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## Review of The Destruction of the Canaanites: God, Genocide, and Biblical Interpretation

Dale Launderville OSB  
*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, [dlaunderville@csbsju.edu](mailto:dlaunderville@csbsju.edu)*

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***The Destruction of the Canaanites: God, Genocide, and Biblical Interpretation.* Charlie Trimm. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022, paper, 117 pp, ISBN: 978-0-8028-7962-21**

Dale Launderville, OSB  
Saint John's University School of Theology and Seminary  
Collegeville, MN

This short book is a primer for dealing with the ethical problem of the violent statements and actions attributed to YHWH in the Old Testament (OT). How could YHWH order the killing of the Canaanites? Trimm aims to survey the various ways in which scholars have tried to understand how a good and compassionate God could orchestrate the violent removal of children, women, and men from the land of Canaan. Through the course of seven chapters, Trimm successfully sets the stage for his readers individually and collectively to wrestle with the intellectual and personal dimensions of sacred violence.

The opening chapter of part one of the book sketches a picture of warfare in the ancient Near East (ANE). In six subsections Trimm identifies (1) why these ancient peoples typically went to war; (2) how they prepared for war; (3) what weapons they had for fighting on the open battle field and for conducting a siege; (4) how winners and losers carried on after battles; (5) how they called upon the gods to assist them in battle; and (6) how they shaped their rhetoric to glorify their kings and their protector deities as victorious warriors both in texts and on monuments.

The concluding two chapters of part one provide a history and definition of genocide and a description of who the peoples might be who were included under the umbrella of the label "Canaanites." Trimm identifies two general categories of genocide: colonial and internal. Colonial genocide refers to the forcible removal of an indigenous people from a land in order to resettle that territory (e.g., European settlers vs. Native Americans). Internal genocide refers to the elimination of a people within a land by expulsion or killing (e.g., Turks vs. Armenians). The Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin coined the word "genocide" by combining the Greek *genos*, "people", with the Latin *caedo*, "cut, kill." He then went on to shape the document forged by the "UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide" in 1948 (<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide-convention.shtml>). Trimm notes that stricter definitions of genocide used in legal contexts require that mass killings occurred, whereas looser definitions used by scholars to compare and contrast events might include destruction of libraries and other cultural identifiers of a people. Trimm notes that atrocities involving the mass killings of civilians are rarely attested in ancient Near Eastern records (p. 31). But there are notable instances of cultural genocide such as the Assyrian policy of trying to convert the identities of conquered peoples into "Assyrians" so as to minimize their potential for rebellion against Assyrian rule.

The "Canaanites" were the peoples who lived between the Mediterranean and the Jordan rift with a northern border including most of what is now known as Lebanon and a southern border at the beginning of the Sinai desert. Trimm helpfully creates a table of Old Testament texts addressing the expulsion of the Canaanites from the land that YHWH promised to the patriarchs: Exod 23:23-30; Lev 18:24-30; Num 33:50-56; Deut 6:18-19; 7:1-5. These texts use different terms for describing the expulsion of the Canaanites from the land and the destruction of their cultural

monuments and religious items. The book of Joshua is a frequent point of reference since it describes the conquest of Canaan as the killing and destruction of the Canaanites. YHWH's commanding the mass killing of the Canaanites at Jericho (Josh 6:17, 21) and other cities (Josh 8:26; 10:28-40) exemplifies the moral problem that requires reflection and interpretation.

How do deal with this moral problem is the subject of Part Two of Trimm's book. To facilitate the comparison and contrast of the various scholarly proposals for wrestling with this moral problem, T. offers the following four categories to structure these proposals for interpreting the OT's image of God: (1) "God is good and compassionate" versus "God is not good"; (2) the OT is "a faithful record of God's dealing with humanity and favorably portrays YHWH's actions" versus the OT is "not a faithful record"; (3) the OT "describes events that are similar to genocide" versus the OT "does not describe anything like a genocide"; (4) "mass killings are always evil" versus "the mass killing of the Canaanites in the Old Testament was permitted for that one point in history" (pp. 49-50).

In category one, those who reject the God of the OT on the basis of the violent acts ascribed to YHWH include Celsus, Richard Dawkins, and Hector Avalos. The latter proposes that religion consists primarily of unverifiable claims and thus the most straightforward way to eliminate religion's promotion of violence is to eliminate religion. However, to restrict knowable reality to what is verifiable is to reduce reality to what is logical and controllable. In effect, these scholars reject monotheism (p. 52).

In category two, scholars who wish to maintain the authority of the OT as a whole propose that the violent texts be deconstructed or even excised. Rüdiger Schmitt denies the historicity of *herem* texts (i.e., putting objectionable peoples under the ban by removing them from everyday interactions and transferring them irreversibly into the sacred sphere by killing them) such as Deuteronomy 7 and Joshua 6 and categorizes them as metaphorical (p. 54). Regina Schwartz regards even metaphorical accounts of violent acts by God as morally unacceptable (p. 55). John J. Collins counsels that some violent OT texts should be ignored simply because we know intuitively that such violent acts are wrong (p. 56). Walter Brueggemann claims that the violent texts are products of ANE culture and do not reflect "pure divine revelation" (p. 57). Eric Seibert argues that any violent OT text that does not convey an image of God compatible with the non-violent Jesus of the New Testament (NT) should be rejected. This Christological way of reading OT texts may be seen as simplistically picturing the OT God as angry, judicial, and harsh in contrast to the NT God as loving, mild, and good (pp. 58-60).

In category three, scholars try to downplay the violence in the OT texts that would otherwise be seen as reporting divinely-ordered genocide. Eleonore Stumpf contends that divine violence needs to be seen in context; she notes, for example, that the pain induced by hand surgery could be seen as "torture" outside of a hospital context (p. 66). John Cassian spiritualized the seven nations to be exterminated in Deut 7:1-5 as the seven deadly sins (p. 66). R.W.L. Moberly interprets the *herem* command in Deuteronomy 7 as a metaphor for religious fidelity (p. 67); such fidelity is to be realized by the Israelites' not intermarrying with the Canaanites and by the Israelites' destroying Canaanite religious items. Nathan Macdonald claims that the killing of Canaanites was not in the OT authors' minds in the *herem* texts. But Trimm criticizes Macdonald for not dealing with the ethical problem in 1 Sam 15:15, 22-23 that ostensibly has YHWH ordering Saul to exterminate

the Amalekites. When Saul spares the king of the Amalekites, Samuel condemns Saul for his disobedience of the divine command (p. 69). K. Lawson Younger claims that war texts in Joshua used hyperbole to accent the power of the king under the protection of YHWH. But Trimm counters that the ethical question remains unanswered by such a literary-rhetorical approach: was there a mass killing of the Canaanites as a result of a divine order or not? Richard Hess tries to see the texts in Joshua on divinely ordered violence as referring merely to isolated military battles that did not involve civilians (e.g., Joshua 6); Trimm accepts some of the examples Hess brings forward, but on the whole sees Hess's approach as hypothetical and fragmentary (pp. 73-74).

In category four, scholars interpret the divine command to exterminate the Canaanites as a one-time action that was justified because of the extreme wickedness of the Canaanites (Gen 15:16; Lev 18:25; Deut 9:4-5; 2 Chr 28:3; Wisdom of Solomon 12). The holy land could not tolerate Canaanite worship (Gary Anderson, p. 82). Some will argue that the Canaanites were free to stay in the land as long as they converted to Yahwism (e.g., Hawk, pp. 81-82). Rahab in Joshua 2 stands out as such a convert. Other arguments put forward to soften the violence of divine judgment of the Canaanites is that God treated the Israelites similarly, or that God was urging the Canaanites to begin the process of reforming their lives, or that the flood story and other scenes of the final judgment in the Bible form parallels to the conquest accounts and so encourage readers to reform their lives because they realize that they will be held accountable.

Trimm gives short shrift to the issue of how divine violence factors in the mystery of divine sovereignty in the initial and ongoing creation of the world (pp. 77-78). Trimm claims that this approach may do justice to the significance of divinely-ordered violence for the reader of the OT but it tends to avoid the ethical problem of the actual killing of Canaanites as a result of a divine decree. In my view, Trimm does not provide an adequate definition of "divine revelation." In his interpretation of OT texts, he seems to assume that such divine communication will actually or potentially take place within the sense perception and logical reasoning of human observers. The occurrence of divine signs that point beyond the visible to the invisible realm may be recognized within the discussion of OT texts but do not seem to be granted the same weight as factual evidence. Thus, the discernment of divine presence and activity is reduced to searching for facts rather than engaging the mystery of a personal divine presence. By contrast, the context of mystery allows the human author of the biblical text to be inspired by the divine author and yet be limited by the particular space and time in which he lives. Understanding inspiration and revelation within the context of mystery permits a reader to judge for errors in matters of faith and morals within texts from the first millennium BCE without jettisoning the entire text. For example, Deut 7:1-5 states that YHWH will expel the seven nations that are living in the land by putting them under the ban. To what extent is this dark view of God manufactured by the human author to justify the take-over of the land? A historical-critical reading of a text like Deut 7:1-5 gives more room for the claim that the human author has read this dark view of God into the text. Alternatively, to what extent is this dark view of God attempting to have the reader puzzle over how God is present in events perceived as evil by the reader? How might such a dark view of God move a reader to wrestle in a Job-like manner over the meaning of innocent suffering? It seems that Trimm sees revelation primarily as divine communication in a public, verifiable form and not in a symbolic, "sacramental" form that requires the reader to have faith in order to perceive the divine presence in the event. The verification criterion allows one to accept or reject the reality of God on the basis of cognitive logic rather than engagement of both the mind and the heart of the reader. Trimm

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takes an important step in the direction of this more symbolic understanding of revelation by his overall aim of not trying to solve the problem of God and violence merely by logical reasoning. Instead, Trimm wishes that his text will urge readers to engage in ongoing dialogue with the texts and with one another over the important ethical question of whether God authorizes violence against humans.

This book is clearly written and well organized. The generally educated reader and scholar alike will profit greatly from reading it.