

# Peace and the Divine Warrior

BY SCOTT W. BULLARD

These studies of shalom, God's vision of well-being for all of creation, and of the divine warrior motif that permeates Scripture, are best read together. They challenge us to study the entire Bible honestly and prayerfully, and press us to revisit many of our basic assumptions about Christian discipleship within a global village.

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Since Walter Brueggemann has a wonderful gift for bringing the Old Testament alive in relevance for the church today, it's no surprise that Chalice Press has republished *Peace* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001, 205 pp., \$24.99), his essays on peace and war written during the 1960's and 1970's. Back in those turbulent times Brueggemann hoped to rid Christians of sentimental notions of peace and to help them appreciate the sacrifices everyone must make for peace to be realized. Today, as we leave the bloodiest century in human history and enter into a new millennium already marked by violence, Brueggemann hopes his essays will have "resonance for those in the church who care about the public dimension of the gospel and the ministry of the church" (p. 1).

Brueggemann, who is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, believes the church has a responsibility to participate in bringing God's peace into the world. He doesn't approach peace strictly at the individual level, nor does he dangle before us a single issue such as international warfare or interracial conflict. Rather, he offers us a firm foundation for addressing all these concerns: a sharpened understanding of the biblical notion of shalom. We've applied this Hebrew concept, which is usually translated "peace," much too nar-

rowly, he writes. It's not a simple idea. Biblical shalom represents God's vision of well-being for all of the creation, at the individual *and* communal levels (p. 26). His claim is that this vision pervades Scripture; and while he is an Old Testament scholar, he demonstrates that he is equally comfortable describing the vision of shalom in the New Testament.

Brueggemann is careful not to idealize or sentimentalize this vision of well-being for all. He has no illusions concerning the dire situations suffered by many of society's "have-nots"; repeatedly he reminds us that what appears to be a situation of shalom from the perspective of the well-to-do may really be an oppressive situation for others (p. 25). In the view of the prosperous who prefer that things stay the way they are, shalom is about maintaining order and celebrating our many gifts. Meanwhile, for the burdened and fortuneless who long for God's liberation, shalom requires individual and social changes in which we are called to participate with God's help. Brueggemann warns that eventually many social and economic systems must collapse; their transformation toward God's peace will be ongoing and their redemption painful.

The church's role, at every time and in every society, is to articulate and concretize the biblical vision of shalom. We live in an era when many Christians are among the "haves" rather than the "have-nots." This dynamic differs from formative periods in the church's history when persecution and poverty were common. Thus, for Brueggemann, Christians face the same choice as always, though our decision will be more difficult personally: Which story will narrate our lives—the biblical vision of shalom or the competitive political and economic directives of the world?

Consider how Brueggemann articulates the vision of shalom in his treatment of health care. In the final chapter, "Health Care and Healing as Caring," he is at his best as a biblical scholar and a very pastoral theologian. He views personal health holistically, as having "stability enough to share in the costs and joys, the blessings and the burdens of the community" (p. 199). "Healing" is closely linked to this definition of health as it is the "restoration of and rehabilitation of persons to their full power and vitality in the life of the community" (p. 199). Brueggemann skillfully helps us see how the Bible applies to hot-button issues like access to health care. Looking to the Old Testament, he sheds light on the stark contrast between Pharaoh and Yahweh, the king who reserved access to "goodies" for Egyptians versus the One who heals all. Regarding the New Testament, he encourages us to ask additional helpful questions: "Is it strange that the temple—the place where healing occurred—became perverted into a place for the elite?" and "Why did the Pharisees *really* disdain Jesus? Was it because he 'saw the issues' and instituted a health care system that frightened and infuriated the 'qualified elite?'" (p. 197)

His understanding of the link between the biblical vision of shalom and contemporary health care is but one example of the many helpful connec-

tions Brueggemann makes in *Peace*. This book presses us to revisit many of our basic assumptions about Christian discipleship and about life in a global village.

In *God is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995, 224 pp., \$16.99), Tremper Longman III and Daniel Reid flesh out the biblical motif of God as the “divine warrior”—a theme that, at least at first glance, stands in stark contrast to the theme of shalom that Brueggemann develops. Longman, a professor of Old Testament at Westminster Seminary, and Reid, the reference book editor for InterVarsity Press, trace the divine warrior motif through both testaments, from Israel’s conflicts with her enemies to Christ’s return in Revelation. Much like Brueggemann, Longman and Reid seem as comfortable in reading and writing about the New Testament as they do the Old Testament.

According to Longman and Reid, the image of God as one who engages in violent warfare against enemies of God is “one of the most pervasive of all biblical themes” (p. 9). Though the authors acknowledge that this motif “has long been recognized,” they offer a different approach to the motif in two ways (p. 19). First, their study “concentrates on the image of God as divine warrior, not the institution of holy war per se.” In the second place, the authors “approach the Bible as an organic whole...as a single writing that presents

an internally consistent message, including an internally consistent, yet unfolding picture of God as a warrior” (p. 26). Moreover, they note that the divine warrior motif is a source of the Bible’s unity, for it is a metaphor that guided not only writers of Hebrew Scripture but also the leaders of the New Testament church who wrote later works in the church’s infant years.

After an introductory chapter, the authors devote the remaining chapters to the development of the theme of God as a warrior in both the Old and New Testaments. Setting the motif against the broader background of Ancient Near Eastern warrior mythology, they discuss Yahweh’s warfare on behalf of ancient Israel, Yahweh’s judgment battles against rebellious Israel, and biblical prophecies of the coming Divine Deliverer. Most, if not all, of these examples are generally accepted by Old

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Testament scholars and others who have written about the divine warrior motif. However, in the second half of the book, the authors provocatively and creatively trace the divine warrior motif through the New Testament. Longman and Reid begin by depicting Jesus' life, ministry, and healings recorded in the Gospels, as an arena of conflict with spiritual, demonic forces. The thread is followed through the letters of Paul, where Jesus

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and His followers must constantly struggle against "powers and principalities," a group which includes "the devil" or "Satan," but also what Paul considers an unfaithful Israel. The motif appears in the book of Revelation, where the Son of Man is

the victor in the final apocalyptic battle. While the authors' unfolding of the divine warrior motif in Part I is representative of a more traditional line of Old Testament studies, their claim that the theme pervades the New Testament is an innovative hypothesis. Especially intriguing is their depiction of God as divine warrior in the book of Revelation.

In one sense, *God is a Warrior* is even more challenging, both intellectually and to our faith, than Brueggemann's *Peace*: the picture of God warring against God's enemies is hardly attractive to many contemporary readers. Moreover, the copious amount of research and biblical evidence provided for the authors' claims may prove quite difficult to wade through. In another sense, however, the book's failure to relate the God-as-a-warrior motif to contemporary ethical issues leaves us wanting more, especially after reading Brueggemann's book. For example, Longman and Reid scarcely address the many occasions in which an individual's or nation's move to violence has been justified by allegiance to a deity, or simply by calling their use of violence a "holy war." Yet the authors are clear about their intentions for their study, and writing on extra-biblical ancient, medieval, or contemporary holy warriors is not one of them. They are clear in illustrating that in Scripture, Yahweh fought on the side of Israel only to the extent that Israel was faithful to Yahweh. When Israel made a "unilateral" move to war, or was less than faithful to the commands and order prescribed by Yahweh for a holy war, the nation inevitably fell.

Brueggemann's *Peace* and Longman and Reid's *God is a Warrior* are clearly written, creative, and challenging works of biblical scholarship for general readers. Both take the biblical text seriously and bring major themes from Scripture before us in new and often shocking ways.

Yet they are most helpful when read together. Brueggemann's study

of shalom, God's vision of well-being for all of creation, and Longman and Reid's reading of the divine warrior motif that permeates the canon, raise and answer important questions on their own. However, other questions that are raised in each book are best answered by the other. Throughout Brueggemann's book, we're tempted to ask, "How can we reconcile the emphasis on shalom with God's apparent endorsement of war in the Old Testament?" Similarly, as we read *God is a Warrior*, we will inevitably struggle to relate the divine warrior motif to the teaching of Jesus, who proclaimed "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). In asking these questions, we will not only see the need to read both of these books, but also to study the entire Bible honestly and prayerfully.

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