
BIBLICAL STUDY OF WAR

(The OT)
George Battey

QUESTIONS:

- 1) If Israel was "God's chosen people," why did they need a police force?
- 2) What is "the law of retaliation"?
- 3) In OT days, could a man get out of fighting in war just because he was afraid?
- 4) Why was David punished for counting how many soldiers he had?
- 5) Before Israel could fight, what did they have to do – who did they have to consult?
- 6) When Israel fought with an enemy **outside** the borders of Israel, who were they told to kill?
- 7) When they fought with an enemy **inside** the borders, who were they told to kill?
- 8) If the OT is used to justify war today, who could we not condemn?

INTRODUCTION

One man wrote this:

"When a war is 'on' it is almost a hopeless task to find men who can discuss it rationally. ... Reason flies out of the window along with some other valuable human assets. We are all assured that the enemy has not one virtue left, and that we have not one vice in our midst."

(John Haynes Holmes, via John M. Drescher, Why I Am A Conscientious Objector, p. 46)

This is true. The time to discuss the pros and cons of warfare is before it becomes an issue.

In this study we wish to examine the nation of Israel and her relation to warfare during the OT dispensation.

CHURCH & STATE COMBINED

The OT nation of Israel was a combination of both church and state. It was a spiritual nation as well as a physical nation.

Israel, because it was a physical nation, required both:

- A police force to contend with criminal offenders within the nation
- A military force to contend with enemies outside the nation

THE POLICE FORCE

Though their "police force" was not as organized, or as distinguishable as ours today, still there was such a force in operation.

The elders of the city were in charge of (a) apprehending, (b) judging and (c) punishing criminals. This "police force" operated upon those within the nation.

THE RATIONALE

Now ... let me give the rationale for this "police" force.

Every child born in Israel was a member of the kingdom by virtue of his birth alone. As each child grew:

- Some became spiritually minded and could be governed and controlled by spiritual principles.
- Others became carnally minded and only one thing could control them and convince them to live reasonably civilized ⇒ force, brute strength and force.

When some of the men in the kingdom are carnally minded and understand nothing but force, there must be present some carnal laws designed to restrain these savages.

(If everyone in the kingdom were spiritually minded, there would be no need of carnal laws!)

The "carnal law," or physical force that restrained these savages was called "*the law of retaliation.*"

Exodus 21:24-25

²⁴ "eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,

²⁵ "burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Leviticus 24:19-20

¹⁹ 'If a man causes disfigurement of his neighbor, as he has done, so shall it be done to him;

²⁰ 'fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him.

It seems this "*law of retaliation*" applied to most, if not all cases of personal injury, including murder.

Notice two things about **murder** (for example) in the Mosaic Law:

- It required the death penalty (Numbers 35:30-31)
- The death penalty was not necessarily to be administered by stoning. (OT never says stone a murderer.)

Q: If a murderer was not stoned, how was the death penalty administered?

A: "*Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.*"

In other words, the murderer was to be killed in the same fashion in which he killed his victim. An "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" implies:

- If murderer strangled his victim, strangle him
- If murderer stabbed his victim, stab him
- If murderer beat victim to death, beat him to death
- If murderer shoved victim off a cliff, shove him off a cliff

This is made more evident when Moses repeated the law in Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 19:18-21

¹⁸ And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother,

¹⁹ then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you.

²⁰ And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you.

²¹ Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

NOTE: "An eye for an eye" (v21) = "do to him as he thought to have done to others" (v19)

The "law of retaliation" was not an option. God did not simply permit it -- He commanded it.

1 Timothy 1:9-10

⁹ knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers,

¹⁰ for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine,

Paul did not mean the entire Mosaic Law was made for ungodly and lawless men, but only those carnal laws which imposed physical restraints and punishments.

GOOD POINTS OF THE "LAW OF RETALIATION"

The "*law of retaliation*" had many good points:

1) It was good

Romans 7:12

¹² Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

It was good because it exercised restraint over violent, ungodly men.

Any civil government which tries to operate without some form of the "law of retaliation" will soon be at the mercy of savage barbarians.

A civil government cannot be operated by spiritual principles.

ILL: Jimmy Carter. He tried to operate the government on "Christian principles." The military was in shambles.

Romans 13:4

⁴ For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.

2) It was just

FIRST, it was "*just*" because the punishment fit the crime:

Hebrews 2:2

² For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward,

SECOND, it was "*just*" in the sense that the punishment was administered under the oversight of the proper authorities.

A man could not take the law into his own hands and administer punishment without a due process of law.

Proverbs 20:22

²² Do not say, "I will recompense evil"; Wait for the LORD, and He will save you.

Proverbs 24:29

²⁹ Do not say, "I will do to him just as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work."

These passages do not negate the "*law of retaliation*," but they oppose a vigilante.

3) It was merciful

Someone says, "You've got to be kidding!"

No. It was merciful in that it restrained revenge. Human nature is seldom satisfied with an "even settlement." The "law of the jungle" is:

- A leg for an eye
- An arm for a tooth

Men don't stop with revenge until they've outdone their opponent. The Mosaic "law of retaliation" allows only an "even settlement."

4) It prevented crime

Everyone learned a lesson when a murderer was executed by the same method he used on his victim.

Deuteronomy 19:20

²⁰ And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you.

As mentioned earlier, this "law of retaliation" was commanded, not just permitted.

Although some men might go overboard in taking revenge, some men are cowards and are afraid to seek revenge. They are afraid that by pressing charges they are simply providing more incentive for their enemy to do them worse harm.

(They think the matter may as well rest where it is.)

The Mosaic Law was opposed to this type of cowardice. God knew that for the good of the society the crime must be punished.

ILL: In the Old West the hanging was a public hanging and everyone learned a lesson.

This is what's wrong with our society today. Our civil government has become too lax in punishing criminals and we are finding ourselves overwhelmed by them now.

- Prison over-crowding
- Violent crimes increasing
- Drugs
- Mafia

One man wrote to Paul Harvey the following letter:

Dear Paul Harvey News,

Judges should not use such harsh courtroom language. When a person's convicted of some deadly crime that sentencing judge is likely to say: "I sentence you to serve certain years in the penitentiary." The judge should be more specific and more precise. What he should say is: "It is the judgment of this court that you be sentenced to three meals a day; comfortable lodging; a warm place to sleep; medicine if you get sick; color television to watch; all within the security of a state operated facility all of which will be free to you thru the generosity of law abiding American tax payers."

He should have included:

- *air conditioning*
- *job training programs*
- *libraries*
- *basketball courts*
- *weight rooms*
- *professional counseling*

The present day method of punishing crime is teaching no one a lesson! If anything we're teaching that crime pays!

Deuteronomy 19:21

²¹ Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

In this way God provided law and order for the Kingdom of Israel which was composed of both spiritual and carnal men.

THE MILITARY FORCE

Because Israel was a physical nation it also required a military force in addition to a police force.

- **Police force** – criminal offenders within the nation
- **Military force** – enemies outside the nation

As a physical nation Israel had:

- physical land
- physical boundaries
- physical laws
- physical punishments
- physical kings

Because the kingdom of Israel was partly physical (earthly) its existence was threatened by hostile enemy nations.

Israel had to organize, equip and maintain a military force to maintain its existence.

Israel "*learned war*" out of necessity because of the very nature of its composition. Had the kingdom of Israel been totally a "spiritual kingdom" it would not have required a military force, but because of the physical nature of the kingdom it did.

MILITARY REGULATIONS

Now ... let's discuss the laws that regulated the military forces of Israel.

REGULATION #1: Draft laws

There was a draft of sorts in the OT days:

Deuteronomy 20:5-9

⁵ "Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying: 'What man is there who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it.'

⁶ 'Also what man is there who has planted a vineyard and has not eaten of it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man eat of it.'

⁷ 'And what man is there who is betrothed to a woman and has not married her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man marry her.'

⁸ "The officers shall speak further to the people, and say, 'What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart.'

⁹ "And so it shall be, when the officers have finished speaking to the people, that they shall make captains of the armies to lead the people.

You will notice there was no escaping military duty because of conscientious objection! When God (He made the conscience) commanded His people to fight, no one could argue that his conscience would not allow it.

A man could escape military duty by:

- *getting married right quick*
- *building a house*
- *planting a vineyard*
- *just saying, "I'm afraid"*

BUT NOT BECAUSE OF CONSCIENCE!!!

When God commanded His people to fight, there could be no conscientious objectors!

Jeremiah 48:10

¹⁰ Cursed is he who does the work of the LORD deceitfully, And cursed is he who keeps back his sword from blood.

REGULATION #2: The army must remember that God is in control.

Sometimes Israel's draft resulted in too many soldiers and they had to dismiss men who were able and willing to fight. There was a reason for this:

Deuteronomy 20:1-4

¹ "When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.

² "So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people.

³ "And he shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel: Today you are on the verge of battle with your enemies. Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them;

⁴ 'for the LORD your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.'

Judges 7:2

² And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'

The battle belonged to God and these soldiers were not allowed to think that by their own strength they were able to win any war!

1 Samuel 17:47

⁴⁷ "Then all this assembly shall know that the LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's, and He will give you into our hands."

NOTE: This is something for America to think about.

If the Lord wanted our country to win a war, nothing could cause us to lose! But if the Lord decided we should lose, all the nuclear warheads in the world could not bring about victory!

Bows and arrows work just as well as machine guns when God decides who shall win a war!

(There's no reason to feel secure because of all the military we have in America. We can feel secure only if God is behind our country -- and it's getting more and more difficult to think that He could be!)

God purposefully caused Israel to fight from a weak position to teach that it was He in control.

1 Chronicles 5:22

²² for many fell dead, because the war was God's. And they dwelt in their place until the captivity.

Over and over and over again God reminded His people about this! This is what got David in trouble when he numbered Israel.

- David instructed Joab to go out and count the number of soldiers that served in the military.
- Joab protested.
- But the command of David prevailed and Joab went forth to number Israel.
- When Joab was finished, he reported back to king David that there were 800,000 soldiers in all of Israel – 500,000 of them being from the tribe of Judah!

2 Samuel 24:10

¹⁰ And David's heart condemned him after he had numbered the people. So David said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, I pray, O LORD, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly."

David had forgotten God. He was counting the number of his armed forces thinking the number of soldiers, horses and chariots were an indication of his military strength. He had forgotten his strength was God!

Isalah 31:1

¹ Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, And rely on horses, Who trust in chariots because they are many, And in horsemen because they are very strong, But who do not look to the Holy One of Israel, Nor seek the LORD!

REGULATION #3: God must be consulted first.

Although Israel had an army and was ready to fight, still they were not allowed to wage war just whenever they saw fit -- God had to be consulted; God had to give some sort of direct revelation indicating when and against whom to wage war.

(This fact will be very important when we discuss the NT view of warfare. Keep this point in the back of your mind.)

Not only must God be consulted before waging war, He must also be consulted before making peace! It was wrong to make peace with a foreign nation without consulting God first.

Over and over God warned the leaders:

Deuteronomy 7

² and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them.

¹⁶ Also you shall destroy all the peoples whom the LORD your God delivers over to you; your eye shall have no pity on them; nor shall you serve their gods, for that will be a snare to you.

As many times as God warned the people not to make peace with these heathen nations and not to intermarry with them, you would think the people had gotten the message ... but they didn't!

Joshua 9:14-15

¹⁴ Then the men of Israel took some of their provisions; but they did not ask counsel of the LORD.

¹⁵ So Joshua made peace with them, and made a covenant with them to let them live; and the rulers of the congregation swore to them.

There was their mistake! They did not ask counsel of God. No war could be fought and no peace could be made without seeking guidance from God.

(I'm going to belabor this point because it's so important! Please don't forget this point as we study the NT Scriptures later.)

- a) **Barak** received counsel from God before fighting against Sisera (Judges 4).
- b) **Gideon** asked God three times before fighting the Midianites (Judges 6-7).
- c) **Israel** sinned in warring with the Benjamites without seeking God's counsel first (Judges 20-21).

"Every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

- d) **Saul** sinned because he did not wait for Samuel to come offer the sacrifice and seek counsel from God when fighting the Philistines (1 Sam 13).

He sinned even more when, instead of seeking counsel from God, he consulted with a witch (1 Sam 28).

- e) **David**, in contrast, consistently asked counsel of God:
 - He sought counsel before rescuing the city of Keilah (1 Sam 23).
 - He nearly slipped up and fought against Nabal (1 Sam 25), but Abigail prevented the battle.
 - He sought counsel before fighting the Amalekites (1 Sam 30).

2 Samuel 5:19

¹⁹ So David inquired of the LORD, saying, "Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will You deliver them into my hand?" And the LORD said to David, "Go up, for I will doubtless deliver the Philistines into your hand."

2 Samuel 5:22-24

²² Then the Philistines went up once again and deployed themselves in the Valley of Rephaim.

²³ Therefore David inquired of the LORD, and He said, "You shall not go up; circle around behind them, and come upon them in front of the mulberry trees.

²⁴ "And it shall be, when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the mulberry trees, then you shall advance quickly. For then the LORD will go out before you to strike the camp of the Philistines."

REGULATION #4: All males among the enemy are to be killed.

My mother always told me, "If you're going to do something, do it right the first time." This is basically what God was telling Israel.

When God finally decreed a war should be fought, He wanted the job done right the first time. If only one male, no matter how young or small, were left alive, he could grow up and reproduce the enemy nation again and another war would have to be fought again some day. So God decreed that every male among the enemy should be destroyed.

Deuteronomy 20:12-15

¹² "Now if the city will not make peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it.

¹³ "And when the LORD your God delivers it into your hands, you shall strike every male in it with the edge of the sword.

¹⁴ "But the women, the little ones, the livestock, and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall plunder for yourself; and you shall eat the enemies' plunder which the LORD your God gives you.

¹⁵ "Thus you shall do to all the cities which are very far from you, which are not of the cities of these nations.

The women (virgins -- Num. 31:17-18), little girls and livestock could be spared, but make note that this regulation applied only to nations outside the borders of the promised land.

REGULATION #5: Everything BREATHING in the promised land must be killed.

Deuteronomy 20:16-18

¹⁶ "But of the cities of these peoples which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive,

¹⁷ "but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you,

¹⁸ "lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God.

This passage introduces us to a very important principle: the wars of Israel were not always defensive -- many times Israel waged aggressive warfare.

Israel was in the business of ousting nations, exterminating entire tribes of people and taking possession of territories which they never possessed before.

Do you know why you have never met:

- An Amalekite?
- A Philistine?
- A Jebusite?
- A Hittite?
- An Amorite?

Because these nations were exterminated in war.

REGULATION #6: Pillaging the land was forbidden.

They were not allowed to ravage the land during war.

Deuteronomy 20:19-20

¹⁹ "When you besiege a city for a long time, while making war against it to take it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them; if you can eat of them, do not cut them down to use in the siege, for the tree of the field is man's food.

²⁰ "Only the trees which you know are not trees for food you may destroy and cut down, to build siegeworks against the city that makes war with you, until it is subdued.

ILL: When Sherman marched thru Georgia his army pillaged the South -- burning down forests, cities, devastating the land.

Israel could not do this.

Even with this regulation against pillaging the land you will note an exception was made to this rule when Elisha instructed the armies of Israel concerning the war with Moab:

2 Kings 3:19

¹⁹ "Also you shall attack every fortified city and every choice city, and shall cut down every good tree, and stop up every spring of water, and ruin every good piece of land with stones."

Now, either the law against pillaging applied only to warfare waged within the borders of Israel, or else this was a rare exception to the rule.

THE OT MODEL

Now ... these were the rules regulating military force under the OT. Some Christians today point to OT military action as a justification for military action today.

Q: Shall we today conduct our military forces by the regulations given to Israel? If so, here's what we would have:

1) Aggressive, as well as defensive warfare

If we were going by Israel's example we could not condemn Hitler, or Hussein just because of their aggressive war tactics.

2) The only men we could draft into service would be:

- Men that were not afraid
- Men who had not just married
- Men who had not just built a house
- Men who had not just planted a vineyard

(Think of how many houses, vineyards and babies we would have had during the Vietnam Era had these rules existed!)

3) The number of soldiers and the kind of weapons must remain irrelevant!

If all we could muster up was 300 men armed with lanterns and trumpets -- that's good enough!

4) War could be waged only after God directly revealed who to fight and how to fight.

a) **There can be no pillaging of the country during the war.**

That's good you say! But there's one point more:

b) **Once war begins, the enemy must be exterminated** ⇨ no POWs; everything breathing must die ⇨ all men, all women, all children!

We could not condemn the Serbians who are practicing "ethnic cleansing." We could not condemn the Holocaust.

Does that sound a little grizzly? Is that the kind of warfare anyone today wants to see? If not, then don't bring up Israel!

Warfare is activated hate! War is hate! War is not love!

One of the craziest statements I've ever read was written by a preacher of the "Church of Christ":

"Does the military teach us to hate? Not necessarily so. In some cases you will be taught to hate. Some officers believe that hatred for the enemy is necessary training for a good soldier. That depends on the individual officer. Not all are motivated by hate. ... The Christian must rise above such influences; he loves his enemies."

(Fred A. Amick, "Christians in Uniform," via [The Christian and the Government](#), Foy E. Wallace, pp. 267-268)

Isn't that pitiful? Anyone who thinks it possible to "love" someone while at the same time killing them in battle is someone who has not the slightest notion of what Bible "love" is all about!

CONCLUSION

Our study has concentrated only upon the OT regulations governing warfare.

Many people today justify Christian involvement in war because saints of old participated in war, but a close study reveals that Christian involvement in war cannot be justified based on what Israel did.

America must wage war on occasions because it is a physical kingdom and physical kingdoms by their very nature must wage war.

- Physical nations must fight
- Physical wars to protect themselves from

- Physical enemies

I'm not saying that America should never engage in war. Neither am I saying that America should not exercise the "law of retaliation" in its police forces.

I'm just saying that Christians cannot justify involving themselves in warfare because of what Israel did. Israel was unique and different than any other nation that ever existed.

FIRST: We do not have direct revelation guiding us today!

SECOND: No country besides Israel, ever did, or ever could wage war by these OT regulations:

- Do you think the number of soldiers and kind of weapons are totally irrelevant to nations today? Here's the principle all nations today operate under:

Luke 14:31-32

³¹ "Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?"

³² "Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace."

This is not how Israel operated.

- There could be no pillaging of the countryside, but this is exactly what every army does.
- There could be no POWs taken!
- Aggressive warfare would be justified, but we claim we believe only in defensive war.

Israel, because of her nature and place in God's plans, waged war, but we cannot take her unique circumstances and apply them to any other nation on earth.

Isalah 2:4

⁴ He shall judge between the nations, And rebuke many people; They shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore.

This is what the Lord intended among His people today!

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