

Some Introductory Notes on the Biblical Ethics of War

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I. The Holy Wars of Israel in the Old Testament

These wars were “holy” because the battle was the Lord’s (Deuteronomy 20:4; 1 Samuel 17:47). At times victory was secured by God and His angelic hosts fighting alone, at other times by God empowering his people to prevail (Exodus 14:13f.¹; 34:23f.; Deuteronomy 31:3-8; Joshua 6:20; 2 Samuel 5:24; 22; 2 Chronicles 20:17ff.; etc.). But in either case, any enemies were His enemies, and victory was absolutely assured since He was in charge. The issue was never whether He was on Israel’s side, but only whether Israel was on His side (Joshua 5:13-15²)!

As a vivid reminder of God’s presence with Israel, priests accompanied the army (often with Ark and Ephod, Deuteronomy 20:2; Joshua 6:4ff.; 1 Samuel 4:3; 14:18; 23:6; 2 Samuel 11:11), and various ceremonial laws of the sanctuary were applied to the camp, such as the placement of latrines outside the camp (Deuteronomy 23:9-14; 1 Samuel 21:5; 2 Samuel 11:11).

More significant was the insistence that the battle be fought with uncompromising faith in the God of the armies of Israel. To this end foreign military alliances were forbidden and often Israel was directed to fight with distinctly inferior weapons and manpower (Exodus 17:9-11; Deuteronomy 9:3; 20:3, 4; Isaiah 30, 31; Psalm 20:7; Judges 7; 1 Samuel 14:6; 17:45; Hosea 14:3).

A. The Wars of Judgment (waged against the Canaanites and the Amalekites)

These wars are unique and can have no parallel in modern warfare.

1. Characteristics

a. Provocation

Aggravated or prolonged sin against God, including, in the case of the Amalekites, repeated attempted genocide against Israel by attacking women and children (Genesis 15:16³; Leviticus 18:25-28; Deuteronomy 9:1-6; 18:9-13; 25:17-19; Exodus 17:8-16; Numbers 25, 31; 1 Samuel 30; Esther).

b. Purpose

To execute God’s well-deserved temporal judgment (see the texts mentioned above under “Provocation”) — similar to other expressions of God’s temporal judgments, such as against Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 14, 15) or Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) or Elymas (Acts 13:6-11).

Accordingly in general, booty was prohibited to make clear that the battle was not waged for personal gain (Joshua 6:18; 7:1ff.; Esther).

An important benefit from these wars was the elimination of a people who were bound to cause Israel to follow their example of idolatry, etc. (Deuteronomy 7:16; 20:18). Proving that these wars had nothing to do with nationalism or racism, if any Israelites joined the Canaanites in their idolatry or sexual immorality, they were to be executed as well (Leviticus 18:24ff; Deuteronomy 13; Judges 19-21, where, however, Israel failed to eradicate the Benjaminites who had become Sodomites).

c. Warrant

A direct and indisputable command from God, not simply the decision of human beings (Numbers 33:50-54; Deuteronomy 25:19; 1 Samuel 15:3; 28:5, 6; 30:7, 8; 2 Samuel 5:19, 22, 23).

¹ “Moses answered the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.’” (Exodus 14:13f.)

² “Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, ‘Are you for us or for our enemies?’ ‘Neither,’ he replied, ‘but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.’ Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, ‘What message does my Lord have for his servant?’ The commander of the LORD’s army replied, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.’ And Joshua did so.” (Joshua 5:13-15)

³ “In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.” (Genesis 15:16) Joshua 11:20 shows that there was also a self-defensive aspect to Israel’s wars with Canaan.

d. Participation

All able-bodied men over 20 years of age must fight (Numbers 26:2; 32:16-27; Joshua 1:14ff.). To refuse to fight would be sin since Israel was functioning as the agent of God's retributive justice (cf. Numbers 13:26-14:45; Judges 5:15-17; 1 Samuel 15).

e. Conclusion of hostilities

No peace terms are to be offered; hostilities end only with the eradication of the enemy (Numbers 33:55-56; Joshua 9; 1 Samuel 15:27; Esther; Deuteronomy 7:1-6, 16-26). On the other hand, repentant Canaanites, like Rahab the harlot, were to be spared (Joshua 6:17).

2. Significance

The Wars of Judgment, as a form of Holy War, ideally prefigure our present spiritual warfare (2 Corinthians 10:3f.; Ephesians 6:10-18; Colossians 2:15; 2 Timothy 2:3f.; 1 Peter 2:11) and especially Final Judgment (Hebrews 4:1-13; Revelation 19:11-22; 22:14, 15).

B. The Wars of Defense (waged against all other aggressors)

To some extent, at least, the ethics of these wars are transferable to modern warfare.

1. Characteristics

a. Provocation

Enemy attack on Israel's homeland (Deuteronomy 20:1 — "horses and chariots" were the offensive weapons of the ancient world). No first strike policy or even violent revolution (cf. David vs. Saul; Proverbs 17:11; 24:21; 31:3; Jesus' command to pay taxes in Matthew 22:17-21; Romans 13:6f.; Revelation 6:3f.). For this reason Israel was forbidden to have numerous horses and, at times, burned captured chariots and hamstringed horses (Deuteronomy 17:16; Joshua 11:9; 2 Samuel 8:4. See especially Judges 11:27 in context).

b. Purpose

To defend homeland (or allies), not to "get even" nor to execute justice, otherwise there would be an attempt

to fit the punishment to the crime (Genesis 14; 2 Kings 19:34; Zechariah 9:8; etc. — see also "Conclusion of hostilities" below). God alone is authorized to judge between the nations (Micah 4:3, etc.). The taking of booty was permitted as compensation for warriors, as well as for those whose war contribution was less direct (Genesis 14:21ff.; Deuteronomy 20:14; 21:10ff.; 1 Samuel 30:24; 2 Chronicles 20:25).

c. Warrant

The general permission of God for a country to defend itself against an aggressor (Deuteronomy 20; John 18:13; Rom. 13). Consistent with this is the fact that no countries are condemned for seeking to defend themselves (though their pride⁴, lack of righteousness⁵, and brutality⁶, etc., are condemned). Nevertheless, the defense of a nation is not required by God, and therefore surrender for practical or other considerations is at times urged (2 Chronicles 18; Isaiah 20; Jeremiah 21:8; 27:8-22; Luke 19:45; 21:6; 14:31f). Consistent with this, no nation is ever condemned by God for failing to provide adequately for the defense of its people. Indeed, Israel was cautioned that an excessive reliance on defensive measures could itself provoke conflict and perhaps partly for this reason, but mainly to promote faith, was prohibited from maintaining a standing army (Deuteronomy 20:9; 2 Samuel 24; Proverbs 17:19⁷).

d. Participation

Strictly voluntary. With numerous explicit exemptions, Israelites were free to choose not to fight without stigma, even when their compatriots were going to war (Deuteronomy 20:5-8; Judges 7:2, 3; and perhaps the example of a number of prophets such as Micaiah in 2 Chronicles 18 and Jeremiah). Contrast the demand of Jesus in Luke 14:18-20 with the exemptions in Deuteronomy 20.

e. Conclusion of hostilities

Warfare is concluded when aggression is stopped whether by surrender, defeat, or retreat. For example, no attempts are made at retaliation once Assyria left Israel. Peace offers were mandatory (Deuteronomy 20). For this

⁴ Isaiah 16:5f.; 19:11; Jeremiah 49:16.

⁵ Amos 1:1-2:3; 2 Chronicles 20:12.

⁶ Jeremiah 51:25; Amos 1:13f.; Nahum 3:5f.; Psalm 137.

⁷ "He who loves a quarrel loves sin; he who builds a high gate invites destruction." (Proverbs 17:19)

reason only combatants and those harboring combatants (after being warned) are designated as targets; prisoners are to be treated well, the bereaved are cared for through the provisions of slavery, and care is taken not to cause needless destruction jeopardizing an enemy's chances for post-war recovery (2 Kings 6:22; Deuteronomy 20: 21:10-14).

2. Significance

The Wars of Defense, as a form of Holy War, ideally prefigure the Church's mission in this age (2 Corinthians 10:3-6; and especially the feature of proclaiming peace to the formerly hostile nations, Zechariah 9:7-10; Luke 10:5-16).

II. The Old Testament and the New Testament are not at odds

A. Unified in their teaching regarding the love command

Both Testaments teach a radical "individual pacifism" because the right to take a life ("the sword") has not been entrusted to individuals acting on their own (Leviticus 19:17f.⁸; Deuteronomy 32:35; Proverbs 25:21f.; 24:17f.; Exodus 23:4, 5⁹; Deuteronomy 23:7; consider especially the example of David in 1 Samuel 25). The Old Testament is not sub-Christian in this, or any other, respect. Jesus makes clear that he intends his command to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek as a reaffirmation of the Old Testament law over against the popular perversions of that law in His day (Matthew 5:17-20, 39, 43-48).

B. Unified in their teaching that the State has been entrusted with the right to take life ("the sword")

Both Testaments confirm that force is required in the exercise of justice within a state's borders and permitted in the defense of those borders (Genesis 9:6; Romans 13:1-7).

C. Unified in their support of believers bearing the sword as agents of the state

Believers did so before the theocracy with God's seeming approval (Genesis 14). In a vacuum of other legitimate authority, it is possible that individuals are permitted to deputize themselves and act in the defense of others, as when Moses risked his life to save Jethro's daughters by driving off the shepherds who were terrorizing them in Exodus 2:17.

During the theocracy, bearing the sword was not incompatible with love, since both are commanded in the OT and exemplified in the life of the warrior king David (who turned the other cheek in his personal conflicts with Saul and Nabal — 1 Samuel 24-26; cf. Ecclesiastes 3:8).

For the New Testament view of soldiers in the service of Rome, see Luke 3:14¹⁰; the centurion of Capernaum in Matthew 8; the centurion Cornelius in Acts 10:31; consider the obligation to pay taxes supportive of the military, to "go the extra mile" in conscript labor, and various examples of Christians failing to refuse the help of the military (Acts 23:23 and, perhaps, Acts 27).

III. Further guidelines for a Christian's possible participation in war

In other words, a "just war" is one whose cause is just (self-defense) and whose prosecution is just (only combatants and their accomplices are targeted), but whose principal objective is to secure not justice (only God can judge between the nations), but peace.

A. The Bible nowhere condones involvement in a war of aggression

The conquest of Canaan, etc., as noted above, was an unique exception as Israel was authorized by an indisputable revelation from God to exact his righteous temporal judgments against the longstanding heinous

⁸ "Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." (Leviticus 19:17f.)

⁹ "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it." (Exodus 23:4f.)

¹⁰ "Then some soldiers asked him, 'And what should we do?' He replied, 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely —be content with your pay.'" (Luke 3:14)

sin of the Canaanites. The supernatural collapse of the walls of Jericho offer decisive confirmation of the divine warrant for the conquest of Canaan. See also above re. the “Wars of Defense.” Cf. further James 4:1ff.¹¹, Acts 17:26, Romans 13, Proverbs 3:31, Titus 1:7, Revelation 6:1-4, etc.

B. Believers cannot fight (or do anything else) as “the lesser of two evils” or because “the end justifies the means”

Cf. Romans 3:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:22. Participation in war can only be justified if, and only if, it is right (“A War of Defense”) and deemed wise (Luke 14:31; Proverbs 20:18; 24:6; Ecclesiastes 9:14f.).

C. Believers should refrain from fighting in ambiguous cases

Since modern (defensive) war is never obligatory, we should refrain in ambiguous cases (Romans 14:23). See also the discussion above concerning “Participation” in Wars of Defense.

D. While respectful of duly constituted authorities (political and military), believers must at all times maintain their higher allegiance to Christ

Obedience to the state (such as the sentiment, “my country right or wrong”) or commanding officers must always be qualified by our greater allegiance to Christ (Acts 4:19; 5:29¹²) states only have legitimate authority when it comes from God (Romans 13:1ff.)

Concern to avoid fighting against fellow believers (cf. 1 Samuel 28; 2 Chronicles 11:4; etc.).

E. Believers cannot fight for the promotion of, nor in defense of the church

John 18:36¹³; Matthew 16:18; Luke 14:18ff. (cf. this text with Deuteronomy 20).

F. The priority to promote peace and the Christian’s “Secret Weapons”

Although the Bible is realistic in warning believers about the inevitability of conflict and war in this age, which is viewed as an expression of God’s judgment (Mark 13:7; Revelation 6:1-4), believers should at all times seek to live at peace with others and to promote peace (Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14¹⁴; James 3:18; Matthew 5:9; Psalm 120:7). Accordingly, Scriptures place a premium on diplomacy which should be relentlessly pursued (Proverbs 16:32¹⁵; 3:31; Judges 11; Deuteronomy 20; 1 Kings 5:12)

The Christian’s “Secret Weapons” to prevent or end war: Righteousness, which averts God’s judgment (Proverbs 16:7¹⁶; Psalm 23:5; Amos 1, 2; Proverbs 29:14; 14:34; Habakkuk 2; etc.), overcoming evil with good which can win over enemies (Romans 12:21; 1 Samuel 24:17 — Israel’s primary calling was to be a “blessing” to the nations (Genesis 12:2-3), that is, to help them, as did Joseph in Genesis 41; to lend them in Deuteronomy 15:6; 28:12; to be an example to them of a nation living under just laws in Deuteronomy 4:6-8; to pray for them as in Genesis 18; etc.), and Prayer (1 Timothy 2:1-4¹⁷; Jeremiah 29:7¹⁸; Proverbs 21:1).

¹¹ “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God....” (James 4:1ff.)

¹² “Peter and the other apostles replied: ‘We must obey God rather than men!’” (Acts 5:29)

¹³ “Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.’” (John 18:36)

¹⁴ “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (Hebrews 12:14)

¹⁵ “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.” (Proverbs 16:32)

¹⁶ “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him.” (Proverbs 16:7)

¹⁷ “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone — for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

¹⁸ “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (Jeremiah 29:7)