

## CHAPTER 2

# War in the Hebrew Bible: An Overview

RICHARD S. HESS

From the perspective of the Western world, the understanding of war and its ethical issues must begin with a consideration of the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament. This is not merely because this source has been used throughout history as a primary means of justifying all stances on the moral questions raised by war but also because the Hebrew Bible preserves a tradition that continues in an unbroken connection from a time removed from the present day by millennia. Beginning with the Hebrew Bible serves two purposes. First, it allows the student to consider the issue of war in an ancient and different culture and time and thereby to evaluate the validity of modern arguments with the additional evidence of another age. This exercise minimizes the prejudice that we all have, limited as we are by our own culture and experience. The second purpose, however, is equally important. A fresh examination of the teaching regarding war in the Hebrew Bible allows the Westerner to consider how much has changed in views of war since ancient times.

This topic is vast in scope. Virtually every one of the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible mentions the subject of war, and some deal with it in great detail.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there is no unanimity among biblical authors regarding war. Views vary from book to book and, at times, from page to page. Indeed, in the Hebrew Bible war is assumed from the outset as a necessary part of the world in which the ancients found themselves. Neither the speeches of God nor the actions of people who are considered saints ever envisioned the absence of war in the world. It is true that passages such as Isa 2:2–4 and Mic 4:1–4 look forward to a time of universal peace and the complete cessation of hostilities. This vision is not unlike the harmonious relationship ascribed to the first human couple in the opening two chapters of Genesis. However, neither of

---

1. Ruth and the Song of Songs are exceptions, according to Cyril S. Rodd (*Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001] 185). See, however, Song 3:7–8, where both military equipment and warriors appear.

these ideals was a historical reality in the periods in which the writers of the books of the Bible lived. Every generation knew war.

In light of the complexity of this subject and the issues involved, the purpose of this essay is to survey recent studies on the subject of war in the Old Testament and to evaluate their contributions. The essay will limit itself to several contributions related to the ethics of war as it is described in the Hebrew Bible. This delimitation of scope requires a focus on studies related to the moral view of warfare in the ancient world, excluding, for example, studies that consider the materials and strategies used in ancient warfare and in biblical battles. Even given this limitation, the questions related to war in the Bible remain complex and multilayered. While the issue of whether war in principle is “right” or “wrong” is never addressed in the Old Testament, it is not correct to assume that the Bible presents all wars from a single perspective. Nor is it correct to assume that war was either good or bad based on the extent to which it served the purposes of God or some other key character.

Instead, there are at least three levels on which warfare must be examined. First is the question of the nature of God as a warrior who leads his people in battle. This depiction of God is foundational for most of the understanding of war in the Hebrew Bible. Examination of this concept is necessary, for the people who worshiped the God of Israel were surely influenced and guided by the character of the God whom they honored. Second is the analysis of the different types of war described in the Bible and the explicit reflections on war that are suggested by the text. While this inquiry is complex and multifaceted, it provides the most important layer of understanding for appreciating the role of Israelites at war and the ethics that may have governed their prosecution of battle. Third, there remains the critical evaluation of the purpose behind the text’s presentation of battles. This raises questions of ideology and propaganda. To what extent is the biblical presentation of warfare a distortion of the historical events, designed to serve the political purposes of the power elite of Jerusalem?

What is war in the Bible? The verb ‘to make war’ (*niḥam*) occurs in its customary Niphal-stem formation some 164 times in the Bible. The noun form *miḥāmā* ‘war’ appears about 320 times.<sup>2</sup> This relatively high frequency reflects the importance of the subject in the Bible. As others have noted, the practice and ideology of war was shared by the Israelites and other peoples of antiquity.<sup>3</sup> Most references to war concern Israel’s battles in the wilderness, at the entrance into Canaan, and against various enemies of the nation (for example: Philistines, Amalekites, Arameans, and later powers). The role of

2. H. D. Preuss, “*miḥāmā*,” *TDOT* 8:334, 343.

3. *Ibid.*, 336.

Israel's God Yahweh as warrior also significantly influences biblical usage of the term, and I will now examine this usage.

### *Yahweh as Warrior*

Beginning with Exod 15:1–18 and forward, Yahweh is portrayed as a warrior who leads his people in battle and fights for them. Significantly, this is the manner in which Yahweh first reveals himself to Israel in conjunction with Israel's liberation from Egypt. The role of Yahweh as a warrior is the model against which all other fighters and their warfare are measured. This is the first model that Longman and Reid propose in their discussion of God as a warrior.<sup>4</sup> It is also the earliest model in the Bible used as an image for war.

The writer of Exodus celebrates God's defeat of the Egyptian army in the waters of the Re(e)d Sea in the following song:

<sup>1</sup>Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: "I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name. <sup>4</sup>Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea. The best of Pharaoh's officers are drowned in the Red Sea. <sup>5</sup>The deep waters have covered them; they sank to the depths like a stone. <sup>6</sup>Your right hand, O LORD, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy. <sup>7</sup>In the greatness of your majesty you threw down those who opposed you. You unleashed your burning anger; it consumed them like stubble. <sup>8</sup>By the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up. The surging waters stood firm like a wall; the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea. <sup>9</sup>The enemy boasted, 'I will pursue, I will overtake them. I will divide the spoils; I will gorge myself on them. I will draw my sword and my hand will destroy them.'<sup>10</sup>But you blew with your breath, and the sea covered them. They sank like lead in the mighty waters. <sup>11</sup>Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? <sup>12</sup>You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them. <sup>13</sup>In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling. <sup>14</sup>The nations will hear and tremble; anguish will grip the people of Philistia. <sup>15</sup>The chiefs of Edom will be terrified, the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling, the people of Canaan will melt away; <sup>16</sup>terror and dread will fall upon them. By the power of your arm they will be as still as a stone—until your people pass by, O LORD, until the people you bought pass by. <sup>17</sup>You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance—the place, O LORD, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, O LORD, your hands established. <sup>18</sup>The LORD will reign for ever and ever. (Exod 15:1–18, NIV)

4. Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995) 31–47.

Consider this text in light of what it says regarding warfare. The focus is on Yahweh as the leader of the army and the prosecutor of the war. Twice at the beginning and once in the middle, the poem emphasizes the destruction of the Egyptian army (vv. 1, 4–5, and 7). Again, in vv. 10 and 12, there is reference to the waters and then the earth covering the enemy. In this text, Yahweh's activity in battle is a response to the boast of the enemies in v. 9, who claim superiority to Israel and, by implication, to its God. The central text of this construction is v. 7, in which the expressions do not primarily describe the specific event of the drowning of the Egyptians but use general and universal terms to outline God's victory over all opposition. By this means, the psalm becomes more than an account from early Israel. It is a picture of Israel's God who, from the beginning, affirms his superiority over all rivals, whoever they are.

Of particular interest is the dominant theme of the first twelve verses of the passage. They do not focus on the battle itself but constitute a hymn of praise to God. The greatness of Yahweh is described in terms of his role as Savior of his people, and he is portrayed as greater than any of the surrounding deities and as possessor of might and power (vv. 1a, 2–3, 6, 8, 11, and 12a). His might and power are affirmed through the image of his right hand (vv. 6 and 12), as well as his mighty breath (vv. 8 and 10). The image of the right hand, found also in the Psalms, is used in Egyptian literature earlier than this passage to describe the military security that pharaoh provides. Exodus 15, therefore, is an intentional polemic against pharaoh; Yahweh is portrayed as superior to the gods of Egypt by his defeat of the Egyptian army and his subsequent appropriation of Egyptian honorifics and expressions of superiority.

The second half of the hymn of praise emphasizes that the purpose of the victory is not the destruction of the enemy but the salvation of Yahweh's people (vv. 13–18). He leads Israel through the midst of their enemies and settles them on the secure mountain of his choosing. The ultimate theme of this psalm is not war but peace. God leads Israel and ultimately settles them in peace.

The purpose of the warfare in this text is to overcome obstacles that prevent God from achieving the purpose that he has for his people. Furthermore, the battle is portrayed as defensive. It is initiated by the Egyptians, who boast of their ability to attack and destroy Israel. Clearly, the view of the psalm is that this battle is not a slaughter of innocents but the containment of violence that otherwise would be directed at God's people.

The image of Yahweh as a warrior forms the basis for God's presence with his people as he leads them to success in their battles. In the wilderness, Israel repeatedly fought because they were attacked in a manner that far outweighed any provocation on their part. Thus, the Amalekites initiated attacks against Israel (Exod 17:8–16). Other examples are found in Numbers 21, in

which the king of Arad (v. 1), the king of Heshbon (v. 23), and the king of Bashan (v. 33) all initiate battles with Israel. The nation's going to war is portrayed as a defensive response to the aggression of the enemies.

This perspective culminates in the dynastic oracle given to King David in 2 Samuel 7. Yahweh identifies with the line of David in such a way that the wars of Israel become the wars of God. While the oracle identifies Israel's wars as Yahweh's wars, and this identification is reflected in many psalms that celebrate the line of David (for example, Psalms 2, 78, 110), the narrative accounts of battles in the successive generations do not often exemplify this approach.

Longman and Reid also discuss the image of Yahweh as warrior in which he fights not against Israel's enemies but against his own people. This aspect of war frequently appears in the prophetic books of the Old Testament. It also appears in the historical books of Kings in their account of the destruction of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. One biblical writer describes the fall of the Northern Kingdom in moral terms that suggest a direct relationship between Israel's sin and God's allowing the kingdom to fall into the hands of its enemies:

<sup>21</sup>When he tore Israel away from the house of David, they made Jeroboam son of Nebat their king. Jeroboam enticed Israel away from following the LORD and caused them to commit a great sin. <sup>22</sup>The Israelites persisted in all the sins of Jeroboam and did not turn away from them <sup>23</sup>until the LORD removed them from his presence, as he had warned through all his servants the prophets. So the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria, and they are still there. (2 Kgs 17:21–23, NIV)

Notice that it is not weakness on the part of Yahweh that permits this destruction and deportation. Instead, the deportation is part of his response to the rebellion of his people. More than a generation before these events, the prophet Amos had proclaimed that Israel held no privileged place in God's evaluation: "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?" declares the LORD. "Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" (Amos 9:7, NIV).

This prophet and others like him pronounce Yahweh's words of judgment against the enemies of Israel and in the same breath turn to the people of God and launch the fiercest and most sustained attack on them. The fact that Yahweh, as a warrior, could turn against his people was not a late development, however. It was already in place at the beginning of the nation's history (Exodus 32–34). At Mt. Sinai, when Israel turned away from God to pursue other deities, God was prepared to destroy the nation until Moses and other faithful Israelites interceded for the people.

The two pictures of Yahweh as warrior, fighting both for Israel and against Israel, are consistent only if one recognizes that Yahweh's warfare forms part of his commitment to preserve his holiness. When his people join in his holiness through faithfulness to him, they experience his battle on their behalf. However, when they turn away from him and no longer observe his covenant agreement with them, they face Yahweh's wrath and the threat of the loss of their land and national identity (Deut 28:49–68). The prophets capture this theme in their depictions of the Day of the Lord, on which God will visit judgment on all peoples, both Israel and the other nations, inflicting terror and destruction on those who have turned their backs on him and giving hope and salvation to the faithful.<sup>5</sup>

In this manner, the picture of Yahweh as warrior developed from traditions regarding divine acts of salvation on behalf of God's people, to a God who acts against his own people, and finally to a God who is the embodiment of righteous judgment. This development sidetracks the issue of the ethics of warfare among historical nations. However, the theme that resonated in the reality of war for Israel was that their success depended on their relationship to the divine warrior. Additionally, Craigie comments that, despite the sinfulness of war as a human activity, the role of God as warrior provides hope.<sup>6</sup> He notes that, for the Israelite and for the faithful individual who understands the nature of God as warrior, "even in his human dilemma, with the concomitant human sin, he may seek God and find him." God's presence in war, for example, will not justify it or make it holy, but it does provide hope in a situation of hopelessness.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the ethics of war were already relativized in the Judeo-Christian tradition by the presence of God.

### *Israel at War*

Most discussions of the ethics of warfare as described in the Hebrew Bible consider it important to distinguish the different types of warfare in which Israel participated. Among these, the best known is the "holy war," initially described by the theologian Gerhard von Rad.<sup>8</sup> The basic elements of holy war may be summarized as a summons by God to battle, consecration of the warriors, sacrifices, receiving an oracle, Yahweh's movements in front of the army, loss of courage by the enemy, enactment of the *ḥērem* 'ban' (Deut 20:10–18 and

---

5. See the book of Joel. Also see Longman and Reid on other important texts (*God Is a Warrior*, 61–82).

6. Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 41.

7. *Ibid.*, 43.

8. See Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (ed. and trans. Marva J. Dawn and John H. Yoder; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

elsewhere), and a dismissal of the warriors of Israel.<sup>9</sup> Although this form may be present in texts such as Joshua's attack on Jericho (Joshua 5–6) and accounts of later Israelite wars described in Chronicles (especially 2 Chronicles 20), there is no consistent usage of this form of war.

Despite the tendency of some to refine or expand the idea of holy war,<sup>10</sup> Craigie, for example, finds no basis to consider any war to be particularly holy.<sup>11</sup> In fact, no ancient war was entirely secular. Despite the horror of battle, the ancient world understood all its wars to be sacred, if not holy. That is, war involved the powers of heaven as well as earth. Therefore, every war that was prosecuted by an ancient people, whether great or small, was dependent on the favor of the gods for its success. The case was no different in Israel. Thus, while the demand for a precise form and particular terminology as proposed in von Rad's theory of holy war may be criticized as inaccurate, he was certainly correct to connect the prosecution of war with the larger picture of Israel's God as a warrior.

The above-mentioned *ḥērem* 'ban' appears in Deut 20:10–18 as a guideline for Israel's engagement with enemies on the territory that God had given to the nation. This "ban" required the total destruction of all warriors in the battle and (in some way) the consecration to Yahweh of everything that was captured. Niditch goes to some length to portray this activity as initially related to a sacrifice to God, part of a larger picture of human sacrifice.<sup>12</sup> However, she writes that this changed: "The dominant voice in the Hebrew Bible treats the ban not as sacrifice in exchange for victory but as just and deserved punishment for idolaters, sinners, and those who lead Israel astray or commit direct injustice against Israel."<sup>13</sup>

A 9th-century stele of King Mesha of Moab describes his destruction of an Israelite town and its sacrificial devotion to his god Chemosh as a *ḥērem* 'ban'. However, this language does not prove that the same theology dominated in Israel. And, indeed, there is no explicit evidence for human sacrifice to Yahweh in the early texts. The fact that God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22 must be balanced against the denial that any sacrifice of this sort was ever performed. God explicitly stopped it and provided an animal substitute. Therefore, this story is not a strong case for the adoption of human sacrifice as an approved form of Yahweh worship.

9. Lori L. Rowlett, *Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence: A New Historicist Analysis* (JSOTSup 226; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 51; Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 187–88.

10. John A. Wood, *Perspectives on War in the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).

11. Craigie, *The Problem of War*, 49.

12. Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 28–55.

13. *Ibid.*, 45.

Nevertheless, the ban as an enactment of God's justice appears in these texts as well as in 1 Samuel 15, in which the prophet criticizes Saul for allowing Agag, the king of the Amalekites, to live, when he had commanded that all must be destroyed. This is the first type of warfare that Niditch discusses. It is portrayed as having an "us-versus-them" quality, in which "a group that fears loss of its identity attempts to define itself" by eliminating "foreigners," both outside and within the group, who are perceived as a threat.<sup>14</sup> An example of a threatening foreigner within the group is Achan in Joshua 7, who, although an Israelite, must be put to death for not observing the absolute demands of the *ḥērem*. A related example appears in Numbers 31, where Moses allows the virgin daughters of the defeated to live,<sup>15</sup> even though, according to the *ḥērem*, they should have been killed (also see Judges 21). Although these texts tend to reduce women to the level of chattel for trading, they also recognize the uncleanness that must be associated with the brutality of war.

A second type of war is the bardic tradition.<sup>16</sup> This is found in the story of David and Goliath and in other stories of the life of David before he became king. Expected rules of warfare were assumed and followed. Wars of this tradition were most conducive to recitation. Niditch identifies their origin in "a courtly bardic tradition produced in glorification of a young nation state, its king, its 'mighty men,' and the heroes of previous generations."<sup>17</sup>

"Tricksterism" often appears in the bardic tradition and in battles in which the Israelites or their representatives are at a military disadvantage and must use some sort of clever ruse to overcome their weakness. Niditch notes many stories involving women in this category, including the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34), the victory by Jael over Sisera (Judges 4–5), and the story of Esther.<sup>18</sup>

A third category of war is the ideology of expediency, in which whatever force is necessary should be used to eradicate the enemy and thus render it unable ever to fight again. Niditch cites many examples of this type of warfare from the life of David after he became king, but she also includes the story the Danite's annihilation of the inhabitants of the town of Laish in order to take it for themselves (Judges 18). Accounts of the ideology of expediency include the manner in which David captures the Ammonites (2 Sam 12:30–31) and makes them laborers, while placing the crown of their deity on his own head. The pragmatic and blood-drenched intrigues and wars of

---

14. *Ibid.*, 74.

15. *Ibid.* Niditch calls this the priestly ideology of warfare and identifies it as a separate type.

16. *Ibid.*, 90–105.

17. *Ibid.*, 105.

18. *Ibid.*, 106–22.

David have received much discussion; the various views have been summarized by Baruch Halpern.<sup>19</sup>

Niditch concludes her perspectives on war in the Hebrew Bible with what she calls an ideology of nonparticipation.<sup>20</sup> This study includes the critique by the prophet Hosea of Jehu's bloody purge of Ahab's dynastic house, despite the sin of the dynasty (Hos 1:4). The study also discusses the criticism of the expedient approach that is implicit in the tale of Abimelech (Judges 9). Other critiques include Jacob's negative evaluation of the rape of Dinah (Gen 49:5–7) and Amos's criticism of the injustices perpetrated by various nations in their martial activities (Amos 1–2). Although there are exceptions, the accounts in Chronicles tend to omit many of the cruelties of David and other blood-filled war traditions that are preserved in Samuel and Kings. God's protection of the weak and the future anticipation of a millennial age without war also belong to this ideal perspective of nonparticipation.

### *Accounts of War as Propaganda*

A further issue that must be considered is the purpose of the accounts of warfare in the Hebrew Bible. Why did the authors record their battle stories? Niditch has already alluded to an answer in her analysis of the bardic tradition, discussing the role of entertainment and, by implication, the passing on of values. However, she also describes the universal need in human society to justify the killing of other people. War accounts provide a justification for killing when they establish the legitimacy and even the necessity of the taking of human life. The Bible, as noted above, also contains implicit criticism of warfare (as in some of the prophets). This critique of war has led some to believe that the role of Yahweh as warrior provides a substitute for human involvement in war and thereby to assert a pacifist stance.<sup>21</sup> While accounts such as Israel's victory over the Egyptians (Exodus 14–15) and some later wars of Israel (for example, 2 Chronicles 20) support the noncombatant status of Israel as it merely bears witness to Yahweh's victory over its enemies, both the legal prescriptions for war in Deuteronomy 20 and the actual wars fought by Israel under divine direction clearly presume the involvement of the nation in the taking of human life. Thus, the Bible prescribes for Israel neither a total ban on war nor permission for the nation to fight however it wishes.

19. See Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (The Bible in Its World; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

20. Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible*, 134–49.

21. Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980).

Nelson and Rowlett represent scholars who perceive a fundamentally propagandistic purpose in the war accounts of the book of Joshua.<sup>22</sup> Denying or ignoring any significant historical basis for these texts, these scholars argue that the texts support the later reforms of King Josiah by describing the ideal warrior, Joshua, and the military successes that he and the nation of Israel enjoyed as they conquered the land. This literary fantasy then forms the basis for Josiah's call for religious reform, coupled with his commitment to restore the borders of ancient Israel in a series of campaigns in the final decades of the 7th century B.C. Rowlett advances this thesis by arguing that the word pictures and rhetoric of battles in Joshua 1–12 were created in Josiah's court by scribes who drew upon Neo-Assyrian models of recording war campaigns. These annals of the 8th and 7th centuries B.C. preserve verbal images (just as Neo-Assyrian reliefs preserve pictorial images) of violence and torture of defeated opponents. Horrific pictures of this sort were designed to reinforce obedience among the vassals of the Neo-Assyrians and to win respect for their empire. Josiah borrowed them in order to serve similar purposes for his developing empire.

This theory fails to convince anyone who has studied the ancient Near Eastern evidence. First, the descriptions in the Neo-Assyrian annals are designed to evoke terror in the defeated population in a manner not found in the book of Joshua. Rowlett notes the example of the treatment of the five kings of the southern coalition whom Joshua captured and killed. The text describes his invitation to the army generals of Israel to place their feet on the necks of each king, how he killed the kings, and how he hung their bodies on trees until evening, at which point he buried them in a cave, marked by a pile of rocks (Josh 10:25–28). Whatever effect this story may have had on the nation of Israel, no enemy of Israel is described as a witness to this event. This is contrary to the Neo-Assyrian method. Their brutality toward all prisoners of war and not only kings exceeded the brutality of other nations. They flayed some of their victims alive and impaled others on poles and heaped up the bodies of the rest of the population that they intended to kill. These horrid sights were not temporarily visible only to the army of Assyria; their purpose was to make a public spectacle to all onlookers. Assyrian writers and artists recorded the horrors in detail in both visible reliefs and in their annals. Few can read the accounts of the 10th-century Assyrian king Assurnasirpal without shuddering at the delight that he took in describing these atrocities. This is

---

22. Richard D. Nelson, "Josiah in the Book of Joshua," *JBL* 100 (1981) 531–40; idem, *Joshua: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); Rowlett, *Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence*. See the broader survey by Robert B. Coote and Mary B. Coote, *Power, Politics and the Making of the Bible: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990).

propaganda on a level that far exceeds the four brief verses in Joshua, which only mention the five leading kings and not dozens or hundreds of hapless prisoners of war. The same is true of the remainder of the book of Joshua. Furthermore, neither the account of Josiah's reign in Kings nor the parallel account in Chronicles describes anything resembling the atrocities that the Neo-Assyrian kings committed. Thus, it is too much of a leap to ascribe similar propagandistic motives to the biblical writers of wars such as the campaigns of the book of Joshua.

Nonetheless, it is not inappropriate to find in the description of Joshua a model of leadership that later kings such as Josiah emulated. However, in comparing the accounts of warfare in the Bible with extrabiblical accounts, especially of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires, one suspects that there is far less record of brutality in Israel's practice of war. This is true despite the formal similarities between war accounts in Joshua and other ancient Near Eastern literature.<sup>23</sup> The biblical text simply does not linger over the gruesome details. There is little suggestion that war is an act of human sacrifice to a god who demands it. Finally, although the Israelites do receive permission to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan, as recorded in Joshua, they never have divine authority to expand their territories beyond what is initially given to them. In this sense, all wars subsequent to the taking of the land in the book of Joshua are wars of defense. This, of course, stands in stark contrast to the nature of the battles of all the major empires surrounding them. Whether the battle was with the Hittites or Egyptians in the second millennium or involved the Arameans, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, or Greeks in the first millennium, Israel's military contact with these groups in Canaan was always a defense against an aggressor entering Israel's homeland.

To what extent are the conquests described in Joshua genocidal wars of extermination that have no place in any reasonable ethic of warfare? In my view, a description of this sort would be inaccurate and distorted. References to the destruction of noncombatants in these wars, that is, to "men and women," are scarce, referring only to Jericho and Ai (Josh 6:21 and 8:25). However, there is reason to suspect that these references in Joshua are stereotypical phrases that emphasize the complete destruction of everyone. On the other hand, Jericho and Ai, the initial two sites of conquest, instead of being towns or cities, may have been military forts guarding the routes from the Jordan Valley up to population centers in the hill country such as Bethel and Jerusalem. Evidence for this conclusion includes (1) the complete absence of references to specific noncombatants such as women and children with the exception of Rahab and

---

23. K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (JSOTSup 98; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

her family, who are not killed; (2) the lack of evidence for settlement at Jericho and Ai during the time of Israel's emergence in Canaan, suggesting that these were not cities but military forts; (3) the use of the term *melek* 'king' to mean a military leader in Canaan at this time; (4) the lack of indication in the biblical text that these were large cities (unlike Gibeon and Hazor, which are thus described); and (5) the meaning of the name Ai 'ruin', which suggests the reuse of earlier fortifications to serve as a temporary fort instead of a more permanent site of habitation.<sup>24</sup>

The other two major battles, which were against the northern and southern coalitions, are represented in the biblical text as defensive wars (Joshua 10–11). In both cases, they begin as the coalitions assemble against Israel or its ally and therefore force the people of God into battle (Josh 10:3–5, 11:1–5). Note, furthermore, that the eight or more references to complete destruction of the cities represented by these coalitions (in which nothing was left alive) could plausibly be stereotypical descriptions for the purpose of demonstrating obedience to the command to drive out the Canaanites (Josh 10:28, 30, 32, 35, 37, 39; 11:11, 14).<sup>25</sup> It is possible that, after the defeat of the army, the populations fled rather than remaining in a relatively defenseless city. Furthermore, we know that many of these "cities" were used primarily for government buildings, and the common people lived in the surrounding countryside.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it is not certain that there was a population remaining in these cities to be destroyed. There is no indication in the text of any specific noncombatants who were put to death. In any case, there is clear evidence that there were Canaanites remaining in the areas where Israel settled (Judg 2:10–13).

For the purposes of this essay, it is not relevant to ask whether these battles were truly defensive or whether they were even historical. It is enough to observe that this is how the writers of the Bible presented them. They were, in every case, justified wars against combatants. Does this mean that biblical Israel never killed anyone unjustly? Certainly not. The wars recorded in Judges become increasingly brutal, until the final chapters depict a civil war with killing that resembles a massacre. However, as in other descriptions of battles in the Bible, there is no suggestion in Judges that these wars and atrocities reflected the ideal that Israel was expected to follow in obedience to its God, the true warrior. The same can be said of later battles, including the campaigns of David (especially after he became king); they are not held up as an ideal to emulate.

I must emphasize that we must always preserve the distinction between a record of what happened, or at least a story about it, and a moral evaluation of

---

24. See my *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996).

25. See Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*.

26. See my *Joshua*, 137–38.

the account.<sup>27</sup> To highlight this distinction, the biblical writer may stress, for example, the peaceful and defenseless nature of the city of Laish that the tribe of Dan attacks (Judg 18:7–10, 27–29). However, it is wrong to argue that the writer of the account “sees this as divine providence,” as Rodd maintains.<sup>28</sup> The writer nowhere makes this claim. Instead, it is reported that the tribe of Dan determines that God has given the city into their hands. Whether this is true or not and whether they have any right to murder the innocents in the city are points not discussed. This is characteristic of the writers of Judges who, especially in the final chapters, record events and dialogue but leave moral and theological evaluations to the readers. Indeed, Rodd seems intent on offensive interpretations of the biblical texts about war when none are warranted. In a similar vein, he notes regarding David’s slaughter of Moabites and Edomites that “there is no hint of any criticism of David’s military zeal.”<sup>29</sup> Like the writers of Judges, the composers of the books of Samuel often reserved judgment and merely described the events. Plenty of criticism of David’s ethics is placed in the mouths of Nathan the prophet and others, but it is part of the narrative and not a task of the narrator.

Rodd represents the postmodernist view of the biblical tradition, stressing the differences between various texts and arguing that there are “many different strands within the Old Testament, often contradictory and impossible to harmonize.”<sup>30</sup> Rodd concludes that Deuteronomy’s attempts to regulate war are idealistic, that peace in the Bible often implies total subjugation of enemies rather than positive actions, and that the Old Testament glories in war in a manner that is ethically unacceptable, though a few prophecies provide a bit of hope of future peace. For this reason, all the recent treatments of the ethics of war in the Old Testament fail to address seriously the major moral issues involved. The view of T. R. Hobbs, that warfare was necessary for the survival of ancient Israel, is inadequate because it does not address what the Old Testament has to say regarding war in the modern age.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Rodd’s own conclusions seem to follow Hobbs in arguing the inadequacy of the Old Testament to speak to issues of war (and other ethical issues) in the modern age. While he is severely critical of all who have attempted to address this issue, he does not explain why Old Testament ethics are inadequate. It remains to be proved that the Hebrew Bible glories in war. The evidence of Exodus 15 may be multiplied throughout the Bible; whenever war is associated with God’s

---

27. John J. Collins, “The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence,” *JBL* 122 (2003) 20.

28. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 187.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 193.

31. T. Raymond Hobbs, *A Time for War: A Study of Warfare in the Old Testament* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989).

activities, the majesty of God receives far more attention and praise than the war that he prosecutes. What is true of the divine warrior is also true of his human counterparts.

In the end, neither Rodd nor other writers have succeeded in overturning the observation of Craigie that war is an evil necessary to the fallen human condition. In this regard, Rodd's comment is relevant: "We may grant that the ancient Israelites felt the anguish of pain, grieved over their dead, and longed for security, yet this does not mean that they even glimpsed the reaction to war which two world wars and countless conflicts since then have evoked in many today."<sup>32</sup>

However, the events of September 11, 2001, have thrown this conclusion into stark relief. For many, the relativism of the late 20th century, embodied in postmodernism, is no longer the final answer to the difficult questions surrounding war and peace. Nor is it acceptable to take a text such as the Bible, which has influenced the entirety of Western tradition, and merely to parade a collection of contradictions from its many and diverse pages. When each text is examined in its context, different results often appear. In the end, the Bible reflects a variety of reasons for war, but it does so with a moral tenor that ultimately recognizes battle as a necessary evil in the context of a greater, cosmic struggle between good and evil.

---

32. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 203.