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NEW DICTIONARY OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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pitfalls and failure. As Paul points out, God's own action towards us, 'when we were God's enemies', was not wrathful vengeance but reconciliation 'through the death of his Son' (Rom. 5:10). And Paul habitually transposes the imagery of warfare into spiritual warfare (e.g. Rom. 6:13; 2 Cor. 10:3-6; Eph. 6:10-17). James warns those who would take the course of violence: 'the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God' ( Jas. 1:20, RSV; cf. 2:11-13). And Hebrews commends those who, without anger or retaliation, have suffered violence for the sake of the gospel (Heb. 10:32-34).

The righteousness of God will be expressed further in eschatological judgment. Jesus employs imagery of violent judgment (e.g. Hades, fire of hell, eternal punishment) to speak of the end of those who ultimately resist God's will. Paul and other apostles follow this pattern in speaking of the violent destruction that will accompany the 'coming wrath' (1 Thess. 1:10) when Jesus the divine warrior will come in 'blazing fire' and punish his enemies with 'everlasting destruction' (2 Thess. 1:6-10; 2:1-12). 2 Peter 3:10-13 speaks of a violent, fiery judgment that will envelop the cosmos as a precursor to the emergence of a new heaven and earth. And the book of Revelation depicts manifold violent judgments and scenes of divine warfare (Rev. 19:11-21; 20:7-10) that precede the advent of the new creation (Rev. 21). But this apocalyptic violence takes place according to the sovereign will of God, the all-wise creator and redeemer. The people of God are followers of the slain Lamb (Rev. 5:5-6; 9-10), a veritable army 144,000 strong, sanctified for holy warfare like Israel's warriors of old (Rev. 14:4). Their strategy is not violence but faithful witness to the Lamb, even to the point of suffering the violence of martyrdom.

The twentieth century was probably the most violent in human history. All too frequently and sadly, violence in the West has been undergirded by an appeal to biblical texts. Consequently serious charges have been laid against the Bible, its interpreters and Christians. The irony, however, is that this moral aversion to violence and concern for its victims owes much if not all of its impetus to the influence of the Bible, and particularly the cross of Christ. As René Girard has argued, it is the gospel of Christ crucified that subverts the world's ideologies of violence. Any consideration of the question of divine and human violence in the Bible must begin by admitting that the issue resists easy resolution, for violence (in its many dimensions) involves a seemingly impenetrable mystery. But extracting biblical texts of violence from their canonical context, particularly from their climactic resolution in the NT, leads to a serious misreading of these texts and of the biblical story as a whole.

See also: SIN; WARFARE.

Bibliography


D. G. REID

WAGES, see REWARD

WARFARE

Introduction

*Violence, conflict and warfare are found throughout the Bible. From Genesis 3 (the story of the fall) to Revelation 20, we read of strife and fighting. Only the first two chapters of the Bible (creation) and the last two (recreation) fall outside the long period of human conflict.

But the conflict is more than human. *God
Who is he, this King of glory?
The LORD Almighty—
he is the King of glory.
(Ps. 24:7-10)

Perhaps the best known characteristic of OT sacrificial war is that Israel does not rely on a large army or powerful weapons. In the days of the judges, Israel's military was made up of volunteers, often part-time warriors. The battle of the nations was not a ritualized activity for Israelite warriors, but a spontaneous outpouring of God's power through human agency.

When Gideon assembles an army for his battle against the Midianites, God informs him that he has 'too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands' (Judg. 7:2). He directs Gideon to reduce the size of his army, first by allowing all who are afraid to go home and then by making the remaining soldiers drink water from the wadi Harod. No special skill is involved in this 'test'; its only purpose is to get rid of the vast majority of the troops. Further, the Israelite army does not use powerful weapons. Joshuahamstraps horses and burns chariots (Josh. 11:6-9) captured in battle. David does not wear armour in the fight with Goliath and is equipped only with a sling (1 Sam. 17).

This strategy is at the heart of Yahweh war. Why fight with fewer soldiers and with less effective weapons than one's opponents have? To do so is to acknowledge that victory results not from human skill or resources, but only from God's power and will. As the psalmist expressed it:

Some trust in chariots and some in horses,
but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.
They are brought to their knees and fall,
but we rise up and stand firm.
(Ps. 20:7)

Of course, this is not to say that the people of God stand idly by while God wins the victory. On each occasion God calls on his people to act in some way. Even in Jericho, where the walls fall down (Josh. 6), Israel must march and shout. God wins the victory, but the people participate actively.

After a battle
Yahweh fights for Israel in their sacrificial wars against their enemies. Thus Israel, when obedient, always wins. The praise, however, goes only to God, without whom Israel would have been defeated. The OT includes many songs celebrating the victories that God won for Israel. One of the most notable is the Song of the Sea, associated with the crossing of the Red Sea:

I will sing to the LORD,
for he is highly exalted.
The horse and its rider
he has hurled into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.
He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.
The LORD is a warrior;
the LORD is his name.
(Exod. 15:1-3)

Many psalms were written in order to celebrate God's victory in battle (cf. Ps. 68).

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Yahweh war for modern readers to understand is the "herem." This is a difficult word to translate, but it expresses the idea that all the booty and the prisoners of war are the property of Yahweh. After all, Yahweh is responsible for the victory; he deserves the spoils. This means, on the one hand, that all the spoils (the precious metals and other treasures) are placed in the temple treasuries. On the other hand, it means that all the prisoners of war—men, women, and children—are executed. Sinful people who do not stone for their sin by sacrifice are destroyed because of their wrongdoing.

The five phases of Yahweh war
Having synthesized the material on Yahweh war in the OT, we will now describe the development of the theme through five phases from Genesis to Revelation.

God fights the flesh-and-blood enemies of his people
In the OT, God frequently appears to fight on behalf of his people. He fights against the Egyptians at the Red Sea, the Canaanites during the wars of conquest, the encroaching foreign nations during the period of the judges, and so on until the eve of the exile. The prophet "Nahum utilizes the divine warrior theme as he looks forward to the destruction in the near future of Nineveh, capital city of Israel's oppressor Assyria. The prophet spoke some time between 664 BC, when the city of Thebes (whose defeat is remembered in 3:8) fell, and 612 BC, the date of the fall of Nineveh. God fights for his
Warfare

himself enters history and takes the role of a warrior, fighting both human and spiritual enemies.

Warfare in the Bible is more than a sociological category, describing historical events; it is an important and pervasive theological theme. Furthermore, as we will see, the wars of the Bible are more than isolated events; they provide a unified but varied story as we proceed from Genesis to Revelation. However, rather than moving book by book through the Bible, we will explore this important theme first by describing the theology of OT war, and then by tracing the development of the theme of divine warfare through five phases from the beginning to the end of the biblical revelation.

Divine warfare has sometimes been called 'holy war'. While this term is never used in the Bible, it correctly emphasizes the sacred nature of divine warfare. However, due to the term's undesirable associations today, it is more usual to refer to sacred warfare in the Bible as 'Yahweh war', since Yahweh is at the centre of the battle.

The theology of Yahweh war

We garner the evidence for the following description from two major sources: 1. the laws for the waging of warfare in Deuteronomy 7 and 20, and 2. the descriptions of Yahweh war in the historical books. We will synthesize this material and present it under three headings: 1. before a war; 2. during a war; 3. after a war.

Before a war

The Israelites did not decide on the appropriate time to initiate war. God revealed to them, in a variety of ways, when and whom they were to fight. *Joshua 5:13–15 narrates a theophany in which God, the warrior, appears to Joshua and gives him the battle strategy for the defeat of Jericho. In 1 Samuel 23:1–5, God does not initially reveal his desire that David lead his army against the Philistines at Keilah. David hears that the enemy has attacked the Israelites there, and responds by asking the Lord, through the priest Abiathar and presumably with the oracular ephod, if he should attack. He proceeds only after the oracle replies in the affirmative. In Joshua 9, without consulting the Lord, Joshua decides not to wage war against the Gibeonites, and thus incurs God's displeasure.

The sacred nature of warfare in the Bible is revealed by the rituals which surround it. Many of these were performed before the battle. Israeliite soldiers had to make ritual preparations to fight in a Yahweh war. In the unusual circumstances preceding the battle of Jericho, the Israelite men underwent circumcision, which was not militarily wise (Josh. 5; cf. Gen. 34). From reports like that of 1 Samuel 13:1–15, it seems that every act of Yahweh war was preceded by sacrifice.

During a war

The sacred nature of warfare in ancient Israel is revealed also in the people's march into battle. The ark of the covenant was the Israelites' most potent symbol of God's presence. During times of peace it was lodged in the most holy place in the tabernacle (or, later, the temple). At times of war, however, the army took it with them.

The ark, representing God's presence as divine warrior, took the lead as the nation marched to war. During the wilderness wanderings, the ark led Israel during its slow march towards the battles of the conquest. That the wanderings were understood to be the march of an army into battle is shown by the words of Moses at the beginning of a day's march as the ark set out:

Rise up, O LORD!
May your enemies be scattered;
may your foes flee before you.
(Num. 10:35, NIV)

The location of the ark in the Israelites' camp is a further indication of its role as the symbol of God's presence as warrior. The ark was situated at the centre of the camp, the place where the tent of the human war leader would normally be found (Num. 2).

Psalm 24 is a liturgy recited at the conclusion of a successful Yahweh war. As the army, led by the priests bearing the ark, approaches the gates of Jerusalem, there is a ritual interchange between the doorkeeper and the army:

Lift up your heads, O you gates;
be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory?
The LORD strong and mighty,
the LORD mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, O you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
people when they are obedient to his law in fulfillment of the "covenant/treaty" blessing recorded in (e.g.) Deuteronomy 28:7: 'The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven.'

God fights against Israel

However, Israel is not consistently faithful to the Lord. In the "covenant/treaty" between God and Israel, there are not only blessings for obedience but also curses upon disobedience (Deut. 28:49-52).

This second 'phase' overlaps historically with the first. After Jericho comes Ai (Josh. 7). With God's help Israel defeats the impressive walled city of Jericho, but is then easily defeated by the inhabitants of Ai (which means 'ruin') because one individual, Achan, breaks the bērem (Josh. 7:24-25). Later Israel is defeated despite the presence of the ark of the covenant, since it is regarded by the war leaders, Hophni and Phinehas, more as a magic charm than as a symbol of God's presence (1 Sam. 4:1-11).

The most horrific display of God's power against his people is the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. The book of Lamentations records the terror felt by the faithful as they see the holy city in chaos. They knew that God was the author of the destruction:

Like an enemy he [God] has strung his bow;
his right hand is ready.
Like a foe he has slain
all who were pleasing to the eye;
his has poured out his wrath like fire
on the tent of the Daughter of Zion.
The Lord is like an enemy;
he has swallowed up Israel.
He has swallowed up all her palaces
and destroyed her strongholds.
He has multiplied mourning and lamentation
for the Daughter of Judah.
(Lam. 2:4-5)

God, the future warrior

But the OT does not conclude on this negative note. The exilic and post-exilic prophets speak about the future with hope. Daniel 7, for instance, speaks of 'one like a son of man' who appears on the clouds of heaven, the chariot of God the warrior (cf. Pss. 18:7-15; 68:4, 33; 104:1-3; Nah. 1:3, also antecedents in Ugarit literature with Baal the 'rider on the clouds'). Zechariah 14 also looks into the future and announces the coming day of the Lord (see 'Eschatology'), when the Lord 'will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle' (Zech. 14:3). It is with this expectation of coming liberation that the OT ends.

Jesus Christ, the divine warrior

The hope expressed at the conclusion of the OT is affirmed at the beginning of the NT. John the Baptist, in the wilderness, announces the coming crisis: 'I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire' (Matt. 3:11-12).

*Jesus appears in the wilderness at the Jordan, and John recognizes him as the coming one. Soon after Jesus' baptism, John is imprisoned and Jesus' ministry begins. However, while he is in prison, John hears reports that disturb him: that Jesus is healing the sick, exorcising demons and preaching the good news. John is worried. Where is the judgment and the warrior? Is Jesus, who was the son of the people when they are obedient to his law in fulfillment of the *covenant/treaty* blessing recorded in (e.g.) Deuteronomy 28:7: 'The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven.'

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The conclusion of the

Jesus, the future warrior

But according to the apocalyptic portions of the NT, there is more divine warfare to come. Jesus looked forward to the day when 'the Son of Man' would come on the clouds of heaven (Mark 13:26). This language obviously echoes Daniel 7:13, and shows that John the Baptist was not wrong in his anticipation of a coming violent judgment; he simply saw a two-act drama as one event. A second coming of Christ is anticipated and is most fully described in the book of Revelation, in which divine warrior language abounds. Revelation 19:11–16 describes the coming of Christ on a white horse with a sword coming from his mouth. He is followed by the armies of heaven as he judges and makes war (v. 11). The Bible concludes with a dramatic picture of the final battle, which symbolizes the final judgment and just punishment of all God's human and spiritual enemies. Thus ends the conflict that began at the Fall with the curse upon the serpent, who is understood by later writers (Rom. 16:20; Rev. 12:9) to represent the worst extreme of spiritual evil: 'Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman.'

Conclusion

The theme of divine warfare is a pervasive and important one in biblical theology. It is found throughout the biblical narrative. However, the Bible never glorifies warfare or violence in themselves. Indeed, the ideal state is one of perfect peace. Micah looks forward to a day when: 'They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more.' (Mic. 4:3)

Warfare is God's 'strange' work (Is. 25:21) in which he judges evil. The purpose of Yahweh war is the eradication of evil and the punishment of sin. Its climax is the final judgment.

The purpose and dynamic of sacred warfare in the Bible indicate that this theme cannot be used to justify war between nations today (although many Christians believe that war can sometimes be justified on other grounds). For God's people spiritual warfare has replaced physical, and they are no longer a single nation; thus a modern war cannot be called Yahweh war. The NT places God's people today in the period between the fourth and the fifth phases. We fight a spiritual war against the powers and principalities (Eph. 6:10–18), while knowing that victory has been won on the cross. We look forward to the culmination of the conflict when Christ comes again 'with the clouds' (Rev. 1:7).

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