

THE OLD TESTAMENT, "HOLY WAR" AND CHRISTIAN MORALITY

If we listen to the music of "holy wars" without the full symphony of Scripture, we will likely distort both.

by Heath Thomas

Editor's Note: The Old Testament is full of much which is confusing, violent, and ambiguous. This Comment series, curated by [Ryan O'Dowd](#) (lecturer at Cornell University and author of Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction) explores how and why we should read the Old Testament for public life today.

The Bible is a blueprint of in-group morality, complete with instructions for genocide, enslavement of out-groups, and world domination.

—Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion

Divine Violence and a Father's Discomfort

My four lovely children enjoy listening to the narratives from the Scriptures, particularly the ones that involve fantastic events: Jonah in the great fish, Jesus walking on the water or silencing the storm. A healing is also always nice. But it can be a bit less comfortable when it comes to narratives, appearing in books like Joshua, about what is commonly called "holy war."

It's not uncomfortable for them, of course, because the accounts are clear and poignant, with plenty of details and action. But for myself, I wonder, "Is all this bloodshed and violence really good for my children to hear?" To be honest, it is sometimes easier simply to avoid the narratives, especially those that command or depict "total destruction" of men, women, and children (and sometimes even donkeys). We see such a command given clearly in Deuteronomy:

Only in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. But you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the Lord your God has commanded you, so that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 20:16-18, NASB)

And although it is not always carried through, evidence from the books of Joshua and Samuel testifies that Israel did enact such warfare in history (for example: Joshua 6 and 10, 1 Samuel 15). What do we do with such presentations? Does the Old Testament depict and authorize "ethnic cleansing" or "genocide" like Dawkins suggests? Is God the author of such apparent evil?

Another way of asking the question is this: "Can texts like these be good for us?" Ryan O'Dowd's [very helpful essay opening this Comment series](#) urged the Church to "feast" on the

Scriptures. But how can the average Christian (or more personally, my own children) feast on *this*?

A number of issues need to be addressed before we can answer that question adequately, but I do believe that the Scriptures—even the seemingly horrendous bits—are a word from God, and a good word. In fact, *all the Scriptures* are breathed out by God and are profitable for shaping the Christian life (2 Timothy 3:17). So what needs to be grasped to read the Old Testament teaching on "holy war" as a good word?

Two issues stand: (1) the character of God in the Bible and (2) the nature and purpose of what is commonly called "holy war." Of course more can (and should) be said. But this essay will address these two issues so that we might *begin* to formulate a way of thinking about the Old Testament, Holy War, and the Christian life.

The Character of God in the Bible

When we consider how we can begin to make sense of "holy wars" in the Bible, we must remember God's redemptive plan. This overarching narrative should form the backdrop to any such investigation. The Bible, from creation to new creation, reveals a God who is holy, just, and good. God has good plans for the world he has made. His divine character is revealed precisely and perfectly by his reconciling "all things" to himself in and through Jesus (Colossians 1:15-20). Old Testament "holy wars" can only be rightly understood within a story that reveals a God who is committed to eradicating sin and renewing his creation. This point seems so simple, and yet it remains so profound. "Holy wars" are not the *only* part of the story or even the *most important* part of the story. If we rip the troubling accounts of the Old Testament out of their broader creation—new creation context, then we may well distort their contents.

Imagine only listening to the bass instruments in Beethoven's fifth symphony. Of course the music would sound strong and powerful, but such a hearing would still be deficient. Listening to *part* of the score, or only *some* of the instruments, inevitably distorts the overall force and beauty of the full symphony. If we listen to the music of "holy wars" without the full symphony of Scripture, we will likely distort both.

It is interesting that Richard Dawkins uses the difficult material in the Old Testament—like "holy war"—to reinforce his point that God is egomaniacal, genocidal, and abusive. He pulls these presentations out of the biblical narrative and then parades them as evidence: "See! It's all very bad. This Old Testament god is horrible! If you worship this god then you worship a brutal vindictive ethnic cleanser!" But because he doesn't actually read these texts in their proper contexts, it's no wonder that his presentation is skewed. This same error may proceed in our reading of "holy wars" in the Old Testament. The result is that our understanding of God and the biblical teaching may well be distorted. "Holy wars" are present, but are only part of the story in the redemptive plan of God in Scripture.

What is Biblical "Holy War"?

But this draws us to the question: "In light of the biblical narrative, what is 'holy war' in the Old Testament?" Old Testament "holy war" is a particular kind of warfare in a particular time in

Israel's history where God fights for Israel to secure his land for his people, so that his redemptive plan might come to pass. You may notice that I put the words "holy war" in scare quotes throughout this essay. This is because "holy war" is not a biblical term but rather language that was coined by German scholarship (Friedrich Schwally) in the early twentieth century. Schwally applied this language to certain biblical texts (such as Deuteronomy 2:34, 7:3-5, 20:16-18; Joshua 6, 11:12-20; 1 Samuel 15). He compared the warfare depicted there to *jihad* in Islam.

Of course, there are many problems with this comparison. The first of course is anachronism. But the second is the very notion itself in the Bible. If *jihad* speaks to an ongoing "struggle" or even "fighting in the name of God," then Old Testament "holy war" does not match this vision. The overall picture in Old Testament presents not a religious military strategy for *Israel to fight for God* (as if he needs help) but rather *God fighting for Israel at a particular point in time*. This is why it is better to speak of this kind of battle as "divine war" or "Yahweh war." Most current scholars follow this, and I will use "divine war" throughout the rest of the essay. But regardless of how we translate it, what kind of warfare is this?

First, "divine war" in the Bible actually represents non-repeatable actions in the history of Israel. These wars were fought in a particular time and are neither to be repeated by the Church nor to be justified for any peoples in the present world. Although some have used the "divine war" material in the Old Testament as fodder for the war machine (especially during the colonization of the Americas), such applications of the biblical material simply misunderstand the place of "divine war" in the story of Scripture. This kind of warfare was particular for Israel as they moved into the land of Canaan.

Second, "divine war" is an act of a patient and merciful God. God commanded "divine war" against Canaan, but only after 400 years of waiting for their sin to reach "full measure" (Genesis 15:16). That is to say, God did not punish the Canaanites for sin immediately—his mercy extended long, because his compassion and grace are long. And if the Canaanites would have turned to God, then they would have been saved. The story of Rahab provides evidence for this (Joshua 2). She is saved because of her faith in God despite the fact that she is both a prostitute and a Canaanite. Still, even the story of Rahab is not unique in the Old Testament, contradicting the argument that the Biblical God is xenophobic or an "ethnic-cleanser": Jethro the Midianite is brought into the fold of Israel in his faith (Exodus 18) and Ruth the Moabitess is clearly brought into the fold of Israel because of her faith in God (Ruth 1). Joseph's and Moses' children are of mixed ethnicity as well, brought into the family of God.

Third, "divine war" is not concerned with genocide or ethnic cleansing but rather with eliminating false worship. Divine war represents a focused attack upon sinful and idolatrous religion rather than simply an attack on people (Deuteronomy 7:3-5, 12:2, 3; compare Exodus 34:12, 13). But to get at the religious ideals of an ancient people, you had to address more than just—let's say—their spiritual lives. This is because they did not separate secular from sacred as we do in the modern world. This is hard for our modern ears to hear, but ancient peoples saw their national identities tied to their particular place, their particular god, and their particular people group. For the Moabites, their land was the region south-east of the Jordan River, and their patron god was Chemosh. Their god ruled the Moabites from that particular place. For the Canaanites, it was Baal, who governed them in the land of Canaan. For the Hebrews, their particular place was the land of Israel, where God ruled them from Jerusalem.

Biblical "divine war" breaks the ideological nexus between deity-people-land. As the Canaanites were displaced and defeated, their gods were defeated and shown to be impotent and false. If the Moabites were defeated or displaced, their deity was shown to be false and unreliable. Interestingly, Israel's God, Yahweh, is the only God in the ancient Near East who is able to leave his land and people and then return to both in his own power (see Ezekiel 8-11; 43:1-9).

The point is straightforward: for Israel's God to show the gods of the nations to be false, a simple sermon would not do. He chose to demonstrate his power so that the world would know the vitality of *this* God. And remember, those who heard of this God and responded in faith would be spared and receive the blessing that comes with worshipping the true God. The clearest example of this comes in the story of Rahab, who tells the Israelites that all of Canaan "heard" of God's fame and mighty power, and then makes a pact with the Israelites (Joshua 2:9-19).

Fourth, "divine wars" in the Old Testament actually use typical hyperbolic language to get the point across. When we see God's commands to utterly destroy "men, women, and children" (Deuteronomy 2:34, 3:6; 1 Samuel 15:3) and that Joshua killed "all that breathed" (Joshua 10:40), this language represents the kind of exaggerated language that was employed in these kinds of war texts in the ancient Near East. These are not simple descriptions but rather hyperbolic expressions. The reason is quite simple, yet possibly foreign to modern ears. Idolatrous nations who would remain in Israel would lead Israel to idolatry. Idolatry, in the grand sweep of the biblical story, leads to creation-destroying realities: discord, disease, and death. On this understanding, it is sensible that the language was so extensive: do not allow any vestige of idolatry to remain lest it draw Israel away from the God of Life.

A complementary point to the hyperbolic language is that it is not the only language used to describe divine warfare. The terminology commanding the "utter destruction" and "annihilation" of the Canaanites is counterbalanced by the more frequent language of "driving out" the Canaanites from their land or "dispossessing" them of it ("driving out": Exodus 23:28; Leviticus 18:24; Numbers 33:52; Deuteronomy 6:19, 7:1, 9:4, 18:12; Joshua 10:28, 30, 32, 35, 37, 39, 11:11, 14; "dispossessing": Numbers 21:32; Deuteronomy 9:1, 11:23, 18:14, 19:1). And as we saw above, disconnecting the people from their land disrupts the god-land-people ideological nexus that underwrites ancient Near East national identity. So we see that God is primarily concerned with addressing the false religion of Canaanites, not obliterating them. He is not "bloodthirsty," as Dawkins supposes, but he is just, righteous, and holy. Ironically, perhaps, driving the Canaanites out of the land in fact gave the possibility for future repentance.

"Holy War" and Christian Morality

So is Old Testament "holy war" good for us? Well, it is certainly a difficult phrase, but one that needs to be heard. It speaks of God's resolute opposition to idolatry in any form. Even when God's own people resort to idolatry, he enacts such warfare against them to purge the land and his people of their idolatrous ways (see Lamentations 2). Still it should be remembered that such warfare remains a non-repeatable action within the grand narrative of God's redemption. In terms of military struggle for God's people in God's land, "holy war" was for one or two generations of Israel and is not for the church today.

For the Christian, there is no place whatsoever to take up arms in the manner of Israel to conquer a land. In Jesus' teaching, which is a revitalization of the Old Testament law, the task of people of

the Kingdom of God is to love their "enemies" (including enemy nations) and serve them with the good news of the Kingdom (Matthew 5:43-8, 28:18-20). The book of Ephesians powerfully teaches that because of God's victory in Christ, the Christian wages war neither for land nor for a place in the world. The whole world sits under the authority of Christ (Matthew 28:18), and so the world is the Lord's. Wherever a Christian lives in God's world, he or she engages in a spiritual battle against the cosmic rulers that futilely wage war against God's victory in Christ (Ephesians 5:1-9, 6:10-18). Christian "warfare" involves learning to rightly live in the triumph that God has provided in Christ and His Kingdom. This subversive instruction in Ephesians reveals that God's Kingdom is and will be established not through coercion and or domination but through self-sacrificial love, in the manner of Christ.