



The Moral Outrage Of Holy War

Three approaches to the problem of holy war in Joshua.

by Jerry A. Gladson

THE BOOK OF JOSHUA GREATLY TROUBLES contemporary readers by its advocacy of wholesale violence against the Canaanites. Not only do the Israelites proceed to devastate Canaanite towns and villages, but believe God commands them to do so, turning the wars of conquest into acts of religious devotion. "So Joshua defeated the whole land . . . he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded" (Joshua 10:40, NRSV). From the Christian perspective, how do we account for such brutality? How does it affect our contemporary attitude toward war?

Ancient peoples customarily linked military conquest with religion. War began with the gods' command, or at least divine approval. War was accompanied by sacrifices and carried out through divine assistance. After the victory, the gods received a part of the spoils

of war. Among the Hebrews, this practice was known as *berem*, the act of devoting, or "separating" the booty to Yahweh (Leviticus 27:28; Joshua 7:1). The famous Moabite Stone, a black basalt slab found at Dibon in 1868, attests to a similar belief among the ninth century B.C. Moabites, in this case, directed against Israel. "I had devoted them [Israel] to destruction for (the god) Ashtar-Chemosh," intones Mesha, king of Moab.¹ The Greeks called such wars "holy wars" (*Hieroi polemoi*), a name we continue to apply to them. Although it no doubt has roots in the holy war tradition, the Muslim *jihad* is not strictly a holy war, but a war to spread the faith by military force. The holy war, therefore, is an ancient social practice, and its presence in the early stages of the development of the Hebrew faith merely shows something of the acculturation of the latter.

Merely to understand the holy war tradition as a part of ancient society, however, does not fully explain the biblical record. Even if we consider the Bible a progressive development of faith and ethics, it remains morally offensive

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to think of God approving of such wholesale slaughter, even if only for a time. Murdering entire populations in the name of God seems incredibly barbaric and cruel. The brutality of holy war appears in need of urgent moral reform, whatever the divine agenda may be.

Three solutions have been proposed to the problem of holy war:

1. *The religious and moral degradation of the Canaanite culture was such that their destruction was necessary for Israel's well-being.* Deuteronomy 20, which contains the rules for warfare, advances this explanation. "You shall annihilate them . . . so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods" (verses 17, 18, NRSV). Perhaps one might compare holy war to a surgeon who does not hesitate to remove an arm or a leg if the situation warrants. The spiritual life of Israel was at stake, and ultimately through Israel, that of the entire world. Yahweh had to use drastic means, including the ancient holy war procedure, to accomplish his ends. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, which advocates this view,² points to the fertility worship, sacred prostitution, child sacrifice, and general brutality of Canaanite religion, known to us through the Ugaritic texts from Canaan, as justification for the slaughter of the Canaanites.

The plausibility of this solution is mitigated when we consider that we tend to judge Canaanite religious practice on the basis of fragmentary information and from our own perspective, rather than from within that faith itself, as a truly objective observer would want to do. Furthermore, the use of wholesale

violence seems strikingly incongruous with the larger goals of Yahweh, viz.; the conversion of the nations. Was holy war the only option in confrontation with Canaanite culture? Does the end justify the means?

2. *The wars in Joshua are to be regarded as battles interpreted by later tradition as commands from God.* In this view, the actual battles have been heightened in the text and given religious interpretation by later Deuteronomist editors. They were not originally holy wars, but only became such through later interpretation. Such an understanding is no doubt related to recent historical reconstruction of the Israelite presence in Canaan in the 13th century B.C. as either the result of

an internal revolt or a gradual migration rather than an actual conquest of indigenous peoples. According to this reconstruction, much of the portrayal found in Joshua has been amplified or enhanced by later theological editors. Holy war interpretation is thus given

to battles, but was not originally part of the actual event.

While the conquest tradition has no doubt been subjected to Deuteronomistic editing, it seems problematic to believe that the holy war tradition, a very ancient notion, is solely part of a later interpretive strata. The notion of holy war appears to have been in decline during the monarchy, the very time the Deuteronomistic editing is presumed to have been in process.

3. *In using holy war, Yahweh entered into the cultural structures of the time.*³ This is an example of how God meets people where they are, leads them step by step until they are where God wants them to be. The

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biblical revelation is progressive, so we should not expect it hastily to introduce moral reforms until a proper basis for them is established. Another example of such divine accommodation is the institution of slavery. Rather than abolish slavery, God makes provision for more humane treatment of slaves (e.g., Exodus 21:1-7, 26, 27; Ephesians 6:5-9). God enters the cultural structure of slavery and attempts to reform—and abolish—it from within. Holy

war can be viewed in exactly this same light.

Yet we must ask, How far will God go in such accommodation? Are there not moral limits to such divine self-abnegation?

The problem of holy war continues to challenge our thinking. How we decide this question has important ramifications for contemporary Christian attitudes about war. The entire complex matter must be evaluated in the light of the teaching of the prophets and, ultimately, the teaching of Jesus.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Lines 15-20, trans. W. F. Albright, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, J. B. Pritchard, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University, 1969), p. 320.

2. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*

(Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1954), Vol. 2, pp. 199-204.

3. Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979).