

The Wars of Israel

A quandary swirled around Big John's world. His teenage son's birthday was coming up, and he knew that Little John wanted a gun in order that he might go hunting with his friends and their fathers. He also knew that if he didn't give it to him, someone else would. Yet he knew the dangers of his son having a weapon, and he earnestly would have preferred him not to have one. What could he do?

As expected, his son did get a gun, so what was Big John to do? Should he entirely reject his dearly beloved son and never go near him again as long as he had a weapon? Or should the father help the boy learn how to use the gun safely to minimize the inherent risks? I believe we will agree that the father should help the boy, even though he, the father, had no use for the gun and would have preferred that his son not have it.

Similarly, God never intended that His children take up weapons, but they did take them up, and we have interpreted this ever since as telling us that God delights in warfare.

But God does not delight in warfare, as the example of Jesus clearly teaches. Throughout the Bible, especially the books of Moses, we see Him trying to lessen the results of His children taking up swords and trying to protect themselves.

Coming Out of Egypt

Although God had rained miracles to facilitate Israel's escape from Egypt, when they crossed the Red Sea and were out of reach of the Egyptians, they believed they were on their own. Except for God's being a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to lead them, provide shelter from the burning sun, and illuminate the Night, when they faced real dangers from enemies—the Amalakites, the Philistines, the Moabites—they felt pretty much responsible for their own protection.

Why would God do this? Why would He suddenly change the rules for dealing with their enemies *after* they left Egypt? Did God lose the ability to do miracles? Did He lose interest? Or like the father and son in our story, did God decide to assist them with something He preferred that they not do.

The Macro View

It's an interesting thing about Scripture. Did you ever think how many Bible stories leave out something important? Take the story of the departure of Cain into the land of Nod, east of Eden. What mark did God put on him to prevent his untimely death at the hand of others? Who was his wife? Scripture doesn't say. It is unthinkable that a contemporary writer would leave such a hole, since it violates the conventions of modern writing. But not so for ancient writers. They sometimes left out some rather important information. (Genesis 4:15)

And what about the story of Cain and Abel? Who told them that it was appropriate to slay an *animal* for a sacrifice and not to bring for sacrifice the produce of the ground? How did they know this? Scripture is silent with regard to it. We read over it, assuming someone must have told them. Either it was one or both of their parents or a communication direct from heaven. They clearly knew the difference—which sacrifice foreshadowed the Savior to come and which did not—, but the Bible does not tell us how they knew. (Genesis 4:2-8)

Or take the case of the prophet Elisha and King Jehoash of Israel. At Elisha's instruction the King shot an arrow out of the window, took the remaining arrows and struck them on the floor. But he only struck them three times. Sorry, said the prophet. You should have struck them five or six times, because they were a metaphor for how many times you were to strike your enemy. Five or six times would have sufficed to completely destroy him; three times would not. But it appears that no one told King Jehoash before the test. (2 Kings 13:14-19).

The point is, something is missing from each of these stories and from innumerable other Bible stories, and readers must fill in the blanks from somewhere else in Scripture or from their own reasoning abilities. I believe this was the case with Israel and warfare.

The Micro View

Let's take a closer look at the scene of Israel's complete victory over the Egyptians. The Red Sea march was behind them. The waters had receded to allow Israel passage over dry land, and then advanced, as the Egyptians tried to cross in the same way as had the Israelites. Imagine the relief of Israel as they looked on the scene and saw the deliverance. Great rejoicing soon broke out among the children of Israel, and they danced and sang a song of rejoicing and praise to God.

But something else was taking place while Israel rejoiced. This we can only conjecture, because Scripture doesn't mention it. But is it possible that, as an aftermath of the devastation that came upon the Egyptians, some among the Israelites looked with covetous eyes at the weapons of warfare that had washed up on the Red Sea shores, knew that much more lay on the Sea floor, determined to have them, and took steps to possess those weapons for Israel?

How do we support this inference?

- Let's look at slavery and polygamy as an example. There are no texts saying either is wrong. Yet Christendom has come to see *both* as wrong, based on certain principles; i.e., the principle that God prefers that everyone be free and the principle of one woman, one man, in marriage, which God expressed so well in Genesis. Notice, however, that God instructed them in keeping these cultural practices as fair as possible, until further light should come to them and Israel would have the will to put these things away. Is it possible that war was just as offensive to God, but He stayed with the people, guided them in making war, and waited until the people could receive further light that should come?
- When the people asked for a king, the Lord didn't want to give them one, but He nevertheless relented and did it when they insisted (1 Samuel 8:5-22). But He didn't leave them because of it.
- God never intended them to see war, although, again, He patiently guided them in it. Scripture says, "Now when Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, 'The people might change their minds *when they see war*, and return to Egypt'" (Exodus 13:17, NAS; emphasis supplied). Notice, God expressed this at the point in time when Israel was leaving Egypt. Now we must decide whether His thinking applied to that time alone or if it applied to all time.
- Moses recapped the Kadesh Barnea rebellion in these words: "The Lord your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, *as he did for you in Egypt*, before your very eyes, and in the desert. There you saw how the Lord your God carried you . . . all the way you went until you reached this place" (Deut. 1:30, 31, NIV; emphasis supplied). Continuing, he said, "In spite of this, you did not trust in the Lord your God, who went ahead of you on your journey, in fire by night and in a cloud by day, to search out places for you to camp and to show you the way you should go" (vs. 32, 33). How poignant and tender these words. How can we imagine that a Father like this would choose to allow His children to risk their lives to protect themselves?
- God was in no way indebted to Israel's sword for their possession of the Promised Land. "For by their own sword they did not possess the land, and their own arm did not save them. But Your right hand and Your arm and the light of Your presence, for You favored them" (Psalm 44:3, NAS). "You rely on your sword, you commit abominations and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife. Should you then possess the land?" (Ezekiel 33:26, NAS). All these deeds are bad, including relying on their sword. "Do not fear them, *for the Lord your God is the one fighting for you*" (Deut. 3:22, NAS; emphasis supplied). Repeatedly this thought appears in the sacred text.
- God gave them flawed instruction due to their hardness of heart. He says, "I also gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live" (Ezekiel 26:25, NAS. See also Matthew 5:21-48; 19:8). Think "writing of divorcement," "an eye for an eye," boring an ear through with an awl to mark the slave as belonging to you (Exodus 21:6) — terrible directions that God gave for dealing with aspects of the culture that He did not even approve of in the first place (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Exodus 21:24-27).
- Victory always depended on their obedience, not on their military might. "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty" (Zechariah 4:6). God's message to Solomon was, "[I]f you will walk before Me . . . in integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you and will keep My statutes and My ordinances, then I will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever. . . . But if you or your sons indeed turn away from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes . . . then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them . . . and I will cast them out of my sight" (1 Kings 9:4-7).

Jesus, Always the Perfect Example

Therefore, we need have no fear of being led astray when we embrace the example of Jesus as the perfect picture of the Father, even where taking up weapons is concerned. We have up to now taken the surface view as revealing the Father, but we have now surveyed the abundance of evidence that reveals Him as He describes Himself in Exodus 34—"merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. . . ." But He will in no wise acquit the guilty—a subject for another pamphlet.

These stories with their traditional understanding have settled like concrete in our heads, and it is very, very difficult to back up and look at them another way. But you are now equipped to again read those stories of the wars of Israel and ask yourself, Can *this* be what is going on in these stories? When you compare this with the character of Jesus, who claimed to be and was, the perfect example of the Father, I think you'll see that the weight of evidence supports this position.

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- www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBZfdggyXw&feature=youtu.be
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