The Wars of Israel: From the Wilderness to the Judges

A Comprehensive Examination of Every Conflict, the Reasons Behind Them, and What the Evidence Actually Shows

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Introduction

The Israelite conquest of Canaan remains one of the most debated and morally challenging episodes in the Bible. From the wilderness wanderings through the book of Judges, the Israelites fought dozens of wars against numerous peoples and nations. The natural question arises: Were these wars justified? Were they provoked or unprovoked? Were the people they fought actually wicked, or did Israel simply steal their land and credit God for it?

This document examines every recorded conflict from Exodus through Judges, cataloging who Israel fought, who started each conflict, what the Bible claims as justification, and what outside evidence tells us about the peoples involved. It also considers the Latter-day Saint perspective through the Joseph Smith Translation and additional LDS scripture.

The goal is not to provide easy answers but to lay out the evidence honestly and let the reader draw their own conclusions.

Part I: The Wilderness Period (Exodus through Deuteronomy)

1. Egypt / Pharaoh's Army at the Red Sea

- **Reference:** Exodus 14
- **Who initiated:** Egypt pursued Israel after releasing them.
- **Biblical reason:** Pharaoh changed his mind about freeing the Israelites and sent his army to recapture them (Exodus 14:5-9).

• **Israel's role:** Entirely passive. God fought for them. Moses told the people, "The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace" (Exodus 14:14).

• **Outcome:** The sea parted for Israel and closed on Pharaoh's army. This was a defensive escape, not an Israelite attack.

Assessment: Clearly defensive. Israel did not fight at all. God delivered them from an army pursuing them to re-enslave them.

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2. The Amalekites at Rephidim

• **Reference:** Exodus 17:8-16

• **Who initiated:** "Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel in Rephidim" (Exodus 17:8). Amalek attacked first.

• **Biblical reason:** Unprovoked aggression by the Amalekites against a traveling people. Deuteronomy 25:17-18 adds a critical detail: "Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt; how he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God." The Amalekites attacked the vulnerable rear of the column -- the elderly, the sick, the stragglers.

• **Outcome:** Joshua led the defense. Israel won while Moses held up his arms (supported by Aaron and Hur). God declared perpetual enmity with Amalek: "The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Exodus 17:16).

Assessment: Clearly defensive. The Amalekites attacked without provocation, targeting the weakest members of Israel's group. This is the origin of the special enmity between Israel and Amalek.

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3. The Failed Invasion After the Spies' Report

• **Reference:** Numbers 14:39-45

• **Who initiated:** Israel -- against God's explicit command.

• **Biblical reason:** After the ten spies gave a negative report and the people refused to enter Canaan, God sentenced them to 40 years of wandering. In a fit of presumption, some Israelites decided to invade anyway. Moses warned them: "Go not up, for the LORD is not among you; that ye be not smitten before your enemies" (Numbers 14:42).

• **Outcome:** Total defeat. "The Amalekites came down, and the Canaanites which dwelt in that hill, and smote them, and discomfited them" (Numbers 14:45).

Assessment: Israel was the aggressor here, and they acted against God's command. They were defeated precisely because they acted without authorization. This episode is actually evidence that the biblical narrative distinguishes between authorized and unauthorized warfare.

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4. The Canaanite King of Arad

• **Reference:** Numbers 21:1-3

• **Who initiated:** "King Arad the Canaanite, which dwelt in the south, heard tell that Israel came by the way of the spies; then he fought against Israel, and took some of them prisoners" (Numbers 21:1). Arad attacked first.

• **Biblical reason:** Defensive. Israel made a vow to God that if He delivered the Canaanites to them, they would "utterly destroy their cities" (Numbers 21:2).

• **Outcome:** God gave them victory. They destroyed the Canaanite cities and named the place Hormah ("destruction").

Assessment: Defensive. Arad attacked Israel and took prisoners. Israel responded.

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5. Sihon, King of the Amorites

• **Reference:** Numbers 21:21-32; Deuteronomy 2:24-37

• **Who initiated:** Israel asked for peaceful passage; Sihon refused and attacked. "Israel sent messengers unto Sihon king of the Amorites, saying, Let me pass through thy land: we will not turn into the fields, or into the vineyards; we will not drink of the waters of the well: but we will go along by the king's highway, until we be past thy borders. And Sihon would not suffer Israel to pass through his border: but Sihon gathered all his people together, and went out against Israel into the wilderness: and he came to Jahaz, and fought against Israel" (Numbers 21:21-23).

• **Biblical complication:** Deuteronomy 2:30 adds that God "hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into thy hand." This suggests divine orchestration behind what appeared to be a diplomatic situation.

• **Outcome:** Israel defeated Sihon and took his territory from the Arnon to the Jabbok.

Assessment: Mixed. Israel genuinely requested peaceful passage and was refused. Sihon attacked first at Jahaz. However, Deuteronomy acknowledges God hardened Sihon's heart specifically to create a pretext for conquest. This is an honest admission within the text that the situation was engineered. The land Sihon controlled had itself been taken from Moab by conquest (Numbers 21:26), so this was not ancestral Amorite homeland.

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6. Og, King of Bashan

• **Reference:** Numbers 21:33-35; Deuteronomy 3:1-11

• **Who initiated:** "Og the king of Bashan went out against them, he, and all his people, to the battle at Edrei" (Numbers 21:33). Og attacked.

• **Biblical reason:** God told Moses, "Fear him not: for I have delivered him into thy hand, and all his people, and his land" (Numbers 21:34).

• **Outcome:** Israel defeated Og and took his territory. Og is described as having an iron bedstead nine cubits long (about 13.5 feet), suggesting he was unusually large or that the bed was ceremonial (Deuteronomy 3:11).

Assessment: Og attacked first. Israel was on the defensive initially, though they were clearly marching through territory that triggered these confrontations.

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7. The Midianites -- The War of Vengeance

• **Reference:** Numbers 25; Numbers 31

• **Who initiated:** This one is complex. The Midianites did not attack militarily. Instead, following Balaam's counsel, Midianite women seduced Israelite men into sexual immorality and idol worship (the incident at Baal-Peor, Numbers 25:1-9). A plague killed 24,000 Israelites. God then commanded Moses: "Vex the Midianites, and smite them: For they vex you with their wiles, wherewith they have beguiled you in the matter of Peor" (Numbers 25:17-18).

• **Biblical reason:** Retaliation for what the text presents as a deliberate scheme to corrupt Israel through religious seduction.

• **God's command:** Explicit. "The LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites" (Numbers 31:1-2).

• **Outcome:** Israel sent 12,000 men. They killed the five Midianite kings (Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba) and Balaam. They took the women and children captive. Moses was angry that they spared the women, since it was the women who caused the seduction at Baal-Peor (Numbers 31:14-16). He commanded the death of all women who had been with men, sparing only the young girls.

Assessment: This is one of the most troubling passages. The provocation (religious/sexual corruption) was real by the text's own account, but the response -- killing captive women and keeping young girls -- strikes modern readers as disproportionate and horrifying. The text does not shy away from the severity. It presents Moses commanding this as military protocol of the ancient world, not as a feel-good story.

Nations Israel Was Told NOT to Attack

It is significant that the Bible records God explicitly forbidding Israel from attacking certain nations:

• **Edom** (descendants of Esau): "Meddle not with them; for I will not give you of their land, no, not so much as a foot breadth; because I have given mount Seir unto Esau for a possession" (Deuteronomy 2:4-5).

• **Moab** (descendants of Lot): "Distress not the Moabites, neither contend with them in battle: for I will not give thee of their land for a possession; because I have given Ar unto the children of Lot for a possession" (Deuteronomy 2:9).

• **Ammon** (descendants of Lot): "Distress them not, nor meddle with them: for I will not give thee of the land of the children of Ammon any possession; because I have given it unto the children of Lot for a possession" (Deuteronomy 2:19).

Why this matters: If Israel was simply stealing land and claiming God told them to, why would they invent restrictions? These prohibitions show that the narrative is more nuanced than "conquer everything in sight." The commands to avoid Edom, Moab, and Ammon are evidence of a framework -- however debatable -- that distinguished between peoples God authorized them to displace and peoples whose land was off-limits.

Part II: The Conquest of Canaan (Joshua)

The General Command

Before the specific battles, the broader context: God commanded Israel to drive out or destroy the inhabitants of Canaan. The stated reasons were:

1. **Their wickedness:** "Not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thine heart, dost thou go to possess their land: but for the wickedness of these nations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee" (Deuteronomy 9:5).

2. **To prevent corruption of Israel:** "Lest the land vomit you out also, when ye defile it, as it vomited out the nations that were before you" (Leviticus 18:28). The specific practices listed include child sacrifice, ritual prostitution, incest, and bestiality (Leviticus 18:21-23; Deuteronomy 18:9-12).

3. **The long patience of God:** Genesis 15:16 records God telling Abraham that his descendants would return to Canaan in the fourth generation, "for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full." This implies God waited over 400 years for the Canaanites to reach a threshold of wickedness before authorizing their displacement.

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8. Jericho

- **Reference:** Joshua 6

- **Who initiated:** Israel besieged the city under divine command.

- **God's command:** "See, I have given into thine hand Jericho, and the king thereof, and the mighty men of valour" (Joshua 6:2).

- **Outcome:** After marching around the city for seven days, the walls fell. Israel "utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword" (Joshua 6:21). Rahab and her family were spared because she had hidden the Israelite spies.

- **Note on Rahab:** A Canaanite prostitute who recognized God's power was spared. Her testimony in Joshua 2:9-11 reveals that all of Canaan knew about Israel's God and His mighty acts for 40 years. The Canaanites had information and could have responded as Rahab did.

Assessment: A city under siege and devoted to destruction (herem). The sparing of Rahab shows that the destruction was not indiscriminate ethnic cleansing -- those who aligned themselves with Israel's God were

preserved.

9. Ai -- First Battle (Defeat)

• **Reference:** Joshua 7

• **Who initiated:** Israel attacked Ai but was defeated because Achan had taken forbidden spoil from Jericho.

• **Outcome:** About 36 Israelites killed. This defeat is presented as divine punishment for covenant violation within Israel's own ranks -- evidence that God held Israel to the same moral standard.

10. Ai -- Second Battle (Victory)

• **Reference:** Joshua 8

• **God's command:** "Fear not, neither be thou dismayed: take all the people of war with thee, and arise, go up to Ai: see, I have given into thy hand the king of Ai, and his people, and his city, and his land" (Joshua 8:1).

• **Outcome:** Israel used an ambush strategy and took the city. The king of Ai was hanged.

11. The Gibeonite Deception

• **Reference:** Joshua 9

• **Who initiated:** The Gibeonites (a Hivite people) deceived Israel into making a peace treaty by pretending to be from a distant land.

• **Outcome:** When the deception was discovered, Israel honored the treaty rather than destroying the Gibeonites. They became servants but were protected. Joshua even fought a war to defend them (Joshua 10).

Assessment: This is significant. A Canaanite people sought peace (even through deception), and Israel honored the covenant. The Gibeonites survived the conquest entirely. Combined with Rahab's story, this suggests that the conquest was not a blanket ethnic extermination -- those who sought peace or aligned with Israel were preserved.

12. The Southern Coalition -- Battle of Gibeon

• **Reference:** Joshua 10

• **Who initiated:** Five Amorite kings (of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon) attacked Gibeon for making peace with Israel. The Gibeonites sent word to Joshua for help.

- **God's command:** "Fear them not: for I have delivered them into thine hand; there shall not a man of them stand before thee" (Joshua 10:8).

- **Outcome:** God fought for Israel with hailstones ("more died from hailstones than from the sword," Joshua 10:11). Joshua commanded the sun and moon to stand still (Joshua 10:12-14). The five kings were captured and executed. Joshua then conducted a southern campaign taking Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir.

Assessment: The coalition attacked Gibeon, not Israel. Israel came to defend their allies. The broader campaign that followed was offensive, however.

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13. The Northern Coalition -- Waters of Merom

- **Reference:** Joshua 11

- **Who initiated:** "Jabin king of Hazor... sent to Jobab king of Madon, and to the king of Shimron, and to the king of Achshaph" and many other kings. They "came and pitched together at the waters of Merom, to fight against Israel" (Joshua 11:1-5).

- **God's command:** "Be not afraid because of them: for tomorrow about this time will I deliver them up all slain before Israel" (Joshua 11:6).

- **Outcome:** Israel defeated the northern coalition. Hazor was burned.

Assessment: The northern kings formed a coalition and marched against Israel. This was technically defensive on Israel's part, though Israel was already engaged in a conquest campaign.

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14. Joshua's Complete Campaign -- The Thirty-One Kings

Joshua 12 lists 31 kings defeated during the conquest -- 2 under Moses (Sihon and Og) and 29 under Joshua. These include the kings of Jericho, Ai, Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, Eglon, Gezer, Debir, Geder, Hormah, Arad, Libnah, Adullam, Makkedah, Bethel, Tappuah, Hepher, Aphek, Lasharon, Madon, Hazor, Shimron-meron, Achshaph, Taanach, Megiddo, Kedesh, Jokneam, Dor, Goiim, and Tirzah.

The Tension Within Joshua Itself

Here is something the text itself admits: the conquest was not total.

- Joshua 10:40 says Joshua "smote all the country... he left none remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed."
- Yet Joshua 13:1 says "there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed."
- Joshua 15:63 says "the children of Judah could not drive out the Jebusites."
- Joshua 16:10 says "they drave not out the Canaanites that dwelt in Gezer."
- Joshua 17:12 says "the children of Manasseh could not drive out the inhabitants of those cities."

This internal contradiction is widely recognized by scholars. The "total destruction" language appears to be hyperbolic war rhetoric -- a convention used throughout the ancient Near East (see the section on outside evidence below) -- while the actual historical situation was far more gradual and incomplete.

Part III: The Period of the Judges

The book of Judges follows a recurring cycle: Israel sins by worshiping other gods, God allows an oppressor to subjugate them, Israel cries out, God raises a deliverer (judge), there is peace, the judge dies, and the cycle repeats (Judges 2:11-19).

15. Cushan-Rishathaim, King of Mesopotamia

- **Reference:** Judges 3:7-11
- **Judge:** Othniel
- **Who initiated the oppression:** God allowed it because Israel "served the Baals and the Asheroth" (Judges 3:7).
- **Oppression:** 8 years
- **Outcome:** Othniel delivered Israel. Peace for 40 years.

Assessment: Defensive. Israel was under foreign oppression and fought for liberation.

16. Eglon, King of Moab (with Ammonites and Amalekites)

- **Reference:** Judges 3:12-30
- **Judge:** Ehud
- **Who initiated:** Moab, with Ammonite and Amalekite allies, oppressed Israel for 18 years.
- **Outcome:** Ehud assassinated Eglon and led Israel to defeat the Moabites, killing about 10,000 at the fords of the Jordan. Peace for 80 years.

Assessment: Defensive. Liberation from foreign oppression.

17. The Philistines (Shamgar)

- **Reference:** Judges 3:31
- **Judge:** Shamgar
- **Outcome:** Shamgar killed 600 Philistines with an oxgoad and "saved Israel."

Assessment: Defensive. Minimal details given.

18. Jabin, King of Canaan / Sisera

- **Reference:** Judges 4-5

- **Judges:** Deborah and Barak

- **Who initiated:** Jabin king of Hazor (with 900 iron chariots under commander Sisera) "mightily oppressed the children of Israel twenty years" (Judges 4:3).

- **God's command:** Through Deborah: "Hath not the LORD God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor?" (Judges 4:6).

- **Outcome:** The river Kishon flooded and bogged down Sisera's chariots. Sisera fled on foot and was killed by Jael, who drove a tent peg through his skull. Peace for 40 years.

Assessment: Defensive. Liberation from a 20-year oppression.

19. The Midianites, Amalekites, and "People of the East"

- **Reference:** Judges 6-8

- **Judge:** Gideon

- **Who initiated:** Midian oppressed Israel for 7 years, coming up during harvest season "like locusts" and devastating Israel's crops until the people were "brought very low" (Judges 6:6).

- **God's command:** "Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?" (Judges 6:14).

- **Outcome:** God reduced Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300 to prevent Israel from claiming credit. The 300 men routed the Midianite army with trumpets, jars, and torches. The Midianite kings Zebah and Zalmunna were captured and executed. Peace for 40 years.

Assessment: Defensive. Liberation from foreign oppression. The reduction of the army to 300 is notable -- the text emphasizes that this was God's deliverance, not military superiority.

20. Abimelech's Internal Conflicts

- **Reference:** Judges 9

- **This was not a foreign war but an Israelite civil conflict.** Abimelech (Gideon's son by a concubine) murdered 70 of his brothers to seize power, then warred against Shechem and Thebez. God sent judgment: a woman dropped a millstone on Abimelech's skull.

Assessment: Internal violence, not divinely sanctioned warfare. The text presents it as a cautionary tale of human power-seeking.

21. The Ammonites

- **Reference:** Judges 10:6-12:7

- **Judge:** Jephthah

- **Who initiated:** Ammon oppressed Israel east of the Jordan for 18 years.

- **Diplomatic attempt:** Jephthah first tried diplomacy, sending messengers arguing that Israel had not taken Ammonite territory -- they had taken it from Sihon the Amorite, who had previously taken it from Moab. Israel had held the land for 300 years without Ammonite objection. "The king of the children of Ammon hearkened not unto the words of Jephthah" (Judges 11:28).

- **Outcome:** Jephthah defeated the Ammonites decisively.

- **Tragic aftermath:** Jephthah's rash vow resulted in the sacrifice (or lifelong virginity) of his only daughter (Judges 11:30-40). This is presented as a tragedy, not a divine endorsement.

Assessment: Defensive. Jephthah even attempted diplomacy first and was refused.

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22. The Philistines (Samson)

- **Reference:** Judges 13-16

- **Judge:** Samson

- **Who initiated:** The Philistines oppressed Israel for 40 years (Judges 13:1).

- **Samson's role:** Highly personal and driven by personal vendettas as much as divine calling. The text notes God was "seeking an occasion against the Philistines" through Samson's actions (Judges 14:4), but many of Samson's conflicts arose from his own desires and poor choices.

- **Outcome:** Samson "began to deliver" Israel (Judges 13:5) but never completed the task. His final act brought down the temple of Dagon, killing him and about 3,000 Philistines.

Assessment: The Philistine oppression was real, but Samson is a deeply flawed deliverer. The text does not present him as a moral hero -- it presents him as a man with divine strength and human weakness.

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23. The Danite Conquest of Laish

- **Reference:** Judges 17-18

- **Who initiated:** The tribe of Dan, seeking territory they had failed to secure in their allotment.

- **God's command:** None recorded. The Danites consulted a corrupt Levite priest running a private shrine with a stolen idol. The priest said, "Go in peace: before the LORD is your way" (Judges 18:6), but the entire episode is steeped in idolatry.

- **The victims:** The people of Laish are described as "quiet and secure" and "unsuspecting" (Judges 18:7, 27). They had no allies and "no deliverer" because they were far from Sidon.

- **Outcome:** 600 armed Danites destroyed Laish, killed its inhabitants, burned the city, and rebuilt it as the city of Dan. They set up the stolen idol.

Assessment: This is one of the clearest cases of unprovoked aggression in Judges. There is no divine command, no moral justification given, and the victims are described sympathetically. The entire episode is connected with idolatry and corruption. The book of Judges includes this precisely to show how far Israel had fallen from the ideal -- it is not presented as righteous conquest.

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24. The Civil War Against Benjamin

- **Reference:** Judges 19-21

- **Cause:** Men of Gibeah (in Benjamin) gang-raped and murdered a Levite's concubine. When Israel demanded Benjamin hand over the guilty men, Benjamin refused and chose war instead.

- **God's involvement:** Israel inquired of God three times before each battle. God confirmed they should fight -- but Israel lost the first two battles (losing 40,000 men total) before winning the third.

- **Outcome:** Benjamin was nearly annihilated. Only 600 men survived. Israel then attacked Jabesh-Gilead (for not joining the fight) and allowed the kidnapping of women from Shiloh to provide wives for the surviving Benjaminites.

Assessment: The initial cause (punishing a horrific crime) was just, but the escalation was catastrophic. The "solutions" to the aftermath -- destroying Jabesh-Gilead and kidnapping women -- are presented as desperate measures by a people without moral direction. The book of Judges ends with: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). This is not an endorsement. It is a lament.

Part IV: What Does the Outside Evidence Say?

Were the Canaanites Actually Wicked?

The Bible's primary accusations against the Canaanites center on:

1. Child sacrifice (especially to the deity Molech/Molek)

2. Ritual sexual practices

3. Divination and sorcery

4. General moral corruption

What does the evidence outside the Bible show?

Child Sacrifice -- The Archaeological Evidence

The Tophet at Carthage: Carthage was a Phoenician (Canaanite) colony in North Africa. Excavations beginning in 1921 uncovered a precinct called the Tophet containing thousands of urns with cremated

remains of infants and young children, along with dedicatory stelae to the gods Tanit and Baal Hammon. Lawrence Stager and Samuel Wolff ("Child Sacrifice at Carthage," 1984) analyzed the remains and concluded that many showed evidence of being sacrificed rather than simply buried after natural death.

The Pozo Moro Monument (Spain): This 6th-century BC Iberian monument, influenced by Phoenician culture, depicts a figure placing a child into the mouth of a deity -- visual evidence of the practice in the broader Canaanite cultural sphere.

The Ugaritic Texts: Discovered at Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit) in Syria beginning in 1928, these 14th-13th century BC texts are the closest we have to Canaanite religious literature. While the ritual texts from Ugarit do not explicitly describe child sacrifice, the mythological texts depict Baal's conflicts and the goddess Anat wading through blood and body parts, suggesting a culture where extreme violence had religious dimensions.

The Amman Citadel Inscription: A 9th-century BC inscription from Amman, Jordan, may reference the construction of a sanctuary associated with human sacrifice, though the text is damaged and interpretation is debated.

The Debate: Some scholars, notably Moshe Weinfeld and more recently Heath Dewrell (*Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel*, 2017), have argued that the evidence is stronger than skeptics allow. Others, like Francesca Stavrakopoulou (*King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, 2004), suggest that Israelites themselves may have practiced child sacrifice and that the biblical polemic against Canaanite sacrifice is partially deflection. The Israelite prohibition (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 18:10) implies that the practice was known and tempting enough to require explicit condemnation.

The Amarna Letters -- Political Chaos in Canaan

The Amarna Letters are approximately 382 cuneiform tablets discovered in 1887 at Tell el-Amarna, Egypt. They are diplomatic correspondence between the Egyptian court and its Canaanite vassals, dating to roughly 1390-1332 BC -- the century or so before the Israelite conquest.

What they reveal:

• **Canaan was politically fragmented.** Dozens of petty city-states were constantly at war with each other. Rulers like Rib-Hadda of Byblos wrote over 60 desperate letters begging Egypt for help against neighboring aggressors. Lab'ayu of Shechem was accused of territorial aggression against other Egyptian vassals.

• **Egyptian control was collapsing.** The Canaanite vassals repeatedly begged for military aid that never came. Egypt under Akhenaten was distracted by internal religious revolution.

• **The Habiru were destabilizing the region.** Multiple letters reference groups called Habiru (or 'Apiru) -- displaced, marginal peoples who were seizing territory. Abdi-Heba of Jerusalem wrote: "the Habiru capture the cities of the king... Lost are the lands of the king."

• **The Habiru-Hebrew connection:** While most scholars no longer equate the Habiru directly with the Hebrews, the linguistic connection is acknowledged, and the Habiru may overlap with or include

groups that later became part of Israel.

Significance: The Amarna Letters confirm that Canaan was already a region of endemic warfare, political collapse, and social upheaval before Israel ever arrived. The land was not peaceful and stable before the Israelites showed up -- it was a war zone of competing city-states preying on each other, with Egyptian imperial control dissolving.

The Mesha Stele (Moabite Stone) -- Herem Was Not Unique to Israel

Discovered in 1868 at Dhiban, Jordan, this 9th-century BC inscription by King Mesha of Moab (referenced in 2 Kings 3) provides the most direct parallel to Israelite herem (total destruction as a religious act):

> *"I took [the vessels of YHWH] and dragged them before Kemosh. And I fought against the city and took it, and I **devoted to destruction** all the people of the city as a spectacle for Kemosh and Moab."*

> *On the capture of Nebo: "I took it and **devoted to destruction the whole of it** -- 7,000 men, boys, women, girls, and maid-servants, for I had devoted it to Ashtar-Kemosh."*

The Mesha Stele uses the exact same Semitic root (h-r-m) as the biblical herem and applies it identically: total destruction of a conquered population as a religious act dedicated to a deity. This proves conclusively that herem was not invented by Israel but was a broader Canaanite/West Semitic practice. The Moabites did the same thing to Israelites in the name of their god Kemosh.

Ancient Near Eastern War Rhetoric -- Was "Utterly Destroy" Literal?

K. Lawson Younger Jr. (*Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 1990) demonstrated through detailed comparison that Israelite conquest accounts follow the same literary conventions as Egyptian, Assyrian, and Hittite conquest accounts -- all of which used "total destruction" language that was demonstrably non-literal:

• **Thutmose III of Egypt** (15th century BC): Describes campaigns in Canaan as utterly destroying cities and populations, yet the same cities appear intact in subsequent campaigns.

• **Ramesses II:** Describes the Battle of Kadesh as a total Egyptian victory; Hittite sources describe it as a Hittite victory.

• **The Merneptah Stele** (c. 1207 BC): "Israel is laid waste; his seed is not." Obviously hyperbolic -- Israel continued to exist.

• **Sennacherib of Assyria:** Claims to have destroyed 46 walled cities of Judah -- numbers that are almost certainly exaggerated.

• **Assyrian palace reliefs** at Nineveh depict impalement, flaying, and blinding -- Assyrian warfare was far more brutal than anything described in Joshua.

The conclusion: "Utterly destroyed" and "left none remaining" were stock phrases in ancient Near Eastern military writing. They meant "we won a decisive victory," not necessarily "we killed every living thing."

The internal biblical evidence supports this: Joshua says he "utterly destroyed" groups that are then still living in the land a few chapters later.

Genesis 15:16 -- "The Iniquity of the Amorites Is Not Yet Full"

This verse is theologically crucial. God told Abraham that his descendants would return to Canaan in the fourth generation, "for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full."

What this implies:

1. God delayed the conquest for over 400 years. If this were simply about land-grabbing, why wait?

2. The timing was tied to a moral threshold -- the Canaanites had to reach a certain level of wickedness.

3. The same principle was later applied to Israel itself: when Israel sinned in the same ways, God used Assyria and Babylon to displace them (Leviticus 18:28: "lest the land vomit you out also, when ye defile it, as it vomited out the nations that were before you").

Critical perspective: Skeptics argue this is a retrospective theological justification written later to legitimate the conquest. This is possible. But the internal logic of the text is at least consistent: the same moral standard is applied to Israel, and Israel does eventually suffer the same fate.

Were the Canaanites Warned?

Rahab's testimony (Joshua 2:9-11): "I know that the LORD hath given you the land, and that your terror is fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land faint because of you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you... and what ye did unto the two kings of the Amorites." The Canaanites had 40 years of information about Israel's God.

The Gibeonites: A Canaanite people who sought peace were preserved. Their survival shows the destruction was not indiscriminate.

Rahab: A Canaanite prostitute who responded to what she knew about God was saved and became an ancestor of Jesus (Matthew 1:5).

Rabbinic tradition (Maimonides): Jewish tradition holds that Joshua sent three proclamations to the Canaanites before the conquest, offering three options: flee, make peace, or fight. Only those who chose to fight were subject to war. The Talmud records that the Girgashites voluntarily emigrated to Africa.

Part V: The Latter-day Saint Perspective

The Joseph Smith Translation (JST)

Joseph Smith did not extensively revise the conquest narratives in the JST. The commands in Deuteronomy 7, the battles in Joshua, and the stories in Judges remain essentially unchanged. This is itself significant -- Joseph Smith left the difficult texts intact, implicitly affirming their place in the narrative.

What the JST does add is a broader theological lens through the Book of Moses (JST Genesis):

> • **Moses 7:28-37:** Enoch sees God weeping over the wickedness and suffering of humanity. God says, "Among all the workmanship of mine hands there has not been so great wickedness as among thy brethren." This portrays God as grieving, not gleeful, in judgment.

The Book of Mormon -- The Most Direct Commentary

The Book of Mormon provides the most developed Latter-day Saint commentary on the conquest.

1 Nephi 17:32-38 -- Nephi directly addresses the conquest:

> *"Do ye suppose that the children of this land, who were in the land of promise, who were driven out by our fathers, do ye suppose that they were righteous? Behold, I say unto you, Nay."*

> *"Do ye suppose that our fathers would have been more choice than they if they had been righteous? I say unto you, Nay."*

> *"Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God. But behold, this people had rejected every word of God, and they were ripe in iniquity."*

Key principles from this passage:

1. **God does not play ethnic favorites.** "The Lord esteemeth all flesh in one." The Canaanites were not displaced because they were the wrong ethnicity. Israel was not favored because of their bloodline.

2. **The Canaanites "had rejected every word of God."** This implies they had received divine communication and thoroughly rejected it.

3. **The standard is universal.** If Israel had been wicked and the Canaanites righteous, the roles would have been reversed.

Ether 2:8-12 states the principle in its most universal form:

> *"Whatsoever nation shall possess it shall serve God, or they shall be swept off when the fulness of his wrath shall come upon them. And the fulness of his wrath cometh upon them when they are ripened in iniquity."*

The Book of Mormon applies this pattern across multiple civilizations:

Civilization	Land	Outcome
Canaanites	Canaan	Displaced by Israel for wickedness
Israel	Canaan	Later displaced by Assyria/Babylon for wickedness
Jaredites	The Americas	Destroyed through wickedness (Ether 14-15)
Nephites	The Americas	Destroyed when they became wicked (Mormon 6)

The pattern is clear: no people gets a permanent, unconditional land grant. The Nephites -- the protagonists of the Book of Mormon -- suffer the exact same fate as the Canaanites. This creates empathy for the displaced rather than triumphalism.

Mormon 4:5 adds a sobering nuance: "It is by the wicked that the wicked are punished." Sometimes God's instrument of judgment is itself a flawed nation. The conquering people are not necessarily righteous just because they serve as God's instrument.

D&C 98:33-37 -- The Revealed Law of War

This revelation provides what it claims is the law God "gave unto mine ancients" regarding warfare:

> 1. Israel "should not go out unto battle against any nation, kindred, tongue, or people, save I, the Lord, commanded them."
>
> 2. If attacked, they should "first lift a standard of peace unto that people."
>
> 3. Peace must be offered three times before God would "justify them in going out to battle."

This framework, applied retroactively, provides a theological structure: the conquest required divine authorization and the offering of peace first.

Part VI: Honest Assessment -- What Can We Actually Say?

Cases Where Israel Was Clearly Defending Itself

- Egypt at the Red Sea
- The Amalekites at Rephidim (and their targeting of the weak and elderly)
- The Canaanite king of Arad (who attacked first)
- Og king of Bashan (who attacked first)
- Every oppression cycle in Judges (Moab, Canaan/Sisera, Midian, Ammon, Philistines)

Cases Where Israel Had a Plausible Justification

• Sihon king of the Amorites (Israel requested passage; Sihon attacked -- though God hardened his heart)

• The southern coalition at Gibeon (they attacked Israel's ally)

• The northern coalition at Merom (they mobilized against Israel)

• The Midianite war of vengeance (response to the Baal-Peor incident)

Cases Where the Justification Is Theological, Not Military

• The general conquest of Canaan under Joshua (commanded by God as judgment on Canaanite wickedness, but Israel was the initiator of most individual campaigns)

• The herem (total destruction) commands -- deeply troubling to modern sensibilities, though paralleled in the practices of Israel's contemporaries (Mesha Stele)

Cases Where Israel Acted Badly

• The failed invasion against God's command (Numbers 14) -- they were punished for it

• The Danite conquest of Laish (no divine command, innocent victims, connected to idolatry)

• Abimelech's power-grabs (civil violence, divinely judged)

• The aftermath of the Benjamin war (attacking Jabesh-Gilead, kidnapping women at Shiloh)

• Samson's personal vendettas (though the text says God used them)

What the Evidence Suggests

1. **The Canaanites were not innocent.** Archaeological evidence supports the practice of child sacrifice, and the Amarna Letters show a region of endemic warfare and political chaos even before Israel arrived.

2. **The conquest was not total.** Both the biblical text itself and archaeology indicate that Canaanite populations continued living alongside Israelites. The "total destruction" language is almost certainly hyperbolic.

3. **Herem was not unique to Israel.** The Moabites practiced the same kind of religiously-motivated total warfare against Israelites.

4. **Israel was held to the same standard.** The Bible explicitly states that Israel would be vomited from the land if they committed the same sins -- and they were.

5. **Some conflicts were genuinely defensive.** Many of the wilderness and Judges-era wars began with attacks on Israel.

6. **Some were not.** The broad conquest of Canaan under Joshua and episodes like Laish involve Israel initiating violence against peoples who had not attacked them.

7. **The theological framework is internally consistent** even if debatable. The narrative presents a God who waits over 400 years, distinguishes between peoples who are off-limits and peoples who are not, spares those who seek peace (Rahab, the Gibeonites), and applies the same standard to Israel that He applied to the Canaanites.

Conclusion

The wars of Israel from the wilderness to the Judges were a mix of defensive responses, divinely commanded campaigns, opportunistic conquests, and outright failures. The biblical text does not present a sanitized picture -- it includes Israel's defeats, their violations of God's commands, their moral failures, and the terrible cost of the conquest on both sides.

Whether one reads these accounts as divine justice enacted through a flawed people, as ancient tribal warfare clothed in theological language, or as something in between depends on one's starting assumptions. What the evidence does not support is the simplest versions of either extreme: neither "Israel was always righteous and everyone they fought deserved it" nor "Israel was simply a band of land-thieves who invented God's approval" captures the full picture.

The truth, as usual, is more complicated than either narrative allows.

Quick Reference: Every People/Nation Israel Fought

Wilderness Period

People/Nation	Reference	Who Started It	Outcome
Egypt (Pharaoh's army)	Exodus 14	Egypt pursued	God destroyed Egypt's army
Amalekites (Rephidim)	Exodus 17	Amalek attacked	Israel won
Amalekites/Canaanites (failed invasion)	Numbers 14	Israel (against God's command)	Israel defeated
Canaanite king of Arad	Numbers 21:1-3	Arad attacked	Israel won
Sihon, king of the Amorites	Numbers 21:21-32	Sihon attacked after refusing passage	Israel won

People/Nation	Reference	Who Started It	Outcome
Og, king of Bashan	Numbers 21:33-35	Og attacked	Israel won
Midianites (5 kings + Balaam)	Numbers 31	God commanded (after Baal-Peor)	Israel won

Conquest of Canaan (Joshua)

People/Nation	Reference	Who Started It	Outcome
Jericho	Joshua 6	Israel (God commanded)	Destroyed
Ai (1st battle)	Joshua 7	Israel	Israel defeated
Ai (2nd battle)	Joshua 8	Israel (God commanded)	Destroyed
Southern coalition (5 Amorite kings)	Joshua 10	Coalition attacked Gibeon	Israel won
Northern coalition (Jabin of Hazor et al.)	Joshua 11	Coalition mobilized against Israel	Israel won
31 kings total	Joshua 12	Various	Israel conquered
Various Canaanite groups (incomplete)	Joshua 13-17	Various	Many not driven out

Period of the Judges

Oppressor/Enemy	Reference	Judge	Oppression Length
Cushan-Rishathaim (Mesopotamia)	Judges 3:7-11	Othniel	8 years
Eglon of Moab (+ Ammon, Amalek)	Judges 3:12-30	Ehud	18 years
Philistines	Judges 3:31	Shamgar	Not stated
Jabin/Sisera (Canaan)	Judges 4-5	Deborah/Barak	20 years
Midianites/Amalekites/Eastern peoples	Judges 6-8	Gideon	7 years
Shechem/Thebez (civil)	Judges 9	N/A (Abimelech)	N/A
Ammonites	Judges 10-12	Jephthah	18 years

Oppressor/Enemy	Reference	Judge	Oppression Length
Philistines	Judges 13-16	Samson	40 years
Laish (Danite migration)	Judges 18	None	N/A (unprovoked)
Benjamin (civil war)	Judges 19-21	None	N/A

This document was compiled from biblical texts (primarily KJV), archaeological evidence, ancient Near Eastern parallels, and Latter-day Saint scripture and scholarship. Specific verse references should be verified against a Bible text for any citations used in formal study.