

Biblical Warfare

The Divine Model of Warfare

A Muslim friend of mine once asserted that Muslim conquests both historically and in modern times are no different than what Israel did invading ancient Canaan in Biblical times. Why? Because Allah told Muhammad to conquer other nations, just like God told ancient Israel to do. I addressed this some in Messiah Brief 14, *The Jihad Spirit of Islam*. But there's more to it. The ultimate answer must be drawn not only from the history of Abraham and Moses but also from the Old Testament prophets. It has to do with the nature of war, itself, which Jesus would one day transform dramatically.

Despite repeated examples of warfare in the Old Testament, the Biblical treatment of violence is unique among other origin narratives of that era. As mentioned in the preceding Messiah Brief, the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* placed war at the very center of creation, as does Hesiod's *Theogony*, the seminal Greek creation narrative.¹ In contrast, the Book of Genesis describes creation without ascribing violence to the original nature of things. Peace and beauty is the norm of the Genesis story beginning with the third Day when dry land and seas are "gathered" and vegetation begins to come forth. The day ends with God seeing the teeming variety of earth was "good," which can also be translated as "beautiful."

On the fourth Day, God made the sun, moon and stars. Oddly in the Genesis account, the earth had already begun bringing forth vegetation, which requires sunlight (and tells us the narrative is not a scientific account of creation). God again saw that "it was good." Ignoring the explosive transformations needed to set the sun, moon and stars in place, the account chooses to emphasize goodness and beauty as integral to the process of Creation.

On the sixth Day, after making humanity (*adam*) in His own image and likeness—which includes male and female (Genesis 1:27)—God blesses them with the extraordinary bounty of paradise. He then declares everything He's made is not just good but "*very good*." Which can also be translated "exceedingly beautiful." There's no mention of violence anywhere in this story, just creation of good and exceedingly beautiful nature, and humanity living in harmony in Paradise on earth. Genesis tells us that's our ultimate origin, not conflict and destruction.

Violence Begins Outside of Paradise

Violence enters creation in seedlike fashion in Genesis 4, after the story of Adam and Eve's banishment from Eden for having ignored God's command to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Following their expulsion, one of Adam and Eve's first two sons kills the other in a fit of jealousy, and God says the ground itself cries out with the blood of his brother, Abel. The murderous brother, Cain, is banished to wander the earth apart from the presence of God.

¹ A quick scan of Asian origin stories shows a wide variety of narratives, more focused on the emergence of cosmic forces, energies (*chi*) and polarities, like yin and yang, as the physical world emerges. The great Chinese monotheistic narrative of Shangdi, doesn't present him as an *ex nihilo* Creator or a personally relatable deity. The seminal Hindu document, the Mahabharata describes human wars but does not offer a creation narrative linked to divine violence or to peaceful origins.

Within 10 biblical generations, that seed of brotherly violence has so filled the earth with human wickedness and “evil thoughts” the Lord regrets having made Mankind. “Grieved in His heart,” the Lord determined to blot out humanity altogether, except for one man named Noah, who found favor in the eyes of the Lord. Noah’s name means “rest.” Prophetically speaking, God brings on the Great Flood to give rest to a world corrupted by man-made wickedness. Then He begins over again with Noah and his descendants.

Abraham Fought One War

Fast forward another 10 generations to the story of Israel’s early formation, and we discover that Abraham fought one battle, and only one battle, to defend against unprovoked enemies. When his nephew Lot was captured from Sodom by five tribes from the north, Abraham formed a small army to get him back. Pursuing the captors at night, Abraham’s force succeeded in recovering Lot, along with others taken from Sodom, and their possessions. On the way home, the ruler of Sodom told Abram to keep the war spoils but Abram refused, declaring: “I have sworn to the Lord God Most High...I will not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, for fear you would say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’”²

In sum, Abraham is never seen as an invader, marauder, conqueror, or imperialist. He was always a sojourner following wherever God led, a fitting model for Christians, who Jesus taught to be in this world but not of it (John 17:16; see also Hebrews 11:8-10.)

Moses, like Abraham, Only Led One War

Fast forward again six generations to Moses, the great liberator of the Hebrew people from enslavement in Egypt. Yet we find no military hero, only God’s divine intervention. God Himself forewarns Moses that the Pharaoh will not let the people go unless “a mighty hand compels him” (Exodus 3:18). God’s own show of supernatural power would be needed to deliver Israel.³ Ten times the Bible says God hardened the Pharaoh’s heart. Ten times, it also says Pharaoh hardened his own heart. This is taken to imply Pharaoh had the freedom to choose to let Israel go. But God declared to Pharaoh: “I have spared you for a purpose—to show you my power and to spread my fame throughout the earth” (Exodus 9:16). God knew Pharaoh’s character from the outset, and used it to establish an archetypal model of divine deliverance.

God released a series of plagues that culminated with Pharaoh finally letting the Hebrews go. On the night of the first Passover, when the Angel of Death bypassed Israel’s sons, all the first sons of Egypt died, leading Pharaoh to summon Moses and say: “Get up, leave my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds as well, just as you have said, and depart! And bless me also” (Exodus 12:31-32). Despite his request, God did not bless Pharaoh. Pharaoh was about to change his mind. More importantly, God would soon consecrate a radical covenant with Israel at Sinai that would become instrumental in transforming the entire world.

² During this time Abram also met the mysterious king Melchizedek (“King of Righteousness”) of Salem (aka Jerusalem, “City of Peace”), who was also a priest of the Lord God Most High. Abram gave a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek, who blessed him. In other words, the spoils were consecrated, not used as personal plunder or for a bargaining chip.

³ Technically, the Hebrew people were not known as “Israel” until after the Exodus from Egypt.

The Pharaoh did indeed change his mind and ordered his army to chase after the Israelites. That's when God parted the Red Sea to allow them to escape, while swallowing up the Pharaoh's army. The entire saga takes place at God's direction through divine intervention in a story so extraordinary it has been recited by Jews for millennia as an archetype for trusting God to free Israel from oppression. God liberates Israel without their having to strike a blow.

However, Moses still had to fight one true battle against the Amalekites⁴ before the Hebrews reached the Promised land. The newly freed Hebrews first trekked to Mt. Sinai, where God revealed the Torah and Ten Commandments. As they continued across the desert toward Canaan, the Amalekites attacked them, targeting the rear guard of Israel's camp. Moses dispatched Joshua with an army to fend them off. This was the battle at Rephidim, where Aaron and Hur famously held up Moses' raised arms as he oversaw the ebb and flow of the battle from a hill. This was the only battle in which Moses engaged militarily. Like Abraham's sole battle, the battle at Rephidim was strictly defensive—and successful. It was not an aggressors' battle initiated by Moses.

Joshua's 13 Wars

God told Moses' successor, Joshua, to be "strong and courageous" when entering the land God promised Abraham's descendants—and Joshua was. He led 13 successful wars, all definable as holy in the sense that they involved divine interventions for the purpose of establishing Israel as a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" as God had declared at Mt. Sinai. Every person in Israel was to play a part in representing God to the world, not just the Levitical priesthood. This was the divine goal behind the Holy Wars of Israel under Joshua.

Walter Wink, quoted in the previous Messiah War Brief, summarized the conquest of the Holy Land this way:

God would drive out the inhabitants of Canaan by means of hornets, fear, panic, or pestilence, not the sword.⁵ Jericho's walls collapsed after ritual, not military action. (Mopping up was carried out by Hebrew warriors, noted in Joshua 6.) God overcame the Midianites by means of three hundred men armed only with torches and trumpets (Joshua 7). Even the "*ban*," the practice of "devoting" booty to God by destroying it, can be seen as the imposition of extremely ascetical limits on the enjoyment of the fruits of war. ... At least one strand of Israelite reflection regarded holy war, not as a war fought for or in the name of God, but as a war *that God alone fights*.⁶

Only later would Israel begin trusting in their own decisions rather than God to make war, after the Israelites demanded they be given a king like other nations instead of relying on God's divinely chosen judges for leadership. Here is what God directed the prophet Samuel to say about how kings would reign:

⁴ The Amalekites take their name from Amalek, a king descended from Esau, the brother of Jacob, both sons of Abraham. While Esau forgave Jacob for tricking him, his descendants appear to have harbored bitter unforgiveness. They were known for persistent hostility to Israel. Another descendent of Amalek was Haman, the arch enemy of Israel in the Book of Esther. Separately, Islamic tradition holds that "Amalek" (Amaliq) refers to ancient tribes of giants, people of great power considered predecessors to Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula. However, the Amaliq are not mentioned in the Quran.

⁵ See Exodus 23:28; Deuteronomy 7:20, and Joshua 24:12

⁶ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Augsburg Fortress press, 1992, p. 188. The text above is slightly paraphrased for brevity, and italics added.

"The king will draft your sons and assign them to his chariots and his charioteers, making them run before his chariots. Some will be generals and captains in his army, some will be forced to plow in his fields and harvest his crops, and some will make his weapons and chariot equipment.

The king will take your daughters from you and force them to cook and bake and make perfumes for him. He will take away the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his own officials. He will take a tenth of your grain and your grape harvest and distribute it among his officers and attendants.

He will take your male and female slaves and demand the finest of your young men, and donkeys for his own use. He will demand a tenth of your flocks, and you will be his slaves. When that day comes, you will beg for relief from this king you are demanding, but then the LORD will not help you." (English Standard Version)

This has always struck me as a fair metaphorical description of how worldly rule works. It's what comes from unredeemed leaders under the sway of the myth of redemptive violence who do not acknowledge God's blessings, design and purpose for the nations.

Walter Wink goes on to clarify what happened in Israel after kings were installed in place of God's appointed judges, when prophets emerged to offer divine direction to the rulers of Israel:

Israel came to trust in military might rather than God (Hosea 10:13); yet God continued to offer to save the people, but not "by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen."⁷ The unique contribution of the true prophets was their refusal to turn holy war into political war.

This led them at times to declare that God was waging holy war against faithless Israel.⁸ [The prophets] recognized the impossibility of maintaining a standing army and concluding treaties with foreign powers while still preserving Israel's utter reliance on God alone to fight for them. The prophets turned to a kind of "prophetic pacifism." Holy war came to be seen as a context fought not with the sword but with the divine word: truth against power.

In a new twist on the warrior asceticism of old, the Hebrew prophets waged solitary moral combat against virtually an entire people who were convinced that wars of national defense, liberation, or conquest were their only hope of salvation. Israel had succumbed to the myth of redemptive violence, but the prophets had discovered that the word of God was a mighty sword that cut both ways, for and against God's people (cf. Hebrews 4:12). [Bolded emphasis added]⁹

Walter Wink concluded that Jesus upheld this prophetic tradition. "Jesus said to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. His teachings spell out how to fight non-violently against evil, without being transformed into the evil we oppose. The apostle Peter summarized it this way: **"Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing"** (1 Peter 3:9).

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⁷ Hosea 1:7. Zechariah 4:6 elaborates: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty."

⁸ Isaiah 10:5-6, 22:1-8, 28:1-22, 29:1-4, 30:8-17; Amos 3:1-2, 5:18-20.

⁹ Wink, *Ibid.* pp. 188-189