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KILLING THE CANAANITES A Response to the New Atheism's "Divine Genocide" Claims

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SYNOPSIS

The “new atheists” call God’s commands to kill the Canaanites “genocide,” but a closer look at the horror of the Canaanites’ sinfulness, exhibited in rampant idolatry, incest, adultery, child sacrifice, homosexuality, and bestiality, reveals that God’s reason for commanding their death was not genocide but capital punishment. After all, the Old Testament unequivocally commands that those who do any one of these things deserves to die. Also, God made it clear in His conversation with Abraham regarding the Canaanite cities of Sodom and Gomorrah that He knows who would or would not repent, and in the case of those cities, not one person would heed the warning and even Lot’s family had to be forcibly pulled away from the coming destruction. In Leviticus 18 God then warns Israel that if they commit similar sins that the land would similarly “vomit” them out. Later when Israel disobeys God and allows the Canaanites to continue to live among them, the corruptive and seductive power of Canaanite sin results in the Canaanization of Israel. Subsequently, God sent prophets to warn Israel of their coming destruction, but they didn’t repent and God said that they became “like Sodom to me” and He visited destruction on Israel for committing the same sins. This again reveals that God’s motive isn’t genocide, but capital punishment. That we commit similar sins today renders us incapable of appropriate moral outrage against these sins and thus we accuse God of “genocide” to justify our own sinfulness.

Richard Dawkins and other new atheists herald God’s ordering of the destruction of Canaanite cities to be divine “ethnic cleansing” and “genocides.”¹ With righteous indignation, Dawkins opines that the God of the Old Testament is “the most unpleasant character in all of fiction.”² But was the killing of the Canaanites an example of divine genocide? If you think the Canaanites deserved to die because of their own wickedness, Dawkins will zealously compare you to acting like the Taliban.³ A closer look at several

key facts will help explain God's reason for the destruction of the Canaanites and reveal how our own sinfulness demonstrates our incapacity to judge rightly.

That atheists are incapable of judging spiritual matters leads some Christians to wonder why we even need to answer them at all, especially if they lack any objective, moral, or epistemological foundation for their claims. Moreover, most atheists do not customarily condemn the very practices that God condemns, for example, idolatry, adultery, and homosexuality. Predictably so, their values conflict with what God hates.

Concerning the destruction of the Canaanites, atheists especially like to exploit the Christian condemnation of genocide. They reason something along these lines: (1) Christians condemn genocide. (2) Yahweh's command to kill the Canaanites was an act of divine genocide. (3) Therefore, Christians should condemn Yahweh for commanding genocide.

The second premise is false, however. Part of the goal of this essay is to offer evidence to show that God had good reason to command Israel to kill the Canaanites. In Leviticus 18 and elsewhere, for example, the Bible reveals that God punished the Canaanites for specific grievous evils. Also, this wasn't the entire destruction of a race as God didn't order that every Canaanite be killed but only those who lived within specific geographical boundaries (Josh. 1:4). Canaanite tribes (especially the Hittites) greatly exceeded the boundaries that Israel was told to conquer. And since, as we will see, He punished Israel when they committed the same sins, what happened to the Canaanites was not genocide, but capital punishment.

This wasn't merely punishment, however. God sought to reveal His standards of righteousness to a thoroughly corrupted humankind, and He chose Israel out of the nations to exhibit the requirements for relationship with Him (Deut. 4:5–8). Before He redeemed humankind, He needed to unambiguously demonstrate what exactly He was redeeming them from: a blatant and unrestrained evil that resulted in a worthless, nasty, and cruel existence. God knows what is best for humankind, but He allowed free creatures to rebel and find out on their own that He is right. If Jesus had died to redeem humankind prior to humankind's comprehending the depth of their sin, then people would question the need for Jesus' death. Why would Jesus die for basically good folk? God waited to redeem humankind until they had the chance to be, as 2 Live Crew once put it, "as nasty as they wanna be."

THE CANAANITES WERE WICKED

The Bible is explicit concerning the sins of the Canaanites: idolatry, incest, adultery, child sacrifice, homosexuality, and bestiality. Much of what follows is horrific, but if we refuse to look, will we really understand the reasons for God's judgment?

Idolatry. The Canaanites worshiped other gods, which the Old Testament frequently denounced as no more than sticks or pottery made by human hands that could not "see or hear or eat or smell" (Deut. 4:28 NIV). Yahweh derided these handmade gods that cannot speak and must be carried because they cannot walk (Jer. 1:16; 8:2–5).

The Canaanites took seriously the testimony of the Old Testament witness of Yahweh and His revelation, if for no other reason than intentionally to transform the scriptural depiction of Yahweh into a castrated weakling who likes to play with His own excrement and urine.⁴

Of course Dawkins complains that “God’s monumental rage whenever his chosen people flirted with a rival god resembles nothing so much as sexual jealousy of the worst kind.”⁵ But does anyone think that if Dawkins’s wife left him for a gingerbread man of her own baking, and then she began to tell everyone that he liked to play with his excrement, that Dawkins would tolerate the characterization of his feelings as no more than “sexual jealousy of the worst kind”?

Idolatry perverts our ability to love what Yahweh loves. Consequently, we love what He hates, and we hate what He loves. The story of Canaanite incest, adultery, child sacrifice, homosexuality, and bestiality flow out of the plot line of idolatry. The tragedy of this story is that not only is idolatry an offense to Yahweh, but it fails to supply a happy ending for human communities as well.

Incest. Like all Ancient Near East (ANE) pantheons, the Canaanite pantheon was incestuous. Baal has sex with his mother Asherah,⁶ his sister Anat, and his daughter Pidray,⁷ and none of this is presented pejoratively.

Although early Canaanite laws proscribed either death or banishment for most forms of incest, after the fourteenth century BC, the penalties were reduced to no more than the payment of a fine.⁸ In the larger ANE context, it is helpful to consider that in an Egyptian dream book dreams of having sex with your mother or your sister were considered good omens.⁹

Adultery. Canaanite religion, like that of all of the ANE, was a fertility religion that involved temple sex. Inanna/Ishtar, also known as the Queen of Heaven, “became the woman among the gods, patron of eroticism and sensuality, of conjugal love as well as adultery, of brides and prostitutes, transvestites and pederasts.”¹⁰ As University of Helsinki professor Martti Nissinen writes, “Sexual contact with a person whose whole life was devoted to the goddess was tantamount to union with the goddess herself.”¹¹

The Canaanites even remake the God of the Bible, El, after their own image and portray Him ceremonially as having sex with two women (or goddesses). The ceremony ends with directions: “To be repeated five times by the company and the singers of the assembly.”¹² About this John Gray comments, “We may well suppose that this activity of El was sacramentally experienced by the community in the sexual orgies of the fertility cult which the Hebrew prophets so vehemently denounced.”¹³

Child sacrifice. Molech was a Canaanite underworld deity¹⁴ represented as an upright, bullheaded idol with a human body in whose belly a fire was stoked and in whose outstretched arms a child was placed that would be burned to death. The victims were not only infants; children as old as four were sacrificed.¹⁵ Kleitarchos reported that “as the flame burning the child surrounded the body, the limbs would shrivel up and the

mouth would appear to grin as if laughing, until it was shrunk enough to slip into the cauldron.”¹⁶

Homosexuality. No ANE text condemns homosexuality. Additionally, some ANE manuscripts talk about “party-boys and festival people who changed their masculinity into femininity to make the people of Ishtar revere her.”¹⁷

Let us also remember that the problem with the Canaanite city of Sodom wasn’t just sex among consenting adults: the men of Sodom, both young and old, tried to rape the visitors (Gen. 19:5).

Bestiality. Probably the ultimate sexual depravity is intercourse with animals. Hittite Laws: 199 states, “If anyone has intercourse with a pig or a dog, he shall die. If a man has intercourse with a horse or a mule, there is no punishment.”¹⁸ As with incest, the penalty for having sex with animals decreased about the fourteenth century BC.¹⁹

There should be no surprise that bestiality would occur among the Canaanites, since their gods practiced it. From the Canaanite epic poem “The Baal Cycle” we learn: “Mightiest Baal hears / He makes love with a heifer in the outback / A cow in the field of Death’s Realm. / He lies with her seventy times seven / Mounts eighty times eight / [She conceiv]es and bears a boy.”²⁰

There were absolutely no prohibitions against bestiality in the rest of the ANE.²¹ In fact, in an Egyptian dream book it was a bad omen for a woman to dream about embracing her husband, but good things would happen if she dreamed of intercourse with a baboon, wolf, or he-goat.²² In short, their sexual fantasies involved everything that breathes.

This explains why, in certain cities, Yahweh sentenced to death everything that breathes. If they had sex with just about every living thing they could get their hands on, and they did, then all had to die. Dawkins objects that it adds “injury to insult” that “the unfortunate beast is to be killed too.”²³ But Dawkins doesn’t seem to grasp that no one would want to have animals around who were used to having sex with humans.²⁴ Moreover, this might also explain why God used a flood to destroy what Dawkins called the “presumably blameless” animals in the days of Noah.²⁵ If pre-flood humankind frequently had sex with every imaginable animal, then even though it wasn’t the animals’ fault, it would be harmful to allow these animals to be a part of God’s start-over society.

ISRAEL SEDUCED AND CORRUPTED

Israel’s response to Canaanite sin is a parable of how their own sinfulness empowered them to ape the sin of the Canaanites and thereby procure God’s judgment on them. For God does not show favoritism. Israel was warned not to let the Canaanites live in their land, but to completely destroy them (Exod. 23:33; Deut. 20:16–18), lest the Israelites learn the Canaanite ways (Exod. 34:15–16). If they did not destroy them, the

land would “vomit” them out just as it had vomited out the Canaanites (Num. 33:56; Lev. 18:28; Deut 4:23–29, 8:19–20).

Instead, the Israelites worshiped the Canaanites’ gods and “did evil” (Judg. 10:6; 1 Kings 14:22; 2 Kings 17:10). They had “male shrine prostitutes” (1 Kings 14:22), committed acts of “lewdness,” adultery, and incest (Jer. 5:7; 29:23; Hos. 4:13–14; Ezek. 22:10–11; Amos 2:7), and even Solomon set up an altar to Molech (1 Kings 11:5, 7–8). But instead of repenting when things went badly, they concluded that their misfortune was because they stopped burning incense to “the Queen of Heaven,” Inanna/Ishtar (Jer. 44:18). So the Lord said that Israel became “like Sodom to me” (Jer. 23:14). In short, Israel was Canaanized.

Although prophets warned the northern kingdom (usually referred to as Israel or Samaria) of impending doom, they didn’t repent, and in 722 BC the king of Assyria killed or deported most of them, and filled the land with conquered peoples from other nations. Similarly, the southern tribes (usually referred to as Judah) were deported when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem beginning in 586 BC. Just as God had demonstrated his knowledge of who would repent in the Canaanite cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, before he destroyed Jerusalem He told Jeremiah that if He could find even one righteous person He would spare the entire city (Jer. 5:1).

It doesn’t stop there. In Luke 20 Jesus told the Jews the parable of the tenants and the vineyard. Servants were sent to the tenants of the vineyard, but had been mistreated, and so the owner of the vineyard sent his son, but the tenants killed the son. Jesus then warned, “What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” Then, in AD 70, forty years after Jesus was crucified, the Roman emperor Titus destroyed Jerusalem. Josephus records that the Jews in Jerusalem “were first whipped, and then tormented with all sorts of tortures, before they died, and were then crucified before the wall of the city....So the soldiers, out of the wrath and hatred they bore the Jews, nailed those they caught, one after one way, and another after another, to the crosses, by way of jest, when their multitude was so great, that room was wanting for the crosses, and crosses wanting for the bodies.”²⁶ Titus then renamed the region Palestine and for almost 1,900 years one couldn’t find “Israel” on the map.

What God commanded Israel to do to the Canaanites wasn’t genocide—it was capital punishment. In both Testaments we see that God hates sin and will punish it.

GOD KNOWS WHO WILL REPENT

Could there have been any righteous Canaanites, especially in view of the pervasive, seductive, and corrosive nature of Canaanite sin? Abraham asked the Lord this exact question in Genesis 18 regarding the coming destruction of two Canaanite cities—Sodom and Gomorrah: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city?...Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked

alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"²⁷ Ultimately the Lord then agrees to spare both cities if only ten righteous people were found.

When angels arrive, however, the men of the city try to rape them and not only does Lot not find anyone who will repent, Lot himself tarries so long that the angels take Lot and his family by the arms and all but drag them out of the city. Later Lot's own daughters get him drunk to have sex with him and so even Dawkins, in a surprising moment of moral clarity, writes, "If this dysfunctional family was the best Sodom had to offer by way of morals, some might begin to feel a certain sympathy with God and his judicial brimstone."²⁸

Skeptics often complain that children were killed in Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction. Such a complaint usually masks an unspoken premise: God shouldn't have killed the children because that wouldn't give them the chance to reject Canaanite sin. Curiously, this simply relates back to the entire dialogue of God with Abraham. God knows who will or will not repent of his or her sin and if He concludes that all the children would have been similarly corrupted, then He is perfectly right to institute capital punishment.

Moreover, given the evidence of Canaanite sin, it is no stretch to realize that even many young children would have already learned Canaanite ways. Thus, if God wanted to rid the world of their wickedness, then He couldn't have them grow up wanting to imitate their birth parents with whom they bonded. Imagine the teenage rebellion in those households! Wouldn't even infants, as they grew, begin to ask, "What practices did my parents do which resulted in your killing them?" As sad as this is, it also points to the horror of sin. Parents can corrupt their children.²⁹

But why should we take seriously the skeptic's advocacy for Canaanite children? Doesn't the new atheist's complaint ring hollow, since they are often at the forefront of defending a woman's right to suction, dismember, or scald to death her unborn baby at any time and for any reason?

Perhaps what the skeptic is really concerned about is whether the just destruction of the Canaanites is license for Christians to resort to killing the wicked. The answer is: absolutely not! We don't live in a theocracy anymore and, as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, we don't fight with "the weapons of the world," but "we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God" (NIV). In other words, we now wage war in prayer and in the realm of ideas.

OUR SIN AND THE NEW ATHEIST CLAIMS

The new atheists immaculately exemplify what the Bible has proclaimed all along: sin corrupts our authority to judge rightly; what we think is justified prosecution against God Almighty turns out to be, on further illumination, a raucous rant full of the noxious fumes of the sinful heart.

Consider one basic example of how new atheist rationalizations echo the propensities of "Canaanite sin," and indeed, echo the rationalizations of the human heart. Concerning sexual desire, Dawkins questions why evangelical Christians are so

“obsessed” with “private sexual inclinations.”³⁰ The apparently not obsessed Christopher Hitchens considers “dangerous sexual repression” so serious that he calls it one of the “four irreducible objections to religious faith.”³¹ Dawkins and Hitchens are not just encouraging a sort of sexual libertarianism per se. They are insisting that God and Christianity are in fact poisonous and must diligently be resisted and defeated. In a recent debate with William Lane Craig, Hitchens exhorted the Christians in the audience, “Emancipate yourself from the idea of a celestial dictatorship and you’ve taken the first step toward becoming free.”³²

Although Dawkins nowhere endorses sex with animals, he does endorse Princeton atheist and ethicist Peter Singer as an “eloquent advocate” for our need to become “postspeciesist.”³³ According to Singer, to claim that one species is better than another is to invoke grave implications because, after all, “We are animals....This does not make sex across the species barrier normal, or natural, whatever those much-misused words may mean, but it does imply that it ceases to be an offence to our status and dignity as human beings.”³⁴

The problem with new atheist divine genocide claims is rather simple: God hates sin, but the new atheists do not.³⁵ Consequently, they complain of divine genocide in the face of Canaanite sin! So let’s not kid ourselves: at the end of the day no amount of explanation will cause today’s illuminati (or “brights,” as some new atheists like to be called) to consider God’s commands justified.³⁶ But our job as Christians is to proclaim unambiguously, especially to strongholds set up against knowledge of God, that humankind is sinful, that the wages of sin is death, and that by trusting Christ’s sacrifice we can be saved from the wrath of God and enjoy resurrection life in and with Him forever.

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NOTES

1 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 247.

2 Ibid., 31.

3 Ibid., 246.

4 See Ulf Oldenburg, *The Conflict between El and Ba'al in Canaanite Religion* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1969), 172.

5 Dawkins, 243.

6 For the story of Baal having sex with Asherah, see: “El, Ashertu and the Storm-god,” trans. Albrecht Goetze, ed. James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: Supplementary Texts and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1969), 519.

- 7 W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1968), 145.
- 8 Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., "Incest, Sodomy and Bestiality in the Ancient Near East," in *Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. Harry A. Hoffner, Jr. (Neukirchen Vluyn, Germany: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 82.
- 9 See the Papyrus Chester Beatty III recto (BM10683) from about 1175 BC as referenced in Lise Manniche, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt* (London: Routledge, 1987), 100.
- 10 Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 57.
- 11 Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 33.
- 12 John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1965), 101–2.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 14 John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989), 62.
- 15 Shelby Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in Their Mediterranean Context* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 14.
- 16 Kleitarchos, Scholia on Plato's *Republic* 337A as quoted in Day, 87.
- 17 Stephanie Dalley, "Erra and Ishum IV," *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1989), 305.
- 18 Hoffner, 82. HL §§ 187–88, 199.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 85.
- 20 Mark S. Smith, trans. *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997), 148.
- 21 Hoffner, 82.
- 22 Manniche, 102.
- 23 Dawkins, 248.
- 24 For an example of how embarrassing and dangerous this could be, see Robert M. Yerkes, "The Mind of the Gorilla: Part III. Memory," *Comparative Psychology Monographs* 5, 2 (1928): 68–69.
- 25 Dawkins, 237–38.
- 26 Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Hartford, CN: S. S. Scranton, 1905), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 822.
- 27 Genesis 18:23–25 NIV.
- 28 Dawkins, 240.

29 Although no Scripture is definitive that all children will be saved, many Christians point out that it is possible (based on verses like Matthew 19:14). And if all children are saved, then a Canaanite child would benefit by being alive in a better place.

30 Dawkins, 238.

31 Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Boston: Twelve Books, 2007), 4.

32 The debate between Craig and Hitchens occurred on April 4, 2009 at Biola University. The quote is from Gail Patches, "The Great Debate: Craig, Hitchens ask 'Does God Exist?'" Whittier Daily News, April 5, 2009, A1, A4.

33 Dawkins, 271.

34 Peter Singer "Heavy Petting: Review of Midas Dekkers, 'Dearest Pet: On Bestiality' (London, 2000)," Nerve.com, 2001, <http://www.nerve.com/opinions/singer/heavypetting/main.asp>. Accessed 5 November 2008.

35 Sadly, all too often, neither do we.

36 Dawkins, 338. A special thanks to Joseph Gorra for his many helpful suggestions and to my wife, Jean E. Jones, for her extensive reading of ANE primary and secondary sources and for years ago explaining to me much of the Old Testament.