



Tough Questions From Christian Teens

Was It Right For Israel To Kill Children?

By

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Atheists are known for asking tough questions. That's what they do. That's what I did when I was an atheist. I would ask Christians a tough question, then mock them for whatever answer they gave me.

However, tough questions from Christian teens is different. They are already theists. They believe in the God of the Bible. They believe in Jesus Christ. So, when a Christian teen asks questions we need to give them the best answers we can.

That's what we're doing in this series, *Tough Questions From Christian Teens*. We are talking with Christian teenagers and their parents or youth leaders in multiple communities to get some of the toughest questions they have about the God, the Bible, and Christianity.

This next question is one we hear often from atheists and Christians. It is a question that many young people have said led them to leave Christianity and become atheists.

How would you answer your teen if they asked this question?
We hope our thoughts will help.

“God’s ordering the Jews to kill every living thing in certain cities (Deuteronomy 20:16-18): Is the above a correct understanding of scripture? If so, how was it right for them to kill the children that must have lived in a city so large?”

Great question!

This sounds pretty extreme, though we’ve seen some similar situations in our recent past (e.g. World War II bombing in Germany, atomic bomb in Japan, defeat of Isis caliphate in Iraq, etc) where it became necessary to destroy cities, villages, etc. because of extreme evil. Even though many believed the actions were justified, some thought what we did in World War II and with Isis was not ‘right’ because of the loss of ‘innocent’ life. That may be similar to your question about the killing of children in the Canaanite cities the Israelites would conquer.

So, how are we to understand something God commanded Israel to do thousands of years ago? We need to start from the beginning of the people groups in question.

Noah had three sons. One of them, Ham, had several sons including Canaan. There is an interesting situation mentioned in Genesis 9 where we first see Canaan mentioned – it includes a curse from Noah –

“And Noah began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father’s nakedness. So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done to him. Then he said: ‘Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants He shall be to his brethren.’ And he said: ‘Blessed be the Lord,

The God of Shem, And may Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth. And may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant.” GENESIS 9:20-27

One important note here is that Noah specifically cursed his grandson Canaan and said that Canaan would be the servant of Shem. We'll see how that plays into your question as we look deeper into the issue.

Canaan's sons included Sidod, his firstborn, and Heth. From them came the Jebusite, the Amorite, and the Girgashite; the Hivite, the Arkite, and the Sinite; the Arvadite, the Zemarite, and the Hamathite. The term 'Canaanites' seems to include all of those mentioned in the family group. 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." (Genesis 10:15-19)



When you look at a map of those ancient areas it is the area from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River from the brook of Egypt to the Ugarit in Syria to the Euphrates. The word 'Canaan' has been found in the Elba Texts from about 2300 BC. The descendants of Canaan apparently moved west of Babel after God confused the languages at the Tower of Babel. Even as Nimrod, a grandson of Ham, took over Babel and areas east of Babel, Canaan, a son of Ham, brother of Cush and uncle to Nimrod, took over areas west of Babel. Both groups would have a big influence over Israel.

Now, concerning Noah's prophecy that Canaan would be a servant to Shem. Shem was the lineage ancestor of the Israelites, which becomes of interest to your question about God commanding the Israelites to destroy cities of the Canaanites. We go to God's call of Abram to get some background to that.

“Now the Lord had said to Abram: ‘Get out of your country, From your family And from your father’s house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’” GENESIS 12:1-3

Abram was a son of Terah who was from the lineage of Shem. Terah moved his family from Ur to Haran. He and his family worshipped some of the gods that people worshipped after God scattered the families at Babel.

The gods of the Chaldeans (Ur) and the Assyrians (Haran) were similar, but often had different names. We know about some of the gods Terah and his family worshipped from Genesis 31 and 35 and Joshua 24.

The Canaanites were polytheistic (many gods) and some of them are mentioned by name in the Old Testament including Baal, Asherah, Ashtoreth, Molech, Dagon, Chemosh, and Tammuz.

As we research these ancient gods of the Canaanites we learn how evil and wicked they were. Much of the people's beliefs centered around fertility worship that mixed human sexuality with agricultural cycles of planting and harvesting. Worship included acts of violence, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity, incest, sodomy, and bestiality. One of the worst aspects in worship of the Canaanite gods was child sacrifice. Molech was a primary god for sacrificing children.

An interesting note about the sin of 'sodomy' is that the name comes from the Canaanite city of Sodom. That's where Abram's nephew Lot moved his family. God told Abram about His plan to destroy Sodom and another Canaanite city, Gomorrah. Abram was concerned about his nephew and family living in Sodom, so he bargained with God. You can read about that in Genesis 18. You can read about the

destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, including saving Lot and his daughters from destruction.

God called Abram to leave Haran and move his family to “the land of Canaan.” When they arrived in Canaan they arrived at Shechem, “as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh.” That’s where God appeared to Abram and said – “To your descendants I will give this land.’ And there he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.” (Genesis 12:7)

Abram moved to the mountain east of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. As we look at ancient maps we get a good picture of Abram’s journey from Haran to Shechem to Bethel. Bethel and Ai were located several miles north of Jerusalem.

God told Abram that He would give the land of the Canaanites to his descendants –

“... from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates— the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.” GENESIS 15:18-21

Something very interesting happened as God was making His unconditional covenant with Abram that pertains to what we’re looking at now. God told Abram –

“Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return

here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

GENESIS 15:13-16

We know that the nation that would afflict the descendants of Abram was Egypt, but the Amorites are also mentioned in the same verse. Notice that God said Abram’s descendants would return to the land “in the fourth generation” .. “for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

Going back to what we saw in Genesis 10, the Amorites came from the lineage of Canaan –

“Canaan begot Sidon his firstborn, and Heth; the Jebusite, the Amorite, and the Girgashite; the Hivite, the Arkite, and the Sinite; the Arvadite, the Zemarite, and the Hamathite.”

The next time we see the Amorites mentioned is in Genesis 14 when kings were battling each other. The Amorites were described as dwelling in Hazezon Tamar. 2 Chronicles 20:2 identified Hazezon Tamar as En Gedi, which was located about 35 miles southwest of Jerusalem.

The Amorites were a warrior people, as were many other peoples of that time. As Jacob was on his deathbed in Egypt he said this to his son Joseph –

“Then Israel said to Joseph, ‘Behold, I am dying, but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers. Moreover I have given to you one portion above your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and my bow.’ GENESIS 48:21-22

Notice the prophecy that God would bring Joseph and his brothers (the Israelites) “back to the land of your fathers.” That was the land of Canaan.

The Amorites worshipped other gods and their wickedness was great. However, at the time of Abram, the iniquity of the Amorites was “not yet complete.” It would be many years before that time of completed iniquity would come – a time determined by God since the Amorite iniquity was against Him.

It may also be helpful to remember that Amorite children grew up to be Amorite adults whose iniquity would continue to worsen. The Amorite iniquity God spoke about to Abram would be ‘completed’ hundreds of years later when God spoke to Moses and Joshua. Using the term ‘children’ in an argument can mislead unless we consider the history of a people, especially in light of how they sinned against God. The iniquity of the Amorites God spoke about to Abram and the iniquity of the Amorites God spoke about to Moses and Joshua occurred over a period of hundreds of years and several generations.

That time finally came and God called to Moses from the burning bush –

“And the Lord said: ‘I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites. Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.’ EXODUS 3:7-10

When Moses and the Israelites left Egypt and were in the wilderness, God explained more about His plans for the Amorites and others in the promise land –

“But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off. You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their works; but you shall utterly overthrow them and completely break down their sacred pillars.”

EXODUS 23:22-24

Notice that God said he would “cut them off.” He told the Israelites not to bow down to or serve their gods or do according to their works. That covered all of the abominable things the Amorites and other Canaanite peoples were doing. What was Israel to do? “... you shall utterly overthrow them and completely break down their *sacred* pillars.” God not only

didn't want Israel to participate in worshipping the false gods of the promised land, He also wanted Israel to utterly overthrow them and completely break down their sacred pillars. The spiritual wickedness was a primary purpose God had in having His people overthrow the Canaanites. Wickedness and violence came from their spiritual worship of false gods. The iniquity of the Amorites had become complete and God would use His people, Israel, to deal a blow to their terrible sin against Him.

We continue with the second part of our answer to a Christian teen who asked:

“God’s ordering the Jews to kill every living thing in certain cities (Deuteronomy 20:16-18): Is the above a correct understanding of scripture? If so, how was it right for them to kill the children that must have lived in a city so large?”

Moses led Israel in its first battles against the Canaanites and Amorites. You can read about them in Numbers 21. Moses rehearsed some of what Israel did to the the Amorites in Deuteronomy chapters 1, 3 and 4. Moses went into depth about what Israel was to do when they entered the promised land and why there were to do it –

“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, 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. Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. 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. 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. 'For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

‘Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments; and He repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face. Therefore you shall keep the commandment, the statutes, and the judgments which I command you today, to observe them.’ DEUTERONOMY 7:1-11

Israel was a holy people to God. God had chosen them to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on earth. That’s why God told them to conquer them and utterly destroy them. God did not want the Israelites to make marriages with them because He knew they would turn the Israelites from following Him and to serve other gods. God wanted Israel to destroy the Canaanite altars, break down their sacred pillars, cut down their wooden images and burn their carved images with fire.

Again we see that the reason God told Israel to conquer and utterly destroy the Canaanites was because they were worshipping other gods in the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel). God had been incredibly patient and longsuffering, but the iniquity of the Canaanites had finally reached its completion and God would lead His people to conquer, overthrow and completely destroy the wickedness of the Canaanites.

Moses died and the mantle of leadership fell to Joshua. Joshua sent spies into Canaan and learned that the Canaanites knew about Israel's defeat of the Amorites and were afraid of the God of Israel (Joshua 2). We read this in Joshua 5:1 –

“So it was, when all the kings of the Amorites who were on the west side of the Jordan, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan from before the children of Israel until we had crossed over, that their

heart melted; and there was no spirit in them any longer because of the children of Israel.”

Joshua’s first military campaign would be Jericho, a very old city that belonged to the Canaanites. Before the battle of Jericho, Joshua met the “Commander of the army of the Lord,” who some scholars believe was the pre-incarnate Son of God.

As we read the early chapters of Joshua we see how God demonstrated His power to Israel. It’s clear that He will win the battles as they obey Him. Jericho was the first victory. Joshua and the children of Israel did as God commanded them.

“And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword.” JOSHUA 6:21

The only people who did not die were Rahab and her family. That was part of the promise the Israeli spies made to her because of her help when they were secretly inside Jericho prior to the battle (Joshua 2).

The next battle took place where Abram had started centuries before –

“Joshua therefore sent them out; and they went to lie in ambush, and stayed between Bethel and Ai, on the west side of Ai ... For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the spear, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai.” JOSHUA 8:9, 26

Remember what we read in Genesis 15? God said to Abram –

“... for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” We see the Amorites suffer defeat in Joshua 10. Joshua executed the five Amorite kings – “the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, and the king of Eglon.”

Joshua 12 includes a list of the kings defeated by Moses and Israel and the kings defeated by Joshua and Israel. Joshua 13 says that Joshua was an old man and there was still more land for Israel to possess. God told Joshua to divide the land they had conquered into the tribal allocations according to what God had told Moses (Joshua chapters 14 – 23).

Joshua came to the end of his life and made a farewell statement to the children of Israel where he rehearsed the great things God had done for them. Joshua also left them with a warning –

“Therefore take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the Lord your God. Or else, if indeed you do go back, and cling to the remnant of these nations—these that remain among you—and make marriages with them, and go in to them and they to you, know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you. But they shall be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until

you perish from this good land which the Lord your God has given you.” JOSHUA 23:11-13

Joshua led the leaders of Israel in making a covenant with God. It was a conditional covenant that included not serving other gods –

“Now therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord! And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.’ So the people answered and said: ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for the Lord our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among

all the people through whom we passed. And the Lord drove out from before us all the people, including the Amorites who dwelt in the land. We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God.’ But Joshua said to the people, ‘You cannot serve the Lord, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after He has done you good.’ And the people said to Joshua, ‘No, but we will serve the Lord!’ So Joshua said to the people, ‘You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord for yourselves, to serve Him.’ And they said, ‘We are witnesses!’ ‘Now therefore,’ he said, ‘put away the foreign gods which are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord God of Israel.’ And the people said to Joshua, ‘The Lord our God we will serve, and His voice we will obey!’ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem.” JOSHUA 24:14-25

What we learn in the Book of Judges is that Israel did not keep its covenant with God. Israel did forsake God and serve foreign gods. Israel did not finish conquering the Canaanites, but intermarried and co-habited with them. Judges is a record of the sad cycle of Israel's unfaithfulness and disobedience that led to the punishment both Moses and Joshua had prophesied –

“Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals; and they forsook the Lord God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; and they followed other gods from among the gods of the people who were all around them, and they bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. They forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. And the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel. So He delivered them into the hands of plunderers who despoiled them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. Wherever they went out, the hand of the Lord was against them for calamity, as the

Lord had said, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were greatly distressed.” JUDGES 2:11-15

The children of Israel ‘forsook’ God and served the primary gods of the Canaanites – Baal and the Ashtoreths. That’s what God had warned them not to do and why He wanted them to ‘utterly destroy’ the Canaanites.

That also demonstrates that Israel did not kill all the people of Canaan, including ‘innocent children.’

With that historical background let’s consider the idea of the children of the Canaanites being ‘innocent.’

The iniquity of the Canaanites, Amorites and other people groups living in the land of Canaan began many centuries earlier. God told Abram that the iniquity of the Amorites was “not yet complete.” That means the iniquity of the Canaanite people was already in existence when God made His covenant with Abram. Based on the time period between the

Tower of Babel and God speaking to Abram, the iniquity of the Canaanite people had been going on for centuries.

The so-called ‘innocent’ children of the Canaanite families (including the Amorites) had been growing up to become the violent and wicked people of the land of Canaan. That had continued for many generations from Babel to Moses and Joshua. Can we then call the children of the Canaanites ‘innocent?’

God allowed the Canaanite families to continue in their sin for hundreds of years until He viewed their iniquity to be ‘complete.’ God has suffered long with the nations of the world, but there is a point where He will judge them for their iniquity.

God wants wicked people to repent and live –

“As I live,” says the Lord God, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” EZEKIEL 33:11

God's patience with the Canaanite people is one of the remarkable stories in the Bible that demonstrates His patience. Even as God suffered long with people from Adam to Noah, He eventually punished the wicked who would not turn from their sinful ways.

The same is true of the Canaanite people. God suffered long with them until their iniquity was complete. That's when God told Moses, Joshua and the people of Israel to utterly destroy the cities of the promised land. It was necessary to rid the land of the wickedness that had infested it for centuries.

God did not tell Israel to go beyond the boundaries He gave to Abram and they didn't. What God told Israel to do was specific to spiritual cleansing of a specific group of people in a specific and small part of the world.

“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, 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, 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

God acted patiently, righteously and judicially in commanding Israel to utterly destroy the cities of the Canaanites – not every city everywhere. The people of Canaan had long been involved in doing things with their gods that the true God saw as ‘abominations.’ God would not tolerate similar behavior from His people, Israel.

Having said that, let me add that some Christian apologists believe Moses and Joshua used the phrases ‘utterly destroy’ in a way that might be similar to other ancient military leaders.

Dr. Paul Copan wrote a book titled “Is God a Moral Monster?”. He argues for understanding the genre of the ancient writings. He believes Joshua’s warfare rhetoric was common in other military accounts from that region during the same time period. Copan also argues that archaeological evidence shows no civilian populations at Jericho, Ai and other cities Joshua mentioned, so no women and children would have been targets. Copan also believes that Israel’s conquest of Canaanite cities was to drive the people out and destroy everything about their evil religion, not destroy them.

I don’t agree with all of his perspective, but wanted you to know there are other views by Christian apologists.

Whichever perspective you might take, I think it's fair to say that God was extremely patient with the Canaanite people. It's also fair to say that Moses and Joshua went to war with the Canaanite people and killed their leaders and people and destroyed their cities and their worship of foreign gods.

Other Tough Questions

You can read answers to other tough questions from [Christian teens here](#).

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