

GOD AND WAR IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

**A study of God's use of war
in the Old Testament actually demonstrates
His love and compassion.**

Theologians should be the humblest of scholars because as finite, imperfect, and sinful beings, they dare to investigate the infinite, perfect, and infallible God! Yet this God has consented to reveal Himself in a written document, the Bible. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is a privilege to explore the inspired information.

And an attempt to understand the problem of God and war in the Old Testament is still more daring, even more humbling. Too often a picture

of the Almighty is drawn according to simplistic prejudices: an immovable statue, certainly loving, but remaining in His celestial sphere when His reputation is at risk.

How can a loving God permit—or even order—cruel wars? There is dif-

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We can conclude that from the beginning of the history of the Israelites the following principle was established, supported by God's "mighty acts": If the Israelites allowed God to take charge of their adversaries, the only action required of God's people would be to trust and obey.

ficulty in explaining every example, but it is appropriate to try to trace a basic principle. Could it be applied to cases where the principle is not specifically stated or apparent in the context? The reader must decide.

God's Ideal Plan

Repeatedly, God made clear statements concerning His plan when Israel was confronted with enemies. To recount a few:

Exodus 14. Fearing the Egyptians marching after them, the Israelites reproved their leader. But "Moses answered the people, 'Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. . . . The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still'" (vss. 13, 14, NIV).¹ The Lord "made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving" (vs. 25). The Egyptians caught the message: "'Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt'" (vs. 25). The Israelites also caught the message and reacted the way they always

should have reacted throughout their history: "The people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant" (vs. 31).

Exodus 23. God clearly revealed His plans for the conquest of Canaan: "'I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. . . . If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you. My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out. . . . I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. . . . Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land'" (vss. 20, 22, 23, 27, 28, 30).

The only action God expected from the Israelites: "'You must demolish [the gods of the Amorites] and break their sacred stones to pieces'" (vs. 24). And the Israelites gave God their trust: "'Everything the Lord has said we will do'" (24:3).

Deuteronomy 1. Here we have a confirmation of God's intent in a book beginning with a reminder of Israel's history: "'The Lord your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt'" (vs. 30).

Ellen White confirms this: "The Lord had never commanded them to 'go up and fight.' It was not His purpose that they should gain the land by warfare, but by strict obedience to His commands."²

From these texts we can conclude that from the beginning of the history of the Israelites the following principle was established, supported by God's "mighty acts": If the Israelites allowed God to take charge of their adversaries, the only action required of God's people would be to trust and obey.

Further Demonstrations of God's Battle Strategy

Gideon. Facing the threat of the Midianite army, Gideon gathered together 32,000 men (Judges 7:3). God reduced the number to 300 (vs. 7) with only trumpets, empty jars, and torches as weapons (vs. 16). How did the battle turn out?

"When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords. The army fled" (vs. 22) without any armed intervention by Gideon's soldiers. It is true that the "Israelites . . . pursued the Midianites" (vs. 23) and "killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb at the winepress of Zeeb" (vs. 25). Gideon also killed Zebah and Zalmunna, taking the ornaments off their camel's necks (8:21) and requesting "an earring from your share of the plunder" (vs. 24). The truth that these were Gideon's and the people's human initiatives and not according to God's plan is confirmed by the tragic ending of the story: "Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family" (vs. 27).

Jehoshaphat. Facing a threatening army, the pious and trustful king declared to his people: "'Do not be afraid. . . . For the battle is not yours, but God's'" (2 Chron. 20:15). "'You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you'" (vs. 17). The king took a clear stand: "'Have faith in the Lord your God'" (vs. 20). The army consisted of only a choir (vs. 21)! "As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes" (vs. 22). The result:

“The men of Ammon and Moab rose up against the men from Mount Seir to destroy and annihilate them. After they finished slaughtering the men from Seir, they helped to destroy one another” (vs. 23).

Hezekiah. The king was known among his very adversaries as one who trusted in the Lord (2 Kings 18:22; 19:10). Sennacherib attempted to destabilize the people’s trust in God (vs. 29, 30), but it was useless. The result: “That night the angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp” (19:35) without any intervention from Israel!

God promised that if Israel trusted in Him, He would deliver them, and they would not have to do anything. In reality, throughout Israel’s history, when the leaders and the people trusted the Lord, He delivered them. However, God was not responsible for the other situations in which Israel interfered.

When the Israelites Ignored God’s Plan

Wars apparently permitted by God. Israel’s first battle against the Amalekites is one of many examples, but it provides a thoroughgoing case study.

The Bible text is very sobering: “The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, ‘Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites’” (Ex. 17:8, 9). Let’s look at the

background: Ten times in the 10 plagues the almighty hand of God had been revealed, and the people of Israel had only recently left Egypt. They had once again witnessed the almighty hand of God in the spectacular destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. One would think that they would trust the Lord forever!

A few days after events related to crossing the Red Sea, “the people grumbled against Moses” (15:24) instead of trusting the One who had just recently accomplished such fantastic miracles. But right away “the Lord showed [Moses] a piece of wood. [Moses] threw it into the water, and the water became sweet” (vs. 25). And instead of being offended, as should have been the case, God brought them to Elim “where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water” (vs. 27)!

How magnificent of God! One would think that this time the Israelites would trust their kind heavenly Father for the rest of their lives! A few days later, however, on their way to Sinai, “the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. . . . ‘You have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death’” (16:3).

Again, instead of being offended, God, with His usual graciousness, immediately provided a delicious biscuit that was “white like coriander

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seed and tasted like wafers made with honey” (16:31) as in Egypt, the Lord offered them quails, which “covered the camp” (vs. 13) for dinner. We can imagine that the Creator certainly did not enjoy doing that, but what wouldn’t He consent to do to win back His dissatisfied children?

Without dwelling too extensively on the new, abusive disregard for God’s program seen when “some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather [manna]” (16:27), despite the command of the Lord to rest on the Sabbath (vs. 30), a comment by Ellen White explains the circumstances of the confrontation with the Amalekites: “[The people of Israel] had not really suffered the pangs of hunger. They had food for the present, but they feared for the future. They could not see how the host of Israel was to subsist, in their long travels through the wilderness, upon the simple food they then had, and in their unbelief they saw their children famishing. The Lord was

willing that they should be brought short in their food, and that they should meet with difficulties, that their hearts should turn to Him who had hitherto helped them, that they might believe in Him. He was ready to be to them a present help. If, in their want, they would call upon Him, He would manifest to them tokens of His love and continual care After this sure promise from God it was criminal unbelief in them to anticipate that they and their children might die with hunger.”³

Note the three elements in a quotation that appears later in the article: “[1] Because of their unbelief, [2] God suffered their enemies to make war with them, [3] that He might manifest to His people from whence cometh their strength.”⁴ Stated positively, it might appear like this: [1] If they had trusted God, [2] He would have prevented their enemies from making war with them, and [3] He would have in this way manifested to His people from whence cometh their strength.

Because of the criminal unbelief and the constant cruel murmurings of the people, God permitted the Amalekites to attack the Israelites at Rephidim. God did not order Joshua to organize the battle; but Moses, as leader of the Israelites, had to take in hand the situation in which they had put themselves.

Following this “criminal unbelief”⁵ and their “wicked murmurings,”⁶ the Israelites deserved to be left to themselves. But, God condescended to help them in the very battle that their unbelief toward Him had provoked: “As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning” (17:11).

The Story of Redemption explains that this act of Moses, reaching his hands toward God, “was to teach Israel that while they made God their trust and laid hold upon His strength . . . He would fight for them and subdue their enemies.”⁷

With this illumination of the text, we could paraphrase Exodus 17:8, 9 in the following way: Because of the criminal unbelief and the constant cruel murmurings of the people, God permitted the Amalekites to attack the Israelites at Rephidim. God did not order Joshua to organize the battle; but Moses, as leader of the Israelites, had to take in hand the situation

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Joshua was designated as the head of the army. With the miraculous intervention of God, he was able to overcome the Amalekite army “with the sword” (vs. 13). This way of obtaining a victory was totally opposed to God’s plan, since He had promised to do the fighting Himself for the deliverance of His people. In fact, we can imagine the sorrow of this same Joshua when he had to confess in his own writing at the end of his career: “The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Gishites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. . . . You did not do it with your own sword and bow” (Joshua 24:11, 12).

Wars God Ordered

One specific example of a war that God ordered appears in the Book of Judges: “After the death of Joshua, the Israelites asked the Lord, ‘Who will be the first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?’” (1:1).

An explanation of this order of God to make war becomes apparent in the context. In his farewell speech, the old leader reminded them: “You yourselves have seen everything the Lord your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the Lord your God who fought for you” (23:3). “The nations I conquered” (vs. 4). “The Lord your God himself will drive them out of your way. He will push them out before you, and you will take possession of their land” (vs. 5). The only contribution the people had to make was to “obey all that is written in the Book of the Law” (vs. 6); “do not associate with these nations” (vs. 7); “hold fast to the Lord” (vs. 8); “love the Lord” (vs. 11).

Assembling the tribes of Israel at Shechem, Joshua had the people renew the covenant (Joshua 24). The patriarch insisted on the action of God: “I [God] sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you—also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow” (vs. 12).

But Joshua died (Judges 2:8), and “another generation grew up, who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel” (vs. 10). (At least they pretended not to know the Lord; although they had been systematically informed and instructed!) They “disobeyed” God (vs. 2). But strangely enough, they “asked the Lord, ‘Who will be the

first to go up and fight for us against the Canaanites?’” (1:1).

What should God’s reaction have been? We would expect Him to say, “You act as if you do not know Me. You do not even listen to My voice. You know perfectly well that I promised to take care of the conquest and that you wouldn’t have to fight at all. Joshua and your fathers reminded you of My miraculous interventions, and now you ask, ‘Who will be the first to fight?’ Are you making fun of Me? You offend Me! I am going to abandon you!”

But amazingly, “the Lord answered” (vs. 2). Even when His people broke the relationship, God maintained it as long as He could, consenting to answer a partner who had not even listened to Him in the past. This was the first surprise.

The second surprise: God conformed to the project of the Israelites and—although it completely opposed His project—He ordered a war.

We may react to this in several ways. We might say, “You see, God did take the initiative to order wars.” Or we might say, “God was not consistent. One time He said He would do the fighting, and another time He said Judah should do it.” Or we might say, “Shouldn’t we try to understand God?”

God goes as far as possible to reach His children where they were. “Even if you do not listen,” He seems

to say, “and you ask for the exact opposite of My plan, I shall answer and accompany you in your undertaking. Judah is to go!” Further, we read: “When Judah attacked, the Lord gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands” (vs. 4).

If you were afraid of being misunderstood, you certainly wouldn’t have done that, would you? But God did it. This is the God of the Old Testament. What condescension on God’s part to our level of thinking!

My wife, Gisela, was studying voice at the Music Conservatory in Basel, Switzerland. Realizing the perversity of the opera—with its gorgeous music, beautiful voices, and grand orchestras presenting immorality, crimes, and lies—she opted for *oratorios* and *lieder* [songs]. Her teacher, an opera prima donna, suggested that the best way to observe the application of her technique would be for the students to attend the concerts where she was performing. With a little embarrassment, Gisela told her father she would attend the concerts exclusively for professional reasons.

Her highly moral preacher-father was perplexed. But he felt that if he forbade his 18-year-old daughter, who was in a critical stage of personality development, to attend the opera, it might break the fine relationship of loving trust they had developed through the years. And besides, she would go anyway! So he

not only let her go, but also gave her the money for the tickets.

One evening, after attending a couple of concerts, as she was listening to and watching another glorious opera performance filled with adultery, her eyes turned to the ceiling, from which a huge chandelier was hanging. Suddenly the thought flashed into her mind: What if the chain holding the chandelier would break and the chandelier would fall and kill me? Would people (and the Lord) have to say, “She died willfully contemplating adultery in the opera house”?

During intermission, pretending she was not feeling well, she rushed home. Approaching the house, she was surprised to see light in her father’s study, because he was usually absent every night of the week, either holding evangelistic meetings or giving Bible studies. But that night he was at home.

As she entered the house, her father met her and asked if the performance was already finished. She answered no and explained her abrupt decision to leave the opera house, never to return again.

“We are glad you came to this decision all by yourself, Gisela,” her father said. “Each time you went to the opera, I cancelled the scheduled Bible study, and your mother and I prayed for you.”

God acted in the same way toward His children in the Old Tes-

tament! When they insisted on going their own way in life in general—or in wars in particular—He let them go, sometimes even adding His blessing! Unexpected from a pure and holy God? Or wise pedagogy in the face of stubbornness and pride! And so often He did win them back by maintaining His love relationship with them and allowing the free choice of His people.

Unfortunately, the Israelites overdid it. Having caught Adoni-Bezek, they “cut off his thumbs and big toes” (vs. 6). This, of course, was not according to God’s plan. What a disgraceful testimony of the so-called people of God!

The Book of Judges should not be considered as the ideal book of God’s philosophy! The last sentence in the book, a sober definition of this period in Israel’s history, declares: “In those days . . . everyone did as he saw fit” (21:25). An atheistic anarchy!

But at the very center of the book—could it be the central message?—we read the following statement: “the Lord . . . could bear Israel’s misery no longer” (10:16). What a God!

The ideal plan of God: The Lord

will fight for you. Just trust and obey, and He will deliver you.

The fulfillment in history: When the leaders and the people trusted God, He delivered them.

When God’s plan was not respected: God, as far as possible, accompanied His wayward children in the hope of winning them back, even when they made a decision that was the opposite of His will.

In considering the attitude of God in these complicated problems of war, we are left with an example of a Master Teacher. And thus He extended His love to its extremity in order to reach His erring people, as low as they were, to bring them back to His caring guidance.

What a risk, and so easily misunderstood! Instead of being shocked, let us bow in wonder before this most gracious and flexible God. This is the God of the Old Testament! □

REFERENCES

¹ All Scripture quotations used are taken from the New International Version.

² *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 392.

³ *The Story of Redemption*, p. 127.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

