

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.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Joshua 10:14*

Study Focus: *Josh. 5:13–15; Isa. 37:16; Rev. 12:7–9; Deut. 32:17; Exod. 14:13, 14; Josh. 6:15–20*

There is no doubt that the book of Joshua is also a book of war. However, God’s direct involvement in the conquest of Canaan drastically affects the nature of this war, which some have called a “holy war.” For those touched by the sting of war, however, the combination of “war” and “holy” may be especially troubling. For many Christians, though, even more vexing is God’s characterization as a warrior who not only commands the Israelites to advance against the Canaanites and other peoples but also fights for them. This week, we will attempt to tackle this sensitive and fraught topic.

Our study of this topic involves a two-part approach. The first part relates to worldview, which provides the lens through which we interpret biblical data. The second part involves a good analysis of the biblical data itself, including a proper understanding of the biblical language, its literary aspects, and its historical context. This week’s lesson focuses on the first part of the approach. The great conflict between good and evil, which started with the rebellion of Lucifer in heaven, is an indispensable aspect of the proper worldview to deal with this complicated matter. God’s involvement in Joshua’s wars can be correctly understood only in light of His participation in this broader conflict. The correct understanding of this great conflict impacts all biblical doctrines. It is not an exaggeration to affirm that the great conflict is the most appropriate Adventist lens through which to interpret this issue and Scripture as a whole. Indeed, the Bible encourages us to employ this lens from the very beginning.

Part II: Commentary

The Great Conflict as the Theological Framework of Scripture and Adventism

An inadequate appreciation of the metanarrative of the cosmic conflict will inevitably curtail the ability of the biblical interpreter to understand not only the concept of Joshua’s holy war but also the big picture of Scripture. A deficient perception of this worldview affects nearly every biblical doctrine. In fact, only “an understanding of the cosmic conflict provides the Christian with a worldview of history that is both rational and coherent.”—Frank Holbrook, “The Great Controversy” in *Handbook*

of *Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), p. 995.

The significance of this worldview is evident in how the great conflict shapes the belief system of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As we shall see, the church's 28 beliefs may be categorized into six doctrines. Here, we will provide a brief summary of how the great controversy worldview influences these beliefs.

God

When dealing with evil, God is not only addressing the human predicament but also working to show His justice to all the vast creation in the worlds not touched by sin (*1 Cor. 4:9*). At the center of the great conflict is the "theodicy." In a self-inflicted, temporary limitation, God allows evil to develop to a certain point to show its true character, so that His creation may see it in its true light. This way, they can realize God's love and justice when addressing a given crisis within the great controversy. Any reading of Scripture without this perception will eventually produce a distorted view of God's character, whether concerning His ability, or willingness, to end evil. For this reason, the divine announcement regarding the destruction of the Canaanites, 400 years before Joshua, must be seen against this backdrop (*Gen. 15:13–15*). God allowed the evil in the land to develop up to a determined limit. In this context, God is not simply giving the land to Israel but judging the persistent sin of those nations by expelling them from the land (*Lev. 18:24, 25*).

Man

God created humans in His image and likeness. Immortality was conditioned to their loyalty, based on their free will to adhere to their role as coregents of the Creator (*Gen. 1:27, Gen. 2:15–17*). The rebellion initiated in heaven was transferred to this earth when the first couple chose to ally themselves with Satan by disobeying a clear and direct commandment of God (*Genesis 3*). As a result, death, decay, and suffering entered the once-perfect environment of this world. From that moment on, humans were born with the propensity for evil (*Rom. 3:23*), which, without God's intervention, would bring this world to a state of chaos (*Rom. 8:22*). Because of God's holy and loving nature, He cannot be indifferent to sin and human propensity for evil (*Hab. 1:13*). That is why, as a righteous Judge, He steps in to break the destructive spiral of sin (*Rev. 20:14*). The conquest of Canaan and the destruction of those who decided to cling to this vicious cycle reflect the divine desire to eradicate evil.

Salvation

The rise of the cosmic conflict did not catch God unprepared. A rescue

plan already had been drawn up in the trinitarian eternal communion (*1 Pet. 1:20*). At the center of this plan was the atoning death of Jesus and His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary (*Heb. 9:11–28*). In Jesus, humanity has a new opportunity and, by His power, can overcome sin (*Col. 2:13*). On the cross, He paid the price by dying in our place; in His heavenly ministry, He makes His merits available to all people. In light of what Jesus did, no one is beyond God's ability to restore, even in the heart of Canaan, as the story of Rahab and the Gibeonites reveals.

The Church

By virtue of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and His subsequent ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, a new creation emerges. This new community of believers is encouraged to gather under the leadership of the resurrected Savior in the church (*ekklesia*), also known as the body of Christ (*1 Cor. 12:27*). The church has the mission to preach the everlasting gospel (*Rev. 14:6*) in the context of the whole counsel of God (*Acts 20:27*) and bring people from all the nations to its fellowship (*Matt. 28:18–20*). In the eschatological windup of the great controversy on the earth, the church has a crucial role in God's plan. For this reason, it has been fiercely attacked by Satan. However, God has always preserved a faithful remnant that in the end will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the last invitation of grace for humankind. As militant Israel was victorious in the past, so the militant church, under the leadership of the new Joshua—Jesus—will be triumphant in the end.

Daily Living

The cosmic conflict is the narrative that shapes our lives, impacting every aspect, such as how we handle finances, interact with others, and make personal decisions. As members of the body of Christ, we are urged to emulate Jesus through lives of faithful discipleship, characterized by radical surrender and obedience to God (*Rev. 14:12*). While salvation is not earned through obedience to God's law, aligning ourselves with the moral principles of His law serves as evidence of our new experience of salvation in Christ. Obedience to divine commandments, especially the observance of the seventh day as the Sabbath, as an act of worship, will be at the center of the controversy during the closing moments of this cosmic war on earth (*Revelation 12; 13*). Similarly, in the Promised Land, the Israelites were called to live in holiness before the Lord, experiencing the positive outcomes of obedience as a nation of priests.

Last-day Events

Finally, the impact of the great-conflict worldview is even more substantial

on the doctrine of last-day events. The time of the end starts after the end of the 2,300-day prophetic period and paves the way for the divine judgment in three phases.

The first phase, also known as the pre-Advent judgment, started on October 22, 1844, when the restoration/purification of the heavenly sanctuary began (*Dan. 8:14*). It extends until the second coming of Jesus, which opens the second judicial phase, also known as evidentiary judgment, wherein the redeemed will participate during their stay of 1,000 years in heaven (*Rev. 20:4–6*). At the end of this period, the executive judgment closes the cosmic conflict with the destruction of Satan, his angels, and all impenitent sinners (*Matt. 25:41, Rev. 20:9–14*).

What is expected in each phase? The theodicy. The theodicy is God's concern in showing His love and justice in eradicating evil from the universe. In the pre-Advent judgment, He reveals His justice and love to the unfallen worlds by saving His people and condemning the little horn and its followers. In the evidentiary judgment, God reveals the same to the redeemed when they learn from the heavenly records why some people were saved and others lost. Finally, in the executive judgment, at the end of the millennium, even Satan, the fallen angels, and the lost will kneel in recognition that God is just (*Rom. 14:11*). This group includes all those Canaanites who, like the other lost, refused to accept God's grace.

Part III: Life Application

The Spiritual Battle Today

In many situations, the spiritual nature of Israel's battles becomes apparent because of God's direct involvement. Meditate carefully on the following incidents and ponder how they can teach Christians today about the nature of spiritual warfare and the ways in which we may become victorious. Pay attention to the interaction between human and divine agencies.

Judges 7. Gideon overcomes the Midianites with only 300 men after dispensing with 32,000 troops. The remaining army defeated the large army of the Midianites by breaking jars and blowing trumpets.

2 Kings 6:24–7:20. While the starving inhabitants within the city walls of Samaria are completely unaware that events have suddenly turned in their favor, four lepers explore the empty camp of the massive Aramean army, which abandoned its position in a hurry and left everything behind in confusion.

Isaiah 36–38. Under overwhelming pressure, King Hezekiah seeks the Lord and the prophet Isaiah for help. The 185,000-man army of Sennacherib, the Assyrian king, is the biggest threat Jerusalem has ever faced. In this existential crisis, God miraculously intervenes to save the helpless city.

- 1. Now, compare these accounts with the description of the last battle in human history, which John writes about in Revelation. What do they have in common?**

- 2. How do the battles of Israel best strengthen your faith regarding the outcome of the cosmic conflict in Revelation?**

Read Revelation 20:7–15. In a final confrontation, Satan raises a large army to launch his last attack against God and the redeemed inside the New Jerusalem.

How does this last battle end the war behind all wars?
