

The Canaanites

"Cursed be Canaan" - Genesis 9:25-27

In Genesis 9:20-27, we read that Noah became drunk and, being overheated by the effects of the wine, unclothed himself in his tent. Though we aren't given many details, his son Ham entered his father's tent and found delight in what he saw (and possibly in what he did). This was a display of Ham's corrupt moral character - an act that is much more serious than people in our corrupt "modern" society seem to understand. In contrast, Shem and Japheth (his two brothers) displayed moral integrity, and showed honor to their father (compare to Exodus 20:12).

When he became aware of what had happened, Noah, as the patriarchal head of the family and also as a prophet, pronounced blessings and judgment, as was appropriate to the situation. Shem and Japheth were blessed; but Ham's son, Canaan - rather than Ham himself - received the judgment.

Why would Noah judge Canaan and not Ham? Ham had four sons, and to judge Ham would have affected all four of them. This would have been unjust, for (as far as we know) three of his sons did not share his corrupt nature. Rather than do an injustice, Noah pronounced judgment only on the son who shared Ham's corrupt moral character, and who's offspring would take this moral corruption to the extreme. History demonstrates that the Canaanites - the offspring of Canaan - actually were this way, and that the prophetic judgment actually did occur.

Warnings of judgment - an expression of grace and an opportunity to repent

400 years before the judgment came, events happened that would serve as a warning to the people. Had they been willing to repent, this judgment would not have been necessary. However, repentance did not occur. Even in the immediate years prior to their destruction, there were warnings. But would they repent and turn to God for mercy and forgiveness? No!

Sin has a corrupting and enslaving effect on those who choose to indulge in it. The more a people *choose* to sin, the less they are able to *not* sin - *or to even recognize it as sin*. In the end, there is no recourse, but to be destroyed.

The promise that the land would be given to Abraham's offspring - Genesis 15:12-21

Long before the judgment came, God promised to give the land to Abraham. But this would only happen *after* the sins of the people reached the "point of no return." This would take another 400 years. The Amorites were the largest of the Canaanite groups; and in the first part of God's promise to Abraham, they seem to represent all of them.

The specific land area that would be given to Abraham's descendants is described by a list of the nations (or groups of people), who's territory they would receive. This list is comprised mostly of descendants of Canaan, though some were nomads who lived in the region and were not necessarily among those eventually to be destroyed. (In the space of 400 years, the inhabitants of some of these territories could have changed. Some of the names here are not listed in later passages.)

The warning of Sodom and Gomorrah (and the nearby towns) - Genesis 18:20-22; chapter 19

This group of cities had already reached the "point of no return," and judgment could not wait another 400 years. In his mercy, God gave them a final warning and an opportunity to repent, the night before judgment fell; but they laughed it off. The smoke of their judgment would be visible for many miles; and news about it would spread throughout the land. The *significance* of the judgment would also be known, *as it is to this very day*, and the people in the surrounding regions would have no excuse.

Further warnings - Joshua 2:8-14

Even as God led Israel out of Egypt, and as they journeyed toward the land of Canaan - just 40 years before the judgment came - news of what was about to happen reached the ears of the people in Canaan. Even so, they would not repent. Even though they were terrified, they remained unwilling to turn from their ways. In this way, the prophecies made centuries before that time would be fulfilled.

Could things have been different? - Joshua 6:25 (compare to James 2:25); Jeremiah 18:7-10

Things *were* different for one family - the family of Rahab, who hid the spies that Joshua had sent into the land. Things could have been different for others, if they had been willing to change.

Throughout Scripture, when God pronounced judgment on a nation because of their sin, it was normally (if not always) given with an implied (or sometimes directly stated) offer of mercy. Sometimes the people would repent, and judgment would be withdrawn, or at least postponed until later (if the people reverted to their evil ways). An example of this was Nineveh, who was spared for 100 years, but was later destroyed. (See Jonah 3 and the book of Nahum.) At other times, the people were unwilling to change, and the inevitable came. The Canaanites are an example of this.

The role of Israel in this judgment

Israel had a role, but NOT because they were righteous! - Deut. 9:4-6; 7:1-8

It was only because of the Canaanite's wickedness that God would destroy them. Israel *wasn't* righteous, and God told them so!

Interestingly, in the battles that occurred with the Canaanites, Israel often played a minor role. Frequently, God raised up nature itself (such as the weather) to fight against the Canaanites! They were destroyed, not because of Israel's strength, but because of God's holy and righteous justice (a justice that *cannot* ignore evil forever).

What was the "normal" course of action in times of war? - Deut. 20:10-18

Under normal conditions, Israel was to first offer peace to an enemy. But this did *not* apply to the Canaanites, who had become so corrupted by evil that they had lost the ability to change (other than a few, such as Rahab). The people had become a "moral cancer" to the human race, and had a corrupting influence on *anyone* who became associated with them. God warned Israel about this. If they failed to destroy the Canaanites, then their wickedness would affect Israel - and this would later result in *Israel's* destruction.

The Canaanite's abhorrent idolatry

The God who brought Abraham out of the land of the Chaldeans and into the land of Canaan (Genesis 15:7) is the one who created the heavens and the earth. This God created humans - male and female - "in his image" (Genesis 1:26-27), and placed them in charge over the rest of creation, to live and rule in a manner that would honor the Creator and reflect his nature.

False gods

Humans have rebelled against this God, the one who created them, and have invented false gods (or "god-concepts") to their own liking. All people are guilty of this, in one form or another; but the Canaanites had increased their sins to the point that they were irreversibly corrupt. By the time they were destroyed, they had invented a pantheon of gods that were related to every aspect of life - including gods that encouraged every type of depraved activity that a human could imagine. Some of these gods are mentioned in Scripture; others have been learned about through archaeology.

All forms of the occult - Leviticus 19:31; Deut. 18:9-16

In addition to false gods, they had become engrossed in all sorts of evil occult practices, such as consulting (or becoming) mediums or spiritists, practicing divination, sorcery, and witchcraft, interpreting omens, casting spells, and consulting the dead.

Depraved sexual conduct and human sacrifices

This issue is the focus of the next section. Such practices were often done in the name of their gods, and often as an expression of devotion to them. (Some of the gods they invented were said to practice such activities. This further reinforced their own willingness to do such things.)

Warnings against doing such practices - Leviticus 19:31; 20:22-24; Deut. 18:14-22

Repeatedly, God warned Israel against learning and practicing the Canaanite's corrupt ways. Such practices would defile the people and profane the name of God. Anyone found practicing such things was to be put to death without mercy.

Rather than imitating the ways of the wicked for guidance (false gods and the occult), the Israelites were to follow the commands of the prophets, who God would raise up from among them - including the ultimate prophet (who was more than just a prophet), Jesus Christ (Acts 3:18-23). God would not communicate *directly* to the people; because when he did so previously, they were too terrified, and asked for someone to go between him and them - the prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15-16).

The Canaanite's abhorrent sexual practices and human sacrifice

Since sexuality is one aspect of what it means for male and female to be created in the "image of God" (Genesis 1:26-27) there is a relationship between one's attitude toward God and one's attitude toward sexuality. Because of this, these two practices are probably the most commonly mentioned sins in Scripture. In fact, going after false gods is often described as "spiritual adultery," and is compared to prostitution; and sexual sin is considered a sin against *God* (Genesis 39:7-9).

The nature of God, being "one and three" (unity and plurality), is reflected in the nature of sexuality and marriage - where "the two (plurality) shall be one (unity)" (Genesis 2:24). Because of this, it was only *natural* for the idolatrous Canaanites to indulge in every form of depraved sexual activity.

Depraved sexual practices - Leviticus 18:1-23

The Canaanites practiced all kinds of sexual perversions, including prostitution, many varieties of incest, homosexuality and bestiality.

Depraved sexual practices and human sacrifice, considered to be a form of "worship" - Leviticus 18:21; Leviticus 20:1-5; Deut. 23:18

Frequently these depraved sexual practices were merged with their religious practices. (And why not? Their gods did these practices, too.) In addition, they would dedicate their children as temple prostitutes, or even burn them to death, as an act of "worship."

A warning to Israel - Leviticus 18:24-30; 20:22-24; Deut. 12:29-13:3

Because of such practices, the very land became defiled; and when judgment came, the land itself "vomited" them out of it. Much of their destruction came through "acts of God," in which God used nature itself to destroy them.

Because such practices are so corrupting, Israel was warned that they were to put to death *anyone* who practiced or encouraged such activities - even among their own people. Otherwise, the land would vomit them out, as it did the Canaanites.

History demonstrates that depraved sexual practices bring judgment

In addition to what we know about the Canaanites and their fate, we can also see what happened to *Israel*, when they disobeyed God and did not completely destroy the Canaanites.

God warned Israel: Do not follow their practices; have nothing to do with them - Leviticus 18:1-5; Deut. 7:1-5
Repeatedly, God warned the Israelites that they were to *not* follow the wicked practices of the Canaanites (or even the practices of the Egyptians, where they had previously lived). They were not to associate with them, intermarry with them, or have anything to do with their gods; but were to totally destroy them, because of their corrupting influence. They were to carefully follow the laws and decrees of the Creator God, instead of going after the false gods which were the product of human imagination. Obedience to true God was to be their way of life.

The Israelites chose to disregard God's command to destroy the Canaanites - Deut. 7:22; Judges 1:28; 2:1-3
In order that the land wouldn't become overrun with wild animals, God said that he would drive out the Canaanites "little by little." But instead of obeying God's instructions (when it was time to drive them out), the Israelites chose to live side-by-side with them. Instead of destroying them, because of the contaminating effects of their "moral cancer," the Israelites chose to benefit from their services in forced labor. In doing this, they lost God's blessing and the Canaanites became a snare to Israel.

The final outcome - Judges 2:10-13; Jeremiah 19:5; 1 Kings 14:24; Hosea 4:14; 1 Kings 15:12; 22:46
Over and over again, Israel turned to the gods and practices of the Canaanites. God would judge them and they would temporarily return to him. The book of Judges is a dramatic example of this.

During the times of the kings, an occasional king would rise up and oppose the Canaanite practices. For a while, the nation would return to the true God; but later, they would go back, with even greater zeal, to the corrupt Canaanite practices. In the end, after many warnings from God, they were judged. Like the Canaanites before them, they too were driven out of the land. It is only because of promises made to their ancestors (such as Abraham) that they were not totally destroyed.

A warning

The judgment of the Canaanites is a testimony to the holiness and righteousness of God. The fact that judgment was postponed for 400 years is a testimony to his grace, mercy, and patience. The Canaanites *could* have received mercy, had they been willing to repent. But as Scripture warns repeatedly, a people who *refuses* to do what is necessary for mercy (i.e., repentance) *must* experience judgment.

The sinful human nature has a pervasive tendency to sin and to downplay sin's significance. Today, we live in a "crooked and perverse generation" (Philippians 2:15, etc.) that no longer considers these sins to be very serious. Though some may find these practices offensive and repugnant, increasing numbers (especially in the younger generation) find them to be interesting, perhaps even exciting and worth experimenting with. Yet God's Word still stands; his warnings remain true. Without repentance, the day is coming in which we, too, will be "vomited out of the land."

The holiness of God cannot be profaned forever, without consequences.