guard, because it had not been explained what should be done to him. 35 Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man must surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” 36 So, as the LORD commanded Moses, all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him with stones, and he died. (Numbers 15:32-36)

Atheists say – Look how harsh and cruel God is. This man was only collecting sticks presumably to cook food for his family. Did such a crime really warrant death!

How might Christians respond?

18 “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and *who*, when they have chastened him, will not heed them, 19 then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city. 20 And they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ 21 Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death with stones; so you shall put away the evil from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear. (Deuteronomy 21:18-21)

Atheists say – How evil it is to kill our own children merely because they are rebellious and do not listen to us. Isn't that just what teenagers are like.

How might Christians respond?

15 And Moses said to them: “Have you kept all the women alive? 16 Look, these *women* caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD. 17 Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man intimately. (Numbers 31:15-17)

Atheists say – This shows how God is against women. It also demonstrates that God is cruel and uncaring.

How might Christians respond?

- ▶ **Question: How do these passages make you feel?**
- ▶ **Question: What must we take into account when we read passages like those above?**
- ▶ **How might we go about explaining what is happening in these passages to non-believers?**

Sadly even some within the church have fallen into this trap, and accept to some degree these horrendous accusations against God. Some within the modern church would like to “unhitch” from or ignore the Old Testament completely and only focus on the meek, mild and loving Jesus of the New

Testament.

Our question then is as follows.

■ **How could a supremely good (Mark 10:18), all-loving (1 John 4:8), perfectly holy God (Leviticus 11:44-45) order the Israelites to kill with swords thousands of human beings, letting “none remain” in Canaan?**

In this study we will look at how we might attempt to answer this question.

2 Did God really call for genocide or ethnic cleansing?

One of the frequently used arguments against God is that he called for **genocide** against the people of Canaan.

The term genocide is formed by combining one Greek and one Latin word. The first is the Greek word *genos* meaning “race,” “tribe,” or “nation.” The second is the Latin word *cide* meaning “killing.”

Genos (Greek)	Cide (Latin)
Race / tribe / nation	killing

So literally when combined we get;

“Tribe / race / nation + killing.”

A more comprehensive definition is as follows.

The deliberate and systematic destruction of a group of people because of their ethnicity, nationality, religion, or race. (Britannica)

The United Nations defines Genocide as:

Any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, including:

1	Killing members of the group
2	Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
3	Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
4	Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
5	Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

The United Nations added to the definition above in 2008 adding, “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide”

Source (United Nations, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1948)

3 Contemporary examples of Genocide

► **Question – Can you think of any contemporary examples of genocide?**

The genocide of the Armenians

This genocide took place during the Ottoman Empire through the years 1914-1918 (also to a lesser degree up to 1923). It was a systematic and deliberate campaign of deportation and mass killing conducted against the Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Empire by the Young Turk government. By the end of 1918 more than 90 percent of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were gone, and many traces of their former presence had been erased. It is estimated that between 600,000 and 1.5 million Armenians were killed. The Turkish government to this day deny it was a genocide. (Source History.com)

The genocide in Rwanda

This genocide took place in Rwanda from April to July of 1994. Over this period of just 100 days between 800,000 and one million people, mostly members of the minority Tutsi ethnic group, were massacred by members of the Hutus ethnic group. What is perhaps most shocking is that these two ethnic groups had lived together peacefully for centuries prior to this event.

The National Geographic commissioned an article in 2006. It claimed that between 1900 and 2005 there had been at least 15 separate cases of genocide. These varied in severity from around 5000 deaths in Burma to more than 3 million deaths in Pakistan.

4 Genocide in the Old Testament?

The verses most often cited by those accusing God of genocide_

<p>1 Samuel 15:2-3</p>	<p>2 Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘I will punish Amalek <i>for</i> what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt. 3 <u>Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.</u></p> <p>► “<i>Utterly destroyed</i>” = Herem (khay-rem) The word can carry a variety of meanings. It may mean as you'd expect to “destroy” or “annihilate,” but it may also mean to “ban,” to “put under a ban,” “prohibit,” or “to devote” or “to dedicate.” Literally it means to <u>devote</u> a city or a people group to destruction. When a city or people were made <i>herem</i>, everything living was to be destroyed, and no part of the spoil should go to the conquerors. Any captured valuables</p>
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	were put into the sacred treasury.
Deuteronomy 2:31-34	31 “And the LORD said to me, ‘See, I have begun to give Sihon and his land over to you. Begin to possess <i>it</i> , that you may inherit his land.’ 32 Then Sihon and all his people came out against us to fight at Jahaz. 33 And the LORD our God delivered him over to us; so we defeated him, his sons, and all his people. 34 <u>We took all his cities at that time, and we utterly destroyed the men, women, and little ones of every city; we left none remaining.</u>
Deuteronomy 3:3-7	3 “So the LORD our God also delivered into our hands Og king of Bashan, with all his people, and we attacked him until he had no survivors remaining. 4 And we took all his cities at that time; there was not a city which we did not take from them: sixty cities, all the region of Argob, the kingdom of Og in Bashan. 5 All these cities <i>were</i> fortified with high walls, gates, and bars, besides a great many rural towns. 6 <u>And we utterly destroyed them, as we did to Sihon king of Heshbon, utterly destroying the men, women, and children of every city.</u> 7 But all the livestock and the spoil of the cities we took as booty for ourselves.
Deuteronomy 20: 16-18	16 “But of the cities of these peoples which the LORD your God gives you <i>as</i> an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, 17 <u>but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you,</u> 18 lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God.
Joshua 6:20-21	20 So the people shouted when <i>the priests</i> blew the trumpets. And it happened when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat. Then the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city. 21 <u>And they utterly destroyed all that <i>was</i> in the city, both man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword.</u>

God’s actions were not an example of ethnic cleansing or genocide.

When we read the above verses it may appear that what is being described is Genocide. That God is calling for the systematic destruction of specific ethnic groups. However this is not the case for the following reason.

The Pentateuch (Genesis-Deuteronomy) provided laws for two types of warfare:

- (1) battles fought against cities outside the Promise Land.**
- (2) battles fought against cities within the Promised Land.**

The first type allowed for Israel to spare people; the second type did not. The second type of warfare often fell under the *herem* practice. This meant that those to be attacked were earmarked for “devotion/consecration to destruction.” This act of warfare was carried out as an act fulfilling divine judgment.

This lies beyond any category we have today for thinking about warfare. Even though the destruction is commanded in terms of totality, there seems to have been exceptions. God often showed mercy. He showed mercy to those who repented and turned to Him (think of Rahab and her family Josh 2:9, and the Gibeonites Josh. 11:19). What this means is this;

God's reason for these people's destruction was because of their rebellion and rejection of God and according to God's special purposes. It was not because of their ethnicity.

“Ethnic cleansing” and genocide refer to destruction of a people due to their ethnicity. They are specifically chosen because of WHO THEY ARE. Adolf Hitler for example sought to eradicate the Jewish people because they were ethnically Jewish.

In the bible people groups are selected for destruction because of their sinful natures and rejection of God. They are frequently given an opportunity to repent, but they remain stubborn and hard-hearted. It is then a heart not an ethnicity issue. Therefore to describe what happened to the Canaanites as Genocide is inappropriate.

However even if it cannot be categorized as genocide we are still left having to answer why God called for the mass extermination of a large people group. Let us consider exactly who this people group were.

5 The historic background – The history of the Canaanites

Let's see what the bible tells us about the history of the Canaanites.

1	Canaan, the ancestor of the Canaanites, first appears in the story of Noah (Genesis 9). His father is Ham. Ham saw his father Noah naked after Noah had become drunk. He didn't cover his father's shame and as a result he and his <u>future descendants were cursed</u> .
2	The Canaanites or the descendants of Canaan next appear in the table of nations (Genesis 10). 6 The sons of Ham were Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan. 15 Canaan begot Sidon his firstborn, and Heth; 16 the Jebusite, the Amorite, and the Girgashite; 17 the Hivite, the Arkite, and the Sinite; 18 the Arvadite, the Zemarite, and the Hamathite. Afterward the families of the Canaanites were dispersed. 19 And the border of the Canaanites was from Sidon as you go toward Gerar, as far as Gaza; then as you go toward Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha.
3	From this point forward they serve as the backdrop to the promise of Abraham. It is the land where the Canaanites dwell that God promises to give to Abraham.
4	God called Abraham to go to an unknown land that would be revealed to him (Genesis 12:1). The Lord led Abraham to that land, Canaan, but Abraham lived there as a “stranger,” and God

	<p>promised that his descendants would own it (Genesis 17:8).</p> <p>8 Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”</p>
5	<p>God also told Abraham that his descendants would be captive in a foreign nation for about 400 years but that God would bring them back to the land He had promised. They would conquer the land, and this conquering would be a judgment upon the inhabitants of the land at that time (Genesis 15:13–16)</p> <p>13 Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land <i>that is not theirs</i>, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. (Gen 15:13)</p>
6	<p>Abraham’s grandson Jacob (Israel) went down to Egypt with all his family, about 70 in all (Genesis 46). They lived and thrived in Egypt for many years until they became so strong and numerous that the Pharaoh felt threatened by them, so he enslaved them (Exodus 1:1–14). God delivered them from Egypt through Moses (Exodus 2—12), and they journeyed back to the Promised Land.</p>
7	<p>As the Israelites were preparing to go in and take possession of Canaan through conquest, twelve spies were sent on ahead to scout out the land. They all agreed that the land was good and that the people there were strong. Ten of the spies said they were incapable of taking the land, while only two, Joshua and Caleb, trusted that the Lord would give them the land (Numbers 13). The people listened to the ten spies and revolted. As a result, God said that none of those adults alive at the time would enter the Promised Land except Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 14).</p>
8	<p>When that generation including Moses died off in the intervening years, Joshua was finally ready to lead a new generation of Israelites in to conquer the Promised Land. The Old Testament book of Joshua tells the story of the conquest.</p>
9	<p>The first major target was the city of Jericho in the middle part of Canaan (Joshua 2).</p>
10	<p>The next target was the city of Ai. The Israelite army felt this would be an easy victory, but, unexpectedly, the men of the city defeated Israel.</p>
11	<p>A group of five Amorite kings decided that they should align themselves and preemptively attack Israel, but they were all defeated (Joshua 10). Later, another group of kings in the northern half of Canaan also formed a confederacy to attack the Israelites; they, too, were defeated (Joshua 11).</p>
12	<p>Joshua and the people of Israel continued the conquest until all of Canaan was subdued (Joshua 11:23). Israel’s strategy seems to have been to defeat the strongest cities first (Joshua 12) and then to divide the territory among the individual tribes and allow each tribe to finish conquering their own territory (Joshua 13—22).</p>
13	<p>Israel was largely successful in defeating or driving out the Canaanites; however, they were not completely successful. Sometimes they left pockets of Canaanites to continue to rule themselves, and sometimes they enslaved the Canaanites (Judges 1). Both of these things had</p>

been forbidden by God, who told Israel to drive them out completely (Deuteronomy 7:2). As a result, the Canaanites remaining in the land became a temptation and a snare to the people of Israel. At times Israel would worship the Canaanites' gods, and at times God would allow those remaining pagans to rule over them. The book of Judges tells the story.

Who exactly were the Canaanites?

- The Canaanites were a group of ancient people who lived in the land of Canaan on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Canaan is described in the Bible as extending from Lebanon toward the Brook of Egypt in the south and the Jordan River Valley in the east.
- In the Bible, notably in Genesis 10 and Numbers 34, this was called the “land of Canaan” and occupies the same area that is occupied by modern Lebanon and Israel, plus parts of Jordan and Syria today.
- The Canaanites are mentioned over 150 times in the Bible. They were called *Phoenicians* by the Greeks, *Poeni* by the Romans and as the *Habiru* to the Egyptians. By race the Canaanites were Semitic. They spoke a language related to Hebrew. They were famous as merchants and seamen, as well as for their artistic skill. Archaeologists have discovered a large number of beautiful artifacts including pots, necklaces, jewelry boxes and figurines. The Canaanites are described in the Bible as a large and fierce people, a nation that it would not be easy to defeat.
- In terms of their character or nature they were a wicked, idolatrous people. Scripture depicts the people of Canaan as idolatrous and superstitious (Deuteronomy 29:17)
- In some biblical passages, Canaanites specifically refers to the people of the lowlands and plains of Canaan (Joshua 11:3); in other passages, Canaanites is used more broadly to refer to all the inhabitants of the land, including the **Hivites, Girgashites, Jebusites, Amorites, Hittites, and Perizzites** (see Judges 1:9–10).

6 Why did God call for the extermination of the Canaanites?

This is a difficult issue. The bible does not really explain to us why God would command such a thing. However there are certain things that as believers we must accept.

- ▶ God is ALWAYS just, righteous and fair. He cannot act in any other way.
- ▶ As a wise and righteous judge God is entitled to pronounce His judgment, and appropriate punishment on anyone who is deemed guilty. God is frequently merciful and patient. However the guilty cannot escape punishment forever, we would expect nothing less from a fair judge. This means that God can pass judgment when He deems it appropriate,
- ▶ He has the right to exercise His power in any way He chooses. He has absolute rights of ownership over all people and places.
- ▶ God is sovereign, infinite and eternal. He sees the big picture that we cannot.

- ▶ Unlike us God is not rash or foolhardy. He doesn't act without due care and forethought.
- ▶ God's ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts.
- ▶ God DOES not make mistakes.

So perhaps you may not be wholly persuaded by the arguments I will put forward. You might still have questions, or feel a little uneasy at the end. However we must **trust God** and have complete **faith in Him and all He does**.

Let us begin by considering why God may have chosen to judge the Canaanites.

A) God was punishing them for rejecting Him and worshiping false gods

We know that the Canaanites had rejected Yahweh as God. They did not honor or respect Yahweh and instead put their faith and trust in man-made idols. Who did they revere?

El

The earliest deity recognized by the peoples of the ancient Near East was the creator god El. His mistress, the fertility goddess Asherah, gave birth to many gods, including a powerful god named Baal ("Lord").

Baal

There appears to have been only one Baal, who was manifested in lesser Baals at different places and times. Over the years, Baal became the dominant deity, and the worship of El faded.

Baal won his dominance by defeating the other deities, including the god of the sea, the god of storms (also of rain, thunder, and lightning), and the god of death. Baal's victory over death was thought to be repeated each year when he returned from the land of death (underworld), bringing rain to renew the earth's fertility.

Baal is frequently portrayed as a man with the head and horns of a bull, an image similar to that in biblical accounts. His right hand (sometimes both hands) is raised, and he holds a lightning bolt, signifying both destruction and fertility. Baal has also been portrayed seated on a throne, possibly as the king or lord of the gods.

Asherah

Asherah was honored as the fertility goddess in various forms and with varying names (Judg. 3:7). The Bible does not actually describe the goddess, but archaeologists have discovered figurines believed to be representations of her. She is portrayed as a nude female, sometimes pregnant, with exaggerated breasts that she holds out, apparently as symbols of the fertility she promises her followers. The Bible indicates that she was worshiped near trees and poles, called Asherah poles (Deut. 7:5, 12:2-3; 2 Kings 16:4, 17:10; Jer. 3:6,13; Ezek. 6:13).

Asherah was worshiped in various ways, including through ritual sex. Although she was believed to be Baal's mother, she was also his mistress. Pagans practiced "sympathetic magic", that is, they believed they could influence the gods' actions by performing the behavior they wished the gods to demonstrate. Believing the sexual union of Baal and Asherah produced fertility, their worshipers engaged in immoral

sex to cause the gods to join together, ensuring good harvests. This practice became the basis for religious prostitution (1 Kings 14:23-24). The priest or a male member of the community represented Baal. The priestess or a female members of the community represented Asherah. In this way, God's incredible gift of sexuality was perverted to the most obscene public prostitution.

Molech / Moloch/ Molek

As with many details in ancient history, the exact origin of Moloch/Molech/Molek worship is unclear. Molech is often depicted in a similar way to Baal.

We do know that at times of national or regional crisis the Canaanites **sacrificed their children to Molech**. This wicked practice is known as “passing children through the fire.” It is believed that idols of Moloch were giant metal statues of a man with a bull’s head. Each image had a hole in the abdomen and possibly outstretched forearms that made a kind of ramp to the hole. A fire was lit in or around the statue. Babies were placed in the statue’s arms or in a hole. When a couple sacrificed their firstborn, they believed that Moloch would ensure financial prosperity for the family and future children.

The Midrash elaborates on this disturbing practice:

How did the Molech work in the valley of Ben-Hinnom? It was built outside of Jerusalem. It was an idol with the face of a calf and open hands like someone who wants to take something from another. They would light this idol on fire until his hands were scorching. There were seven chambers before him and according to the quality of the sacrifice that is how close one could come to him. If one came with a bird, then chamber one; goat, chamber two; sheep, chamber three; calf, chamber four; cow, chamber five; and ox, chamber six.

He who brought his child, the priests would say that he is offering the greatest sacrifice. He would enter the innermost chamber and go kiss the Molech . . . The priests would then take the child and place it near the Molech. They would then bang with drums to drown out the cries.

. . . Come see how obsessed the nation was with idol worship that they were willing to do something so reprehensible! But in the future, says God, “I will remove your heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh.”

The Midrash is the oral law in Judaism, as opposed to the written Torah, or the Mosaic Law.
Taken from - Tanchuma (Buber) addition to Va'etchanan, section 2

Such worship practice demonstrates such a depth of depravity that only the most morally degenerate could justify it. So God was fully justified in passing judgment on a people who rejected Him and turned instead to gods of their own creation.

As we have seen the Canaanites were far from being a moral and upright people. God had shown them great patience and given them time to repent of their wickedness. They had failed to do so. they had rejected God and his law. It was a willful and purposeful rejection. Some might argue that the Canaanites had never had an opportunity to know God. But we should remember that there were witnesses in the land from whom the Canaanites could have learned;

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their families.

They were people who followed the Lord. The Canaanites were not innocent; they were morally bankrupt and incorrigible in their wickedness. God was being just and rightly punishing them. Let us never forget that **His longsuffering is not an “eternal” suffering**. His patience with sinners eventually ends.

B) God was punishing them for their wickedness

We all accept that wicked and evil people should be punished. We all believe in the rule of law. We expect earthly judges to uphold the law and to pass judgment (punishment) on those who break it. Since this is God's world He has the right to judge those who reject Him and spurn His law. So God was fully justified in bringing punishment upon the wicked Canaanites. But...

What about the women?

Most readers can understand the military aged men being killed. This was a necessity in the ancient world. If you let your enemies free they would regroup, rearm and later attack you again. It would be folly to allow them to do this. But Yahweh's command of the death of the women and children is much harder for us to understand.

However, the Canaanite women were not innocent bystanders. They were to be killed because they participated in the violence, child sacrifices, bestiality, and sexual immorality just as much as the men did. The women would often fight in battles and participate with the men in the cutting off of their enemies' heads and hands. They would often seduce men from other villages so that their men could kill them (Judg. 16:4-22). They also willingly offered their own children as a burnt sacrifice. So they were just as guilty as the men, and warranted the same punishment.

What about the “innocent” infants?

Firstly we need to be clear that no human being is born innocent. We all inherit a sin nature that comes originally from Adam and which has been passed down through the generations.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned. (Romans 5:12)

**Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.
(Psalm 51:5)**

So even new born babies are sinners in God's sight. We also need to address the idea of an “age of accountability.” The concept of the “age of accountability” suggests that children are not held accountable by God for their sins until they reach a certain age. In simple terms we are suggesting that children are too young to know that what they are doing is sinful.

We should acknowledge however that the Bible does not directly address an age of accountability. The age of 13 is an age that is commonly suggested for the age of accountability. This is based on the Jewish custom that a child becomes an adult at the age of 13. The Bible however gives no support to the age of 13 being a set age of accountability. The age at which a child can distinguish right from wrong and becomes capable of choosing Christ likely varies from child to child. So even though the

idea of the killing of infants shocks us we must accept that God can only ever do what is right and good.

Does God treat infants who die before they are “accountable” differently to those who are old enough to be held to account? Many theologians think He does. In Deuteronomy for example we find an unbelieving generation of Israelites being prevented from entering the Promised Land while their children were exempt from that penalty (Deuteronomy 1:39). Other verses refer to young children as “innocents,”

Also on your skirts is found The blood of the lives of the poor innocents. I have not found it by secret search, But plainly on all these things. (Jer 2:34)

"Because they have forsaken Me and made this an alien place, because they have burned incense in it to other gods whom neither they, their fathers, nor the kings of Judah have known, and have filled this place with the blood of the innocents. (Jer 19:4)

This may indicate that God treats their naive sinful desires differently than the willful sinfulness of mature individuals. Some maintain that infants and babies who die are given a direct pass into heaven. I certainly hope that this is the case, but the Bible doesn't explicitly answer the question of whether children who die in infancy go to heaven. Again this is a difficult area and we must simply trust that God will do what s best in every circumstance.

What about the Canaanite children?

In terms of the children of the Canaanites we should remember that these children would have likely grown up as adherents to the evil religions and practices of their parents. Children see, learn and copy the ways of their parents. This is why we need to ensure we raise our children to know, love, fear and respect God. It is most likely that the Canaanite children would have grown up to be resentful of the Israelites. Later we must imagine that they would have sought to avenge the “unjust” treatment of their parents. This practice is known as **blood retribution**. So long as one member of a family remained, that person was bound by cultural law to attempt retribution against the enemies of his people. Such unrest and hostility would have persisted throughout Israel's history. This means in practice that it would be very hard to establish peace in the land.

We also need to take account of the rules of engagement followed by God's people. Before any fighting began a warning and declaration period of the coming, impending war was announced. Women, children, the elderly, and others who wished to safely exit the area were given time to do so. Only those who (or whose parents) stubbornly remained would face war and its outcome.

One final thing to consider when thinking about the death of babies and infants is highlighted by Dave Miller,

“Including the children in the destruction of such populations actually spared them from a worse condition; that of being reared to be as wicked as their parents and thus face eternal punishment.” (Miller, Dave, 2009, “Did God Order the Killing of Babies?”)

C) God was protecting His people from future hostility

Unlike us, God knows sees the full and complete picture. He knew that if Israel did not carry out God's

orders, these hostile people groups would come back to trouble the Israelites in the future. We only have to look at an event in the life of King Saul to see this. Saul claimed to have killed everyone but the Amalekite king Agag (1 Samuel 15:20). Saul was lying. Just a couple of decades later, there were enough Amalekites to take David and his men's families captive (1 Samuel 30:1-2). If Saul had fulfilled what God had commanded him, this never would have occurred.

Several hundred years later, a descendant of Agag, Haman, tried to have the entire Jewish people exterminated (see the book of Esther). So, Saul's failure to obey God's command almost resulted in Israel's destruction. God knew this would occur, so He ordered the extermination of the Amalekites ahead of time.

D) God was trying to protect His people from being led astray

God of course knew what the results would be if Israel did not completely eradicate the wicked pagan peoples occupying the land.

“When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, 2 and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them *and* utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. 3 Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. 4 For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly. 5 But thus you shall deal with them: you shall destroy their altars, and break down their *sacred* pillars, and cut down their wooden images, and burn their carved images with fire. (Deuteronomy 7:1-5)

So God did not order the extermination of these people to be cruel, but to prevent even greater evil from occurring in the future. In regard to the Canaanites, God commanded,

16 “But of the cities of these peoples which the LORD your God gives you *as* an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, 17 but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you, 18 lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 20:16-18)

What do we find repeated again and again throughout the Old Testament? That God's people strayed away from Him and took on the pagan religious practices of their neighbors. God was forced repeatedly to punish them and bring them back into proper relationship with Him. How much pain and misery might they have avoided if only they'd followed God's commands to exterminate the people living in Canaan.

E) God was cleaning house

Israel had a unique calling as God's chosen covenant people. Their monumental task was to prepare the way for the arrival of the Messiah. Therefore, Israel's own mission foreshadowed Jesus's mission in a

number of ways. Their purity laws pointed to the holiness demanded by God. Their sacrificial laws pointed to our need for atonement. And their laws concerning *herem* warfare pointed to God's just judgment against sin.

So when entering the promised land a radical cleaning was necessary. This helps explain what some see as the radical way God treated those living in the promised land. Because His special chosen people were coming every vestige of the debased religious system of the pagans living there had to be wiped clean. God's rescue plan to save mankind depended on the theological purity of Abraham's seed, Israel. Syncretism (mixing or blending) with pagan religions was a very real danger. So God knew the only way to avoid this was to rid (clean) the whole area of pagan influences.

7 What do we learn from all this?

Some of the accounts we read in the pages of the Old Testament are challenging. We are often left with troubling questions surrounding why God is calling for such a thing. Although people are often frustrated or upset by this we really should not be. If we could understand all the things of God then He would cease to be God. God's ways often remain an impenetrable mystery to His creatures. We are frequently left to speculate or wonder. You may not find the reasons I have given particularly persuasive. You may think God was unduly harsh on the people of Canaan. Whilst we may never find fully satisfactory answers we must never forget the essential truths of God. He is always good, right and just. He only ever does what is best in every circumstance or situation. For these reasons we can rest assured that He did, does and will always do what is right.