

**MARTIAL ARTS
AND
THE OLD TESTAMENT
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“Christian martial arts.” To many, this term appears to contradict itself: After all, even non-Christians refer to God as a God of love and peace. And any mature Christian knows that we are to emulate the character of our Creator. So how is it then that a mature Christian can practice the martial arts-- a lifestyle which prepares the practitioner for violence and war? As in other controversial matters, our personal feelings are not the determining factor to whether or not we condone certain action. On the contrary, our thinking must be affected by the teaching of the Word of God. It is at this place that we do away with preconceived ideas, personal opinions and biased feelings. Only by doing so are we enabled to seek the character of God in His Word and open-mindedly see what He has to say on a certain matter. Our response to His Word should then be an acceptance of the absolute truth contained in it. Any other response simply appeals to our pride as we foolishly think that we may know better than an all-knowing God.

Now that it has been established that the Word of God is the final authority on all matters pertinent to our Christian walk, let us examine the teachings of the Word of God on war and martial arts as found in the Old Testament. Before we begin, however, we must establish some ground rules to ensure that we properly handle God's Word to serve His purposes. Good hermeneutics advise us that we must never take truth that belongs to a past dispensation and bring it up to the present. (An example of this would be the error Seventh Day Adventism makes in bringing the Law which was given to the Jewish people into our dispensation). In light of this, it is correct to assume we should not take statements applying to other dispensations-- past or future-- and attempt to make them fit the present. In addition to this, we must understand that Old Testament narratives record what happened-- not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. An Old Testament narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine, though it may often illustrate a doctrine taught propositionally elsewhere. Each narrative does not necessarily have a moral of its own, either. If we are to use such narratives properly, we should understand that they are primarily factual stories telling of God's universal plan for His creation, the nation of Israel and select individuals involved in that plan. No Bible narrative was written specifically about you! These ideas must be kept in mind as we explore the martial arts in the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, we find numerous examples of war and even instructions given by God as to how war should be fought. So as we begin, let us return to the question that introduced this writing. How could a God of love and peace condone warfare?

One cannot argue with a passage such as the one found in I Chronicles 5:22: “For many fell slain, because the war was of God.” This statement clearly declares God's position on this particular event-- He was integrally involved! The question is, why?

To answer this question, we must examine the validity of certain assumptions. In his book, The Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties, Gleason L. Archer offers some insight:

“Is it really a manifestation of goodness to furnish no opposition to evil? Can we say that a truly good surgeon should do nothing to cut away cancerous tissue from his patient and simply allow him to go on suffering until he finally dies? Can we praise a police force that stands idly by and offers no slightest resistance to the armed robber, the rapist, the

arsonist, or any other criminal who preys on society? How could God be called “good” if He forbade His people to protect their wives from ravishment and strangulation by drunken marauders or to resist invaders who have come to pick up their children and dash out their brains against the wall?”

Pacifism adheres to a policy of supine surrender to evil. When law-abiding citizens subscribe to this policy by giving up their right to self-defense, they only give a greater opportunity for crime and violence to flourish. Ultimately, this situation only helps to promote the chaos and destruction wrought by the powers of hell. Knowing this, it seems as if it is a necessity of a God of peace to institute the right of self-defense for His people. There would be no peace and God would not be a God of love if He were to allow the earth to be controlled by violent criminal action or unanswered attack by aggressive forces.

The entire Bible supports self-defense conducted in a responsible manner. However, this may not be the only reason the people of God engaged in war in the Old Testament. The text in Joshua 6:21 reads, “And they utterly destroyed everything in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox and sheep and donkey, with the edge of the sword.” This city, Jericho, was only one of the corrupt heathen nations that God commissioned His people to execute His judgment upon. The Bible explains that in this particular incident Joshua was simply carrying out God's orders. Archer adds:

“The loss of innocent life in the demolition of Jericho was much to be regretted, but we must recognize that there are times when only radical surgery will save the life of a cancer-stricken body. The whole population of the antediluvian civilization had become hopelessly infected with the cancer of moral depravity. Had any of them been permitted to live while still in rebellion against God, they may have infected Noah's family as well.”

We now know that there were distinct reasons for martial arts in the Old Testament and not just senseless, brutal killing. Today, we possess as believers an infinite resource in resisting the corruption of sin-- the Holy Spirit. Prior to Pentecost and the resurrection of Christ, this powerful weapon was not available to the people of the old covenant. For this reason, we can thank God while simultaneously withholding our judgment of those living in a radically different situation before the Cross. As we desire today, they were simply living in obedience and faith toward Jehovah.

Upon identifying some possible reasons underlying God's involvement with battle in the Old Testament, the question arises: Did God's instruction transcend the mere command to go to battle?

To know the character of God is to know that He is a God of details. He always explicitly lays down the terms by which His orders are to be followed. The primary list of instructions for engaging in battle found in the Old Testament is located in the twentieth chapter of Deuteronomy.

Rather than exegete verse by verse, we will look at some particular verses and attempt to derive some principles for battle in the Old Testament from them.

In verse one, God commanded His army not to be afraid because the outcome would never be determined by mere military strength alone. Verse two described the duties of the priest, one of which was to encourage the soldiers with the Word of God. A lack of trust in God would lead to fear resulting in a weak will for battle. In extreme cases, this would result in panic and neutralize a soldier's ability to fight intelligently. The role of the officers as described in verse five was to choose men qualified for battle. Men were chosen not only on the basis of being gifted for battle, but also upon evaluation of their commitment to God and other distractions in their lives which would deter their focus. It is especially interesting to note in verse ten that the soldiers were commanded to make an offer of peace prior to engaging in battle. Only when this offer was refused were the soldiers to conduct battle. One final principle we will examine here is found in verses nineteen through twenty. These verses describe the prohibition against destroying fruit-bearing trees. This was partly due to common sense. Why destroy the land you are about to occupy and the fruit you could eat? (In the ancient Near East military powers punished their enemies by indiscriminately laying waste to the land).¹ Other principles can be derived from this verse as well. Such annihilation could demonstrate an unhealthy desire for the use of excessive force and destructive power. As God's people and martial artists, such behavior is not tolerable.

At times physical battle is justified. God justified it to the Israelites simply by His command. God also gave specific principles by which this battle was to be conducted. But a command and code of ethics only paints a partial picture. The soldiers heading into battle had to be trained to war effectively. At least Psalm 144 suggests this to be the case. Verse one of this chapter reads as follows, "Praise be to the Lord my Rock who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle." Such training was crucial to David's decisions as he selected men for battle. What qualities was David looking for? I Chronicles, chapter twelve, gives us some insight. Verse one suggests the men worked extremely hard to hone their techniques with the spear, sling and bow-- even to point of being proficient with both hands! Verse eight speaks of their determination and mental composure, "they were brave ... their faces were the faces of lions." It also speaks of their physical condition, "they were as swift as gazelles in the mountains." "In the mountains" also indicates their ability to use their environment to their advantage. We can assume that some combat took the form of hand-to-hand duels. I Samuel 1:23 and 2: 18 tell of the high value attached to fleetness of foot and strength of arm.

We know that training was an integral part of a soldier's preparation to condition him physically for battle. But exactly what kind of battle did he engage in? The remainder of this writing will examine this by focusing upon two areas (1) strategies employed in battle and (2) actual weapons employed on the battlefield,

¹ Bible Knowledge Commentary

One of the first strategic attacks explained in the Old Testament is found in the eighth chapter of Joshua. Beginning in verse two, we read of Joshua's plan to ambush Ai. During the night, Joshua sent one detachment of soldiers just outside of Ai to lie in wait. In the morning Joshua and the leaders of Israel marched up to Ai and set up camp just north of the city. When the armies of Ai saw Joshua and his men, they attacked. The Israelites camped in the north pretended to scatter at the initiation of Ai's attack before turning back against them. As the northern camp attacked, the Israelites lying in ambush moved in to burn the city. The Israelites used the ambush again in Judges Chapter twenty when attacking the city of Gibeah. When the Benjamites attacked, ten thousand Israelite men, waiting to ambush, attacked from the front. How effective was this technique? The entire force of Benjamite soldiers numbered twenty-six thousand and seven hundred. Twenty-five thousand and one hundred were killed.

Surprise was another battle strategy employed as evidenced by Gideon's battle with the Midianites. Gideon divided his three hundred men into three separate companies with two strange weapons: trumpets and empty jars ... with torches inside. The army arrived at the edge of the Midianite camp at a very crucial time-- the changing of the guard. At that time, the trumpets were blown and the jars were broken making a terrible noise and revealing the torches. The Midianites imagined a much larger Israelite army and may have mistaken the returning guards just relieved from duty for Israelites. Whatever the circumstances may have been, the Midianites turned on one another with the sword as Gideon and his men watched in safety.

Circumvention was another military strategy used as described in 2 Samuel 5:23. David and his army opted not to attack from straight on, but rather to circle the enemy from behind. When David and his men heard the Philistines marching in the balsam trees, they attacked driving them from Gibeon to Gezer.

Yet another method of resolving conflict upon warring neighbors was the selection of champions. A tempting reward lured one into accepting the challenge to battle for one's people and win the decision in their favor. Upon a decision, the victors retreated at the sounding of a trumpet. By using champions, an army often avoided the high cost of battle. The most popular narrative depicting this mode of battle is found in the seventeenth chapter of I Samuel. The armies of Israel and Philistia squared off across the valley of Elah. It was decided that the outcome would be determined by a champion and the Philistines offered Goliath, a man standing over nine feet tall. Saul, the tallest of the Israelites, may have been relieved when a young boy named David, the son of Jesse, begged him to let him face the giant. Although Goliath was equipped with a bronze helmet, a coat of scale armor, bronze greaves and a spear yielding a fifteen pound iron tip, David defeated him with only a sling and five smooth stones. After David defeated Goliath, the Israelites forced the Philistines back to Ekron and Goliath's home town, Gath.

The weapons employed by most nations in ancient biblical times were basically the same with slight modifications from generation to generation and country to country. Due to

the many variables in weapons mentioned in the Bible, this writing will analyze four of the basic weapons found in the Bible: the sword, spear, bow and sling.

The Hebrew sword was fairly short (approximately eighteen to twenty-two inches) and relatively similar to that of the oriental nations. According to references in I Samuel 17:39 and II Samuel 20:8, the sword was carried in a sheath held by the girdle. The Egyptian sword was short and straight and about three feet in length. It was typically double-edged and tapered to a point. Assyrian swords were identified by their lavish adornment of the heads of lions which acted as a crossbar in addition to the handle. The Greek and Roman sword was composed of a broad, straight two-edged blade. Rather than tapered, it was of equal length from the point to the hilt.

As in oriental martial arts, the sword had figurative meaning as well. Leviticus 26:33 discusses the drawing of the sword which symbolized war and destruction. Jeremiah 47:6 describes the sheathing of the sword, figurative of friendship and peace. Living by the sword refers to plunder as stated in Genesis 27:40 and not departing from the sword represents perpetual calamity according to 2 Samuel 12: 10.

Of the Gadites who defected to King David in I Chronicles chapter twelve, all were experts with the shield and spear. The spear was common as it was utilized in all warring nations. A variety of spears is documented in the Scripture. Because the terms denoted for “spear” in the Bible are largely uncertain, we will look to Unger's Bible Dictionary for added assistance :

“(1) The hanit, a “spear” of the largest kind, was the weapon of Goliath (I Samuel 17:7,45; II Samuel 21: 19; 1 Chronicles 20:5) and also of other giants and mighty warriors. (2) Apparently lighter than the preceding was the kid on or “javelin”. When not in action, the javelin was carried on the back of the warrior (I Samuel 17:6). (3) Another kind of spear was romah. In the historical books, it occurs in Numbers 25:7 and 1 Kings 18:28 and frequently in the later books as in I Chronicles 12:8 and II Chronicles 11:12. (4) The shelah was probably a lighter missile or “dart” (II Chronicles 23: 10, 32:5; Nehemiah 4"17,23; Job 33:18, 36:12; Joel 2:8) ... (5) Shebet, a “rod” or "staff is used only once to denote a weapon (II Samuel 18:4).”

Gadites were not the only soldiers to defect to King David's army. Others, such as the Benjamites, were skilled technicians with the bow. Bowmen were also found among Reuben, Gad, Manasseh (I Chronicles 5: 18) and Ephraim (Psalm 78:9). The bow was the primary weapon employed by the Egyptians and Assyrians as well as the Hebrews. The Scripture gives very little detail of the construction of the bow. However, certain passages can give us a glimpse of how it was utilized. Psalm 7: 12 may give the impression that the bow was bent by the foot, and II Samuel 22:35 speaks of bronze bows as being especially strong. Arrows were most likely constructed of reed and feathers with a flint tip. Job 6:4 gives reference to arrows with poisonous tips, and Paul's referral to the “flaming arrows of the evil one” may have been in reference to arrows set on fire used in battle.

Many Benjamites in David's army were also expert slingers. Just how expert? Judges 20:16 describes them as being able to sling a stone at a hair and not miss!

It is believed that the book of Job was written during the time of the patriarchs. Its reference then to the sling in 41:28 would make the sling one of the oldest of the ancient weapons. The sling consisted of two strings usually made of leather or sinew, and a leather pouch which held the stone. I Samuel 17:40 describes the stones as being smooth and carried in a small handbag. The sling was operated by placing a stone in the pouch, grasping both strings and swinging it overhead two or three times. The stone was released by letting go of one of the strings. It has been documented that by using this method, a man could hurl a stone as far as six hundred feet!

This has been a brief overview of martial arts and warring techniques in the Old Testament. It has covered justification of war, principles of war and methods of war. It is, however, worth noting one final thought, which is the most significant. Despite the tremendous skill of the aforementioned warriors, victory was only experienced by God's people when the plans were executed God's way.

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