



[Home](#) > [Bible Topics](#) > [Words and Meanings](#) > [Hebrew](#) > this page

[CRI/Home](#)
[Site Contents](#)
[Daily Readings](#)
[Bible Topics](#)
[Worship Topics](#)
[Ministry Topics](#)
[Lectionary](#)
[Church Year](#)
[Theology Topics](#)
[Non-English](#)
[PhotoTour](#)
[New Additions](#)

[Search This Site](#)

[Click here to
 Make a Donation](#)

Devoted to Destruction

Dennis Bratcher

The Hebrew verb *charam* (חרם and its cognate noun חֲרָם, *cherem*, pronounced with a guttural ch, as in lo**ch**) is a technical term in Hebrew. That is, it has a very narrow and specialized meaning, and does not easily translate into English. It has usually been translated as something like "put under the ban" or "devote to destruction." In some places it can simply mean "exterminate," and rarely has the much milder meaning of "ostracize" or "excommunicate."

The term comes from the ancient practice of holy war in which a conquered enemy would be totally destroyed, usually including women and children along with the entire settlement in which they lived. At times certain spoils could be taken depending on the circumstances. This idea of holy war was a religious concept in which there was an attempt to eliminate religious ideas or practices that posed a threat to the conquering people. This could include not only outsiders but members of the clan or tribe that posed a religious threat to the community, for example by worshipping other gods.

The verb occurs about 50 times in the Old Testament and the noun about 30 times (several instances may have other meanings).

Exodus 22:20 illustrates the basic idea behind the concept of *cherem*:

Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than the LORD alone, shall be devoted to destruction.

This also applied to other actions that Israel understood to threaten the religious integrity of the community.

Judges 21:11 This is what you shall do; every male and every woman that has lain with a male you shall devote to destruction.

This was not just extermination for the sake of killing. There was a religious element to it so that what was destroyed was understood to be "devoted" to God and therefore belonged to God. In this sense, there is an element of ritualized killing. However, it was not a "sacrifice" in the normal sense, since Israelite sacrifice served a much different purpose.

Lev 27:28-29 Nothing that a person owns that has been devoted to destruction for the LORD, be it human or animal, or inherited landholding, may be sold or redeemed; every devoted thing is most holy to the LORD. No human beings who have been devoted to destruction can be ransomed; they shall be put to death.

Hebrew Terms

חרם

to devote to
 destruction

Related pages

[Old Testament
 History/Culture
 Biblical Theology](#)

In one case, Israel initiated the offer to eliminate Canaanite cities who worshipped other gods. Again, this reflects the idea that non-Yahweh worshippers were a contamination on the land and posed a threat to proper worship of God.

Num 21:2 Then Israel made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will indeed give this people into our hands, then we will utterly destroy their towns." The LORD listened to the voice of Israel, and handed over the Canaanites; and they utterly destroyed them and their towns; so the place was called Hormah.

In the historical recounting of Deuteronomy, cities are listed that were devoted to destruction (Deut 2:34, 3:6; Josh 2:10). Deuteronomy also contains warnings about the dangers of not eliminating the Canaanites when the Israelites enter the land.

Deut 7:1-4 1 When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you--the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you-- 7:2 and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. 7:3 Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 7:4 for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

The accounts of Israel's entry into the land in Joshua remember that the Israelites practiced *cherem* on captured Canaanite cities, described graphically in the account of the destruction of Jericho (for similar comments about the destruction of Ai and other cities, see Josh 8:26, 10:1, 28, 35-40, 11:20-21).

Josh 6:18 As for you, keep away from the things devoted to destruction, so as not to covet and take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel an object for destruction, bringing trouble upon it. 6:19 But all silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are sacred to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD." 6:20 So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. 6:21 Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys. . . . 6:24 They burned down the city, and everything in it; only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD.

The warning in Deuteronomy serves to illustrate just how serious the idea of *cherem* was to the Israelites (also 13:17).

Deut 7:26 Do not bring an abhorrent thing into your house, or you will be set apart for destruction like it. You must utterly

detest and abhor it, for it is set apart for destruction.

The story of Achan in Joshua 7 illustrates the problem for Israel. It is prefaced by another warning.

Josh 6:18 As for you, keep away from the things devoted to destruction, so as not to covet and take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel an object for destruction, bringing trouble upon it.

Josh 7:1 But the Israelites broke faith in regard to the devoted things: Achan son of Carmi son of Zabdi son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of the devoted things; and the anger of the LORD burned against the Israelites.

The narrative recounts that Achan's action in defying the *cherem* brought a curse upon the people and led to defeat in the next battle. God revealed to Joshua the problem and how the matter should be resolved.

Josh 7:11 Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I imposed on them. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have acted deceitfully, and they have put them among their own belongings. 7:12 Therefore the Israelites are unable to stand before their enemies; they turn their backs to their enemies, because they have become a thing devoted for destruction themselves. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you. 7:13 Proceed to sanctify the people, and say, 'Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "There are devoted things among you, O Israel; you will be unable to stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you."

This illustrates what other passages reveal, that whatever or whoever was placed under *cherem* was considered to belong to God.

Num 18:14 Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours.

Since Achan's action posed an equal religious threat to the people, then the one guilty himself becomes *cherem*.

Josh 7:15 And the one who is taken as having the devoted things shall be burned with fire, together with all that he has, for having transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and for having done an outrageous thing in Israel. . . . 7:24 Then Joshua and all Israel with him took Achan son of Zerah, with the silver, the mantle, and the bar of gold, with his sons and daughters, with his oxen, donkeys, and sheep, and his tent and all that he had; and they brought them up to the Valley of Achor. 7:25 Joshua said, "Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD is bringing trouble on you today." And all Israel stoned him to death; they burned them with fire, cast stones on them

Whether it was practiced consistently or not, the biblical tradition recalls that the idea of *cherem* persisted as the Israelites struggled to overcome the influence of surrounding peoples and religions in the early monarchical era. While King Saul saw a practical aspect in saving the best of livestock, the prophet Samuel condemned the king for not fulfilling his instructions to Saul concerning *cherem*.

1 Sam 15:3 "Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." . . . 15:8 He took King Agag of the Amalekites alive, but utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. 15:9 Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed. 15:10 The word of the LORD came to Samuel: 15:11 "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands."

The practice of *cherem* seems to have been abandoned as the Israelites gained control of the land and developed a stable monarchy. However, there are also references to other people practicing *cherem*. This may reflect the same thinking concerning religious purity that prevailed in early Israelite society. Or it may simply be the way that Israelites described the actions of other nations that were in reality more a political and military strategy (also 2 Chron 32:14).

2 Kings 19:11 [Isa 37:11] See, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, destroying them utterly. Shall you be delivered?

By the time of the prophets (8th-7th centuries BC), the concept of *cherem* could be used in purely metaphorical and poetic ways to describe the judgment of God (Jer 50:21, 26, 51:3, etc.; also Dan 11:44).

Isaiah 34:2 For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their hoards; he has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter.

Jer 25:9 I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the LORD, even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace.

Micah 4:13 Arise and thresh, O daughter Zion, for I will make your horn iron and your hoofs bronze; you shall beat in pieces many peoples, and shall devote their gain to the LORD, their wealth to the Lord of the whole earth.

By the post exilic era (after 538 BC), the term came to have a much milder meaning, referring to being banned or exiled from the community, something closer to what we mean by excommunication or ostracizing.

Ezra 10:7 They made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, 10:8 and that if any did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all their property should be forfeited, and they themselves banned from the congregation of the exiles.

There are a few passages that seem either to be anachronistic or to use the term simply to mean exterminate, for example, in 1 Chronicles, which is a later version of Samuel and Kings edited during or shortly after the exile (c.

550 BC):

1 Chron 4:41 These, registered by name, came in the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, and attacked their tents and the Meunim who were found there, and exterminated them to this day, and settled in their place, because there was pasture there for their flocks.

As far as we know, *cherem* was not still being practiced this late in Israel's history (c. 700 BC; with the possible exception of 1 Kings 20:42). So this seems to be a non-technical use of the term (likewise, in 2 Chron 20:23).

The concept of holy war and the corresponding *cherem* were ancient tribal concepts that related to protection of a clan, tribe, or people from outside influences, especially in religious practices. The biblical tradition remembers that it was used by early Israelites as they settled into Canaanite territories. The elimination of non-Israelite people was understood to be the command of God as a way to preserve the Israelites' commitment to the covenant that God had made with Moses (see **Did God Order the Massacre of the Canaanites?**).

The extent to which it was actually practiced by Israel is not clear, especially given the uneven recounting of the settlement in the land when Joshua is compared with Judges (**History and Theology in Joshua and Judges**). As a tribal tool of warfare, there seems little doubt that Israel would have invoked *cherem*. However, the settlement traditions were compiled from a much later perspective, during or after the exile (586 BC; see **The Deuteronomic History and Historiography**). The prophets, especially Jeremiah, interpret the exile theologically as due to syncretism of the worship of Yahweh with Ba'al worship. The biblical traditions, especially in Judges, also remember that Israel did not, in fact, remove the threat of syncretism posed by remaining Canaanites living among them.

It is possible that the idea of *cherem* was actually practiced far less than implied in the biblical accounts. Looking back from the perspective of exile, it may have been projected back into the accounts, especially in Joshua and Deuteronomy, as a needed solution to the later problems posed by the dominance of Ba'al worship. As such, *cherem* becomes a theological device to call the post-exilic community to reform its worship and practices by eliminating any vestige of Ba'al worship.

The ethical questions related to *cherem* are monumental for people in the modern world. But we need to remember that Israel was an ancient tribal people who lived in a world where violence, especially in warfare, was common. Israel's encounter with God at the exodus certainly set them on a course that would transform them as a people and touch the entire world. Yet, that transformation did not happen all at once. It took nearly a millennium before Israel's commitment to God would work out fully to create a people of God who would fully abandon polytheism and become the "people of the Book."

Similar ethical questions concerning God's role in *cherem* are likewise vexing. Did God really order the extermination of the Canaanites? And if so, how does that relate to the God of love and grace revealed in Jesus who is the Christ? The article **Did God Order the Massacre of the Canaanites?** addresses this dimension.

-Dennis Bratcher, Copyright © 2011, Dennis Bratcher - All Rights Reserved

[See Copyright and User Information Notice](#)



[Top of page](#)



Send mail to [the site director](#) with questions or comments about this web site.

Copyright © 2011, CRI / Voice, Institute

Last modified: November 08, 2011