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ARTICLE

When the Canaanite Conquest Met the Enlightenment: How Christian Apologists of the English Enlightenment Harmonized the Biblical Canaanite Conquest with the Moral Values of the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

This article examines British and American Christian apologists' reinterpretation of the biblical account of the Canaanite conquest in response to concerns about natural rights and ethical behavior that emerged from the English Enlightenment. Because of Enlightenment-era assumptions about universal rights, a new debate emerged in Britain and America in the eighteenth century about whether the divine order for the biblical Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites was morally right. The article argues that intellectually minded Christians' appropriation of Enlightenment values to reframe their interpretation of the biblical narrative (often in response to skeptical attacks from writers classified as deists) demonstrates that in the English-speaking world, Enlightenment rationalism and Christian orthodoxy frequently reinforced each other and were not opposing forces. Though many orthodox Christians repudiated traditional Calvinist interpretations of the biblical Canaanite conquest, they defended the authority of the biblical narrative by drawing on Enlightenment-era assumptions about natural rights to provide justifications for what some skeptics considered morally objectionable divine orders in the Bible. By doing so, they set the framework for the continued synthesis of natural rights and rationality with a biblically centered Protestantism in the early nineteenth-century English-speaking world and especially in the United States.

Keywords: Christian Apologetics; History of biblical studies; Deism; Religion in the Englightenment

When the late eighteenth-century patriot and skeptic Thomas Paine cast his critical eye across the Bible, he found little that met his approval, but he was especially appalled by the Old Testament book of Joshua and the stories that it told of the Israelites' conquest of the promised land. "As to the character of the book, it is horrid," he wrote. "It is a military history of rapine and murder; as savage and brutal as those recorded of his predecessor in villainy and hypocrisy, Moses; and the blasphemy consists, as in the former books, in ascribing those deeds to the orders of the Almighty."[1]

[1]Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (London, 1796), 89. Throughout this article, I use the term "Old Testament" instead of "Hebrew Bible" because this is the term that eighteenth-century English and American writers used.

Paine's critique, which summarized a central message of at least six decades of eighteenth-century skeptical attacks on Christian orthodoxy, presented a challenge that Protestant ministers in Britain and America who believed in the authority of the Bible could not ignore. Like Paine, many of them accepted the Enlightenment-era views of natural rights that had led Paine and other deists and skeptics to question the justice of a God who would order the annihilation of a civilian population. But unlike the skeptics, orthodox Christians believed that the actions of the Hebrew God, as recorded in the biblical book of Joshua, could be harmonized with Enlightenment views of justice and reason. God's command to annihilate the people living in the promised land was "calculated for a beneficial purpose, even for the general advantage of mankind," the British mathematician and Christian apologist Olinthus Gregory wrote. It was "neither inconsistent with the justice of God, nor with the usual proceedings of divine providence."[2]

While the skeptical critique of the ethics of the biblical God may be well-known to anyone who has read Paine or any of the other eighteenth-century deists who cited the biblical account of the killing of the Canaanites as evidence for their arguments against Christian orthodoxy, the story of how Christian apologists such as Gregory countered this argument by revising their own interpretation of the Bible has received little scholarly attention. And yet this story is equally important. By understanding the way that Christian apologists from a variety of Protestant traditions in both Britain and America reframed the Canaanite story in response to the Enlightenment, we can arrive at a more informed view of the relationship between Enlightenment rationalism and Christian faith, along with a better perspective on the question of why the Enlightenment led not to a loss of Christian influence in American educational institutions but a perpetuation of it. Recent popular history has often portrayed Enlightenment rationalism and Christian faith as opponents, but in reality—as some of the best scholarship on the subject has suggested—the most zealous proponents of Enlightenment ideas about scientific empiricism and natural rights were often rationalist Christians who thought that new scientific discoveries were so compatible with Protestant Christianity that they could even serve as evidence of the truth of biblical tenets.[3] This was especially true in Britain and in English-speaking America, where

[2]Olinthus Gregory, *Letters on the Evidences, Doctrines, and Duties of the Christian Religion* (London: Baldwin and Craddock, 1836), 221.

[3]Histories of the Enlightenment that portray the rationalism of the eighteenth century as ultimately opposing or undermining traditional Christian assumptions include: Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of a Secular Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011); Matthew Stewart, *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006); Margaret C. Jacob, *The Secular Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019); and Jonathan Israel's scholarship, especially *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009); and *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Studies that take a contrasting view by emphasizing the religious roots of the scientific revolution and the compatibility between rationalist approaches and Christian orthodoxy for many European (especially British) intellectuals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries include: John Henry, "Religion and the Scientific Revolution," in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. Peter Harrison (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 39–58; Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin, *Essays on the Context, Nature, and Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1990). Studies that attempt to find a *via media* between these views by highlighting the religious origins of Enlightenment thought while

religion and rationalism often went hand-in-hand in the eighteenth century, not only among liberal Anglicans and Unitarians but even among many theologically conservative Calvinists.[4] Yet, while recent scholarship that positions the Enlightenment as a product of Christian thinking is persuasive, it is also incomplete, because it focuses mainly on the way that Christians harmonized Enlightenment *science* with Christian orthodoxy. This article uses the eighteenth-century Christian reinterpretation of the biblical story of the killing of the Canaanites to examine how educated Christians in Britain and America harmonized their religious views with another new development in Enlightenment-era intellectual culture: Lockean-inspired ideas about natural rights and universal standards of justice.[5] The issue of divine justice was an enormous concern for Thomas Paine and most other American and British deists of his generation. This article presents an analysis of the eighteenth-century British and American reinterpretation of the biblical narrative of the Canaanite conquest to demonstrate that these same questions of natural rights and divine justice were just as pressing concerns for educated English-speaking Christians of the Enlightenment era who, unlike Paine, chose to remain confessing adherents of Anglican, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and other

also noting the ways that the new eighteenth-century view of reason as a primary authority undermined traditional Christian orthodoxies or transformed them include: Frederick C. Beiser, *The Sovereignty of Reason: The Defense of Rationality in the Early English Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[4]For natural theology and rationalism among English Calvinists (and English Christians more generally) at the end of the seventeenth century, see Dewey D. Wallace Jr., *Shapers of English Calvinism, 1660–1714: Variety, Persistence, and Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27–34. Commenting on the relationship between science and religious faith in late seventeenth-century England, Wallace states: "There is relatively little evidence that the new science was experienced generally as a challenge to religion in Restoration England. For the scientific divines, Dissenter or Church of England, natural philosophy, by showing the order and regularity of the universe, provided evidence for the belief that God had designed an orderly and purposeful world": Wallace, *Shapers of English Calvinism*, 34.

[5]In this article, I generally treat England and North America (especially New England and the mid-Atlantic colonies) as a single—though not undifferentiated—religious world, as David N. Hempton and Hugh McLeod do in their co-edited volume *Secularization and Religious Innovation in the North Atlantic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Hempton and McLeod's work focuses mainly on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but for the eighteenth century, this transatlantic approach is even more applicable, because the Christian apologetic books published in England circulated widely in America; indeed, I cannot find much evidence of a substantive difference in approach to Christian apologetics between American and British writers for most of the eighteenth century. Differences between British and American approaches to Christian apologetics became somewhat more evident after the American Revolution and, especially in the 1790s, when American Christian apologists linked their attacks on Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* to a defense of the American republic—a move that British Christian opponents of Paine did not do, for obvious reasons. In the early nineteenth century, American colleges had a closer relationship with both evangelicalism and Christian apologetics than British universities did, and at that point, the differences between British and American Christian apologetic enterprises became more pronounced. For that reason, the section of this article that covers the early nineteenth century focuses mainly on the United States, rather than Britain, since during that period it was in American colleges that the connection between the ideas of the English Enlightenment and a defense of the authority of the Bible was especially evident. But for much of the eighteenth century, the same works of English Enlightenment philosophy, deism, and Christian apologetics circulated equally in both Britain and America and were subject to extensive intellectual debate in both regions of the English-speaking world. It therefore makes sense to study these intellectual developments as a transatlantic phenomenon.

orthodox Protestant churches and who remained committed to the preservation of biblical authority. If we understand how Christians who accepted the new Enlightenment-era standards of human rights harmonized those views with their religion by reinterpreting the Bible, we will better understand why the continued influence of Protestant Christianity in America and Britain—and especially in American colleges during the early nineteenth century—constituted not a rejection of Enlightenment rationalism but an acceptance of it.

But why choose the reinterpretation of the biblical account of the killing of the Canaanites as a case study of this phenomenon? Though there are other biblical stories that may raise equally difficult questions about the ethics of divine behavior for some readers, perhaps no other story in the Bible received as much attention in the eighteenth-century debate between skeptics and Christians over divine justice. As the Boston-based evangelical Congregationalist magazine *Panoplist* conceded in 1808, it was "one of the principal" parts of the Old Testament "which serious minds have thought difficult to be reconciled to the benevolence of the divine government."[6] The late eighteenth-century British Christian apologist Jacob Bryant went even further and declared that "there is no part of the sacred writings, which has been esteemed so exceptionable [i.e., objectionable], as the account given of the slaughter of the seven nations in Canaan. The impropriety of the fact has been urged by many, who were no friends to Revelation, and who have announced it to have been a most unjust and cruel proceeding; and unworthy both of God, and man."[7]

The story of the Canaanite conquest, which is prefigured in Genesis and Deuteronomy, is the entire focus of the book of Joshua, where it is recounted in extensive detail, and it is then celebrated in a few of the Psalms. According to the biblical narrative, God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses, brought them to the edge of the promised land of Canaan, and then began annihilating the Canaanites through supernatural intervention while also ordering the people of Israel to "smite them, and utterly destroy them" in battle (Deuteronomy 7:2). Though the biblical narrative also suggests that the destruction was less than complete, total annihilation was the divine mandate, and this troubled some British and American readers in the eighteenth century.

Before the Enlightenment and the development of a new ideology of universal human rights, such a defense had not been necessary for most English Christians. Among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Calvinists who believed in a sovereign God and the total depravity of humans, the idea that God could order the Israelites to completely annihilate a group of wicked Canaanites did not seem especially troubling. But many eighteenth-century Britons and Americans who rejected the divine right of kings and the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity wanted God to behave more like a constitutional monarch who respected human rights—which is why they found the story of the divine order to kill the Canaanites troubling and why they devoted so much commentary to it.

Both because of the extensive attention that the Bible gives to this story and because of its seeming incongruity with emerging eighteenth-century views of human rights and the international laws of war, both Enlightenment-era English skeptics and more orthodox Christians spilled a large amount of ink discussing it, and it became a stand-in for

[6]"The Conquest of Canaan Vindicated," *Panoplist*, 1 May 1808, 543.

[7]Jacob Bryant, *A Treatise upon the Authenticity of the Scriptures, and the Truth of the Christian Religion* (London: T. Cadell and P. Elmsly, 1792), 241.

other pressing questions about God's justice in dealing with sinners, including questions about the justice of eternal punishment in hell. As the London Calvinist Baptist minister John Martin noted in a two-hundred-page book that he devoted to defending the "equity of the divine conduct" surrounding the "conquest of Canaan," those who were troubled by the divine command to exterminate the Canaanites would find the doctrine of hell equally objectionable—which was why Protestant Christian ministers who believed in the existence of hell and the authority of the Bible felt compelled to provide a reasoned defense of the justice of the Canaanite conquest.[8] At stake, they believed, was nothing less than the truth of the Christian Bible, the character of the Christian God, and the harmony of Christianity with now widely accepted Enlightenment ideas of reason and justice.

I. English Christian Interpretations of the Canaanite Conquest before the Enlightenment

The English debate between Christians and skeptics over the justice of the Canaanite conquest was a product of the Enlightenment; before the eighteenth century, this debate did not exist. The first English writer to cite the Canaanite slaughter and other biblical stories of military conquest as proof that the Bible's ethics did not accord with reason was probably Matthew Tindal, whose deistic tome, *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (1730), set the standard for skeptical arguments about the Canaanite conquest for the rest of the eighteenth century. Before Tindal, skeptics had not expressed much concern about the moral behavior of the God of the Bible. This was especially the case among seventeenth-century "atheists" (a broad term that orthodox Christians employed for many different types of religious skeptics, including not only those who denied the existence of God but also some who might have accepted the idea of a higher power, yet rejected the principle of an immaterial soul). Since atheism and blasphemy were capital offenses, most English skeptics before the 1670s left behind few written accounts of the exact contours of their beliefs, so figuring out exactly what parts of the Christian religion they considered most objectionable can be challenging. Nevertheless, historians can piece together some of the major beliefs of the skeptics of the day from the more than two dozen anti-atheist tracts that have survived from the seventeenth century. These tracts offer rebuttals to many skeptical arguments that were presumably circulating in England during the Tudor and Stuart eras, but unlike the Christian apologetic works of the 1690s and beyond, they contain no discussion of debates about the moral character of biblical stories—an omission that strongly suggests that concerns about God's actions toward the Canaanites were largely absent from skeptical arguments for most of the seventeenth century. Instead, atheists and other skeptics of the time focused on demonstrating the lack of God's intervention in the world but rarely focused on the specific claims of Christianity; not until the late seventeenth century did they begin critiquing the Bible itself. And even when they did start to critique the Bible, they did not immediately settle on the conquest of the Canaanites as an issue of concern; questions about original sin and the Mosaic authorship of the

[8]John Martin, *The Conquest of Canaan: In Which the Natural and Moral State of its Inhabitants, the Character of their Conquerors, with the Manner of Design of their Conquest, are Considered* [. . .] (London, 1777), 42.

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Pentateuch (a concern that they could have picked up from the Dutch Jewish rationalist Benedict Spinoza) seemed more urgent.[9]

If skeptics of the seventeenth century did not raise questions about the Canaanite conquest, Protestant Christian ministers in both Britain and America did not seem troubled by it either. Throughout the seventeenth century, English ministers who mentioned the Israelite wars against the Canaanites in their sermons did not emphasize the sufferings of the Canaanite people themselves but rather the judgments that the Israelites experienced when they failed to fully carry out God's command to completely destroy the Canaanites. The slaughter of the Canaanites was not ethically problematic to them; instead, what was disturbing was the Israelites' failure to complete this conquest—a failure that could serve as a warning to backsliders who were in danger of "infidelity," the cardinal sin for many seventeenth-century Puritan Christians, especially in New England.[10]

There were probably a variety of reasons why seventeenth-century English Calvinists, especially, did not consider the destruction of the Canaanites ethically troubling, but among the most important factors was their view of God and humanity, a view that came directly from John Calvin. English divines who were Calvinists believed, along with Calvin, that God's actions were always right, because they stemmed from God's perfect moral character. They also echoed Calvin in believing that humans were too corrupted by sin to serve as competent judges of what was right and wrong when it came to God's decrees. Thus, although Calvin believed that God always acted in accordance with God's own moral character, sinful humans might not be able to accurately perceive God's true character and might therefore wrongly charge God with injustice.

This conviction informed Calvin's analysis of the slaughter of the Canaanites. In his commentary on Joshua, he wrote: "The indiscriminate and promiscuous slaughter, making no distinction of age or sex, but including alike women and children, the aged and decrepit, might seem an inhuman massacre, had it not been executed by the command of God. But as he, in whose hands are life and death, had justly doomed those nations to destruction, this puts an end to all discussion." In other words, Calvin was convinced that if God ordered something, it must have been ethically right, no matter how it might appear to humans. But he also added several other justifications for the action. First, he said God had given a warning about the Canaanites' iniquity four hundred years before Joshua's conquest of the land. "Who will now presume to complain of excessive rigor, after God had so long delayed to execute judgment?" Calvin asked. And then Calvin raised what to a later generation would be one of the most ethically troubling aspects of the conquest: the slaughter of children. The fact that Calvin felt the need to deal with this issue—albeit only in passing—suggests that even in his day

[9]See, for instance, Henry Smith, *God's Arrow against Atheists* (London, 1617) for an example of Christian apologists' responses to atheists' arguments at the beginning of the seventeenth century. For a historical survey of these arguments, see Kenneth Sheppard, *Anti-Atheism in Early Modern England 1580–1720: The Atheist Answered and His Error Confuted* (Boston: Brill, 2015). The most well-developed critique of the Bible published in England in the seventeenth century was probably Charles Blount's *Oracles of Reason* (London, 1693). Despite its extensive critique of the first few books of the Old Testament, it did not mention any potential moral objections to the Canaanite conquest.

[10]See, for instance, Henry Wilkinson, "The Dark Vision," in *Three Decades of Sermons Lately Preached to the University in Oxford* (Oxford: T. Robinson, 1660), 129–130. For discussions of the definition of Puritanism and its relationship to the theology of John Calvin, see John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–7.

some found the issue unsettling, though it had not yet become part of a widespread skeptical critique of the Christian faith. But Calvin believed that the doctrine of original sin offered a ready answer to such objections. He wrote:

> If any one object that children, at least, were still free from fault, it is easy to answer, that they perished justly, as the race was accursed and reprobated. Here then it ought always to be remembered, that it would have been barbarous and atrocious cruelty had the Israelites gratified their own lust and rage, in slaughtering mothers and their children, but that they are justly praised for their active piety and holy zeal, in executing the command of God, who was pleased in this way to purge the land of Canaan of the foul and loathsome defilements by which it had long been polluted.[11]

For Calvin, that ended the matter.

Following Calvin's lead, seventeenth-century Puritan ministers in Massachusetts sometimes described the execution of the Canaanites in detailed, graphic terms, only to then conclude that the punishment was just. "The Providence of God does wonderfully suit his Judgements according to what the sins of men have been," Increase Mather, a prominent Boston pastor, declared in 1684 when discussing the conquest of the Canaanites. "God does sometimes retaliate upon men, the very same evils which they have done, or designed to doe against others. So that there is a suffering in the same kind; the sinner is paid off in his own Coyn."[12] Mather's son, Cotton Mather, likewise cited the example of the destruction of the Canaanites as a warning to his own audience to repent; he did not question the justice of God's actions in the biblical story, nor did he think that God's dealings with humanity had changed since the time of the Israelite conquest.[13] Indeed, Massachusetts Puritans singing from the Bay Psalter—one of the most popular printed books in seventeenth-century New England, second only to the Bible—regularly celebrated the conquest of the Canaanites in song:

> First-born of Egypt smite did he,
> Of mankind and of beast also,
> . . .
> Who smote great nations, slew great kings.
> Slew Sihon king of th' Amorites,
> Og also one of Bashan's kings,
> All kingdoms of the Canaanites.
> And gave their land an heritage
> His people Israel's lot to fall.[14]

[11]John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Joshua*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854), 97.

[12]Increase Mather, *The Doctrine of Divine Providence Opened and applied: Also Sundry Sermons on Several Other Subjects* (Boston: Richard Pierce, 1684), 62.

[13]Cotton Mather, *The Short History of New England: A Recapitulation of Wonderful Passages Which have Occurr'd* [. . .] (Boston: B. Green, 1694), 31.

[14]*Bay Psalm Book*, 8th ed. (Boston: John Allen, 1695), 309.

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In England, some pastors encouraged their audience to identify with the conquering Israelites in the text, as the nonconformist Presbyterian minister Matthew Henry did when he enjoined a congregation at Chester to "let us cordially concur with the other tribes of our English Israel, in driving the Canaanites out of our land. . . . Vice, and profaneness, and debauchery, are the enemies I mean, which war against both our civil and sacred interests. . . . And is any thing more the interest of the nation, than to endeavour the rooting out of these Canaanites, that if possible they might not be among us?"[15] Henry's encouragement to his audience to exterminate their own allegorized "Canaanites" suggests that he, like the Puritan ministers of New England, saw the Christian church as a new Israel to which all Old Testament commands, including the command to slaughter the Canaanites, still applied—albeit in strictly spiritualized form. And if he thought anyone in his audience was likely to be troubled by the ethics of the story, he gave no indication of it; he presented the story without apology, as though the justice of God's order to annihilate the Canaanites should have been readily apparent to all.

Henry was a Calvinist, but his appropriation of the Canaanite conquest as a model for Christian spiritual warfare, with no hint that the story might be morally troubling to anyone in his audience, could also be found among Anglicans who rejected several Calvinist tenets. John Tillotson, a London minister who was arguably the most popular Arminian cleric of the late seventeenth century (he eventually became archbishop of Canterbury, and his sermons remained popular on both sides of the Atlantic for decades), allegorized the story of the Canaanite conquest in terms that were nearly identical to those that Henry employed. "When we look beyond ourselves, as Caleb and Joshua did to that presence and strength of God . . . we should then encourage ourselves as they did, *Fear ye not the people of the land; for they are bread for us*," Tillotson declared. "All our spiritual enemies would quail before us, and as it is said of the Canaanites, Josh. v.i, *Their hearts would melt*."[16]

If even Christians in "old" England saw the ancient Israelites who invaded Canaan as spiritual forebears worthy of imitation, the New England Puritans to an even greater degree saw in the Israelite conquest of Canaan a precursor to their own "errand into the wilderness." But in the seventeenth century they were more likely to interpret the story of the conquest as a warning for what they might experience if they violated God's covenant than as a justification for killing the indigenous people in the land that they considered an extension of their own "new Israel." In speaking of the conquest of the Canaanites, the agent of the destruction was always God, and the purpose of the story was to teach God's principles of holiness, judgment, and salvation; the human actors who carried out God's order to kill the Canaanites were so incidental to God's work that Puritan preachers often omitted them from the story entirely.

This changed in the early eighteenth century, when some New England ministers began to call the Indians "Canaanites" and to use the Old Testament texts as

[15]Matthew Henry, "Separation without Rebellion: A Sermon Preached at the Opening of the New Meeting-House at Chester, August 8, 1700," in *The Miscellaneous Works of the Rev. Matthew Henry* [. . .], ed. J. B. Williams (London: Joseph Ogle Robinson, 1833), 2:1141.

[16]John Tillotson, "The Efficacy of Prayer, for Obtaining the Holy Spirit," sermon 198, in *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson, Late Lord Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. Ralph Barker (London: Ralph Barker, 1728), 3:620.

justification for warfare against them.[17] New England Christians' new interpretation of the biblical text in the early eighteenth century reflected a hermeneutical approach that now saw scripture not primarily as a record of God's sovereignty but as an ethical manual for human behavior. This approach was widespread among eighteenth-century Anglicans and even some New England Congregationalists, but it was rooted not in Calvinist theology but in Arminianism. And though a few of these Arminian-inspired Christians seemed untroubled by the ethical implications of the Canaanite conquest, many other Arminian Christians of the eighteenth century were.

II. Grotius and the Arminian View of the Canaanite Conquest

Although John Calvin's ideas influenced a large number of English ministers and educators after his death, over the course of the seventeenth century the biblical interpretations of another continental European theologian—Jacob Arminius—began to seem more persuasive to many Anglican divines. Unlike Calvin, Arminius was not willing to accept actions of God that he viewed as incompatible with commonly accepted standards of goodness. In his view, a morally good God would never predestine any of God's creatures to damnation. Though Arminius continued to follow Calvin on many points—including his belief in substitutionary penal atonement, his assertion of total human depravity apart from God's sovereign grace, and his supreme respect for scriptural authority—some of Arminius's followers soon began distancing themselves from these doctrines whenever they found them incompatible with the doctrine of God's beneficent character, as judged by the standards of seventeenth-century European reason.[18]

In the 1620s and 1630s, the Dutch philosopher Hugo Grotius—whose works were quickly translated into English and enjoyed wide circulation in England—rejected the traditional Reformed (and medieval scholastic) view of substitutionary atonement. He argued instead for a "governmental theory" that said that God the Father had allowed Jesus to be crucified not because Christ's death on the cross constituted a penal satisfaction for sin that literally paid the price that human sin demanded but because the death of Jesus was necessary to show the full horrors of sin and deter people from bad behavior. Just as capital punishment allegedly deterred people from crime, so Christ's death on the cross as the consequence of sin demonstrated the moral weight of God's commands and preserved God's moral government, Grotius said.[19] By the eighteenth century, Grotius's view of the atonement had become so widespread among Anglican divines that some British ministers expressed surprise whenever Calvinists insisted on the substitutionary penal view as the only correct interpretation of the meaning of the cross.[20]

[17]William Williams, *Martial Wisdom Recommended: A Sermon Preach'd at the Desire of the Honourable Artillery Company in Boston, June 6, 1737* [. . .] (Boston: T. Fleet, 1737), 23–24. Much has been written on New England Puritans' view of themselves as a new Israel, but for a very succinct discussion of this idea, see David D. Hall, "New England, 1660–1730," in *Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. Coffey and Lim, 154.

[18]For Arminius's views, see Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[19]Hugo Grotius, *A Defence of the Catholic Faith: Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ, against Faustus Socinus*, trans. F. H. Foster (Andover, Mass.: W. F. Draper, 1889); and Ben Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze* (Eugene, Oreg.: Cascade, 2014), 134.

[20]See, for instance, Archibald MacLaine, *A Series of Letters Addressed to Soame Jenyns, Esq.: On Occasion of His View of the Internal Evidence of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: Charles Bathurst, 1778), 87–98.

Arminius's—and, to perhaps a greater extent, Grotius's—writings brought to the fore a number of ideas that would play a central role in moving English Christians away from Calvinism and toward a new concept of God, reason, human rights, and human nature. Both Arminius and Grotius said that theological systems should be measured against the standard of God's goodness before they could be accepted—and Grotius went even further by revising the traditional Reformation theology of the atonement to bring it into conformity with contemporary views of justice. But Grotius, who was convinced that biblical teaching presented a perfect system of ethics that could be applied to every sphere of life, did not seem particularly bothered by the divinely commanded slaughter of the Canaanites. Instead, he reinterpreted the story as a model for modern political behavior, making the biblical passage not a message of divine sovereignty (as Calvin and the Puritans had interpreted it) but a human-centered treatise on ethics. This was especially so in the work that he produced on the laws of war, a body of scholarship that, despite its appeal to Christian scripture, became foundational for a new belief in universal human rights and a rationally based system of ethics based on reason rather than divine command. In *The Rights of War and Peace*, he argued that God's treatment of the Canaanites was a model of religious tolerance that could instruct governments in his own era. God did not destroy the Canaanites for their idolatry but only for their moral wickedness, Grotius argued, because God had told Abraham in Genesis 15 that the "wickedness of the Amorite"—a people that was fully idolatrous—"was not yet full" and that it would therefore be another four hundred years before God allowed Abraham's descendants to displace the Canaanites in the land. Similarly, Grotius said, the governments of his own time should learn from God's example of tolerance by not using military force against religious heretics, since even the slaughter of the Canaanites did not offer a precedent for religious wars. And governments could also learn from God's offer of peace to the Canaanites, "the most wicked of any people of the earth." If God allowed even wicked Canaanites to escape destruction by becoming "tributaries" of the Israelites, surely the laws of justice required modern governments to attempt diplomatic negotiations with their enemies before resorting to war.[21]

Grotius's replacement of a Calvinist biblical hermeneutic centered on God's holiness and sovereignty with a hermeneutic focused on human ethics did not immediately lead to the view that the divinely sanctioned slaughter of the Canaanites was morally problematic. On the contrary, Grotius viewed the divinely sanctioned wars against the Canaanites as an exemplary model of perfect justice and an instructive example for the ethics of modern warfare. Just as the crucifixion was a perfect display of God's moral government, so was the slaughter of the Canaanites. Grotius's political framework of analysis was much more concerned with the moral rights of humans than Calvin's theology ever was, but ultimately, he came to the same conclusion that Calvin did regarding the slaughter of the Canaanites: it was morally justifiable.

For a few decades after Grotius's death in 1645, English ministers—many of whom were influenced by Grotius's views—depicted the Israelite slaughter of the Canaanites as a judicial action, analogous to a judge's decision to execute a convicted criminal in a capital case or an executioner's action to carry out that sentence. One example of this sort of preaching came from Richard Fiddes, rector of Halsham in Yorkshire, who employed the example of the slaughter of the Canaanites as a model of passionless

[21]Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, trans. A. C. Campbell (Washington, D.C.: M. Walter Dunne, 1901), bk. 3, chap. 11, sec. 17, p. 363.

judicial action in a book published in 1720. For Fiddes—who held a doctor of divinity degree and was well versed in both the Bible and the thinking of the early English Enlightenment—the only morally troubling part of the story of the Canaanites was the question of whether it could be reconciled with Jesus's command to love one's enemies. That conundrum could easily be solved, he thought, on the same basis that the actions of a judge or executioner could be harmonized with the Christian ethic of love. The Israelites were, in essence, God's judges and executioners; they were "ministers of divine justice," he asserted, and were thus "only the executioners of his [God's] just wrath and vengeance." "As they who are entrusted with the execution of the law are never suppos'd to be in a passion, it is so far from being necessary to assert, the Jews were oblig'd for this reason to hate their enemies," he wrote. "They had a positive command indeed to extirpate certain nations about them, in particular the Canaanites; but this is no more an argument that they were therefore oblig'd to hate the Canaanites, than it is an argument, that a judge, when he condemns a malefactor, ought to consider him as an object of his hatred: In a proper sense the case is the same of a soldier, who executes the orders of his commander, as a judge does the sentence of the law."[22]

For several decades, ministers were comfortable citing the Israelite slaughter of the Canaanites as a wise judicial action, but after the 1730s, some intellectuals in England began calling this interpretation into question because of a new view of human rights. Calvin and the seventeenth-century English Puritans had viewed the Canaanites as reprobate sinners who deserved the full outpouring of God's wrath. Grotius and some of the English Arminians had viewed them as analogous to criminals deserving execution. But by the 1730s, some skeptics began to see them as political citizens who possessed inalienable rights, despite their crimes. One of the primary thinkers responsible for this change in thinking was the late seventeenth-century political philosopher John Locke.

III. The Enlightenment Critique of the Canaanite Conquest

Locke never wrote about the ethical questions raised by the slaughter of the Canaanites. (His complete works contain only an incidental passing reference to the Canaanites that gives no hint of his opinion on the ethics of their demise.) But Locke's social contract theory of government, his assertion of inalienable human rights, and above all, his belief that scriptural claims could be judged by the dictates of reason led to a revolution in thinking about the ethics of the God of the Old Testament. Locke called himself an Arminian (though he was probably also a closet anti-Trinitarian) and was influenced by Grotius, but his ideas about the appropriate role of reason in judging God's actions went beyond the assertions of either Grotius or Arminius. For Locke, reason could both determine whether an action was moral and adjudicate claims of divine revelation. "Nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with, the clear and self-evident dictates of reason, has a right to be urged or assented to as a matter of faith," Locke declared.[23] This meant that certain Christian doctrines that were clearly contrary to moral reason—such as the teaching that "Adam's posterity" was "doomed to eternal, infinite punishment, for the transgression of Adam, whom millions had never heard of, and no one had authorised to transact for him, or be his representative"—could be rejected on

[22]Richard Fiddes, *Theologia Speculativa: Or, the Second Part of a Body of Divinity* [. . .] (London: W. Bowyer, 1720), 420–421.

[23]John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (London, 1690), 4.10, p. 352.

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the grounds that they were "so little consistent with the justice or goodness of the great and infinite God."[24]

But Locke believed that reason would lead one to believe in both the existence of a God who was a moral legislator and the truth of Christianity. For him, Jesus was primarily important as a perfect moral teacher, and he believed that Jesus's moral teaching always met the high standard of reason and was thus invariably true. "We have from him a full and sufficient rule for our direction, and conformable to that of reason," he declared. "Here morality has a sure standard, that revelation vouches, and reason cannot gainsay, nor question; but both together witness to come from God the great law-maker."[25]

Many educated Christians in eighteenth-century England accepted Locke's view of Christianity primarily as a perfect moral system that was consonant with reason, not as a revelation of God's grace to a sinful and depraved humanity, as John Calvin and the seventeenth-century Puritans had. Having rejected the doctrine of original sin, they had no reason to believe that the human mind was corrupted or that human reason would be an insufficient guide to the truth. What humans needed was primarily a system of perfect moral laws, with a system of eternal rewards and punishments. And this is what they believed Jesus and the Bible provided.

Within Locke's own lifetime, though, some who followed the path of reason that he advocated came to the conclusion that the morality of the Bible was not nearly as compatible with human standards of justice as he had imagined. Books lampooning some of the Old Testament stories began appearing as early as the 1690s, and they became increasingly common in the eighteenth century.[26] The skeptics of the 1690s and early eighteenth century—who were somewhat heterogeneous in their philosophical perspectives but were commonly designated "deists" (not "atheists") because they generally accepted the existence of God though not the God of the Bible—were especially troubled by the same doctrines that disturbed Locke and many Arminian Christians of his day: the doctrines of original sin, predestination, and eternal damnation, especially the damnation of those such as infants who had no opportunity to come to faith in Christ.[27] But unlike Locke and the Arminians, they did not believe that they could

[24]John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity: As Delivered in the Scriptures* (1695; repr. London, 1824), 4–5. Whether Locke really believed that unaided reason was fully competent to judge the truth of revelation is a matter of some debate. Alan P. F. Sell argues that although some of Locke's contemporaries (among both deists and Christians) understood Locke to mean this, their interpretations were incorrect in that Locke actually viewed revelation as a higher authority than reason in at least some instances. See Alan P. F. Sell, *John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Divines* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 62–85. But regardless of Locke's intended meaning, there can be no doubt that Locke's writings were used in the eighteenth century to justify the use of reason as a judge of the truth of scripture and scriptural morality.

[25]Locke, *Reasonableness of Christianity*, 142–143.

[26]One of the earliest of these skeptical books was Blount's *Oracles of Reason* (1693), which said nothing about the slaughter of the Canaanites. Similarly, the closest early eighteenth-century counterpart to Blount's work—Anthony Collins's *A Discourse on the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (London, 1724)—included no discussion of the Canaanites either. Both books presented a critique of the Bible's rationality, with Collins giving a refutation of the common Christian apologetic claim (which Locke, among others, had championed) that the fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies in Jesus was sufficient proof of the divine origin of the scriptures and the Christian religion.

[27]For a sample of historical studies of eighteenth-century deism, see James A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: The Discourse of Skepticism, 1680–1750* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997); Wayne Hudson, *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Kerry S. Walters, *The American Deists: Voices of Reason and Dissent in the Early*

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solve these problems merely by jettisoning Calvinism. For them, the problem was the Bible itself. In the 1730s, they began making God's treatment of the Canaanites in the Old Testament a centerpiece of their sweeping attacks on biblical depictions of God.

Eighteenth-century skeptics adopted this line of argument because they were using Locke's view of natural rights to critique not only Calvinism but also the prevailing eighteenth-century English Arminian notion—propagated by ministers and writers who were influenced by both Grotius and Locke—that the Bible should be interpreted primarily as a guide to ethical behavior. According to Matthew Tindal, biblical ethics were unjust and therefore could not have been the product of a divine mind. Accounts of unethical atrocities, supposedly ordered by God, pervaded the Bible, he said. There was, for instance, Psalm 137, which concluded with a prayer of blessing for someone who took revenge on the Babylonians by dashing their children against the stones. There was David, whose acts in war contradicted the commonly accepted laws of civilization. "How cruelly did he treat the Ammonites, when he took their Cities, cutting the People with Saws, and with Harrows of Iron, and with Axes?" Tindal asked.[28] In fact, "the holier Men in the Old Testament are represented, the more cruel they seem to be, as well as more addicted to cursing," Tindal noted.[29] But Tindal reserved some of his most pointed critiques for the Israelites' treatment of the Canaanites, as recorded in the book of Joshua. Tindal mentioned the Canaanite slaughter at several points in his book, circling back to the issue in order to underscore his argument that the Bible was full of ethically problematic material.[30]

If the Bible was supposed to serve as a moral guidebook, the story of the Israelites slaughtering the Canaanites under divine sanction was a dangerous example that, if followed, would lead to further atrocities. In fact, the sixteenth-century Spanish had followed this example, he asserted, and the results had been ethically disastrous. Tindal thus asked:

> Wou'd not People, if, like the Children of Israel, they were destitute of a Habitation, be apt to think what the Israelites did to the Canaanites, a good Precedent; and that they might invade a neighbouring, idolatrous Nation, that never did them the least Harm; and extirpate not only Men and Women, but even their innocent Infants, in order to get possession of their Country? And I question, whether the Spaniards wou'd have murder'd so many Millions in the Indies, had they not thought they might have us'd them like Canaanites.[31]

Modern Europeans would have been better off, he thought, if they had never had the example of the ancient Israelites to excuse their own barbarous actions. For Grotius and the early eighteenth-century English ministers who were influenced by his ideas, the Israelite wars had been exemplary models of restraint that could be instructive in the modern era, but for Tindal, they were barbaric and the source of modern atrocities—especially the alleged atrocities of the Catholic Spanish who, in the minds of

Republic (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992); and Eric R. Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

[28]Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation: Or, The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London, 1730), 265.

[29]Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 264.

[30]Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 264, 273–275.

[31]Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 264.

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many eighteenth-century English, were a symbol of the very antithesis of enlightened, rational behavior.

But what especially galled Tindal about the stories of divinely ordained warfare in the Old Testament was their implication about God's character. Like other deists, Tindal believed in a just God, and he was upset that Christians had defamed God's character with their stories of divinely ordered atrocities. A morality based on reason, he believed, clearly indicated that the Israelites had no right to annihilate a people who had never attacked them. A reasonable God would never order them to do such a thing, he believed. Even if it were right for God to punish the Canaanites for their wickedness—a point that Tindal was not ready to concede but that he entertained as a hypothetical—it was wrong for God to order the Israelites to perform this work for him because the Israelites themselves had not been attacked by the people whose land they were trying to seize. "If God wou'd punish the Canaanites, for acting contrary to the Law of Nature; wou'd he, in order to do this, require the Israelites to act contrary to the same Law; in murdering Men, Women, and Children, that never did them the least Injury?" Tindal asked. Furthermore, even if one were to conclude that it was right for the Israelites to seize the Canaanites' land, it was surely wrong for God not to give the Canaanites fair warning. "If the Jews had a divine Commission to extirpate the Canaanites, ought not the Canaanites to have known it, to prevent their resisting Men acting by a divine Commission?" Tindal asked. "Otherwise wou'd there not be two opposite Rights at the same time; a Right in the Jews by Revelation, to take away the Lives of the Canaanites; and a Right in the Canaanites by the Law of Nature, to defend their Lives?"[32] The implication, for Tindal, was clear: those who followed the dictates of reason had a moral obligation to reject the Bible and its depiction of a morally reprehensible God and to instead follow the God of nature and of reason, who always acted in accordance with the eternally unchanging standard of perfect justice. Tindal's critiques of the ethics of the Canaanite conquest were echoed in the posthumously published skeptical writings of Lord Bolingbroke in the 1750s and in Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* in 1794.[33]

IV. Christian Apologists' Responses to the Skeptics' Critique

Ministers and theology professors felt compelled to respond to such unprecedented attacks, so the deistic critiques of the Bible led to the rapid growth of Christian apologetics. Unlike the Christian apologetic works of the seventeenth century—which had focused principally on arguments for the existence of God and demonstrations from biblical prophecies that the Bible was divinely inspired—the apologetic tracts of the eighteenth century had to take account of the deists' argument that the Bible portrayed God as immoral and unjust.

Calvinists had a ready response to the deists' charges: Deists refused to acknowledge God's justice because they—like all unregenerate people—were depraved and therefore inclined to find fault with God. "If you read the word [of God] prejudiced against it, and determined to turn it into ridicule, you cannot expect that God will open your eyes and discover to you the wondrous things found in his law, he will rather leave you to believe a lie, and allow your hearts to be hardened by that fire which softens others, to your

[32]Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation*, 273.

[33]For Bolingbroke's critique, see Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, "Letters on the Study and Use of History," in *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke: With a Life* [. . .] (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1841), 2:209.

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utter ruin," one such Calvinist, James Muir (minister of a Presbyterian church in Alexandria, Virginia), wrote in 1795 in response to Paine's *The Age of Reason*. For Muir and other Calvinists, the divinely sanctioned wars of the Bible were not injustices but rather examples of the righteous outpouring of God's wrath upon wickedness in order to deliver his chosen covenant people from destruction. The same was true of modern wars. "Devout persons consider wars as the rod with which God corrects the nations, and brings about his own purposes," Muir declared.[34] Jonathan Edwards—the most famous American Calvinist theologian of the eighteenth century—took a similar view. In his history of redemption, he followed his Puritan forebears in treating the conquest of the Canaanites not as an ethical problem that needed to be excused but rather as a merciful sign of God's salvation of his covenant people in the midst of judgment on the wicked. Like other examples of the outpouring of God's wrath in scripture, it was a demonstration of the "glory of his [God's] justice."[35]

But a large number of American and British ministers of the eighteenth century rejected strict Calvinism, and the arguments that might have appealed to Calvin—though they had been widely held in the early seventeenth century—no longer made as much sense to them. Like Locke, they believed that God's actions should conform to the dictates of reason, and like him, they held a more optimistic view of human nature and the human mind than the doctrine of total depravity allowed for. The Canaanite slaughter did pose an ethical problem, and it, therefore, needed to be defended on rational grounds if the Bible was to remain credible. If skeptics had used the presuppositions of Locke to undermine the Bible, Arminian and moderate Calvinist Christians would employ the same grounds to defend the scripture. Beginning with some of the first responses to Tindal—such as Thomas Broughton's *Christianity Distinct from the Religion of Nature*, published in London in 1732—and continuing with American responses to Thomas Paine published as late as the start of the nineteenth century, Christian apologists spent decades responding directly to their deist antagonists and providing a rational defense for the justice of the Canaanite conquest.

Like many subsequent Christian apologists of the eighteenth century, Broughton echoed Grotius in relying heavily on the analogy of a magistrate and an executioner in defending divine and human conduct in the conquest of the Canaanites. Just as a magistrate had a right to take the lives of those who, by their crimes, had forfeited their right to live, so God, as the supreme magistrate, had the right to punish the Canaanites with death because of their extreme wickedness. And just as an executioner had the right to carry out the sentence that a magistrate had ordered, so, too, the ancient Israelites had the right to act as God's executioners in carrying out the extermination of the Canaanites. Broughton declared:

> It is in general contrary to the Law of Nature, that One Man shou'd take away the Life of another; yet, if I forfeit my Life to the Society, The Executioner, who takes

[34]James Muir, *An Examination of the Principles Contained in the Age of Reason* (Baltimore: S. J. Adams, 1795), 51, 151.

[35]Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption: Containing the Outlines of a Body of Divinity, In a Method Entirely New* (Edinburgh, 1774), 3.10.10, p. 377. For Edwards's defense of God's justice and goodness against attacks by the deists, see Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

> it, does not offend against the Law of Nature. The Jews were but Executioners of the divine Vengeance on a Wicked and Idolatrous Generation. . . . The Jews had just such a right to take away the Lives of the Canaanites, as an Executioner, authoriz'd by any Government, has to take away the Life of a Malefactor, who has forfeited it by sentence of the Law. . . . They did nothing, in this whole transaction, inconsistent with the Law of Nature.[36]

Broughton even had a ready answer for Tindal's complaints about the killing of children in the conquest: Because the children were innocent, they were taken directly to heaven to enjoy eternity with God, and they were saved from a life of wickedness and idolatry.[37] This was not at all the explanation that John Calvin had given nearly two centuries before, but for a generation of Arminian Christians who had largely abandoned the idea of infant guilt, Broughton's approach may have seemed more plausible.

But it was Broughton's appropriation of the idea of the law of nature that especially set the stage for a decades-long Christian apologetic project of harmonizing the Canaanite conquest with the Enlightenment. Nearly all subsequent Christian apologists attempted to argue that the Canaanites' extreme wickedness merited the punishment of death and that that punishment was fully in keeping with natural law and with the principles of justice that were commonly accepted as justifications for capital punishment in England.

This was the line of argument that the English Presbyterian minister John Leland adopted in several works of apologetics, including *A Defence of Christianity* and *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers*, which he published in the 1750s in response to Lord Bolingbroke's resuscitation of Tindal's skeptical arguments. The Israelites had acted as divinely appointed magistrates in killing the Canaanites, Leland argued, and their actions were as fully consonant with justice as the actions of modern law enforcement. "In this case the reason of the judgment was as apparent, as when a malefactor is put to death by an officer of justice for a crime, in execution of the sentence of a just magistrate," Leland declared, in an analogy that closely echoed Broughton.[38] The Canaanites were uniquely wicked, he believed; "never was there upon earth a more profligate and abandoned race of men."[39] And therefore, according to Leland, the divine command to annihilate an entire people would probably never be repeated. The Spanish who massacred the natives of the Americas had acted without divine authorization and were therefore in the wrong; since they lacked the divine mandate that the ancient Israelites had received, they could not appeal to the slaughter of the Canaanites for justification. The Spanish conquest of the Americas stemmed from their "own Ambition, Avarice, and Cruelty" and had nothing to do with the biblical Canaanite conquest.[40] Leland thus drew upon Enlightenment-era concerns about natural law and justice to argue that the biblical God was just as concerned about the rule of law as any English magistrate and that the slaughter of the Canaanites was a perfect model of justice, not a precursor of modern genocide.

[36]Thomas Broughton, *Christianity Distinct from the Religion of Nature: In Answer to a Late Book, Entitled, Christianity as Old as the Creation, &c.* (London: Weaver Bickerton, 1732), 37–39.

[37]Broughton, *Christianity Distinct from the Religion of Nature*, 35–36.

[38]John Leland, *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers That Have Appeared in England in the Last and Present Century* [. . .] (1754; repr., London: Charles Daly, 1837), 442.

[39]Leland, *A View of the Principal Deistical Writers*, 442.

[40]John Leland, *A Defence of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: D. Browne, 1752), 2:358.

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Nevertheless, even the defenders of the biblical narrative sometimes had to admit to discrepancies between Enlightenment morality and the conduct of the ancient Israelites. The "rules of war" might now be "better understood" than they were in Joshua's time, an anonymously written 1753 tract titled *Remarks on the Conduct of Joshua toward the Canaanites* conceded, and Joshua's conquest might not meet the standards of modern acceptable military conflicts between nations (a concession Grotius had never been willing to make), but the evil nature of the Canaanites' behavior nevertheless provided sufficient justification for God's action. Indeed, it argued, the Canaanites were "guilty of a species of crime productive of more moral evil in the world than any other conceivable one, and consequently were juster subjects for the displeasure of God."[41] This was the only example in all of history, the unnamed tract author argued, when God ordered the "total extermination" of a people. The author went on to argue: "And one country thus made an example of, during so long a period, can with no more justice be said to cast a reflection upon the moral government of God, than the execution of a single malefactor can be brought as an argument for the tyranny of a prince."[42] At first glance, this tract might seem unusual in its apparent willingness to concede a great deal of ground to its critics by admitting that the conquest of Canaan did not meet modern standards for a just war, and indeed, most Christian apologists were not willing to make that concession. Nevertheless, this tract represented the degree to which Enlightenment philosophy influenced orthodox Christians seeking to harmonize the Bible with the principles of reason. They accepted the idea of universal laws of war, and by the mid-eighteenth century, they had begun to recognize that perhaps, contrary to Grotius's view, the biblical conquest of Canaan could not be reconciled with those laws. Having conceded this, they then had to find another ground on which to justify the conquest, and to do that, they turned to other widely shared principles of Enlightenment-era reasoning, such as natural rights.

British Christian appropriations of Enlightenment-era rights ideology to defend the actions of the Canaanites may have reached their height with Baptist minister John Martin's book *The Conquest of Canaan* (1777). Although Martin was a Calvinist, he did not simply reproduce the defenses of the Canaanite conquest that John Calvin had given two centuries earlier; instead, he reframed Calvinist theological ideas of divine sovereignty in Enlightenment language. Rather than speaking of God's right to execute wrath on sinful creatures (as Calvin had done), Martin centered his defense of God's actions on property rights, and in doing so, focused mainly on an issue that had not even concerned Calvin: the appropriation of the Canaanites' land and redistribution of it to the Israelites. In an era that now considered property rights sacrosanct, the divinely commissioned (and apparently unjust) Israelite seizure of the Canaanites' property seemed almost as objectionable as the killing of the Canaanites, but Martin defended this action by appealing to the same Enlightenment principles of inalienable property rights that critics of the story drew upon. If God was the owner of the whole earth, he asked, was it not God's right to take property from whomever God willed (including the Canaanites) and redistribute it to whomever God chose? And by this same logic, when God ordered Israel to invade Canaan, they had a "right"—a word choice that signaled Martin's appropriation of Enlightenment ideas of natural rights—to do so.[43]

[41] *Remarks on the Conduct of Joshua towards the Canaanites* (London: R. Baldwin, 1753), 15.
[42] *Remarks on the Conduct of Joshua*, 31–32.
[43] Martin, *Conquest of Canaan*, 42–43, 51.

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Other Christian apologists of the eighteenth century attempted to justify the slaughter of the Canaanites with a variation of Grotius's theory of atonement, which had rested on the assumption that there was a need for God to provide a universal deterrent to sin by making a spectacular example of one severe punishment of evil. This was the line of reasoning that Anglican bishop Richard Watson adopted in 1796 in his refutation of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*. The divinely ordered destruction of the Canaanites served as a "benevolent warning" of the evil of sin, he argued, and thus it contributed to the "supreme happiness to the human race." The Canaanites were "idolaters, sacrificers of their own crying or smiling infants; devourers of human flesh; addicted to unnatural lust; immersed in the filthiness of all manner of vice," Watson declared; it was only right that God would save humanity from such wickedness by using the punishment of the Canaanites as a warning to future generations.[44] Though Watson developed this argument at length in his refutation of Thomas Paine in the 1790s, he was not its inventor; English Christian apologists had issued nearly identical arguments decades earlier, in the 1750s, in response to Lord Bolingbroke's skeptical treatises.[45] Perhaps the decades-long endurance of this line of argument—with its strong echoes of Grotius's philosophy of justice—was a testament to its persuasive power.

The defense of the Canaanite slaughter that the British layman and historian Jacob Bryant published in the early 1790s rested on similar grounds, but with a slight utilitarian variation: If God had allowed the Canaanite nations to remain, he said, these nations would have grown increasingly worse and would have destroyed the church, so their slaughter was necessary to preserve a greater social good. They were the "most iniquitous of any people upon earth," he declared, echoing Grotius, and they sacrificed their own children as burnt offerings to idols. Just as numerous other Enlightenment-era apologists did, Bryant appealed to the analogy of an English magistrate to defend the justice of God's actions, asking: "If then it be ever proper to take off a criminal by a human law; how can we presume to dispute the justice of Providence in devoting these nations to destruction, who were rebels and apostates, and would have proved the greatest enemies to his church and religion?" This rationale, he argued, was sufficient even to explain the divine mandate to kill Canaanite infants en masse, because the Canaanites' "posterity" would have brought both the "church and religion" to "ruin."[46]

Many of the Christian apologetic works published in London circulated widely in America as well; the American Revolution did nothing to diminish American Christians' interest in British refutations of the deists' arguments. Leland's work was advertised in American newspapers for decades. Watson's *An Apology for the Bible in a Series of Letters Addressed to Thomas Paine* was especially popular; Vice President John Adams ordered a copy as soon as it was released and read it cover-to-cover as soon as it arrived in July 1796.[47] But by that point, a new homegrown American Christian defense of the conquest of the Canaanites was beginning to emerge

[44]Richard Watson, *An Apology for the Bible in a Series of Letters Addressed to Thomas Paine* (London, 1796), 18–19, 35–36.

[45][Thomas Church], *An Analysis of the Philosophical Works of the Late Lord Viscount Bolingbroke* (London: J. Whiston and B. White, 1755), 129–130.

[46]Bryant, *Treatise upon the Authenticity of the Scriptures*, 250–251.

[47]Advertisement from Samuel F. Bradford, bookseller, *Philadelphia Gazette*, 8 July 1805; Advertisement from Increase Cooke & Co., booksellers, *New Haven Connecticut Journal*, 29 November 1810; Advertisement from E. F. Backus, bookseller, *Albany (N.Y.) Balance*, 18 December 1810; John Adams Diary 46, 21 July 1796, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, https://masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/popup?

in response to Thomas Paine's critique. Several British ministers issued critical responses to Paine as well, but because of Paine's reputation in America as a preeminent patriot whose bestselling *Common Sense* had inspired the Revolution, American ministers believed they had a special duty to refute his skeptical attacks on the Bible. In doing so, they drew heavily on the Enlightenment-inspired apologetic arguments that the British ministers had already pioneered, and they thus appropriated the principles of the English Enlightenment for an American synthesis of biblically centered Protestantism and rights-conscious rationalism.

Some of their arguments in defense of the morality of God's actions came from Anglican bishop Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion*, published in 1736 and repeatedly reprinted for more than a century as one of the two most widely read and widely cited Christian apologetic works in both Britain and America (along with William Paley's *Evidences of Christianity*). Butler argued that God's seemingly objectionable actions in scripture were analogous to God's actions in nature. If the deists objected to God's slaughter of the wicked in the Bible, should they not on the same grounds complain about death and suffering in nature? And if nature contained much that was difficult to understand or accept, should they not expect the same of the Bible? This did not mean that the Bible must be accepted on blind faith, Butler insisted. Rather, it meant that the Bible should be accepted because it was perfectly congruous with nature, which is what one would expect if both nature and the Bible came from the same creator God. If deists raised no objection when the God of nature annihilated children and other innocent people in floods or other natural disasters, what right did they have to complain when the God of the Bible annihilated the Canaanites? And besides, Butler argued, there was nothing in the Bible that was "plainly contradictory to wisdom, justice, or goodness," which the "light of nature teaches us of God."[48] There were some commands in the Bible that required actions that "would be immoral and vicious" in normal circumstances, Butler conceded—and certainly the deists would have put the killing of the Canaanites in that category—but, he argued, the "precepts" behind these commands were not "contrary to immutable morality" and thus these actions were justified.[49]

New York Presbyterian Cornelius Davis, publisher of the *Theological Magazine*, drew on Butler's arguments in his response to Paine's critique of the biblical conquest of the Canaanites. In 1795, at the height of the controversy over *The Age of Reason*, Davis published an article responding to a "man who declared, that the God of Moses should not be his God" since "the God of Moses must needs be a cruel and malicious being, because he had commissioned the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites." "But surely this man did not extend his ideas very far," Davis wrote, "or for reasons equally substantial he would have refused to own the God of common providence as his God," because the God of nature "has commanded the yellow fever and other diseases to cut off many more men in every age, than the Canaanites commanded to be cut off by the Israelites."[50] In an era when very few English-speaking skeptics—especially in

id=D46&page=D46_38; and John Adams Diary 46, 23 July 1796, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, https://masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/popup?id=D46&page=D46_40.

[48]Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* [. . .] (1736; repr., New York: Harper and Brothers, 1860), 230.

[49]Butler, *The Analogy of Religion*, 230–231.

[50][Cornelius Davis], "Of the Character of the God of Moses," *Theological Magazine*, 1 November 1795, 187–188. For Davis's biographical background, see Kyle B. Roberts, *Evangelical Gotham: Religion and the Making of New York City, 1783–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 118.

the United States—were willing to cross the line from deism into atheism, many orthodox Christians believed this argument from Butler's *Analogy* carried a lot of rhetorical power, since they thought any intellectually honest deist would have to admit that the God of nature was responsible for numerous deaths every day. Whether the argument really did persuade as many skeptics as they expected is questionable, since reviews of some of the works that employed it suggest that it may not have carried as much weight as they thought.[51] Nevertheless, it remained in widespread circulation at the leading colleges in America until the late nineteenth century.

American Christian apologists in the era of the early republic also appropriated the eighteenth-century British Enlightenment view of property rights to defend scripture. "Nations, as well as persons, have their respective rights in distinction from one another; but neither nations nor persons have rights paramount to that of the supreme Proprietor," the Boston Congregationalist periodical *The Panoplist* declared in 1808 in an article titled "The Conquest of Canaan Vindicated." "He has a right to dispose of men's lives, as well as their properties," *The Panoplist* continued. "If the Jews had a warrant from God to execute his purpose against those nations, and knew the warrant was from him, they were bound to obey."[52]

Yet even as they defended the actions of God and the ancient Israelites in the conquest of Canaan, Christian apologists such as the editors of *The Panoplist* took particular effort to limit their application to the biblical era and expressly deny that they had any moral application in the present. Nearly two centuries earlier, Grotius had cited the Canaanite conquest as a model for modern laws of war, but by the early nineteenth century, *The Panoplist* editor Jeremiah Evarts—who was an outspoken opponent of the Cherokee removal—wanted to avoid any suggestion that the story could be used as a justification for contemporary removals or exterminations of people. Christian antislavery advocates sought to place similar restrictions on the Canaanite conquest's applicability. At a time when proslavery theologians cited Noah's curse on Canaan, the son of Ham, as a justification for the enslavement of Africans (who most eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century white Christians believed were descended from Ham, if not Canaan himself), Christian antislavery advocates in both Britain and America produced treatises arguing that while the Canaanite slaughter was morally justified, it was also a unique event that could never be repeated without the express command of God—which the African slave trade, they said, most certainly did not have.[53]

V. The Place of the Canaanite Passages in the Development of Christian Apologetics

In the early nineteenth century, debates over more contemporary issues of social morality—including slavery and Indian removal—quickly eclipsed the debate over the morality of the Canaanite conquest. But there was another reason why the debate over the Canaanite conquest did not receive as much attention in the nineteenth

[51]"Divinity and Controversy," *Monthly Review*, March 1753, 236–237.

[52]"The Conquest of Canaan Vindicated," *Panoplist*, 1 May 1808, 543.

[53]See, for instance, the anonymous British antislavery tract *Scripture the Friend of Freedom* (London: W. Smith, 1789), 39; and the African English abolitionist Ottobah Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1787), 35. For Evarts's opposition to the Cherokee removal, see John A. Andrew III, *From Revivals to Removal: Jeremiah Evarts, the Cherokee Nation, and the Search for the Soul of America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992).

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century as it had in the eighteenth: in the United States, at least, the orthodox Christians largely won this debate in the court of popular opinion. Christian apologists treated it as a settled issue that no longer merited much examination. Rising church attendance rates, a wave of evangelical conversions, a rapidly burgeoning Christian apologetic publishing industry, and a widespread commitment of American colleges to the teaching of Christian evidences all suggested that respect for the Bible would remain secure for the majority of the population. In most of the dozens of apologetics works published in the United States in the early nineteenth century, the Canaanite conquest—which had received extensive attention in similar books published in the late eighteenth century—was not mentioned at all. Nor did Christian apologists spend much time debating the central question that had given rise to the debate over the Canaanite conquest: the question of whether biblical morality could be a reliable guide to behavior in the modern world. By the early nineteenth century, many American college presidents, professors, publishers, judges, and other opinion leaders were sure that it could. While there were many reasons for their confidence, one of the most obvious was political. The late eighteenth-century debate about the morality of the killing of the Canaanites took place against the backdrop not only of Enlightenment reason but of international revolution. And in this debate, in the view of many American opinion leaders, Thomas Paine and other deistic skeptics took the wrong side, while the Christian apologists who defended the morality of God's actions took the side of reason, sensibility, and morality.

The eighteenth-century deistic critique of the Canaanite story was an antiauthoritarian attempt to use reason as a standard to critique both divine revelation in general and the justice of the biblical God's actions in particular, and perhaps it was not surprising that this project was closely connected to other antiauthoritarian stances in the political realm. The biblical God was nothing more than "an unjust and cruel tyrant," Lord Bolingbroke declared in the early 1750s, in language that presaged Thomas Jefferson's later concern with opposing tyranny in both politics and religion.[54] Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine, as American patriots, were even more direct in their effort to connect the deistic critique of the Bible to the language of liberty. "Soon after I had published the pamphlet *Common Sense*, in America," Paine wrote, "I saw the exceeding probability that a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion. . . . Human inventions and priestcraft would be detected; and man would return to the pure, unmixed, and unadulterated belief of one God, and no more." In the process, people would abandon belief in the Bible, a book that was filled with such "unrelenting vindictiveness" that it should have been called the "word of a demon" rather than the "word of God."[55] After all, was there not a similarity between Paine's rebuke of the biblical God for allegedly ordering injustices such as the slaughter of the Canaanites and the revolutionary patriots' rebuke of King George III as another such tyrant? This connection may have seemed obvious to Paine, but his prediction that his fellow citizens would soon see the light of reason and give up their faith in the Bible was never fulfilled. Instead, Paine's *The Age of Reason* became one of the last major deistic critiques of the Bible that was widely disseminated in the United States; deism's popularity began to fade less than a decade after *The Age of Reason*'s publication. The causes for this had a lot to do both with French politics and with

[54]*The Philosophical Works of the Late Right Honorable Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke* (London, 1776), 4:151.

[55]Paine, *Age of Reason*, 4, 13.

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the success of Paine's orthodox Christian opponents in positioning themselves as defenders of a more moderate version of Enlightenment rationality—an approach that promoted political stability and morality by using reason to defend scriptural authority rather than attack it.

When the French Revolution began in 1789, several leading deists—including Paine—heralded it. Indeed, Paine was such an avid supporter of the revolution that he traveled to France and became a direct participant in the fight against the monarchy. The early French revolutionaries were anticlerics as well as antimonarchists, and they fought against the king and church in the name of deism. The French Assembly replaced Christianity with a new "religion of reason" and appropriated many historic churches, including even the Cathedral of Notre Dame, for a new civil religion of deistic-style veneration of rational philosophy. Not surprisingly, orthodox Christians in England and the United States were alarmed. When the revolution became more radical, and when even some of its early supporters—including Paine—were arrested and charged with treason for not sufficiently supporting the cause, orthodox Christians claimed vindication. The moral bankruptcy of the "religion of reason" had been revealed, they believed. If deism had destroyed France, it would surely destroy the American political order as well if it were allowed to do so.[56]

The American Christian apologists who attacked Paine's *The Age of Reason* and defended the morality of God's actions against the Canaanites weighed into this political debate by connecting orthodox Christianity to the American Revolution and deism to the French Revolution. The former offered a moral framework for a law-abiding society, they argued, while the latter led to social disorder and lawlessness. James Muir's tract against Thomas Paine, for instance, included repeated warnings about the dangers of revolutions that proceeded in the manner of the one launched by French deists.[57] Uzal Ogden's attack on Paine's book was even more direct. Ogden, the rector of Trinity Church in Newark, New Jersey, enveloped his book, *The Antidote to Deism*, in the language of American patriotism by dedicating it to George Washington and framing his argument against Paine as a contest between Anglo-American Christian morals and the lawlessness of the French deists. Whereas earlier Christian apologetic responses to deism had focused on the alleged weakness of its intellectual arguments, Ogden's book—like several works of Christian apologetics published in the 1790s—focused largely on deism's threat to subvert social morality and American virtue with French libertinism and social disorder. "In all the annals of Deism, is there the least trace of evidence, that it hath reformed the morals even of one of its converts?" Ogden asked. "And yet Deism, the present rage of the French nation (the benign effects of which, in many respects, they so happily experience, especially in preserving men from assassinations, suicide, massacres, and the power of the guillotine) Mr. Paine, in the goodness of his heart, wishes to be the Religion of Americans!"[58] Christianity, by contrast, offered an adequate foundation for a virtuous citizenry and a just government that operated under the rule of law. The religion of Christ was "most happily calculated

[56]New England Congregationalist ministers' anxieties about the French Revolution and their desire to use orthodox Protestant Christianity to save the new American republic from the dangers of deism and "infidelity" are central themes of Jonathan J. Den Hartog's *Patriotism and Piety: Federalist Politics and Religious Struggle in the New American Nation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014).

[57]Muir, *Examination of the Principles*, 118–119, 146.

[58]Uzal Ogden, *Antidote to Deism: The Deist Unmasked; Or An Ample Refutation of All the Objections of Thomas Paine* [. . .] (Newark, N.J.: John Woods, 1795), 1:16.

to advance the interest of civil society," Ogden argued. "Where the Christian religion is sincerely embraced, it hath a manifest tendency to cause those entrusted with the powers of government, to act with probity; and the people to be peaceful in their demeanor; conscientious in their actions, and diligent in the discharge of the duties of their several stations."[59]

British Christian apologetic responses to Paine drew a similar dichotomy between British Christian morals and French deistic lawlessness. The Anglican rector William Finch, for instance, concluded one of his Christian apologetic lectures at Oxford in 1797 with an exhortation for the members of his audience to choose between Christian civilization and deistic moral disorder. "If you think the atrocities occasioned by the authors of the late revolution sufficiently engaging to induce you to imitation, bid adieu to Christianity, and follow them," he declared. "But if the mild virtues, and extensive blessings of society, produced by the doctrines of Christ . . . evidently declare him a teacher sent from God, then immediately, and at all events still continue to follow him."[60] For Christian apologists, the international political events of the 1790s offered sufficient proof that the Bible did not promote violence, as the deists had charged; it was instead the remedy for that violence. Only by retaining a faith in the Bible as the supreme moral standard and the foundation for societal morality could Britain and the United States escape the fate of France.

But this faith in the Bible would not be an unreasoned or anti-intellectual faith. Instead, it would draw on the principles of the Enlightenment by positing a biblical God of rationality whose behavior was perfectly compatible with modern ideals of human rights. Nearly every major American college of the early nineteenth century required all students to take a course in Christian evidences that would demonstrate why reason should lead every thinking person to embrace the truth of Christianity. Even at Unitarian Harvard, all students in the early nineteenth century spent a year studying Christian evidences by reading, among other works, Joseph Butler and William Paley's writings against the deists. The other leading colleges of the day likewise required their students to take courses on Christian apologetics. In fact, several of the leading works of Christian apologetics published in the United States during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were authored by college presidents, including the top administrators at Yale, Princeton, and Williams College. At the University of Oxford, there was an annual lectureship established in the late eighteenth century for the express purpose of defending the Christian faith. In the United States, a similar annual lecture series was established in Lowell, Massachusetts, where some of the nation's leading educators came to provide philosophical defenses of Christian truth claims. And the nation's first independent seminary, Andover Theological Seminary, made Christian apologetics a central component of its educational curriculum for students preparing for the ministry.[61]

[59]Ogden, *Antidote to Deism*, 1:36.

[60]William Finch, *The Objection of Infidel Historians and Other Writers against Christianity* [. . .] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1797), 103–104.

[61]Elizabeth A. Clark, *Founding the Fathers: Early Church History and Protestant Professors in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 7; *Seventeenth Annual Report of the President of Harvard University to the Overseers, on the State of the Institution for the Academical Year 1841–42* (Cambridge, Mass.: Metcalf, Keith, and Nichols, 1843), 5; and E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 173–175.

The eighteenth-century debate over the Canaanites was temporarily forgotten as Christian apologists moved on to other issues, but the philosophy behind those defenses remained an essential foundation for the success of early nineteenth-century rationally minded, biblically centered, evangelical Protestant Christianity in the antebellum United States. By successfully meeting the skeptics on their own ground, the eighteenth-century defenders of the biblical Canaanite story found a way to harmonize Enlightenment ideas with biblically minded Protestant Christianity, and in the process, they created a path for the continued growth of the Christian faith in a culture that accepted both Enlightenment ideals of human rights and the authority of the Bible.

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