

Who were the Canaanites?

The Canaanites were a group of ancient people who lived in the land of Canaan on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Canaan is described in the Bible as extending from Lebanon toward the Brook of Egypt in the south and the Jordan River Valley in the east. In the Bible, notably in Genesis 10 and Numbers 34, this was called the “land of Canaan” and occupies the same area that is occupied by modern Lebanon and Israel, plus parts of Jordan and Syria.

The Canaanites are mentioned over 150 times in the Bible. They were a wicked, idolatrous people descended from Noah’s grandson Canaan, who was a son of Ham (Genesis 9:18). Canaan was cursed because of his and his father’s sin against Noah (Genesis 9:20-25). In some passages, Canaanites specifically refers to the people of the lowlands and plains of Canaan (Joshua 11:3); in other passages, Canaanites is used more broadly to refer to all the inhabitants of the land, including the Hivites, Gergashites, Jebusites, Amorites, Hittites, and Perizzites (see Judges 1:9-10).

The land of Canaan was the land God promised to give to Abraham’s descendants (Genesis 12:7). The Canaanites are described in the Bible as a large and fierce people, not easily defeated, so the Israelites would need divine help to come against them, defeat them, and take their land away. God promised Moses and Joshua that help (Joshua 1:3).

After the Exodus, when the Lord told Moses to invade Canaan, Moses sent a group of spies into the land of Canaan to see what the people were like. The spies came back with a report that was both encouraging and daunting. The fruit of the land was huge—it took two men to carry back one cluster of grapes (Numbers 13:23)—and the land was bountiful in many other ways. However, the Canaanites were strong, and the cities were large and

fortified. Also, the Israelite spies had seen what they described as Nephilim and the descendants of Anak there (Numbers 13:28, 33)—next to these fierce people, the Israelites saw themselves as “grasshoppers” (verse 33). In the end, the Israelites were so afraid of the Canaanites that they refused to go into the land God had promised to them. Only Joshua and Caleb were confident that God would help them defeat the Canaanites. Because of their unwillingness to trust God, that generation of Israelites was denied entry into Canaan (Numbers 14:30-35).

After Moses’ death, Joshua was called by God to lead the people of Israel through the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. The first city they came to was Jericho, a strong-walled city of the Canaanites. Joshua believed God and told the people that God would drive the Canaanites out of the land so that Israel could take the land of Canaan (Joshua 3:10). The fall of Jericho was a supernatural event, as God overthrew that city (Joshua 6). This victory was a sign to the people of Israel and to the people of Canaan that God had given the land of Canaan to the Israelites.

Despite a long campaign against the inhabitants of Canaan, there remained several pockets of Canaanites in Israel after the land had been divided among the twelve tribes (Judges 1:27-36). Some of the Canaanites who remained in Israel were pressed into forced labor, but many strongholds remained in the land. The partial obedience of Israel, resulting in these Canaanite citadels, caused much trouble throughout the time of the Judges.