

Christians and Violence: A Two-Part Series

Part 1: The Problem of War in the Old Testament

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Religion and Politics: An Explosive Mix

Nothing is quite as divisive as religion and politics. Considered individually, they can divide families and be the source of horrendous conflicts even amongst friends. But as the September 11 terrorist attacks reminded us, mixed, they can be deadly. That horrific event also served as a catalyst to reflect on how one responds to such extreme actions of violence. While some immediately advocated for swift military retaliation, on the other side of the spectrum, many proceeded to embark on bizarre rituals of symbolic self-flagellation! As the drums of war beat ever louder, Christians are increasingly confronted to the necessity to think through, not only their stance on war, but also their attitude towards the use of force and violence in general.

In this two-part series on Christians and violence, I will examine a number of issues, which I hope, will provide helpful guidelines on this difficult yet critical issue for the Church. In the first part, I will discuss the problem of war in the Old Testament in an attempt to offer a rationale for Yahweh's involvement in war. In a second article that will be published later this spring, I will endeavor, using some of the principles derived from our brief discussion of the problem of war in the Old Testament, to provide a preliminary reflection on the issue of Christians and violence.

Right from the outset, I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor Peter C. Craigie, who has produced one of the most lucid and incisive discussions of the problem of war in the Old Testament.¹ I recommend it highly to anyone who wishes to pursue at length this thorny issue.²

God and War: An Inescapable Reality

You shall devour all the peoples that the LORD your God is giving over to you, showing them no pity; you shall not serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you (Deut 7:16, all Bible passages are taken from the NRSV unless stated otherwise).

Moreover, the LORD your God will send the pestilence against them, until even the survivors and the fugitives are destroyed (Deut 7:20).

He trains my hands for war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze (Ps 18:34). Blessed be the LORD, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle (Ps 144:1).

This shall be the plague with which the LORD will strike all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem: their flesh shall rot while they are still on their feet; their eyes shall rot in their sockets, and their tongues shall rot in their mouths (Zech 14:12).

This may come as a surprise to some people who are not that familiar with the Old Testament, but the fact remains that the concept of war is one of its major themes. The

Hebrew word for war (*milhamah*) appears over 300 times, and the expression “Lord of hosts” (literally, “Lord of the armies”) appears over 200 times. The use of these two expressions not only suggests that war is a very important aspect of the Old Testament, but the texts also establish an intimate relationship between war and God. In this respect, the Song of Moses in Exodus 15 is particularly evocative.

Two questions immediately come to mind:

1. Why is there such an emphasis on war in the Old Testament?
2. What does it mean for the Christian community?

A Thorny Problem

The problem of war in the Old Testament represents one of the most critical theological problems Christians.

*It seems to be in absolute contradiction with the spirit of peace and non-violence Jesus displayed in his ministry.

*The link between Yahweh and war in the Old Testament creates the image of a violent, vengeful and bloodthirsty divinity. In fact, this problem has been so serious that many have, throughout the centuries, not only repudiated the Old Testament but sometimes even the Christian faith. For example, Marcion, in the second century AD, was so revolted by the Old Testament portrayal of God, that he rejected the entire corpus as inspired Scripture.

The problem of war in the Old Testament creates a real difficulty even for those who unconditionally accept the Old Testament as divinely inspired and authoritative. Some deal with the theological tension by simply ignoring the issue. Others cleverly bypass the problem altogether by spiritualizing the passages dealing with war. The foreign nations against which Israel is waging war are compared to the sins in our lives. But as attractive as this option might be, it negates the historical nature of the narratives and does not give proper consideration to the Old Testament itself. Some choose to resolve the tension by viewing war as a fundamental manifestation of God’s justice. This perspective is behind the development of the Just War theory, which has historically been used to justify Christian participation in specific war efforts.

God and War: A Preliminary Rationale

The intimate connection between Yahweh and war is derived from two critical events in the history of Israel. The first one is linked to the liberation of the Hebrew people from the hand of the Egyptian Pharaoh; from that point on, Yahweh is known as a warrior (cf. Ex 15:1-4). The perception of Yahweh as a God of war is further reinforced by the conquest of Canaan, a phase during which God is portrayed both as one who fights for his people (cf. Deut 1:30), and as one who invites his people to participate actively in combat (Deut 20:1).

It should be noted that in both cases, Yahweh’s acts of war are given a rationale. In the first instance, the text states that Yahweh intervenes to liberate his people from an oppressive and ruthless ruler. It is important to note that Yahweh destroys Pharaoh and his army only after repeated warnings by Moses. In the second instance, the biblical narrative indicates that the dispossession of the Canaanites was not simply some whimsical action on God’s part. Genesis 15:14-16 and Leviticus 18:24-25 indicate that

the decision to remove the original inhabitants of the land in order to make it possible for the Hebrews to possess it, was intimately linked to a moral criterion. In an earlier period of its history, Israel is not permitted to enter the land, “for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (cf. Gen 15:14-16). In other words, God estimates that the Amorites have not yet reached the stage where they must be removed. Leviticus 18:24-25 points to a very different situation. The text justifies the removal of the inhabitants of the land by pointing to the immorality of their culture.

Although there is theoretically no necessity to justify God’s actions, the text nevertheless provides a moral justification. Incidentally, this is a consistent theme throughout the Old Testament. Whenever, for example, the prophets announce God’s judgment against Israel, they meticulously and carefully build their case for judgment against God’s people. God’s judgment, whether it is against the nations or Israel herself, is never indiscriminate (see for example Am 2:6-16; Mic 2:1-2; Hab 1:2-4; etc.).

Nationhood and War

Before we can arrive to any firm conclusions about this close association between war and Yahweh, it is important to consider some of the factors that may explain why God gets involved in war in the first place. Yahweh’s and Israel’s participation in war are linked to one basic factor: the creation of a political state. Intrinsic to the existence of a state or a nation, is the protection of its territorial and political integrity. In other words, the state must ensure it has the capability to protect its borders or engage in aggressive campaigns to increase its resources. The most critical component of such capability is the maintenance of a military force. In the kind of world we live in, the possibility of war is unfortunately an inescapable reality. Smaller nations surrounded by other countries will often take extraordinary means to defend its territorial integrity. Switzerland is a case in point. Since the beginning of the Swiss Confederation in 1291, Switzerland has required that every Swiss male citizen have a weapon in his home, and that he be ready to use it to resist an invading force. Observers note that this willingness and readiness to defend itself is ultimately what convinced the Nazis to forego any attempt to invade Switzerland.³

International conflict and war are intrinsic to the concept of international states. It has always been that way, and will most likely continue to be a reality until the establishment of the ultimate state, i.e., the Kingdom of God. The potential for war is intrinsic to the concept of nationhood.

The implication of this reality for our topic becomes clear:

When God decided to work through an ethnic group, and when he committed himself to establishing his Kingdom through a political and national entity, he also committed himself to the necessity of war both to conquer a territory and to retain it thereafter.

Policies of War: The Politics of Rhetoric

The fact remains, however, that though one may reluctantly accept the hard reality of the relationship between nationhood and war, one may nevertheless ask why the Old Testament had such harsh policies of war and whether these were really necessary. If one must wage war, isn’t there some way to do it humanely? If anything, verses such as Deuteronomy 7:16 and 20 would seem to indicate otherwise.

You shall devour all the peoples that the LORD your God is giving over to you, showing them no pity; you shall not serve their gods, for that would be a snare to you (Deut 7:16).

Moreover, the LORD your God will send the pestilence against them, until even the survivors and the fugitives are destroyed (Deut 7:20).

Before we denounce the brutal ruthlessness of the war policy reflected in these verses, it is important to clarify a number of issues. First of all, there are not one but two distinct military strategies. One that applied to regions outside the territory the Israelites were to conquer and one that applied to regions inside.

In the first instance (Deut 20:10-15), the Israelites were to make an offer of peace. If accepted, the inhabitants would be allowed to live, but would be enslaved. If the enemies rejected the offer, the Israelites were to put the men to death, but women and children could be taken as plunder. As to the cities located inside the territory to be conquered (Deut 20:16-20), they were to be put under siege and every living being was to be destroyed.

Although we may profoundly abhor the very notion of war policies, the fact remains that the first one is somewhat understandable, at least from the perspective of military strategy. It is, by no means, desirable to destroy everyone in sight, but it would certainly be advisable to prevent any possibility of surprise attacks from neighboring states. The implicit purpose of this doctrine is to ensure that potential enemies are incapacitated. The explicit intent of this policy is to create a security buffer zone.

Although we may grudgingly admit the logic of the first policy, most people would undoubtedly question the legitimacy and the morality of the second. Why such a seemingly callous and heartless directive? In order to understand the intent of this text, we must temporarily distance ourselves from Israel and the Old Testament, and gain some insight into war theory in general.

When it comes to the issue of war policy, we must first distinguish between the theoretical and practical aspects of war. According to C. von Clausewitz,⁴ the ultimate intent of waging war is victory. The aggressor has to use every possible means and strategy at his disposal to ensure complete and overwhelming victory. This is the most critical principle of military confrontation.

The aggressor has three objectives:

1. To destroy the military might of the enemy. This objective is necessary in order to eliminate any potential for counter aggression at some later point.
2. To conquer the enemy's territory in such a way as to negate forever any possibility of military buildup.
3. To annihilate the enemy's will to fight.

It is imperative to read the war policies outlined in Deuteronomy 20 in the broader perspective of military theory. At the very heart of military discourse is rhetoric. It entails a twofold intent: first, to demoralize the enemy and, second, to maintain and boost morale amongst the troops. Such language is intrinsic to the practice of war. Military doctrines dealing with the treatment of the enemy must by definition be radical; to introduce some principle of moderation would be contradictory and counter productive in terms of the rhetorical intent of the policy.

In regards to Israel, it is helpful to imagine the presence of these stringent policies as one of the critical links in an inexorable domino-like chain of events (see box). Once we

admit the necessity of creating a political entity, then we must also accept the possibility of international conflict and even war, if the integrity of a territory is at stake or, as is the case with Israel, there is land to conquer. Once we admit the theoretical necessity of war, we must also recognize the necessity of developing a war policy. There is simply no choice. If the articulation of a war policy becomes unavoidable, this policy must be sound in order to be effective. It must be unequivocal in order to avoid confusion amongst the troops, and it must be radical so as to have the intended dissuasive and demoralizing effect on the enemy.

So What about God?

So where does that leave us in respect to God?

At this point, it is possible to propose two hypotheses. In hypothesis A, we conclude that God's unabashed involvement in war signals that the God of the Old Testament is in essence a deity that thrives on war and violence. The problem with this hypothesis is that it clearly conflicts with the traditional Judeo-Christian understanding of God as a God of love and compassion.

But there is a second possibility: hypothesis B. To understand properly what this connection between Yahweh and war may mean, Craigie suggests that the close link between God and war may not have anything to say about the fundamental moral character of either God or war itself. These texts in no way indicate that God is a warmonger or that war is morally good. God's involvement in war primarily indicates something about how God works within human history. To understand more clearly what this means, let's review a number of basic principles that appear to guide God's action in the world.

1. The problem of war must be interpreted in the light of the broader theological agenda of the Old Testament. As Elmer Martens has so brilliantly demonstrated in his *God's Design*,⁵ the central and foundational idea of the Old Testament is that God has a project. Ultimately, this project is about the creation of a people composed of men and women who freely choose to love and serve God. This project is, above all, what has motivated God to create the universe and to interact with humanity.

2. In God's project, humanity is not only the object of divine action, but is invited to be an intrinsic component in the very execution of that project. In other words, God wants men and women to enter into a partnership with him. That God is fully committed to the principle of partnership with humanity is an incontrovertible principle of Scripture.⁶

3. God's pledge to work in partnership with humanity also commits him to working with human beings where they are at, with their strengths and weaknesses. Humanity is by nature locked in history. God cannot simply transcend human culture to bring man up to some idealistic plane of existence. I am not suggesting that God is intrinsically limited; the problem is not with God but with us. Because we are historical beings, God has no choice but to work within history. God is in a sense limited by human culture; his dealing with humanity is subject to a historical imperative.

A personal example may help clarify what I mean. When my children were very young, I could often be found on the floor playing with them, rolling around, making noises with toy cars, imitating assorted animals, etc. A person who would conclude from these actions that I was immature and infantile would only show how little he or she understood human behavior. In reality, this kind of behavior revealed something about my love for my children and my willingness to put myself at their level in order to relate to them. A father cannot expect little children to come up to his level; if he really wishes to relate to them in a

significant manner, he must take into account their limitations and adapt himself to their reality.

God's involvement in war in the Old Testament reveals exactly the same thing. It does not suggest that God is essentially violent in character. On the contrary, his willingness to intervene and participate in human history, a history profoundly and irrevocably tainted by sin, broadcasts his infinite love for humanity.

This concept should fill us with hope. God's unconditional commitment to Israel in its historical situation, with all of its limitations, including the necessity to use war, teaches us two things:

*Even today, God's project carries on: He still has a purpose for humanity as a whole and for each one of us.

*God is profoundly and unswervingly committed to partnering with us in full recognition of the human condition. The greatest proof of this unconditional intent towards us is found in the historical appearance of Jesus Christ as a man, in his life, his death, and his resurrection. There lies our hope.

Box:

Yahweh's involvement in war is part of a broader domino-like cascade of events.

1. God has a project: the creation of a people composed of men and women who will love and serve him freely.
2. God's project made necessary the creation of a world where humanity could truly exercise free will, and where evil and suffering were real possibilities.
3. Human disobedience resulted in the introduction of a principle of death in human nature and in history.
4. God is committed to working in partnership with human beings.
5. God is committed to dealing with humanity within the limitations of its historical situation.
6. In a first phase of God's plan to redeem humanity, God chose to work through an ethnic/political entity: Israel.
7. The creation of a political entity entails the acquisition of a territory.
8. The necessity to obtain a piece of land made it necessary for Israel to engage in military conquest.
9. Israel's involvement in war made it necessary to articulate specific rules of war.
10. God's involvement in war does not sanitize war! It points, however, to God's profound and unconditional commitment to working with human beings in full recognition of the destruction and evil brought about by sin.

There lies our hope!

¹ Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 1978).

² There are other interesting treatments of the issue of war in the Old Testament, but in my opinion, Craigie's thesis best represents the issue as it appears in the texts in their final form. For a representative sample of other approaches, see: Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, tr. by Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991); Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald, 1980); Tremper Longman and Daniel G. Reid, *God is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995); Patrick Miller Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973).

³ For more information, see Stephen P. Halbrook, *Target Switzerland: Swiss Armed Neutrality in World War II* (Da Capo Press, 2000).

⁴ See C. von Clausewitz, *On War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968 [1832]).

⁵ See Elmer Martens, *God's Design*, 3rd ed. (Bibal, 1998 [1981]).

⁶ See in particular Gen. 1:27-30 and 2:15.