

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament
G. Rebellion Against the Divine Order
20. Spiritual Warfare

As we've seen previously, Satan, masquerading as someone concerned for Adam and Eve's enlightenment and happiness, had a hand in unleashing sin on the world. And since that first work of deception he has continued to war against Almighty God and frustrate his purposes. The New Testament is more explicit about this ongoing spiritual warfare than the Old, but it is often implied and sometimes depicted outright in the Old Testament as well. Let's look at a few of these Scriptural accounts.

Although Satan is not mentioned in the biblical record of life in the time leading up to the worldwide flood, he is clearly at work in the increase of wickedness then. The differences between the godly line of Seth and the ungodly line of Cain reflect the continuing tension that began in the Garden of Eden—between God's way and the serpent's way. Seth's fifth-generation descendant, Enoch, offers the best example of the sort of service God desired; he "walked with God." By contrast, Cain's fifth-generation descendant was Lamech, who is singled out for his reckless disregard for what God wanted. Lamech insisted on having his own way, on being his own god; he exemplifies the attitude to which the serpent exhorted Adam and Eve.

But eventually, even the godly line succumbed to Satan's temptation as evidenced by the intermarriage between the sons of God and daughters of humans, and the rise of the Nephilim and their progeny, which Gen. 6:2-5 makes clear, excelled in wickedness. Although we know little of the specifics of what they did, who can doubt the spiritual warfare being waged against the Creator and Sovereign of the universe. Things got so bad that God decided to start over with Noah and his family. And even after that, it was not long before another supernatural act of God became necessary to frustrate the godless intentions of the builders of the tower of Babel.

A few centuries later, the continuing spiritual warfare became especially pronounced in the conflict between the Lord and Egypt's Pharaoh over the right to the allegiance and worship of Abraham's descendants. The plagues upon Egypt showed God's sovereignty over the whole natural world as well as the world of humanity. They progressively destroyed life in Egypt. What God had spoken into existence, he spoke out of existence. Pharaoh's magicians and sorcerers eventually concluded, *This is the finger of God* (8:19).

Pharaoh came to that conclusion more reluctantly. It took so long because he had such a hard heart. And in the end, he yielded only because he had no alternative. His heart was as stubborn and resistant as ever, as evidenced by his pursuit of Israel after he had let them go. Neither Moses nor Pharaoh acted on their own. Moses was the representative of God, who was behind the scenes coordinating everything. But Pharaoh was also a representative. He represented all those before and after him who claimed independence from the Creator and King of heaven and earth. And he was a representative preeminently of the Great Deceiver who has supported every such rebellion against God

The spiritual warfare continued in Israel's wilderness experience. One series of events in particular illustrates the spiritual warfare in and behind Israel's struggles on the way to the Promised Land—the encounters between Israel and King Balak on the plains of Moab (Num. 22-24).

Balak and Moab were very worried at this time over the presence of the Israelites in their neighborhood. They had heard the accounts of what God was doing for Israel. Of course, everybody had gods, but it seemed that the God of Israel was somewhat stronger than the others. They had heard, for example, of how the Lord had arranged Israel's escape from the mighty Pharaoh, and also, more recently, how Israel had handily defeated the Amorites and taken over Heshbon and the rest of their cities, a mere 10 miles away.

So it became apparent to Balak that ordinary means would not be strong enough for preserving his people's land, life, and possessions. He would need help from the spirit world—some sort of curse to stop the advance of these Hebrews through the wilderness. And, as luck would have it, there was a famous and powerful sorcerer in the region. His spells worked. So Balak sent his messengers to Balaam armed with a large fee for his for such sinister work.

Balaam had some respect for the Lord. But he was also intrigued and tempted by Balak's offer. In fact, he coveted the rewards Balak offered, and sought permission to earn them. In his heart Balaam was willful—a man who preferred money to serving God. Nor was he dissuaded from his intention to fulfill Balak's request, even in the supernatural events that accompanied his journey to the plains of Moab.

There is something both humorous and tragic in the story of Balaam and his donkey. It's ironic that a dumb animal was able to see more clearly than Balaam, a man made in the image of God, and a prophet to boot. Balaam finally was made to understand that he couldn't play around with sorcery and curses against the chosen people of the Almighty Lord of heaven and earth. Not that he was totally dissuaded from trying to please Balak, but he became more careful in how he proceeded in what was obviously a spiritual warfare.

What was happening here is made clearer in other scriptures, notably Rev. 12, where a dragon stands before a woman about to give birth so that he might devour her child as soon as it is born. The woman is faithful Israel; the child is the promised Messiah. The time appears to be just before Jesus was born. But, it seems clear that the dragon has been doing his best to prevent this birth all along—throughout the pregnancy of the woman, which corresponds to the whole time of redemptive history prior to Jesus' birth.

All of those, like Egypt, Midian, Edom, and now Balak and Moab, who fiercely hated Israel and opposed their advance from Egypt and through the wilderness toward the Promised Land, can be seen as agents of the dragon working overtime to destroy God's people. They all hoped for Israel's destruction as much as God worked for their salvation. What this means is that this was much more than a local squabble with temporary significance. This was God's plan against the devil's plan, and God's people against the devil's people. Who would prevail. To use the imagery from Rev. 12, would the woman and her unborn child be destroyed here, or would God actually be able to fulfill his promise to bring the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into a land where they could dwell together?

According to what came out of Balaam's mouth later in the story, God would indeed prevail. For what Balaam found was that no matter how hard he tried to fulfill Balak's demand to curse Israel, he could speak only blessings—words put into his mouth by God telling of God's care for his people and the wonderful future he had in mind for them. Balaam's oracles ended up being a kick in the teeth to Balak. But more than that, a kick in the teeth to Satan who stood with Balak.

The next significant phase in the spiritual war happened after the death of Moses, as Joshua was considering how to proceed against Jericho, Canaan's first line of defense against Israel. ^{5:13-15} *Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" The commander of the LORD's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.*

It was the messenger's answer to his question, that made Joshua realize that this man was from God. For he identified himself as the one who would carry out God's judgment on the Canaanites. The early Christian church speculated that this was the second person of the Trinity: Jesus, before he became human. We cannot know. But this was important business, important enough that the Lord himself would attend to it.

God wanted to be sure that Israel would never make the mistake of thinking that they had done something in their own strength. The first battle was not only most important for strategic reasons, it was to be the model for all of Israel's battles. Not a model for battle techniques, but a model for showing that it was the Lord God who was to be in charge of every single venture.

God personal involvement in the preservation and redemption of his people is repeatedly emphasized in later chapters of Joshua too. God used such things as confusion of the enemy, large hailstones from heaven, and delay of the setting of the sun for about a full day to guarantee Israel's successes against a coalition of five Amorite Kings in the southern part of Canaan. There were similar results in Israel's campaign against a northern coalition led by the king of Hazor. Although scripture describes Hazor's soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore, the Lord handed them over to Israel.

One more very significant victory for Israel was over the Anakites. The spies that Moses had sent out forty years earlier had said this about them (Num 13:32-33): *All the people we saw there are of great size. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.* The Anakites had not gotten smaller, but they were not too big or powerful for the Lord. They too, were conquered by the divinely enabled people of God—all except for a few, including Goliath's ancestors, who were unfortunately left alive.

In the end it was clear that all of Israel's success was due to the power of the Lord. Israel's soldiers fought and died, to be sure, but their victories, as Josh. 10:42 says of the southern campaign, were *because the LORD, the God of Israel, fought for Israel.*

God also advanced his purposes off the battlefield by incorporating some strangers into Israel—strangers like some Egyptians who joined the Israelites on their exodus from Egypt, and like Rahab and Ruth who also believed in the Lord and staked their future on his success. But every bit of what happened in connection with God's installation of his people into the Promised Land, whether it took place on or off the physical battlefields, was part of the spiritual warfare of which Scripture's first record is the struggle in the Garden of Eden between the Creator and the serpent over Adam and Eve's allegiance. Each advance in the struggle, although largely unseen by human eyes, was part of the sequence of events by which God would fulfill his promise that an offspring of Eve would one day strike the serpent a mortal blow.

One of God's instructions for the whole endeavor to establish his people in the Promised Land highlights this—that the Canaanites were not just to be conquered or displaced from the land, but destroyed. Under the rules of this so-called "ban" there were only two alternatives. Everything and everyone was to serve the Lord or be totally destroyed. In the matter of Jericho, for example, only Rahab and her family were to escape the ban, and of things, only those articles set apart for the Lord's treasury. The Canaanites had made their choice. For many years they had flaunted their worship of false gods instead of giving God the allegiance he demanded. Now was the Day of Judgment, in which they would reap the reward for their sin.

This helps us understand the radical response to Achan's disobedience to God's command. Achan's sin was not an ordinary act of selfishness and theft; it actually constituted rebellion against God's plan to recapture something of his original intentions for his whole creation in installing his people in the Promised Land to live under his rule. With the benefit of hindsight, we today can see that what was to happen in Jericho was actually a preview of God's final judgment. Everyone who persists in their rebellion against One True God is subject to eternal destruction. Make no mistake, God prefers it when those who oppose him see the error of their ways and join his cause. But some will not, including Satan whose perpetual resistance to God stands behind all human opposition and will be eternally silenced only in the Final Judgment.

Other stories from Israel's history could be used to illustrate the ongoing spiritual warfare, but one of the clearest is that of the encounter between the Lord's prophet, Elijah, and the false prophets of Baal and Asherah on Mt. Carmel during the reign of Ahab. The prelude to this encounter was three years of drought, which as Elijah had told Ahab, was because he and Israel had forsaken the worship of the Lord to serve false gods. The penalty of drought was particularly appropriate to demonstrate the powerlessness of Israel's fertility gods to bring the rains that were signs of the Lord's blessings.

Elijah proposed a contest on Mt. Carmel: Both he and the prophets of Baal and Asherah would construct altars for sacrifice to their respective gods. Then they would pray for fire from heaven to light the sacrifice. Elijah said, and the others agreed (1 Ki 18:25), "The god who answers by fire—he is God." Of course, the gods of the false prophets failed to answer; they were not real unless you count the spiritual agents of Satan who stood behind them. But the Lord did answer Elijah's prayer, even after he made the request more difficult by drenching his altar with water. As a result, the people of Israel again put their faith in the Lord, however temporarily.

The first sign that Israel's trouble was not yet over came when Jezebel heard what had happened to her favorite prophets. She got the news from Ahab. The Bible doesn't say what side he took; he didn't seem to come out strongly on either side. He had just been addressed in the strongest terms by the actions of God, but he apparently remained lukewarm. Evidently, Jezebel didn't even feel a need to conceal her blatant attempts to continue to fight against the Lord God. Rather than submitting to the revelation of the Lord's justice on Mt. Carmel, she resisted it and vented an unholy hatred against the Lord's appointed spokesman.

It should not surprise us that there is a similarity between the description of Jezebel, Elijah's fierce opponent, and the description in Revelation 17 of the full-grown anti-Christian powers in the image of the harlot who tries to waylay the bride, the church. That harlot is Jezebel writ large. The same powers of hell are operative in both. Van't Veer "Promise and Deliverance" 323-324

However, Jezebel was apparently not strong enough to carry out her evil intentions immediately; if she had been, she wouldn't have wasted time sending a messenger to tell Elijah of her plans. Most likely she was waging psychological warfare, trying to strike fear into Elijah's heart. It worked. Elijah ran for his life (v.3). But through another remarkable series of events God recalled him to service, sending him back into battle.

God's people soon returned to their unfaithful ways, and although God would always preserve a faithful remnant, Israel and Judah continued in their disobedient ways until God exiled both nations from the Promised Land. That was seen as the ultimate catastrophe to the remnant who remained faithful to God. Indeed, it represented a return to the situation Israel had been in during its period of Egyptian slavery, before God had given his Law and before he had given his people a homeland and a special city and temple in which to worship him. That's why the name of Judah captors (Babylon) became, like the name of its original enslaver (Egypt) a euphemism for all that was detestable to all who continued to love God.

No doubt Satan was particularly jubilant and hopeful about the subjugation of God's people by Egypt's spiritual sibling: Babylon. But if he celebrated, he did so prematurely, as the book of Daniel makes clear. For Daniel and his friends had the uncommon wisdom to realize the nature of the warfare into which circumstances had thrust them. And in test after test, they refused to compromise their faith in spite of the odds against them.

God encouraged Daniel (and those who have since read his story) by giving him insight into the eventual defeat of every one of God's opposers. Even to Daniel it must have been clear that this would not happen quickly or without considerable distress for God's people. There remains an opposition to God's rule, an opposition that often appears to be very powerful, and even unstoppable. Indeed, this is one of the things that most troubled Daniel about his visions of the future. But all the time God revealed, he would be control, even when His opponents seemed most successful. His kingdom would eventually fill the earth, and it would be an eternal kingdom. Daniel 7:18 states the truth of what's coming as clearly as any text of Scripture: *the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever-- yes, for ever and ever.'*

A significant milestone in the ascendancy of God's kingdom has now been reached in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. But the culmination of that kingdom is still to come; it awaits Christ's return to judge the living and the dead. It is this matter of God's righteous judgment against sin that is necessary to bring an end to all rebellion against God and all who live according to the principles of his kingdom. What the Old Testament says about that judgment is the focus of our next lecture.