

Deuteronomy 20:10-18

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Moses prescribed regulations concerning how the Israelites are to conduct themselves in war against adversaries that are either far or near.

This section deals with how to conduct warfare when conquering the Promised Land. Moses mentioned two groups of adversaries the Israelites would encounter:

- Those who were far away from Israel outside Canaan (vv. 10-15), and
- Those who were within the boundary of Canaan (vv. 16-18).

The scenario that Moses addressed here was *when you approach a city to fight against it, you shall offer it terms of peace*. The word translated as *terms of peace* here is “shalom” in Hebrew. In this context, it means to enter into an agreement, to make a peace treaty ([Joshua 9:15](#); [Judges 4:17](#)). Thus, the first thing the Israelites were to do was to make an offer of peace with the city in question.

Moses then described what Israel was to do when the city *agrees to make peace with you and opens to you*. Opening the city gates was an indication that the city wanted to make a covenant of peace with the Israelites. So, if the city did open the gates, *then all the people who are found in it shall become your forced labor and shall serve you*. Thus, the Israelites were not to kill any of the city’s inhabitants if they surrender.

This peace treaty would require that the inhabitants of that city serve Israel as vassals. They would agree to surrender to Israel. The city would open its gates and its inhabitants would be put under *forced labor*. That means that the inhabitants of that city would work in agriculture and construction projects for the Israelites ([1 Kings 9:15-21](#)).

However, *if a city does not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it*. To *besiege* a city is to encircle it to take full control of it. The Israelites were commanded to encircle that city with troops so that nobody would be able to either enter or leave the city. This would cause the enemy to become weak, usually by running out of food and water, and to surrender to Israel.

Once the city was surrounded, the Israelites were to wait until the time *when the LORD your God gives it into your hand*. When this happened, they were to *strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword*. Notice that Moses emphasized that the surrendering of the Canaanite nations would be God's work. He was the One who would deliver the enemy into Israel's hand as He had done in the past ([Deuteronomy 3:21-22](#); [Deuteronomy 7:23](#)).

The *sword* was one of the most important weapons of warfare in the ancient Near East and in the Greco-Roman world. Ranging from sixteen inches to three feet in length, with one or both sides sharpened, this implement was used for thrusting and slashing opponents in armed conflicts. This is the instrument the Israelites were instructed to use to strike all the men of that city.

Though the Israelites were to execute the men of any city that chose war over peace, all others were to be spared: *Only the women and the children and the animals and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourself*. The word translated *Only* (Heb. "raq") probably should be translated "however" or "nevertheless." In the cities that refused to surrender to the Israelites, they were to kill all the men, but spare the women, the children, the animals, as well as the spoil of that city for themselves.

The word *spoil* refers to the property and goods that conquerors might seize from their adversaries ([Deuteronomy 2:35](#); [3:7](#)). The word *booty* also refers to all the belongings of the enemies. The Israelites were to seize all those valuable goods and property that belonged to the adversaries upon conquering their cities. They were to *use the spoil of their enemies which the LORD their God had given them*.

Moses then repeated that these commands pertained *to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations nearby*. The rules about killing all the males in a city and taking the women, children, animals, and other spoils applied to cities that were *very far from you*.

These *cities that are very far from you* could refer to cities outside the borders of Canaan, or it could refer to cities that the Israelites were to conquer that were beyond the borders of the whole Promised Land. Remember that the LORD's Promised Land stretched from the Nile River in Egypt in the South through current-day Lebanon, Syria, and northern Iraq all the way to the Euphrates River ([Deuteronomy 1:7](#), [11:24](#)).

Moving on to the instructions regarding cities that were within the border of Canaan, Moses told the people that *only in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. These cities* refer to the Canaanite cities of the peoples listed in v. 17. God's people were to eliminate everything *that breathes*. That means, they were to execute all the people (male, female, and children) as well as animals in the cities that were inside the borders of these peoples.

This is emphasized in the first part of the next verse when Moses stated that the Israelites were to *utterly destroy them*. The verb translated here as *utterly destroy* (Heb. "ḥāram taḥarēm") is intense in the Hebrew and refers to an act of obedience which dedicates the adversaries to the LORD ([Numbers 21:2](#); [Deuteronomy 7:2](#); [13:17](#)). Thus, Israel was to dedicate themselves to obey God's command to eliminate these nations living in Canaan, and to take full control of their land. This was in fulfillment of God's judgment on the Canaanites because of the exceeding wickedness of their culture ([Deuteronomy 9:5](#)). Furthermore, this command intended to prevent that wickedness from polluting Israel ([Deuteronomy 7:4](#)).

Moses listed the nations that were to be completely eliminated. They all lived in the land of Canaan.

- The Hittite*. The Hittites migrated to Canaan from the north central part of Asia Minor (current-day Turkey). They may have been the descendants of Canaan through Heth, according to [Genesis 10:15](#). They lived around Hebron ([Genesis 23:1-20](#)).
- The Amorite*. This group was native to Canaan and lived in the mountains. The *Amorites* appeared as a group that covered five major kingdoms in the Ancient Near East: Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon, according to [Joshua 10:5](#).
- The Canaanite*, also native to the area of Canaan, who lived along the Mediterranean coast.
- The Perizzite*, who resided in the hill country of Canaan in unwalled cities and towns both east and west of the Jordan River.
- The Hivite*. They lived in the northern part of Canaan just south of the Lebanese mountains.
- The Jebusite*. This group lived in and around the city of Jerusalem.

This list is similar to that of [Deuteronomy 7:1-2](#), except that the Gergashites are left out. All these six nations living in Canaan were to be eliminated.

Moses commanded Israel to eliminate them completely. There were two reasons for this. First, they were to do just as *the LORD* their *God* had *commanded* them. Killing these people was the will of the LORD, and His people were to obey Him.

The second reason for the complete destruction of these peoples was given in v. 18. The Israelites had to do this *so that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the LORD your God.* (v. 18). The people in Canaan were involved in perverted practices, and this would turn out to be an irresistible temptation to the Israelites. The way of the Canaanites was filled with the strong exploiting the weak ([Leviticus 18](#)). God's way for Israel was for each Israelite to love and serve the other. These two cultures were wholly incompatible, and God desired that the exploitive Canaanite culture be eliminated, in order to prevent its contamination.

So, the elimination of these peoples was for Israel's benefit. It was so that these surrounding nations might not *teach* Israel to practice the *detestable things* they were doing. The term translated as "detestable thing" (Heb. "to'evah") is often translated as "abomination" ([Deuteronomy 7:25](#)). The term "abomination" refers to that which was repugnant or detestable in the eyes of the LORD, ranging from defective sacrifices ([Deuteronomy 17:1](#)) to the practice of magic and divination ([Deuteronomy 18:12](#)) and idolatrous practices ([2 Kings 16:3](#)). It also includes sexual perversion, including a vast array of incest, as well as child sacrifice ([Leviticus 18](#)). The Canaanite nations sacrificed their children (usually, by fire) when they wanted to appeal to the gods, to make the gods do something, such as averting a calamity or giving them victory in a battle. Such perverse practices were in stark contrast with God's ways. God's ways are to protect the innocent and to elevate neighborly love. That is why the Suzerain God told the Israelites to eliminate all these perverse nations so that they [the Israelites] might not adopt their perverse ways.

Biblical Text:

¹⁰ When you approach a city to fight against it, you shall offer it terms of peace. ¹¹ If it agrees to make peace with you and opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall become your forced labor and shall serve you. ¹² However, if it does not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. ¹³ When the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword. ¹⁴ Only the women and the children and the animals and all that is

in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourself; and you shall use the spoil of your enemies which the Lord your God has given you. ¹⁵ Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations nearby. ¹⁶ Only in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. ¹⁷ But you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the Lord your God has commanded you, ¹⁸ so that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the Lord your God.