

WEAPONS AND WARFARE

by James Moyer

A study of weapons and warfare in the Bible by Dr. James Moyer, chairman of Religious Studies at Southwest Missouri State University. Beginning with the book of Judges, the work examines military practices and their significance in biblical history.

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Weapons and Warfare Weapons and Warfare Weapons and Warfare By James Moyer, Ph.D., chairman of the Department of Religious Studies, Southwest Missouri State University. The book of Judges describes the period when the Israelites were settling into the Promised Land following the Exodus from Egypt. Because the conquest was not complete, warfare was frequent, and resulted in the hero stories preserved in Judges. These heroes were known as "judges", meaning, not people who decided court cases, but military leaders who delivered Israel from her enemies. What weapons did these heroes use, and what was their strategy in defeating their enemies? The Bible does not usually give a detailed description of weapons or of military strategy. Yet we have a good knowledge of weapons from archaeological discoveries and drawings, paintings and reliefs.

Offensive weapons

Offensive weapons in use at this time can be divided into three categories according to their range. Short-range weapons were used in hand-to-hand combat and included the sword or dagger and the spear. Medium-range weapons were designed to be thrown at enemies a short distance away. Occasionally spears were light enough to be thrown, but the shorter and lighter javelin was better suited for throwing. Long-range weapons could be thrown or fired at an enemy further away. Examples of long-range weapons include the sling, used to hurl stones, and the bow, for propelling arrows.

Armour was used to protect the foot soldier's body as far as possible. Armour included the helmet for the head, scale armour, coats of mail, the breastplate for the body and greaves to cover the shins. The foot soldier also carried a shield to cover any unprotected parts of his body. An armour-bearer or shield-bearer could also be employed to carry the soldier's weapons and his shield. With this information, we can discuss the weapons and warfare described in the book of Judges, where we read "...not a shield or spear was seen among forty thousand in Israel" (Judges 5:8). Clearly weapons were in short supply, at least for the Israelites, an interpretation which is supported by the [above] lists of weapons mentioned in Judges.

These two lists of weapons reveal a striking contrast between Israel and her enemies. The Israelites used mostly "primitive" weapons, such as farm implements and household articles, and had few metal weapons. By contrast, their enemies possessed metal weapons, particularly iron weapons. Iron was much harder and more durable than bronze or copper, and its manufacture took greater technological skill than the Israelites possessed. The Iron Age commenced in Israel during the days of the judges...the Philistines already had something of a monopoly of iron metallurgy.... As long as the Philistines maintained this monopoly, Israel could not hope to dislodge them from the plain (Judges 1:19). On those occasions when the Israelites did prevail against their enemies, it was credited to divine help; some of their success must also have been the result of better strategy or tactics.

Iron chariots

Let us look first at the weapons of Israel's enemies. We learn that the men of the tribe of Judah could not drive out the inhabitants of the plain because they had iron chariots (Judges 1:19). Pulled by two horses, the chariot was in effect a moving platform for two or three soldiers. It was most valuable in making rapid flanking movements where the land was fairly flat and open. The coastal area of Palestine was relatively level, while the hill-country inland featured steep slopes and deep valleys. In ancient times the hills were heavily forested and Israelite guerilla tactics proved successful in this territory. However, in the coastal plain the Canaanite and Philistine iron chariots proved to be the tanks of their period, racing across the flat country. But chariots were ineffective on wooded hills.

Since the Iron Age had just begun in Canaan, iron chariots would have been the latest and best military weapon. Some scholars believe the iron would have been used to make part of the wheels and fittings of the chariot, while others think there was an iron plate to reinforce the wooden body of the chariot. In either case, the iron would have been superior to bronze, and would have made the chariot more durable.

Since Israel did not obtain chariots until the time of the monarchy, they simply could not dislodge the people of the coastal plain. But in one instance there was a strikingly different result. Jabin and Sisera, from the stronghold of Hazor, had a massive force of 900 iron chariots (Judges 4, 5). But Deborah and Barak, the Israelite leaders, were successful against this superior force because God routed the enemy. There is also the implication that there was a late spring storm which turned the river Kishon into a raging torrent and rendered the iron chariots useless in the battle.

Apart from the chariots, the only other enemy weapon mentioned in Judges is the sword. The Midianites possessed them (Judges 7:22), but in their panic to flee from Gideon, killed one another.... The assassination of Eglon Weapons from ancient Egypt. Photo courtesy of Dallas Brown, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville The Israelites also used some traditional weapons. The story of Ehud, who plotted a daring one-man assassination attack on King Eglon of Moab, is told in Judges 3:12-30. The standard sword of this period was curved, with one sharp edge used for slicing and slashing. It is sometimes called a sickle sword, and is the basis of the expression "smite the enemy with the edge of the sword" [see, for example, Judges 1:8; Judges 1:25; Judges 4:15; Judges 18:27, KJV]. This type of weapon would not have served Ehud's need, since it could not easily have been concealed from the palace guards, nor could it be used to thrust or stab to death. So the text explains: "Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a foot and a half long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing" [Judges 3:16]. Such metal weapons were still very rare in Israel.

Because Ehud was left-handed, he hid his sword on the right side; right-handed soldiers would wear their swords on their left side. This reversal may explain Ehud's success in getting past the king's guards. By implying that he was the bearer of a confidential message, Ehud got rid of all of Eglon's attendants. When Ehud told the king that his message was from God, Eglon stood up and put himself in an ideal position for Ehud to stab him with the concealed sword. As the sword had been designed for stabbing, it probably had a relatively short hilt, which would have penetrated Eglon's fat body. Having accomplished his piece of treachery, Ehud fled, calling his waiting men into battle. With their king dead, the Moabites would have retreated hastily across the river Jordan to their homeland, or sought for reinforcements from Moabite territory. By taking control of the

fords across the river, Ehud's men were able to win the ensuing battle decisively. In another incident the judge Gideon told his son, Jether, to kill Zebah and Zalmunna with a sword (Judges 8:20). However, Jether was afraid because of his youth, and Gideon did it himself. This is one of the rare instances recorded in the book of Judges of an Israelite using a sword.

After Gideon's son Abimelech had been severely wounded, he asked his armour-bearer to kill him (Judges 9:54). The armour-bearer took the sword and killed Abimelech, as commanded. This was apparently one of the accepted functions of the armour-bearer in these times; later King Saul made a similar request of his own armour-bearer (1 Samuel 31:4).

There is no record in Judges of other individual Israelites using the sword, and the only other conventional weapon mentioned is the sling. We are told that 700 left-handed slingers from the tribe of Benjamin could sling a stone at a hair and not miss (Judges 20:16).

Alternative weapons On the other hand, many other objects served as weapons when nothing better was available. We are told that Shamgar struck down 600 Philistines with an ox goad, in a tantalizingly brief reference (Judges 3:31). Perhaps he was ploughing with his oxen when the Philistines appeared over the hill. The ox goad was a farm implement, about two or three metres (eight or ten feet) in length, with one end pointed, and sometimes metal-tipped, to prod the ox to plough. The other end was fashioned with a scraper to dislodge the clods that became entangled in the plough. Shamgar's heroic feat fits the pattern in the book of Judges of gaining victory with inferior weapons. In Judges 4 and 5 we learn how Sisera fled the battlefield to avoid being killed or captured. He came to the tent of Jael, who seemed to offer him safety. However, while he was sleeping off his fatigue, she took a hammer and tent-peg and pounded the peg through his temple (Judges 4:21; Judges 5:26). The hammer she used was probably made of stone, and the tent-peg a wooden object.

Gideon's surprise attack

Gideon was faced with the task of fighting the Midianites (Judges 7). They had large encampments, with women, children, cattle, camels and tents, which meant their greatest weakness was that they could easily be panicked by a surprise attack. This was exactly the strategy that Gideon chose to employ, which explains why he used such a small force of only 300 men. The smaller the force, the less chance there was of detection in a surprise attack. Gideon divided his troops into three companies and positioned one company on each of three sides of the Midianite camp. He probably left open the east side, where the terrain was most problematic, so that any survivors would have had a difficult time if they fled.

Gideon waited until the Midianites were all sleeping soundly, and until the new sentries, unaccustomed to the darkness and to night conditions, came on duty. Since co-ordination is absolutely essential in a surprise attack, he himself was to signal the attack, to ensure that nobody made a false start. At his signal, everyone smashed his jar, blew his trumpet and shouted. The noise panicked the Midianites; when they looked out of their tents they saw the flickering torches, which could easily have been used to set the tents alight, and so increase the panic. Fearing that they were surrounded by a huge enemy force, the Midianites rushed to escape, falling on each other with their swords in the confusion. The surprise attack had succeeded to perfection, and Gideon won the battle with ease.

Another unusual weapon was used by a woman against Abimelech (Judges 9:50-54). When he attacked Thebez, all the people fled to the city's tower. Safe in the tower, the woman waited till Abimelech was close to the entrance, then dropped a millstone on his head, mortally wounding him. A millstone was normally about five to eight centimetres (two or three inches) thick and 50 centimetres (eighteen inches) in diameter.

Samson's weapons

Samson did not use orthodox weapons either. When he was met by a roaring lion, he had no weapons at all; using his bare hands and brute strength, he tore the lion apart as if it had been a tender young goat (Judges 14:6). On another occasion, he was weaponless because he had just been handed over to the Philistines. He picked up the fresh jawbone of a donkey (this must have been heavier and moister than an old, dried-out jawbone) and killed 1000 Philistines with it, wielding it like a club (Judges 15:15). On another occasion, Samson went to Gaza, in Philistine territory, to visit a prostitute. Since it was night, the Philistines closed the city gate on him. (The city would have had a thick wall surrounding it, and only one exit.) When the hero went to leave, he found the gate barred shut. Undeterred, he pulled up the gate-posts and the gate itself, and walked free from the city (Judges 16:1-3). Since a city would have taken great pride in its fortifications, his action would have been a great humiliation to the citizens, and left the place temporarily defenceless. Finally, at the end of his life, Samson used his hands and arms to topple the columns of the Philistine temple and thus kill himself and 3000 Philistines with him.

Final battle The last battle recorded in the book of Judges, the attack on Gibeah, gives an interesting account of battle tactics (Judges 20:18-48). As the defenders, the people of Gibeah and the Benjaminites had an advantage since they were fighting to defend their home territory. Israel's two head-on assaults were successfully repulsed, as the town of Gibeah was well fortified and encircled by a thick, high wall. On their third attempt, the Israelites set up an ambush out of sight of the city, and then pulled back their assault force as if in flight. The unsuspecting Benjaminites sallied out from the safety of the city to pursue the "fleeing" army, leaving Gibeah defenceless. At this point the ambush party attacked the city, and set it on fire. The clouds of smoke from the burning city acted as a signal to the assault force to turn and counter-attack the Benjaminites, now trapped between the Israelites and their burning city. The clouds of smoke from the destroyed city further demoralized them. This civil war disaster and its aftermath led the writer of Judges to conclude the book with a strong plea for kingship: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25).

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