

God and War in the Old Testament

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We, as theologians, should be the humblest of scholars. Why? Because as finite, imperfect, and sinful beings, we dare to investigate the infinite, perfect, and infallible God! And this God has consented to reveal Himself in a written document, the Bible. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit it is our privilege to explore the inspired information. An attempt to understand the problem of God and war in the Old Testament is still more daring, and we must feel even more humble.

Too often we draw a picture of the Almighty according to our 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? From the very outset, I must admit my difficulty in explaining every example. My research will attempt only 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.

My study will be divided into the following parts: the ideal plan of God when Israel is confronted with enemies; demonstrations of further fulfillment of this plan throughout Israel's history; situations where this plan was not respected; and what this teaches us about the character of God?

God's Ideal Plan

Repeatedly, clear statements were made by God concerning His plan when Israel was confronted with enemies. We shall limit ourselves to just 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*

* All Scripture quotations used are taken from the New International Version. All emphasis is added.

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will fight for you; you need only to be still” (vs. 13, 14). The Lord “made the wheels of the chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving” (v. 25). The Egyptians caught the message: “Let’s get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt” (v. 25). The Israelites also caught the message and reacted the way they always should have reacted throughout their history: “when the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed . . . they put their trust in Him” (v. 31).

Exodus 23: God revealed his plans for the conquest of Canaan. A long quotation will confirm the clarity of God’s plan: “See, 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” (Exodus 23:20, 22, 23, 27, 28, 30). The only “action” God expected from the Israelites: “You must demolish them [the gods of the Amorites, etc.]” “and break their sacred stones to pieces” (v. 24). And the Israelites gave God their decision of trust: “Everything the Lord has said we will do” (24:3b).

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

Ellen White confirms this in *Patriarchs and Prophets*: “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” (392).

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 the adversaries, the only “action” required of God’s people would be to trust and obey.

Further Demonstrations of God’s Battle Strategy

Gideon (1211–1171 B.C.). Facing the threat of the Midianite army, Gideon gathered together 32,000 men (Judges 7:3b). God reduced the number to three hundred (v. 7) with only trumpets, empty jars, and torches as weapons (v. 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 . . .” (v. 22) without any armed intervention by Gideon’s soldiers. It is true that the “Israelites . . . pursued the Midianites” (v. 23) and “men of Ephraim killed Oreb and Zeeb” (v. 25). Gideon also killed Zebah and Zalmunna, taking the

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ornaments off their camel's necks (8:21) and requesting an "earring from the share of the plunder" from each of the Israelites (v. 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" (v. 27).

Jehoshaphat (872–848 B.C.) 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 20:15b). "You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions, stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you" (v. 17). The king took a clear stand: "Have faith in the Lord your God" (v. 20c). The army consisted of only a choir (v. 21)! "As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set ambushes . . ." (v. 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" (v. 23).

Hezekiah (729–686 B.C.) The king was known among his very adversaries as one who trusted in the Lord (2 Kgs 18:22; 19:10). Sennacherib attempted to destabilize the people's trust in God (2 Kings 18:29, 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!

The conclusion is that 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 where Israel interferes.

When the Israelites Ignored God's Plan

Wars apparently permitted by God. I will bring just one example: Israel's first battle against the Amalekites; but we shall spend some time on this episode, because it is typical and some explanations are available.

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'" (Exodus 17:8, 9a). Let's look at the background: Ten times in the ten 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!

Three days later, "the people grumbled against Moses" (Exod 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" (v. 25). And instead of

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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” (15:27)!

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” (Exod 16:3).

Again, instead of being offended, God, with His usual graciousness, immediately provided a delicious biscuit which was “white like coriander seed and which tasted like wafers made with honey”—manna (16:31). And because they had grumbled about not having any more “pots of meat” as in Egypt (16:3), the Lord offered them quails, which “covered the camp” (v.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? We shall not spend time discussing 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” (v.30) on the Sabbath. However, I cannot help but quote a penetrating comment of Ellen White from *The Story of Redemption* which will explain the circumstances of the confrontation with the Amalekites:

They [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! (127)

Note the three elements of the next sentence (numbers are mine): “[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” (133). If I were going to state the preceding statement positively, I would say: (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. Following this “criminal unbelief” (127) and their “cruel murmurings” (132), the Israelites deserved to be left to themselves. But, God condescended to help them in the very battle that their unbelief towards Him had provoked: “As long as Moses

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held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning” (Exodus 17:11).

The Story of Redemption explains that this act of Moses, reaching up his hands towards 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” (133).

With this illumination of the text, we could paraphrase Exod 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 in which they had put themselves.

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” (Exod 17:13). 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, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I [God] gave them into your hands . . . You did not do it with your own sword . . .” (Josh 23:11, 12).

Wars God Ordered

Let’s look at a specific example of a war God ordered, Judges 1:1, 2a: “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?’” God ordered Judah to be the first to “attack” the Canaanites.

How can we explain this order of God to make war? Let us again make an effort to look at the context. In his farewell speech (Josh 23), 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.” “[T]he nations I [God] conquered” (v. 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 the land” (v. 5). The only contribution the people had to make was: “obey all that is written in the Book of the Law” (v. 6); “do not associate with these nations” (v. 7); “hold fast to the Lord” (v. 8); “love the Lord” (v. 11).

Assembling “all the tribes of Israel at Shechem,” Joshua had the people renew the covenant (Josh 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 Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow” (v. 12).

But Joshua died (Judg 2:8), and there came “another generation who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel” (v. 10). (At least they

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pretended not to know the Lord; although they had been systematically informed and instructed!) They did not “listen to the voice” is the literal translation, or according to the NIV, they “disobeyed” God (2:2). 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 [among us] to . . . fight!’ Are you making fun of me? You offend me! I am going to abandon you!”

But amazingly, “the Lord answered . . .” (1:2) Before we continue reading, let us stop here a moment and reflect on this first verb. 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!’” What’s more, we read: “when Judah attacked, the Lord gave the Canaanites and Perizzites into their hands.” (Judg 1:4).

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!

May I illustrate my point with a modern story, realizing the limitations of the illustration? 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 which present immorality, crimes, and lies—she opted for oratorios and *lieder* [songs]. Her teacher, being 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 would forbid his eighteen year old daughter, who was in a critical stage of personality development, to attend the opera, it might break the fine relationship of loving

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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 candelabra was hanging. Suddenly the thought flashed into her mind: What if the chain holding the candelabra would break and the candelabra would fall and kill me? Would people (and the Lord) have to say, ‘She died willfully contemplating adultery in the opera house?’”

At intermission time, 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.”

Could we suggest that God acted the same way toward His children? 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.

Coming back to our Israelites, we find that unfortunately they overdid it. Having caught Adoni-Bezek, they “cut off his thumbs and big toes” (Judg 1:6). This, of course, was not according to God’s plan. What a disgraceful testimony of the so-called “people of God”!

Incidentally, 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” (21:25b). An atheistic anarchy!

But at the very center of the book—could it be the central message ?—we read the following statement: “and the Lord was sorrowful because of Israel’s misery” (my translation of Judges 10:16c). What a God!

Conclusion

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.

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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.

What does this teach us about the character of God? In considering the attitude of God in these intricate problems of war, my admiration of Him has increased immensely. In coming down to the level of His people, He has left us an example of a Master Teacher which is fathomless. And thus He extends His love to its extremity in order to reach His erring people, as low as they are, and bring them back to His caring guidance.

Yes, what a risk, and so easily misunderstood! And how often He has been 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! How fortunate that He is also your God and mine, accompanying us on our wayward, spiritual journey!

What a God!