War in the Old Testament

B Y   J O H N   A .   W O O D

How can Israel be a "light to the nations" while taking up arms against them? How can God be both a God of peace and a God of war? The ancient Israelites reached no consensus about holy war, just war, and pacifism. Yet Scripture faithfully records their long and difficult debates, for the diversity of viewpoints arose out of a deep faith in God who had brought the people out of Egypt.

Historian Ronald Wells, writing in 1991 about the wars of America, just as easily could be writing about the wars of the Old Testament when he notes:

> While the history of war is not the history of humankind, humankind's history cannot be studied fully without reference to war. Moreover, the way in which a nation wages war reveals a great deal about its basic values. Thus, the illuminating qualities of war should be of greater interest to the historian of society than the actual stuff of warfare, such as armaments, battles, and tactics. *To examine a nation's experience of war, and its response to it, is to learn something fundamental about a nation's values and its social order* (emphasis added).[1]

Though the history of war is not the history of the Old Testament, we cannot understand the Old Testament without reference to war. It may be too much to claim that one can find war and conflict on every page of the Hebrew Bible, but not by much. War was almost a daily part of ancient Israelite life, primarily because of that nation's size and location. Here was a nation no larger than the state of Vermont located in the strategic Syria-Palestinian corridor—and all the surrounding nations coveted it. Egypt in

the south and various Mesopotamian empires in the north-northeast saw that territory as a buffer zone to protect themselves from encroaching armies bent on conquest and pillage. The Old Testament scholar Norman Gottwald observes the Israelites' preoccupation with war "imparts a vigor to the biblical records but also often casts about them an aura of somber realism and a sense of the fragility of human life."[2]

> Pessimism and hope existed side-by-side. Isaiah and Micah's breathtaking visions of peace are even more startling in the light of the constant threat of warfare that hung like a dark shadow over the land. War-weary Israelites longed for peace, but instituted policies that made war inevitable.

It is difficult for Americans to fathom what it must have been like for citizens of this tiny country to live with the prospect of large, invading armies camped out on their doorstep on a regular, unrelenting basis. Consider that Bethel, an important city to ancient Israel, was destroyed four times in the two-hundred-year period from the time of the Judges to the establishment of the Davidic monarchy. For comparison, consider the city of Philadelphia being destroyed four times since the Declaration of Independence. America's "dean of biblical archaeology," W. F. Albright, noted over half a century ago that under these conditions "one can hardly be surprised…[that] Israel became martially minded."[3]

We also discover a great deal about ancient Israel's values by analyzing how the Israelites conducted battles and how they reacted to warfare. Although many similarities existed between Israel and her neighbors with regard to warfare, there were stunning differences that point to very distinct values. For example, the Israelites did not glorify warfare as did their neighbors, refusing to engage in hero worship or erect great monuments commemorating battles, which are seen most clearly in the brutal Assyrian Empire. Contrast the more restrained narratives of the Old Testament to the gory and blood-curdling history of war in Assyrian records. Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal boasted that he draped the skin of enemy corpses over the walls of their cities, and "with their blood I dyed the mountain red like red wool…I cut off their heads…I burnt their adolescent boys and girls." The annals of Assyrian king and warrior Sennacherib chronicle in grisly detail how he surpassed his predecessors in cruelty. "I cut [the enemy warriors'] throats like lambs," he bragged. "My prancing steeds harnessed for my riding, plunged into the streams of their blood as into a river…. With the bodies of their warriors I filled the plain like grass. Their testicles I cut

off, and tore out their privates like the seeds of cucumbers."[4] Miles of the excavated bas-reliefs in the sumptuous palaces of Assyrian kings demonstrate such brutal torture techniques as ripping the tongues out of enemy warriors, cutting off their hands and feet, decapitating them, and staking their heads like human totem poles to use for target practice. Clearly Israel's war methods, however brutal they may seem to us, were relatively mild in comparison to other ancient cultures. Indeed, Israelite kings were reputed for being merciful in victory (1 Kings 20:31). Furthermore, ancient Israel's wars were generally defensive in nature, for as noted earlier, the nation was almost constantly under attack. Israel's God, Yahweh, is never viewed as merely a tribal, victory God of Israel. Yahweh is the God of *all* nations, demanding righteousness and justice for all, and punishing Israel as well as other nations for any evil and injustice. Finally, an element of humility was injected into Israel's understanding of war. Israel's securing of the Promised Land, and the blessings that followed, were gifts of God's grace and not the result of the nation's military prowess. Nowhere did Israel claim that she deserved the land, and passages like Deuteronomy 8:11-18 are powerful reminders for the people to be thankful to God.

Though war was a constant and brutal fact of daily life, it is striking how many times the biblical prophets condemn Israel's militarism and how much they long for peace. The prophet Hosea scolds the Northern Kingdom (Israel) for having "trusted in your power and in the multitude of your warriors" (Hosea 10:13), and faults the Southern Kingdom (Judah) for building "multiplied fortified cities" (8:14), indicating that the foreign policy of both kingdoms had become thoroughly militarized. A "mystique of violence" permeated Israelite society in the eighth century, and the prophets cried out against it.

Pessimism and hope, then as now, existed side-by-side. The prophet Amos concludes that sin and evil are so rampant in Israel that destruction, not peace, must be the inevitable outcome (Amos 2:13-16; 4:2; 5:18-20; 7:17). Meanwhile Isaiah and Micah doggedly maintain their hope of lasting peace. Their breathtaking visions of peace (Isaiah 2:2-4; 9:5; 11:1-9; and Micah 4:1-7) are even more startling in the light of the constant threat of warfare that hung like a dark shadow over the land. War-weary Israelites longed for peace, but instituted policies and developed a mindset that made war inevitable.

A COMPLEXITY OF TRADITIONS

The Old Testament does not speak with one voice regarding warfare. We might hope that the constant threat and experience of war would have forged a consensus among the ancient Israelites about this fundamental reality of their existence, but this consensus was not to be. What happened instead, by all evidence, were vigorous debates about war during virtually all periods of Israel's history. Scripture faithfully records these debates, for

the diversity of viewpoints arose out of a deep faith in God who had brought the people out of the land of Egypt.

Events on the international scene certainly played a part in the debate about war as well as the efforts to grapple with what it meant to be God's chosen people in the midst of a hostile environment. How can Israel be a "light to the nations" while taking up arms against them? How can God be both a God of peace and a God of war? This conversation was a long and difficult one among the people of faith. The Hebrew Scriptures record elements of the classical positions of holy war, pacifism, and just war; and these three understandings of war, of course, have persisted in the biblical religious traditions for centuries.

HOLY WAR

The concept of holy war was widespread in the ancient Near East during the biblical period. After examining the historical records from areas surrounding Israel, Gwilym Jones concludes that all the nations believed that their affairs were controlled by the gods, and they attributed military successes to the work of their gods.[5]

One important strand in Israel's tradition of holy war was the belief that God fought *with* the nation. Patrick Miller describes this as a belief in "synergism," that victory was the result of a fusion of divine and human activity.[6] The great military strategist Joshua is the classic example of the noble warrior in Israel: while the biblical texts insist that victory was ultimately from God, his careful military preparation and brilliant strategy were essential. Numerous warriors in the book of Judges—Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and so on—as well as the incomparable King David later on, fit this mold.

However, this synergistic understanding of holy war is not the only one present in Scripture. Beginning with the Exodus event, there is a firm belief that God fights not with or through Israel, but *for* Israel. "The Lord will fight for you," Moses tells the people, "and you have only to keep still" (Exodus 14:14). Israel's role was "limited" to worship and singing. The power of this story was not lost on the early Christians who struggled with the issue of participating in warfare. The third-century Christian theologian Origen responded to the Roman philosopher Celsus's charge that Christians were aloof and irresponsible in refusing to join the Roman army. Origen insisted that Christians through prayer and faith can "overthrow far more enemies who pursue them than those whom the prayer of Moses—when he cried to God—and of those with him overthrew."[7] The book of Isaiah especially seems to embody this approach toward war. Isaiah, who prophesied during numerous military crises in the eighth century, constantly exhorts the nation to trust in God alone to meet these military emergencies (see Isaiah 19:1-3; 30:15-18; 31:1-5). God alone has the right to destroy and kill, Isaiah claims; Israel trusts and obeys.

PACIFISM

Many passages express the classic pacifist view that God will bring about peace without violence. The roots of Old Testament pacifism are found as early as the patriarchal period. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob coexisted peacefully with the inhabitants of Canaan, refusing to fight over territory and water rights, and offering alternative solutions for problems that war would not solve (for example, Genesis 21:25-34; 26:17-33; 36:6-9). Even the Exodus story contains elements of traditional pacifism, placing the Egyptians in a good light when some of them donate items to the Israelites and even accompany them out of Egypt (Exodus 12:35-36, 38). All the hostility is directed toward Pharaoh, who embodies the evil of rejecting God.

Later stories stun us with their radical inclusiveness and demonstrate that there is a better way to deal with conflict than resorting to violence. For example, the prophet Elisha cures the enemy Syrian general Naaman of his leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14) and later insists that a captured army of Aramaeans be fed and released (2 Kings 6:8-23). The remarkable conclusion to the latter story reads: "And the Aramaeans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel." In similar fashion, the obscure prophet Oded challenges the standard treatment of captives by having them clothed, fed, and returned to their homeland (2 Chronicles 28:9-15). These prophets believed the horrible domestic consequences of warfare not only *must* be but *could* be averted by bold non-violent initiatives. The famous Isaiah and Micah passages cited earlier attest to a persistent belief that genuine reconciliation and peace are possible. Knowing what we know about Israel's often-violent history, it is remarkable that this pacifist tradition survived. These patriarchs and prophets pointed to a more excellent way of dealing with conflict than the well-worn pattern of violence and vengeance.

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JUST WAR

The "just war" perspective, developed within the Christian tradition by medieval theologians such as Augustine, Suarez, and Aquinas, has roots in the Old Testament. In a few passages war is justified not on the basis of a perceived direct command from God or a unique Israelite theological principle, but on the basis of humankind's universal sense of justice. Jephthah's speech in Judges 11:14-27 has a courtroom ring to it, when he asks God to judge the merits of the land dispute with the Ammonites not on the basis that Israel can claim to

be God's chosen people, but on the reciprocal rights and obligations of the disputants.[8] Similarly, King Jehoshaphat argues against a military coalition attacking him as if they were in "the courtroom of Yahweh"; he details that Judah has clear title to the disputed land, has possessed it peacefully, and mercifully had not destroyed these nations when Judah had power to do so (2 Chronicles 20:5-12). Jehosphaphat appears to argue that Judah earlier had waged war with a view to establishing an enduring and equitable peace, a theme found in traditional just-war theory. Later, the prophet Amos condemns the surrounding nations for violating commonly accepted norms of justice (Amos 1-2). In these settings, God is not perceived as a might-makes-right sovereign. Such just-war scenarios occur often enough in the Bible to show that this tradition co-existed in ancient Israel alongside other understandings of war. Their experience of being under almost constant threat from neighboring peoples understandably pushed the Israelites toward more militant and emotional views of warfare. Yet at times they moved beyond a visceral response to a calmer, more reasoned one.

FROM THEN TO NOW

Having seen the diversity within the inspired texts, we can more easily understand the intense debates about war during the two thousand years of Christian history. Facing a hostile Roman Empire during the first two hundred years after Christ, most Christians were pacifistic. After Emperor Constantine's conversion to the faith in the fourth century, when Christianity became a dominant religion in the Empire, a holy-war mentality grew stronger. This reached a peak during the eleventh through thirteenth centuries with the Crusades to regain territory controlled by Muslims. The just-war tradition, which continued to develop from the Middle Ages to the present, probably is the dominant position among Christians today. Yet all three views have persisted throughout Christian history precisely because each is rooted in the biblical texts.

As we have seen, Israel believed that God had put severe restraints on its use of state violence and therefore depicted war in a far less gory way than other ancient societies. Nevertheless, some Christians struggle to move beyond the holy-war mentality in the Old Testament. We judge that many other ancient Israelite practices—including polygamy in the family, patriarchal treatment of women in society, monarchy in government, and dietary laws in religion—are not normative, for we insist that Jesus Christ is the standard by which all Scripture is interpreted and applied. By this standard we should discern that ancient Israel's holy-war mentality was more influenced by the surrounding cultures than by the revelation of God. Regardless of whether holy war was *ever* normative for ancient Israel, we should acknowledge that holy war is not a proper Christian response to war and conflict.

The pacifist and just-war positions are more biblically and theologically

responsible approaches to issues surrounding warfare. Whether "brothers" or merely "cousins," they share a presumption against violence and place severe limits on the use of violence to resolve conflict. Pacifists urge that there is *always* a non-violent way to respond to conflict. Just-war theorists, while admitting their approach has been misused by some people to justify virtually any use of state violence, insist that violence, when it is truly justified at all, must be the last resort, carried out in a restrained manner, and used with humility and grief. For example, when Christians first served in the Roman army in the third century, churches welcomed home their soldiers not with tickertape parades, but with the requirement that they retreat and mourn over their participation in killing, even when their participation in war was morally justified.

Expressing a sentiment that both ancient Israelites and modern-day Christians could affirm, historian Ferdinand Braudel writes, "Historians refer constantly to war without really knowing or seeking to know its true nature—or natures. We are as ignorant about war as the physicist is of the true nature of matter. *We talk about it because we have to: it has never ceased to trouble the lives of men*" (emphasis added).[9]

NOTES

1 Ronald A. Wells, ed., *The Wars of America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991), 1.

2 Norman K. Gottwald, "'Holy War' in Deuteronomy: Analysis and Critique," *Review and Expositor* 61 (Fall 1964), 296.

3 W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1940), 219.

4 Cited in Erika Bleibtreu, "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death," *Biblical Archaeological Review* (January/February, 1991), 57 and 60.

5 Gwilym Jones, "The Concept of Holy War," in *The World of Ancient Israel*, edited by Ronald Clements (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 300.

6 Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 156.

7 Cited in C. John Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War* (London: Headley Brothers, 1919), 132.

8 Robert M. Good, "The Just War in Ancient Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 104/3 (1985), 395.

9 Ferdinand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. II (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 836.

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