



War in the Hebrew Bible and Contemporary Parallels

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ALL OF US DEFINE OURSELVES IN TERMS OF MYRIAD RELATIONSHIPS—FAMILIAL, political, ethnic, and religious. We like to feel good about those groups, institutions, or traditions to which we are in some way vitally and essentially connected. The need to approve of the contexts that in part identify us makes it difficult to accept that one's nation wages war unjustly or that one's government lies or that threads in one's religious tradition demand behavior one considers anathema.

Of course, definitions of ethical acceptability differ within groups and over time. Among ancient Israelites some believed that the only sacrificial worship that was proper and acceptable to God was at the central shrine in Jerusalem; others allowed for more decentralized ritual worship, as both archaeological evidence and inner-biblical debates indicate. Some threads in the Hebrew Bible condone marrying foreign women. Other threads strongly condemn the practice. Slavery was a feature of Israelite commercial and social life, as legal and lexical data from the Hebrew Bible indicate; yet we surely reject this aspect of what is biblically acceptable. As Jews or Christians, can we pick and choose among Israelite attitudes, rejecting some as outdated or unjust, while still retaining our connection to the tradition? Indeed, how much have our standards been shaped by ancient Israelite perspectives inherited in sacred scripture?

These are some of the issues that arise in teaching the Bible in a liberal arts

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setting. Students are ethically comfortable with much of the biblical tradition. Murder is condemned, care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger is enjoined. But Israelite attitudes to slavery and to women are troubling to students, especially as such biblical attitudes have shaped modern attitudes to African Americans and justified a subordinate treatment of women.

I. WAR IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Consistently, however, the most ethically alienating biblical texts for my students have been the war texts describing the imposition of the ban. According to this ideology, all enemy men, women, and children are to be killed regardless of their military status. They are to be shown no mercy (Deut 2:34; 7:3; 20:17-18). Deuteronomy 13 directs the ban against Israelite towns, should their inhabitants be found to worship other gods: "You shall put the inhabitants of the town to the sword, utterly destroying it and everything in it—even putting its livestock to the sword." In Joshua, the rapid repetition of impositions of the ban is numbing (e.g., 11:2-39), as devotion to destruction is directed against conquered enemies and against Achan, an Israelite who dares to take from objects devoted to God.

By mid-Joshua, students strongly begin to experience the dissonance of "not feeling good" about their own tradition. The reaction to the war texts may be especially heightened these days by visceral news reports concerning ethnic violence and civil war in Bosnia, Rwanda, the former Soviet Union, Somalia, and elsewhere. Did the Israelites engage in divinely sanctioned ethnic cleansing? What motivates people to turn those of their own group into a dangerous Other deserving of destruction?

Various responses to these questions reduce the dissonance and alienation, but I myself have never found any of the following arguments fully convincing.

Scholarly distancing of contemporary religion from ancient precursors: The Israelites are not like us; they are an ancient people from another time and culture and we cannot expect to find acceptable all of their moral action guides. Our Judaism or Christianity is not the Israelite's religion.

Selective appropriation: The ban is an unfortunate feature of the Israelite worldview, but other aspects of Israelite culture are so much more appealing, emphasizing liberation and life, God the creator and rescuer. Let us look to the good side.

Sympathetic justification: The Israelite sacred scripture does appear to approve of wholesale slaughter in war, but idolaters are idolaters, and God's justice must be done.

The problem with the first approach is that the violence in which Israel is described to be engaged does look, at least on the surface, so much like the behavior of warriors in some modern wars. Perhaps, scarily, they are not so unlike us. The second answer is a bit of a smoke screen. Two rights do not necessarily erase what seems wrong. The third response is, for me, the most troubling, a process of judgmental identification. Who are the new idolaters worthy of destruction? Falling into the biblical medium, St. Bernard thought they were the Muslims, Cotton Mather thought they were the native Americans of New England.

My own approach with students is to urge none of the above: distancing, selective appropriation, or appropriation and justification. Rather, I urge contextualization and identification. If we explore not just Deuteronomy or Joshua, but a wide and representative range of texts dealing with war in Israelite literature, we find, in fact, that the ban is itself a more complicated phenomenon than often allowed and that Israelite views of war are many. Views of violence in war, of the role fighters should play, of causes for fighting, and of treatment of enemies, military and non-military, reflect a complex culture allowing for various views of war-related issues, some views overlapping, some contrasting. A study of Israel's views of war is a gauge of Israel's worldviews in their variety at any one period and through the course of Israelite history.

As we explore the war texts of the Hebrew Bible, I urge my students to imagine being an Israelite man or woman, to assume that ancient Israelites had the same emotions as we, that they loved their children and their spouses, that they mourned the death of their parents and friends, that they themselves feared death and found it difficult to kill even in war. Their worldview somehow had to make sense of war for them, to show that the violence and bloodshed were necessary or desirable or acceptable. In applying this methodology of identification and contextualization, the following categories of Israelite war ideology emerge.¹

II. ISRAELITE WAR IDEOLOGIES

1. *The Ban: Two Varieties*

Biblical ban texts admit of self-contradiction when one attempts to understand them all under one rubric. On the one hand, banned items are things devoted to God, his booty, his "whole burnt offering" (Deut 13:16; see also Lev 27:21, 28). On the other hand, banned objects and people are contaminated, associated with sin and idolatry, a bad influence on Israel and deserving of destruction (Deut 20:17-18).

In fact, there are two ban ideologies in the Hebrew Bible; the ban as sacrifice and the ban as God's justice, and the latter may well be a response to the former, an inner Israelite attempt to make sense of a troubling and ancient tradition.

a. *The Ban as Sacrifice*

The ban as sacrifice is an ideology of war in which the enemy is to be utterly destroyed as an offering to the deity who has made victory possible. Does the God of Israel desire human sacrifice? Indeed, increasingly scholars suggest that Israelites engaged in state-sponsored rituals of child sacrifice at a location just outside of Jerusalem in the Valley of Hinnom at the *tophet*, a term cognate with oven or furnace. Such ritual activity is condemned by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and other biblical writers (e.g., Lev 18:21; 20:25; Deut 12:31; 18:10; Jer 7:30-31; 19:5; Ezek 20:31), and

¹The following discussion is drawn in part from S. Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford, 1993).

the seventh-century reformer king Josiah sought to put an end to it, but the notion of a god who desires human sacrifice may well have been an important thread in Israelite belief.²

Religious actions implying that God desires human sacrifice are on one level curiously respectful of the value of human life. Implicit in this ideology is a view of a God who appreciates human sacrifice because human beings are the most desirable and valuable offerings; they are the portion of God. In the ban texts the Israelites are often portrayed keeping animal and inanimate spoil. Only humans go to God.

The ban as sacrifice may have offered Israelites one way to make sense of killing in war. Implicit in the ban as sacrifice is a sense of inevitability that allows the killers to eschew responsibility for the kill. God demands all the humans as an offering. No decision to spare this person and kill that one need be made. The enemy is never kin, an Israelite, nor, however, is he a monster. He is a human, a mirror of the self whose destruction is a promised sacrifice exchanged for victory.

In Num 21:2-3, for example, the Israelites make a vow: if God allows them victory, they will devote the enemy to God in destruction. This ideology of war is probably as ancient as Israel itself or, more accurately, as ancient as the precursors of that group that would be called Israel, but is a view of war, the deity, and the enemy's death that is preserved in some form throughout Israelite history. The ban as sacrifice informs not only Num 21:2-3 but additional texts such as Deut 2:34-35; Josh 6:17-21; 8:2; 24-28; 11:11, 14; and 1 Kgs 20:35-38. In 1 Kings 20, a prophet denounces King Ahab through the media of dramatic symbolic action and parable for not having devoted to destruction Ben-Hadad, the defeated Syrian monarch. As leader of the enemy, he was the most desirable spoil. Having withheld this boon from God, Ahab's own life is now declared by a prophet to be forfeit (1 Kgs 20:42; cf. also Saul's interaction with Samuel in 1 Samuel 15).

Did Israelites ever fight actual wars motivated by the ban as sacrifice and treat those conquered in accordance with its tenets? We have no way of knowing for certain, but Israel's ninth-century B.C.E. neighbor, the king of Moab, describes an imposition of the ban (*herem*) against an Israelite city in his famous victory inscription.³ Clearly this notion of devoting human conquests to the deity, be it the Israelite Yahweh or the Moabite Chemosh, existed in Israel's immediate world of thought.

b. The Ban as God's Justice

The ideology of the ban as God's justice reflects an attempt to make sense of Israelite banning traditions in terms of right and wrong, good and bad, a Deuteronomic ethic of deserved blessing and curse. The enemy is totally annihilated because they are sinners, condemned under the rules of God's justice. Killing in

²See, for example, John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1959); George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek. A Reassessment* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985).

³For an excellent set of essays on the Mesha inscription, see Andrew Dearman, ed., *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989).

war thus might be rationalized and guilt assuaged. The Israelites are to be regarded as God's instrument of justice, and the enemy is a less-than-human monster who must be eradicated (Deut 7:2-5, 23-26). The enemy is unclean and his uncleanness may contaminate non-human booty that belonged to him, especially when the enemy is a fellow Israelite or a group of fellow Israelites; for this ban can also be directed against those perceived as the enemy within (Deut 13:12-18).

The concept of the ban as God's justice seems especially appropriate for the seventh-century B.C.E. reformers who preserved much of the biblical conquest and other warring traditions, but belongs also to their precursors and offspring in the tradition. The ideology of the ban as God's justice is not reliant upon the notion of a god who appreciates human offerings, an idea anathema to these reformers who condemn child sacrifice, but is entirely relevant to the Deuteronomic concept of Israel as a unique, pure, and self-contained whole that had become soiled by idolatrous enemies, within and without the people. A society under siege, Israel must be cleansed of contaminating influences.

2. The Priestly Ideology of War

The priestly ideology of war in Numbers 31 reveals similarities to the ban as God's justice. The enemy is regarded as deserving of God's vengeance and is almost annihilated, but virgin girls are spared. This glitch in a war ideology allowing for massive destruction stems from the post-monarchic, priestly emphasis on clean and unclean that frames the ideology as a whole. Female children who have not lain with a man are clean slates in terms of their identity, unmarked by the enemy, and, after a period of purification, can be absorbed into the people Israel. So, too, booty can be kept after purification and distributed for the use of God, his priests, and the people. The emphasis on the need for purification is stronger in Numbers 31 than in the Deuteronomic ban as God's justice. The uncleanness, however, is not only a matter of contagion from the idolatrous enemy. The very act of killing in war renders the Israelite soldier unclean. He, too, must be purified before resuming his life as a whole member of the people Israel (Num 31:24, 50). In this way, a late-biblical ideology of war acknowledges the humanity of the enemy whose death tears the orderly fabric of the Israelite universe even while insisting upon the necessity of eliminating the impure Other. This ideology thus underlines some of the deep paradoxes implicit in biblical ethics of violence.

3. The Bardic Tradition

The bardic tradition, so called because of the beautiful and traditional narrative style in which much of the material is preserved, presents a view of war that glorifies warriors, their courage, daring, leadership, and skill. Respect is apparent between enemies, whose confrontations sometimes take the form of a duel and involve a stylized form of war behavior: taunting. The image of war as a men's game or sport is strong (e.g., 2 Sam 12:12-16) as is the emphasis on a code of fair-play in the game that is war (2 Sam 2:22, 27). Men, for example, should fight their equals in experience and skill. Hence, Goliath's disdain for the boy opponent David (1 Sam 17:43). Spoil in goods and women is sought after and enjoyed but

sometimes leads to conflict among allies. This all too beautified picture of war nevertheless lays a foundation for an Israelite *jus in bello*. The bardic tradition preserves an aristocratic, prettified view of war that may well have its origins in the royal courts of Judah.

4. *Tricksterism*

The ideology of tricksterism is a war ethic of the underdog who must use deception or trickery to improve his lot. Akin to guerrilla warfare, the ideology of the trickster does not admit of guilt concerning the enemy's death and allows for no code in the fighting, though the cause is always just from the perspective of the tricksters. Tricksterism, an avenue available to those out of power, is an ideology probably as old as the people Israel, available to Israelites throughout their difficult history of subjugation, and is exemplified in biblical tales of Samson (Judges 14-15), Ehud (Judg 3:12-30), and Jael (Judges 4-5). In the latter story, rich in double-entendres connoting eroticism and death, a woman lures the defeated enemy general Sisera to her with womanly promises of protection and warmth. She gives him milk to drink, sets him at his ease, and then assassinates him, hammering a tent-peg through his head. She is celebrated, of course, as a great heroine of the underdog Israelites who face better equipped, feudal Canaanite oppressors.

5. *Expediency*

The ideology of expediency suggests that once there is war, anything can be done to achieve objectives. Once the war is won, anything can be done to subjugate the defeated enemy. In contrast to tricksterism, this is an ideology of the powerful, able to employ brutality to achieve military goals, defensive or offensive. The war is sometimes argued to be just but oftentimes involves naked aggression and conquest—all undertaken, according to the adherents of this ideology, with God's blessing. The formulaic language typical of the ban is sometimes found, but without a framework of self-justification, be it the need to give God his portion or to kill sinners. This ideology treats war as business as usual, practiced by Israelite rulers and their ancient near eastern counterparts. Even the great hero David is portrayed as a cruel practitioner of the dictum "war is hell" (2 Sam 5:7-8; 8:2).

6. *Non-Participation*

The ideology of non-participation is rooted in biblical traditions that describe God's capacity to save Israel through the performance of miracles. These traditions are reinforced by prophetic injunctions not to rely on mere humans and their governments for salvation. The ideology of non-participation suggests that the people need not fight wars. God, in fact, loves a helpless, faithful people best. As he heard the cries of the powerless Hebrew slaves in Egypt and redeemed them, so he will save his people again. The neatest portrayal of this ideology is found in the late-biblical 2 Chronicles 20. Non-participation offers the powerless an alternative to other ethics of war.

The several war ideologies described above are neither self-contained nor

related to one another in simple chronological sequences in the social, religious, and intellectual history of Israel. It has been customary for scholars to suggest that the ban (treated usually as one phenomenon) is an early ideology or actual form of warfare in ancient Israel that was replaced by more pragmatic war beliefs and behaviors under the monarchy, or that the ban, acknowledged by some as early, by others as late, had its heyday as an ideology only during the seventh-century B.C.E. Josianic reform or in the social tensions of the exilic period.

In fact, the history of attitudes to war in ancient Israel is complex, involving multiplicity, overlap, and self-contradiction. There is more than one variety of ban ideology, and various war ideologies coexist during any one period in the history of Israel. The priestly ideology of war has much in common with the ideology of the ban as God's justice, while the violent pragmatism of the ideology of expediency is reflected also in the ideology of tricksterism. Those whose courts produced the ennobling bardic tradition may well have practiced the brutal ideology of expediency. Those who imagine God fighting (and not humans), thereby planting seeds for pacifists later in the western tradition, nevertheless express desires to utterly destroy certain of their own kinsmen.

Do ideologies comparable to those of ancient Israel continue to inform modern attitudes to war and its bloodshed? Do the ancient Israelite writings on war in some way warn us about our own behavior or help us to avoid recourse to violent confrontation to settle disputes or to achieve goals?

III. LATER INFLUENCES AND MODERN PARALLELS

Certain biblical war ideologies have had a direct influence on the war actions of later leaders and their people in western tradition. We already mentioned the Puritans' use of the ban as God's justice. Cotton Mather describes his fellow settlers as Israel in the wilderness, the native Americans of New England as Amalek.⁴ Mather would live the biblical myth and participate in it, his people's conquest of America and disinheritance of the native inhabitants ordained by God himself.

Closer to our own times is the case of David Koresh who also sought to live biblical myth. The war ideology claimed by Koresh is, in fact, difficult to delineate, for its model is found in the biblical version of apocalyptic, a worldview which can incorporate many views of war in interesting and complex ways. The apocalyptic mentality is rooted in beliefs that the current world is to be overturned and replaced with a new, cleansed and God-sent cosmic order. The forerunner of the new kingdom, however, is the battle with chaos, a key motif in the ancient pattern of creation that frequently, for believers, expresses the apocalyptic process. Nuances of the ban as God's portion may enter, for the defeated enemy is often described as a ghoulish sacrifice (see, for example, the battle against Gog in Ezek 39:17-20). Nuances of the ban as God's justice are strong. The community that awaits the final battle frequently considers itself a beset, chosen, select few, separated (often by their own choice) from the enemy, the unclean forces of chaos who

⁴See Niditch, *War*, 3-5.

subvert God's will and oppress the precious ones whom God loves. Such a self-image characterizes the author of the second-century B.C.E. Daniel 7, for example, whose saints await the final battle, and the Dead Sea Scroll covenanters who describe themselves as the sons of light preparing for battle with the sons of darkness. Imaginings of the final battle among the Qumran covenanters are lively and realistic, including descriptions of battle formations and a list of the phrases that will be on the standards the warriors carry. They live in a condition of ritual purity that prepares them to be soldiers in a holy war. They believe that the enemy will be utterly destroyed, rooted out, and eliminated.

For some who partake of apocalyptic worldviews, however, the view of war also includes nuances of the ideology of non-participation. God will lead his armies and obliterate the enemy, but his human charges need only wait and watch. This is clearly the point of view that lies behind the vision of the final battle found in the book of Daniel.

David Koresh was a reader and applier of biblical war texts, in particular the version of the eschatological battle found in Revelation, but of course each interpretation creates its own vision within certain biblical parameters. He and his followers armed themselves in expectation of the end. They did use some of these end-time weapons against U.S. government agents. Did they believe themselves to be ushering in the final battle? The least we can say is that the government authorities' abysmal lack of knowledge of the biblical myths that informed the worldviews of Koresh and his followers contributed to the disaster in which Koresh and most of his followers were killed. Had the FBI been able to speak in the medium of apocalyptic but urge upon Koresh the ideology of nonparticipation, one of the nuances available in the tradition, a peaceful outcome might have been achieved.

These are some examples of ways in which the war texts of the Hebrew Bible and the ideologies contained in them have influenced more recent views of war. Even when specific influence of or dependence upon the Bible is not an issue, however, many links exist between ancient Israelite and modern western views of war. There is, in fact, great continuity through time in human responses to killing in war. By studying the Israelite case we may learn more about contemporary war responses. How do people justify fighting or the treatment of enemies? What appears to elicit certain war responses, and how can we avoid eliciting the responses in adversaries that necessitate a defensive military reaction on our part? How can we avoid our own offensive aggressive actions? What are the situations that produce certain ideologies or allow them to make sense, ideologies that in turn may produce and support certain varieties of warring behavior?

The ideology of the ban as God's justice is an Israelite phenomenon rooted in particular notions of God's covenant with Israel and her obligations as God's people, but aspects of the ideology of the ban as God's justice operate today whenever the enemy is dehumanized and treated as a monstrous Other who must be destroyed. The contemporary war in Bosnia offers ample evidence of human beings' capacity to dehumanize those with whom they engage in conflict, as do the

alarming acts of slaughter that characterized the Rwandan civil war. Humans frequently need to feel the enemy is other than human to destroy him. If our Israelite model is correct, this response is evoked when the aggressor himself feels insecure about his identity or stability. Defining the enemy, however negatively, helps to define "us" as "not them." This explains why varieties of ethnic cleansing have been recurring themes in so many of the former Soviet satellites or republics. The absence of political and economic stability almost insures the creation of an Other increasingly perceived as monstrous.

Aspects of the bardic tradition also operate nowadays. In the recent Gulf War, for example, one frequently heard in the language of interviewed soldiers the equation between sport and war: whether "scoring" direct hits, or commenting on "the playing field," the language of soldierly camaraderie within the American forces did not seem so different from attitudes and expressions that Israelite authors attribute to Israelite men of valor. War films of the 1940s and '50s, such as those starring John Wayne, glorify young men's courage, war as a means of obtaining glory or of reaching manhood. The difference between ancient bardic traditions and modern ones is significant, however, as Jean Renoir described in his classic film *Grand Illusion*. According to Renoir, World War II had become something other than a gentleman's game in which enemies can mourn the deaths of their counterparts and respect their skill and courage. Of course, war had always been other than sport, but now the aristocratic veneer with its implicit code of conduct between warring enemies had been stripped away, revealing the unadorned reality of war: death and destruction. A doctrine of "just war" that would set limits on warring behavior has become the purview of international authorities such as the United Nations and is expressed in agreements such as the Geneva Convention. It might be suggested that bardic nuances now operate only among comrades of the same side.

The ideology of expedience also still governs the waging of war. Secular doctrines of just war, of course, condemn naked aggression, which is not considered the proper or usual business of the state. When nations undertake acts of aggression they clothe them in "just war" excuses (e.g., this piece of land belonged to our people five hundred years ago). Expedience, allowing for anything that achieves goals more completely and efficiently, however, remains common, as a controversial and recently withdrawn U.S. postage stamp confirms. The stamp showed a picture of the nuclear mushroom cloud with a caption declaring that exploding the atomic bomb ended the war. Arguments of proportionality are made. More people would have been killed had the bomb not been used. This argument may well be valid but is also fulfilling a need to feel good about the warring actions of one's nation.

Finally, we note that the ideology of tricksterism lives today in guerrilla warfare or terrorism. Those who feel they have no recourse to power in its normal direct channels use assassination and ambush, the warring of the deceiver. Now, as in tales of Ehud and Jael, those who adhere to this ideology believe in the righteousness of their cause, while the establishment understandably regards them as

criminals. As in the ideology of the ban, stability, an even distribution of power (political and economic), a belief that one's group has a stake in the current political structure, and proof that one's culture is respected make the ideology of tricksterism unnecessary and less likely to appeal. As long as there are haves and have-nots, oppressors and oppressed, threads in the ban ideology and the ideology of tricksterism will remain rationales for warring and will help to make sense of the killing. A study of war in the Hebrew Bible is thus not only vitally important in understanding Israelite culture but also serves as a mirror of contemporary realities.

All of the attitudes to war we have uncovered in the Hebrew scriptures are as old as human culture itself and as complex as human thought, linking our ancestors with ourselves and our neighbors' cultures with our own. I have explored the ways in which seven ideologies of war emerge in the biblical tradition of ancient Israel, examining why and how each one may have functioned among Israelites of particular situations and settings. These currents in and influences upon the course of Israelite social and intellectual history do not lose their force with the close of the biblical period but continue to inform attitudes to war and peace and to define ways in which people understand, justify, and set in motion the process of human conflict. ⊕