

Deuteronomy 20:19-20

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Moses asked the Israelites to protect the trees when they besiege a city. Non-fruit bearing trees could be cut down and used in building siege works, but fruit-bearing trees were to be left intact in order to produce food for the Israelite army.

In this section, Moses instructed the Israelites on how they were to treat the trees *when you besiege a city a long time, to make war against it in order to capture it* (v. 19). It would not be unusual for sieges to last a long period of time. During the siege, the Israelites were told to *not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them*. To *besiege a city* is to encircle it with troops thus depriving it of food and water so that it would surrender.

During the siege, the Israelites were commanded not to *destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them*. The Egyptians were known to cut down all of the trees and devastate the land during their sieges. But the Israelites were *not to cut the trees down* so that they might *eat from them*. In other words, fruit trees were to be protected because they produced food for the Israelite army and the Israelite settlers later on. The goal was not to destroy the land, but to conquer it and make it fertile and productive for the Israelites who possessed it.

Moses gave the reason for this by asking a question—*for is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you?* This question served to remind the Israelites that the *trees* had nothing against them. They did not pose any threats to them because *trees* are not human beings. Also, the trees had not sinned against the LORD and thus were not worthy of destruction. As such, they were to be preserved even if the city was besieged. The attitude of utter destruction was to be strictly limited; it was to be held in check and only applied to the specific target. So, the *tree of the field* is singled out for protection, and by implication, everything else should be spared other than the specific objects God had appointed.

In verse 20, Moses gave one reason why some trees could be cut down. He stated, *Only the trees which you know are not fruit trees you shall destroy and cut down*. The Israelites were permitted to *cut down* those trees that could not produce fruit suitable for food. The point of cutting down non-fruit trees was

so *that* the Israelites *may construct siegeworks against the city that is making war with you until it falls*. The term *siegeworks* refers to platforms an army built around and above the city wall. This would allow the attacking army to shoot arrows and throw warfare missiles down into the city.

To sum up, in the Ancient Near East, it was common for an army to punish its enemies by destroying their crops and cutting down its trees. They essentially laid waste to the area around them. Israel, though, was not allowed to do this. The reason is that it was a lack of respect for God's creation, an unnecessary expression of the power to destroy, and an improper stewardship on behalf of future residents.

Biblical Text:

¹⁹ When you besiege a city a long time, to make war against it in order to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them; for you may eat from them, and you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you? ²⁰ Only the trees which you know are not fruit trees you shall destroy and cut down, that you may construct siegeworks against the city that is making war with you until it falls.