

No Horses Allowed

In the book of Deuteronomy Moses is speaking to the Israelites as they are about to enter the Promised Land, and he is instructing them about how they are to live in the land. In Deuteronomy 17:14-20 we learn that if the Israelites should ever ask for a king, that king would be required to live by a variety of principles. One of the most significant is that he is to write out a copy of the Law (Torah), the Pentateuch, and he is to read it and follow it all the days of his life. It is by living by the Word of God that he will reign long and well. By making a copy of the Torah, he will be aware of everything in it, and he will always have a copy available for himself.

Prior to this instruction there is another important instruction regarding his military assets. If the Israelites should obtain a king for themselves, that king must not acquire for himself a great number of horses. Horses were not pets, such as they often are today; horses were military animals, used specifically by armies to strengthen themselves. Having a calvary gave an army a distinct advantage over the enemy, and having horses also enabled an army to acquire chariots, the most formidable military piece on a battlefield. Horses, in biblical times, were not often used for transportation; rather, it was more common for people to use donkeys or, if they had a lot of things to transport, camels. Horses were military animals.

There are other instructions to the potential king, but let's consider the prohibition against horses. If an army did not acquire horses, they were at a distinct disadvantage. Because the army would have been limited to an infantry (foot soldiers), they would not be helpless before an army which had horses and chariots. Consider a modern-day equivalent: imagine an army of foot soldiers facing an army equipped with tanks and aircraft. No betting person would put any money on the army consisting of only infantry. It appears, then, that God was deliberately placing his people, the Israelites, at a distinct disadvantage. How could they fight against the much more powerful armies that surrounded them? Would they not be defeated and the nation Israel destroyed?

Humanly speaking, if the Old Testament Israel did not develop a strong military, they would have been destroyed, no question. But there was a reason that God didn't want the king to go beyond a mere infantry and that was that there would be no question as to who gives the victory. If the king had all the tanks and missiles and drones (modern technology), and Israel won a victory, they would take credit for their own successes and not acknowledge God's intervention.

Some people, among them Christians, would say that the present state of Israel (Israelis) is the same as the nation of Israel as the Old Testament. If that were true (and this is problematic considering how secular Israel is), then it should follow that although the threats are significant – Iran, along with many Mideastern states want to see the nation of Israel destroyed – it should follow that Israel did not need to develop one of the strongest and most technologically advanced militaries in the world. They could have simply said, "We rely on God to protect us and win our battles, so we don't need to own even one tank." But, if the Israelis and the Israelites are the same nation, then they certainly don't take God's promises very seriously.

We can have the debate about whether or not the present state of Israel is the same as the ancient state of Israel, which hasn't existed as an independent nation since 586BC, but we probably won't come to a satisfactory conclusion to which all would agree. What is clear from Scripture, however, is this: all those who put their trust in Jesus Christ, Jews and Gentiles, are part of God's covenant community and come under his covenantal care. This does not mean that we may not have horses, if we take Deuteronomy 17 literally, but it does mean that we can trust God so much that we can be assured that he will protect his people against destruction. In other words, the church, who is brought into God's covenant community through Jesus Christ, can rely completely on God for its existence, even when it might be threatened by powerful forces.

In the last few decades, and in particular in the last few months, I have heard followers of Jesus Christ talk about the Muslim threat, however they define it. They would go so far as to say that if we want to be truly safe, we cannot have them near us, for they pose a danger to the church. But would it also not be true that if God protects his church, there is no threat against the church. Yes, there might be persecution, but we are not threatened. The same can be said for government policies and laws which some seem to believe are a threat to the people of God. But if it is true that God is for us, then no one can stand against us. We simply need to live in trust.

In a world where we seem to be relying more and more on human-developed power for safety and protection, it would seem that the church has a message that has become more and more vital. We have a gracious God who has made promises to his people, and one of those promises is that he will fight our battles for us and give us victory. That doesn't mean that we won't be called to engage as well, but we engage as foot soldiers, even though that might seem we are in a weaker position. We trust that it is God who ultimately must bring victory.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, riding on a donkey. He didn't ride on a horse. The gospel writers say that this was in fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy (Zech 9:9), and it is clear that Zechariah was basing his prophecy on Deuteronomy 17. Jesus rode on a donkey to show the world that it was God who would win the battle against the forces of evil, and Jesus did, not by amassing tanks and missiles but by dying on the cross. That was true victory, and it was complete. God doesn't need tanks and armament to win the battle, and, it would seem, neither do we.

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