

Weapons and Warfare in the Bible

“The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord.” (Prov. 21:31)

Time Period

This class will mostly cover the period between the conquest of Canaan and the end of the OT, particularly the time of 1 Samuel - 2 Kings. During this time, Israel developed from a group of wandering nomad tribes into a civilization holding its own against rivals on all sides. Despite mentioning wars quite frequently, the Bible rarely goes into detail describing the details of tactics and weapons, so much of this information is based on the study of Israel's neighbors.

Role of Warfare in the Ancient Near East

For most ancient peoples, wars were a matter of “kill or be killed.” They had to defend themselves and conquer surrounding nations or be conquered themselves. Often wars were fought over land, because land meant food. Sometimes a conquering nation would completely destroy the people they conquered and replace them with their own (Joshua, 2 Samuel 5:6-9). At other times, they would subjugate them and collect tribute in the form of either money (gold and silver) or agricultural produce (sheep and cattle) (2 Chron. 17:10-11).

Another major source of conflict in Israel is the nation's strategic location. Until the time of Alexander the Great, the most powerful civilizations in the area were located in Egypt to the south and Mesopotamia in the north. These two regions frequently fought each other for dominance, and Israel was often caught in the crossfire (2 Kings 23:29). Armies would pass through Israel to avoid travelling through the eastern desert, and would loot and pillage local towns and cities for supplies.

Wars were usually fought in the spring (2 Samuel 11:1) because there was little rain, which would soften the ground, making chariots harder to maneuver (1 Kings 18:44). Also, since the harvest had recently finished in the fall, men were not needed at home, and the enemy would have plenty of food to plunder. Looting was the primary way the army fed itself when attacking an enemy (1 Samuel 14:31-32) and a major motivation to fight, because soldiers could earn great rewards (see Joshua 7:20-21 for an example of this motivation leading to sin). If wars were fought on friendly soil, the leader might ask nearby towns for aid (Judges 8:5) or the families of soldiers might send them provisions (1 Samuel 17:17-18).

Most troops were not professional soldiers. They were militias, men who were conscripted to join the military for a time and then return home (Judges 4:6, 1 Kings 12:16). As Israel grew in power, the king could afford to keep his best men around at all times, as in the case of David's mighty men (2 Samuel 23:8-39). Charioteers, too, had to be professional military men, not temporary conscripts (1 Samuel 8:11).

“Branches” of the Military

Infantry

These were the main force of the army. They used mostly close-range weapons and would attack as a large group. The other branches would support them before and during their assault.

- Weapons: Spears, swords, axes, clubs, maces, etc. (Ezekiel 39:9). Before the time of Saul and David, the Israelites did not have iron weapons (1 Samuel 13:19). They would have used bronze or perhaps even stone.
 - Spears were the most common (2 Chron. 26:14), as they are easy to use and cheap to make. They probably had points on both ends, which let soldiers stick them in the ground when not in use (1 Samuel 26:7) or even attack with the butt end of the spear (2 Samuel 2:22-23).
 - Swords of the time were not long, especially before steel was discovered. Most bronze age swords were less than 30 inches in length.
 - Many Israelites, especially earlier in their history, would have used agricultural implements as weapons (1 Samuel 13:20-22). A bronze plowshare (a sharp, pointed blade used to cut through the soil) could be sharpened and converted into a sword. A curved pruning hook for cutting tree branches could be turned into a spear (Isaiah 2:4).
- Armor and Shields
 - 1 Samuel 17:38-39 lists a helmet and a coat of mail as the main parts of Saul's armor. This could have been bronze or iron, but since even Goliath is wearing bronze, I think Saul's armor would also have been bronze. This mail would not be the ringed chain mail of the Middle Ages, but scale mail, with many small overlapping plates.
 - Armor-bearer (1 Samuel 14:12) carried armor and other equipment when not in combat, and helped fight during a battle. Similarly, the word “squire” comes from a French word meaning “shield-bearer.”
 - Spearmen would carry a large shield (*tsinnah*) and archers/slingers would carry a small shield (*magen*) (2 Chronicles 14:8). These would be made of wood, and possibly covered with leather.
- See 1 Samuel 17:4-6 for an example of an especially well-equipped foot soldier. Most would not have this much high-quality armor and weapons, such as leather armor.

Archers and Slingers

The second major division of troops consisted of both bowmen and slingers (1 Chronicles 12:2) and were used to harass and weaken the enemy before the infantry attacked (Psalm 18:13-14). Once the infantry closed the distance and began to fight the enemy, the archers would have to stop for fear of hitting friendly troops. Ranged troops could also be used to defend a city or other fortified location (2 Samuel 11:23-24).

- Bows were used by most ancient peoples for hunting and warfare. In the hands of a trained Bowman, they could be deadly (Psalm 7:12-13). These could either be a single

long piece of wood, or a composite made of layers of wood, animal horn, and sinew glued together. These were called composite bows, and could be much shorter than a wood bow without sacrificing power. The Bible does not distinguish between the two kinds.

- Slings were cheap to make and easy to use, but could still be very effective (Judges 20:16, 1 Samuel 17:48-49).
- As mentioned, these troops would have smaller shields than the infantry, probably to protect them from enemy archers and slingers.
- Psalm 57:4 lists some other ranged weapons that could be used by infantry or charioteers.

Chariots

Light and fast, these were the most powerful units on the battlefield until the Intertestamental period (Judges 1:19). They had two wheels attached to a platform with protective walls on three sides, and were pulled by two horses. They were made mostly of wood; references to “iron” chariots probably means the chariots had iron reinforcements or iron fittings that made them much sturdier than normal chariots. A chariot made completely of iron would be far too heavy to be useful. Chariots excelled in the plains but were much harder to use in hilly country, part of the reason the Philistines never fully conquered Israel.

They were used primarily as mobile archery platforms, with one man driving and another shooting a bow (2 Kings 9:20, 24). Some nations included a third man who used a spear or a sword to attack foes at close range. They were not usually used to charge in among infantry like medieval knights. With their superior speed, they could scout, flank, and harass foot soldiers while staying at a safe distance. See 1 Kings 22:29-40 for a description of a chariot battle.

Chariots became a symbol of military might (2 Kings 6:15-17), partly because they were very expensive to make and maintain (1 Kings 10:29). Besides making the chariot, a king had to provide for and train the horses and men who used it (1 Samuel 8:11-12, 1 Kings 9:22). The wealthier a king was, the more chariots he could support. Because of this, God often warns his people against reliance on chariots and horses (Psalm 20:6-8, Isaiah 31:1), as this led them away from trusting in Him. Chariots also became symbols of prestige, and nobles often rode in chariots long after they became obsolete in the military (Acts 8:26-28). See also the story of Elijah being taken to heaven by fiery chariots (2 Kings 2:11-12).

Cavalry

It is often unclear whether references in the OT to equestrian troops mean cavalry or chariots. The word means roughly “horseman” and could mean cavalry or chariot drivers (2 Kings 18:23-24).

For the most part, cavalry filled a role similar to chariots. At first, chariots had the advantage because horses had not yet been bred to be big enough to carry armored troops. Also, saddles and stirrups had not yet been invented, so it was much harder for a rider to stay in the saddle.

This prevented them from charging into enemies like a knight, as the impact would knock them off their own horse. Cavalry during this period would either shoot arrows from horseback (in which case a second horseman held the reins of the bowman's horse) or the soldier could jab at people with a spear from atop his horse (Nahum 3:1-3).

Siege Warfare

In order to capture a fortified city during this time, an invading army either needed to force their way in quickly or sit outside and wait for the defenders to surrender when their food or water ran out. Sitting outside and waiting came to be called "besieging" and the blockade the army caused was called a "siege."

David avoided having to besiege Jerusalem by sneaking in through the waterways (2 Samuel 5:6-8), a tactic the Persians also used to capture Babylon (Daniel 5:30-31).

An early example of an army attempting to capture a fortified city can be found in Judges 9:46-57. Abimelech son of Gideon is trying to destroy the stronghold of Thebez by fire. He has already used this strategy to destroy the Tower of Shechem. As he and his men are piling up wood to burn down the tower, a woman throws a millstone (basically a large rock) onto his head, mortally wounding him. This was a common strategy by the defenders: throwing rocks or other missiles at the attackers, as well as shooting arrows. The attackers would sometimes respond by setting up large wicker shields or screens for cover (2 Kings 19:32).

However, the real masters of siege warfare during this period were the Assyrians. During their invasion of Judah, they laid siege to the city of Lachish, west of Jerusalem. This siege is documented by the Bible (2 Kings 18:13-14) and by detailed accounts written by the Assyrians. The Assyrians used captured Judean slaves to build a massive earthen ramp up to the city walls, as well as attacking weak points like gates with battering rams. A battering ram is essentially a large wooden timber suspended with ropes from a wooden frame. Men would swing it back and then shove it forward to batter down the gates in front of them. The Assyrians also used siege towers, which were huge wheeled vehicles like small towers that were rolled up to the wall and then allowed soldiers to climb over. Ezekiel 21:22 gives a good list of all the tactics the Babylonians used decades later when besieging Jerusalem.

Sieges were horrible affairs for the people inside the city. They are one of the curses threatened in Deuteronomy if the Israelites disobeyed God (Deut 28:52). They had no way to bring in food or water, and so had to rely on what they had stored. Cities were often built on springs, so starvation was usually the result (2 Kings 6:24-25). People resorted to eating unclean animals, and sometimes even to cannibalism. Jerusalem had no natural water supply, so in order to make it less vulnerable, Hezekiah dug a tunnel from the nearby Gihon spring into Jerusalem to provide a constant source of water (2 Kings 20:20). This tunnel still exists today.