

הָרֵם “herem” or “the ban”

HALOT: to put under a ban, to devote to destruction, esp. war-booty.

#### Occurrences of “the ban” against nations in the Old Testament:

- Deut 7:1-3, Commanded as prophecy of entrance into Promised Land.
  - 7:2, *“when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them.”*
- Deut 13:12-18, Commanded against Israel for disobedience.
  - 13:15, *“you shall surely put the inhabitants of that city to the sword, devoting it to destruction, all who are in it and its cattle, with the edge of the sword.”*
- Deut 20:1-20, Commanded as part of procedure for conquering Promised Land.
  - 20:16-17, *“But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded,”*
- Joshua 6:1-27, First instance. Commanded against Jericho.
  - 6:17, *“And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers whom we sent.”*
- Joshua 8:1-29, Commanded against Ai. Only people to be destroyed, goods and livestock OK.
  - 8:2, *“And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king. Only its spoil and its livestock you shall take as plunder for yourselves.”*
- Joshua 10-11, Executed against Gibeon (10:10), Makkedah (10:28), Libnah (10:30), Lachish (10:32), Gezer (10:33), Eglon (10:35), Hebron (10:37), Debir (10:39), Hill country and Negeb (10:40), from Kadesh-Barnea to Gaza, as far as Gibeon (10:41), Hazor (11:11), nearby cities (11:12), from Mount Halak to Baal-gad (11:17)
- Judges 1:17, Executed by Caleb as part of continuing conquest after the death of Joshua
  - 1:17, *“Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they defeated the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath and devoted it to destruction.”*
- Judges 21:11, Executed by congregation against Jabesh-Gilead to find wives for tribe of Benjamin
  - 21:11, *“This is what you shall do: every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction.”*
- 1 Samuel 15:1-23, Commanded for Saul to take vengeance on Amalekites
  - 15:3, *“Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”*

#### Other interesting occurrences:

- Exodus 22:20, *“Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction.”*

- Leviticus 27:28, “But no devoted thing that a man devotes to the LORD, of anything that he has, whether man or beast, or of his inherited field, shall be sold or redeemed; every devoted thing is most holy to the LORD”
- Numbers 18:13-14, “The first ripe fruits of all that is in their land, which they bring to the LORD, shall be yours. Everyone who is clean in your house may eat it. Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours.”

#### Observations:

- Implication of word is that warfare in the Old Testament is a kind of *worship*. This is not just destruction. It is a *handing of someone over* to Yahweh.
- Only used in context of early Canaanite conquest and Saul’s vengeance on Amalekites.
- Counter question to “why did God destroy the Canaanites” could be “why didn’t God destroy the Israelites?” The point of the story is that God *chooses* the nation of Israel for mysterious purposes. Reason given for complete destruction in Deut 7:4-6 is to protect the holiness of the nation of Israel by saving them from idolatry. Result of the nation’s failure to completely execute the ban was that it struggled with idolatry for 400 years until God executed judgment through the exile.
- *Herem* is viewed as God’s judgment against evil in the Old Testament. One reason why the descendants of Abraham had to wait so long to enter the Promised Land was that “*the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.*” (Gen 15:16)
- Only Israel was authorized to execute *herem* for a limited period of time.
- Ultimately, *herem* was executed against Jesus Christ as an expression of saving love for all people
- Physical warfare is a symptom of the spiritual warfare that began in the garden (Genesis 3:14-15), climaxed in the cross (Col 1:20), is continued by the church (Eph 6:12), and will culminate at the return of Jesus (Rev 19:11-21).

#### Conclusions:

- Eugene Merrill. “Biblical genocide was part of a Yahweh-war policy enacted for a unique situation, directed against a certain people, and in line with the character of God himself, a policy whose design is beyond human comprehension but one that is not, for that reason, unjust or immoral. Those very limitations preclude any possible justification for modern genocide for any reason.”
- Tremper Longman’s five phases of herem:
  - Phase 1: God fights the flesh-and-blood enemies of Israel (conquest)
  - Phase 2: God fights Israel (exile)
  - Phase 3: God will come in the future as a warrior (post exilic prophets)
  - Phase 4: Jesus Christ fights the spiritual powers and authorities (church age)
  - Phase 5: The Final Battle (eschaton)
- Analogy of growing up from infancy to childhood, through adolescence to adulthood. *Would parental decisions for me as an infant make sense if I were to be subject to them today?*

#### Other Resources:

- Brief article from Probe Ministries: <https://www.probe.org/god-and-the-canaanites/>
- Detailed expansion by the same author: <https://bible.org/article/yahweh-war-and-conquest-canaan>
- Book outlining different views: *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide.*