

## War in the Old Testament

*Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands.  
1 Samuel 18:7*

### Biblical Context

We mentioned previously that the aim of 1 Samuel is to show us the transition and contrast between the dynasty of Saul to the dynasty of David.<sup>1</sup> A more explicit comparison between the two is found in David's military victories compared to Saul's. And yet, for our modern Western senses, the notion of God condoning wars and His people praising military accomplishments can feel archaic. This begs the question, why would God allow and permit war in the Old Testament? To answer this, we need a few biblically-grounded presuppositions:

First, God is the same in the Old Testament as He is in the New Testament. Scripture makes clear that while God's means may look different between the testaments, His character stays consistent.<sup>2</sup> So while it's true God is good and loving and sovereign in both testaments, His means of exercising His character will look different based on the biblical context.<sup>3</sup> Second, God's goodness is a holy, holy, holy goodness. The most important attribute of God is not His goodness or His love, but His holiness. In Isaiah 6 God is said to be "holy, holy, holy" the thrice repetition implying emphasis to the highest degree. Holiness simply put, is set apart, categorically other-than. So while it's true God is good and loving, those attributes are a holy good and holy love. His goodness and love are based on how God's holiness defines them, not how we might or how culture might define them. Third, God has Creator rights. The first seven words of the Torah make clear God's relation to creation. He created, therefore, He has the sovereign right to do as He pleases.<sup>4</sup>

With those biblical presuppositions in place, we can move onto how we are to understand biblical war narratives.

First, biblical morality extended to categories beyond care/harm. In the modern West, our dominant way of looking at morality is through the lens of care/harm. In other words, an action is seen as moral or immoral based on if it causes harm to someone or not. However, different cultures around the world for millennia viewed morality in more categories such as fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, and liberty/oppression.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture Guide, 1 Samuel 16. Available on the sermon page, "David and the Crown."

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29, Psalm 102:26-27, Isaiah 46:10-11, Malachi 3:6, 2 Timothy 2:11-13, James 1:17

<sup>3</sup> We must be careful not to drift into the early teachings of Marcion who "refused to believe that the God of the Old Testament was the same as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Marcion simply could not believe in a God full of wrath and justice. So he threw away the Old Testament and took for his Bible a truncated version of Luke's Gospel and selectively edited versions of Paul's epistles. When all the cutting and pasting was finished, Marcion had the Christianity he wanted: a God of goodness and nothing else; a message of inspiring moral uplift; a Bible that does away with the uncomfortable bits about God's wrath and hell." "Marcion and Getting Unhitched from the Old Testament." *The Gospel Coalition*.  
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/marcion-getting-unhitched-old-testament/>

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 24:1, Psalm 29:10, Job 42:2, Psalm 135:6

<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth study on moral categories, read Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*.

In the Ancient Near East, pagan nations violated multiple categories of morality. And while it's true other nations had moral codes, they also actively participated in child sacrifice (care/harm), they participated in demon worship (sanctity/degradation), they enacted forced slavery (liberty/oppression), temple prostitution (sanctity/degradation), and did not follow after the true God Yahweh (authority/subversion).

Second, God's commissioning His people to war was to be an act of justice not a power play. Because of other nations in the Ancient Near East (ANE) violating multiple categories of morality, God commissioned His people to war as an act of retributive justice for their sin when it threatened the spiritual and/or physical harm of Israel. While it was common in the ANE to go to war primarily out of power, God sent His people to war primarily out of His holy love and holy goodness.<sup>6</sup> God would not allow the actions of other nations to go unpunished while they continued to willfully sin and destroy the things God cares about. This also explains the severity behind moments in the Old Testament when Israel plunders or ransoms enemies from other nations - they are to be for justice not power, they are to be holy from the nations not like the nations. We see a similar parallel in modern times, countries will go to war with other countries in the name of justice when in reality it was for what they owned not what they did.

### **Personal Application**

First, God's means of justice are different in the New Testament. While God's character stays the same in both Testaments, His primary means of executing justice changes. In the New Testament we most clearly see God's retributive justice for the sins of people are taken on His Son Jesus at the crucifixion, (Romans 5:10, 2 Corinthians 5:21.) God is able to exercise His forgiveness toward sinners through enacting justice on His Son instead.

At the same time, Scripture tells us that God will enact His retributive justice for sin once and for all upon the second advent of Jesus. At the eschaton,<sup>7</sup> those who do not pledge loyalty to Jesus and experience His kingdom will suffer the wrath for their sins.

Second, warfare is viewed on a cosmic spiritual scale, not a political-geographical one. For followers of Jesus, our means of warfare is not with other nations but "against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). While we are no longer commissioned to go to war with other nations, Jesus calls us to the Great Commission, proclaiming the good news of his kingship to all nations.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, followers of Jesus live under a new kingdom. God's people are no longer called to strive for an Old Testament theocracy - where religion and government are inextricably linked. Rather, God's supreme rule and reign is seen in His kingdom The Church. Therefore as people in the world but not of this world, we should strive for unity and the advancing of His mission.

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<sup>6</sup> This was in large part why wars commissioned by God in the Old Testament would often have strict orders not to plunder the goods or capture prisoners of war but to "devote to destruction" (Joshua 7:1-26, Numbers 21:3, Deuteronomy 2:34) Plundering and capturing others were tactics done by other nations out of power not justice.

<sup>7</sup> From the Greek ἔσχατον (*éskhaton*), neuter singular of ἔσχατος (*éskhatos*, "last"), referring to Jesus' return.

<sup>8</sup> It's also important to note "gospel" has strong connotations with warfare. "The vb. [euangelion, good news] is used to herald Yahweh's universal victory over the world and his kingly rule (Ps 40:9 [LXX 39:10]; 68:11 [67:12]; 96:2 [95:2]; Isa 41:27; 52:7). With his enthronement and with his return to Zion, a new era begins. The subst. ptc. מְבַשֵּׂר (transl. εὐαγγελιζόμενος) refers to the messenger of good tidings who announces this new era of world history and inaugurates it by his mighty word. Peace and salvation have now come; Yahweh has become king, and his reign extends over the whole world. εὐαγγέλιον *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Volumes 1-5