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The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh



You must destroy all the peoples ADONAI your God gives over to you. Do not look on them with pity and do not serve their gods, for that will be a snare to you (Deuteronomy 7:16).

These harsh words are shocking in the context of **the TaNaKh**. They are part of an address delivered by Moses to the Israelites, assembled on the plains of Mo'ab. Moses, speaking on behalf of **ADONAI**, was preparing **His** people for the conquest and conflict, which happen immediately. **God** is a tender warrior (see the commentary on **Genesis**, [to see link click Ec - When Abram Heard Lot Had Been Taken Captive, He Went in Pursuit as far as Dan](#)). The pre-incarnate **Yeshua ha-Meshiach** is the commander of **ADONAI's** army (**Joshua 5:15a**), there is a **Book of the Wars of the LORD** (**Numbers 21:14a**), and **He** commanded **His** chosen people to engage in a "holy" war (**First Samuel 17:45**). **Holy War** differed from other kinds of war in that **Ha'Shem Himself** led the army. The result was to be total annihilation of all living things and the devoting of all material properties to **YHVH**, as seen below in **the cherem judgment**.

This call to war seen in **Deuteronomy 7:16** is complemented by commandments in **Deuteronomy 20** that are again presented as part of Moshe's address at the base of Mount Sinai. In **Deuteronomy 20:10-18**, a two-part military policy of conquest is presented. First, when the Israelites came to cities lying outside the Promised Land, they were to offer terms of a peace treaty. If their offer was rejected, they were to lay siege the city and kill all the men, but the women and children could be spared and taken as the spoils of war. But the second part of the policy applied to cities lying within the territory of the Promised Land. They were to be besieged, and after they had fallen, all living creatures, men, women,

children, and animals were to be killed.

It is helpful to compare these ancient commandments given to the Israelites with the theory of Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian soldier and student of war (1780-1831 AD). Von Clausewitz defined war as “an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will.”⁷ As a part of his analysis of war he made an important and necessary distinction between the theoretical or abstract conception of war, on the one hand, and real wars on the other hand. From a theoretical perspective, war must end in victory for the aggressor, for otherwise it would be pointless to start a war in the first place. If complete victory was to be obtained, then no effort could be spared; for von Clausewitz, “to introduce into the philosophy of war itself a principle of moderation would be absurd.”⁸ Thus, the reality of war was quite different from the abstract notion of war.

Von Clausewitz argued that from a military perspective there were three principle objectives of war. First, the military power of the enemy must be destroyed, so that the enemy could no longer continue a war. Second, the enemy’s country must be conquered, for from that country a new military force could arise. And third, war could only end when the enemy’s will to fight had been crushed.

Now let’s look at the commandments of war in **Deuteronomy** in the light of the theory of von Clausewitz. Clearly **Deuteronomy 20** describes wars of conquest, by which the Israelites imposed their (and **God’s**) will on Gentile nations. It is also obvious that those commandments dealing with their enemies did not introduce the principle of moderation, but were thoroughly pragmatic in a military sense. Although the cities outside of the Promised Land were to be treated less harshly than those within it, that distinction was merely a part of the overall military policy. They would eventually become neighbors of the new state of **Isra’el** and would receive a warning concerning **Isra’el’s** military capability, but they were not the prime military targets. Those cities within the Promised Land, however, were an entirely different story. **However, in the cities of the nations ADONAI your God is giving you as an inheritance do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them - the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites - as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against ADONAI your God (Deuteronomy 20:16-18).** Here all three of von Clausewitz’s military objectives would be achieved in three verses. The military power of **the Israelites** enemies would be destroyed, the countries could be conquered so that no new military threat could emerge, and the will of the enemy would be mortally subdued.⁹

This command was, however, essentially theoretical, and as von Clausewitz pointed out,

there could be a difference between the theory of war and the reality and practice of war. True to form, **the Israelites** did not obey **Deuteronomy 20:16-18** in every instance. But when they refused to obey the commands of **ADONAI** they always suffered. When King Sha'ul was **unwilling to completely destroy the Amalekites** (see the commentary on [Esther Ag - Haman the Agagite: The Enemy of the Jews](#)), **the Israelites** would eventually swallow the poison pill of idolatry. It was left up to **Esther** and Mordecai to finish the job (see the commentary on [Esther Bm - So the Jews Struck Down All Their Enemies with the Sword, Killing and Destroying Them](#)). But the problem remains - wars were carried at the command of **God**, in the name of **God**, and with the help of **God**. Can there be a **holy war**?

First, we must understand that our total depravity is real and insidious. Very early in the Bible we read: **The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Genesis 6:5)**. Paul describes the Gentiles as **darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart; they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness (Ephesians 4:18-19)**. His description of sinners in **Romans 1:18-32** and **Titus 1:5**, as well as of the men of the last days in **Second Timothy 3:2-5**, focus on their corruption and desperate wickedness. Those who do not surrender their lives to **the Lord Jesus Christ** are doomed. **For anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God (James 4:4)**. All who are not adopted into **the LORD's** family (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Bw - What God Does For Us at the Moment of Faith](#)) will ultimately be set apart for destruction (see the commentary on [Revelation Fo - The Great White Throne Judgment](#)).

Thus, total depravity does not mean that the unregenerate person is totally insensitive in matters of conscience, or of right and wrong. For Paul's statement in **Romans 2:15** says that the Gentiles have **the Torah written on their hearts**, so that **their conscience also bears witness and their thoughts accusing them**. Further, total depravity does not mean that the sinful man is as **sinful** as he can possibly be. There are unregenerate people who are genuinely unselfish, who show kindness, generosity and love to others, who are good, devoted spouses and parents. But any or all of those actions do not save a person from **God's** wrath. Salvation is like a test with a thousand questions and only one that counts. Do you admit that you are sinner, have you asked **Yeshua** for forgiveness and accepted **Him** as your **Lord** and **Savior**? Finally, total depravity does note that **the sinner** engages in every possible form of **sin**.

What then do we mean by the idea of total depravity? First, **sin** is a matter of the entire person. The existence of sin is not merely one aspect of the person, such as the body or reason. Further, it means that even the lost person's unselfishness always contains an element of improper motive. The good acts are not done entirely or even primarily out of perfect love for **ADONAI**. The Pharisees who so often debated with **Jesus** did many good things (**Matthew 23:23**), but they had no real love for **God**. So **He** said to them: **You search the Scriptures** (which was of course good), **because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to Me; yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life. I do not receive glory from men. But I know that you do not have the love of God within you (John 5:39-42)**. A genteel layer of charm and graciousness sometimes covers **sinfulness**. The lost can be so very pleasant, thoughtful, helpful, and generous. At times it's hard to think of them as being completely **sinful** and in need of salvation. We need to remember that total depravity is not defined in terms of what we may regard as unpleasant. It is, rather, failing to love, honor, and serve **God**. So even the likeable and kindly person is in need of the Good News as much as any obnoxious, crude and thoughtless person. Finally, total depravity means that the lost are completely unable to free themselves from their **sinful** condition. Rabbi Sha'ul writes: **And [Yeshua] made you alive when you were dead through the transgressions and sins in which you used to live . . . But because of His great love for us, ADONAI, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and that not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast (Eph 2:1, 4 8-9)**.¹⁰ Consequently, when we examine the problem of **holy war** in the **TaNaKh**, we need to keep the doctrine of total depravity in mind. Without willing obedience to **YHVH**, those cute little **Canaanites** would grow up to be idol-worshipping **Canaanites**.

Lastly, there is a concept in the TaNaKh called the cherem judgment of ADONAI. Cherem means *to be devoted to destruction*. When conquering the Land after forty years of wilderness wanderings the **LORD** declared **the city of Jericho and all that is in it are to be devoted to destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies [that were] sent in. But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Then they devoted the city to ADONAI and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it - men, women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys. Then they burned the whole city and everything in it (Joshua 6:17-18, 21 and 24a)**.

But Achan son of Carmi, son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah took

some of the devoted things. So by using the Urim and Thummim (see my commentary on Exodus [Gb](#) - **The Urim and Thummim: The Means of Making Decisions**), **Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, then clans, then the Zerahites and Zimri was taken. Then Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to ADONAI, the God of Isra’el, and give Him the praise. Tell Me what you have done; do not hide it from me.” Achan replied, “It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Isra’el. When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylon, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath (Joshua 7:1, 16-21).**

So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the LORD (Josh 7:22-23).

So Joshua, together with all Isra’el, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters (and presumably his wife), donkeys and sheep his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor, or *the Valley of Trouble*. Joshua said: Why have you brought this trouble on us? ADONAI will bring trouble on you today. Then all Israel stoned him, and after that they stoned the rest, they burned them (Joshua 7:24-25).

When Moses spoke to **the Israelites** before leaving on their journey to **the Promised Land** saying that they were to **completely destroy the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites - do not leave anything alive**, those pagan nations were being *devoted to destruction* by a **Holy God**; therefore, it became a **holy war**.