



War in the Old Testament



War is a dominant part of the Old Testament story. "God's people" are often on the offensive, following God's instructions to destroy people and property. This is troubling for many. The following outline hopefully helps provide biblical perspective on this subject.

Basic Propositions

1. God exists. He is good, gracious, righteous, and just. He is the Creator and giver of life.
2. War is a consequence of a broken relationship with God. This includes conflict between humans and God, conflicts between humans, and conflicts between groups of humans. Conflict and war are characteristics of a "fallen world."
3. Humankind is responsible for this broken relationship because of their sin (rebellion against God). Sin may be defined as attitudes or actions opposed to the authority and moral will of God. "All are sinners" (*Romans 3:21*). Therefore, no one is "innocent" in the absolute sense.
4. Because God is righteous and just, he must judge sin and sinful humanity.
5. Because God is good and gracious, he has provided a way of "redemption," so that humans can be brought back into a relationship with Him, resulting in peace.
6. In history, God has used wars for his purposes of judgment and redemption.

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1. As part of God's plan of redemption, He chose a people (Israel) to become a great nation – a nation set apart for his purposes. God gave them a Law (a constitution) and a land (territory needed for national existence).
2. The wars involving Israel included wars of conquest (to take possession of the land), defense (to protect the land), and defeat (to lose possession of the land).
3. The wars of conquest are disturbing to many. God instructed Israel to completely destroy all life in cities of the promised land (*Deuteronomy 20:16-18*).¹
4. In Old Testament history, God used wars for his purposes of judgment and redemption.

God's Judgment

1. Prior to the conquest, the inhabitants of the promised land were extremely wicked (even to the point of child sacrifice). Their sin had "reached its full measure" (*Genesis 15:16*). Though the loss of "innocent" life might be disturbing to many today, the destruction might be compared to the radical surgery needed to save a cancer-stricken body.

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¹ Paul Copan notes that the *herem* ('ban' or 'consecration to destruction') language connected to Israel's warring against other nations is limited. Based on his analysis, Copan makes the following points, among others:

- The language of the consecrated ban (*herem*) includes stereotypical language: "all," "young and old," and "men and women." The ban could be carried out even if women and children weren't present.
- As far as we can see, biblical *herem* was carried out in particular military or combatant settings (with "cities" and military "kings"). It turns out that the sweeping language of ban is directed at combatants.
- The ban language allows and hopes for exceptions (e.g., Rahab); it isn't absolute.

Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 174, 184.

2. God's judgment was not only directed at Israel's enemies. God used other nations to judge Israel. Eventually, God used Assyria and Babylon to destroy Israel and Judah because of their rebellion against God.
3. Thus God's judgment was not primarily directed toward the enemies of a particular nation, but toward the enemies of God.
4. Since God is the giver of life and ultimate Judge, only He has the right to take away life. And God has worked through nations and states to accomplish his judgment.

God's Redemption

1. God's plan of redemption involved the nation of Israel inhabiting a particular land at a particular time in history. The wars of conquest and defense were necessary for Israel's possession of the land.
2. God used Israel as a channel of God's revelation, the ultimate revelation being Jesus Christ, who was a descendant of Israel. The Old Testament scriptures reveal the God of creation and redemption, and the background and anticipation of the promised Savior.
3. God used Israel, with her Law and land, as a picture of spiritual realities fulfilled in Christ. The "redemption" of Israel in Old Testament history pointed to the ultimate redemption of humankind in Jesus Christ.
4. God used Israel, with her failures and eventual defeat, to demonstrate that real redemption is not to be found through human effort or in the human institution of the state, but through God's grace in his Son (Jesus Christ).