

Wars in the Old Testament

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INTRODUCTION:

The incidence of war and violence found in the Old Testament are stumbling blocks for many Christians and non-Christians alike. How does a Christian layperson or a theologian put God's holy judgement on a sinful society into perspective? At first sight war and violence would appear to contradict the New Testament in which Christian "warfare" uses weapons of love and compassion. Do you enjoy watching action and war movies? Take for instance, a group of young boys watching the film "Midway" on television. These children cheer when they see the Americans destroy Japanese aircraft carriers. "Cool", is the boys' reaction to the destruction of lives aboard these aircraft carriers, whether they understand or not. This example is analogous to a scene in C.S. Lewis's book "Screwtape Letters". Wormwood, a junior devil is "delirious with joy" because the "European humans" have commenced another one of their wars, namely WWII. For the devil war is his reward; it is his entertainment. Separation from God is anguish and bewilderment that leads to the fragmentation of Life¹, which ultimately leads to war and violence. It is not a typical scenario in which good guy kills bad guy, but rather a question of watching from an unrealistic viewpoint the loss of lives through acts of violence. Is that how we define entertainment? Some people may view my reaction as extreme.

A friend of mine once made this interesting comment. "There are people who will line up at theatres for hours to watch a movie like James Bond or Private Ryan. These movies set a new standard for gruesomeness. But little do they realize that if they were to become the victims of war and violence, it is no longer mere entertainment but a very harsh reality." Of course the devil would find these movies entertaining. Indeed, as Screwtape the senior devil once said "The immediate fear and suffering of the humans is legitimate and a pleasing refreshment for our myriads of toiling workers."

As a contemporary Christian reader of the Old Testament the predominance of war has always troubled me a great deal. The conflict between war and religion was not reconciled in my mind, until recently. For myself the problem of war in the Old Testament was not academic, but rather it was more related to my practice of Christian living. I was unable to answer the question of why there were wars in the Old Testament, and its relevance to Christianity. For a time when I was unable to answer these questions, I began to feel a sense of moral frustration, and theological anxiety. I am certain that the moral problem of war troubles many Christians and non - Christians alike. For myself, it was disturbing to read about the ruthless laws of war in Deuteronomy 20:10-18. In Joshua 6:21, it is unsettling to read about the slaughter of "both man and women, young and old."

CRITICISM OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH:

The external problem of war in the Old Testament creates a platform for criticism and attacks on the Christian Faith. Take for instance, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, a representative of atheism from the United States. O'Hair attended a theological discussion held at the University of Calgary. During what became an intensive debate she conveyed her thoughts about the Old Testament. Her comments were that she was "shocked and appalled" by the content of killing and brutality described in the Old Testament. Dr. Peter Craigie, a professor of Old Testament theology commented that, " her reaction was no doubt an honest one."² Like myself, she failed to comprehend the theological perspective of the Old Testament scriptures, which unfortunately contributed to her atheism as well as her negative critique of Christianity.

WAR – A THEORETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL DEFINITION:

One of the most influential philosophers of war in modern times was the Prussian military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz (1780-1831). Clausewitz defines war “as an act of violence undertaken in order to compel the enemy to fulfill the will of the aggressor.” I agree with this definition from a theoretical standpoint. But what is the moral significance of war?³ Craigie defines war as the engagement of evil and sinful human activity, which reveal man’s inhumanity to his fellow man.⁴

THE SPHERE OF HISTORY:

When we read Deuteronomy 2:26-37, we are told about the Conquest of Heshbon. Let us examine verse 30 in detail.

“But Sihon king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him: for the Lord thy God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into thy hand, as appeareth this day.”

We should note that King Sihon’s confidence stems from his military successes against the Moabites. Why then should he submit himself to the Israelites? Remember, King Sihon was stubborn and he was unwilling to allow the Israelites to pass through. When we read this portion of the passage “for the Lord thy God hardened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate, that he might deliver him into thy hand, as appeareth this day.” One question comes to mind: *Does this literally mean that God caused Sihon’s mind to refuse the Israelites passage?* The answer is No. According to a scholarly study conducted by G.T. Manely this passage does not reflect determinism, but rather a part of the “Hebrew Theology of History”⁵. Humans are free and responsible in action, but the actions of all people are set within the “sphere of history” and God is the Lord of History. To elaborate further with regards to this matter, C.K. Barrett, professor of Old Testament theology, explains that history in Ancient Israel was not a “scientific discipline”. The acts of God in its very nature are “trans-historical” in relationship to a modern concept of history. Trans-historical is in effect above our control of history. People control the outcomes of history, and are responsible for their actions. A philosopher named Dr. Karl Marx, expressed that “Man’s actions defines history”, which means that history can in no possible way define our actions.⁶ We interact with our environment, which in effect determines our social status. Marx indicates that the point is not just to interpret history but also to change it. From a human perspective, I believe that history and change are essential to our existence. I certainly agree with Marx’s statement from a human philosophical standpoint, however, there are limitations to his theory. What Marx fails to realize, as a non-religious person is, that the acts of God in their very nature are trans-historical. Thus, the roles of history are controlled by our actions, but it is ultimately in God’s control. It is in effect God’s arena.

How can we as contemporary Christians understand the association of war and violence in the Old Testament with the loving and compassionate Jesus Christ? Initially, it may appear that these two portraits of God are not reconcilable. How can we resolve this problem? Should we as Christians reject the Old Testament, and make the assumption that it is a “*second class*” revelation in contrast to the New Testament. Let us discuss this alternative by referring to the Christian theologian C.E. Raven. In his book, “War and the Christian” he writes:

“Until lately, the Old Testament stood along side the New Testament as inspired... Large parts of the O.T. glorify the God of Battles rather than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”⁷

C.E. Raven developed the notion that in order to maintain a consistent position of God as being a kind, loving and merciful God, he was forced to reject certain aspects of the Old Testament scriptures in which he associates God as a warlike, weak and cruel Creator. Consequently, these false doctrines caused C.E. Raven to eventually become an unorthodox theologian. In addition, I would perceive that this sort of Christian practice creates a form of Gnosticism, and unfortunately

C.E. Raven eventually became a heretic. Raven is an example of a person who could not reconcile the different portraits of God given in the Old Testament and New Testament. In other words, for Raven, the warlike description of God provided in the Old Testament is not compatible with the description of God in the New Testament. Once again I will restate the question, *should we reject the O.T. scriptures that refer to war and violence*. The answer is obviously No! Why? The Old Testament and New Testament is part of our Christian Bible, and it is simply *a take it or leave it situation*. Peter Craigie, professor of O.T. theology put forth this conditional statement:

“If the Old Testament was scripture for Jesus and the first Christians, let us not lay it aside too lightly, however, proper our appreciation of New Testament maybe.”⁸

NORMANDY:

General Montgomery is a good example of a person who understood and diligently read both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Professor Robert Osborne of Carleton University provides this commentary of how Montgomery affirmed his Christian faith. The allied invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944 was the largest combined military operation in the history of warfare involving, the air, sea and land forces of Britain, the Commonwealth, France and the United States. On the eve of this military campaign General Montgomery sent a message to his troops:

“Let us pray that the Lord Mighty in Battle will go forth with our armies, and that His special providence will aid us in the struggle”⁹

General Montgomery was a soldier who associated God with war in the correct context. Montgomery did not have any difficulties understanding theologically the role of God as a Warrior in the Old Testament. That is, it did not appear to be in conflict with his understanding of Jesus Christ in the New Testament as it was for C.E. Raven. In the past “God the Warrior” as presented in Exodus in The Song of Sea, had fought on behalf of His chosen people as the O.T. clearly affirms. “Then why should God not continue to be known as the Warrior of the modern world?”¹⁰

MISUNDERSTANDING THE TEACHINGS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT:

According to history the scriptures of the Old Testament influenced the First Crusades. How? In summer of July 15, 1099 the first Crusades captured and liberated Jerusalem from the Muslims. The Crusades considered Jerusalem the most sacred and beloved city in Christendom. Unfortunately, their victory was achieved by bloodshed, and during this questionable period in history 10,000 Muslims were massacred. At that time the chroniclers recount these facts with “*joy and applauded the justice that was done*” all in name of Christianity.” On July 15, 1099 it was declared that these expeditions were undertaken and justified in order to fulfill a promise to God directed against all pagans, heretics, and Muslims. Simply stated the Crusaders felt “it was the justification of all Christianity.”¹¹ Obviously, they did not value the reverence for human life by committing these savage acts of murder and brutality. What can we learn from this? It is important that the lessons of our history evoke a serious attempt to carefully and appropriately study the Old Testament. Henceforth, we must understand the message of the whole bible,

“beware of the danger of manipulating the O.T. scripture teachings to human ends.”¹²

CAUSES OF WAR – A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY:

Let us examine the relationship between God and ourselves. A relationship begins with creation itself; we are created by God and placed in this world in order to develop and enjoy a relationship with Him. In Genesis man enjoyed this relationship with God before he was exiled from paradise.

Our disobedience and rebellious acts against God made us fall out of favour with Him. For instance, the breaking of the covenant has its consequences as illustrated in the Mosaic Texts. This fall leads to the alienation from God. By virtue of being a creature of God, our lives are whole and complete whereas our separation from God leads to a fragmented life. This is the dilemma of our human condition, which is ultimately the theme of the Old Testament. In a complete relationship with God, peace is the primary and desirable human condition. What is the fragmented human condition? **The answer is war and violence**¹³, which inevitably leads to the alienation from God, and ultimately drives a wedge between people. By separating from God our human condition begins to worsen and we are left with no moral pathway to guide us.

Dr. Peter Craigie, professor of O.T. Theology expresses it more succinctly:

“Alienation from God resulted in the fragmentation of human life and therefore, contributed to conflict between men.”¹⁴

LIMITATIONS OF HUMAN LANGUAGE:

First, we must address the theological problem of God. In particular, we know that the dominant representations of God in the O.T. are “*God is Warrior*”, or “*A Man in Battle*” (The LORD is a man of war: Exodus 15:3) At first sight these descriptions of God convey the image of a militant warlike God. Furthermore, these descriptions appear to be out of context with the conception of a loving and merciful God in the New Testament. The phrase: “The Lord is a man of war” was at that time the nature of human language for the Israelites.¹⁵ We already know that God operates within a domain of reality and that God is also transcendent, therefore, linguistic construction tend to be limiting. In essence, “God exceeds the limitation of human language.” Dr. Peter Craigie wrote:

“Words such as “warrior” and “armies” point to the realities of human existence and human history. When the words are used of God, they point to his involvement in that existence and history. God is Warrior, or rather to translate it means God participates actively in the human institution of warfare.”¹⁶

THE PROBLEM OF ETHICS:

What we must understand is that God is the giver of all life; and God has the absolute and only authority to withdraw life or command war in which human life will be withdrawn. Dr. Peter Craigie illustrates this fact by reminding us that Ancient Israel could only be justified by the divine command of God. The right to give or take lives pertains only to God. The world in that period of history was as it is; now the world of sinful men engaged in sinful activities.¹⁷ This basic truth of the human condition is necessary to understanding war. Ironically, the participation of God through evil human activities has a positive end in view (i.e. the justified retribution from God.) Specifically, the final judgement of God in the larger perspective is the mercy of God. Within the providence of God war was justified to execute the divine judgement on the people of the world who are said to have been sinful beyond redemption.

God’s participation in the wars of the Israelite conquests was a means of executing divine judgement on evil nations. Conversely, God also provides foreign nations victorious warfare in the execution of his judgement upon his own chosen people. One example of this can be found in Deuteronomy 28:25:

“The LORD shall cause thee to be smitten before thine enemies: thou shalt go out one way against them, and flee seven ways before them: and shalt be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth.”

Once again God has participated in warfare towards the ends of both judgment and redemption. The O.T. scriptures provide references to God judging the evil of the Canaanites. The divine judgement of God was affirmed in the defeat of Judah and the fall of Jerusalem. Indeed, God is also just with his own people who were chosen as the religiously conceived nation. The people of

Ancient Israel were punished for their evil and disobedience. God's intervention in human history, specifically the history of warfare, in terms of judgment and redemption, points to a larger truth: the concern with the providence of God.

IS GOD MERCIFUL?

Some people conclude that the Lord suddenly descended on the Canaanite people without warning and destroyed them. This is **not so!** In Joshua chapter 6 we are told that God gave the people of Jericho seven more days to turn from their sins. God sent the Minor Prophets to warn the people of Edom to change their evil ways. Even the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were not condemned until they were warned numerous times that God was going to destroy them because of their infidelity, and idolatry. To further illustrate the evidence of God's mercy, consider the book of Jonah. One can appreciate the story of Jonah because it describes the limitations of our own finite understanding of morality. By reading the story of Jonah we know that Jonah rebels against God's divine revelation. Jonah not only disobeys Yahweh, he also attempts to flee from His presence. As Father Mapple's Sermon expresses in the novel *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville "He thinks that a ship made by men, will carry him into countries where God does not reign but only the Captains of this earth. See ye not then, shipmates, that Jonah sought to flee worldwide from God? Miserable man! As with all sinners among men, the sin of this son of Amittai was in his wilful disobedience of the command of God."²⁰

Jonah was against the Ninevites, a race of people who are known to be barbaric and cruel, and he questioned why God should show mercy and compassion for such a race of people? The challenge for Jonah was great indeed, for as Father Mapple explains

"never mind now what that command was, or how conveyed- which he found a hard command. But all the things that God would have us do are hard for us to do- remember that- and hence, he oftener commands us than endeavours to persuade. And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists."²¹

We must understand that where God is concerned there are no limits and boundaries to His divine grace. Jonah was not comfortable with the fact that Yahweh was showing mercy and patience towards a nation that was violent and barbaric. Jonah made the conclusion that Nineveh should be destroyed, but Yahweh had not. No sooner does the question arises, what right do we have to be angry at God's decision to spare Nineveh? The answer is that we have no right! Jonah is the story about a prophet who learned the difficult lesson that God has the absolute right to show compassion to those whom we might think do not deserve it. Our God has revealed Himself decisively; to be the God of compassion and forgiveness, not just toward us but also toward others who we might believe do not deserve it.

There were times when I read about wars in the Old Testament and often interpreted it as perhaps a narrow and vengeful reaction from God directed towards an emotionally weak and misguided people. However, I realized that my misunderstandings emanate from a narrow view of the Old Testament, which does not consider the wider context of God's providence. By examining previous prophecies from the Minor Prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Malachi I understand that God is offering us a number chances to fully cleanse ourselves from sin. The Old Testament scriptures tell me that God on numerous occasions provided His people the encouragement and opportunities to repent and redeem themselves. Unfortunately, the people of Heshbon, Edom, the Canaanites, and the people of Jericho refused to heed the call of repentance.

ADVOCATES OF PEACE;

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS:

Dr. Craigie wrote:

“But the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus reveals to us a new understanding of violence; the tables are turned. Whereas the old kingdom was established by the use of violence, the new Kingdom was established in the receipt of violence. Over and Over again, Christians have forgotten that God the Warrior becomes the crucified God, the one who receives the full force of human violence.”¹⁸

Dr. Craigie is referring to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross. In the O.T. the manifestation of the Kingdom of God was revealed to the nation of Ancient Israel. But the new covenant establishes a completely different conception of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God has no boundaries or limits, but rather God’s revelation exists in the person of Jesus to all nations of our world. Christ transcends violence and teaches us that it is obsolete.

Professor G.H. Gilbert suggests:

“The peace of the Golden Age was not thought to spring out of commercial and economic principles, nor from the circumstances of international affairs. It was not conceived of or desired as the handmaiden of civilization, but it was Yahweh’s gift first to his nation (i.e. Israel) and through them to the World.”¹⁹

Reverend Martin Luther King and Ghandi are recognized in our history as very courageous men who advocated peace. They both believed that **non-violence** was the only road to freedom and peaceful co-existence among people.

During a very challenging period in American history, the year 1966 brought about many riots in the ghettos of North Chicago. There was even some discussion about achieving political influence through violent and terrorist activity. *“How should the Black Population be heard? Should the Negroes Fight Back?”* heralded the nation’s press.²² In order to quickly defend civil rights there were discussions about using strident military retaliations, self-defence and Black Power within the United States. During these harsh and bitter moments Martin Luther King expressed his Christian philosophy against hatred and violence:

“Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods. Never let Satan make you succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. Let no one and/or Satan pull you so low as to hate your fellow man. In your struggle for justice, let your oppressor know that you are not attempting to defeat or humiliate him, or even pay him back for the injustices that he heaped upon you. Instead, let him know that you are seeking justice for him as well as for yourself. I think I have discovered the highest good. It is Love. As St. John proclaims “God is Love”. He who loves is a participant in the being of God. He who hates does not know God. I am convinced that for practical reasons as well as moral reasons, non-violence offers the only road to freedom for my people. In violent warfare, one must be prepared to face ruthlessly the fact there will be casualties by the thousands. In Vietnam, (King writes) the United States has evidently decided that is willing to slaughter millions, and sacrifice some 200,000 men to secure the freedom of the Vietnamese. Violence as a strategy for social change is obsolete.”²³

The death of Jesus Christ, which is the death of God Incarnate, has demonstrated that in order to transcend violence Jesus had to receive violence or become a victim of violence, rather than use it on others. It is evident that Martin Luther King followed this similar pattern as a social prophet of his time. In 1955 his home was bombed, and in 1961 he was imprisoned in the Birmingham Jail cell after being charged for illegal street demonstrations. Finally on April 4, 1968 he was assassinated at the Loraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. As courageous and relentless as he was before his death, King still insisted that only a refusal to hate and kill can put a forcible end to the claim of violence in the world, and instead lead us toward a community of God where people can live without fear.

FOOTNOTES:

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- Ibid. p. 74.