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The Passion History as Holy War

Devon Wiens

It is by now common knowledge that the notion of holy war represented a deeply-entrenched aspect of ancient Israelite faith. This paper has the purpose of tracing the vestiges of the archaic ideals of holy war into the New Testament, in particular, into the passion accounts, as recorded by the Synoptics.

The battle-charged atmosphere of the evangelists' depictions of Jesus' life and activity has often been noted.¹ However, sufficient cognizance has not been taken of the almost inevitable influence of technical holy war ideas upon these writers. Instead, with considerable ingenuity, every seemingly conceivable hint of conflict has been blown up into a theory that Jesus was at war with various enemies. These theories tend to result from modern impositions upon the gospel material. The important methodological question is: Did the evangelists themselves employ the age-old tradition of holy war in explicating their understanding of Jesus? Strict focus upon this question will discourage the arbitrary importance of militaristic ideas in general into the gospels, merely because proponents of such ideas are fully aware of the wide currency of martial language in NT times.

If the history of tradition approach has taught us anything, it is that of the longevity and tenacious reusability of ancient ideas. This fact, when coupled with the scholarly return to the acknowledgement of the OT as the significant background for primitive Christian thought, argues for the continuation of beliefs surrounding holy war, in the NT. This was, after all, the case with respect to the Maccabees and Zealots² and the Qumran Covenantors.³

Therefore, to use the various strife-metaphors as illuminative of battles of a kind is warranted, but the designation 'holy war' should be reserved for specialized, technical applications, wherein the old, familiar imagery recurs. In the case of the NT gospels, the present writer found that the stereotyped usages of holy war ideology are focused, almost exclusively, upon the passion narratives. Furthermore, it is Mark and, even to a greater degree, Matthew who associates most dramatically the old ideas with the suffering and death of Jesus, so that, for them, the passion is envisioned as another example of a holy war.

To begin with, one needs only to be reminded of the war-like nature of the whole passion event to realize that these terminal occur-

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rences were especially susceptible of investment with this traditional terminology and ideology. For instance, there are soldiers present throughout Mr. 14:1,2 = Mt. 26:3-5; Mk. 14:27 = Mt. 26:31; Mk. 14:43-50 = Mt. 26:27-46.

It is possible that the event which commenced the activities of passion week, the entry into Jerusalem, triggered the treatment which is accorded the specific incidents of that week. Clearly, some among the crowd saw Jesus as a war-hero coming to take possession of the city. The mob's acclamation is natural enough, viewed in this light: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!" This fervid expectation of national liberation is interpreted by Matthew along the lines of the warrior-like king whose coming is announced in Zechariah 9:9.

As one proceeds to probe the accounts — beyond the evident references to conflict and the world of war in general — in the search for traditional holy war motifs, one is not disappointed. For, as was the case in the ancient warfare of Israel, so now the warrior, first of all, must prepare himself ritually for the fray. The experience in Gethsemane represents such a necessary and disciplined consecration, for this is the time of temptation (Mk. 14:38 = Mt. 26:41). This term

has its roots in the imagery of a state of war between two powers in the world, that of God and that of Satan, in which the believer, as God's soldier, is constantly exposed to the attacks of the devil and must therefore be watchful and armed at his post.⁴

This brings about the need to 'watch' (Mk. 14:34, 37, 38 = Matt. 26: 38, 40, 41). Most instructively, this is the same term as that used to picture the required vigilance of the disciples, in anticipation of the coming of the Son of Man and the accompanying travail and cosmic phenomena of the final tribulation, in the eschatological discourse (Mk. 13: 33, 35, 36 = Mt. 24:42).⁵ There is a network of ideas common to both the passion narrative (e.g., the thought of the 'hour',⁶ the need to watch, the idea of 'tribulation', the cosmic prodigies which attend both the crucifixion and the description of the coming of the Son of Man). This suggests that Jesus undergoes, in a prefigurative sense, precisely those things of which he forewarns his followers (Mk. 13 = Mt. 24). In a real sense, then, this means that the future Day of the Son of Man, with its accompanying portents, is, to a degree, realized in the passion as holy war.

As is only to be expected, the upcoming strife prompts fear and diffidence. Accordingly, as in days of old, divine guidance must be invoked: "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup⁷ from

me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mk. 14:36; cf. Mt. 26:39). Inasmuch as the outcome of the battle is determined by God himself,⁸ faith and acquiescence in the divine will are indispensable. Only at this juncture does the fighter bestir himself and sound the battle cry: "Indeed, the hour has come"⁹ (Mt. 26:45; cf. Mk. 14:41).

Jesus, fully in control of the situation, verbally sets into motion the forces which result in the confrontation with the powers of evil and the arrest¹⁰ (Mk. 14:42 = Matt. 26:46). He, so to speak, advances to the front, at the head of his troops, to engage the enemy.

These traditional holy war catchwords and idioms appealed to yet again to portray this conflict. However, there is, within this basic continuity of thought, a refraction of some key ideas. For Jesus, paradoxically enough, announces to his followers that "the Son of Man is being handed over to the power of sinful men (Mk. 14:41; cf. Matt. 26:45). In the old Israelite records of holy war, a standard motif was the assurance that Yahweh had given the enemy into Israel's hand (Josh. 2:24, 6:2, 16; 8:1, 18; 10:8, 19; Judges 1:2; 3:28; 4:7, 14; 7:9, 14, 15; 10:30; 18:10; 20:28; I Sam. 14:10, 12, 37; 17:46; 23:4; 24:5; 26:8; II Sam. 5:19; I Kings 20:28). But, now, in this later example, the tables are turned against God's own. Both Mark (14:27) and Matthew (26:31) cite Zech. 13:7 ("I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered"), in the effort to explain how this unexpected turn of events could have come about. It is clear that the original reference in Zechariah is to war-situation, for it is the sword, as the parallel construction of the verse shows, which smites the shepherd and scatters the sheep.

This scattering of the disciples illustrates, rather graphically, their unpreparedness, throughout the section. Peter was to deny his master (Mk. 14:29-31 = Mt. 26:33-35); he is in this respect but representative of the others who were all to "fall away" (Mk. 14:27 = Matt. 26:31) that night. Again, the three disciples cannot maintain the necessary vigil (as sentries?) in Gethsemane; they fall asleep at the post (Mk. 14:37, 40, 41 = Mt. 26:40, 43, 45). Consequently, the combatant must sally forth into the fray all alone.¹¹ As in the time of Gideon, now the undesirables and the unfit have been weeded out. Eventually, the disciples bear out the truth of Jesus' solemn warning: "Then all the disciples left him and ran away" (Mt. 16:56; cf. Mk. 14:50).

Although the intervening passages reflect ideas of antagonism and conflict, it is the event which is the climax of the passion history, the crucifixion, which gathers to itself a cluster of the traditional images.

In the first place, one notes that the cross is raised on the promontory of Golgotha, in a manner reminiscent of the summoning of Israel to war by the raising of a signal or standard on a hill. For comparative

purposes, we refer to one such call to battle, as recorded in Isaiah 13; here the scene is the cataclysmic war to take place on the Day of Yahweh:

On a bare hill raise a signal, cry aloud to them; wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, have summoned my mighty men to execute my anger, my proudly exulting ones. Hark! an tumult on the mountains, as of a great multitude!¹² Hark! an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together. The Lord of hosts is mustering a host for battle (13:2-4).

In keeping with correct martial decorum, Jesus spurns the drink offered him (Mk. 15:23 = Mt. 27:34), thus demonstrating the gravity of the hour by his abstention from anything which would render him unfit for the impending conflict (cf. Numbers 21:2; Deut. 23:10-15; Judges 11:36; I Sam. 14:24; 21:6; II Samuel 1:21).

While Jesus is on the cross, the apparent victors in this war engage in the distribution of the spoils, Jesus' garments (Mk. 15:24 = 27:35). Although this was doubtless a customary act at such times, as was the case also with the offer of drink, one must not overlook the cumulative effect of all these detailed parallels to the tradition in the narrative, for, taken together, they serve to enhance the impression of the total scene as one of war.

As he is about to succumb, the crucified one cries out: "My God! My God! why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34).¹⁴ This may be thought of as a war-cry; indeed, the fact that he is said to have cried in a loud voice tends to confirm this. For it does seem a bit unnatural that one in his weakened condition would do so. The writer probably wishes for us to think back to the shouts which punctuated the wars of antiquity.

What follows next provides support for the thesis which we have posited. Immediately, after the cry, assorted terrestrial and celestial phenomena occur, attending the course of this war and illustrating its crucial character. The family portents and prodigies are reported once again: darkness covers the earth (Mk. 15:33 = Mt. 27:45; cf. Amos 5:18-20; 8:9, 10; Zeph, 1:15; Joel 2:2, 10, 31; 3:15); the veil of the temple is torn asunder, the earth shakes, rocks are split, and death sur-renders its hold on many bodies of the saints (Matt. 27:51).

As a result of all this spectacular activity, the centurion and those with him, who were guarding the spot, are said to have been struck by fear (Matt. 27:54). The fact that it is stated that it was the soldiers who feared greatly is significant; it reminds one of the consternation and panic brought about by Yahweh, in the enemy camp, in the records of

Israel's holy wars. In this case, both Mark and Matthew go on to record the guards' verbal response, though Matthew generalizes Mark's limitation of this to the centurion, so that the entire company is made to exclaim: "This man was really the son of God (Mk. 15:39 Matt. 27:54). By way of pointing to the striking correspondence with much older terminology and concept, we may refer to the incident reported in I Sam. 4. There, the presence of the ark of the covenant in the camp signifies for Israel the presence of Yahweh himself. As a result, prior to beginning the clash with the Philistines, all Israel gives a "Mighty shout" so that the earth "resounds." The Philistines become terrified. In their mortification, they put the following interpretation upon the situation: "The gods (God) have come into their camp (I Sam. 4:7).¹⁵

Admittedly, the cross-struggle is a somewhat curious example of a holy war. A couple of concluding questions deserve attention. First, who exactly may be said to be the "enemy" in this conflict? This question is worth asking because the identity of the foes is not explicitly revealed in the synoptic passion narratives. Hints in this direction are found in Jesus' word to the disciples, at the conclusion of the experience in Gethsemane: "The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners" (Mk. 14:41 = Mt. 26:45). Earlier, the chief priests and the scribes are portrayed as plotting to do away with him (Mk. 14:1 = Luke 22:2; cf. Matt 26. 26:3). It appears that the earthly foe, quite unspecified in the synoptics, is spiritualized into the 'powers and principalities' of the Pauline and deutero-Pauline literature (cf. Eph. 6:12; Col. 2:15). This ambiguity would imply that, whereas the identity of the foe is a variable, the fact of the battle itself is a constant and, hence, the important datum. The stress is upon the waging of the war itself, not the description of the principles involved.¹⁶

The second question is whether Jesus really "wars" here. Is it not rather a case of his acquiescence to the real contestant, God himself? We have examined the Gethsemane episode, in which there is real tension between the desire to avoid the approaching battle, represented by the 'cup', and the simultaneous desire to surrender in faith to the will of the one who alone makes the ways of war to serve him. In the same vein, the old descriptive imagery pertaining to holy war is now utilized to depict a passivity which results in apparent submission to the enemy, despite the crowd's taunts and challenges for Jesus to save himself from the cross.

Of course, the salient point in all of this is precisely Jesus' refusal to wage the kind of traditional holy war which would have spared him from the agony of the crucifixion (according to Mr. 26:52, 53). Instead, Jesus takes his own distinctive back and, in so doing, further scandalizes his followers, who fail to comprehend this strange "resignation." For they are attuned to allow one possible way to wage a holy war and fail

to realize that the way of the cross is the way of victory. Indeed, there are sufficient indications, though these are not unequivocal, that this seeming defeat contains within itself the seeds of triumph, even without the obvious proclamation of this in the ancillary resurrection narratives.

References

¹ See, among others, Anton Fridrichsen, "The Conflict of Jesus With the Unclean Spirits," *Theology* 22 (1931): 122-135; Ragnar Leivestad, *Christ the Conqueror: Ideas of Conflict and Victory in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1954); G.B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956); Otto Betz, "Jesu heiliger Krieg," *Novum Testamentum* 2 (1975): 116-137; J.M. Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark* (London: SCM, 1957); Heinrich Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961); Gerald Bonner, *The Warfare of Christ* (London: Faith Press, 1962); Ernest Best, *The Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology* (Cambridge, 1965). For the development of such ideas in the early church, subsequent to the gospels, see two older classics: Adolf Harnack, *Militia Christi: Die christliche Religion und der Soldatenstand: in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1905) and Hans Windisch, *Der messianische Krieg und das Urchristentum* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1909).

² The definitive study of such ideas in the Maccabees and Zealots is that by William Farmer, *Maccabees, Zealots, and Josephus: An Inquiry into Jewish Nationalism in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Columbia University, 1956). See also Martin Hengel, *Die Zeloten: Untersuchungen zur jüdischen Freiheitsbewegung in der Zeit von Herodes I. Bis 70 N. Chr.* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961).

³ This is epitomized in the "War of the Sons of Light and Darkness."

⁴ Karl George Kuhn, "New Light on Temptation, Sin and Flesh in the New Testament," in Krister Stendahl (ed.), *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1957), p. 96.

⁵ R.S. Barbour, "Gethsemane in the Tradition of the Passion," *New Testament Studies* 16 (1970): 236: ". . . it seems likely that Mark understood the *peirasmos* of the disciples in Gethsemane by reference to the hour of the Son of Man alike in its historical and eschatological senses; the three are told to watch and pray so that they shall not enter into the eschatological *peirasmos* that is described in chapter xiii, but also so that they shall not be put to the test and fail in the struggle that immediately confronts them."

⁶ According to Werner Kelber, "The Hour of the Son of Man and the Temptation of the Disciples," in Kelber (ed.), *The Passion in Mark: Studies on Mark 14-16* (Fortress, 1976), p. 44: "'The hour', used in this absolute sense [in Mark 14:35], not merely attaches weight to the period of passion proper, but it qualifies this suffering in an eschatological sense . . . 'The hour' is therefore a cipher for suffering [14:35,41], for the eschatological quality of suffering [13:11], and for eschatological revelation in a purely futuristic sense [13:32]."

⁷ The idea of the 'cup' has its analogues within the Old Testament prophetic literature, wherein the Lord is portrayed as coming in fury and vengeance, to do battle, either in independent fashion, against Israel herself (Is. 51:17,22; Ez. 23:31-33) or the nations (Jer. 25:15,17,28; 49:12; Lam. 4:21; Hab. 2:16) or in dependence upon Babylon (Jer. 51:7) or Jerusalem (Zech. 12:2), as the latter represent the 'cup'.

⁸ Millard Lind, "Paradigm of Holy War in the Old Testament," *Biblical Research* 16 (1971): 26, refers to the "unique tradition of holy war in the Old Testament that

Yahweh is the warrior God who fights for his people, that faith does not demand cooperative military action, but trust in Yahweh's action and obedience to specifications of a non-martial character."

⁹ This is similar in form to what was, according to von Rad, an ancient war-cry: "The Day of the Lord is near." See his *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. II: *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), 124 n39:

¹⁰ One notes a striking affinity to this language in Judges 5:12, where Israel's heroes, Deborah and Barak, are incited to celebrate the triumph over Sisera's host: "Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, utter a song! Arise Barak, lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam."

¹¹ In earlier days, enemy forces would occasionally agree to settle the issue by single combat (see I Sam. 17:4, 8-10,23; II Sam. 2:14f; 21:15-21).

¹² This would seem to be typified by the *titulum* over Jesus' head: "This is Jesus the king of the Jews."

¹³ This is paralleled by the throngs assembled to witness the execution of Jesus. The fact that it was the time of Passover would indicate the presence of a large crowd in Jerusalem at the time. A further pointer to the affinity between the two descriptions (Isaiah 13 and the crucifixion Narrative) is the presence in both of the same features (e.g., the identical specific prodigies, the element of fear).

¹⁴ One remembers the assurances, in the Old Testament, that God's people would not be forsaken in time of crisis; hence the command to 'Fear not', a command at least tangentially associated with the wars of Israel. It follows that one has here but one more instance of the unorthodox nature of Jesus' holy closure with the foe.

¹⁵ One observes that, despite all the ruckus and the confusion among the Philistines, it is they who win the battle. There is here an instructive parallel to the plight of the lonely combatant on the cross, who, despite the usual sights and sounds of a successful holy war, seemingly goes to his defeat.

¹⁶ William Manson, "Principalities and Powers: The Spiritual Background of the Work of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels" *Bulletin of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* 3 (1952): 14,15: "From the Pauline, and indeed from the whole New Testament standpoint, when the Christ bowed his head on the cross, all the powers of darkness, all the demonism of the cosmos, affronted Him and closed with Him in moral combat."