

War and Hope for Peace in the Hebrew Bible

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Introduction

The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) makes clear that God's ultimate purpose for the world is peace and reconciliation among the nations, but it also contains troubling passages concerning warfare. How are we to understand the biblical praise of God as a mighty warrior (Exodus 15.3)? How can the biblical God of justice and mercy command wars of annihilation against Israel's enemies (e.g., 1 Samuel 15.2-3)? How can a Scripture containing such elements inspire peacemaking in the world today?

To address these questions, we must recognize that the diverse writings of the Hebrew Scriptures took shape over the time span of a millennium, involving multiple authors and changing historical settings. Diverse points of view concerning war and peace inevitably found their way into these writings. The Hebrew Bible, moreover, is profoundly shaped by the ancient Near Eastern cultures from which it emerged. This is especially true regarding warfare.

The Divine Warrior and "Holy War" in Ancient Israel

In the world of the Hebrew Bible, war and religion were closely related. Ancient Near Eastern peoples such as the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians typically conceived of their high gods as divine warrior kings who accompanied their human kings in battle. Ancient Israel likewise thought of God as a divine warrior:

Who is this King of Glory?
The Lord, strong and mighty,
The Lord, mighty in battle (Psalm 24.8).

Israel's divine warrior, however, first appears in the story of the Exodus, where God saves the fleeing Hebrew slaves from their Egyptian pursuers. After God's defeat of the Egyptian army, the people sing:

The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation.
This 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 (Exodus 15.2-3).

Israel's God is revealed as a liberator, a God of compassion and justice who frees slaves and defeats the oppressor. How different this is from other ancient Near Eastern national gods. The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Egyptian divine warriors sanctioned brutal conquest and exploitation, but here Israel's God defends the vulnerable.

Israel, however, has its own conquest story in the book of Joshua, where the Israelites wage total war aiming to annihilate the Canaanite population (e.g., Joshua 6.21). The biblical text speaks of sacral "utter destruction" to describe this practice: all the spoils of war, including captured

humans and animals, are to be destroyed, rendered to God as a sacrifice (Deuteronomy 13.16). Like the divine warrior motif, this “holy war” language is common to Israel and other ancient Near Eastern nations. It is a way of asserting that wars are devoted to God and of claiming, or at least threatening, total defeat of enemies.

The continued existence of Canaanites in the biblical record, however, makes clear that Joshua’s armies did not exterminate them (Judges 1.1; cf. Joshua 15.63; 16.10; 17.12-13; 19.47; Deut 20.16-18). Historically speaking, Israel did not actually wage wars of total destruction. Scholars now generally agree that Israel’s occupation of the Promised Land involved not the unified invasions that the book of Joshua recounts, but chaotic internecine conflicts among various groups, all of whom would have believed that they entered battle with God on their side.

The accounts of Joshua-Judges and the Deuteronomic commands to destroy the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 7.2; 13.15; 20.16-18) were composed centuries after the times that they describe. They are written in such a way as to emphasize the threat of Canaanite customs to Israelite faithfulness: if they had totally vanquished the Canaanites, perhaps the Israelites would have remained faithful and escaped their own downfall. In the present text, however, the legal provision for war of total destruction is framed so that it pertains only to the generation of Joshua (Deuteronomy 20.15-16). From the biblical author’s point of view, such warfare is a thing of the past, not to be repeated.

The martial associations embedded in the theology of the Hebrew Bible are of great antiquity. They reflect ancient Near Eastern cultural assumptions. As the biblical literature develops, they become significantly qualified or mitigated. Still, these elements of the Bible are problematic. Fortunately, the Hebrew Bible also offers a deeply sustaining vision of peace, an affirmative ground for the work of peacemaking through the centuries.

The Meaning of Biblical Shalom

The hope for peace in the Hebrew Bible is a deep longing because warfare was a constant reality in biblical antiquity. People lived in ever-present dread of being defeated by foreign enemies, their cities destroyed and population killed or enslaved—a fate that both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah eventually met. Thus peace, Hebrew *shalom*, certainly includes the absence of warfare, but it also involves much more than that.

The basic meaning of the Hebrew term *shalom* is completeness, wholeness, or well-being in an all-inclusive sense. In peace, the necessities of life—food, shelter, health, safety—are secure for all. The prophet Micah’s vision of peace foresees a time when everyone is provided for and all are free from even the threat of harm:

They shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
And no one shall make them afraid;
For the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken (Micah 4.4)

Peace, righteousness, and justice come together in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Isaiah 32.16-18). In the beautiful vision of the Psalmist, “righteousness and peace will kiss,” they are intimately

related (Ps 85.10). The Psalmist also urges, “do good; seek peace, and pursue it” (Ps 34.14). Peace then is not simply still and quiet; it involves deep commitment to working for justice. If any members of a community are harmed, the *shalom* of the whole is broken: there is no peace.

Jeremiah, for example, denounces the Jerusalem leadership for proclaiming “Peace, peace, when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6.14; 8.11; cf. Ezekiel 13.10, 16). He rebukes the people’s false confidence: their religiosity, wealth and power will not save them. The people will live in peace only if they act justly and care for the most vulnerable: the alien, the orphan, and the widow (Jeremiah 7.1-7). If Jeremiah were present today, we can imagine him joining in with those who chant: “No justice, no peace!”

God’s *shalom* finally extends beyond human society, restoring the entire world to the original harmony and wholeness that God intended for it as part of a good creation (Genesis 1). Isaiah, for example, envisions the world as a peaceable kingdom where even the violence among animals ends. Predator and prey will live together peaceably, the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and no one will hurt or destroy in God’s entire realm (Isaiah 11.6-9).

Biblical peace therefore is truly universal in scope: God wills wholeness for all. In today’s world still ravaged by war, we need ever more urgently to understand the biblical role of Israel as the Lord’s servant who brings peace to all the nations of the earth. Christ embraced the role of God’s servant Israel. Christian believers are called to do so too.

God’s Ultimate Purpose: Peace and Reconciliation of the Nations

From the beginning of Israel’s story in God’s call to Abraham, it is clear that God’s blessing of Israel is linked with the blessing of “all the families of the earth” (Genesis 12.1-3; cf. 18.18; 22.18; 28.14). Historically, Israel saw this role in a new light after the Babylonian destruction of 587 BCE, when Jerusalem was burned, the leading population exiled, and Judah as an independent nation was effectively destroyed. Some of the Judeans in Babylonian exile hoped for a restored monarchy and the chance to avenge Judah’s humiliation.

In the book of Jeremiah (ch. 29), the prophet sends these exiles a word from the Lord: Do not fight, but build houses, plant gardens, have children, and finally:

seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you,
and pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*” (Jeremiah 29.7).

Jeremiah tells the people to nurture life, to pray for their enemies, and work for reconciliation, even with Babylon, the deadliest foe.

The central section of the book of Isaiah (chs. 40-55), also addresses the exiles in Babylon. Here Israel, crushed and dispossessed by the nations, is reconceived as a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 42.6; 49.6; 51.4), the Lord’s Servant, who for the sake of others yields even to profound suffering (52.13-53.12). The early Church, of course, recognized the figure of Christ in this depiction of the Lord’s Suffering Servant. To grasp Isaiah’s meaning for the original addressees in Babylonian exile only enhances our appreciation of the Christian interpretation. God’s grace

works reconciliation in the world. God's servant ends the cycle of violence by renouncing force, suffering for others rather than returning harm for harm, praying for enemies (Isaiah 53.12b).

Israel's role as a mediator of forgiveness to enemies and of blessing to the nations appears also in the remarkable proclamation of Isaiah 19.24-25:

On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

Here Egypt, the arch-oppressor of the Exodus, and Assyria, destroyer of the northern kingdom of Israel, are gathered with Israel as recipients of the Lord's blessing.

We could multiply examples of this theological strain in the Hebrew Bible, but perhaps the most memorable is Isaiah 4.2-4. Here Jerusalem is envisioned as a fount of salvation flowing out to all the world. The nations will stream in to receive God's instruction, and the Lord will establish peace among them:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2.4; cf. Micah 4.4).

God's ultimate aim is manifest here. The question for people of faith is, how shall we embrace this vision and live as God's servants, sacrificing and working for reconciliation in a world broken by violence?

Postscript: The Sixth Commandment, "You shall not kill"

What is the relevance of the sixth commandment, "You shall not kill" (Exodus 20.13, Deuteronomy 5.17) for ethical reflection on war and peace? In the strictest sense, the language of the commandment refers to murder, as both the NRSV and NIV translations indicate. Killing in war and capital punishment are licit in the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 20.10-18; Exodus 21.12-17; 22.18-20), and biblical Hebrew denotes them with language different from that of the sixth commandment.

Christian tradition, though, has often taken the sixth commandment more fundamentally to convey reverence for human life. Consider the following:

- 1 In biblical perspective, all life belongs to God (Leviticus 17.11) and hence should be regarded as sacred.
- 2 The taking of human life is especially unjustifiable, as humanity is made in the image of God (Genesis 1.27).
- 3 Jesus' Sermon on the Mount affirms the sixth commandment and extends it beyond violence to include even the expression of anger, stressing reconciliation as the most important value (Matthew 5.21-24).

Many Christians therefore conclude, taking the sixth commandment broadly, that it obliges us to renounce all taking of human life, including in war.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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This article is part of a project on "The Theology of Peace and War". For further information, go to <http://www.mupwj.org/theologyofpeaceandwar.htm>. Or contact Methodists United for Peace with Justice at 1500 16th Street, NW, Washington, D.C.20036 or at [mupwj87 \[at\] mupwj.org](mailto:mupwj87@mupwj.org).