Most people think that the Old Testament God is very different from the New Testament God, and that He willingly calls Israel to commit genocide against the Canaanites. But the Bible claims that God is always the same loving, compassionate God. So what about the Canaanites? The context of Deuteronomy 7, and other relevant passages, reveal that this was no genocide at all, and God plays fair with all peoples at all times, giving them equal chances for repentance and reformation.

God had given the Canaanites more than four hundred years of probation, during which He sent prophets and warnings. Speaking with Abraham, God predicted that the Canaanites would eventually become so evil that He would have to give their land to someone else (Abraham’s descendants), but their cup of iniquity was not yet full (Gen. 15:16). Leaders like Melchizedek were true followers of God, and Balaam was at least initially a true prophet of God, famous beyond Israel and Moab (it was perhaps due to his prophecies that the wise men found baby Jesus). While Genesis is focused on Israel, hints make clear that God was always trying to reach all people, even seeking to bless the world through Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3).

God gives Israel about four hundred years of probation after they take possession of the land before they are also kicked out due to their cup of iniquity being full. God then gives the land to Babylon (He earlier gave Assyria the northern kingdom). God does not play favorites. In fact, the prophets point out that Israel is actually acting worse than Canaan right before the exile (cf. Ezek. 16)!
Write out Deuteronomy 7:1–11 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you are pressed for time, write out Deuteronomy 7:7–11. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
**DRIVEN OUT, NOT WIPED OUT**

Deuteronomy 7 may initially seem harsh, but it is crucial to examine the passage carefully. For instance, if the words “destroy utterly” (v. 2) actually mean to “wipe out” or “kill completely,” why would it be necessary to say that Israel should not intermarry with the Canaanites (v. 3)? That implies that there were people to marry still! In addition, as Moses continues, he makes clear that the destruction the people were to effect was in reference to the altars and high places, not the people themselves (v. 5). God did not want anyone to die, if at all possible, but He wanted people to return to true worship of Him. If the Baal and Asherah cults were still around, that would mean that people would be sacrificing their children and having sex with the temple priestesses. These actions were an abomination to God but would have been very attractive to Israel, as the Canaanites believed these rites were supposed to bring fertility to the land.

Driving out is not equal to wiping out. Deuteronomy is clear that Israel inherited cities that they did not build, houses and farms that they did not build or plant, wells they did not dig (Deut. 6), and so on. If this had been a massive conquest, all the cities would have been destroyed. As it is, there is archaeological evidence for the destruction of only three cities, which are the ones the Bible tells us were burned: Jericho, Ai, and Hazor. In all other cities, there is basically no evidence of change in occupation, so much so that many scholars do not believe the conquest happened at all. However, when we look at the biblical evidence, Joshua tells us that the Canaanites were afraid and fled, which would leave cities open to habitation by Israel, and they would not have to build or conquer much of anything. Some of the Canaanites also were willing to make peace or treaties with Israel (Gibeonites), and many others became Israelites themselves, converting to the worship of Yahweh (Rahab and Uriah among others).

In Exodus 23, God tells the people that it is His plan to do any work of killing, and that He will drive out the Canaanites ahead of Israel. Indeed, when Israel had faith, God did everything for them, because He knows hearts and when people are totally given over to evil. We see this especially in, for example, the Exodus event, the story of Jericho, God’s triumph through Gideon, 2 Chronicles 20, and the decimation of Sennacherib’s army. And God does not give land only to Israel. He recues other nations as well and gives them land, seen, for example, with Edom (Obadiah), and in Amos 9:7. Thus, when land is taken away, and people are destroyed, God treats everyone equally. He would have driven Israel into exile with minimal loss of life as well, but they were not willing to listen to Jeremiah and surrender.
As archaeologists have learned more about the Canaanites and their religion, the reasons for their loss of the land become more and more apparent. Like Israel, the longer they existed to rebel against and defy God, the more vile and abhorrent their sins. The sacrifice of children and other humans was a highpoint of the Canaanite religion. And unfortunately, this carried over into Israel as well (Judg. 11; 2 Kings 21), as they did not destroy the Canaanite religion the way God asked them to do (Judg. 1-2). In addition, worship at the temples involved having sex and even orgies with the temple priestesses. This also carried over into Israel (see Num. 25 and the cult prostitutes mentioned often by the prophets). It was not just about worshipping other gods; the punishment against the Canaanites was due to their evil and wicked practices. And yet, God accepted any individuals who repented, though the nations as a whole were destroyed.

Although God’s original plan was to do any killing Himself, sometimes Israel had to defend themselves against attack, carry out capital punishment, or took things into their own hands, and God had to work with their lack of trust in His delivering power. But in all these wars and battles, even the ones that were not ideal, God made clear that this was not normal war. Israel was not supposed to have a standing army, but to rely on God for rescue. They were also not to take any of the plunder, but to dedicate it to God, seen clearly by the punishment against Achan, who kept some for himself. These wars were not really about Israel, but more about the punishment of the Canaanites for their sins, just as the exile was for Israel four hundred years later.

One of the most difficult parts to understand of this transition of power from Canaan to Israel is the seeming indifference toward women and children who were at least somewhat innocent, but were to be destroyed (see Josh. 6). However, it is significant to note that the three cities that were utterly destroyed (Jericho, Ai, and Hazor) were actually military forts at that time, and probably had few if any women and children living there. Rahab was an innkeeper who lived with her family and was saved with them, and it was common for the innkeepers to live in between the walls of the military forts, to serve travelers coming through. So, most of the people who died in these cities would have been soldiers, not civilians. In addition, the rest of the Bible mentions many of the Hittites, Amalekites, and other non-Israelites who were still alive, hinting that any destruction language was probably hyperbolic and symbolic (other nations at that time used the same language), not intended to be indicative of genocide (even at the end of the conquest, in Josh. 23, Joshua himself notes that Canaanites still live there!).

Read more at www.inversebible.org/deut05-4
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Joshua 2:8–13
Deuteronomy 20:1–20
1 Kings 11:1–13
Exodus 23:20–33
Judges 2:1–12
Amos 9:7–12
Isaiah 13:19–22, 34:8–17

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Deuteronomy 7?
GOD KNOWS HEARTS

The grace of God is clear even here in these most difficult passages. God does mighty wonders to rescue His people, and He wants as many as possible in heaven. God did everything He could to bring the Canaanites to a knowledge of Him. However, because of their depths of evil, God’s love as well as His justice had to bring consequences. But even in those consequences and extreme measures, God was seeking their redemption as well, just like the plagues on Egypt led many Egyptians to choose to follow God and leave with the Israelites, and just like the exile for Israel led them to return to God as well. God has mercy for thousands of generations (Exod. 34:7), and brings even nations like Assyria to repentance (Jon. 3–4). Many of the prophets who we think of as preaching only to Israel also had messages of warning for other nations that came after the Canaanites, and it appears that at least some of those people turned to God as a result as well.

The Canaanites knew about Yahweh and what He had done for Israel, that He was the true God and all powerful. In fact, Rahab’s statement of faith and realization that God was giving the land to Israel (Josh. 2) actually was one of the reasons that Israel had courage to go forward into the land. And then Rahab married a prince in Israel and became the progenitor of David, through Boaz (Matt. 1:5)! God does not look at ethnicity but at faith in Him, and at least some Canaanites turned in faith to God and became faithful followers even though their nations were punished.

Yahweh knows the hearts of people, and this is part of His love as well. The most powerful part of this story is that the consequences for the Canaanites are connected to the covenant curses, just as they were for Israel four hundred years later. But the covenant curses are optional, and no one has to experience them as a final death sentence for eternity. The Messiah takes the covenant curses on Himself! When we choose to accept God’s grace for us, He pays the penalty that we deserve. The punishments that come on the suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 are straight from the covenant curses, but the innocent Messiah takes them on Himself so that we can be saved and live with Him eternally. This promise is for all, Canaanite or Israelite, Christian or pagan. Amen and amen!
THE CONQUEST OF BASHAN

“These nations on the borders of Canaan would have been spared, had they not stood, in defiance of God’s word, to oppose the progress of Israel. The Lord had shown Himself to be long-suffering, of great kindness and tender pity, even to these heathen peoples. When Abraham was shown in vision that his seed, the children of Israel, should be strangers in a strange land four hundred years, the Lord gave him the promise, ‘In the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.’ Genesis 15:16. Although the Amorites were idolaters, whose life was justly forfeited by their great wickedness, God spared them four hundred years to give them unmistakable evidence that He was the only true God, the Maker of heaven and earth. All His wonders in bringing Israel from Egypt were known to them. Sufficient evidence was given; they might have known the truth, had they been willing to turn from their idolatry and licentiousness. But they rejected the light and clung to their idols.

“When the Lord brought His people a second time to the borders of Canaan, additional evidence of His power was granted to those heathen nations. They saw that God was with Israel in the victory gained over King Arad and the Canaanites, and in the miracle wrought to save those who were perishing from the sting of the serpents. Although the Israelites had been refused a passage through the land of Edom, thus being compelled to take the long and difficult route by the Red Sea, yet in all their journeyings and encampments, past the land of Edom, of Moab and Ammon, they had shown no hostility, and had done no injury to the people or their possessions. On reaching the border of the Amorites, Israel had asked permission only to travel directly through the country, promising to observe the same rules that had governed their intercourse with other nations. When the Amorite king refused this courteous solicitation, and defiantly gathered his hosts for battle, their cup of iniquity was full, and God would now exercise His power for their overthrow.” (White, Patriarchs and Prophets, 434, 435.)

The Fall of Jericho

“The inhabitants of Canaan had been granted ample opportunity for repentance. Forty years before, the opening of the Red Sea and the judgments upon Egypt had testified to the supreme power of the God of Israel. And now the overthrow of the kings of Midian, of Gilead and Bashan, had further shown that Jehovah was above all gods. The holiness of His character and His abhorrence of impurity had been evinced in the judgments visited upon Israel for their participation in the abominable rites of Baalpeor. All these events were known to the inhabitants of Jericho, and there were many who shared Rahab’s conviction, though they refused to obey it, that Jehovah, the God of Israel, ‘is God in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath.’ Like the men before the Flood, the Canaanites lived only to blaspheme Heaven and defile the earth. And both love and justice demanded the prompt execution of these rebels against God and foes to man.” (White, 492.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How did you see God’s grace and fairness this week in the Canaanite discussion?

How do you now see God’s consistent actions more clearly throughout the whole Bible?

How does the punishment in Deuteronomy 7 compare to the second-death final destruction in Revelation?

How can we take the principles of justice against the wicked and apply them in our non-theocratic context?

How have you seen God give probation in your own life?

How do we remember what God has done for us in the past so that we can bring it to mind in new and challenging situations?

Will you accept Jesus, the Bearer of our covenant curses, again or anew today?