

Pacifism Or Peace? War, Peace And Justice In The Old Testament¹

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Peace is a central concern of the Old Testament

In the North Garden area of the United Nations complex in New York, there stands a nine foot tall bronze statue. The statue shows a man about to strike a huge sword with a hammer. The sword is already buckling and its sharp end has been turned into the cutting blade of a plough. The statue was presented to the UN in 1959 by the then Soviet Union. It symbolises the hope that the sword of soldiers will become the ploughshare of the farmers. We want peace, not war. This hope for peace is based directly on a verse of Scripture found in the Old Testament.

(The LORD) will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

This glorious vision of peace is found in two places in the Old Testament: Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-3. Its repetition lends emphasis to a central Old Testament concern for world peace.

¹ A summary of what the Old Testament says on any subject is an endeavour that is fraught with significant methodological and hermeneutical difficulties. The following article is not intended to be a comprehensive or critical treatment of the subject of war and peace in the Old Testament. Many of the summary conclusions in this article could (and should) be qualified and refined by other Old Testament passages not cited. Whether such qualifications might prove to be more akin to rejection rather than refinement can be discussed only in the context of a much broader methodological and hermeneutical debate. Nevertheless, it is my hope that this article will have the value of exposing the reader to several key passages and ideas in the Old Testament that cannot be ignored in any discussion of the vexed subject of war and peace.

More examples might easily be cited. Isaiah 11:6-9 paints a symbolic picture of the harmonious coexistence of those who are enemies by nature.

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Even if one regards as unlikely the theory that the animals were symbols of specific nations in the ancient world, it is still clear that the vision speaks of peace that extends beyond the animal world into the arena of politics and human relations. This same vision of peace also enjoys emphasis in the Old Testament by its repetition in Isaiah 65:25.

Zechariah 9:9-10 describes a vision of a victorious king who rides, not on a war horse, but on a donkey, an ancient symbol that implies a desire to rule with gentleness in the promotion of peace.

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations.

Peace is a central concern of the Old Testament.

There is no Peace without Justice in the Old Testament

But what is the nature of peace in the Old Testament? A comprehensive answer is beyond the scope of this brief article. One

prominent and relevant characteristic will suffice: peace in the Old Testament is closely associated with the establishment of justice.

We see this in each of the visions of peace cited above. In Isaiah 2:2-4 (Mic 4:1-3), the desired peace comes in the wake of the LORD rendering judgement and justice amongst the nations.

He will judge between the nations and will *settle disputes* for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

The vision of peace in Isaiah 11:6-9 is preceded by a description of the ruler who will usher in this age of peace (verses 3-4).

He will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, *with justice* he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

The idyllic peace envisioned in verses 6-9 comes in the wake of the wicked being slain in the course of establishing justice and righteousness (see verse 4).

The same is true for the king of peace in Zechariah 9:9-10. The ruler who comes in the proclamation of peace is, in verse 9, described as “righteous” (NIV) or “just” (KJV), and verse 8 describes the removal of evil oppressors.

As a final example, consider the messianic description of the prince of “peace” in Isaiah 9:6-7.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, *Prince of Peace*. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,

establishing and upholding it *with justice and righteousness* from that time on and forever.

Peace is inextricably linked to justice and righteousness. There is no peace where justice is ignored.

Divine Justice through human Warfare in the Old Testament

How does the Old Testament envisage the establishment of justice and peace on earth? There is abundant evidence to show that injustice often goes unpunished on earth for a long period of time. The suffering of the innocent and the prosperity of the unjust on earth is a central theme of the Old Testament. But though the wheels of God's justice often grind slowly in the Old Testament, it is clear that they are grinding. And the turning of these divine wheels of justice is very often depicted in terms of human forces. Thus, in Exodus 32:26-28, divine anger is executed through human beings (Levites) wielding the sword against their fellow Israelites.

Moses said: "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me." And all the Levites rallied to him. Then he said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.'" The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died.

The military conquest and occupation of Canaan is portrayed in Deuteronomy 9:5 as an expression of divine judgement against the Canaanites.

It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Similarly, according to Micah 1:6, Israel's injustice is punished by God through the military destruction of Samaria, Israel's capital city. This "divine" destruction was executed through the human agency of Assyria (see 2 Kings 17:22-24). The earthly nation of Assyria is also described as the instrument of God's anger against His own people in Isaiah 10:5. A similar understanding stands behind the report heard by Habakkuk concerning Babylon or Chaldea (Hab 1:6). War, or military defeat, is regularly understood in the Old Testament as an expression of God's judgement against a people who have been unjust and unrighteous (e.g. Judg 2:14f.).

It is therefore not surprising to find Old Testament descriptions of the LORD as a Soldier or Warrior. In the Old Testament, God's justice is often executed by war.

The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name (Ex 15:3).

The LORD will march out like a mighty man, like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies (Isa 42:13).

A faithful believer in God could therefore understand himself as an agent of God's justice. The taking up of arms in the name of such justice was therefore assumed as justifiable and necessary. See, for example, Nehemiah 4:14, 21.

After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." ... So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out.

It is this same understanding of human force in the service of God's justice that underlies the prayer in Psalm 144:1.

Praise be to the LORD my Rock, who trains my hands for war,
my fingers for battle.

In the Old Testament, God's justice is often executed in human warfare.

Human warfare is inherently dangerous and defiling

The Old Testament, however, is not naïve. It is not only God's justice that is executed through the exercise of human force and warfare. The Old Testament warns that human injustice and cruelty are also expressed by the same agency. Thus, the passage which describes Assyria as God's instrument (Isa 10:5) also rebukes her for going beyond the intentions and purposes of God (Isa 10:7). 2 Samuel 21:2 implies that King Saul killed the Gibeonites out of "zeal for Israel and Judah". However, Saul's act of zeal involved bloodshed and, in verse 1, is portrayed clearly as incurring God's wrath. Simeon and Levi take justice into their own hands, avenging the alleged rape of their sister Dinah (Gen 34) by the use of human deceit and violence. Their anger and violence are condemned in Genesis 49:5-7. Human force, even when exercised in the name of divine justice, is therefore fraught with the danger of human injustice.

But human force is not only inherently dangerous. It may also be inherently "defiling". This is probably the reason why Numbers 31:50 speaks of soldiers needing to seek atonement. There is no obvious injustice or evil associated with the soldiers or warriors in Numbers 31. Instead, their act of war is explicitly described as being in the service of "the Lord's judgement on Midian" (verse 3). The war they fight is, according to the biblical narrator, a war sanctioned by God (verse 7). Yet, in the aftermath of this successful campaign in the name of God's justice, the officers and soldiers are considered "unclean" for a week (verse 19) and require "atonement before the LORD" (verse 50). Atonement is needed even though the war was sanctioned by God. Why is this so? "These purification rules reminded Israel that the death of one's fellow men was a catastrophic disruption of God's creation, even though in some cases it was the Creator himself who demanded the execution of the sinner."² In the

² Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers* (Leicester: IVP, 1981), p. 212.

same vein, Niditch writes: “Numbers 31 expresses genuine ambivalence concerning the ethics of war. The cause is holy, the war is ritualized, but the killing defiles. Thus as one enters war ritually one must exit with separation, cleansing, and sacrifices of atonement.”³

The same ambivalence and inherent “uncleanness” of warfare in the Old Testament may be discerned in the example of King David. This ruler, “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam 13:14), was also a man of many wars. David fought and won many battles in God’s name and there is no indication that these wars were unjust or against the will of God. Yet, the reason he is disqualified from building a temple for God is twice attributed to his having shed blood in battle.

But this word of the LORD came to me: “You have shed much blood and have fought many wars. You are not to build a house for my Name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight” (1 Chron 22:8).

But God said to me, “You are not to build a house for my Name, because you are a warrior and have shed blood” (1 Chron 28:3).

The Old Testament, therefore, knows that human warfare is dangerous because it is often an expression of human cruelty and injustice. Even when it is undertaken in harmony with God’s purposes, human warfare and bloodshed “defiles”.

Peace or Pacifism?

The Old Testament champions the cause of peace and justice. It longs for the day when the world “will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks”, when “nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Isa 2:4; Mic 4:3). The Old Testament glorifies a God “who makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow

³ Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible : a study in the ethics of violence* (New York: OUP, 1993), p. 89.

and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire” (Ps 46:9). But this glorious day of peace has not yet been ushered in. Injustice and evil still abounds. Consequently, in the harsh realities of the Old Testament world, divine judgment is executed, on occasion, through the agency of human force. The use of such force, however, is recognized as being inherently dangerous and even defiling.

How might the danger and defilement of warfare be guarded against? Pacifism and the rejection of human warfare is one obvious option. As we have seen, the total renunciation of human warfare and weaponry is a central part of the Old Testament vision of peace and justice (cf. Isa 2:4; Mic 4:3). However, this pacifist stance has to be evaluated in the light of each particular circumstance. Are peace and justice best served and best promoted by the renunciation of human force and human warfare? If so, then such renunciation is faithful to the Old Testament vision of peace. But on other occasions, it may be judged that pacifism allows the increase of injustice and evil to advance. In this situation, the renunciation of human force must be questioned. There is no peace if injustice thrives. ***The Old Testament vision is peace, not pacifism.***

This does not, however, mean that the Old Testament gives preference to war over pacifism. At times, the non-violent pacifist response may be the best way to halt the escalation of violence and convict the consciences of leaders in power (cf. Elisha’s counsel of restraint that led towards peace and reconciliation in 2 Kings 8:21-23). On other occasions, as we have seen above, the pacifist response is not considered to be the best means towards achieving justice and peace. In short, ***the Old Testament counsels neither war nor pacifism; it champions justice and peace.***

But if pacifism is rejected on occasion, one is still left with both the danger and defilement of human warfare. Does the Old Testament offer any help in countering these two characteristics of warfare?

Firstly, what help does the Old Testament offer against the problem of unjust and evil human motives inherent in the practice of war? Perhaps the attitude and fervent prayer of the Psalmist in Psalm 139 might serve as a model. The Psalmist asks God to search his heart and to test his motives. He believes that his hatred of the enemy is justified. He believes that they are enemies of God’s justice.

They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies (verses 20-22).

But the psalmist has a healthy suspicion of his own assessment of the enemy. He, therefore, begins and concludes by asking God to search his heart and to test his understanding.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (verses 23-24).

He subjects what he believes to be his justified anger to the searching light of God's wisdom and knowledge. Every leader who has the unenviable task of deciding between war and pacifism should do the same. The Old Testament warns that human warfare often promotes, not divine justice, but human injustice.

Secondly, how might the Old Testament teaching on the "defiling" nature of warfare help us in our complex world? Let us suppose that a healthy suspicion of one's own understanding has been scrutinized under the light of God's searching Spirit, and let us suppose that we are still convinced that human warfare is a necessary action in the promotion of peace and justice. If human warfare is inherently defiling, then the adoption of it is inherently evil. There is no place for warfare and bloodshed in God's vision of heaven on earth. Therefore, if war is deemed necessary, it should be understood as a necessary evil. If our evaluation of the situation has been clear and correct, then warfare will be the lesser of two evils. If we engage in war, we must be certain that to refuse it will be to promote the greater evil of injustice. We strive for peace, and there is no peace without justice.

The understanding of war as a necessary evil in certain circumstances means that we should never glorify it. It may be necessary and it may be the lesser of two evils, but it is still inherently evil, and all who are engaged in it should humbly seek atonement for the act of war which defiles.

May God keep us humble as we strive to be faithful to the glorious vision of peace in the Old Testament.

Some Reading Suggestions

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