



Islam in America | A Special Edition from thESource for Youth Ministry

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Jihad - Holy War - in the Bible | by Rev. Dr. Reed Lessing

Shock and outrage were two of the most prominent reactions to the events of Sept. 11, 2001. Yet those even casually acquainted with the Old Testament are aware that there is some correspondence between the Muslim jihad and the Old Testament idea “holy war.” There are roughly sixty battle accounts from the exodus (1446 BC) to 586 BC (the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem) in which Israel is involved in some kind of war. About one-fourth of these contain clear references to “holy war.” But if genocide and ethnic cleansing is morally wrong in the twenty-first century A.D. was it also wrong in the fifteenth or thirteenth centuries B.C.? Put another way, how are the atrocities of our day that are done in the name of religion different from the slaughter of Canaanite men, women and children prisoners of war that we read about in the Old Testament? (cf. e.g., Joshua 6). And even more pressing, how could this God command such slaughter, especially since in the New Testament Jesus commands believers to love and pray for enemies? (cf. Matt. 5:44).

These questions present a moral dilemma for Christian readers of the Old Testament and evoke another set of queries. How should we apply the Old Testament holy wars to our lives? Should a wedge be placed between the Old and New Testaments in order to preserve the integrity of both? Can there be a connection between these ancient accounts of God’s people Israel and the image of God as Savior so prevalent in the Gospels?

Some make the claim that the Old Testament is a document of Israel’s history and only secondarily an authoritative document for the church. They believe Israel’s Great Commission as one of annihilation as opposed to the New Testament’s mission of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. Proponents of this view believe that the holy war texts of the Old Testament are “pre-Christ, sub-Christ and anti-Christ.”

The critique of this view is that – if not in theory then in practice – this position almost de-canonizes three-fourths of the Bible. It means that the only texts that apply to Christians are found in the New Testament. This understanding also overlooks the fact that if “the LORD is a Man of War” (Exod. 15:3), then so is Jesus who “judges and makes war,” who is “dressed in a robe dipped in blood,” and from whose mouth “comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations” (Rev. 19:11-15). The revelation of Jesus in the New Testament is no less violent than the revelation of the LORD in the Old Testament.

So is there another way to look at these Old Testament texts? Yes there is. At its root holy war is a battle against spiritual darkness and wickedness in realms that transcend the human and earthly (cf. Gen. 3:15; Job 1:6-12; 2:2-6; Eph. 6:10-18; Col. 2:13-15). The paradigmatic Song of the Sea ought to be understood in these terms, for it not only celebrates the LORD’s triumph over Pharaoh and his armies (Exodus 15:1, 4-5) but also has clear overtones of an even more profound and significant victory, one over every competing deity real or imaginary. “Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” (Exodus 15:11). Pharaoh and Egypt become ciphers for Satan and his kingdom, hence “in, with and under” Israel’s enemies are the “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12). Such enemies cannot be pacified – they must be destroyed.



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The issue, then, cannot be whether or not genocide is intrinsically good or evil – its sanction by a holy God settles that question. Rather, the issue has to do with the purpose of genocide, its initiator, and the particular circumstances of its application. Biblical genocide was part of a holy-war policy enacted for a unique situation, directed against a certain people, and in line with the character of God himself, a policy whose design is beyond human comprehension but one that is not, for that reason, unjust or immoral. Those very limitations preclude any possible justification of modern genocide for any reason.

The baptized are involved in “holy war” every day, only our enemy is not “flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12) but Satan “who comes to kill, steal, and destroy” (John 10:10). We are called upon to “put on the full armor of God” (Eph. 6:11) and be prepared for battle (Eph. 6:13-17). When Jesus comes again many promises will be fulfilled. He will separate believers from unbelievers (Matt. 25:31-46). He will say to those who trusted in his salvation, “Come and enter into the joy of the Master” (Matt. 25:21, 23). But on this day the final holy war will take place (Rev. 19:11-21).

To summarize: “Holy war” is what God uniquely commanded in the Old Testament. The New Testament transforms the idea to indicate that the baptized are involved in a spiritual war. However on the Last Day Jesus will defeat his enemies and throw them into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15).

For further study see *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*. C.S. Cowles, Eugene H. Merrill, Daniel L. Gard and Tremper Longman III, edited by Stanley N. Gundry. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.