

The Conflict Behind All Conflicts



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Josh. 5:13–15; Isa. 37:16; Rev. 12:7–9; Deut. 32:17; Exod. 14:13, 14; Josh. 6:15–20.*

Memory Text: “There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded the voice of a man, for the LORD fought for Israel” (*Joshua 10:14, ESV*).

Reading the pages of Joshua, we are confronted with the aggressive military campaigns carried out at the command of God, in the name of God, and with the help of God. The idea that God was behind the conquest of Canaan pervades the book of Joshua, and it is expressed in the assertions of the narrator (*Josh. 10:10, 11*), in God's own words (*Josh. 6:2, Josh. 8:1*), in Joshua's addresses (*Josh. 4:23, 24; Josh. 8:7*), by Rahab (*Josh. 2:10*), by the spies (*Josh. 2:24*), and by the people (*Josh. 24:18*). God claims to be the initiator of these violent conflicts.

This reality raises unavoidable questions. How can we understand that God's chosen people carried out such practices in Old Testament times? How is it possible to reconcile the image of a “warlike” God with His character of love (*for example, Exod. 34:6, Ps. 86:15, Ps. 103:8, Ps. 108:4*) without diluting the credibility, authority, and historicity of the Old Testament?

This week and next, we are going to explore the difficult question of divinely commanded wars in the book of Joshua and elsewhere.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 25.

Commander of the Army of the Lord

Read Joshua 5:13–15. What does this text say about the background of Canaan’s conquest?

The Israelites have just crossed the Jordan and stepped onto the enemy’s ground. The fortress of Jericho lies in front of them, its gates firmly shut (*Josh. 6:1*). At this point, the people are unaware of any battle strategy. What is even more concerning is that Israel has only slings, spears, and arrows to take on a city fortified to withstand a long siege.

Joshua’s questions regarding the identity of the strange visitor receive a rather obscure answer: “No.” The visitor’s answer reveals that He is unwilling to step into the categories defined by Joshua. In other words, the ultimate question is not whether He is on Joshua’s side; rather, is Joshua on His side?

Compare Joshua 5:14, 15 with 2 Kings 6:8–17, Nehemiah 9:6, and Isaiah 37:16. What do you learn about the identity of the commander of the Lord’s army?

While the expression “commander of the army of the LORD” is unique in the Hebrew Bible, the combination of the terms “commander” and “hosts” always refers to a military leader. The word “host” in Scripture can refer to military troops, to the angels, or to celestial bodies.

The pre-incarnate Christ appears to Joshua not merely as an ally nor even as the true Commander of Israel’s army but as the Commander of the unseen yet real army of angels involved in a far greater conflict than that of Joshua with the Canaanites. Joshua’s answer clearly indicates his understanding of the Commander’s identity. He is equal to God, and Joshua falls prostrate in front of Him as a sign of profound respect and worship (*Josh. 5:14, Gen. 17:3, 2 Sam. 9:6, 2 Chron. 20:18*). Joshua is ready to receive the battle strategy for a military campaign that is an intrinsic part of a far greater conflict in which the God of hosts Himself is involved.

What comfort can, and should, we draw, from knowing that the “Commander of the army of the LORD” is at work in defense of His people?

War in Heaven

Joshua understood that the battle was part of a larger conflict. What do we know about the conflict in which God Himself was involved?

Read Rev. 12:7–9, Isa. 14:12–14, Ezek. 28:11–19, and Dan. 10:12–14.

God populated the universe with responsible creatures to whom He gave free will, a prerequisite for them being able to love. They can choose to act in accordance with, or against, God's will. The most powerful of angels, Lucifer, rebelled against God, and took a lot of angels with him.

Isaiah and Ezekiel refer to the conflict, although some commentators try to restrict the meaning of Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 to the king of Babylon and to a ruler in Tyre. However, there are clear indicators in the biblical text that point to a transcendent reality. The king of Babylon is presented to have been in heaven at the throne of God (*Isa. 14:12, 13*), and the king of Tyre is said to have resided in Eden as a protective cherub on God's holy mountain (*Ezek. 28:12–15*). None of this is true about the kings of Babylon and Tyre.

Neither can it be said about the earthly kings that they were blameless and the “signet ring of perfection.” Consequently, these characters point beyond the literal kingdoms of Babylon and Tyre.

Isaiah presents a “parable” (Heb. *mashal*) that conveys a meaning beyond the immediate historical context. In this case, the king of Babylon becomes a paradigm of rebellion, self-sufficiency, and pride. Similarly, Ezekiel makes a distinction between the prince of Tyre (*Ezek. 28:2*) and the king of Tyre (*Ezek. 28:11, 12*), where the prince, being active in the earthly realm, becomes the symbol of a king who acts in the heavenly one.

According to Daniel 10:12–14, these rebellious heavenly beings obstruct the fulfillment of God's purposes on earth. It is in light of this connection between heaven and earth that we have to understand the divinely sanctioned wars of Israel. We need to recognize them as earthly manifestations of the great conflict between God and Satan, and between good and evil—all ultimately with the purpose of restoring God's justice and love in a fallen world.

What are ways we see, in the world around us and in our own lives, the reality of this cosmic battle between good and evil?

The Lord Is a Warrior

Read Exodus 2:23–25; Exodus 12:12, 13; and Exodus 15:3–11. What does it mean that God is a warrior?

During their long sojourn in Egypt, the Israelites have forgotten the true God of their ancestors. As many episodes of their travels through the wilderness demonstrated, their knowledge of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob faded, and they had mixed pagan elements into their religious practices (*compare with Exod. 32:1–4*). Under the oppression of the Egyptians, they cried to the Lord (*Exod. 2:23–25*), and at the right time, the Lord intervened on their behalf.

However, the conflict described in the first 12 chapters of Exodus was greater than a simple power struggle between Moses and the pharaoh. According to ancient Near Eastern war ideology, conflicts between peoples were ultimately considered as being conflicts between the respective gods. Exodus 12:12 declares that the Lord inflicted judgment, not only on the pharaoh but also on the gods of Egypt, those powerful demons (*Lev. 17:7, Deut. 32:17*) that stood behind the oppressive power and unjust social system of Egypt.

Ultimately, God is at war with sin and will not tolerate this conflict forever (*Ps. 24:8; Rev. 19:11; Rev. 20:1–4, 14*). All the fallen angels, as well as the human beings who have definitely and irrecoverably identified themselves with sin, will be destroyed. In light of this, the battles against the inhabitants of the land have to be perceived as an earlier stage of this conflict, which will reach its apex on the cross and its consummation at the final judgment, when God's justice and character of love will be vindicated.

The concept of the total destruction of the Canaanites must be understood on the basis of the biblical worldview, in which God is involved in a cosmic conflict with the exponents of evil in the universe. Ultimately, God's reputation and His character are at stake (*Rom. 3:4, Rev. 15:3*).

Since sin has entered human existence, nobody can stand on neutral ground. One must be either on God's side or on the side of evil. Hence, with this background in mind, the eradication of the Canaanites should be viewed as a preview of the final judgment.

The reality of the great controversy allows for only one of two sides. How do you know which side you are really on?

The Lord Will Fight for You

According to Exodus 14:13, 14, 25, what was God’s original and ideal plan concerning the involvement of the Israelites in warfare?

In that moment of crisis, when the people of Israel were forced into a physical impasse, “Moses answered the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still’ ” (*Exod. 14:13, 14, NIV*). According to the biblical narrative, even the Egyptians themselves understood that reality: “ ‘Let us flee from the face of Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians’ ” (*Exod. 14:25, NKJV*).

God’s miraculous intervention for the helpless Israelites, untrained in military skills, becomes the pattern. The Exodus constituted the model, the paradigm, for God’s intervention on behalf of Israel. Here, not only is the battle fought by Yahweh, but Israel is required not to fight (*Exod. 14:14*). God is the warrior; the initiative belongs to Him. He establishes the strategy, defines the means, and conducts the campaign. If Yahweh does not fight for Israel, they have no possibility of success.

Ellen G. White interprets this as an expression of the fact that God “did not design that they should gain the land of promise by warfare, but through submission and unqualified obedience to his commands.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, September 2, 1880. As in their deliverance from Egypt, God would fight their battles for them. All they had to do was stand still and witness His mighty intervention.

History demonstrates that whenever Israel had sufficient trust in God, they did not need to fight (*see 2 Kings 19, 2 Chronicles 32, Isaiah 37*).

In God’s ideal plan, the Israelites never needed to fight for themselves. It was a consequence of their unbelief, expressed after the Exodus, that God permitted them to have a part in the war conducted against the Canaanites. In the same way, they did not need to raise a single sword against the Egyptians during the Exodus; it would have never been necessary for them to fight in conquering Canaan (*Deut. 7:17–19*).

“If the children of Israel had not murmured against the Lord, He would not have suffered their enemies to make war with them.”—Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption*, p. 134. How might murmurs impact our lives today?

The Second-Best Option

Read Exodus 17:7–13 and Joshua 6:15–20. What similarities do you find between these two war narratives? How do they differ?

The first time Israel fought after the Exodus is recorded in Exodus 17, where the Israelites defended themselves against the Amalekites. Israel had witnessed God's almighty power in both afflicting the Egyptians and leading the Israelites to freedom. We have seen that God's initial plan for Israel did not include fighting against other people (*Exod. 23:28, Exod. 33:2*). But shortly after their deliverance from Egypt, the Israelites started to murmur on the way (*Exod. 17:3*), even questioning God's presence in their midst. It was at this moment that Amalek came to fight against Israel. This was not by chance. God allowed the Amalekites to attack Israel so that the Israelites might learn to trust Him again.

Without compromising His principles, God comes down to the level where His people are, continually calling them back to the ideal plan: complete and unreserved trust in divine intervention. In fact, the law of warfare (*Deuteronomy 20*) was given only after the 40 years of wilderness experience, which was also caused by Israel's unbelief. New circumstances demanded new strategies, and it was only then that God required Israel to completely annihilate the Canaanites (*Deut. 20:16–18*).

Besides the reality that war became a necessity for the children of Israel, it also turned out to be a test of their allegiance to Yahweh. God did not give up on them but allowed them to witness His power by experiencing total dependence on Him.

The participation of the Israelites in the conquest is evident from the conclusion drawn by Joshua at the end of the book. Here the Canaanites are said to have been fighting against the Israelites (*Josh. 24:11*). While the collapse of the walls of Jericho was the result of a divine miracle, the people of Israel had to be actively involved in the battle and face the stubborn resistance of the city's inhabitants.

Israel's participation in armed conflict became a way to develop unconditional trust in Yahweh's help. Yet, the people were always reminded (*Josh. 7:12, 13; Josh. 10:8*) that the outcome of each battle ultimately lay in the Lord's hands, and the only way they could influence the outcome of a military conflict was through their attitude of faith, or unbelief, toward the promises of the Lord. The choice was their own.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Fall of Jericho,” pp. 487–493, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

When rebellion against God’s authority arose in the universe, either God was going to cease to be what He essentially, immutably, and eternally is and give away the leadership of the whole universe to one of His rebellious creatures, or He was going to be the holy, righteous, loving, and merciful Father of all that exists. The Bible presents the second picture, and in this case, the clash between the forces of evil and His power is inevitable.

When political or sociohistorical powers associated with chaotic and rebellious cosmic forces manifested the same defiant attitude against Yahweh, He, as the Sovereign Lord of the universe, intervened. The motif of Yahweh as a warrior becomes a prefiguration of that ultimate victory, which will finally put an end to the ongoing cosmic conflict between good and evil (*Rev. 20:8–10*). Moreover, Israel’s divine wars not only reflect a glimpse of the cosmic conflict as in a mirror but are part and parcel of the same controversy, anticipating God’s end-time judgment in the sphere of present history.

“God had made it their privilege and their duty to enter the land at the time of His appointment, but through their willful neglect that permission had been withdrawn. . . . It was not His purpose that they should gain the land by warfare, but by strict obedience to His commands.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 392.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How does the cosmic conflict background help you better understand the Lord’s commanding Israel to go to war?
- ❷ In class, discuss your answers to Monday’s question regarding the reality of the great controversy and how it plays out in the world around us. What is our role in this controversy, and how do we seek to fulfill it?
- ❸ How can we apply the principle of standing still and waiting for the Lord to fight for us in our spiritual life?
- ❹ Many times, in our discussions and occasional disagreements in the church, we want to see who is on our side. How should we change our attitude in light of Joshua 5:13–15?

“What Do You Want?”

By LAURIE DENSKI-SNYMAN

A missionary and his local partner were selling Christian books in a non-Christian neighborhood in a large city in southern Asia. They could see residents' religious devotion by their clothing. Women wore scarves; men had long beards. Some people even had dark spots on their foreheads from bowing their faces to the floor for long prayers.

At one house, a man with an angry face came to the front gate. “What do you want?” he asked gruffly, without opening the gate.

“We are working on a project in your community and selling books,” said the missionary, David. “Would you be willing to take a few minutes to look at these books?”

“I’ll be back in just a minute,” the man said harshly and left.

The missionary’s local partner, Maria, was afraid. “Let’s pray,” she said. “He looks scary. I think he’s a fanatic, a radical member of his faith.”

“Maybe he’s just hungry,” David said. It was the time of the year when devout religious men fasted for a month during the daytime.

Then the man returned. “Why don’t you come in?” he said.

Inside the house, he spoke abruptly. “What do you want?” he said.

David pulled several health books from his bag.

The man looked intrigued. “My wife will be interested in these because she’s a nutritionist,” he said, and called her to come and look at the books.

As he and his wife thumbed through the books, he commented with enthusiasm, “Wow, this is really good,” and “This looks really helpful.”

Then he asked bluntly, “Who are you working for?”

“We are Seventh-day Adventists,” David replied.

Abruptly, the man stood up and walked away. Then he returned and sat down. He stared at the visitors. The silence grew uncomfortable.

His wife broke the silence. “You know, I have Adventist clients,” she said. “They are very good people. But I really don’t know much about them.”

The man started to pace. He seemed agitated. Then he sat down again.

“What are those other books that you have?” his wife asked.

David opened his bag and pulled out *The Great Controversy*. “This book is all about true love, true forgiveness, and true peace,” he said.

She looked through it excitedly. David also showed her *Steps to Christ* and *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*. The man stood up, stared at the visitors, and sat down. His wife asked, “What do you believe?”

The man stood up again and walked over. He seemed determined to hear every word. Pulling out his cell phone, he started to record the conversation.

Pray for missionaries as they seek to proclaim the gospel around the world. Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offering that supports missionaries. Read the rest of this mission story next week.