

God Fights *for* You



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 15:16; Lev. 18:24–30; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8; Exod. 23:28–30; Deut. 20:10, 15–18; Isa. 9:6.*

Memory Text: “And Joshua captured all these kings and their land at one time, because the LORD God of Israel fought for Israel” (*Joshua 10:42, ESV*).

The book of Joshua contains some disturbing scenes. Serious questions are raised by the concept of a *divine or holy war* portraying a group of people with a God-given mandate to destroy another group.

The issue of divine war in the Old Testament is challenging. God appears in the Old Testament as the sovereign Lord of the universe; therefore, everything that happens must, somehow, be related to His direct or indirect will. So, the question “How can God allow such things?” becomes inevitable. Last week, we saw that God Himself is involved in a conflict that is far greater than any war or battle fought in human history, a battle that permeates every aspect of our lives. We saw, too, that the events of both biblical and secular history can be fully understood only in light of this conflict.

This week, we continue to explore the complexity of divinely sanctioned wars, the limitations and conditions of divine war, the final vision of peace offered by the Old Testament prophets, and the spiritual implications of such wars.

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 1.*

The Canaanites' Iniquity

Read Genesis 15:16, Leviticus 18:24–30, Deuteronomy 18:9–14, and Ezra 9:11. What are these texts telling us about God's larger plan in offering the land of Canaan to the Israelites?

We need to look beyond the book of Joshua to completely understand what was meant by the iniquity of the nations inhabiting Canaan. These nations' abhorrent practices of child sacrifice, divination, sorcery, witchcraft, necromancy, and spiritualism give us a hint (*Deut. 18:9–12*).

The discovery of the ancient Ugaritic texts (from Ras Shamra) provides more insight into the Canaanite religion and society, and they demonstrate that condemnation of this culture was not only understandable but—according to Old Testament moral standards—also justified.

The Canaanite religion was based on the belief that natural phenomena, which assured fertility, were controlled by the sexual relationships between gods and goddesses. Thus, they envisioned the sexual activity of the deities in terms of their own sexual behavior and engaged in ritual sexual practices in order to incite the gods and goddesses to do likewise. This concept resulted in the institution of “sacred” prostitution, involving both male and female prostitutes engaging in orgiastic rites, again all as part of their own religious practices!

A nation cannot rise to a moral ground that is higher than that of the gods its people worship. As a result of such an understanding of their deities, it is no wonder the Canaanites' religious practices included child sacrifice, which the Bible warned specifically against.

Archaeological evidence confirms that the inhabitants of Canaan regularly sacrificed their firstborn children to the gods, really demons, whom they worshiped. Little skeletons found crushed into large jars with votive inscriptions testify to their degrading religion and what it meant for many of their children.

The eradication of the Canaanites, then, was not an afterthought, something that emerged in the wake of God's decision to give the land of Canaan to the Israelites. The inhabitants of Canaan were granted a time of probation, a time of additional mercy during which they had the opportunity to discover God and His character through the witness of the patriarchs living among them. They had the chance, but obviously they squandered it and continued in their horrific practices until the Lord finally had to put a stop to them.

The Supreme Judge

Read Genesis 18:25; Psalm 7:11; Psalm 50:6; Psalm 82:1; Psalm 96:10; and 2 Timothy 4:1, 8. What are these verses saying about God's moral character? How does the role of God as the Judge of the universe help us understand the question of divine war?

The holiness of God's character means that He cannot tolerate sin. He is patient. However, sin must reap its final consequence, which is death (*Rom. 6:23*). Yahweh declared war against sin, regardless of where it was found, whether in Israel or among the Canaanites. Israel was not sanctified through participating in holy wars any more than other nations were (*Deut. 9:4, 5; Deut. 12:29, 30*), even when they became the means of Yahweh's judgment against His chosen nation. Different from other ancient Near Eastern people, the Israelites experienced the reversal of holy war when God did not fight for them but against them, allowing their enemies to oppress them (*compare with Joshua 7*).

The whole concept of holy war can be understood only if it is seen in the light of God's activity as judge. When seen this way, Israel's wars of conquest take on a completely different character. In contrast to the imperialistic wars of self-aggrandizement, so common in the ancient world (and ours today), Israel's wars were not meant to accomplish glory for themselves but to establish God's justice and peace in the land. Therefore, at the heart of understanding the concept of holy war stands the concept of God's rule and sovereignty, which are at stake in the imagery of God as warrior, just as they are in the imagery of God as king or as judge.

Yahweh as warrior is the One who, as a judge, is committed to implementing, stabilizing, and maintaining the rule of the law, which is the reflection of His character. The image of God as warrior, similar to that of judge and king, asserts that Yahweh will not tolerate rebellion against His established order forever. Therefore, one can affirm that the goal of Yahweh's activity is never war itself, or victory itself, but the reestablishment of justice and peace. Ultimately, to judge and to wage war, or to deliver justice, are the same thing if God is the subject of the action.

Reflect on God as a righteous judge who cannot be bribed nor influenced by partiality. How is a God who will not endlessly tolerate sin, oppression, the suffering of the innocent, and the exploitation of the oppressed part and parcel of the gospel?

Dispossession or Annihilation?

Compare Exodus 23:28–30; Exodus 33:2; Exodus 34:11; Numbers 33:52; and Deuteronomy 7:20 with Exodus 34:13; Deuteronomy 7:5; Deuteronomy 9:3; Deuteronomy 12:2, 3; and Deuteronomy 31:3, 4. What do these texts reveal about the purpose of the conquest and the extent of the destruction?

God's original purpose for the Canaanites was not annihilation but, instead, dispossession. An examination of the passages that describe the way Israel had to be involved in the battles of the conquest used terms that speak about the dispossession, ejection, and dissipation carried out against the inhabitants of the Promised Land. The second group of terms that express destruction and have Israel as the subject of the action refer mostly to inanimate objects, such as articles of pagan worship and objects devoted to destruction. Evidently, the places of pagan worship and the altars constituted the main centers of the Canaanite religion.

Holy war is mainly oriented toward Canaan's corrupt culture and society. In order to avoid contamination, Israel had to destroy all the elements that were propagating corruption. However, all the inhabitants of Canaan, and those who, on an individual basis, recognized God's sovereignty prior to the conquest, or even during the conquest, were able to escape through immigration (*Josh. 2:9–14; compare with Judg. 1:24–26*). The only part of the Canaanite population doomed to destruction were those who withdrew into the fortified cities, obstinately continued to rebel against God's plan for the Israelites, and hardened their hearts (*Josh. 11:19, 20*).

However, this does raise a question: If the initial purpose of conquering Canaan was to drive out the inhabitants of the land and not to annihilate them, why did the Israelites have to kill so many people?

Analysis of the biblical texts related to the conquest of Canaan revealed that the original intent of the conquest implied the dissipation of the Canaanite population. However, the majority of the Canaanites, like the pharaoh of Egypt, hardened their hearts and, as such, became one with the culture to such an extent that the destruction of their culture meant they had to be destroyed, as well.

What elements in your own character and habits must be uprooted and annihilated?

Free Choice

Read Deuteronomy 20:10, 15–18; Deuteronomy 13:12–18; and Joshua 10:40. How does the law of warfare and the procedure against an idolatrous town in Israel, expressed in Deuteronomy, help us understand the limitations of total destruction in the war that the Israelites were engaged in?

The Hebrew text uses a unique term to describe the destruction of people in war: *cherem*. This term refers to what is “banned,” “damned,” or “dedicated to annihilation.” Most of the time, it designates complete and irrevocable placement of people, animals, or inanimate objects in God’s exclusive domain, which in warfare involved, in most cases, their destruction. The concept and practice of *cherem* as a total eradication of a people in war needs to be understood in the light of Yahweh’s conflict with the cosmic forces of evil, where His character and reputation are at stake.

Again, since the emergence of sin in the world, there is no neutrality: one is either on God’s side or against Him. One side leads to life, eternal life, and the other to death, eternal death.

The practice of total destruction describes God’s righteous judgment against sin and evil. God uniquely delegated the execution of part of His judgment to His chosen nation, ancient Israel. The devotion to destruction was under His tight theocratic control, limited to a certain period of history, the conquest, and to a well-defined geographical area, ancient Canaan. As we saw in yesterday’s study, those who came under the ban of destruction consistently rebelled against God’s purposes and defied them, never repenting either. Therefore, God’s decision to destroy them was neither arbitrary nor nationalistic.

Moreover, Israel would expect the same treatment if they decided to adopt the same lifestyle as the Canaanites (*compare with Deuteronomy 13*). Even if it seems as though the groups situated on either side of the divine war are pre-defined (the Israelites are to inherit the land and the Canaanites are to be destroyed), there is the possibility to move from one side to the other, as we will see in the cases of Rahab, Achan, and the Gibeonites.

People were not arbitrarily given protection or placed under a ban. Those who benefited from a relationship with Yahweh could lose their privileged status through rebellion, and those under the ban could submit to the authority of Yahweh and live.

What are the spiritual implications of the Canaanites’ defiance of God for our context today? That is, what are the consequences of our free choices for us personally?

The Prince of Peace

How do the following texts describe the future that God had envisioned for His people? *Isa. 9:6, Isa. 11:1–5, Isa. 60:17, Hos. 2:18, Mic. 4:3.*

Although the main focus of this week's lesson has constituted the divinely commanded and assisted wars of the Old Testament, we need to mention the presence of another equally significant theme of the Old Testament's prophetic writings: the future vision of the peaceful Messianic era. The Messiah is depicted as the "Prince of Peace" (*Isa. 9:6*). He will usher in a kingdom dominated by peace, where the lion and the lamb will graze together (*Isa. 11:1–8*), in which there will be no destruction or hurt (*Isa. 11:9*), and where peace will rule (*Isa. 60:17*) and flow like a river (*Isa. 66:12*).

Read 2 Kings 6:16–23. What insights does this story provide into the deeper purposes of God for His people and humanity?

Consider the story of the feeding of the Syrian army at the initiative of Elisha. Instead of massacring them (*2 Kings 6:22*), he showcased to them the supreme ideal, peace, which has always been God's desire for His people. It is interesting to observe that Elisha fully is aware of the superiority of the invisible army that surrounds the enemy (*2 Kings 6:17*). As much as God is involved in a cosmic conflict that also has affected our planet, the final goal of redemption is not a perpetual conflict or even an eternal subjugation of the enemy in a state of slavery but, instead, everlasting peace. As violence breeds violence (*Matt. 26:52*), peace engenders peace. The story concludes by stating that the "Syrians did not come again on raids into the land of Israel" (*2 Kings 6:23, ESV*).

Think about all the ways we can, by seeking to emulate Jesus, be agents of peace. What about your own life right now? In what ways, in whatever conflict you might be facing, could you be an agent of peace instead of conflict?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Fall of Jericho,” pp. 491–493, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

As with everything in the Bible, knowing the context and the background is crucial. As we have seen, the cosmic conflict and the motif of God as judge are crucial in understanding these wars against the Canaanites.

“God is slow to anger. He gave the wicked nations a time of probation that they might become acquainted with Him and His character. According to the light given was their condemnation for refusing to receive the light and choosing their own ways rather than God’s ways. God gave the reason why He did not at once dispossess the Canaanites. The iniquity of the Amorites was not full. Through their iniquity they were gradually bringing themselves to the point where God’s forbearance could no longer be exercised and they would be exterminated. Until the point was reached and their iniquity was full, the vengeance of God would be delayed. All nations had a period of probation. Those who made void God’s law would advance from one degree of wickedness to another. Children would inherit the rebellious spirit of their parents and do worse than their fathers before them until God’s wrath would fall upon them. The punishment was not less because deferred.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 1005.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Discuss the implications of God’s being our judge as well as the Supreme Judge of the universe. Why do you think the fact that God is the Judge is foundational to the gospel and to our salvation?
- 2 How does the case of the Canaanites offer us a window into God’s patience and justice? How could we reflect God’s character in the way we deal with our fellow human beings?
- 3 Think about the fundamental nature of free will. Why do you think God respects our freedom of choice? How are love and freedom of choice related to each another?
- 4 The Old Testament contains many stories of war and conflict, but ultimately, it forecasts a vision of peace. What role should Christians play in establishing peace in their environment?

“This Was Not an Accident”

By LAURIE DENSKI-SNYMAN

Maria glanced nervously at David as the man approached them in his home in a large city in southern Asia. The man’s cellphone was recording as he waited for them to answer his wife’s question about their religious beliefs.

“As I already said, we are Seventh-day Adventists,” David said.

“Does this mean you are Christians?” the man said.

David prayed silently. He knew that many people in the country were not open to Christianity because they were troubled by the reality that many Christians drank alcohol and ate unclean food, which their religion forbade.

“Let me explain,” David said. “We believe what the Torah says, including passages such as Deuteronomy 6:4, which says, ‘The Lord our God, the Lord is one!’ We believe there is one God. This verse tells us that.”

“Interesting,” the man said.

“We also believe the mandate in the Torah that says we should worship the Lord on His Sabbath, which begins Friday at sunset and lasts until Saturday at sunset,” David said.

Then he spoke about the Lord condemning pork in Isaiah 66:17.

The man continued recording the conversation, but his terse scowl slowly melted into a smile.

David continued, “We believe our bodies are the temple of God and they are lent to us. While we are here on earth, we are to take care of them.”

The man smiled widely.

“We do not believe in hurting our bodies by smoking or drinking alcohol.”

The man said, “I believe our meeting was divinely ordained.” He got up and left. Returning with food, he placed it on the table and insisted that the visitors eat. “This was not an accidental appointment,” he said repeatedly. “It was set up from above.”

Then he offered a prayer of gratitude for the unexpected meeting and a blessing on the food. After that, he brought in his adult son from a back room, saying, “I want you to meet these people.” Turning to David and Maria, he said, “I want to share my family with you.” He apologized that he and his family could not eat because they were observing a fast.

As the visitors ate, he plied them with questions about *The Great Controversy*. He appeared appreciative of their replies. Then he said, “We are happy that you came today, and we know that you were sent here. This was not an accident. We will be tolerant toward you, and peace be with you.”

As the visitors got ready to leave, he blessed them, saying, “May you have peace and blessings, especially as you go through our neighborhoods.”

Pray for missionaries as they seek to proclaim the gospel around the world. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offering that supports missionaries.