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Elmer A. Martens

Yahweh Fights His Own Kind of War

Bad news for King Jehoshaphat. A huge army of Moabites and Ammonites was on its way to attack Judah. Keeping his cool, the king told the whole country to fast, then gathered them together to ask the Lord what to do. The answer came through a Levite named Jahaziel: "Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's." On the day of the battle, Jehoshaphat asked a bunch of singers to lead the way. They praised the Lord for the splendor of his holiness. By the time the men of Judah reached the battlefield, "they saw only dead bodies lying on the ground; no one had escaped." The nations surrounding Judah were very impressed when they heard "how the Lord had fought against the enemies of Israel. And the kingdom of Jehoshaphat was at peace, for his God had given him rest on every side" (2 Chronicles 20).

The hard question of wars in the Old Testament must now be asked. There are certainly strong voices for war in the Old Testament. What are they saying? What are they trying to teach us? Let's listen.

In the Old Testament God is given several secondary titles. He is the "Good Shepherd" (Psalm 23), "Judge", "Law Giver" and "King" (Isaiah 33:22). Another striking description is "The Lord is a warrior."

That expression is found in a song sung after the great deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt. After the Israelites were hastily sent off by the Pharaoh, they were soon followed by the Egyptian army.

God's people were trapped. In front of them was the Red Sea, on either side were mountains, and pursuing them from behind was the powerful Egyptian army. Their future looked grim.

The warrior at the Exodus

Then the unexpected, in fact the unimaginable, took place. The sea parted, and in the night God's people marched through on dry land. The Egyptians followed the Israelites into the parted sea, but then God covered the Egyptians, and they were destroyed.

The enemy had been wiped out; and the Israelites themselves had not as much as swung a sword or killed even one Egyptian. God as *warrior* had dealt effectively with the enemy—this time totally without Israel's help.

Safe on dry ground, the rejoicing Israelites broke into song, celebrating God's triumph. They were led by Miriam, Moses' sister. They sang:

*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 (Exodus 15:1-3).*

Israel had experienced the power of God. They had seen a warrior, greater than they could imagine, fight for them and win. This incident became a model. For centuries poets and prophets recalled the event with the message that Israel need not fight but must trust the Warrior Lord and obey Him.

This bold statement at the Exodus is not the only description of the warlike qualities of God. God uses a sword in Ezekiel 32:10 and Isaiah 34:6. Isaiah predicts that “The Lord will march out like a mighty man, like a warrior” (Isaiah 42:13). David gave thanks to God “who trains my hands for war, my fingers for battle” (Psalms 144:1).

His name is “Lord of Hosts”

In addition to these descriptions of God’s war-like activity, there is a military expression used for God: *Yahweh Sebaoth*, usually translated “Lord of Hosts.” The word *Sebaoth*, literally “armies or hosts,” may refer to Israel’s armies of which God is the leader (1 Samuel 17:45), or perhaps to heavenly beings such as angels (1 Kings 22:19), and sometimes to the sun, moon and stars (Deuteronomy 4:19).

The term *Sebaoth* is used 285 times in the Old Testament. It holds at least two major ideas: military might and majestic royalty. When *Yahweh Sebaoth* was used in connection with the nations, the term meant that God, the Lord of Hosts, was a total match for every power.

The term was also used in connection with worship, for example in Psalm 46:7-11. When Isaiah declared, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of Hosts,” he was in the temple (Isaiah 6:1). In worship settings, *Yahweh Sebaoth* had kingly authority, since he was in total command.

This explanation helps us understand what the Old Testament has in mind when it calls the Lord a man of war. It is referring to God’s power. In Old Testament times strength and power were associated with a strong man, the warrior—just as we might associate those qualities with a fighter jet or MX missile.

The name *Yahweh Sebaoth* was a striking way of letting everyone know that God was the kingly strong man whose forces were equal to the opposing powers, whether nations or idols.

The warrior’s enemies

The forces against which God fought were the forces of injustice. In the story of the Exodus, God’s warrior activity was on behalf of

oppressed people (Exodus 3:7-10). If he drove out the Canaanites, it was because of their sins. When nations exploited nations, God brought punishment, for example in Nahum 3:1.

While God often fought *for* Israel, sometimes he not only threatened but actually fought *against* Israel. Three examples are recorded: when the Israelites tried to take the land against God's will (Numbers 13:26-14:45); at Ai during the conquest (Joshua 7:1-5); and at Aphek against the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:1-11). These stories show that God does not always fight for a single national group—even his own people!

At one point the Assyrians were God's agent to punish Israel for injustice. But when Assyria became arrogant, God brought her to account by inciting other nations against her (Isaiah 10:12-19).

God's battles were not fought for a show of strength or delight in destruction. Quite the opposite—God has no pleasure in the death of persons (Ezekiel 33:11). In God's final battle when His enemies shall be destroyed in the great day of the Lord, his goal is the establishment of a kingdom of justice (Ezekiel 39:25-29).

God was and always will be a warrior God. There is a war that continues—the war between God and evil powers. God is a powerful warrior over the forces of evil and chaos symbolized by the monster Rahab (Isaiah 51:9-11). That same picture recurs in Revelation 6. From these passages we understand that evil will not gain the upper hand and that God will remain sovereign.

Calling people to war

As we listen to voices of war in the Old Testament, we hear God calling people to go to war. During the conquest, God said to Moses, "Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them" (Numbers 25:17). Later in the book we read, "They fought against Midian as the Lord commanded Moses and killed every man" (31:7).

Bible readers have accounted for these and other similar passages in various ways. Some have said that a God who calls people to war could not be the same God who sent Jesus into the world. Others

have said that Israel misunderstood God. Israel wanted to conquer territory and in order to justify war invoked the name of the Lord.

We must ask what God's reasons were for commanding war. An explanation for the expulsion of the Canaanites is given in Deuteronomy. God was not bringing Israel into the land of Canaan because Israel was a righteous people. No, "it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is going to drive them out before you" (Deuteronomy 9:4-5). Wars were God's punishment on nations for their evil ways.

A second reason for the command to destroy the people of Canaan involved their evil influence. God ordered total destruction of the Hittites, Ammorites and others, "otherwise they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 20:17-18). Still other wars, such as those Gideon was called to fight, were for self-defense and security (Judges 6:14).

A helpful consideration is that Israel was both a people of God and a political group. One cannot simply say God commanded war in the past, therefore Christians today should also go to war. Individual Christians today belong to a nation, but Christians as a group do not make up a political group—they are part of every nation on earth.

The Lord's War

The most helpful observation about God's command to make war comes from looking at the kind of war which God commanded. The Bible describes this as the Lord's war (Numbers 21:14). Scholars in the past have called it a "Holy War." This war is quite unlike the wars we know.

The Lord's War had four characteristics which set it apart: religious ritual, charismatic leaders, victory through faith instead of military might, and the destruction of booty.

One *ritual* was to consult God before going into battle. The book of Judges reports civil war during which the people of Israel asked the Lord, "Shall we go up again to battle?" (20:23, 28). A threat in itself was not sufficient reason to go to war; the crucial question was,

“Does God approve?”

Another ritual before battle was to offer sacrifice. In Samuel’s day the Philistine lords were on their way to fight Israel. Samuel offered a whole burnt offering as a call for help to the Lord (1 Samuel 7:9). Joshua called his people to offer sacrifice as an act of consecration before they entered the promised land (Joshua 3:5).

As a matter of course, soldiers were under certain hygienic restrictions that had nothing to do with military matters (Deuteronomy 23:9-14).

A more significant feature of the Lord’s war was *leadership*. The person who addressed the army as it prepared for war was initially one of the priests, to be followed then by other officers (Deuteronomy 20:2). The priest, rather than military generals, would sometimes lead the way. The leader of the people at the Exodus was Moses, who is described not as a military general but as a prophet (Exodus 18:14-19).

The leaders for many of the Lord’s wars were not military personnel; instead, they were people on whom God’s Spirit had come—such as Gideon. The qualifications of a general seemed to have little or nothing to do with military expertise; and as for the “army”, during the time of the judges these were farmers who often showed up with their farm tools.

Destroy the booty

One of the most interesting features of the Lord’s war is that victory came not through military skill or strength in numbers or weapons, but as a result of *faith* in God. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the familiar story of Gideon, whose initial army of 32,000 dwindled to 10,000 and then down to 300 (Judges 6-7).

In Gideon’s war, the offensive weapons consisted of a pitcher, a torch and a trumpet. These “weapons” were hardly lethal! When victory came, it was not because of weapons or men but because of the intervention of the Almighty.

A fourth feature of the Lord’s war was that as a rule the *booty* was to be dedicated to God. It was not to be taken for private or even

public use. The city of Ai could not be conquered, the Scripture explains, because a man called Achan had failed to destroy all war booty. Achan was punished before the campaign could continue.

Another example comes from the life of King Saul. Saul's orders from God were to destroy the Amalekites completely but, as Saul explained to the prophet Samuel, the people wanted to keep some livestock. God's anger with Saul was great—and Saul's kingdom was taken from him (1 Samuel 15:28). This practice of complete destruction of booty was a safeguard against waging war for the sake of financial gain.

In view of these four characteristics of the Lord's war, it is not right to equate it with modern wars such as World War I or II. Modern wars are not waged from a sense of God's directive. Highly educated militarists, not religious leaders, direct the war effort. There is a constant demand for bigger armies and more lethal weapons. And the idea of the destruction of booty is unknown.

Lessons of the Lord's war

What did God intend to teach us through the war stories of the Old Testament?

First, God wanted to say that he enters the human scene and comes to the aid of troubled people. He is not a detached God. He entered the human scene according to the need and experience of the people. In their experience the warrior brought down the mighty. God is such a God.

Second, the stories show that God works by means other than the sword, such as miracles. At the Red Sea, the Israelites were exhorted, "The Lord will fight for you; you only need to be still" (Exodus 14:14). Indeed, Exodus 23:20-33 may suggest that God also intended Israel to conquer the land without using the sword. In that passage, God urges obedience, and promises that His angel will go before them and bring them into the land (verse 23); that His terror will precede Israel so that the land will be thrown into confusion (verse 27); or for that matter, that He will send hornets ahead of Israel to drive out the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites before them (verse 28).

Third, these war stories help us understand faith. Consider what faith meant for the Israelite soldier going into the Lord's war, armed only with the promise that "The Lord shall fight for you." Imagine yourself as that soldier facing the deadly swords and spears of the enemy. To follow God now is to put your life on the line. Faith is a risk to the point of one's life that God will really come through.

Fourth, the Lord's wars show that God is sovereign and fully in control. He is Lord. Nobody is a match for him—not even the mighty empires of the Egyptians or Babylonians. That is the message the prophets picked up from these stories. When they recalled the events of the Exodus, for example, they declared that God had taken care of his and seen them through the most astonishing difficulties. If we follow him in obedience, we can trust him with our lives.

SHOULD A CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATE?

As we have noted in this and the previous chapter, the student of the Old Testament hears mixed voices. There are voices for peace and voices for war. Which voice should we listen to when we face the question whether a Christian should participate in war?

Our summary of the Old Testament teaching on peace and war must take into account the following observations:

The Old Testament teaching on war suggests a Christian's non-involvement. There is little doubt that the Exodus story—the first reported struggle involving a people group—is intended to be a model. In that conflict, Israel actively trusted God but did not lift up swords to kill. The emphasis on miracle is carried forward in the report of the Lord's wars during the time of the Judges, and in certain battles during the monarchy such as Jehoshaphat's battle and Hezekiah's contest with the Syrians.

The emphasis on God's unassisted role in victory is present later in the exilic time, when Daniel receives the vision of a huge statue representing world empires. The image is smashed by a rolling stone "cut without human hands."

Similarly, the emphasis on God as a warrior is introduced at the

outset and continues through to Zechariah, one of the last prophets (see Zechariah 9). It is because God is a mighty warrior that the sword and spear are uncalled for.

Since the dominant note on war is sounded at the Exodus, we might think of the other types of war as concessions. In other words, God adjusted himself to the weakness of the people.

Could it be that the record of those other wars is given to show us how evil and unproductive wars are? The history of human wars, whether in the Old Testament or in any other history books, shows that war is a shame for humankind. War is ugly.

The Old Testament teaching on God's concern for life urges non-involvement in war. War is destructive and brings death. But the overall tone of the Old Testament is that God is concerned about life. He is the God who breathed into man the breath of life. As the giver of life, His intention is for *shalom*.

In light of ancient Near East culture, even some of the instructions about war have a human touch: "When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace....When you lay siege to a city for a long time...do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them" (Deuteronomy 20:10, 19). Ezekiel announces, "as surely as I live; declares the sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezekiel 33:11).

The high value placed on life is shown by the the direct command "thou shalt not kill" and by the severe penalty laid down for those who take life. Noah receives the directive "Whoever sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God has God made man" (Genesis 9:6).

The Old Testament teaching on peace calls for non-involvement in war. When deciding from the Old Testament whether to participate in war, the believer must ask "What is the direction in which God is moving?"

In the last chapter we noted the calls for peaceful living given in the book of Proverbs and illustrated in the stories of Abraham and Isaac and also in later incidents in Israel's life. The prophets picture a

coming age of peace. They lift up our sights to a time when war will be no more, when conflict and destruction will be unknown.

Believers are God's advance agents of the coming kingdom. They have chosen to submit to God's ways. Since God's goal is *shalom*, these God-followers are committed to peaceful ways. The voices for peace in the Old Testament demand for today's Christian conscientious objection to war and non-participation in it.

The New Testament endorsement of the Old Testament pushes the believer toward non-participation in war. Jesus recognized that wars would continue in the world, yet he blessed the peacemakers. He taught that the one who fights with the sword will die by the sword. He called on his followers to love the enemy. To do so, even in the face of threat, is to follow up on the principles of the Lord's War and in trust leave the outcome to the Lord of Hosts.

Jesus' own example clinches the argument in favor of non-resistance. Suffering love and not revenge is the word from Jesus.

This call for peace is even stronger when we note that God's people are found not in one nation but in many nations. Who is to receive our first loyalty? The Old Testament answers, loyalty is above all to God, the Lord Sabaoth sovereign over nations. His people are different. They wage peace, not war.