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**YAHWEH AS WARRIOR: OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES
ON GOD'S INVOLVEMENT IN WAR**

by

Eric A. Seibert

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Biblical Studies

Asbury Theological Seminary

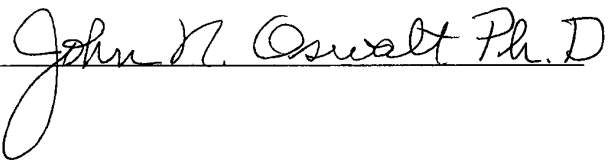
May 1996

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APPROVED

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "John N. Oswalt Ph.D.", is written over a horizontal line.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING THE STUDY

William Tecumseh Sherman, a distinguished general in the Union army during the American civil war, is said to have spoken these words at "a graduation address at Michigan Military Academy" on June 19, 1879: "War is at best barbarism. . . . Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell."¹ The Israelites, seeing the dead bodies of the Egyptian soldiers on the shoreline of the Red Sea said, "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 a warrior; the LORD is His name."²

For centuries Christians have wrestled with how to reconcile the horrors of war with the Old Testament's (OT's) depiction of a God who is literally called "a man of war." How could the Biblical writers praise a God bent on destruction? Likewise, many have struggled to explain how the warrior God of the OT can in any way be related to Jesus, the Prince of Peace revealed in the New Testament (NT). Are these images mutually exclusive? Are they irreconcilable? Or is there a way to navigate these murky waters and arrive at some coherent understanding of this divine warrior who pervades the OT and is by no means absent from the NT? We shall seek to find such a way as this study progresses.

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

It may be helpful at the outset to make some brief comments about the author's

¹John Bartlett, Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, ed. Justin Kaplan, 16th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992), 492.

²Exod. 15:1b,3. Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted. Also, more recent conventions of capitalization have been used when citing Biblical references. Concordance searches have been done using Bible Works for Windows, computer software, version 3.0. (Big Fork, Mont.: Hermeneutika, 1995).

interest in this subject. When reading any piece of writing, whether it be a term paper, a master's thesis, or a published book, it is fair to ask, "Why has the author chosen to write on this particular subject?" The following comments attempt to answer that question for the present study.

Several reasons combine to explain why the theme of Yahweh as Warrior has been selected for this study. First, the topic is important to this writer because of his denominational heritage as a Brethren in Christ (BIC). The BIC, being a historic peace church, have elevated the peace position to a place of prominence as a denominational distinctive. Thus, as a candidate for ordination in the BIC Church, this writer has needed to articulate his position regarding the issues of war and peace. This has left certain questions unanswered, particularly questions about how one reconciles the plethora of martial material in the OT with such a position. While, the divine warrior theme in the OT is but one component of the larger debate, it is hoped that a study which focuses specifically on this theme will begin to yield some answers to the rather complex issue of warfare in the OT. It is suspected that a vast majority of Christians who adopt a "peace position" do so having never adequately wrestled with the OT witness. To avoid this pitfall, the present study attempts to deal honestly with the Biblical text to determine if and to what extent a peace position today may or may not accord with this data.

Second, this topic is of interest because its frequent misinterpretation has contributed to a general deemphasis of the significance of the OT in large portions of the Church today. The inability to make sense of a God who not only sanctions war but who actively engages in it has caused many to depreciate the value of the OT texts.³ Many Christians, whether they consciously admit it or not, view the OT as "primitive" and treat it in a fashion not so unlike the second century heretic Marcion who simply discarded

³Mennonite Waldemar Janzen in "War in the Old Testament," Mennonite Quarterly Review 46 (Apr. 1972): 155, has argued that the OT's "war-filled pages have presented a persistent problem to those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. It has been the theme of war, more than anything else, that has led to a repeated devaluation of the Old Testament throughout our history as a peace church." The same could possibly be said for the BIC, though this would need to be substantiated.

those portions which he deemed unsuitable. Notions of a warrior God are believed to be passé in a day and age which trumpets global peace and toleration. In light of this trend, it is imperative to reexamine the Biblical data to determine what is and what is not being affirmed about God as warrior.

Third, and closely related to the foregoing point, a study of Yahweh as warrior is of interest to this writer because its misunderstanding has proved to be an obstacle of faith for many. The apparent inconsistencies between the warrior God in the OT and Jesus in the NT provide ammunition for the scoffer and a cause of stumbling for the skeptic. Since one's image of God will to a large degree determine how that person relates to God, it is necessary to be certain we rightly understand what is meant when God is said to be a "man of war." If that translates into believing God to be an unmerciful and bloodthirsty tyrant, few are likely to love and praise Him. Those who would dare to worship such a God would do so from an unhealthy fear, not a vibrant faith.

In short, the issues which fueled this study include both the writer's denominational heritage and personal struggle with the issue as well as a concern that this image be rightly interpreted in order to avoid a devaluation of the OT or worse, a rejection of the God revealed within its pages. With this in mind, the study of Yahweh as warrior has been undertaken with the conviction that this topic is not only one of great personal interest but also one of great importance for the Church's theological study and reflection.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In general terms, this study examines the OT concept of Yahweh as warrior as a window through which to understand the larger phenomenon of war in the OT. This allows us to suggest several ways in which we might reconcile both the presence of warlike material in the OT and God's participation in war with the larger Biblical witness of love and peace. More specifically, this study will examine the Biblical data related to Yahweh as warrior and will enter into the scholarly debate. Here we will attempt to understand how the Israelites conceived of God as warrior theologically and what that might suggest for us today. It will be argued that the ubiquitous divine warrior motif in

the OT, though largely neglected in Christian praxis, is an exceedingly fertile theological image which must be reclaimed in the Church's preaching and teaching.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

It is stating the obvious to say that the Hebrews' experience of war was multivalent and complex. Hence, it comes as no surprise that a vast amount of literature has been generated in the attempt to elucidate this perplexing and pervasive OT motif. This review of related literature examines only the portion of that material which pertains specifically to one particular facet of warfare in the OT, namely, the theme of God as warrior. While the following discussion will inevitably touch on other dimensions of the Hebrews' experience of war such as "holy war," the mechanics of warfare, and the ethics of war, the primary focus remains on those materials most directly related to the divine warrior motif in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In spite of all that has been written on the topic of warfare in the OT, it has, for the most part, only gained scholarly attention in the twentieth century. The starting point for all subsequent discussion initially centered around the theme of "holy war."⁴ This was first dealt with in a "systematic" way at the turn of the century by Friedrich Schwally.⁵ Still, it was not until Gerhard von Rad's seminal monograph⁶ that the theme of holy war was thrust into the foreground. No discussion of warfare in the OT can ignore this work,

⁴"Holy War" is not a Biblical phrase. It would probably be more accurate to speak of "Yahweh war" (Num. 21:14; cf. I Sam. 17:47; 18:17; 25:28). For a discussion of the terminology see Gwilym H. Jones, "Holy War or Yahweh War?" *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (Jl 1975): 657-58; Craigie, *Problem of War*, 48-50; J.P.U. Lilley, "Understanding the Herem," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (May 1993): 171-2. Jones argues for "Yahweh War" when speaking of Israel's actual experiences of battle and reserves "Holy War" for the later theological schematization which was superimposed upon the historical accounts of warfare in the OT. Craigie favors expressions such as "Yahweh war" or "the wars of the Lord" as more accurate. Lilley finds "holy war" terminology only marginally useful and elects to discuss "the biblical uses of herem" without reference to it (173).

⁵Ben C. Ollenburger, "Gerhard von Rad's Theory of Holy War," in Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, trans. Marva J. Dawn, 1-33, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 4. Friedrich Schwally, *Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel*, Vol. 1 *Semitische Kriegeralttümer* (Leipzig: Deiterich, 1901).

⁶*Holy War in Ancient Israel*.

regardless of how much one does or does not agree with its conclusions. In fact, in his introduction to the English translation of von Rad's work Ben Ollenburger says that "it is difficult to understand contemporary discussions of warfare in ancient Israel, its theology and practice, apart from von Rad. Those contemporary discussions have been in some measure a series of footnotes to his work."⁷ Von Rad believed Yahweh fought on behalf of Israel, his chosen people, because of the covenant he had made with them. Von Rad, Schwally and other early writers most often focused on the cultic aspects of holy war, supporting their theories by certain types of reconstructions, either of Israel's history or of her traditions.

Henning Fredriksson's Jahwe als Krieger, which preceded von Rad's work deals specifically with "the *image* of God" as warrior rather than the institution of holy war.⁸ As such, his study is more directly related to the discussion at hand. Fredriksson was interested in observing such details as the people and forces Yahweh commanded, Yahweh's adversaries, and the weapons He used.⁹ Fredriksson's work has been criticized as being little more than a cataloging of OT data with little appreciation for the mythological background thought to have give rise to the divine warrior imagery in ancient Israel.¹⁰

An examination of this mythological background is the specific concern of Frank Moore Cross, most notably in his Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic.¹¹ One of Cross' students, Patrick D. Miller built upon and greatly expanded Cross' work in his published

⁷Ollenburger, "Gerhard von Rad's Theory of Holy War," 2.

⁸So Ollenburger, "Gerhard von Rad's Theory of Holy War," 11, emphasis original. Henning Fredriksson, Jahwe als Krieger: Studien zum alttestamentlichen Gottesbild (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1945).

⁹Tbid.

¹⁰So Patrick D. Miller Jr., The Divine Warrior in Early Israel (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 3.

¹¹Frank M. Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973). See esp. Chapter 5, "The Divine Warrior," 91-111, in which Cross argues that "Psalm 24:7-10 can be fitted into the Canaanite [myth-and-ritual] pattern, provided we assume that it was modified somewhat in the Israelite context" (93).

doctoral dissertation The Divine Warrior in Early Israel which focuses specifically on the material from Syria-Palestine. Miller explores the use of divine warrior imagery as it is used in certain mythological contexts and argues that Israel's origins for her use of the image are rooted there. Miller's work exhibits a special concern to demonstrate how Israel used the "mythological tools" at its disposal (e.g. the image of a deity being victorious over chaos monsters¹² and the image of a deity leading heavenly armies in battle) to speak theologically about Yahweh in the context of their experience of war. Thus, while there is great continuity between the work of Cross and Miller, both signal something of a departure from the interests of Schwally, von Rad, and Fredriksson.

Miller recognizes that his monograph deals only tangentially with the theological issues related to the theme of Yahweh as warrior. Thus, he directs the reader to a previous article he has written¹³ and to the work of G.E. Wright.¹⁴ Miller's article explores how the church can utilize the language of God as warrior. According to Miller, such language speaks of God's ability to save and deliver. Thus, "when God is at work for his people the proper stance for them is one of faith and trust without fear."¹⁵ While moving in the right direction, such a conclusion is only partially helpful since it leaves unanswered many of the most troubling moral and ethical questions raised by the presence of a divine warrior in the OT.

Wright takes a slightly different approach. He examines God's work as "Suzerain," the keeper of the covenant in the context of a sinful world. As such, God can be understood as a warrior who uses warfare for the purposes of both judgment and

¹²The same has been argued most recently by Tremper Longman in a book co-authored by Daniel G. Reid entitled God is a Warrior (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). Great emphasis is placed upon God's role as warrior in combating the forces of chaos, most commonly depicted as the sea (yām).

¹³Patrick D. Miller, "God the Warrior: A Problem in Biblical Interpretation and Apologetics," Interpretation 19 (Jan. 1965): 39-46.

¹⁴G.E. Wright, The Old Testament and Theology (New York: Harper & Row, 1969). See esp. ch. 5, "God the Warrior," 121-150.

¹⁵Miller, "God the Warrior," 45.

redemption. He believes the divine warrior language is able to give us confidence that Yahweh will ultimately prevail and that evil will be defeated. This seems closer to the mark.

Miller's article and the discussion in Wright's book reflect attempts to come to grips with some of the theological value of the language of God as Warrior. The first monograph to really deal with this same theme was written by Peter Craigie.¹⁶ Craigie's work is an especially helpful introduction to the theological problems inherent in the OT's war texts.¹⁷ In this more popular approach, Craigie argues that since God works in and through history to reveal himself, and since warfare was an inevitable part of Israel's history, therefore God must be related in some way to the practice of warfare. Craigie attempts to solve the problem of a warrior God by separating God's being from His doing, a move which we shall later argue is unjustifiable.¹⁸

A more scholarly approach devoted singularly to the theme of Yahweh as warrior is found in the work of Millard Lind,¹⁹ a Mennonite scholar. Lind argues that Israel didn't fight in her early wars. Instead, Yahweh delivered his people by miraculous means. While Lind thus "frees" the people from responsibility he apparently implicates God all the more and therefore doesn't resolve the ethical dilemma of God as warrior. Neither does Susan Niditch's more recent ethical study.²⁰ While helpful at many points, her work does not deal directly with the theme of God as warrior but is primarily interested in exploring different ideologies of war Israel maintained throughout her national existence.

¹⁶Peter C. Craigie, The Problem of War in the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978); cf. "Yahweh is a Man of Wars," Scottish Journal of Theology 22, no. 2 (1969): 183-188.

¹⁷While this author is not in full agreement with its conclusions, Chapter 3, "God the Warrior" is perhaps the most helpful in Craigie's work and has great importance for the present discussion.

¹⁸See Chapter 8 of this present study.

¹⁹Millard C. Lind, Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1980).

²⁰Susan Niditch, War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

A somewhat different approach to the theme of God as warrior is taken by Tremper Longman.²¹ He attempts to trace the theme of God as warrior in both the OT *and* the NT. While Longman's discussion of God as warrior in the OT is not especially novel, his attempt to relate OT and NT in this regard is and signals an advance. This approach finds even fuller expression in a book co-authored with Reid.²²

As is evident, the majority of studies discussed thus far have said little about the theological value of this imagery for the Church. Others seem content simply to describe the practice of warfare in the OT.²³ There are some authors, however, who have dealt more directly with the ethical implications. Among those who are concerned with these ethical implications, there are some who wish to retain the Biblical language, attempting to make sense of it, while there are others who reject it, saying we need to find new ways to speak about God.

Of the former, one very helpful work which attempts to wrestle theologically with the concept of God as warrior comes from Marvin E. Tate.²⁴ The title of his article, "War and Peace in the Old Testament," is somewhat misleading since his focus is actually much more narrow. He devotes most of the article to a discussion of various ways one can justify the use of the language of God as warrior. Richard Nysse²⁵ also contends that this language should be maintained. He understands Yahweh as a warrior who benefits those who are weak and fights against those who are powerful, especially against those who presume upon Yahweh and expect his help while oppressing others.

²¹Tremper Longman III, "The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif," Westminster Theological Journal 44, no. 2 (fall 1982): 290-307.

²²Longman and Reid, God is a Warrior.

²³See for example, Albert Curry Winn, Ain't Gonna Study War No More: Biblical Ambiguity and the Abolition of War (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); and T.R. Hobbs, A Time For War: A Study of Warfare in the Old Testament, Old Testament Studies Vol. 3, (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1989).

²⁴Marvin E. Tate, "War and Peacemaking in the Old Testament," Review and Expositor 79 (fall 1982): 587-596.

²⁵Richard Nysse, "Yahweh is a Warrior," Word & World 7, no. 2 (spring 1987): 192-201.

Others, such as Anthony Gelston²⁶ have attempted to understand and retain the language of Yahweh as warrior from the standpoint of God's sovereignty. Gelston forcefully denies the idea that the Israelites merely projected their nationalistic aspirations upon Yahweh and argues that Yahweh's warring is undertaken to mete out divine justice.²⁷ Janzen understand this motif in much the same way. He argues that speaking about God as warrior employs metaphorical language which is used to emphasize God's sovereignty and "not to glorify warfare."²⁸

A less helpful approach is that taken by Paul Hanson²⁹ since it is based on a historical reconstruction. Hanson deals primarily with Israel's early traditions of war (which he argues are basically defensive) and never really deals substantially with the Conquest narratives. Yet, this is where the brunt of the problem lies. Instead, he summarily dismisses these texts as creations of the monarchy used to legitimate its greedy appetite to acquire more land.³⁰

Of those who reject the Biblical language, two examples may be mentioned. Dianne Bergant,³¹ a Catholic scholar, while not wanting to completely deny the historicity of the Biblical accounts, feels they cannot be taken at face value. Rather, she believes one must understand what it was ancient Israel was trying to express about God via the divine warrior imagery and then find more appropriate ways to communicate those same theological truths in today's world where such imagery is no longer appropriate. An even

²⁶Anthony Gelston, "Wars of Israel," Scottish Journal of Theology 17 (Sept. 1964): 325-331.

²⁷Ibid, 325-6.

²⁸Janzen, "War in the OT," 161.

²⁹Paul D. Hanson, "War, Peace, and Justice in Early Israel," Bible Review 3 (1987): 32-45.

³⁰Cf. Paul D. Hanson, "War and Peace in the Hebrew Bible," Interpretation 38 (Oct. 1984): 341-362, where he does discuss wars in the monarchical period.

³¹The three publications of Dianne Bergant on this subject of which this writer is aware all contain basically the same argument and follow a similar layout. From earliest to most recent these publications are: "Yahweh: A Warrior-God?" The Bible Today 21 (1983): 156-161; "Violence and God: A Bible Study," Missiology 20, no. 1 (Jan. 1992): 45-54; "Yahweh: A Warrior God?" in The Church's Peace Witness, ed. Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 89-103.

more radical approach comes from the pen of George Khodr³² who, in seemingly Marcionite fashion, completely rejects the picture of God as warrior as revelatory and resorts to "what could be called a kenotic reading of the Scriptures" to avoid this depiction of God.³³ He completely rejects the OT witness and finds no similarities between the divine warrior of the OT and the Jesus of the NT.

This review has demonstrated that while some scholars have been content to make historical, sociological, and linguistic observations relating to the OT theme of God as warrior, others have at least made preliminary attempts to come to grips with this theme theologically. Though a few think the image unsalvageable, most who explore its theological value find it more or less usable.

Yet, as we have seen, there is considerable difference of opinion among those who are strongly committed to maintaining the language of God as warrior regarding what this language meant to the Hebrew people and how it is to be understood today. While some think it speaks of God's triumph over chaos, others suggest it was merely a necessary mode of revelation in light of the contingencies of time and space in a fallen world. Still others argue that this language speaks of divine judgment and of God's sovereignty. How are we to make sense of these differing proposals? This study seeks to make a contribution to this discussion. By reviewing the Biblical data and then seeking to provide the reader with the means to evaluate some of the "differing proposals" put forth, it is hoped that satisfactory solutions will begin to emerge.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study assumes the OT to be of revelatory value and denies the suggestion that the OT simply represents the religious reflections of the nation of Israel. Instead, the OT

³²George Khodr, "Violence and the Gospel," *Cross Currents* 37, no. 4 (1987):404-414, 475. For an equally radical view see Carol P. Christ, "Feminist Liberation Theology and Yahweh as Holy Warrior: An Analysis of Symbol," in *Women's Spirit Bonding*, ed. Janet Kalven and Mary I. Buckley, (New York: Pilgrim, 1984), 202-212.

³³Khodr, 409-10.

records and (in a certain sense) is the very revelation of God. Moreover, while admitting the possibility of certain schematizations which have been imposed upon the text, this approach nevertheless assumes the basic historicity of the war texts as they are recorded in the OT.³⁴ Additionally, this study approaches the topic from a decidedly Christian perspective, a perspective which maintains there to be great congruence between the OT and the NT.

The following discussion recognizes that Israel's use of the divine warrior motif was not unique to the Israelites. That such a theme was present, even common, in surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures hardly needs to be mentioned. Nevertheless, issue is taken with those who have so emphasized the similarities so as to suggest there was no distinction between the way Israel and her neighbors used the theme. In spite of a certain amount of borrowing, there are several ways in which Israel's use of the divine warrior motif was quite unique.³⁵

METHODOLOGY

This study will approach the material related to the divine warrior theme in the OT both inductively and deductively. Inductively, this study will examine a representative number of explicit and implicit references to the divine warrior motif in the OT. This will involve, among other things, discussing certain titles and images which describe Yahweh as warrior as well as describing Yahweh's arsenal, his opponents, and his impetus for the fight. This will constitute a "fresh" look at the data and reflects a synoptic approach to the

³⁴It should be noted that the problem of the divine warrior imagery in the OT is not solved by denying this or that event ever actually happened in Israel's history. Even if that is granted, one must still deal with the written record that has been preserved and handed down to us. As Craigie writes concerning the Conquest narratives, "Even if it is argued that the Biblical 'historical' narratives have a legendary character to them, and that the wars of conquest described therein did not actually take place, still the problem remains. For although the historical reality of the wars of conquest may perhaps be removed in this manner, the theological ideal remains" (Problem of War, 50).

³⁵For example, boasting in a divine warrior who repeatedly delivers a people who is outnumbered and ill equipped militarily is not a theme found in the ancient Near Eastern literature.

material.³⁶

Secondly, this thesis will specifically deal with the various ways in which scholars have attempted to understand the language of God as Warrior both in its original context as well as in contemporary debate. This will involve a rigorous critique of the extensive secondary literature on the topic. Only once this is completed will we be in a position to make suggestions regarding how the Church might utilize this language in preaching and teaching today. Thus, the approach taken here is theological in orientation in contrast to certain other approaches which view the subject of war in the OT primarily from a "historical" perspective (i.e. one which concerns itself with the materials, means, and men of warfare).³⁷

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In spite of the theological thrust of this study, it should not be mistaken for a full blown theology of war in the OT.³⁸ The focus here is much narrower, looking specifically at the theme of Yahweh as warrior in the OT. Moreover, by limiting this study to only one image of God in the OT, namely, God as warrior, a whole host of other images which

³⁶I am indebted to Janzen, "War in the OT," for this term. See p. 157, esp. n. 8, for Janzen's use of the term and for his distinction of this approach to OT theology from that of Eichrodt and von Rad.

³⁷In order to avoid unnecessary confusion, the reader should be aware of the way in which certain terms and phrases are used throughout this study. "Yahweh" and "God" are used synonymously, especially in phrases like "Yahweh as warrior" and "God as warrior." Likewise, no distinction is intended by the alternation of phrases such as "a warrior God" and "the divine warrior." They are solely for variety in writing. The same applies when referring to the "Old Testament" and the "Hebrew Scriptures." While the trend in much modern scholarship shows a preference for the latter, the former may actually be more precise for this thesis since it reflects a decidedly Christian approach to the Scriptures. See Brevard S. Childs, Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 7-8, for a helpful discussion. Additionally, the conventional use of "holy war" instead of "Yahweh war" will be used consistently, though scholarship has recognized the latter as more precise. See n. 4 above. Finally, "Canaan" denotes the land God promised the people of Israel and "Canaanites" refers to those original inhabitants of the land.

³⁸While some have argued that a theology of war in the OT cannot be ascertained, such a conclusion is unwarranted. For an excellent discussion of the theological nature of war in the OT see Janzen, "War in the OT," esp. 155-57.

the OT uses to describe God are not considered.³⁹ While this study deals considerably with the Biblical text, it does not pretend to be a detailed exegetical study. As profitable as that might be, it is far beyond the scope of this present work. Neither does this thesis attempt to deal systematically with the way in which the OT image of the divine warrior is continued and modified in the NT. Finally, this present work does not have as its goal a detailed comparison of the divine warrior motif with that of other ancient Near Eastern cultures. This has already been done elsewhere and it is unnecessary to reduplicate such work here.⁴⁰

ORGANIZATION

The organization of the material will largely be dictated by the method employed. The first major section of the thesis will begin with a discussion of the Biblical data pertaining to the divine warrior motif in the OT. This discussion will be divided into four sections which generally follow the Protestant division of the OT,⁴¹ namely, the Pentateuch, the Historical Books, the Psalms,⁴² and the Prophets. One chapter will be

³⁹The images of king and judge, though mentioned briefly in this study, could be greatly expanded to further clarify God's role as warrior.

⁴⁰See for example, Miller, Divine Warrior; and more recently Sa-Moon Kang, Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East, (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1989).

⁴¹This means of organizing the material has primarily been chosen for convenience sake, as a way of discussing the OT data in manageable segments. These divisions are *not* intended to suggest that the OT presents four radically different descriptions of the divine warrior, one for each of the sections. On the contrary, as will become evident, there is a great deal of overlap and congruence between these sections. Nevertheless, an attempt has been made to highlight what is the primary contribution of each of these sections to the OT's understanding of the divine warrior. For example, when discussing the Historical Books the questions of who, how and why God fights, come to the fore, while the Prophets seem more interested in the imagery connected with the divine warrior. Thus, these are the features of God as warrior which we will emphasize in each of these sections respectively. This is not to say that there is no imagery in the Historical Books. Nor is it to suggest that there is no concern for the questions of who, how, and why God fights in the Prophets. It simply suggests that certain aspects of the divine warrior motif are more prominent in certain sections in the OT. Thus, approaching the OT material related to the divine warrior through these divisions does not warp the Biblical data but provides us with a helpful orientation to this pervasive OT motif which is guided by the text itself.

⁴²Due to the paucity of material related to the divine warrior motif in the Wisdom Literature it is not treated separately but is briefly considered at the beginning of the chapter dealing with the Psalms.

devoted to each of these sections. At this stage references to secondary literature will be kept at a minimum.

The second major section of the thesis consists of five chapters. The first of these attempts to define the problem more clearly. Then, Chapters 7-9 explore the range of possible interpretations which have been given to this material. Chapter 7 deals with those interpretations which, to a greater or a lesser degree, reject the image of the divine warrior. Then, Chapter 8 explores some positive approaches, which attempt to keep the language, but which are ultimately found to be inadequate. Only in Chapter 9 do we begin to entertain some possibilities which might unlock the meaning of the divine warrior imagery. The final chapter of this thesis provides some hermeneutical guidelines for dealing with this issue and offers some modest suggestions as to the meaning of this troubling image. This chapter also discusses how this imagery might be used in Christian worship. It concludes by noting some areas for further study.

JUSTIFICATION

Before embarking on our study one final question demands our attention, namely, "Why is such a study necessary?" First, a study like this is necessary due to the great emphasis this theme enjoys in the OT. "Even the most casual reader cannot miss the central place of the warrior imagery in the Old Testament depiction of God."⁴³ It has been rightly observed that "the theme Yahweh-is-a-Warrior is present in all sections of the canon-Torah, Prophets, and Writings."⁴⁴ In fact, one scholar has even suggested that "the extensiveness of the theme raises the possibility of writing an OT theology with the Divine Warrior motif as primary focus."⁴⁵ Whether or not that is so, the massive amount of space given to this theme in the OT warrants its close examination. As Miller observes, "The

⁴³Miller, "God the Warrior," 40.

⁴⁴Nysse, 192.

⁴⁵Longman, Divine Warrior, 306.

view of Yahweh as warrior can hardly be a peripheral matter in the effort to work out a Biblical theology. Rather, it lies at the theological center."⁴⁶

Second, the diversity of opinion regarding the meaning of the divine warrior motif in the OT calls for a reexamination of the data. Not only is there no consensus regarding how the language of Yahweh as warrior should be understood, people often find themselves at opposite ends of the spectrum. As one NT scholar observed, "when the Bible is used to justify positions which are polar opposites one suspects that something has gone awry."⁴⁷ A study such as this is necessary to clearly evaluate the different sides of the discussion so that a more adequate and accurate interpretation of the divine warrior can emerge.

Third, while the latter part of the twentieth century has signaled a great advance in the study of the divine warrior motif in the OT, there is still a great need for careful articulation of the ethical and moral implications of this theme. While many studies content themselves with elucidating ancient Near Eastern parallels or proposing historical reconstructions as a means of dealing with the theme of Yahweh as warrior, rarely has sufficient attention been given to helpful ways for the Church to appropriate this language in its worship and theology. It is exasperating to read the works of numerous writers who raise the ethical issues related to the divine warrior theme, discuss inappropriate ways to address these, and then leave the reader hanging, offering no constructive suggestions about how to accurately interpret the data, let alone appropriate it! As Raymond Hobbs has astutely observed, "In spite of the prominent place warfare has in the pages of the Old Testament, there are relatively few good treatments of the topic. . . . Interpretations of the phenomenon which are designed as an aid to the sensitive Christian reader are few and far between."⁴⁸ In like manner, Janzen notes that "theological treatments of the Old

⁴⁶Miller, Divine Warrior, 7.

⁴⁷Ben Witherington III, Women in the Earliest Churches, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, dealing with an unrelated controversial issue.

⁴⁸Raymond Hobbs, "War in the Old Testament," McMaster Journal of Theology 2, no. 1 (1991): 7.

Testament's preoccupation with war in a more general sense are surprisingly rare."⁴⁹

This thesis represents an attempt to make a positive contribution to this obvious lack by exploring one aspect of warfare in the OT, namely, the theme of Yahweh as warrior. It is written with the express intention of offering help to the thoughtful pastor or Christian layperson who is concerned about the ethical and moral issues raised by the presence of a warrior God in the OT. It is hoped that after more carefully examining this image of God in the OT we, like our Israelite counterparts, will find ourselves singing songs of praise to Yahweh, the only "man of war" worthy of our worship and total devotion.

⁴⁹Janzen, "War in the OT," 155.

PART 1

OBSERVING THE IMAGE

CHAPTER 2

PENTATEUCH: THE WARRIOR DISCLOSED

The sheer mass of data related to the divine warrior theme in the OT makes the attempt to organize and systematize the material daunting. There appears to be little agreement among those who have undertaken the task as to precisely how this material should be arranged. This matter is further complicated by the various methodological approaches applied to the OT, approaches which necessarily shape the way in which the OT materials are collated and interpreted. All this amounts to a considerable range of diversity regarding which texts are evaluated and how they are grouped. Thus, while some have intentionally chosen to limit their study to a few select passages, others have looked more widely at the entire OT corpus to see what is said about God as warrior.

This study will follow the latter, more wholistic, approach. The benefit of such a broad and general approach lies in its ability to gain an overall picture of the OT material rather than just one particular piece of it. Moreover, such an examination of the OT materials also provides safeguards against being overly selective in the choice of which texts are examined. Obviously, the weakness of such a full-orbed approach is its inability to delve very deeply into specific texts. Such an effort, as desirable as that would be, regrettably lies outside the scope of this presentation. This should not, however, seriously weaken the adequacy of this study since there is far less difference of opinion about what the text *says* than there is about what the text *means*.

As we have noted in the previous chapter, the purpose of the first section of this thesis is to observe the prominent features of the divine warrior theme in OT. While some interpretive comments will be made along the way, the primary focus here is upon what the OT *says* about God as warrior. The purpose of this Biblical survey is not to cite every Scripture reference that in some way alludes to the theme of God as warrior. Nor is the purpose to give a detailed analysis of those passages and verses which most clearly contain the theme. Instead, the goal here is a comprehensive (though not exhaustive) examination of the various titles and images associated with the divine warrior motif in the OT. The

broader patterns which emerge will provide us with a more usable understanding of the OT's martial material, especially as it relates to the theme of Yahweh as warrior, and will enable us to proceed with a discussion of how such materials might be accurately interpreted and properly appropriated in our day.

TITLES

Before looking at the divine warrior motif in the Pentateuch, it will be helpful to note three "titles" referring to God as warrior which occur throughout the OT. These three, from lesser to greater frequency are: a man of war, a mighty man, and the Lord of hosts. Each of these shall now be examined in turn.

Man of War (Warrior)

In light of all that has been written on the theme of Yahweh as warrior in the past century, it comes as something of a surprise to discover only two references in the entire OT which directly refer to Yahweh as ʾîšh milhamâ, a warrior (lit. a man of war). These references are

Exod. 15:3 The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is His name.

Isa. 42:13 The LORD will go forth like a warrior, He will arouse His zeal like a man of war. He will utter a shout, yes, He will raise a war cry. He will prevail against His enemies.

These references represent both earlier and later periods in Israel's history. Exod. 15:3 is attributed to Moses and the people of Israel who sang in response to the miraculous deliverance God wrought for them from the Egyptians. Isa. 42:13 occurs after one of the "servant songs" and is located in a passage which speaks positively of God's deliverance of the people of Israel. This passage anticipates God's victory over "His enemies," which, as is often the case, just so happen to be Israel's enemies as well. In both Exodus and Isaiah God is portrayed as a warrior engaged in a fight against real flesh and blood enemies, suggesting God's action on the plane of history as He destroys those who oppose His will and purpose.

A Mighty Man

Another title for God as warrior is gibbôr, a mighty man. Yet, like 'îšh milhamâ, this too is an extremely infrequent description of Yahweh, appearing only five times in the OT in connection with God.

Job 16:14 He breaks through me with breach after breach; He runs at me like a warrior.

Ps. 78:65 Then the Lord awoke as if from sleep, like a warrior overcome by wine.

Isa. 42:13 The LORD will go forth like a warrior, He will arouse His zeal like a man of war. He will utter a shout, yes, He will raise a war cry. He will prevail against His enemies.

Jer. 14:9 Why art Thou like a man dismayed, like a mighty man who cannot save? Yet Thou art in our midst, O LORD, and we are called by Thy name; do not forsake us!

Zeph. 3:17 The LORD your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.

Though all five of these poetic references employ similes or metaphors in connection with the divine warrior motif, the words of Job are least concerned with God's involvement in Israel's military engagements. Instead, Job likens God to a warrior to describe and express the way he felt God was treating him personally. More directly related to our concerns in this study is Ps. 78:65 which depicts God as warrior fighting against the same adversaries He had initially used to punish the sinful people of Israel. Now God is back on the side of Judah, fighting for His people, driving back "His adversaries."¹ In Jeremiah, God is likened to "a mighty man who cannot save," because of His apparent inactivity in the face of Judah's plight. Finally, Zeph. 3:17 is contained within a salvation oracle which describes the people of Jerusalem rejoicing since Yahweh has returned victorious from battle over Israel's enemies and is now in her midst. Thus, it can be concluded from this brief study that Israel most frequently used both 'îšh milhamâ and gibbôr to depict God's fighting against *their* human enemies.

¹For the reference in Isaiah, see above.

Lord of Hosts

Much more frequent than the previous two titles, is this third title, Yahweh ṣabā'ôṭī, the Lord of hosts. In fact, it occurs so frequently that Miller argues it is "the principal epithet for God in the Old Testament."² This claim is probably justified since the phrase occurs nearly 250 times in the OT.³ It occurs primarily in the prophetic literature, though never in the Pentateuch. Its first appearance in the OT is found in 1 Sam. 1:3.

This expression has posed difficulties for both translators and interpreters alike. The majority of versions translate it literally as "the Lord of Hosts" (NAS, RSV, NRSV) while the NIV translates it "the Lord Almighty." The root of ṣabā'ôṭī is ṣabā' which, in its nominal form, has the basic idea of "army, war, warfare."⁴ It also has the idea of "host," whether of human soldiers, celestial beings, or the elements of nature.⁵ Since there is evidence that Israel conceived of God as leading a celestial army in battle against Israel's historical enemies, this more literal translation seems most accurate.⁶

Rev. Igor Kišš, a minister of the Slovak Lutheran Church, argues that a better translation would be "the sovereign Lord of all." Kišš follows those OT theologians who believe the royal imagery of God to take precedence over the military imagery. According to Kišš, "God is . . . not primarily the God of war, but monarch, ruler, king and Lord."⁷ He favors the translation "the sovereign Lord of all" since he sees it as "a more 'royal' concept stressing the kingship of Yahweh."⁸ He also argues against the more literal

²Miller, "God the Warrior," 38. Cf. Waldow, 36.

³The exact number of occurrences per BibleWorks is 248.

⁴Francis Brown, and S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon, (1907; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 838.

⁵*Ibid.*, 838-839.

⁶See Miller's discussion in Divine Warrior, 145-155.

⁷Igor Kišš, "'The Lord of Hosts' or 'The Sovereign Lord of All?'" Bible Translator 26, no. 1 (1975): 102.

⁸*Ibid.*, 103. Kišš basis his argument primarily on the suggestion of Otto Eissfeldt "that 'sebaoth' could

translation "the Lord of hosts" on the basis of its virtual incomprehensibility "to the non-Hebrew reader" and because he feels it lacks theological clarity at points.⁹ He contends "that the translation 'the sovereign Lord of all' is more accurate, stronger, and more theologically meaningful than the literal translation 'the Lord of hosts.'"¹⁰

Yet, there is a certain redundancy in the expression, "the sovereign Lord of all." If he is sovereign than he is by definition also Lord. Kišš would stand on firmer ground if he proposed "the Lord of all" or "the sovereign of all." A more significant weakness with this translation is its inability to bring out the sense of God as commander and chief of armies. Thus, while Kišš' concern to make this expression intelligible to a wide audience is laudable, his suggestion unfortunately obscures the basic meaning of the phrase and is to be rejected.

Implicit in the difficulty of translation is the difficulty of interpretation. What is meant by Yahweh sabā'ôf? Regardless of which image one argues is primary in the OT, the warrior or the monarch, the majority of the references to "the Lord of hosts" are, more or less, meant to refer to the divine warrior. "Eichrodt maintains that the name 'sebaoth' indicates first and foremost 'God of War.'"¹¹ The same is argued by Miller who rightly assesses that "'Yahweh of Hosts' . . . can hardly mean anything other than 'Yahweh of the armies,' whether heavenly, earthly, or both."¹² Janzen also thinks this designation "almost certainly refers to God as the one at the head of the heavenly and earthly armies."¹³ Thus, we conclude that this phrase most commonly refers to God's leadership in battle against

be understood as an abstract plural in the sense of . . . 'mightiness' . . . or 'mighty'" (102).

⁹Ibid., 104-105.

¹⁰Ibid., 105.

¹¹Ibid., 101, quoting Walther Eichrodt, Theologie des Alten Testaments I, 120.

¹²Miller, "God the Warrior," 39. See also "Divine Council and the Prophetic Call to War," Vetus Testamentum 18 (Jan. 1968): 102-103 where he demonstrates how Isaiah uses "the ancient designation "Yahweh of hosts" to announce "that Yahweh has mustered a great army to wipe out the whole earth."

¹³Janzen, "War in the OT," 161.

His enemies. We now turn to look more carefully at the images of the divine warrior disclosed in the Pentateuch.

PENTATEUCH

Of the aforementioned titles, *'îšh milhamâ* is the only one which occurs in the Pentateuch and that only once (Exod. 15:3)! Nevertheless, the Pentateuch provides great opportunity to see God as warrior through Israel's experience of armed conflict. As we would expect, it is in this material which stands at the head of the OT that the image of the divine warrior is disclosed for the first time. The references to this image are most common in the first half of Exodus, the middle and latter parts of Numbers, and throughout Deuteronomy. The following comments are intended to highlight some of the defining characteristics of the divine warrior and His warring activity in the Pentateuch. Specifically, we will look at the way God fights and begin to explore what this manner of fighting might imply.

God and Israel Fight Side by Side

At various places in the Pentateuch, especially in Deuteronomy, God is said to deliver (lit. "give") Israel's enemies into her hands. The first account of warfare recorded in the OT, the War of the Kings, while not mentioning God's direct involvement does illustrate His action on behalf on Abraham. After the battle, Abraham is informed that his nephew Lot has been taken captive. In response, he leads the "trained men" of his house on a daring venture in which he defeats Lot's captors and brings back Lot and others (Gen. 14:13-16). Upon his return we learn of God's activity through the words of Melchizedek, that mysterious, royal, high priestly figure, who says, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, *who has delivered your enemies into your hand*" (Gen. 14:19-20, emphasis mine). Abraham's victory clearly results from God's deliverance, not from his own military prowess or his elite fighting force of 318 men.

While the Book of Genesis gives us little information about the divine warrior, the

Book of Exodus compensates for that lack. Here we discover that after the people of Israel are delivered from the land of Egypt, (a theme to be explored in some detail below), they are attacked by the Amalekites (Exod. 17:8-16). In this instance, the narrative does not explicitly state that God delivered the Amalekites into their hands. Nevertheless, the narrator certainly implies that the victory ultimately comes from God. It is only as Moses holds up the staff of God in his hands that the Israelites are victorious. Otherwise, the battle turned sour for the people of God. "So it came about when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed" (Exod. 17:11). Even though Israel was engaged in a real flesh and blood battle, their victory was from the Lord. God and Israel fought side by side.

This synergistic theme of warfare reemerges as Israel approaches the promised land. When the Canaanite king of Arad hears Israel is coming his way, he fights against them and takes some captive. This prompts the Israelites to make a deal with God in which they promise to destroy the Canaanite cities if God will deliver them into Israel's hands. God accepts the offer and the Israelites keep their part of the deal by destroying "them and their cities" (Num. 21:1-3).¹⁴ Likewise when Israel is east of the Jordan and the king of Bashan arrays his forces against them, God assures Moses that He has "given him [the king of Bashan] into your hand, and all his people and his land" (Num. 21:34). This language of handing Israel's enemies into her hands is likewise used to describe the defeat of the Amorite kings east of the Jordan, namely, Og and Sihon (Deut. 2:32-33; 3:2-3).¹⁵ Moreover, before being allowed to establish a permanent settlement east of the Jordan, Moses instructs the Gadites and the Reubenites to arm themselves for war and "cross over the Jordan before the LORD until He has driven His enemies out from before Him" (Num

¹⁴The aggressor in this case was the king of Arad. It is interesting that a story like this is immediately followed by one in which Israel sins and is punished by God with fiery snakes. God is not partial. Those who are wicked will be punished and eradicated.

¹⁵In the battles against these two kings and in the examples given above, Israel always fought on the defensive or, as in the case of Abraham's exploit to free Lot, and of Israel's war with the Midianites (Num. 31:1ff.), in response to a previous wrong done. This is true of the Pentateuch in general.

32:21).

This brings us to the "sermons" delivered to the people of Israel just prior to their crossing the Jordan. In this material we see most clearly that language which describes God's fighting on behalf of the Israelites. A repeated emphasis in the Book of Deuteronomy is that God will deliver the Canaanites into Israel's hands so that they might destroy and dispossess them (Deut. 7:2,16,23,24; 12:29; 19:1; 31:3-5; cf. Exod. 23:31). Yet, in spite of this emphasis on divine activity, the people of Israel would still need to fight. Even though God had delivered Israel's enemies into her hands, the people of Israel still engaged in a real combat and in real killing. God and Israel were partners in these military maneuvers. The emphasis here, however, is that God's activity preceded Israel's and was necessary for victory. Without it, Israel was helpless before her enemies. Hence, this emphasis on God's role in Israel's military maneuvers corresponds with a general deemphasis of the human side of the equation.¹⁶

God Fights Alone

Descriptions of God defeating Israel's enemies all by Himself are less frequent, though not less significant, than those which portray Him working with the people of Israel to achieve victory. This way of fighting is epitomized in the Exodus account. It is significant to note that the Pentateuch never says that God delivered the Egyptians *into* the hands of the Israelites since such language would necessarily imply that Israel was in some way involved in destroying them. Instead, reference is always made to the fact that God delivered the Israelites *from* the Egyptians. Hence, this paradigmatic salvific act in Israel's history is viewed as coming solely from the hand of God.¹⁷ God initiates this deliverance

¹⁶This point can be adequately substantiated from passages such as Exod. 23:20-33 which emphasize God's decisive role in battle. As for Israel, though they will have a part to play in the battle, they are to be most concerned about obeying God and avoiding idolatry.

¹⁷Though this discussion revolves around the idea of God delivering His people from Egypt, another example of God's deliverance of His people is found in His intervention through the mouth of Balaam (Num. 22-24).

and is the sole actor in it.

God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt is described in several ways. For example, God delivers the Israelites by striking Egypt with His miracles (Exod. 3:20)¹⁸ and great judgments (Exod. 6:6).¹⁹ It is also said that God delivers the Israelites by bringing them out with an outstretched hand/arm²⁰ (Exod. 3:20; 6:6; 7:5; 15:12) and "with by a powerful hand" (Exod. 13:3,9,14,16).²¹ The emphasis here is clearly upon God's activity.

This emphasis that God fights alone is evident in the words of Moses to the people just prior to their crossing of the Red Sea. He says, "Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever. The LORD will fight for you while you keep silent" (Exod. 14:13-14). As the Book of Exodus records it, this is precisely what happened. After Israel had crossed on dry ground and the Egyptians were in process of doing the same, "the LORD looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the army of the Egyptians into confusion. And He caused their chariot wheels to swerve, and He made them drive with difficulty; so the Egyptians said, 'Let us flee from Israel, for the LORD is fighting for them against the Egyptians'" (Exod. 14:24-25). God alone was responsible for this victory. The only human actor among the Israelites was Moses who, at the Lord's bidding, stretched his hand over the waters of the Red Sea, once to part them, and once to bring them back.

It is in response to this event that Yahweh is first hailed as "a man of war" (Exod. 15:3). The significance of this act of the divine warrior is seen in the repeated reference made to it throughout the OT. Even the Pentateuch itself contains many references to this

¹⁸For the details see Exod. 7:8-12:42.

¹⁹While these judgments were, in part, directed against the people of Egypt because of their enslavement of the Hebrews, the larger context suggests they were also judgments against the gods of the Egyptians (Num. 33:4).

²⁰This is a metaphorical way of speaking of power and strength.

²¹This expression, "with a powerful hand," occurs only four times in the OT, all here in Exod. 13.

salvific event, and we are constantly reminded that it was *God* who brought the people up out of the land of Egypt (Exod. 18:1; 20:2; Lev. 11:45a; 25:55; Num. 15:41a; Deut. 5:6; 6:12; 13:10, et al.). Many times, God's deliverance of the people from Egyptian bondage is coupled with His promise to bring them into the promised land²² (Exod. 3:8,17; 6:1-9; 13:3-5; Lev. 25:38). One of the best examples of this connection is found in Exod. 15:1b-18 where these themes are masterfully woven together.

Much attention has been given to Exod. 15 in studies dealing with the divine warrior theme in the OT. The Song of the Sea, as it is referred to in the literature,²³ is widely acknowledged as one of the earliest pieces of Hebrew poetry. It celebrates God's victory over the Egyptians.

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 song, and He has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise Him; my father's God, and I will extol Him. The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is His name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army He has cast into the sea; and the choicest of his officers are drowned in the Red Sea (Exod. 15:1b-4).

The first half of the Song is primarily devoted to praising God's military prowess demonstrated by the destruction of Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea.²⁴ The remainder of the song speaks of God's ability to bring His people into the land He promised them. God has delivered His people from their Egyptian oppressors and will establish them in a good land.

God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt has revelatory value and suggests a

²²Interestingly, in most of the early references to God giving the people "a land flowing with milk and honey," no mention is made of God driving out the inhabitants of the land. In fact, when reading a verse such as Exod. 3:8, where the land is described as spacious, one almost gets the impression that the Israelites will live side by side with the native inhabitants. The first instance in which we get a clear sense that the people of the land will be utterly destroyed comes in Exod. 23:20-33. This idea then comes to fullest expression in Deuteronomy where explicit references to the displacement and destruction of the people of the land are numerous.

²³Traditionally referred to as "the Song of Moses."

²⁴It should be remembered that this was not simply viewed as the victory of God over bad human beings. Rather, God used both the plagues and the waters of the Red Sea to demonstrate his supremacy over the gods of the Egyptians and over any humans who claim divine status as Pharaoh did. There was only one God, Yahweh, and His sovereignty was unchallenged.

certain uniqueness about the God of Israel. Hence we read in Deut. 4:34-35, "Has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him."²⁵ God makes use of this event to reveal Himself to Israel and the world. "When Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses" (Exod. 14:31). The way in which God delivered His people at the Red Sea was intended to create a certain knowledge of God even among the Egyptians. "The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD, when I am honored through Pharaoh, through his chariots and his horsemen" (Exod. 14:18). While God does deliver Israel from her enemies, he does so in such a way that reveals something of who He is and which invites others to know Him. Thus, warfare in the Pentateuch, as elsewhere in the OT, has revelatory value.

God is Present With Israel in Her Experience of Warfare

Special emphasis is placed upon God's presence in battle when God assisted Israel on the field of battle. Thus, when the Israelite soldiers went to war, God was believed to be right there with them in the heat of battle. Such a belief served to bolster their confidence and quiet their fears. Before the people entered the land of promise Moses gave them these words of advice and encouragement:

When you go out to battle against your enemies and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, is with you. Now it shall come about that when you are approaching the battle, the priest shall come near and speak to the people. And he shall say to them, "Hear, O Israel, you are approaching the battle against your enemies today. Do not be fainthearted. Do not be afraid, or panic, or tremble before them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you, to fight for you

²⁵A reference like this raises serious questions about the appropriateness of more or less equating Israel's understanding of Yahweh as divine warrior with that of other ancient Near Eastern nations. This verse suggests precisely the opposite and says that the way in which God fought distinguished Him from all the other gods. More specifically, one of the unique features of Yahweh's warring may be that through it He brought a people into existence (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-10).

against your enemies, to save you" (Deut. 20:1-4).

These verses indicate the close connection between God's presence and the command not to fear. Since the Israelites were assured of God's presence in battle there was no need to be afraid (Deut. 1:29-30). Fear had no place in the war camp of Israel.

God's presence in battle was vitally important since Israel's victory was contingent upon God fighting for her.²⁶ This is suggested by the need to blow trumpets when going to war against those who have attacked them. Moses tells the people to sound an alarm so "that you may be remembered before the LORD your God, and be saved from your enemies" (Num. 10:9). God's presence in battle guarantees victory. At least two of the twelve spies whom Moses sent to investigate the land knew this. Joshua and Caleb rightly told the people that "if the LORD is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land. . . . do not fear the people of the land, for they shall be our prey. Their protection has been removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them" (Num. 14:8-9). God's presence with the Israelites assured victory.²⁷

The reverse was equally true. If God was not with them, defeat would certainly be the result. Because the Israelites believed the bad report of the spies, God sentenced them to forty years of wandering in the wilderness. When they heard this, some suddenly had a "change of heart." They realized they had sinned and decided to go ahead and take up residence in the land the Lord had promised. Yet the Lord warned the people, "Do not go up, nor fight, for I am not among you; lest you be defeated before your enemies" (Deut. 1:42). In spite of this warning, the people still went up, and as expected, were defeated by the Amalekites and the Canaanites. The same account recorded in Num. 14:39-45 repeatedly emphasizes the absence of the Lord and the lack of divine sanction in this

²⁶See Num. 32:20-32. One of the implications of the necessity of God's presence for victory was that it necessarily imposed certain limitations on Israel's warring practices. The people could not simply go and fight whenever and wherever they pleased and expect God to grant them success. The Biblical witness is very clear that while God gave the people of Israel certain lands, He kept others from them, like Seir, Moab, and Ammon (Deut. 2:1-25). They would only be victorious insofar as they were obedient to Him and followed His initiatives.

²⁷Cf. Judg. 6:12,16.

military adventure. Moses tells the people that "the LORD is not among you. . . . And the LORD will not be with you." Moreover, when this renegade contingent of Israelites attempted to enter the land we read that "neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD nor Moses left the camp" (Num. 14:44). In other words, they went to war while God stayed home! They were defeated because God was not fighting for them or with them. Their defeat was not the result of being militarily outmaneuvered or outnumbered by their enemies but was simply and completely due to the fact that God was not in it.

Thus, it is clear that divine sanction, guidance, and presence were imperative for victory in battle. Yet, while it is sufficiently clear that God's presence in battle guaranteed victory, the question that remains is, how could one be sure of God's presence in battle?

God's Presence as Warrior is With Those Who Obey Him

God's presence in the war camp of Israel required the people's purity. "Since the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to defeat your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy; and He must not see anything indecent among you lest He turn away from you" (Deut. 23:14). Moreover, Israel could not presume upon God's presence in battle merely as a result of her status as the "chosen people." Rather, obedience was the key. Obedience was rewarded with victory; disobedience with defeat.

The contrasts in the outcome of battle depending upon obedience or disobedience is vividly portrayed in the Book of Leviticus. God promises the people, "If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out. . . . you will chase your enemies, and they will fall before you by the sword; five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall before you by the sword" (Lev. 26:3,7-8). Equally certain is their destruction if they disobey. "But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments. . . . I will set My face against you so that you shall be struck down before your enemies; and those who hate you

shall rule over you, and you shall flee when no one is pursuing you" (Lev. 26:14,17).²⁸

God is present with His people, giving them victory in battle, when they have been obedient to Him and "do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD" (Deut. 6:18). Being in right relationship with God is the key to acquiring the promised land (Deut. 11:18-25). On the other hand, the people are warned that if they turn to worship idols, they will be ejected from the land (Deut. 4:25-28; 8:19-20; 29:22-28; cf. Lev. 18:24-28; 20:22). Forgetting Yahweh and going after other gods would reduce the Israelites to the status of the foreign nations which God drove out and would result in their expulsion as well. Obedience to Yahweh was necessary to ensure God's presence on the day of battle and thereby guarantee victory for the people of Israel.

SUMMARY

We began this chapter by looking at three titles used to refer to the divine warrior in the OT, noting that both ʾīsh milḥamā and gibbôr occur rarely in reference to the divine warrior while Yahweh ṣabāʾôf is used frequently in the OT, though not in the Pentateuch. We then proceeded to explore some of the ways in which the divine warrior is disclosed in the Pentateuch. Here we noted that God most often fights alongside Israel though at times He fights alone, as in the Exodus. While there are warnings and threats that God will fight against Israel if they forsake Him, these are, by and large, not realized in the Pentateuchal materials. The primary emphasis in the Pentateuch is upon a God who fights for Israel and it became increasingly clear that God's presence in battle was the key to victory and that the way to guarantee God's presence was by maintaining a right relationship with Him. We now turn to the Historical Books to determine how well the Israelites fared as they entered the promised land. Were they obedient and victorious or were they disobedient and defeated? Or, perhaps, was there something of both in their experience?

²⁸For another example of this "obedience equals victory-disobedience equals defeat" see Deut. 28:1,7 and 28:15,25.

CHAPTER 3

**HISTORICAL BOOKS:
THE WARRIOR DISPLAYED**

As one might anticipate, there is a great deal of continuity between the way Yahweh as warrior is described in the Pentateuch and the way He appears in the Historical Books. Many of the lines of development which originated in Israel's emergence as a people are continued and amplified as they settle in the land. This is especially true of the Book of Joshua which emphasizes God's ability to drive out the Canaanites in order to give His people a land flowing with milk and honey just as He promised.

Yet, as the story line of Israel's experience in the land continues into the Book of Judges, and then in Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, a new theme begins to appear with discouraging frequency. Yahweh is repeatedly found fighting against the very people He has fought so hard to bring into the land. What went wrong? Why does God become Israel's fierce opponent on the battlefield? What has caused the divine warrior to war against His chosen people? The answer is, in short, Israel's infidelity. Israel has been unfaithful to the covenant God. The people have forsaken God, and God is punishing them. This tragic turn in Israel's fortunes escalates until it culminates in the destruction of the temple, the devastation of Jerusalem, and the deportation to Babylon. Thus, if the dominant image of Yahweh as warrior in the Pentateuch is of a God who fights for His people, the dominant image in the Historical Books is of a God who fights against His people.

Additionally, the description of the divine warrior in the Historical Books is more "action oriented" than that of the Pentateuch. As we have seen, the first five books of the OT disclose, or reveal, the image of God as warrior. While God is actively engaged in some battles, much of the material in the Pentateuch is *prescriptive*, defining how the divine warrior will act in response to Israel's commitment to Him. The material in Historical Books, however, more often depicts the divine warrior "in action," fighting against the Canaanites, and later, against the Israelites. Since the warring activity of God

is prominently displayed throughout the pages of these books, it seems appropriate to discuss the divine warrior material in this section of the OT under the title, "The Warrior Displayed."

Having sketched the broad contours of this material, we now can proceed to observe more precisely how the theme of Yahweh as Warrior gets worked out in the Historical Books. This will be accomplished by answering three questions which serve as a means to organize the material: With whom does God fight? How does God fight? Why does God fight?

WITH WHOM DOES GOD FIGHT?

First and foremost, as we have observed in the Pentateuch, God fights for Israel, against her enemies. There are many references to Yahweh's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt.¹ Since this has been explored in the previous chapter it need not detain us here. Now the Israelites faced a new set of enemies: the Canaanites. The God who had delivered the Israelites *from* the Egyptians was now giving the Canaanites and their land *to* this same people. This acquisition of the land is a significant emphasis in the Historical Books, especially in the Book of Joshua (Josh. 1:2-4,6,11,13-15; 2:14,24; 21:43-45; cf. Judg. 1:1-2). What is significant for our purposes is the fact that the reception of this land necessarily meant displacing or destroying those who lived there.² It is in this act of

¹At times these references are "proactive" and are intended to inspire the people to obey and serve Yahweh (Josh. 24:1-18). More often, however, these references are carefully used to paint a stark contrast between what God has done for the people and the terrible way they have treated Him (Judg. 2:1-3,11-12; 6:7-10; 1 Sam. 10:17-19; 12:8-9; 1 Kings 9:6-9; 2 Kings 17:5-8). In spite of God's mighty deliverance on their behalf, the Israelites had forsaken God by serving other gods and had rejected Him as their ruler by requesting a human king. Other references to Israel's deliverance from Egypt are used in a more "neutral" way, simply giving the facts (2 Chron. 5:10), or more positively, in the context of praise (2 Sam. 7:23; 1 Kings 8:53). Finally, God's great act of deliverance is even found of the lips of foreigners such as the harlot Rahab, as well as the Gibeonite deceivers (Josh. 2:10; 9:9-10). Regardless of how these references are used, the point is clear: God is the One responsible for delivering Israel from Egypt. Despite the fact that most of these references in the Historical Books omit the details of God's warring activity against the Egyptians, such imagery is certainly implied and would have been immediately available to those familiar with Israel's early traditions.

²Judg. 1:1-7 serves as one example of this oftentimes *implicit* connection being made *explicit*.

dispossessing the people of the land that the divine warrior once again takes center stage. God's activity at this time in Israel's struggle for the land comes in a variety of forms. Sometimes, we are simply told that God "delivers" Israel's enemies into her "hands." This basically means that Israel will defeat her enemies in battle (Josh. 6:2; 8:1,7; 10:29-32; Judg. 1:4; 3:10,28; 4:6-7; 11:32; 1 Sam. 30:23; 1 Kings 20:13; 2 Kings 3:18). Less frequently is it said that God delivers Israel "from" her enemies (Judg. 8:33-34; 10:10-16; I Sam. 14:23; cf. 1 Chron. 11:14).

Other times, rather than simply mentioning that God is delivering Israel from her enemies, the Biblical accounts state explicitly that God fought on behalf of His chosen people. For example, the reason that Joshua and the armies of Israel were successful in the south was "because the LORD, the God of Israel, fought for Israel" (Josh. 10:42).³ Joshua emphasizes this idea in a speech to the people:

You have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations because of you, for the LORD your God is He who has been fighting for you. . . . For the LORD has driven out great and strong nations from before you; and as for you, no man has stood before you to this day. One of your men puts to flight a thousand, for the LORD your God is He who fights for you, just as He promised you (Josh. 23:3,9-10).

Joshua believed God would continue to fight for His people in the future just as He had in the past. Thus, he exhorts them to obey the law of Moses, steer clear of idolatry, and hold tight to God (Josh. 23:5-8).

One of the ways in which God's presence in Israel's battles came to be symbolized was in the ark of the covenant. Where the ark was, God was. Unfortunately, the distinction between the ark as a symbol of God's presence and the ark as a magical sacred object, efficacious in and of itself, got blurred in later years. Hence, when the Philistines defeat the Israelites at Aphek the people of Israel want to take "the ark of the covenant of the LORD, that *it* may come among us and deliver us from the power of our enemies" (I Sam. 4:3, emphasis mine). Nevertheless, when rightly understood, the ark represented the saving and protecting presence of God in the midst of His people. This is perhaps best

³Notice how directly Yahweh is involved in the southern campaign (Josh. 10).

seen in a reference from the Pentateuch, Num. 10:35-36: "Then it came about when the ark set out that Moses said, 'Rise up, O LORD! And let Thine enemies be scattered, and let those who hate Thee flee before Thee.' And when it came to rest, he said, 'Return Thou, O LORD, to the myriad thousands of Israel.'" Certainly the Israelites believed God to be present and active in their experience of war.

Yet, the Historical Books bear ample testimony to the fact that God did not always fight *for* Israel. The Book of Judges makes it clear that Israel's habitual sinfulness resulted in God giving His people into the hands of their enemies (Judg. 3:8,12; 4:2; 6:1; etc.). To be more specific, God delivered his people "into the hands of the Philistines (1 Sam. 28:19), defeated them before the Arameans (2 Kings 5:1) and destroyed them by sending against them "bands of Chaldeans, bands of Arameans, bands of Moabites, and bands of Ammonites (2 Kings 24:2). God's ultimate act of war against His people involved sending them into exile. It was God who prompted the Assyrians to carry his people away into a foreign land (1 Chron. 5:25-26) and it was the LORD who "carried Judah and Jerusalem away into exile by Nebuchadnezzar" (1 Chron. 6:15). Whether it was victory for Israel or her enemies, as far as the Israelites were concerned, it was God who had brought it to pass.

For example, when the Israelites were defeated at the hands of the Philistines they did not cry out, "Why have the gods of the Philistines been victorious over us and over Yahweh?" Instead, they said, "Why has the LORD defeated us today before the Philistines" (1 Sam. 4:3). The Israelites knew that it was the Lord who had given victory to the Philistines by bringing about their own defeat. Moreover, while the Philistines rejoiced at the capture of Samson because they believed that Dagon, their god, had delivered Samson into their hands (Judg. 16:23-24), the narrator makes it clear that the real reason for Samson's capture was the Lord's departure from him (Judg. 16:20). Thus, the Historical Books demonstrate that the same God who fought for Israel was equally capable of fighting against them.

HOW DOES GOD FIGHT?

In the above discussion about *who* God fights we have also noted some rather general ways about *how* God fights. These included delivering Israel from her enemies, giving one nation into the hands of another, and dispossessing the inhabitants of a land.⁴ Statements such as these are, more or less, "generic" from the point of view of ascertaining the precise role God played on the field of battle. In spite of the great difficulty of disentangling the divine and human elements in any one act of war,⁵ the Scriptures do preserve several very clear and specific ways in which God fought. We now turn to consider these in more detail.

When specifics are given, one of the ways we discover God fights is through the use of natural forces and elements.⁶ One of the best and most illustrative examples of this is preserved in the defeat of the five kings of the Amorites who have camped against the men of Gibeon. The narrator tells us that "the LORD confounded them before Israel, and He slew them with a great slaughter. . . . the LORD threw large stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died from the hailstones⁷ than those whom the sons of Israel killed with the sword" (Josh. 10:10-11). Moreover, on that same day of battle the LORD honored Joshua's request for the sun to stand still so that the armies of Israel would have time to finish defeating their enemies. "And there was no day

⁴See also Josh. 13:6; 24:18.

⁵Here we must be content with a considerable amount of "fuzziness." When divine revelation is mediated through human experience there will often be some ambiguity between where the one starts and the other stops. So we ask, "Whence the human? Whence the divine? Can we compartmentalize their activity? Is it even desirable to do so?"

⁶Interestingly, such references to God's use of natural forces only describe His warring activity against *Israel's* enemies, never against Israel herself.

⁷Though not an especially frequent image in the OT, hail was clearly understood as one of the weapons the divine warrior had at His disposal (Ps. 18:12-13; Isa. 30:30; Ezek. 38:22). Remember that the seventh plague against the Egyptians was a hailstorm par excellence (Exod. 9:18-34; cf. Ps. 78:47-48; 105:32). Moreover, God asks Job if he has "entered the storehouses of the snow, or . . . seen the storehouses of the hail, which I have reserved for the time of distress, for the day of war and battle" (Job 38:22-23). It is also fascinating to observe the use of hail in the apocalyptic judgments against the wicked in the NT (Rev. 8:7; 16:21).

like that before it or after it, when the LORD listened to the voice of a man; for the LORD fought for Israel" (Josh. 10:14). Thus, on this singular day of battle God's "weapons of war" included both hailstones and prolonged sunlight.

Another excellent example of God's use of nature to accomplish victory for His people is given in Barak's struggle with Sisera and the Canaanite army. We are fortunate to have two accounts of this battle recorded for us, one in narrative form (Judg. 4) and one in poetic form (Judg. 5). In the former account Deborah tells Barak,

"Arise! For this is the day in which the LORD has given Sisera into your hands; behold, the LORD has gone out before you." So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. And the LORD routed Sisera and all his chariots and all his army, with the edge of the sword before Barak; and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled away on foot (Judg. 4:14-15).

God's activity here is vaguely described as going out before Barak and routing the enemy "with the edge of the sword." The poetic account, however, supplies "the rest of the story" as we are told precisely how God fought against Sisera and his armies. What we discover is that God sent a rainstorm upon Sisera and his charioteers when they were fighting down on the plain. In the poet's own words, "LORD, when Thou didst go out from Seir, when Thou didst march from the field of Edom, the earth quaked, the heavens also dripped, even the clouds dripped water. . . . The stars fought from heaven, from their courses they fought against Sisera. The torrent of Kishon swept them away" (Judg. 5:4,20-21). Though chariots were the most sophisticated weaponry of the day, they were absolutely useless on a muddy, rain soaked piece of ground. God used this cloudburst to defeat the Canaanites and give victory to the people of Israel. We might label these and other such acts as "divinely orchestrated natural phenomena."⁸

A second, though related, way in which Yahweh fights is by causing something "miraculous"⁹ to happen, thereby giving the Israelites the upper hand. This category is to be distinguished from the first only insofar as the means used here are not specifically

⁸Cf. 1 Sam. 7:10. God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt would also fit in this category.

⁹"Miraculous" is used here to refer to those instances when God fights by methods of warfare which would be considered unconventional by human standards.

related to the forces of nature. For example, God causes the walls of Jericho to come tumbling down after the people have marched around the city blowing trumpets for seven days (Josh. 6:1ff.). One might also recall God's "miraculous" deliverance of Gideon's contingent of three hundred men, armed with nothing more than pitchers, torches and trumpets. This is all the more amazing considering the great size of their adversaries. "Now the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the sons of the east were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore" (Judg. 7:12). After Gideon and his men had smashed their pitchers and blown their trumpets anarchy broke loose in the camp of Midian as "the LORD set the sword of one against another even throughout the whole army" (Judg. 7:22). Or recall God's great deliverance of His people living in Samaria. The city had been under a siege for so long that food was virtually non-existent and people were beginning to eat each other (!) when God "miraculously" delivers the people of Israel from the Arameans. How does He do it? What causes the Arameans to leave a city that certainly could not defend itself or hold out much longer? Israel's enemies leave because "the Lord had caused the army of the Arameans to hear a sound of chariots and a sound of horses, even the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, 'Behold, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of the Egyptians, to come upon us'" (2 Kings 7:6; cf. 2 Sam. 5:22-25). Yet, the truth of the matter was that Israel had done nothing of the sort.

Perhaps the most amazing of all these "miraculous" victories was God's deliverance of Jerusalem from the powerful Assyrian army. At a time when the northern kingdom had been conquered and exiled and all that remained in Judah were the strongholds at Lachish and Jerusalem, bets were off that these remaining two cities would be spared. The story is recorded in some detail in no less than three OT books¹⁰ and depicts the people of Judah in big trouble. Hezekiah, king of Judah, turns to Lord for help and finds his trust abundantly rewarded. The word of the Lord comes to him through the

¹⁰2 Kings 18-19; 2 Chron. 32; Isa. 36-37.

prophet Isaiah:

Thus says the LORD, "Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land. And I will make him fall by the sword in his own land" (2 Kings 19:6-7).

What happened next was nothing short of a miracle. "That night . . . the angel of the LORD went out, and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians; and when men rose early in the morning, behold, all of them were dead" (2 Kings 19:35). Imagine the difficulty Sennacherib had explaining that one back at headquarters! Once again, God had defended His people and given them a marvelous victory over the enemy by "miraculous" means.¹¹

A third way in which God sometimes fought was through select individuals who served as His agents of deliverance.¹² This is the generally God's modus operandi in the Book of Judges, as He raises up various deliverers to throw off the yoke of Israel's oppressors. Here we might name such persons as Othniel, Ehud, Barak, Gideon, and others. As we have noticed above, this selection of a charismatic¹³ deliverer was sometimes coupled with God's more active involvement via nature or the "miraculous."

God also used royal figures to accomplish his purposes. David serves as one such example.¹⁴ It was through the hand of David that God said He would save "Israel from the hand of the Philistines and from the hand of all their enemies" (2 Sam. 3:18). When this, in fact, happens David attributes his success to God saying, "The LORD has broken through my enemies before me like the breakthrough of waters" (2 Sam. 5:20). A

¹¹See also 2 Chron. 20:14-23; cf. 2 Kings 3:13-25.

¹²Just as there is often a real sense of cooperation between God and the armies of Israel, so too does God specifically work with His chosen human agent. For example, while it is Eleazar who "struck the Philistines until his hand was weary and clung to the sword," it was "the LORD [who] brought about a great victory that day" (2 Sam. 23:10; cf. v. 12). Moreover, sometimes God is depicted as something of a boot camp sergeant, preparing His chosen instrument for war. Thus, David could say, "He trains my hands for battle, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze" (2 Sam 22:35; cf. Ps. 144:1).

¹³"Dynamic personality" is meant here rather than a certain orientation toward worship.

¹⁴Compare also God's deliverance of His people "by the hand of Jeroboam" (2 Kings 14:27).

negative example, from Israel's perspective, of God's warring through a select individual is Nebuchadnezzar, whom God uses to carry Israel into exile (1 Chron. 6:15; Ezra 5:12).

In addition to those more general statements of God delivering people (which imply God's assistance and help on behalf of those He is making victorious), we have explored three more specific ways God fights, namely, through the forces of nature, by a variety of "miraculous" means, and through appointed individuals.¹⁵ Once again, it should be emphasized that even when God fights alongside of Israel on her behalf, the emphasis is upon God providing the victory. This is especially true in Joshua's prophetic speech to the Israelites at Shechem. "Thus says the LORD. 'I brought your fathers out of Egypt. . . I brought you into the land of the Amorites. . . I gave them into your hand. . . I destroyed them before you. . . I sent the hornet before you and it drove out the two kings of the Amorites from before you, but not by your sword or you bow'" (Josh. 24:2,6,8,12). Thus, regardless of what means God used, it was His activity in battle that was the key to victory, not Israel's military might.¹⁶

WHY DOES GOD FIGHT?

Why did God choose to get involved in Israel's military maneuvers? Why was it that the author of life (Gen. 1!) became the instrument of death to so many? These are questions which require our careful attention and will be explored more fully from a variety of angles in the second half of this study. For now, the task at hand is to observe

¹⁵These examples speak only of the ways in which God fights *for* Israel. When God fights against Israel He generally does so in rather vague and unspecified ways. For example, when Israel sinned in the period of the judges we read that "the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel" (Judg. 3:12). Due to this lack of specificity and detail, we really don't gain any especially new knowledge of how God fights by examining His warring against Israel, and thus, it has not been considered in detail here.

¹⁶This is vividly illustrated in Josh. 1-5 where Israel's spiritual preparedness takes precedence over her military readiness. Noticeably absent from these chapters leading up to the Conquest are references to the Israelites preparing themselves militarily for battle. In fact, at the outset of the northern campaign of the Conquest the Lord explicitly prohibits Joshua from accumulating military hardware and commands him to "hamstring their [the kings of the north] horses and burn their chariots with fire" (Josh. 11:6; cf. Deut. 17:16). Instead, the focus is upon Israel's relationship with God and Israel's need to be holy so that God could act on her behalf.

the Biblical data in the Historical Books in an attempt to understand the reasons given there for God's involvement in warfare.¹⁷

First, God fights to fulfill His promise of land to Israel. This represents a continuation of God's saving activity of the Israelites which began in Egypt. God commands Joshua: "Arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses" (Josh. 1:2-3). Thus, God promises His presence and therefore His military assistance to the people of Israel as they prepare to enter the land of promise.¹⁸ As we have noted in the previous chapter, this assistance was contingent upon the people's faithfulness and obedience to God and Joshua warned them of what would happen to them if they decided to forsake God (Josh. 23:12-13,15-16).¹⁹

Second, God fights to punish the wickedness of the Canaanites.²⁰ Moses had told the people: "It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the

¹⁷The categories given below don't take into account those instances in which God "fights" by not allowing any fighting to take place. Thus, when the kingdom was divided and Rehoboam desired to fight against Jeroboam in order to take back Israel, the word of the Lord comes through the prophet Shemaiah saying not to do so and the violence is thwarted (1 Kings 12:21-24). Another example of this is the incident in which God protects the king of Israel against the violence of the Arameans by disclosing the movements of the enemy troops to the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 6:9). Also, in 2 Chron. 25:7-8 we read of a "man of God" who warns Amaziah not to go into battle since the LORD was not with him but rather would "bring him down before the enemy, for God has the power to help and to bring down." Since these are not, strictly speaking, examples of God fighting, they are relegated to a footnote here. See also Ezra 8:21-23,31.

¹⁸When God fulfilled His promise of land to the Israelites, the people of Israel experienced rest from war and from all their enemies. After certain military victories in the promised land the people had "rest on every side" (Josh. 1:13,15; 11:23; 14:15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1; cf. 1 Sam. 12:11). Likewise, this "rest" was also characteristic of the reigns of David, Solomon, and Asa (2 Sam. 7:1; 1 Kings 5:4; 1 Chron. 22:18; 2 Chron. 14:6,7; 15:15).

¹⁹From the presentation of the Conquest narratives given us in the text, there is no suggestion that Israel "created" these stories to give divine sanction to her armed conflicts. Instead, the Biblical writers want us to understand that the Conquest was God's idea.

²⁰This issue is dealt with at some length in Chapter 9 of this study.

LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Deut. 9:5; cf. Gen. 15:16). The Canaanites were punished for their wickedness by expulsion from the land.²¹ Because they were so depraved, they needed to be removed so that the religious integrity of Israel might be preserved. Hence the command to "utterly destroy . . . the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, as the LORD your God has commanded you, in order that they may not teach you to do according to all their detestable things which they have done for their gods, so that you would sin against the LORD your God" (Deut. 20:17-18; cf. 7:1-5). From these passages it appears that the extermination of the Canaanites was necessary both to execute God's vengeance and to help the people avoid religious syncretism, or worse, complete abandonment from Yahwistic faith.

Surprisingly, the Historical Books never explicitly say that the reason God drove out the Canaanites was because of their wickedness, though this is certainly implied in a number of references. There the logic is as follows: since Israel's apostate practices were similar to those of the Canaanites, and since Israel was exiled for these idolatrous and wicked practices, we can assume that God likewise punished the Canaanites for their wickedness by driving them out of the land. This comparison between Israel's wickedness and that of her neighbors is illustrated in the following two references:

Surely there was no one like Ahab who sold himself to do evil in the sight of the LORD, because Jezebel his wife incited him. And he acted very abominably in following idols, according to all that the Amorites had done, whom the LORD cast out before the sons of Israel (1 Kings 21:25-26).

And the sons of Israel did things secretly which were not right, against the LORD their God. Moreover, they built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. And they set for themselves sacred pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, and there they burned incense on all the high places as the nations did which the LORD had carried away to exile before them; and they did evil things provoking the LORD (2 Kings 17:9-11).²²

Moreover, that Israel and Judah were carried into exile for their sinfulness is clear enough

²¹See Lev. 18:24-30; 20:22-26 which substantiates this and warns Israel not to do likewise lest the land spew them out.

²²See also 2 Kings 16:3; 17:1-8; 21:1-2; 2 Chron. 28:1-3.

from a number of passages (e.g. 2 Kings 17:22-23; 21:10-15). Thus, when passages like these are interpreted in light of each other, the implication is that the reason God warred against the Canaanites was because of their wickedness. Their removal from the land was punishment from the Lord.²³

Third, and quite commonly in the Historical Books, God fights to punish His own people for their sin. God doesn't give Israel special or preferential treatment simply because they are the "chosen people." When the people sin and act wickedly they, like all the other nations, find Yahweh is fighting against them.²⁴ For example, early in the process of settling the land the Israelites are initially defeated at the hands of the people of Ai because an Israelite named Achan had taken some of the things which were under the ban.²⁵ God makes it abundantly clear that He will not be with the people any longer unless this transgression is dealt with promptly (Josh. 7:6-15). Sometimes, as in this instance, it seems that the way God fights against His people is simply by not fighting for them. Instead, in these instances He allows them to experience the defeat that would be theirs every time were it not for the presence and power of God in their experience of warfare.

During the period of the Judges God stopped fighting for Israel because they had sinned by making covenants with the people of the land and by failing to tear down their

²³This corresponds to what we have seen in the Pentateuch (Gen. 15:16; Deut. 9:4-5).

²⁴While it is true that God's warring against His people was an expression of His wrath (2 Chron. 29:8; Ezra 5:12), one must realize that this wrath indicates God's great concern for His people. God's response is not that of an emotionless, unconcerned deity. Rather, God is passionately concerned about His people. He cares about them so much that He simply is not willing to let go of them. God punished His people with the hope that they would return to Him. Those who did so discovered that God would turn His wrath away from them (2 Chron. 12:1-12).

²⁵The ban (herem) refers to people and possessions which were to be completely devoted to Yahweh. In the case of people, those under the ban were to be completely destroyed. Possessions under the ban were either to be completely destroyed or, in some cases, devoted exclusively to religious use. A classic Biblical example of the failure to carry out the ban is found in 1 Sam. 15. Since a detailed examination of this concept is outside of the purposes of this study the reader is referred to the literature on this subject. Examples of this include, but are not limited to, Mark Fretz, "Herem in the Old Testament: A Critical Reading." Essays on War and Peace: Bible and Early Church, Occasional Papers, no. 9, ed. Willard M. Swartely, (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1986): 7-44; Lilley, "Understanding the Herem;" Niditch, War in the Hebrew Bible, esp. chapters 1 & 2.

altars (Judg. 2:1-3). In these instances, not only does God not fight for them, he actively fights against them by handing them over to their enemies time and time again. What follows is a cycle of oppression and deliverance²⁶ (Judg. 3:7-8,12; 4:1-2; 6:1; 10:7; 13:1).²⁷

As noted above, Israel's sins were often of the same nature as those of the surrounding nations. In actuality, sometimes Israel's sins were worse! Thus, Manasseh, a king of Judah about whom the writer of Kings has nothing good to say, is charged with causing the people "to do evil *more than the nations* whom the LORD destroyed before the sons of Israel" (2 Kings 21:9, emphasis mine). Manasseh was the epitome of evil and the absolute worst king in a line which had included some noticeably wicked rulers. In response, the LORD says through His prophets,

Because Manasseh king of Judah has done these abominations, having done wickedly more than all the Amorites did who were before him, and has also made Judah sin with his idols; therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "Behold, I am bringing such calamity on Jerusalem and Judah, that whoever hears of it, both his ears shall tingle. . . I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. And I will abandon the remnant of My inheritance and deliver them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become as plunder and spoil to all their enemies" (2 Kings 21:11-14).

If there was any lingering doubt about whether or not God would really fight against His people, this prophetic word should have settled the question.²⁸

Interestingly, God fights *against* Israel in much the same way as He had originally fought *for* Israel. For example, instead of delivering the outnumbered armies of the Israelites from the hands of their numerous opponents, God causes the larger army of the Israelites to be defeated by a smaller army. "Indeed the army of the Arameans came with a small number of men; yet the LORD delivered a very great army into their hands,

²⁶This is neatly summarized in Judg. 2:6-23.

²⁷Note also that when Solomon is unfaithful to God, God raises up two adversaries against him, namely Hadad and Rezon (1 Kings 11:1-14, 23). Other examples of God punishing Israel's sinfulness in this way include 2 Kings 10:31-33; 13:1-3; cf. 1 Kings 9:6-9; 2 Chron. 21:8-20; 28:1-21.

²⁸Still, the Biblical account reminds us of God's graciousness and compassion in being so long-suffering with the rebellious people of Israel (2 Kings 13:23).

because they had forsaken the LORD, the God of their fathers. Thus they executed judgment on Joash" (2 Chron. 24:24). Likewise, whereas previously one Israelite could put to flight a thousand enemy soldiers, now the prophet Isaiah tells the people that one enemy soldier will put a thousand of them to flight because of their unwillingness to trust the divine warrior to defend them and fight their battles for them (Josh. 23:10; Isa. 30:15-17)! Such "reversals" indicate that the God who fought for His people was now fighting against them by defeating the Israelites at the hands of foreign nations which served as His instruments of judgment.²⁹

Fourth, God fights to punish people for specific offenses.³⁰ Occurrences of this type are relatively rare in the OT. One clear example is represented in the conflict between the Amalekites and the Israelites. The Amalekites have the unenviable distinction of being the first nation to fight against the Israelites when they were en route from Goshen to Canaan (Exod. 17:8-16; Num. 24:20). After the people of God defeated them in battle, God determined to "utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven" (Exod. 17:14). Thus, we are not surprised to hear this word of the Lord coming many years later to King Saul: "I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Sam. 15:2-3). God would fight with the Israelites to execute His judgment upon the people of Amalek for the violence they had done against God's people.

²⁹ Sometimes these foreign nations realized that God was using them as an instrument of judgment (2 Chron. 35:20-27). At other times they did not (Isa. 10:5-19). On still other occasions the nations simply pretended that God was using them as an instrument of judgment when, in fact, He was not. Rabshakeh's psychological warfare against the people of Jerusalem illustrates this point. Knowing that the Israelites believed that God used other countries to punish them for their waywardness he asks, "Have I now come up without the Lord's approval against this place to destroy it? The LORD said to me, 'Go up against this land and destroy it.'" (2 Kings 18:25). Yet, as we know from the Biblical account, this was not to be the case.

³⁰ Another example is God's command to Moses to "take full vengeance . . . on the Midianites" (Num. 31:1-2). Here Israel was clearly to be the aggressor. Though God is not explicitly said to be actively involved in the battle, His role is certainly implied in light of His divine directive.

Fifth, God fights to rightly reveal His character. This is illustrated by Israel's victory over the Arameans. God defeats the Arameans to correct their faulty theology and to reveal who His real character. The Arameans thought that Yahweh was only a God of the hills and not a God of the valleys. Hence, the Arameans felt quite comfortable fighting against the Israelites at Aphek, a flat land. Because of this bad theology a "a man of God" told Ahab, king of Israel, that God would deliver the Arameans into their hands so that the people of Israel would "know that I am the LORD." (1 Kings 20:28). God fights to reveal something of who He is.

Sixth, God fights to free the oppressed. Ironically, the very people whom God strengthened to afflict Israel during the period of the Judges are the ones from whom He later delivers them when they cry out for deliverance (Judg. 3:9,15, et al.).³¹

More specifically, God fights to free the oppressed especially when those who are oppressed are righteous and trust in God (1 Sam. 7:3). God will deliver those who fear Him "from the hand of all [their] enemies" (2 Kings 17:39). David believed that his deliverance from the hand of Saul was due to his righteousness. He says, "The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me" (2 Sam. 22:21; cf. 1 Sam. 23:14). In spite of the truth of this statement, one should be careful not to reduce God's deliverance to a formula in which righteousness is the key ingredient needed to make God deliver someone. Often, the reason God delivers His people is simply because He loves them and is incredibly patient, compassionate and forgiving.³²

The issue of trust lies at the very heart of the whole divine warrior motif in the OT. Could God be trusted to care for His people or was a professional army and a stockpile of military hardware necessary for the nation's security? The Biblical record assures us time

³¹This is also seen in the case of Jehoahaz in 2 Kings 13:4-5.

³²This is repeatedly illustrated in the Book of Judges. We are also told in the Pentateuch that the reason God delivered the people from Egypt was because of His love for them, not because of their "goodness" (Deut. 4:37; 7:7-8). See also Ps. 103:6-14.

and time again that the former was certainly true. Those who chose to trust God found themselves adequately protected and preserved. Thus, when the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manassah cried out to God and trusted in Him they were delivered (1Chron. 5:18-22).³³ Though the troops of Abijah were outnumbered by those of Jeroboam "the sons of Judah conquered because they trusted in the LORD, the God of their fathers" (2 Chron. 13:18). Likewise, Asa's trust in God was the catalyst which resulted in God's deliverance of him even in the face of innumerable odds.³⁴ Outnumbered 2:1 with three hundred chariots to boot

Asa called to the LORD his God, and said, "LORD, there is no one besides Thee to help in the battle between the powerful and those who have no strength; so help us, O LORD our God, for we trust in Thee, and in Thy name have come against this multitude. O LORD, Thou art our God; let not man prevail against Thee." So the LORD routed the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians fled (2 Chron. 14:11-12).

Finally, Hezekiah's close call with the Assyrian army, discussed above, is perhaps the most noteworthy example of God's deliverance of one who trusted in him (2 Kings 18:5). Trusting in God and keeping faith with the covenant were often directly linked to God's activity of delivering those who were oppressed or under attack.³⁵

The question of why God fights will again demand our attention in the latter part of this study. Here it is hoped that the categories listed above provide some means for organizing and understanding what motivates God to become involved in the military struggles of Israel and her neighbors.

³³None reading this material could labor under the delusion that Israel's victories resulted from their military power, prowess, or personnel. Trust in God is diametrically opposed to making military alliances, accumulating weapons of war, or creating a standing army. This is aptly illustrated by David's poor choice to number his troops (2 Sam. 24 || 1 Chron. 21). See also the prophet Isaiah's words of warning in Isa. 30-31.

³⁴The size of Israel's army had absolutely no bearing on whether or not God would or could deliver the people. As Jonathan says, "the LORD is not restrained to save by many or by few" (1 Sam. 14:6). The Bible gives many examples of how God delivered the people of Israel even though they were grossly outnumbered. For example, when the Israelites fought against the Arameans, "the sons of Israel camped before them like two little flocks of goats" while "the Arameans filled the country" (1 Kings 20:27). Still, it was the people of God who won the day.

³⁵Obviously, the opposite side of this equation is also true. For a specific example of God fighting against someone who failed to trust in Him see 1 Chron. 10:13-14.

SUMMARY

We began this chapter by noting that the image of the divine warrior in the Historical Books is a more "action-oriented" image than this same image in the Pentateuch. It was also suggested that the dominant portrayal of the divine warrior in this section of the OT was of one who fought against Israel, notwithstanding the many references to Him fighting on their behalf.

With this general picture in mind, we then attempted to answer three questions about the divine warrior: with whom He fought, how He fought, and why He fought. We discovered that God's enemies were always human enemies, sometimes the enemies of Israel, other times the Israelites themselves. Nevertheless, whether God helped Israel or her enemies, He is the one directly responsible for both victory and defeat. After briefly mentioning some of the more general ways in which God fought, we noted three specific means at God's disposal, namely, through the use of natural forces, by working in certain "miraculous" ways, and through the selection and appointment of certain individual leaders. The chapter concluded with six reasons as to why God fought. The general consensus which emerged here was that God fought for those who were rightly related to Him and against those who were not.³⁶ Thus, having seen the divine warrior displayed in the Historical Books, we now turn to consider the Psalms. Here we find the divine warrior desired, sometimes intensely so.

³⁶This is a generalization which could be qualified in many ways. Nonetheless, it is basically accurate.

CHAPTER 4

PSALMS: THE WARRIOR DESIRED

The Poetic and Wisdom Literature of the OT is comprised of five books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. All descriptions and depictions of God as warrior are virtually non-existent in those books properly classified as Wisdom Literature.¹ Similarly, the Song of Songs has nothing to contribute to the discussion of the divine warrior motif in the OT. Nevertheless, while the divine warrior imagery is largely lacking in these books, that lack is abundantly compensated for in the Psalter. Many of the Psalms are saturated with this image and virtually drip with the military metaphor. The divine warrior appears in Psalm after Psalm so that it is a ubiquitous image in this portion of the OT. In fact, Marc Brettler, in an article dealing exclusively with the imagery of Yahweh as warrior in the Psalms argues that this image "occurs in one form or another in approximately three-quarters of the Psalms."²

The sheer mass of data makes it difficult to decide which Psalms should be examined in a discussion like this.³ The matter is further complicated by the great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the Sitz im Leben of the majority of the Psalms. Often, the adversaries or "enemies" referred to are not specifically named. They are simply regarded as being wicked and therefore worthy of destruction by the divine warrior. The Psalmist⁴ (who most often represents the righteous)⁵ doesn't typically reveal

¹These books are Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. To be sure, there are those occasional references in the Book of Job where Job uses military language to assert that God is fighting against him, believing, as he does, that his afflictions come from the hand of God (Job 16:14; 30:11). Then there is that solitary verse in Prov. 21:31 which admits the pragmatic necessity of preparing for war while realizing that "victory belongs to the LORD." Yet, apart from these scattered and highly infrequent references, one is hard pressed to find any significant data about the OT's divine warrior in the Wisdom Literature.

²Marc Z. Brettler, "Images of YHWH the Warrior in Psalms," Semeia 61 (1983): 136.

³Many divine warrior studies have been focused upon certain Psalms. Brettler focuses upon Pss. 3, 46, 83, 144 and intentionally avoids Pss. 18, 24, and 68 which have often been focused on in divine warrior studies (Brettler 139).

⁴When "the Psalmist" is mentioned without reference to any one particular Psalm it refers to the

his identity and the later superscriptions are only marginally helpful.⁶ These factors make it extremely difficult and tenuous to connect, with any degree of certainty, a particular Psalm with a particular historical event. Thus, a whole host of historical questions surrounds each Psalm. When was it written? By whom? What was the occasion of writing? How was it used in Israel's worship, etc.?"

In spite of these difficulties, it is still possible to learn much from the Psalms in regard to the divine warrior imagery. Many of the themes and images we have seen in connection with the divine warrior in the Pentateuch and Historical Books reemerge here. This comes as no great surprise, since it is certain that many of the individual Psalms in the Psalter arose during the pre-monarchic and monarchic periods.⁷ Such an overlap would be expected. Nevertheless, what gives the Psalms their distinctive place in this discussion is their passion for the divine warrior to act in the Psalmist's life and in the life of his people. Here the petitioner pleads that the warrior God would act accordingly, saving the righteous while destroying the wicked. Such requests assume God is both able and willing to do so. Such a conviction was surely based on Israel's historical experience. They had seen God act as divine warrior in times past and were confident he would and should do so again in the future.

Since the Psalmist's *desire* for the divine warrior to act is more unique to the Psalter, it becomes the focal point of our discussion here rather than certain other themes which have already explored in previous chapters. The following discussion attempts to flesh out this desire for the divine warrior by looking at some of the broader categories in

mindset of the writers of the Psalms in general.

⁵Conspicuously absent, however, are any requests for God to attack the authors because they have behaved badly!

⁶One of the complicating factors regarding these superscriptions is how the preposition ל is to be translated. Thus, when the superscription reads "A Psalm 'to' David," does this mean, a psalm of David? A Psalm about David? A Psalm for David?, etc.

⁷See Artur Weiser, The Psalms: A Commentary (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 23-35, esp. 24-25.

which this image can be understood. Here, our task is still largely observational as it has been thus far. Moreover, the discussion of some of the more picturesque imagery of the divine warrior found in the Psalms will be reserved for the next chapter, dealing as it does with the prophetic literature where such graphic portrayals and descriptions of the divine warrior are commonplace.

WHAT THE PSALMIST KNOWS

The Lord is a Mighty Warrior

The Psalmist affirms that the Lord is a warrior. The King of glory is "The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle" (Ps. 24:8). Such a statement is rooted in Israel's historical experience with her God. The Psalmist is aware of the traditions of Israel's experience and sees in them the activity of God as warrior. Hence, there are numerous references to God leading His people out of Egypt, a theme with which we are quite familiar by now (Pss. 76:1-7; 77:16-20; 78:12-13, 40-53; 81:10). There are also references made to the way in which God brought them into the promised land, as Ps. 44:1-3 (NIV) illustrates:

We have heard with our ears, O God; our fathers have told us what you did in their days, in days long ago. With your hand you drove out the nations and planted our fathers; you crushed the peoples and made our fathers flourish. It was not by their sword that they won the land, nor did their arm bring them victory; it was your right hand, your arm, and the light of your face, for you loved them (cf. Pss. 78:55; 80:8).⁸

Nevertheless, as we have seen elsewhere, Yahweh was not simply pro-Israelite. While the divine warrior did indeed fight for His people "He also delivered His people to the sword" when they sinned against him (Ps. 78:62). Earlier in this Psalm we read, "The sons of Ephraim were archers equipped with bows, yet they turned back in the day of battle." The reason? "They did not keep the covenant of God, and refused to walk in His law; and they forgot His deeds, and His miracles that He had shown them" (Ps. 78:9-11). The point to

⁸Other references to God delivering the people from Egypt and of giving them the land include Pss. 135:8-12; 136:10-22. Extended treatments of God's warring against Egypt during the exodus and of God bringing the people into the promised land can be observed in Pss. 105 and 106.

be made here is simply that the Psalmist assumes Yahweh to be a warrior (for or against Israel) on the basis of past experiences in which He has functioned in that way.

Salvation is From the Lord

Because the Lord is a mighty warrior, the Psalmist is confident that if salvation will come, it will come from the Lord. The notion that "salvation belongs to the LORD" is one of the bedrock convictions of the Psalmist (Ps. 3:8; cf. Ps. 124). Salvation, usually understood as physical deliverance of some sort from sickness, hostile nations, etc., belongs to and comes from the Lord. Because of this the Psalmist confidently asserts, "I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies" (Ps. 18:2). "Some boast in chariots, and some in horses; but we will boast in the name of the LORD, our God" (Ps. 20:7). Yahweh is the Psalmist's shield (3:3; 33:20; 59:11). The futility of the human weapons of war is repeatedly emphasized since the Psalmist knows that salvation comes from the Lord. "The king is not saved by a mighty army; a warrior is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a false hope for victory; nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength. Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope for His lovingkindness, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine" (Ps. 33:16-19). Such optimistic assertions that salvation comes from the Lord reflect the Psalmist's sense of calm in the face of war and danger. "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? . . . Though a host encamp against me, my heart will not fear; though war arise against me, in spite of this I shall be confident" (Ps. 27:1a,3). Thus, for the Psalmist, salvation comes from the Lord.

Yahweh Destroys the Wicked

Yet how is it that this salvation is mediated? What form does it take? Salvation comes from the Lord in two complementary ways, as though they were two sides of the same coin. God destroys the wicked and defends the righteous. God destroys the wicked because they stand against all that for which He stands. Therefore "the LORD abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit" (Ps. 5:6; cf. 11:5). "On the wicked he will rain fiery coals

and burning sulphur; a scorching wind will be their lot" (Ps. 11:6 NIV; cf. Pss. 21:12; 73:16-20; 101:8). The Psalmist praises Yahweh for scattering His enemies with His "mighty arm" (Ps. 89:10).

While this destruction of the wicked is sometimes envisioned as being in the near future, at other times it is more apocalyptic in nature. The Psalter speaks of a day when God will clean house, so to speak, a day when He will judge the nations and destroy the wicked (Ps. 110:5-6).

Yahweh Delivers the Righteous

God delivers the righteous in the very act of destroying the wicked.⁹ Psalm 34 repeatedly affirms that God delivers the righteous in statements such as "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them. . . . The righteous cry and the LORD hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles. . . . Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the LORD delivers him out of them all" (34:7,17,19; cf. 35:9-10). These same sentiments are echoed in Ps. 37:39-40, "the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in time of trouble. And the LORD helps them, and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked, and saves them, because they take refuge in Him." Examples such as these could be multiplied many times over. The theology of the Psalms supports the notion that God delivers the righteous will destroying the wicked. It is a theme which emerges over and over again and one which is congruent with conventional wisdom literature.

It is precisely because the Psalmist has learned so well how God is supposed to act that he experiences such great frustration when Yahweh is conspicuously absent from the scene (Ps. 89:38-51). The divine warrior's delay in executing justice results in feelings of betrayal and abandonment. These reach their highest intensity at those times when the divine warrior seems to be acting completely contrary to how He was expected to act (Ps.

⁹Notice how often this was the case in the six reasons given in the previous chapter for Yahweh's warring.

44:17-26). The Psalmist cannot understand why the divine warrior is fighting against His people when He is supposed to be fighting for them. Even in those cases where Israel was rightly punished the Psalmist cannot make sense of why God has been so long in delivering them and restoring them. Thus we hear such anguished questions as, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning" (Ps. 22:1). "How long, O Lord? Wilt Thou forget me forever? How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?" (Ps. 13:1).¹⁰ There is a sense in many of the Psalms that the petitioner is saying, "God I remember the way you used to act, do it again!" Ultimately, what the Psalmist knows, that the Lord is a warrior and that salvation is from the Lord, only intensifies his desire for what he needs.

WHAT THE PSALMIST NEEDS

Deliverance Now!

The cry of the Psalmist is a cry for deliverance. "Arise, O LORD; save me, O my God!" (Ps. 3:7). "Deliver my soul from the sword" (Ps. 22:20a). "Look upon my enemies, for they are many; and they hate me with violent hatred. Guard my soul and deliver me; do not let me be ashamed, for I take refuge in Thee" (Ps. 25:19-20; cf. 143:9). The Psalter is full of such requests for God to deliver and protect. One of the more graphic of these requests is found in Ps. 144:5-8:

Bow Thy heavens, O LORD, and come down; touch the mountains, that they may smoke. Flash forth lightning and scatter them; send out Thine arrows and confuse them. Stretch forth Thy hand from on high; rescue me and deliver me out of great waters, out of the hand of aliens whose mouths speak deceit, and whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood.

Whatever the reason, when the Psalmist has been overcome by the enemy or is in danger

¹⁰Notice, however, that sometimes the divine warrior's delay is directly attributed to the people's waywardness. Thus, we read these pleading words in Ps. 81:13-14, "Oh that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would quickly subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries."

of being attacked He calls upon God to deliver him. He looks to God for help because he knows there is none other who can save. "O give us help against the adversary, for deliverance by man is in vain. Through God we shall do valiantly, and it is He who will tread down our adversaries (Ps. 60:11-12).

Cries for Justice

Yet, more than simply wanting or needing deliverance in a particular situation, what the Psalmist really craves is justice. The Psalmist desires God's justice to be done and His just government to be established. The Psalmist wants the righteous to be vindicated and longs for the day when the wicked will get what they deserve.

Give the Wicked What They Deserve

The Psalmist is often careful to point out how Israel's enemies are also God's enemies. In Ps. 83 the Psalmist reminds God that the nations hate Him and have made a covenant against Him in their plans to decimate the people of Israel. He calls upon God to "deal with them as with Midian" and others in days gone by. Recalling God's deliverance in the period of the Judges, he wants the divine warrior to rouse himself once again (83:9-12). The Psalmist entreats God earnestly saying,

O my God, make them like the whirling dust; like chaff before the wind. Like fire that burns the forest, and like a flame that sets the mountains on fire, so pursue them with Thy tempest, and terrify them with Thy storm. Fill their faces with dishonor, that they may seek Thy name, O LORD. Let them be ashamed and dismayed forever; and let them be humiliated and perish, that they may know that Thou alone, whose name is the LORD, art the Most High over all the earth (Ps. 83:13-18).

The Psalmist calls upon God to "Break the arm of the wicked and the evildoer" (Ps. 10:15). "O LORD God Almighty, the God of Israel, rouse yourself to punish all the nations; show no mercy to wicked traitors" (Ps. 59:5 NIV). The Psalmist desperately wants the wicked to get what they deserve and is confident that the divine warrior will destroy them in their wickedness (Ps. 94:23).

Save the Righteous

On the other hand, the Psalmist wants God to save and vindicate the righteous

person, often the petitioner himself. In graphic battle imagery one person made his request in these words, "Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me. Take hold of buckler and shield, and rise up for my help. Draw also the spear and the battle-axe to meet those who pursue me; say to my soul, 'I am your salvation.'" (Ps. 35:1-3). The Psalmist wants to be served justice and requests God to "lift up Thyself against the rage of my adversaries, and arouse Thyself for me. . . Vindicate me, O LORD, according to my righteousness and my integrity that is in me" (Ps. 7:6-8; cf. 26:1; 43:1; 54:1). Interestingly, God often saves and vindicates the needy and afflicted and those who are in that condition often have a special confidence that they will be delivered (Pss. 12:5; 35:10; 40:17; 70:5; 72:12).

SUMMARY

We began this chapter by noting the virtual absence of any reference to the divine warrior in the Wisdom Literature. Focusing instead upon the Psalter, we noted that this collection of worship material tells us both what the Psalmist knows about God as warrior and what the Psalmist needs from the same. The Psalmist knows that God is a warrior and that salvation only comes from God. Furthermore, he knows that in times past God has acted in such a way so that the wicked were destroyed while the righteous were delivered. Then, finding himself in some state of need, the Psalmist calls upon God to act once again as He did in the days of old. He needs to be delivered by the divine warrior and longs for the day when God will serve justice to all people. The Psalmist is eager for the wicked to get what they deserve while at the same time hoping for the vindication of the righteous.

Thus, the activity of the divine warrior in the Psalter is decidedly dual-sided; He both delivers and destroys. It is this divine warrior the Psalmist desires, and it is this divine warrior which we shall see in the most brilliant of colors as we look into the Prophets, the final section of the OT.

CHAPTER 5

PROPHETS: THE WARRIOR DESCRIBED

The Prophetic Books describe the divine warrior in the most vivid of colors. Judgment and salvation oracles alike portray the divine warrior in truly awesome imagery and a great deal of pictorial language is used to describe the activity of Yahweh as warrior. This is especially the case in the poetic sections of the Prophets, of which there are many. These colorful and graphic depictions bring us terrifyingly close to the divine warrior. Less frequent, though by no means absent, are the more abstract and strictly "factual" statements such as "God brought us out of Egypt." Instead, we are now thrust into the ring with the divine warrior, so to speak. We can see and hear Him coming. We can sense something of the terror His arrival inspires.

The images used here to describe this divine warrior par excellence are many and varied, attesting to the richness of the Biblical tradition. The following discussion attempts to examine many of the facets of this imagery in order to better understand how the ancient Israelites conceived of their God as a warrior. In so doing, we once again face the perennial difficulty of organization. How should this vast array of images be collated and systematized without constructing artificial categories into which all the data must neatly fit? Perhaps the best approach here is to examine a wide variety of different images to gain an overarching picture of how the prophets conceived of the divine warrior. While only a select number of references have been utilized in this process, these are representative and should provide an adequate background to aid in our understanding of this rich and ubiquitous OT image.

THE WAYS OF THE WARRIOR

The Deliverer Becomes the Destroyer

The prophetic literature again attests to the fact that Israel's warrior God is a deliverer. Yahweh is the One who has delivered His people from Egypt (Dan. 9:15; Hos. 12:13; Amos 3:1; Mic. 6:4). Yet, in spite of this deliverance, the people have not been

faithful to their God. Instead, they have wandered away. The prophets never seem to tire of painting this stark contrast between the good which God has done for His people and the evil which they have returned to Him. God delivered them from bondage and gave them a good land; the people forgot God and worshipped idols.

In essence, God asks the people, "How could you? After all I've done for you, how could you turn your backs on me?" This type of behavior was utterly inconsistent with God's graciousness on their behalf. After accusing the people of Israel of injustice, impropriety, and iniquity, God reminds them:

"Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, though his height was like the height of cedars and he was strong as the oaks; I even destroyed his fruit above and his root below. And it was I who brought you up from the land of Egypt, and I led you in the wilderness forty years that you might take possession of the land of the Amorite. Then I raised up some of your sons to be prophets and some of your young men to be Nazirites. Is this not so, O sons of Israel?" declares the LORD. "But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and you commanded the prophets saying, 'You shall not prophesy!'" (Amos 2:9-12).

Though God had done only good for the people they, by their actions, said they did not want to have anything to do with God. What follows is a graphic depiction of the utter helplessness of even the strongest soldiers when the divine warrior comes in judgment against them. These same sentiments are uttered through the prophet Hosea. "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt. . . . I cared for you in the desert, in the land of burning heat. When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; then they forgot me. So I will come upon them like a lion" (Hos 13:4-7a NIV).¹

Somewhat ironically, this punishment does not come *in spite of* Israel's election, it comes precisely *because of* Israel's election. Hence, there is a close connection between election and accountability. "You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). God will become an adversary to the very people He has delivered because they have forgotten and forsaken Him, and because they, of all people, should have known better (Amos 9:7-8a).

¹The image of the divine warrior as a lion will be explored later in this chapter.

As might be expected, the prophetic literature contains more of these pronouncements of God's warring activity *against* Israel than any other portion of the OT, even more than the Historical Books where we noted this to be the dominant image. These pronouncements are bold and forthright, coming as they do from the mouths of prophets who don't mince words. "Make no mistake about it," the prophets cry out to the people of Israel, "this divine warrior whom you know and love is coming to fight against you!" There is nothing tentative or reserved in the tone of these declarations of destruction. Israel is bad to the bone and must be punished. God will punish Israel's wickedness by raising up a nation to fight against the people of Israel. God will cause them to be delivered into enemy hands. Formerly *for* the people, God is now pitted *against* them and declares, "I will stretch out My hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Zep. 1:4; cf. Jer. 15:6). "I break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel" (Hos. 1:5). "I will deliver up the city [Samaria] and all it contains. . . I am going to raise up a nation against you . . . and they will afflict you from the entrance of Hamath to the brook of the Arabah" (Amos 6:8,14; cf. Ezek. 5:8; 16:27; Mic. 6:16). These are statements with which we become all too familiar when reading the Prophetic Books.

When God fights against his people He does so with the intention to purify them over against simply punishing them. In fact, God's warring against the people of Israel should have driven them back to Himself. Nevertheless, God says, "In vain I have struck your sons; they accepted no chastening" (Jer. 2:30; cf. Amos 4:10). Because of this stubborn refusal to return to God, the divine warrior resorted to the most devastating type of punishment imaginable: exile (Ezek. 12:8-16; 17:11-21).

Thus says the LORD God of Israel, "Behold, I am about to turn back the weapons of war which are in your hands, with which you are warring against the king of Babylon and the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the wall. . . . And I Myself shall war against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm, even in anger and wrath and great indignation. I shall also strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast; they will die of a great pestilence. Then afterwards," declares the LORD, "I shall give over Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and the people . . . into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and into the hand of their foes, and into the hand of those who seek their lives" (Jer. 21:4-7; cf. 20:4; 34:2).

God's warring activity against His people comes to a climax with statements like

these and others which explicitly state that God is going to send His people out of the land. Because of their gross transgressions, particularly idolatry, God would cause the people of Israel to "go into exile beyond Damascus" (Amos 5:27). The exile stands as the apex of God's warring activity against His people. It also represents the worst fate imaginable. Everybody in the ancient Near East knew that people who went into exile never came back! Exiled peoples had no hope of ever regaining autonomy. Their existence as a nation was over, finished.² Though recorded in the Historical Books, the theme of Israel/Judah in exile is played out in full force here (Hos. 9:15,17).

The Babylonian Exile was especially tragic for Israel since their worship of Yahweh was so intimately connected to the land, in particular, with Jerusalem and the temple. What is Israelite religion without a Davidic ruler on the throne? How could they worship God when they were unable to sacrifice in Jerusalem?³ What did the destruction of Jerusalem mean? Had God been defeated? Was He unconcerned? Had God abandoned them forever? Would He forgive them? These were the questions burning on the hearts and minds of many an exilic Jew.

In spite of their national defeat, these Jews did not believe that Yahweh had been defeated by Marduk or any of the other gods in the Babylonian pantheon. Instead, they finally began to understand that God had handed them over and caused them to be defeated before their enemies because of their sinfulness. This is perhaps most poignantly expressed in the Book of Lamentations. The writer of that book had no question in his mind about why his people had wound up where they were--they had sinned and were getting just what they deserved (Lam. 1:5,14; cf. Dan. 9:7). The more pressing question, however, was, "Would God forgive them?" Thus, the book ends on this uncertain note,

²Whereas in the Exodus God had brought them out of the land of Egypt into the land of Canaan (i.e. from enemy territory to security), now He is taking them out of the land of promise and sending them into the land of Babylon (i.e. from security to enemy territory). As such, the exile represents a reversal of God's original intentions for the people of Israel.

³For an especially vivid description of the sorrow the exiles felt and the tenacity to which they held on to their faith see Ps. 137.

"Restore us to Thee, O LORD, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old, unless Thou hast utterly rejected us, and art exceedingly angry with us (Lam. 5:21-22). The deliverer has become the destroyer and the nagging question which remains is, "Will He deliver yet again?"

Hope on the Other Side

Thankfully, judgment was not and is not God's final word. Mercy and forgiveness lay ahead. To our relief, the prophets are not all doom and gloom. Instead they engage in both criticizing and energizing, to use Walter Brueggemann's expression.⁴ Though there was no question that judgment was coming, equally certain was the promise of restoration. In short, there was hope on the other side of judgment.⁵

This hope primarily manifested itself in two ways. One the one hand, when God wars against His people he does so with a measure of restraint (Jer. 30:11). Though he will destroy His people, the good news is that he "will not totally destroy the house of Jacob" (Amos 9:8b). God's plan was not one aimed at total annihilation (Isa. 1:24-26).⁶ Obviously, if the divine warrior had completely and totally annihilated every last Israelite, hope on the other side of judgment would have been inconceivable. This restraint and the promise that a remnant would be preserved even after the divine warrior had passed through His people created hope (Isa. 10:20-23; Jer. 23:3; Ezek. 6:8).

Secondly, more than merely preserving a remnant from among those God has

⁴Walter Brueggemann, The Prophetic Imagination (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

⁵Interestingly, this hope extends even into the post-exilic period where we find Daniel and others delivered. The divine warrior is able to deliver even those persons who are in exile (Dan. 3:17,29; 6:16,26-27).

⁶This is not to minimize the thoroughness of the divine warrior's activity. We read these words in Amos 3:12a: "Thus says the LORD, 'Just as the shepherd snatches from the lion's mouth a couple of legs or a piece of an ear, so will the sons of Israel dwelling in Samaria be snatched away.'" In other words, there won't be anything left of the northern kingdom when Yahweh is through with it! Amos 9:1-4 is also a graphic depiction of the thoroughness of God's warring activity against the sinful nation of Israel. "They will not have a fugitive who will flee, or a refugee who will escape." When the divine warrior comes to town people can run but they cannot hide.

judged and punished, He will also forgive and restore them and will bring them back to the land of promise (Jer. 30:17-18; Zec. 8:7-8; 10:6).⁷ Thus Micah could exclaim, "Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:18-19). This hope of restoration causes the prophet Zephaniah to proclaim, "The LORD has taken away His judgments against you, He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you will fear disaster no more. . . . The LORD your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior" (Zep. 3:15,17a). The destroyer once again became the deliverer, insuring hope on the other side of judgment.⁸

The motivation for this deliverance is compassion. God "will have compassion on the house of Judah and deliver them by the LORD their God, and will not deliver them by bow, sword, battle, horses, or horsemen" (Hos 1:7; cf. Isa. 14:1). Hope of deliverance is sometimes contingent upon the people's return to the Lord (Jer. 15:19-20), other times upon their trust (Jer. 39:18). Yet, the ultimate reason that any are delivered is because of God's lovingkindness. "'As I have watched over them to pluck up, to break down, to overthrow, to destroy, and to bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,' declares the LORD" (Jer 31:28). The destroyer is now the restorer.

The Divine Warrior Judges the Nations

While Israel experiences hope on the other side of judgment, the nations that have dealt wickedly with the people of God can expect to be judged. "For behold, in those

⁷One might ask whether such hope on the other side of judgment was reserved solely for the people of Israel. The answer appears to be "No." There are indications that even some of those people groups which God judges will be preserved and restored by him. Thus, for example, we read about a time when God "shall restore the fortunes of Elam" (Jer. 49:39).

⁸Not only would Israel be restored, God would allow her to emerge from there strong and fully able to defeat her oppressors. Therefore God exhorts her saying, "Arise and thresh, daughter of Zion, for your horn I will make iron and your hoofs I will make bronze, that you may pulverize many peoples" (Mic. 4:13a).

days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all the nations, and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat. Then I will enter into judgment with them there on behalf of My people and My inheritance, Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations" (Joel 3:1-2a). Large sections of the Prophetic Books are devoted to judgment oracles against the nations (Isa. 13-24; Ezk. 25-32). God will destroy the Philistines (Jer. 47:4; Zep. 2:5; Zec. 9:5-6) and the Assyrians (Zep. 2:13). He will slay the Ethiopians with His sword (Zep 2:12) and will "break the bow of Elam" (Jer. 49:35-38). God is against the king of Egypt (Ezk. 30:22). He will utterly decimate Edom by the sword (Isa 34:1ff.; cf. 63:1ff.), and will burn the cities of Babylon (Jer. 50:29-32; cf. 51:1ff.).⁹

Regarding this judgment upon the nations one might say, "what goes around comes around!" Those who dealt wickedly with Israel would be dealt with accordingly. Obadiah, a largely unknown prophet in the OT, provides us with an excellent example of this is his short judgment oracle against Edom. Edom has dealt violently with the people of Israel (1:10) and the Edomites have become proud,¹⁰ thinking themselves to be invincible. Nevertheless, the Lord will make Edom small among the nations. He will bring her down and will destroy her wise men (1:2,4,8; cf. Jer. 49:14-19). Obadiah proclaims to the people of Edom, "the day of the LORD draws near on all the nations. As you have done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head" (1:15). Edom will get a taste of its own medicine.

This same idea of "retributive justice" can be seen in Jeremiah's words to the people of Israel regarding all those who rise up against them. "Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured; and all your adversaries, every one of them, shall go into captivity; and those who plunder you shall be for plunder, and all who prey upon you I will give for

⁹One of the most graphic accounts of God's warring against the nations is found in Ezekiel's prophecy against Gog in Ezek. 38-39.

¹⁰The pride of the nations is often their nemesis. While it is true that God often uses them to judge His people, they consistently fail to recognize this and arrogantly believe it is their strength alone which has caused the victory. See e.g., the ruinous pride of Assyria and Babylon (Isa. 10:5-19; 14:3-27).

prey" (Jer. 30:16). God will judge and punish those who stand opposed to Him and His people. Both God's ability to judge the nations and His ability to use the nations as instruments of His judgment attest to His radical sovereignty.

The Day of the Lord

Much of what has been said in the preceding section about the judgment of the nations could be subsumed under the heading "the day of the Lord." Apparently, the day of the Lord was initially thought to be that day when God would enter into judgment against all of Israel's enemies. Miller refers to this as "the apocalyptic holy war" utilized "for the purpose of bringing about Yahweh's judgement of the nations."¹¹ As we shall see, this later got turned on its head so that the ones being judged were not Israel's enemies, but Israel herself. But first, what kind of a day will this be?

The day of the Lord will be a day unlike any other day. "There has never been anything like it, nor will there be again after it to the years of many generations" (Joel 2:2b). It will be a day of battle such as the world has not seen since nor will see again (Joel 2:1-11; 3:9-16a). On this day things will happen which have never happened before (Joel 2:31). "It will be a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations" (Ezek. 30:3b; cf. Joel 2:2a). It is a day of "destruction from the Almighty" (Joel 1:15). It will be a day of desolation, a day to be greeted by great weeping and wailing (Isa. 13:6; Ezek. 30:2). The day comes "with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation" (Isa 13:9).

The average Israelite seems to have been all for the day of the Lord. This was the day when their enemies would "get theirs." God would finally punish those abominable Ammonites, those miserable Moabites, and those awful Edomites. He would deal once and for all with the Assyrians and the Babylonians. This was good news! Or was it? Some of the prophets said "Wait a minute. Are you sure you want the day of the Lord to come? Is it really going to be good news for you in light of the way you have been living and behaving?" Amos makes it painfully clear that this day is not going to be a good one

¹¹Miller, "Divine Council," 104.

for the people of Israel.

Alas, you who are longing for the day of the LORD, for what purpose will the day of the LORD be to you? It will be darkness and not light; as when a man flees from a lion, and a bear meets him, or goes home, leans his hand against the wall, and a snake bites him. Will not the day of the LORD be darkness instead of light, even gloom with no brightness in it? (Amos 5:18-20).

The prophet Zephaniah dispelled any false notions of a glorious day of the Lord by prophesying these words against the inhabitants of Jerusalem:

Near is the great day of the LORD, near and coming very quickly. . . . In it the warrior cries out bitterly. A day of wrath is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day of destruction and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet and battle cry, against the fortified cities and the high corner towers. And I will bring distress on men, so that they will walk like the blind, because they have sinned against the LORD; and their blood will be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung (1:14-17).

As Gelston rightly comments, "The day of the Yahweh will bring, not so much the judgment of Israel's enemies to her own satisfaction, as judgment of Israel herself."¹²

Finally, it should be mentioned with regard to the day of the Lord that God's warring activity on this day was believed to be the war to end all wars. The purpose of this "day" is not to create more strife or greater turmoil but, instead, to abolish war once and for all and to usher in an age of unprecedented peace. Yahweh alone as divine warrior can and will do just that (Hos 2:18). There is no other way to establish genuine, lasting peace (Mic. 4:3-4; Zec. 8:1-10; cf. 14:1-11).¹³

THE IMAGES OF THE WARRIOR

The foregoing discussion has focused upon the ways of the warrior, noting particularly *what* He does. We are ready to look more specifically at some of the images of the warrior.¹⁴ Here our interest is to observe *how* the divine warrior does what He

¹²Gelston, 330.

¹³For the appropriation of the day of the Lord motif in NT thought see 1Thess. 5:2; 2Thess. 2:1-2; 2Pet. 3:10.

¹⁴As we embark upon this examination of some of the most graphic images of the divine warrior in all the OT, we do well to remind ourselves that this is but one of the many images used by the OT writers to describe God. While the prophet Isaiah, for example, depicts the divine warrior coming from battle with blood

does. Black and white portraits of the divine warrior give way to those which are multi-colored as the pitch is raised to its highest intensity. Here we are allowed to see the divine warrior in all His splendor and all His terror. We begin by commenting on one of the most intriguing and forceful images of Yahweh as warrior, namely, the lion.

The Roaring Lion

The image of a lion is used in a variety of ways by the prophets. The image of a lion, when used metaphorically in the OT, represents great strength and destructive power. Hence, the Psalmist refers to a wicked person as "a lion that is eager to tear . . . a young lion lurking in hiding places" (Ps. 17:12). Sometimes, lions are used to describe foreign kings and their countries who have attacked others (Jer. 2:15).¹⁵ Pharaoh, for example, compared himself to a "young lion" (Ezek. 32:2). Other times the imagery is used more specifically to refer to certain nations which are coming to destroy Judah (Jer. 4:7; 5:6; 50:17; Joel 1:6).

When Yahweh goes out to fight against a nation, it is not unusual to discover Him being compared to a lion. God says, "I will be like a lion to Ephraim, and like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will tear to pieces and go away, I will carry away, and there will be none to deliver" (Hosea 5:14; cf. 13:7-8; cf. Jer. 25:30,38). There is nothing tame or timid about this image. The Israelites are not merely going to receive a slap on the hand or a warning. Yahweh, the divine warrior, is going to come out against them as a roaring lion.¹⁶

As we have come to expect by now, this image is double-edged. Not only will God destroy as a lion would destroy, He will also protect His people with the strength of a

stained garments (ch. 63; cf. 59:15b-21), he also speaks of God as the "Prince of Peace" and the suffering servant (9:6; 50:4ff.; 52:13-53:12). It is only as these varying depictions are held in creative tension that we most fully understand the true nature and character of God.

¹⁵It is interesting to think of Daniel and the lions' den in light of all this. See Dan. 6.

¹⁶Additionally, sometimes God brings a lion upon people as a means of judgment as in the case of Moab (Isa. 15:9).

lion. God uses this imagery to encourage the people not to seek aid from Egypt; they do not need it when they have God as their warrior. He is fully able to protect them. "As a lion or a young lion growls over his prey, and when a band of shepherds is called forth against him is not terrified by their shouting or daunted at their noise, so the Lord of hosts will come down to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill." (Isa. 31:4 RSV). This is a powerful image of the divine warrior and is apt metaphor to describe the ferocity of His fighting.¹⁷

The Armed Military Man

In those instances where God fighting is described in more "human" terms, He has a vast array of weapons at his disposal. His arsenal is comprised of both physical and natural armaments. The former, what we would call conventional weapons of warfare, receive greater attention in the prophetic literature than elsewhere in the OT. They will be the focus here.¹⁸

The Sword of the Lord

Swords were part of the standard machinery of war throughout Israel's history. This made it quite natural for the Biblical writers to speak metaphorically about war by making reference to the sword. This use of "sword" (i.e. as a "code word" for war) is sometimes linked to the image of fire (Isa. 66:16; Ezek. 23:25; Nah. 3:15). Other times it is connected with the destructive forces of famine and plague (Ezek. 5:12,17; 6:11,12; 7:15; 14:21).

There are four references in the OT which specifically refer to the "sword of the LORD" (1Chron. 21:12; Isa. 34:6, Jer. 12:12; 47:6). The first, located in the Historical Books, refers to the punishment David choose for himself as punishment from the Lord for his sinful census taking (1 Chron. 21:14). In Isaiah, the sword of the Lord refers to

¹⁷This imagery extends into the NT and is applied to both Satan (1 Pet. 5:8) and Jesus (Rev. 5:5).

¹⁸For a discussion on how God fights by natural means see Chapter 3 of this present study.

judgment upon the Edomites.

My sword is satiated in heaven, behold it shall descend for judgment upon Edom, and upon the people whom I have devoted to destruction. The sword of the LORD is filled with blood, it is sated with fat, with the blood of lambs and goats, with the fat of the kidneys of rams. For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah, and a great slaughter in the land of Edom (Isa. 34:5-6).

The references in Jeremiah are to the destruction of the men of Anathoth and to the Philistine, respectively. In light of the power of Yahweh's sword, it comes as no surprise to hear the Psalmist ask God to use His sword to deliver him from the wicked (Ps. 17:13).

Throughout the prophetic literature Yahweh is repeatedly depicted as bringing the sword upon people.¹⁹ When interpreting the vision of the plumb line, God says to Amos, "with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam" (Amos 7:9 NIV; cf. 9:1,4). To the Ethiopians God says, "you also . . . will be slain by My sword" (Zep 2:12). God "will bring a sword" on the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Ezek. 11:8) and the "mountains of Israel" (Ezek. 6:3). To Jerusalem and "the land of Israel" (i.e. Judah) God says, "Behold, I am against you; and I shall draw My sword out of its sheath and cut off from you the righteous and the wicked. Because I shall cut off from you the righteous and the wicked, therefore My sword shall go forth from its sheath against all flesh from south to north (Ezek. 21:3-4).²⁰

A Bent Bow

Far less frequent than these descriptions of Yahweh wielding His sword are those instances where He bends His bow.²¹ The prophet Isaiah described Yahweh's warring in this way: "He delivers up nations before him, and subdues kings. He makes them like dust with his sword, as the wind-driven chaff with his bow" (Isa. 41:2; cf. Hab. 3:9). The Psalmist was convinced that God would destroy all of His enemies. He writes, "For you

¹⁹Notice also that sometimes God strengthens the aggressors by putting His sword in their hands (Ezek. 30:24-25).

²⁰In a somewhat more generic fashion, sometimes the Lord simply pronounces that the judgment that will befall people will be from the sword (Jer. 11:22; 15:9; 46:10; 50:35).

²¹Connected to this is the idea of God using his arrows as well (e.g. Pss. 7:13; 64:7; Zech. 9:13-14).

will put them to flight; you will aim at their faces with your bows" (Ps. 21:12 RSV). The Psalmist also knew that the one who was obstinate was an enemy of the Lord. "If a man does not repent, He will sharpen His sword; He has bent His bow and made it ready. He has also prepared for Himself deadly weapons; He makes His arrows fiery shafts" (Ps. 7:12-13). The Jews who were carried off into Babylonian captivity had these words to say about their warrior God: "He bent His bow and set me as a target for the arrow. He made the arrows of His quiver to enter into my inward parts" (Lam 3:12-13; cf. 2:4; Job 30:11). As with all of the warrior's weapons, they are used for those who are for God, and against those who are against God.

A Disarmed Enemy

Rather than using His own weapons, the divine warrior sometimes fights by taking the weapons of His enemies or by weakening them in some way. "Behold, I am against Pharaoh king of Egypt and will break his arms, both the strong and the broken; and I will make the sword fall from his hand" (Ezek. 30:22). In similar fashion God breaks "the bow of Elam" (Jer. 49:35). God disarms the proud Assyrians by sending "a wasting disease" among their warriors (Isa. 10:16; cf. 37:36) and burns their chariots (Nah. 2:13; cf. Ps. 46:9). When God is going to defend Jerusalem He declares, "In that day . . . I will strike every horse with bewilderment, and his rider with madness. But I will watch over the house of Judah, while I strike every horse of the peoples with blindness" (Zec 12:4; cf. Hag. 2:22). Passages like these and others demonstrate how the divine warrior fights in a "subversive" way, by disarming His enemies.

The Consuming Fire

One of the most common images connected with Yahweh as warrior is fire.²² This comes as no great surprise since fire was often a very real part of the historical wars of the ancient Near East. When a king conquered another city it was not uncommon for him to

²²This image is also found in the Psalter. See Pss. 21:9; 78:21,63; 97:3.

pillage it and then set it on fire.²³ Such an act would deter any survivors from quickly returning and refortifying the city. When Hazeal, king of Damascus, asks Elisha what he is crying about the prophet offers this response: "Because I know the evil that you will do to the sons of Israel: *their strongholds you will set on fire*, and their young men you will kill with the sword, and their little ones you will dash in pieces, and their women with child you will rip up" (2 Kings 8:12, emphasis mine).

This theme of fire is so common in the prophetic literature that it occurs in every one of the Prophetic Books except Jonah and Haggai! An excellent example of the pervasiveness of this theme is its occurrence in each of the seven judgment oracles in the first two chapters of Amos. God will send fire upon the house of Hazeal, the wall of Gaza, the wall of Tyre, Teman, the wall of Rabbah, Moab, and Judah (Amos 1:4,7,10,12,14; 2:2,5). Interestingly, the only nation *not* receiving this punishment is Israel, though the rest of the book makes it painfully clear that the threat of it constantly remains (Amos 5:6; 7:4). "The LORD will execute judgment by fire" (Isa. 66:16a). He will burn the cities of Babylon (Jer. 50:32). The divine warrior says, "I shall send fire upon Magog and those who inhabit the coastlands in safety; and they will know that I am the LORD" (Ezek. 39:6). Even Israel will experience this fire from above. "For Israel has forgotten his Maker and built palaces; and Judah has multiplied fortified cities, but I will send a fire on its cities that it may consume its palatial dwellings" (Hos. 8:14). From these and other references it is obvious that fire was a potent weapon in the hands of the divine warrior.²⁴

²³For some Biblical examples of cities being set on fire see Josh. 11:11; Judg. 1:8.

²⁴In the Book of Revelation, fire is used by the beast as a deceptive sign. "And he performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men" (Rev. 13:13). The other place where fire is said to come down from heaven aligns itself perfectly with the OT notion. The picture here is of Satan gathering all of the nations for war. "And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Rev. 20:9-10). On a less apocalyptic note, one also is reminded of the time when the impetuous sons of Zebedee wanted to "command fire to come down from heaven and consume" those Samaritans who didn't receive Jesus (Luke 9:54).

The Earth Shaker

When Yahweh comes to do battle the earth is greatly affected. The world literally falls to pieces before the coming of the divine warrior, so terrible and awesome is His arrival. Before looking more specifically at the Biblical evidence for this, we must first determine how it is He comes. What is His means of transportation?

A Majestic Horse?

Interesting, Yahweh is never depicted as riding on a horse. In fact, only once is there any reference made to Yahweh even having a horse.²⁵ In Zec. 10:3 God says, "My anger is kindled against the shepherds, and I will punish the male goats; for the LORD of hosts has visited His flock, the house of Judah, and will make them like His majestic horse in battle." Perhaps one of the reasons God is not otherwise depicted as riding on a horse is because He is better known as the rider of the clouds.

Riding on the Clouds

The Biblical connection between God and the clouds is extremely fascinating and could be profitably explored at great length, though here we must content ourselves with only the briefest of comments. Throughout the Exodus event, God's presence is often identified with a cloud. God leads His people in a pillar of cloud, and it is a cloud, representing the glory of the Lord which fills the tabernacle and later the temple. This cloud imagery continues on into the NT where we find God speaking from a cloud at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration. Moreover, it is in a cloud that Jesus ascends after His resurrection and when he comes again "we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them [the dead in Christ] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess 4:17).

More directly related to this study are those instances when God's presence in the

²⁵This is certainly *not* the case in the Book of Revelation. There Jesus is repeatedly pictured as sitting on a horse (Rev. 6:2; 19:11,19,21).

cloud is directly related to His activity as divine warrior. For example, God fights against the Egyptian army as they are attempting to cross the Red Sea as he looks "through the pillar of fire and cloud" (Exod. 14:24). There are also some references which suggest that God comes to battle riding on a cloud.²⁶ "Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud, and is about to come to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them" (Isa. 19:1; cf. Ps. 68:33-34; Ezek. 1:4).²⁷

Sometimes the clouds are depicted as chariots. In Ps. 104:3 we read that God "makes the clouds His chariot; He walks upon the wings of the wind." In spite of the relatively few references to Yahweh's own personal chariot, the divine warrior has no lack of chariots. "The chariots of God are myriads, thousands upon thousands" (Ps. 68:17a). Isaiah makes a brief reference to Yahweh's chariots coming, "like the whirlwind" (Isa. 66:15). The riders of these chariots may refer to that part of the host of heaven which fights alongside of Yahweh when He goes to battle.²⁸ Thus, it seems best to understand that God arrives on the scene of battle via a cloud-chariot of some sort.

Yet, regardless of how He comes, the natural world is directly affected and goes into convulsions. When the divine warrior comes in judgment "the mountains will melt under Him, and the valleys will be split, like wax before the fire, like water poured down a steep place" (Mic. 1:4). The following is a terrifying picture of God coming down and destroying Ninevah:

A jealous and avenging God is the LORD; the LORD is avenging and wrathful. The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies. The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. In whirlwind and

²⁶It is well known that Baal was referred to as the rider of the clouds. It seems that the Hebrews have borrowed this expression to set the record straight! "Oh, yes," they say, "we know the rider of clouds. His name is Yahweh." For an alternative position, arguing that the entire divine warrior concept is actually Baalistic, see Carola Kloos, Yhwh's Combat With the Sea: A Canaanite Tradition in the Religion of Israel (Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1986).

²⁷See also Dan. 7:13, a passage which Jesus applied to himself (Mt. 26:64).

²⁸Evidence for this is not abundant, in spite of the great deal of attention it has received in some divine warrior studies. The passages usually referred to include, 2 Kings 6:17; Joel 2:11; 3:11. In 2 Kings 6:17, the mountain at Dothan "was full of horses and chariots of fire" (cf. 7:6). In Joel 2:11 reference is made to the army of the Lord and "His camp." Joel 3:11 is a request for Yahweh to "bring down" His "mighty ones."

storm is His way, and clouds are the dust beneath His feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; He dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither; the blossoms of Lebanon wither. Mountains quake because of Him, and the hills dissolve; indeed the earth is upheaved by His presence, the world and all the inhabitants in it. Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken up by Him (Nah 1:2-6).

A similar example is found in Hab. 3:3-12.

God comes from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. . . . His radiance is like the sunlight; He has rays flashing from His hand, and there is the hiding of His power. Before Him goes pestilence, and plague comes after Him. He stood and surveyed the earth; He looked and startled the nations. Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered, the ancient hills collapsed. His ways are everlasting. . . . The mountains saw Thee and quaked; the downpour of waters swept by. The deep uttered forth its voice, it lifted high its hands. Sun and moon stood in their places; they went away at the light of Thine arrows, at the radiance of Thy gleaming spear. In indignation Thou didst march through the earth; in anger Thou didst trample the nations.

These theophanies cause the natural world to languish.²⁹ When Yahweh, the divine warrior, arrives on the scene, the whole world takes note. These references to His coming and His fighting are both great and terrible. Yet, they leave us asking, "What does this all mean?" How are we to understand, let alone relate to such an awesome warrior? We devote the second half of the study to these questions as we "interpret the image."

SUMMARY

We began this chapter by noting some of the ways of the warrior as described in the Prophets. We discovered that though Israel's deliverer had become her destroyer, He didn't destroy her utterly. The prophets also make it unmistakably clear that the nations of the world will likewise be held accountable for their misdeeds. They, along with Israel, will be judged on the day of the Lord.

We then considered a variety of images associated with the divine warrior, images such as a roaring lion, an armed military man, the consuming fire, and the earth shaker. We noted that Yahweh has a variety of weapons at his disposal such as the sword, the bow, and fire. It was also observed that the divine warrior is sometimes depicted as coming to the battle on a cloud-chariot and that His coming always precipitated dramatic

²⁹Much of this divine warrior imagery is apocalyptic.

response from the natural world.

If nothing else, this chapter should help us appreciate the immense richness and variety with which the divine warrior image was employed by the prophet imagination. There was no monochromatic description. They paint with the most brilliant and communicative colors at their disposal. Having concluded this Biblical survey of the material, we now turn to the interpretation of this multifaceted and rather complex image with the hope of gaining some understanding of what it means and how it can be appropriated into the life and ministry of the Church.

PART 2

INTERPRETING THE IMAGE

CHAPTER 6

THE PROBLEM DEFINED

Starting with this chapter, we begin to focus our attention more specifically on the meaning and interpretation of the divine warrior theme in the OT. This is certainly not an easy task. The range of opinions on this matter is such that one doubts if it is even possible to talk about anything like a general consensus. This diversity of opinion is fueled by the diversity of questions brought to bear on the subject at hand. Even a cursory look at the secondary literature reveals that those engaged in the discussion do not all ask the same questions. For example, while some are interested in Yahweh's role as warrior as it relates to certain ancient Near Eastern "parallels," others content themselves with the Biblical data and the implications this material has for the modern reader. Since this study is more concerned with the latter, the purpose of this chapter is to articulate more clearly the nature of the problem which the image of God as a warrior in the OT presents to many thoughtful readers of the Biblical text today. By doing this, we will be able to proceed more profitably, avoiding those tangential issues which ultimately fail to deal with the crux of the problem.

A TROUBLING IMAGE

One reason that the vast amount of martial material in the OT is troubling to many Christians is because such material *appears* to give divine sanction to killing and violence. This is certainly how many have understood it. The spotted history of the last two millennia have witnessed many groups, both "Christian" and otherwise, who have pressed the OT texts into the service of their particular agenda.¹ One needs only to remember the

¹This deeply troubles Susan Niditch who writes, in part, to set the record straight. In the opening pages of her book War in the Hebrew Bible Niditch mentions several more recent examples of people and groups who have utilized the OT language of war to validate their own engagement in military conflicts. See esp. pp. 3-5.

infamous Crusades as case in point.² Such brutality offends our moral sensibilities. We are shocked and horrified to find within the pages of our sacred Scriptures a God who not only condones war but actively participates in it. To put it slightly differently, even more troubling than a God who sanctions war is One who is a warrior Himself. As Walter Kaiser Jr. has rightly pointed out, "it is Yahweh's involvement with war in the Old Testament that poses the key problem for modern readers."³ Likewise, at the end of his long chapter "Yahweh: Warrior God," Albert Winn has keenly observed, "The main problem is not that the *people* of God were warriors, but that the Old Testament affirms that *God* is a warrior."⁴ What is so deeply troubling is not simply that God would command and thereby condone the total extermination of certain people groups but that he himself would actually participate in the slaying. Hence, it is not surprising that this depiction of God has been referred to as the "skandalon of the Old Testament."⁵

To be even more precise, "the problem becomes most acute in the question of the wars of conquest."⁶ Though the image of Yahweh as warrior is firmly rooted in the Exodus tradition, this image in the early period of Israel's existence (i.e. pre-Conquest) is generally not as troubling as those more disturbing references in the Historical Books which seem to portray a merciless and ruthless God bent on destruction. "For many Christians the most objectionable depiction of Yahweh and Israel as warlike comes in the stories of Joshua which describe an all-Israel military campaign to seize Canaanite land and annihilate the population."⁷

²For a very helpful and succinct discussion of the way in which the OT has been used to legitimate warfare, see Chapter 2, "The Old Testament's Legacy of War" in Craigie's Problem of War. His chapter explores how those of Islamic, Christian, and Jewish faith, respectively, have utilized OT themes of war and violence to promote their particular concerns.

³Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Toward Old Testament Ethics, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 176.

⁴Winn, 65, emphasis mine.

⁵Miller, "God the Warrior," 40.

⁶Craigie, "Man of Wars," 183.

⁷Bruce C. Birch, "Old Testament Foundations for Peacemaking in the Nuclear Era," Christian

This image of a divine warrior stands in stark contrast to the man from Nazareth who preached about turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies.⁸ This portrait of God in the OT seems to contradict the teaching of Jesus which emphasizes forgiveness and mercy. What are we to make of all this? Is it possible to read the OT responsibly and adhere to a position of non-violent resistance? Still more problematic, what does such warlike imagery suggest about the nature and character of God? What kind of God would drown the Egyptians in the Red Sea? What kind of God would demand the total annihilation of whole populations of people, leaving no survivors, not even women and children? Is it possible that the warring Yahweh is really the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? These are important questions which demand our attention. Nevertheless, they must put on hold for the time being as we turn now to explore some preliminary issues.

PRIOR QUESTIONS

Determining what the Israelites believed about God as warrior requires us to first address certain prior questions. How these questions are answered will largely determine how the activity of Yahweh as a divine warrior in the OT is understood. These questions include, though are not limited to the following:

1. What is the nature of revelation?
2. What is the OT?
3. How do the two testaments relate to each other?

Regrettably, these questions can only be explored in the most cursory and unsatisfactory manner here. Nevertheless, it is hoped that by raising these questions to a

Century 102, no. 38 (1985): 1118. As Bergant puts it, "The conquest narratives present an even greater dilemma for those concerned about war language, since they depict aggressive campaigns, and it is here that the image of God the warrior and the theme of Yahweh war are the most forceful," (1994), 98.

⁸While this apparent difficulty between the testaments is frequently noted in the literature, much less attention has been given to what might be called a more immediate "problem," namely, that the OT's warrior God is also described as "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness" (Exod. 34:6). This pushes the question to a deeper level and forces us to ask how this data may be reconciled not simply between the testaments but within the OT itself.

level of consciousness the reader will become aware of their crucial importance in the interpretation of the divine warrior motif in the OT.

First, what is the nature of revelation? For some, there is no such thing; the Biblical texts are nothing more than a human production. Others, having a relatively "low" view of revelation concede that while God has revealed Himself in certain events, the Bible's recording of those events is less than accurate. This then makes it difficult (if not impossible) to ever know what it is that God actually revealed about Himself. Finally, there are those who have a "high" view of revelation. These people believe that the transcendent God has revealed Himself in acts of history which have been interpreted by the prophetic word. Adherents of this position will obviously find the war texts to be of greater revelatory and theological value than those who either discount the possibility of revelation or conceive of it in rather watered-down terms.

Second, what is the OT? This question is not unrelated to the previous one. Is the OT merely a piece of human literature or is it the revelation of God? If the former position is adopted, the divine warrior is understood as something of a creative fiction to justify Israel's thirst for territorial acquisition. The following chapters will amply illustrate that this is the approach of many scholars today. But if the latter is the case, if the OT is the revelation of God, then we must try to understand what this tells us about the nature and character of a God who acts this way and who repeatedly chooses to reveal Himself on the field of battle.

Third, how do the two testaments relate to each other? Paul Hanson quotes Rudolf Bultmann, Friederich Baumgärtel, and Franz Hesse as examples of those who find there to be radical discontinuity between the OT and the NT.⁹ Those who sense a real gulf between the testaments are much more ready and willing to dismiss the images of the divine warrior in the OT as primitive and outdated. Yet those who believe there to be great congruence between the testaments are rather adamant about saying that the God of the OT is the same as the God of the NT. Birch says, "We forget how insistent was Jesus

⁹Hanson, "War and Peace," 342-3.

himself that this God witnessed to us in the Hebrew Scriptures was indeed the God who sent him, and who is both Creator and Redeemer."¹⁰ In the words of Ben Ollenburger, "the New Testament is consistent and unequivocal that the one whom Jesus calls Father is none other than Israel's God."¹¹ Those who adopt this type of wholistic approach will take the OT witness to the divine warrior more seriously.

Finally, we must mention one other interpretive matter which greatly affects the way in which one deals with the war texts in the OT, namely, how Israel entered the land of Canaan. Did the Israelites settle the land by conquest, by peaceful infiltration, or by peasant revolt? These represent the three major views espoused by scholars today. As Bergant has rightly observed, "The position taken relative to these three theories will significantly affect the way war stories are understood."¹² The person who uses historical reconstructions to explain Israel's presence in the land will understand the nature and meaning of the material radically differently than the one who more or less takes the Conquest narratives at face value.¹³ Thus, throughout the remainder of this study we must continually remember that the answers given to these and other prior questions greatly influence the way in which the divine warrior motif is interpreted.

A CONTEMPORARY CRISIS?

Another issue we must deal with is whether this "troubling imagery" was, in fact,

¹⁰Birch, 1115.

¹¹Ben C. Ollenburger, "Peace and God's Action against Chaos in the Old Testament," in The Church's Peace Witness, ed. Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 71. Cf. Hanson, "War and Peace," 344-345. Hanson argues strongly for the need to see the OT and the NT as a coherent whole and to interpret them in light of each other.

¹²Bergant, "Yahweh: A Warrior God?" (1994), 94.

¹³For a brief summary of the three major "theories" of how the people of Israel settled in the land see, Bernhard W. Anderson, "Mendenhall Disavows Paternity: Says He Didn't Father Gottwald's Marxist Theory," Bible Review 2, no. 2 (1986): 46-49. Anderson deals primarily with the peasant revolt model and points out that even though Mendenhall and Gottwald adopt the same model, Mendenhall adamantly rejects the suggestion that his ideas spawned those of Gottwald. Anderson concludes by suggesting that Israel's settlement of Canaan might possibly contain something of all three of these views.

troubling to ancient Israel. Is it merely a modern difficulty which has been exported into and forced upon the text? Did Israel's participation in war and her corresponding understanding of God as warrior raise ethical questions in the mind of the average Israelite or is the discomfort many Christians feel when reading these texts something foreign to the Hebrew mindset?

How these questions are answered has a direct bearing on the way in which the war texts of the Old Testament are read and the image of God as warrior understood. For example, if it is believed God's warring presented no moral difficulty to the Israelites, war being part and parcel of their existence, one reads the war texts through a certain set of lenses. On the other hand, if one concludes that Israel was troubled by its bloody history, a rather different approach will be taken to elucidate the theological meaning of the text.

So again we ask, did the practice of war present any moral difficulty to the Israelites? Those who think not contend that the Biblical witness gives no indication that the people of Israel were troubled by their participation in war and warlike activities. It certainly does not seem that the Israelites were especially concerned about justifying the image of Yahweh as warrior. Peter Craigie, a proponent of this view, believes that war presented no moral difficulty for either the ancient warrior who fought in battle or the ancient writer who compiled the traditions. His reasons are twofold. He first argues that the Israelite warriors would have had no ethical dilemma since "the 'ethics' of any particular situation was determined by its relationship to the Covenant, and war, as a means towards the fulfilling of the Covenant, could not be thought of as unethical."¹⁴ Secondly, since the purpose of those who compiled the accounts was primarily theological, for them "war was just one of the situations in which the meaning of faith was expressed, for in war God met with man and acted on his behalf."¹⁵ War was simply a part of Israelite life and as such required theological interpretation. It did not, however,

¹⁴Craigie, "Man of Wars," 185.

¹⁵Ibid.

present a theological problem for the Israelite.¹⁶ It is worth emphasizing that while Craigie denies war to have been a theological problem for Israel, he still maintains that Israel's experience of war and her imagery of God as warrior had theological significance.

T.R. Hobbs, while agreeing with Craigie on the former point, denies him the latter. Working from a sociological framework, Hobbs uses the title of Craigie's book, The Problem of War in the Old Testament, and faults him for not answering the question raised by that title, namely, "For whom is warfare in the Old Testament a problem?" He continues, "It is clear from a reading of the Old Testament itself that the act of war was *not* a problem for the ancient Israelites. The Old Testament is full of examples of warfare, and there is no evidence to suggest that warfare *per se* is regarded as even a necessary evil. It is taken for granted as a part of life."¹⁷ He argues that any construing of the OT material which suggests warfare was an ethical problem for the Israelites is anachronistic.¹⁸

Hobbs is even more disturbed by those studies which attempt to speak theologically about the martial material in the OT. As far as he is concerned, it is basically impossible to ever write a theology of warfare in the OT. "What we are dealing with here is not a 'theology' of warfare, or of anything else, for that matter, but shared and sometimes conflicting attitudes to the social institution of warfare."¹⁹ Thus, Hobbs will argue that there is little if any theological value to be gleaned from the practice of warfare in Israel.

Many find such arguments unconvincing. Proponents of this view disagree with

¹⁶For another representative of this position see G. E. Wright, The Old Testament and Theology, 121-150. Though not discussing it explicitly, Wright also maintains that Yahweh as divine warrior posed no ethical problem for the people of Israel. They simply understood this role of the divine warrior to be the means by which the "Divine Suzerain" exercised his control over the world. Those who were rightly aligned to Yahweh received his protection and blessing while those who rebelled against Him found themselves the objects of his military engagements.

¹⁷Hobbs, Time for War, 17.

¹⁸Ibid., 210-214.

¹⁹Ibid., 211. In light of Hobbs' position, it is not surprising that the bulk of his book deals with the men, materials, and methods of war and gives virtually no space to theological reflection on the subject.

the suggestion that war posed no ethical dilemma for the Israelite and argue that such a construing reflects an overly simplistic reading of the Biblical texts, and hence, a misreading of the data. To say, with Hobbs "that the ancient Israelites and Judeans took warfare and battle as a matter of course" is to miss certain clues given in the Biblical texts which suggest otherwise.²⁰ Hence, there seems to be an increasing emphasis on understanding these war texts in a more nuanced fashion. By so doing, the careful reader is able to discern certain indications from the text which might suggest Israel's discomfort with her history of holy war.

Susan Niditch contends that there were periods in Israel's history when the Hebrews were extremely uncomfortable with their practice of war. By the use of tradition criticism Niditch attempts "to study the range of war ideologies in the Hebrew Bible, seeking to understand who in Israel might have espoused which ideology and when in the history of the biblical tradition."²¹ According to Niditch, no single explanation will suffice for all of the nation's existence since varied and competing ideologies waxed and waned, sometimes existing side by side. Even if one is uncomfortable with Niditch's methodological assumptions and unable to agree with all her conclusions, her work certainly highlights the great complexity and diversity of Israel's evolving understanding of the meaning of war, an understanding, as Niditch argues, which was shaped by certain unpleasant facets of its bloody history.

Robert Good, while agreeing with Niditch that Israel's moral conscience was troubled by her warring practices in general and the image of God as warrior in particular, arrives at this conclusion by a different route. Instead of arguing for a whole host of differing war ideologies, Good believes there was one unifying understanding of God's warring practices throughout Israel's existence as evidenced in both the early and late literature. This unifying understanding was that God's warring was understood as a judicial act, reflecting His role as Judge. According to Good, the Israelites conceived of

²⁰Hobbs, War in the OT, 2.

²¹Niditch, 5.

the divine warrior as a judge whose courtroom was the field of battle. Good concludes that "the very existence of a jurial concept of war points toward a struggle with issues of war and its justification, and this implies an ancient concern with the morality of individual wars."²²

Lawson Stone is another proponent of the view that Israel was troubled by her experience of war. Stone applies redaction criticism to a select number of verses in the Book of Joshua and convincingly argues that the people of Israel were troubled by their holy war traditions. Stone rejects those approaches which "assume the text of Joshua unreservedly endorses Israel's extermination of the Canaanites, [and which assume] that the ancient writers cared little for the ethical question."²³ Instead, Stone argues "that certain ethical dimensions of holy war did concern the tradents of Joshua, to the extent that the holy war traditions in their earliest form represented an unusable past."²⁴

Now then, having looked at this issue through a variety of different lenses we again ask, "Did the practice of war present any moral difficulty to the Israelites?" Having looked at representatives on both sides of the issue it is clear that the jury is still out on this question. Nevertheless, it seems that the latter position is more tenable on account of the complexity and ambiguity of the material and the tendency to stylize and even spiritualize war texts within Scripture itself.

Yet even if we grant that war presented certain ethical problems for the Israelites this does not automatically suggest that the ethical and moral questions we have today were in any way identical with those of ancient Israel. In fact, it is a mistake to read the war texts as if those who fought in battle and those who wrote the accounts of the battle were wrestling with the same questions and ethical issues we are. Instead, we must first

²²Robert M. Good, "The Just War in Ancient Israel," Journal of Biblical Literature 104, no. 3 (1985): 400.

²³Lawson G. Stone, "Ethical and Apologetic Tendencies in the Redaction of the Book of Joshua," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 53 (Jan. 1991): 27

²⁴*Ibid.*, 36.

determine how the Israelites understood God as warrior and how that understanding subsequently affected their conception of war and of God. Only then can we begin to ask how such understandings may or may not be appropriate for us today.

TWO FINAL OBJECTIONS

There are two final objections with which we must deal briefly before we can proceed full speed ahead into an interpretation of the divine warrior imagery. These questions deal with the sixth commandment and the question of whether or not war is sin.

Thou Shalt Not Murder!

Doesn't the commandment, "You shall not murder" imply that all killing, even killing in warfare is wrong and forbidden by God (Exod. 20:13)? How can this be reconciled with the rest of the Biblical witness which portrays a warrior God who not only participates in killing, but who also commands the armies of Israel to do the same?

The apparent contradiction is easily resolved by understanding the meaning and significance of the word translated "murder" in the sixth commandment. It comes from the Hebrew verb rāṣah, a word which the OT never uses to refer to the killing in the context of war. Rather, it was used "to apply to what is classified as murder" today.²⁵ According to Num. 35:9ff., this refers to what we would describe as first or second degree murder as well as involuntary manslaughter.²⁶ Craigie rightly points out that this term does not refer to killing animals since this verb takes human beings as its direct object. More specifically, this term refers to the killing of one Israelite by another over against the killing of foreigners. When the OT writers wanting to talk about slaughtering animals or about killing people of other nations they would use a term other than rāṣah.²⁷ Thus, the

²⁵Kaiser, Toward Old Testament Ethics, 173.

²⁶Cf. H. Eberhard von Waldow, "The Concept of War in the Old Testament," Horizons in Biblical Theology 6, no. 2 (1984): 42-43.

²⁷Either hārag or qātal would be used in these instances. Craigie, Problem of War, 58.

sixth commandment in no way implies a moratorium on war.

Is War Sin?

The problems related to God's involvement in war are further complicated when one adopts the position that war is inherently evil. This presents us with a much greater difficulty than we encountered with the sixth commandment. If war is sinful, how can God participate in it and yet remain holy? Here we are forced back upon the question, "Is war sin?" Craigie believes so. He writes, "War is a human activity; furthermore, it is a sinful human activity."²⁸ The same conviction is forcefully expressed by von Waldow who takes Gen. 1:1 as his starting point for understanding God and the world, believing that "war is a violation of God's order of creation and as such war is sin."²⁹ Yet, in the next breath Waldow says that "the earlier Old Testament seems to know very well that when war breaks out, God was at work."³⁰ Yet how can God participate in something sinful and not be contaminated? Waldow never deals with this. Knierim, in an article written in response to von Waldow, detects this problem. He qualifies von Waldow's statement by saying, "War, be it divine, semi-divine, or human, is not sin as long as it happens in defense of creation and all life."³¹ If we are to take seriously God's involvement in the wars of the OT we must follow Knierim's lead. Otherwise, we accuse God of being arbitrary and of committing gross sin.

SUMMARY

This chapter has attempted to define the problem of Yahweh as divine warrior

²⁸Craigie, The Problem of War, 41. For a discussion of Craigie's solution to this problem see Chapter 8 of the present study.

²⁹Waldow, 33.

³⁰Ibid., 35-6.

³¹Rolf P. Knierim, "On the Subject of War in Old Testament and Biblical Theology," Horizons in Biblical Theology 16 (June 1994): 9.

more carefully. We began by noting that the image of God as warrior in the OT is a troubling one for many Christians. We then emphasized that the answers given to certain "prior questions" greatly influence the way in which the divine warrior motif is interpreted. These questions included the nature of revelation, the nature of the OT, the relationship between the testaments, and Israel's settlement of the land. Next, we explored whether this "problem" is strictly a modern one or whether the Israelites also struggled with the morality of their experience of combat. We tentatively concluded that it seems that the Israelites were troubled by their holy war traditions. Finally, we determined that the sixth commandment did not forbid killing in war and we noted that war in and of itself is not necessarily sinful. By defining the problem more specifically and removing some potential obstacles, we can now proceed more profitably.

CHAPTER 7

AN IMAGE REJECTED

We are finally ready to begin in earnest our examination and evaluation of the various ways Biblical scholars have attempted to deal with this OT image of a warring God. Admittedly, this is a rather tedious journey at points, traveling as we must through the plethora of literature written on the subject. Our main concern in this chapter will be to discuss "representatives" of those positions which more or less reject the image of Yahweh as warrior. We begin at the far left, with some of the most extreme and unconventional understandings of the divine warrior.

COMPLETE REPUDIATION

A Feminist Agenda

Some persons, being sufficiently uncomfortable with the Biblical image of God as warrior, reject it outright. Carol Christ, a feminist liberation theologian, is one such person. Christ observes the way in which God is inextricably linked to war and warfare in both the Exodus and the Prophetic traditions. This linkage, which she contends arose from a patriarchal perspective, is precisely what troubles her. She writes, "The God of Exodus and the Prophets is a warrior God. My rejection of this God as a liberating image for feminist theology is based on my understanding of the symbolic function of a warrior God in cultures where warfare is glorified as a symbol of manhood and power."¹ While recognizing that some have found the Exodus and Prophetic traditions liberating, she does not. After describing the warlike character of God as depicted in Exodus 15 Christ writes, "This is not my God. This God of war stands for far too much that I stand against."² Thus, her rejection of the divine warrior motif is unequivocal and stems from a basic

¹Christ, 205.

²Tbid., 207.

distrust of the "male image" which associates manhood with war and violence. Christ believes that such imagery, when used of God, simply legitimates male experiences while denying the nurturing and peaceful qualities of women, qualities more suitable for encouraging liberation and peace in our world today. Put another way, since the Bible records the religious reflection of men, their perspective on God is going to be unduly biased by their male experience which is shaped by war and violence. As such, an image of a warrior God is untrustworthy and ultimately unable to help shape an adequate vision of reality, let alone an accurate theology.

A Kenotic Hermeneutic

While the Orthodox bishop George Khodr takes a quite different approach, his rejection of the image of God as warrior is expressed with no less emotion. Based on a kenotic reading of Scripture,³ Khodr utterly rejects the image of God as divine warrior, refusing to attribute the wars waged by Israel to the will of God. He believes there to be "no possible path from the warrior-God of Exodus and Joshua to the God of Jesus Christ" and argues that "that monstrous image cannot be made acceptable."⁴ Khodr's difficulty arises precisely from his inability to reconcile the God of the OT with the God of the NT.⁵ It is this *perceived* irreconcilable tension which drives him to explain the numerous references to God as warrior in the Exodus and Conquest narratives as an innovation of the Hebrews as they attempted to justify their nationalistic aspirations, a conjecture to be considered later in some detail. He writes:

³It is not clear precisely what Khodr means by "a kenotic reading of the Scriptures," pp. 409-410. While he speaks of progressive revelation, his stance is more akin to a developmental theory of religion. Believing that Christ's self-emptying on the cross, the ultimate expression of love, was the climactic revelation of God, Khodr contends that everything else must be evaluated by that standard. Thus, those portions of the Scripture which, according to Khodr, don't reflect this self-giving love, (such as God's command of and participation in the wars of Conquest), must be rejected as a primitive stage in Israel's self-understanding of God.

⁴Ibid., 410.

⁵Note how Khodr's interpretation is influenced by the way in which he has answered a "prior question."

The God Sabaoth, in the service of Israel and its hegemony over the land of Canaan, only reflects the thirst for conquest of a confederation of semitic [sic] tribes, a spirit that is totally foreign to the unfailingly loving nature of the One who is the God of nations and rules history in all its developments. God, whose name, presence, truth and unicity [sic] are love, cannot lend himself to the massacres perpetrated by Joshua son of Nun.⁶

Khodr's hermeneutic combines a certain brand of typology with a developmental, or evolutionary, understanding of religion which believes each subsequent revelation of God (what he calls "divine epiphanies across time") to supersede those which went before. Since the ultimate revelation of God was a revelation of love which came in the death of Christ on the cross, than love must be the preeminent and controlling revelation of God by which all previous reflections about God must be critiqued. On the basis of this framework, Khodr is unable to accept God's involvement in war and killing since this contradicts His ultimate revelation of love in Jesus Christ crucified.

A Neo-Barthian Orientation⁷

While neither Christ nor Khodr attempt to veil their blatant rejection of the image of God as warrior, the rejection of such language by Dianne Bergant is a bit more subtle.⁸ Of the three, Bergant deals most directly with the issue of God as warrior in the OT, highlighting many of the crucial issues in the current debate. For this she is to be commended. Her work raises many penetrating and appropriate questions. For example, she asks:

What is one to make of this conception of Yahweh as warrior? Is it merely an unrefined image of God that Israel eventually outgrew, or was Yahweh really experienced in armed conflict? If the former is the case, does this fact undermine the revelatory value of the early traditions in the Hebrew Scriptures? If the latter is true, can war be judged unequivocally immoral?⁹

⁶Khodr, 409.

⁷By neo-Barthian I mean that attempt to make theological claims from the Biblical text while denying its historical veracity. In short, divorcing theology from the facts of history.

⁸Nevertheless, it should be noted that both Khodr and Bergant agree that Israel's record of God's experience in her warfare is, to state it most bluntly, fiction. As far as they are concerned, Israel wrote God into the story to legitimate her violent actions.

⁹Bergant, "Yahweh: A Warrior-God?" (1983), 157.

As thought-provoking and apropos as such questions may be, the answers she proposes are most disappointing, arising as they do from an inadequate methodology.

Bergant's methodological approach is flawed in several ways. First, she unfortunately adheres to the modern communication theory, a theory which allows multiple levels of meaning for a single communication.¹⁰ This enables her to conclude that the original meaning of the text need not be its meaning today. Hence, while the OT war texts may have been used in a particular way by the Hebrew people, they do not necessarily need to be used in the same way by persons today. Second, even though Bergant is not ready to give up the revelatory value of the Biblical texts (contra Carol Christ), she is unable to accept the Biblical record at face value and conveniently shifts the locus of revelation to suit her particular disposition. Bergant believes "it is *the theological meaning of the events* that is revelatory for us and *not the events themselves*."¹¹ Bergant maintains that Israel's language of God in her experience of war simply reflects a self-legitimizing tendency (i.e. such language is used to give divine sanction to Israel's actions). Nevertheless, Bergant still thinks it appropriate to examine that language, discover what theological truths Israel was conveying by it,¹² and communicate these same truths through more appropriate images and metaphors. The reason for these "more appropriate images and metaphors" is due to the fact that "we may find that the image of a warrior God and the theme of Yahweh war are no longer apt expressions of our theology."¹³ Bergant's approach is representative of a general trend in Biblical studies today which attempts to make theological claims from the Biblical text while at the same time denying its historical veracity. Such an approach rests on the assumption that theology is not

¹⁰Bergant, "Violence and God: A Bible Study," 47.

¹¹Ibid., original emphasis, 52.

¹²Bergant highlights three theological truths which can be gleaned from these war texts, namely, that God is sovereign, that He is present with His people, and that He punishes those who oppose Him. See Bergant, "Yahweh: A Warrior-God?" (1994), 101.

¹³Ibid., 103.

dependent upon historical fact. "Never mind that it didn't happen," they say, "just look at the text and do theology!"

In Christ, Khodr, and Bergant, we find three persons who reject the image of God as warrior on three different grounds, namely, a feminist agenda, a kenotic hermeneutic, and a neo-Barthian orientation, respectively. While our sympathies may lie with these writers insofar as they desire to promote peace and liberation, we must seriously question whether it is justifiable to simply reject (or in the case of Bergant, radically redefine) one of the most pervasive images of God in all the OT. That such an approach is unwarranted becomes clearer in view of the following objections. First, the sheer mass of Biblical data depicting God as warrior in the OT does not allow us to so easily reject or brush aside this ubiquitous image. Second, the NT's unqualified use of this image suggests a certain ease the early Church apparently felt with the OT martial material and therefore gives no warrant for such material to be dismissed today, particularly on grounds that the NT supersedes the OT.¹⁴ Examples of the NT's use of the image of God as warrior in both the Exodus and the Conquest include the following:

- a. In his speech before the Council, Stephen makes reference to the fact that God drove out the nations as Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan (Acts 7:45).
- b. Paul begins his sermon at Pisidian Antioch by reminding his listeners that, "The God of this people Israel . . . made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it" (Acts 13:17).
- c. Likewise, the writers of both Hebrews and Jude refer to God's leading the people out of Egypt (Heb. 8:9; Jude 5).

Finally, the divine warrior image in the OT is not to be rejected since it is continued in the person of Jesus in the NT.¹⁵ This is most graphically portrayed in the Book of Revelation.¹⁶ Thus, as Dearman argues, "One cannot simply reject the warrior language of

¹⁴On this and the preceding point, cf. Craigie, Problem of War, 38.

¹⁵For an excellent and very accessible discussion of the NT's use of the divine warrior theme see, Tremper Longman, "The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif." A fuller discussion may be found in Longman and Reid, God is a Warrior, 91-192.

¹⁶See, e.g., Rev. 1:12-16; 2:16; esp. 19:11-21.

the Bible because it is an indispensable element of Christology."¹⁷

In light of these objections, we conclude that the Biblical record does not warrant such offhanded rejection of the image of Yahweh as warrior. While neither Christ, Khodr, nor Bergant figure very largely into the mainstream of scholarly discussion regarding the theme of God as warrior,¹⁸ these three writers are illustrative of some of the more radical ways in which this imagery has been understood. Moreover, their approaches have raised some additional issues which now require our attention.

A SUBSTANTIAL MODIFICATION

A Legitimizing Function

Those who discuss the divine warrior imagery in the OT while adopting a fundamentally neo-Barthian orientation to the OT (like Bergant) often argue that many of the war texts in the OT are literary creations intended to give divine legitimation to Israel's struggle for land.¹⁹ This rather speculative approach suggests that certain portions of the OT's warring imagery have arisen from Israel's felt need to have divine legitimation for her armed struggles. The battles connected with the settlement of Canaan are typically in view here and a distinction is often made between these battles and the wars of early Israel. The former are believed to have been created to substantiate and legitimate Israel's expansionistic tendencies while the latter preserve a more pure form of "holy war." As

¹⁷J. Andrew Dearman, "The Problem of War in the Old Testament: War, Peace, and Justice," Austin Seminary Bulletin: Faculty Edition 99 (Oct. 1983): 12.

¹⁸To this writer's knowledge, Khodr is not referred to in the secondary literature and Christ is mentioned only briefly in a footnote in Longman and Reid, p. 26 and in a brief annotated bibliographic entry in the "representative bibliography" compiled by Judith E. Sanderson located at the end of Marva J. Dawn's translation of von Rad's classic Holy War in Ancient Israel, p. 141.

¹⁹Bergant's discussion on this point is actually more cautious than most who adopt this approach to the war texts of the OT. Rather than blaming the Hebrews for their legitimizing tendencies, Bergant, in "Yahweh: A Warrior God?" (1994), 100, argues that due to the "sacramental world" in which the Hebrews lived "it may have been inconceivable for ancient Israel to distinguish between characterizing God's presence and legitimizing its wars." In the final analysis, Bergant certainly assumes that some of the OT war texts reflect a "sacralizing" tendency, though she does not press this point.

such, the stories of God's involvement in the "Conquest" narratives are believed to have been fabricated during the royal period to justify Israel's need for land and to legitimate her participation in violence. In short, Israel projected her nationalistic aspirations onto Yahweh to legitimate her warlike actions. By assigning responsibility to Yahweh for the nations' massacres and suggesting they were undertaken in obedience to His will, similar exploits undertaken by kings in need (or in want!) of land could be given "divine approval."

Since this approach is much more "respectable" among the scholarly guild, emerging as it does from a sociological reading of OT texts, its frequent appearance in the secondary literature is not surprising. In fact, so widespread is this construal of the data that Birch believes "a consensus exists for viewing the genocidal violence recounted in many of the stories in Joshua and Judges" in this way, namely, "as the product of a royal period in which kings were attempting to justify their own nationalistic ideologies by appeal to divine favor."²⁰ It will often be noted that this royal ideology was a corruption of Israel's earlier notions of God's deliverance of the people by miraculous means. Therefore, "the prophets, who served as spokesmen for normative covenant faith in this period, had only contempt for such notions of God and God's people."²¹

Patrick Miller is one representative of this viewpoint. He believes "expediency, self-preservation, and the desire for land caused her [Israel] to fight, and she sought, as did the other nations, to give a religious rationale to her actions."²² Arguing that Israel lived in a tension between faith and ideology Miller continues, "underneath Israel's highly elaborated theology of election and promise, there was hidden the concrete and urgent fact that the people needed land and elbowroom."²³ This leads him to speak about "the almost

²⁰Birch, 1118.

²¹Ibid.

²²Miller, "God the Warrior," 42. Cf. Khodr, 409.

²³Ibid., 43.

grossly unfair historical dimension of God's activity" in Israel's record of her history.²⁴ While Miller may be right in saying that Israel's attempt to discern God's will was no less difficult than it is for Christians today, is it true that Israel's descriptions of God's involvement in her experience of war were nothing more than her attempt to give divine sanction to a series of bloody engagements?

Once again we are reminded that how one responds to this question will necessarily depend upon how a previous question has been answered, namely, "What is the OT?" Is the OT what it claims to be, namely, the revelation of the transcendent God to the people of Israel or is it merely the result of Israel's religious reflections about God, reflections which have been intentionally skewed at places to legitimate certain agendas? If you believe it to be the former then Miller's approach becomes unacceptable. If, on the other hand, you affirm the latter, Miller's approach becomes a much more workable solution. To be sure, there are some real benefits to this approach. Those taking it can breathe a sigh of relief since the most troubling aspects of the image of God as warrior, namely his involvement in the Conquest, have been removed since they are really nothing more than a creation of ancient Israel. God never commanded or participated in the Conquest. In fact, there never even was a Conquest. Such an approach greatly eases the apparent tensions between the God of the OT and Jesus of the NT. No longer are there such glaring contradictions between the two.

But before we jump on that bandwagon, we need to be clear about where it is heading. For while it is true that this approach solves one problem, it creates a much larger and more dangerous one. If the Bible simply contains Israelite propaganda, what does that say about its revelatory value? Not much. And once the revelatory nature of the Hebrew Scriptures has been undermined who can be certain about its truth value? Such an approach finally denies the authority of the Bible and suggests it to be ultimately untrustworthy. As such, the tension which has been resolved between the warrior God of the OT and Jesus of the NT becomes meaningless since those texts which refer to God as

²⁴Ibid., 44.

warrior have been deemed theologically worthless.

Another attempt to assert this same position, though approached from a different angle, comes from Paul D. Hanson. Hanson uses the polar opposites of shalom and chaos as windows through which to understand the OT's mention of Yahweh as a divine warrior. Hanson argues that Israel, like her ancient Near Eastern neighbors, believed "the world was situated precariously between order and chaos."²⁵ Nevertheless, Hanson believes that in the Exodus, Israel had a religious experience which forever shaped her view of God, leading the people to conceive of God as the one who delivers those who are oppressed while at the same time punishing the oppressors. Through this event, God created shalom for the people of Israel. On the basis of that experience, Israel then "inferred" what kind of community God desired them to be, namely, a worshipping community which would live by righteous standards, dealing compassionately with each another.²⁶ By living accordingly, Israel could maintain this shalom and resist the ever present threat of slipping back into the chaos from which she was delivered in the Exodus.

Having set the stage, Hanson then argues that the second period in Israel's history, ("the wars of the monarchical period") was illustrative of Israel's move back toward the realm of chaos due to the people's "imperialistic ideology."²⁷ According to Hanson, "The stories of Joshua 6-11 must be read . . . as a reflection . . . of the period of the later Israelite monarchy. It was in the latter period that these stories were shaped so as to give expression of a triumphant royal ideology."²⁸ Hanson believes that Israel's monarchic warfare was incongruent with the holy war traditions of the pre-monarchic period. Thus, the prophets generally stood against the tide of popular opinion, pointing out a people's misplaced trust and looking to a future time of peace.

²⁵Hanson, "War and Peace," 345.

²⁶Ibid., 346.

²⁷Ibid., 351.

²⁸Hanson, "War, Peace, & Justice," 44.

As compelling as such an argument is, several difficulties immediately present themselves. First, Hanson assumes the worldview of early Israel to be identical to that of her neighbors. Yet, the Biblical witness suggests the opposite to be the case. Second, while Hanson argues that the vantage point of the Hebrew people was different from that of her neighbors, he fails to give a reason why it was that the Hebrews alone broke out of this myth. The only way this could have happened, namely, by revelation, is implicitly discounted by Hanson due to the fact that his theology rests upon a reconstructed history of Israel. Finally, and related to the foregoing, Hanson's argument is only as strong as his historical reconstruction, all of which are finally subjective and tentative.

Susan Niditch disagrees with Hanson's position. After making some positive comments about his "brief but thoughtful essay,"²⁹ Niditch writes, "This treatment of the 'crusading mentality' in the Hebrew Scriptures is too neat and too convenient a way of isolating extremist Israelite war ideologies. The ban in its ferocity cannot simply be rejected as a later accretion or as an untrue reflection of the real religion of Israel."³⁰

For different reasons Gelston likewise disagrees with the idea that Israel wrote the story in her own best interests. He vociferously denies that the Israelites merely projected their nationalistic aspirations upon Yahweh and writes, "It is far too facile to say, as one sometimes hears it said, that Israel projected her own ambitions for the acquisition of territory and for her national prestige on to Yahweh."³¹ He believes that "the Old Testament itself contains many higher notions than that of an unbridled nationalism projected on to the deity."³² Gelston will argue instead that Israel's experience of war was based on her notion of God's sovereignty, an idea to be explored in more detail as we look at some more positive approaches in the following chapters.

²⁹Here referring to Hanson's article "War, Peace & Justice."

³⁰Niditch, 9.

³¹Gelston, 325.

³²Ibid., 326.

A Developmental Theory of Religion

While the previous approach charges the ancient writers with conscious deception, this approach simply faults the Hebrew people with ignorance. Those who adopt a developmental approach to the OT's war texts argue that the OT's portrayal of God as warrior simply represents an earlier rung on the evolutionary ladder of revelation. To accommodate Israel's minimal ability to conceive of a "holy" other moral being, God had to reveal Himself in rather crass and less than accurate ways during the people's early years as a nation. This primitive and partial revelation caused the Israelites to conceptualize God as a warrior and caused them to believe that he sanctioned her wars for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, as Israel grew and matured, she "came of age" and eventually shed such inadequate and unworthy notions about her God. This "coming of age" is evidenced by the later prophetic visions of peace where swords are beat into plowshares (Isa. 2:4). Moreover, God's ultimate revelation in Jesus was one of self-giving love. Since this involved submission to violence rather than its perpetuation, it is obvious that all earlier notions of a warrior God are erroneous. Standing on the top rung of this evolutionary ladder we have a vantage point from which to accurately critique all earlier stages, most of which are now passé. Clearly the warrior God of the OT is an outmoded image which has been forever superseded by the suffering servant of the NT.³³

To its credit, the developmental theory of religion portrays the Israelites in a more positive light than other explanations which accuse them of fabricating stories for their self-legitimization. This view asserts that Israel's accounting of her experience of God in war reflects their honest, albeit mistaken, beliefs. They were not intentionally trying to deceive anyone or provide divine sanction for their killing through these war stories, they were simply mistaken, a sad case of misinformation.

Yet, in spite of the relatively positive light such a view casts upon the motivations

³³For an example of the idea that Yahweh as warrior was a primitive idea that was later outgrown, see Harry Emerson Fosdick, A Guide to Understanding the Bible: The Development of Ideas within the Old and New Testaments (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1938), esp. 4-8, and cf. W. S. Bruce, The Ethics of the Old Testament, 2nd enl. ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909), 272-290.

of the Israelites, it presents us with a number of serious theological difficulties. For example, this view implies a radical discontinuity between the God of the OT and the God of the NT and believes that the only way to make sense of the OT's warrior God is to conclude that it represents a lower stage of development in the Hebrews self-understanding of God.³⁴ This being the case, war texts in general and the image of God as warrior in particular must only be used today with the greatest of care. As Gottwald cautions, "The holy war texts must be frankly taught as pages from the preparatory history of Christian faith. They are now passé and the temper that moves them should not only be banished from the church but also from the state." He believes "it would be a tragic betrayal if the church now turned backward to grovel in the nationalistic husks amid which the Christian faith came to its historical flower."³⁵

Thus, we again ask with Bergant, "Is it [the image of God as warrior] merely an unrefined image of God that Israel eventually outgrew, or was Yahweh really experienced in armed conflict?"³⁶ The answer to that question lies in whether or not one adopts a developmental theory of religion to interpret the Scriptures.

To evaluate the relative merits of this hermeneutical approach we must first be exceedingly clear about the difference between progressive revelation and a developmental theory of religion. Since these two are often mistakenly confused,³⁷ we do well to carefully observe the fine distinction Craigie makes between them. Craigie argues against the idea that the God as warrior motif is simply a primitive belief we have outgrown. He

³⁴A more unorthodox suggestion would be that of the process theologian who envisions God Himself changing over time.

³⁵Gottwald, 310.

³⁶See above, p. 90.

³⁷For an example of the confusion of this terminology see, Dearman, "The Problem of War in the Old Testament: War, Peace, and Justice," 8. His first sentence under the major heading "The Role of Progressive Revelation" is, "Some biblical scholars have traced through the Bible an evolutionary development in which the perceived nature of God is changed and transformed." Thus, in spite of the heading, Dearman is clearly speaking of a developmental or evolutionary theory of religion. The same confusion is also seen in John Yoder, The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1977), 93 where he seems to equate these two concepts.

writes:

It involves the mistake . . . of confusing a view of progressive revelation with a developmental (or evolutionary) theory of religion. By progressive revelation is meant the view that God's self-revelation may increase and that therefore more may be known of him over the passage of time, but the progression in revelation does not contradict or cancel out the earlier substance of revelation; it can only complement that substance. But the implication of the summary argument which has been given is that the Old Testament contains not God's self-revelation, or a record of that revelation, but that it portray's man's search after God. Theologically, in other words, the argument amounts to a rejection of the Old Testament *as revelation*.³⁸

For Craigie, the pervasive image of God as warrior in the OT and its continued use in the NT stand as evidence against such a developmental view of religion as it applies to the Judeo-Christian tradition.³⁹

Those who adopt a developmental theory of religion necessarily see certain portions of the OT as primitive and therefore obsolete. Yet, to argue along these lines is to commit the Marcionite heresy of the second century.⁴⁰ As Dearman accurately observes, such an approach to Scripture whereby "the old is simply discarded or obsolete" is "more indebted to Marcion than to the Reformed tradition which takes both Testaments together as Scripture."⁴¹ Moreover, to adopt such an approach to the OT texts is to suggest that the Bible contains two mutually exclusive and contradictory images of God. Yet this is certainly not the case. As Tate rightly argues, "New Testament exegesis does not support the view that the God of Jesus and Paul is other than the God of Moses and the prophets. The Bible clearly deals with *one* God, not two or more."⁴²

Some OT scholars have argued forcefully that Israel's understanding of God as warrior was anything but primitive. As Wright puts it, "the events in Joshua cannot be attributed to primitivism in Biblical theology. The Bible's most advanced interpretations in

³⁸Craigie, Problem of War, original emphasis, 37.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁰Marcion wanted to discard all those portions of the Bible which he found objectionable, which for him was all of the OT and significant portions of the NT.

⁴¹Dearman, 10.

⁴²Tate, 588.

later ages saw there nothing but a most dramatic illustration of power, grace, and justice of God."⁴³ The same sentiments are echoed by Miller who contends that

Israel's holy wars and her notion of God as the divine warrior can neither be ignored nor dismissed as a useless and embarrassing "primitivism." The period of Israel's holy wars was in many respects the high point of her history, and the concept of the Lord as warrior dominated her faith throughout its entire course, reaching even into the New Testament.⁴⁴

Whether or not one agrees that the holy wars were "the high point" in Israel's history, we can certainly cast our lot with Tate who says that "a simple evolutionary theory which moves from primitive beginnings to sophisticated spirituality will simply not do for the Old Testament."⁴⁵

SUMMARY

This chapter has been primarily concerned with an examination of those interpretations which either reject or substantially modify the image of the divine warrior as it comes to us in the OT. The most radical rejections of the divine warrior image were seen in the positions of Christ and Khodr and, to a somewhat lesser degree, Bergant. Though arriving at their conclusions from very different approaches, they all agree that the divine warrior image as it now stands in the OT is totally unusable and must be completely discarded or at best, totally redefined. We then looked at some other "rejections" of the OT's image of the divine warrior which came via 1) a historical reconstruction of Israel's history and 2) a developmental theory of religion. The former contended that the divine warrior was often nothing more than a projection of Israel's nationalistic tendencies upon the deity. The latter dismissed the OT's image of a divine warrior as primitive. In essence, both rejected the ability of the divine warrior image in its present form to communicate

⁴³Wright, 126.

⁴⁴Miller, "God the Warrior," 41.

⁴⁵Tate, 588.

much of theological value. We now turn to look at some more helpful approaches to this seemingly troubling image.

CHAPTER 8

ATTEMPTS TO KEEP THE LANGUAGE

In spite of the inherent difficulties in the interpretation of the divine warrior image in the OT, and regardless of the many attempts to simply dismiss this image out-of-hand, there are a number of more constructive approaches to be explored.¹ This chapter looks at a variety of ways in which interpreters have attempted to keep the language of Yahweh as warrior. In spite of the admitted difficulties, these interpreters believe that this image, when rightly understood, is one of great theological value. While not all of these are equally useful, and in spite of the fact that no one of these approaches by itself is able to satisfactorily answer all our questions about the role of the divine warrior in the OT, taken together they move us closer to a workable solution and, as such, are worthy of our careful consideration.

HISTORICAL ACCOMMODATION

One of the few writers who has really wrestled extensively with the ethical and moral questions raised by the image of God as a warrior is Peter Craigie.² Craigie's attempt to come to terms with this OT image is rather unique, and merits close scrutiny. Craigie's position, which for the sake of discussion has been labeled here as "historical accommodation," suggests that "the Hebrew conviction that God revealed himself in the events of human history provides a clue to understanding the conception of God as warrior."³ Craigie believes that "to describe God as a warrior is thus to say that God participates in human history, through *sinful human beings*, and through what have

¹The title of this chapter is a phrase borrowed from Nysse, 194. Also, the initial portion of this chapter follows the *sequence* of part of his article insofar as it first examines the positions of Craigie and Lind, respectively, before examining Nysse's own proposal.

²See esp. Problem of War, Chapter 3, "God the Warrior," 33-43; "Man of Wars," in toto.

³Craigie, Problem of War, 39.

become the 'normal' forms of human activity."⁴ As such "the activity of God in this world, insofar as it involves human beings as agents, must always appear, to a greater or lesser extent, to be associated with sinfulness."⁵

Hobbs critiques Craigie at this point and asks, "Why did God have to become involved in human history at *this* level? That is, at the level of conflict and violence?"⁶ Hobbs argues that God's most involved act in human history was one of submission to violence, not perpetration of it.⁷ Craigie is not unaware of this kind of criticism and he himself asks, albeit hypothetically, "Could God not have found some (ethically) better way in which to fulfil his promises to Israel? Did it have to be war?"⁸ Craigie, however, seems to believe that there was no better way since "if the Israelites were to become a State, they had to accept the contingent necessity of war; to deny the possibility of war, on ethical grounds, was to deny the possibility of becoming a State."⁹ Thus, since God works through the "normal activities" of human experience, one of these being war, it was only natural for Israel to experience God in war. Were God not at work through war, then His only means of delivering and defending Israel would be by "miraculous" means, something He did on occasion, though not with any great regularity.

Having said that, Craigie then maintains that God's activity in war in no way affects His character. It "does not primarily afford us a glimpse of his moral *being*, it demonstrates rather his will and *activity*."¹⁰ For Craigie God's being and his doing are

⁴Ibid., 41, emphasis original.

⁵Ibid., 41-42.

⁶Hobbs, "War in the OT," 7, emphasis original.

⁷Cf. Knierim, 10.

⁸Craigie, "Man of Wars," 187.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Craigie, Problem of War, 42. Cf. Miller, "God the Warrior," 43, who writes, "we must accept Israel's involvement in war, holocaust, and slaughter . . . because in this very unsavory fact lies the recognition and affirmation of the central thrust of the Old Testament revelation that God is actively at work within human history and through its structures."

separable. Yet is such a separation between who God is and what He does permissible? We think not. As Dearman writes, "One is uneasy . . . at seeing God's 'moral being' separated too neatly from God's activity in human affairs. Can this separation of 'moral being' from deed be true of any activity of God, judgmental or redemptive, which has as its goal peace and justice?"¹¹ The answer must be an unequivocal "No." It is precisely at this point that Craigie's attempt to use a historical accommodation model fails, and his argument unravels. We continue by considering the approach of Millard Lind.

THE LONE WARRIOR

Millard Lind's Yahweh is a Warrior is representative of those approaches which attempt to make sense of the martial material in the OT by emphasizing the prominence of Yahweh's role in Israel's battles.¹² Lind argues at some length that the nature of Israelite warfare was theocentric, that is, fully dependent upon the activity of God. Throughout his work, Lind emphasizes the primary role of the warrior God over against any role the Israelite soldiers may have had in the battle. Specifically, there are "three themes" he develops. These are:

- (1) that Yahweh as God of war fought for his people by miracle, not by sword and spear;
- (2) that this method of Yahweh's fighting affected Israel's theo-political structure in a fundamental way; and
- (3) that Yahweh's warfare was directed not only against Israel's enemies but at times against Israel herself, in such cases not by means of miracle but by the armies of Israel's enemies.¹³

Lind places a great deal of stress upon the Exodus event as foundational for understanding Israel's experience and practice of warfare. He notes the great importance of the Exodus event which "forms the paradigm for Israel's future salvation" and highlights

¹¹Dearman, 11-12.

¹²See also Millard C. Lind, "Paradigm of Holy War in the Old Testament," Biblical Research 16 (1971): 16-31.

¹³Lind, Yahweh is a Warrior, 23.

Israel's non-participation in the battle both here and elsewhere in the OT.¹⁴ Both the Conquest narratives in Joshua and the settlement of the land in Judges are viewed in light of the event at the Sea. Lind argues that even when human soldiers are involved, theirs is only a minor function. For example, in the story of Deborah and Barak in Judges 4-5, Lind notes that Israel cooperated with Yahweh in this battle against Sisera and his armies. Still, as the battle event is portrayed in Judges 5, Yahweh is the one who does the fighting and the people of Israel simply "mop-up." Lind is not alone in his observations. Others have also observed the prominence God is given in Israel's early war traditions and the way in which human participation is downplayed. For example, Birch argues that "all of Israel's earliest traditions point to a concern to de-emphasize human participation in war."

While we have only sketched Lind's thesis in its barest outline, these abbreviated comments are sufficient for our purposes here. Clearly Lind believes Yahweh was intimately and actively involved in Israel's wars. The role of human soldiers in these battles was secondary, at best. While such a view of Yahweh as warrior may alleviate some tension felt by the Christian pacifist, it is questionable how useful such an approach is for the discussion at hand. Placing the onus of war squarely upon the shoulders of Yahweh seems only to aggravate the problem and we are left to wonder how it really helps us come to grips with the image of a warrior God in the OT. As Hanson asks, "Does ascription of violence to the deity avoid the moral offensiveness-or heighten it?"¹⁵ It certainly heightens it. Thus, regardless of whether or not one agrees with Lind's argument, this type of reasoning which places all the responsibility for war upon the divine warrior certainly does not answer the moral and ethical questions raised by the image of God as a warrior in the OT. Rather, we are, as it were, cast out of the frying pan and into the fire! In solving one problem, another emerges more clearly. What we have established here is simply that while the Hebrew people were not bloodthirsty warmongers (at least in these accounts), God was! Since such a suggestion does not move us closer to

¹⁴Ibid., 49.

¹⁵Hanson, "War, Peace, & Justice," 35.

a viable solution we turn our attention elsewhere.

GOD FIGHTS ON THE SIDE OF RIGHT

Nysse rejects both of the foregoing approaches and offers what he believes to be "a more productive starting point," namely, determining who benefits from the activity of the divine warrior.¹⁶ His method involves applying a set of questions to a "cross section of Old Testament texts."¹⁷ These questions, in regard to the divine warrior's activity, are:

- 1) Who benefits?
- 2) What are the beneficiaries to do?
- 3) Who does not benefit?
- 4) What is secured?

Nysse will argue that those who benefit from the divine warrior's activity are the weak and oppressed whose response should be one of worship and praise. Those who do not benefit from the divine warrior's activity are the powerful who stand opposed to the will of Yahweh and those who presume upon Yahweh by expecting His help while oppressing others. A society of peace, justice, and stability ultimately result from the fighting of the divine warrior.

Since Yahweh fights *for* the underprivileged and *against* the wicked oppressors, He is a "just" warrior. Nysse is very concerned that the language of God as warrior be retained in theological discussion today and writes, "It is particularly important that Yahweh-is-a-Warrior be kept because of its centrality in the defense of the rights of the oppressed."¹⁸

This is certainly an attractive approach. Who can argue with a God who always fights on the side of right? Here the divine warrior shines in the best light possible. Yet, the nagging question that remains is, "Were Israel's enemies deserving of the punishment and destruction God commanded Israel to inflict upon them?" Moreover, how could God

¹⁶Nysse, 197. For his analysis of Craigie's and Lind's "attempts to keep the language" see 194-196.

¹⁷Ibid. The texts examined are Exod. 15:3; Ps. 24:8; Isa. 42:13; Zeph. 3:14.

¹⁸Ibid., 194.

be fighting on the side of right when He commanded children and infants to be slain? Conspicuously absent from Nysse's article is any substantial discussion about the Conquest narratives. Was Yahweh fighting on the side of right in the Conquest or was He simply fulfilling His promise of land to the people of Israel, part of which meant moving the Canaanites off their homeland? These are questions we shall need to consider in more detail in the following chapter. Because Nysse fails to address them in his work, the approach he offers is not fully satisfying.

A DIFFERENT DISPENSATION

There are many who attempt to make sense of Yahweh as warrior by asserting that God no longer operates in the world today as He formerly did.¹⁹ In reference to Israel's warring Kaiser writes, "Israel only acted on the basis of a direct revelation from God and such authorization is most unlikely in our day since God has already completed his revelation in his Son."²⁰ This is essentially what Kidner argues as well. He admits that there was a time when God commanded His people to utterly destroy others as a sign of divine judgment. Yet, this is no longer the case since "they were not laid down as military norms even for Old Testament times," but were rather specific commands for specific circumstances.²¹ More to the point, Kidner argues that Israel "stood in a unique relation to God," one in which no single nation stands today. Because "the New Covenant is made with no sovereign state but with a company drawn from every tribe and nation, the true successors of these warriors will be not national armies but the church."²² In other words, since the people of God today are not identified with any one ethnic group or political state, it is impossible to conceive of God commanding Christians to fight others as He

¹⁹See the above discussion on pp. 98-101.

²⁰Kaiser, "Toward Old Testament Ethics," 178.

²¹F. Derek Kidner, "Old Testament Perspectives on War," *Evangelical Quarterly* 57 (Apr. 1985): 102.

²²*Ibid.*, 107.

once commanded Israel.

This is helpful as far as it goes. It does not suggest that the image of God in the OT is a primitive image and therefore avoids the pitfall inherent in the developmental theory of religion approach. Instead, this way of looking at the data simply suggests that the point at which we stand in salvation history no longer warrants God's activity in this fashion. Since God's mode of revelation is no longer through a particular ethnic or national people group, He therefore no longer saves or judges people by commanding the armies of one country to fight against another.

In the final analysis, this approach, like Lind's, is more comforting to the Christian pacifist than it is to the person struggling with the ethical and moral questions raised by a warrior God in the OT. Even if it is true that God no longer works in certain ways, we are still left wondering why God commanded Israel to fight and what His participation with them in battle suggests about His nature and character. While alleviating certain problems for us here and now, such an approach does not helpfully deal with the theological problem raised by the activity of God as warrior in the OT.

SPIRITUALIZATION

One final approach needs to be mentioned here, namely, that of spiritualization. This approach is one "in which the Old Testament . . . accounts of war and the use of force are understood in terms of spiritual action."²³ While recognizing the dangers inherent in such an approach, Tate argues in favor of it and contends that we are not without Biblical warrant for this type of interpretation. Tate cites Josh. 1-12 (and other passages) as evidence for this contention. He writes:

It is not hard to recognize that Joshua 1-12 is much more than a historical report. In the first place, much of the material in these chapters, especially 3-6, seems strongly related to cultic activities. The account of the crossing of the Jordan and the fall of Jericho have the characteristics of religious ritual and may indeed have been more the product of ceremonies in early Israel than of actual historical events. In any case, the use of the material in worship can hardly be doubted. When so used it must have been intended generally to strengthen faith in Yahweh (just as it is usually preached today) and

²³Tate, 589.

only infrequently (if ever) to stir the people into a fervor for war or to whip up the courage of Israelite troops for combat.²⁴

Arguing from a slightly different angle, Wright, while by no means a pacifist, also finds some answers in this "spiritualized" approach. He writes, "The strong, active power [which is] given language in the Warrior-Lord means that there is a force in the universe set against the forces of evil and perversity."²⁵ Wright argues that "if God is Lord, he must also be Warrior. Unless he is, there is no ground for hope, for there is knowledge that human evil is not the last word, that the cards are stacked in behalf of the Kingdom of God, rather than the Kingdom of Satan."²⁶

In favor of this approach, it can be said that the NT certainly does make references to Christ as a divine warrior who fights against the spiritual forces of evil. Nevertheless, to simply spiritualize the material without dealing with the reality of Israel's flesh and blood battles and Yahweh's involvement in them does not relieve the anxiety many feel by the presence of this OT image.

SUMMARY

This chapter has examined five more positive approaches to the OT image of the divine warrior. Each of these in some way attempted to preserve the language of Yahweh as warrior. We began with Peter Craigie's historical accommodation approach which was rejected because of the resulting dichotomy between God's being and His doing. Focusing then upon Millard Lind's "lone warrior" approach we noted that, insofar as this study is concerned, such an approach only heightens the problem of a warrior God. Third was Nysse's approach. Rejecting the conclusions of Craigie and Lind he proposed as his starting point the question of whom the activity of the divine warrior benefits. By answering this and other questions, He concluded that Yahweh as warrior was a just

²⁴Ibid., 589-590.

²⁵Wright, 130.

²⁶Ibid., 148.

warrior who always fights on the side of right. We noted the weakness of this approach as being his failure to deal seriously with the material in the Conquest narratives. We next evaluated those who take something of a "dispensational" approach whereby God's warring activity is consigned to a thing of the past. We noted that while this helps the modern reader, it fails to give us answers about the OT image. Finally, we considered the spiritualization of the OT's war texts. Again, while such an approach helps the contemporary Christian, it ultimately fails to wrestle with God's involvement in real flesh and blood battles. We now turn to consider two final possible solutions to this dilemma which will prove to be more helpful.

CHAPTER 9

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

We are finally ready to look at two of the most helpful ways of understanding the divine warrior imagery in the OT, namely, through the lens of God as sovereign one and through the lens of God as Savior-Judge. While both of these will be discussed at some length, primary consideration will be given to the latter since it seems to get at the heart of the meaning of the divine warrior motif in both the OT and the NT.

SOVEREIGNTY

It has frequently been observed that underlying the OT's notion of God as warrior is the theological claim that He is the "Sovereign One."¹ This is derived from the fact that in the OT, Yahweh is depicted as both warrior and king. This notion of a warrior-king was common in both the Biblical and broader ancient Near Eastern context. Kings were supposed to lead their people in battle. Thus, when the Israelites demanded that Samuel appoint a king for them they said, "there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Sam. 8:19-20).² Yet, this was precisely the role that belonged to Yahweh alone. He was to be their warrior-king and no other.

Many writers have correctly emphasized the combination of these roles in the person of God. Referring to the Song of the Sea Lind observes that, "Yahweh as warrior God and King of Israel is the object of the praise of the hymn throughout."³ Mettinger, in

¹The use of the term "sovereign" is a bit anachronistic in regard to Israel's understanding of God. For us, sovereignty is something of a philosophical category; the Hebrews thought more functionally. They defined things by how they worked or what they did rather than by some mere cognitive abstraction. Hence, the Hebrews knew that God was sovereign not on the basis of some propositional truth He had given them but by the way in which he functioned in time and space in their historical realities, not least of which was war.

²For another example recall that just prior to David's incident with Bathsheba, the king (David) stayed in Jerusalem at that time "when kings go out to battle" (2 Sam. 11:1).

³Lind, "Paradigm of Holy War," 22.

spite of an overemphasis on the mythological,⁴ appropriately stresses this relationship between God's ruling and his warring and writes, "it is a thought provoking realization that the conception of God as King, which emphasizes God's sovereignty, is so closely bound up with the battle motif."⁵ In light of this close connectedness Bergant rightly suggests that "since military defense was one of the major responsibilities of the king, the images of warrior and king should be examined together."⁶ Other writers could be cited here as well⁷ but these are sufficient to show the clear and important connection in the mind of the Israelites between the divine monarch and the divine warrior. For the Hebrew, they are one in the same. And, since a warrior-king possessed a certain measure of sovereignty, it was natural that Yahweh, the warrior-king *par excellence*, would be understood as the sovereign one without rival.⁸

In order to understand this image we should also keep in mind that the Hebrews looked at the world in very black and white categories. This had a decided influence upon their understanding of cause and effect. Since God was the one in control of everything, they believed that all things, good, bad, and indifferent came from the hand of Yahweh.⁹

⁴Mettinger believes Yahweh to be the king who battles against both cosmic and human forces. While we readily agree with the latter object of Yahweh's warring, the former is most unlikely. For a helpful article which deals exegetically with some of the mythical allusions in the OT and demonstrates how they are rooted in redemption rather than creation see, John N. Oswalt, "The Myth of the Dragon and Old Testament Faith," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 49 (1978): 163-172.

⁵Tryggve Mettinger, "Fighting the Powers of Chaos and Hell: Towards the Biblical Portrait of God," trans. F.H. Cryer, *Studia Theologica* 39, no 1 (1985): 21-38.

⁶Bergant, "Yahweh: A Warrior God?" (1994), 93, n.11.

⁷See e.g., Wright who says, "The use of the Divine Monarch theme involves also that of the Divine Warrior because the Monarch's chief concern is universal order" (129). Note also how careful Nysse is in each of the three Scriptural examples he examines in his article to point out that in each case, God as warrior is understood in relation to his kingship. These two themes are inextricably linked.

⁸This is *not* to suggest that the Hebrew people merely projected their understanding of how human rulers functioned onto God. It is simply to suggest that they had certain categories accessible to them which enabled them to speak about God in these terms.

⁹Thus, we are not surprised to hear God describe Himself as "the One . . . causing well-being and creating calamity" (Isa. 45:7). Absent from the Hebrew's discussion were the distinctions we make between God's *perfect* will and His *permissive* will. Rather, since God was in charge of everything, whatever happened

If there was a good barley harvest, it was because the Lord had blessed them. If there was famine, it was because the hand of the Lord was against them. If they were victorious in war, God was on their side. If they suffered defeat, the Lord was fighting against them. It was natural, then, for Israel to interpret her experience of war, whether in victory or defeat, as expressions of God's sovereignty.

In light of these kinds of considerations, many scholars have argued that the primary meaning of Yahweh as warrior in the OT is that He is sovereign one. Of the many representatives of this position which could be highlighted, one of the most celebrated is G. E. Wright. In his book The Old Testament and Theology Wright discusses the concept of God as warrior immediately after a chapter devoted to the topic of God as Lord. This arrangement of chapters is intentional and implies that God's sovereign rule is exercised through his warring activity.¹⁰ More specifically, God's sovereignty is evidenced by His use of war for both punishment of the oppressor and deliverance of the oppressed.

The Mennonite scholar Waldemar Janzen likewise understands the idea of sovereignty to be of central theological significance for the divine warrior theme in the OT. Janzen frames his discussion of God as warrior by pointing out that all of our language about God is necessarily metaphorical.¹¹ He argues that just as the image of

was interpreted as coming from Him. As would be expected, this understanding caused no little difficulty when it came to the issue of theodicy, the study of God in pain and evil. If everything comes from God, does that mean that He is the direct cause of evil?

¹⁰See Waldemar Janzen, "God as Warrior and Lord: A Conversation with G. E. Wright," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 220 (Dec. 1975): 73-75, for a response to Wright's position. Janzen reverses the order and argues that first the divine warrior comes and only afterwards does reign as Sovereign one. To use his words, "The classical Divine Warrior passages of the Old Testament picture the Warrior as one who comes, conquers, and only then establishes his throne and dominion" (75).

¹¹It seems that this is something of a mute point. Even the most literalistic interpreters of the Biblical text would admit that the language of God as warrior is "metaphorical," representing, as it does, humans' best attempts to talk about metaphysical realities. The issue has not primarily to do with the type of language involved, but rather with the source of this language. In other words, where did this language originate? Did God reveal himself to the people as a warrior or did the Israelites simply infer this to be the nature and character of God on the basis of comparative religious observations. Did they think that since the gods of all the other ancient Near Eastern nations were warrior-kings than Yahweh must be one too? The answer to this question will depend upon the answer given to the prior question, "What is the OT?"

"father" or "shepherd" teaches us something about the nature and character of God, so too does the image of warrior. He writes:

Since sovereign authority is central to the image of God in the Old Testament, and since the clearest demonstration of such authority in Old Testament times was the king, particularly as he defeated his enemies and returned victorious. . . . God becomes the divine warrior who defeats his enemies in battle and returns victorious to ascend the throne of his dominion.¹²

Janzen believes that "such warrior language is intended to convey, metaphorically, God's sovereign control, not to glorify warfare."¹³

Miller, takes this notion of sovereignty a step further and proposes that Israel recognized God's rule on both the historical *and* the cosmic plane.¹⁴ As such, God's sovereignty extends beyond historical persons and places to the primordial forces of chaos itself. This is debatable since it is highly doubtful whether the Hebrew people ever conceived of God as the victor over the forces of chaos. Miller stands on somewhat firmer ground when he conceives of Yahweh as sovereign over a body of heavenly forces which He led in battle, an idea for which there is some Biblical evidence as noted earlier. Thus, in spite of certain difficulties in Miller's presentation, we can heartily concur with his emphasis on God's sovereignty as a crucial component for an understanding of the image of the divine warrior. If the massive amount of martial materials in the OT teach us anything, they certainly teach us that God is sovereign over all that is.

SALVATION-JUDGMENT

Knowing that Yahweh as warrior is the sovereign one causing victory and defeat

¹²Janzen, "War in the OT," 161.

¹³Ibid., 161. Cf. also a similar position taken by Gelston who believes that Israel's understanding of God's sovereignty in the affairs of humanity are a key to understanding Israel's view of war (325). For Gelston, God's sovereignty is demonstrated through the wars He waged in history, wars which resulted in judgment for some and salvation for others. This emphasis on God's sovereignty accords well with the Biblical witness of a general de-emphasis on the weaponry of warfare and the mechanics of war. If God is sovereign, and determines who wins, there is little need for a professional militia or a stockpile of military hardware. If God is bringing the victory then trumpets, torches, and pitchers are more than enough to do the job (Judg. 7).

¹⁴Miller, "God the Warrior," 44-45.

on the field of battle still leaves unanswered the ethical questions. Granted, God is the one controlling the outcome of battle. But what does this tell us about the character of God and how does this kind of activity square with the character of a moral being who is "holy" other? The answers to these questions begin to emerge as we look more carefully at the reason why God is involved in warfare which is primarily to save and to judge.

Many scholars have observed this dual-sidedness to God's activity as divine warrior. As Longman argues that, "salvation and judgment are the two halves of the same great warring activity of Yahweh."¹⁵ Every act of deliverance is also an act of judgment. And, every act of judgment is also an act of deliverance. God's warlike activity is a two-edged sword, cutting both ways. In the very process of saving some people God judges others; in the process of judging some, God saves others. In the words of von Waldow, "Whenever God uses war to punish people there are always two sides to the coin: the ones who are losing the war are being punished, and the ones who are used to carry out this punishment are enjoying the benefits."¹⁶

Which end of the stick (or sword!) persons found themselves on depended on how they stood in relation to Yahweh. Those who were rightly related to Him could look forward to His protection and deliverance while those who lived in rebellion could expect invasion and defeat. Moreover, as we have seen earlier, this status was not irreversible. The tables could be turned. Those who had once experienced God's deliverance were not immune to His wrath if they later failed to keep His commandments, as the people of Israel knew all too well. As such, God's warring activity was not tainted by partisan politics or crass nationalism. Ethnic Israel was by no means outside the scope of being the object of God's warring activity. Instead, Yahweh as warrior expressed God's just rule as sovereign Lord over *all* peoples, Israelite and otherwise.

¹⁵Longman, 294, agreeing with Miller, *Divine Warrior*, pp. 172-74. Cf. Wright, "Since so much of history is concerned with warfare, it therefore must be expected that one major activity of the Suzerain will be the direction of war for both redemptive and judgmental ends" (121).

¹⁶Waldow, 35.

This approach to the theme of God as warrior and to the presence of warfare in the OT is perhaps one of the most common ways of making sense of the Biblical materials related to war. In fact, Hobbs calls it "the most popular interpretation of the presence of so much warfare in the Old Testament."¹⁷ This method of interpreting the divine warrior motif in the OT represents the traditional way God's activity has been understood. John Oswalt expresses this position well in relation to the Conquest narratives: "the wars of the conquest served two purposes: the just punishment of a Canaanite people who had become beyond rehabilitation, and the fulfillment of the promise of God whereby world-wide salvation could result. I don't think the Bible leaves us with a lot of options on this one. We either accept its explanation, or we don't, and if we don't we are pretty much on our own."¹⁸ Kaiser likewise argues that in the wars of the Conquest "Yahweh uses war negatively as a means of judgment and positively as a means of fulfilling the patriarchal promises."¹⁹

A Healthy Balance

It is often difficult to determine, in any one event of war, whether judgment or deliverance is prominent. For example, was God's activity in the Exodus primarily judgment upon the Egyptians or primarily deliverance of the Israelites? Certainly both were present and one needs to exercise caution against overemphasizing one at the expense of the other. Gelston falls into this trap. While recognizing the dual nature of God's action in the wars of Conquest, namely, bringing the chosen people into the land (salvation) and driving the inhabitants out of the land (judgment), he deals solely with the latter. For him, God as warrior is primarily God acting in judgment on sinful people. He writes (contra the "peaceful settlement" theory), "Israel marching to the Promised Land

¹⁷Hobbs, "War in the OT," 8. Though Hobbs finds such an approach utterly repugnant. See below.

¹⁸John N. Oswalt, "The Old Testament and War," paper presented at Asbury Theological Seminary, 1995 Theta Phi Lecture Series, Wilmore, KY, Oct. 6, 1995, 9.

¹⁹Kaiser, "Toward Old Testament Ethics," 173.

was not one among many nomadic hordes seeking a homeland, but a crusading army ready to execute divine judgment on the evil inhabitants of Canaan."²⁰ Craigie takes Gelston to task for skirting some of the more difficult problems by not addressing the fact that Yahweh used war as the means to bring His people into the promised land. Do the ends justify the means? Is it right for God to dispossess people (means) so that He can bring his chosen people into the Promised Land (ends)?²¹ These objections remind us of the importance of maintaining a healthy tension between these "twin" ideas of salvation and judgment.

An Attractive Solution

What makes this interpretive approach so attractive is its ability to solve the fundamental moral problem raised by the image of God as warrior by demonstrating that God is a "just" warrior.²² The position has many strengths to commend it. First, this type of explanation appears to accord well with the Biblical account. One need not engage in historical critical gymnastics to demonstrate this position from the text; the natural reading suggests it. Second, this approach provides some parameters for interpreting the image of God as warrior by ruling out some of the more far-fetched explanations. For example, this view dispenses with the mistaken notion that God was bloodthirsty and indiscriminately slaughtered helpless people for no apparent reason. Third, and related to the previous comment, this approach understands the theological significance of God as warrior to reside in his just rule. God is a "just" warrior, one who only fights on the side of right. "He is a God whose moral purpose is consistently bent on delivering the oppressed and punishing the oppressor."²³ Finally, this approach is useful in its ability to highlight the

²⁰Gelston, 326-327.

²¹For a response see Craigie, "Man of Wars."

²²This is unlike the foregoing discussion concerning God's sovereignty in which the ethical problem still remained.

²³Janzen, "War in the OT," 161.

redemptive aspect of God's warring activity, an idea we shall now examine in more detail.

A Redemptive Warrior

It is obvious that God's warring activity is redemptive to those whom He is saving. God redeemed Israel from Egyptian bondage (Exod. 6:6). But how is God's warring activity redemptive to those whom He is judging? It is redemptive insofar as the purpose of God's judgment in war is not merely punitive. God doesn't simply send plagues upon the Egyptians to spank them. Instead, the refrain that echoes throughout the Exodus accounts regarding the purpose of God's action against the Egyptians is "so that you/they shall know that I am the Lord." God wasn't just concerned about getting the Israelites out of Egypt. Were that His sole purpose He could have used a much faster and more efficient means of transporting them from the Nile Delta to the promised land. Instead, through a slower process of ten plagues and an Egyptian chariot chase, Yahweh reveals Himself as God not only to the oppressed, but also to the oppressors so that they too might have an opportunity to know God and enter into a relationship with Him. The effectiveness of this is testified to in the Biblical account itself for we read that when "the sons of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth. . . . a mixed multitude also went up with them" (Exod. 12:37-38). The fact that Yahweh was God had gotten through to some of the folk outside of "ethnic Israel" and they were delivered from "bondage" as well. Therefore we can say that God's judgment upon the nations has redemptive value insofar as it facilitates a knowledge of God (i.e. an experiential knowledge of God) among both those judged and those delivered.

Moreover, judgment is not God's last word. When Yahweh judged the people of Israel by allowing them to be defeated at the hands of their enemies, He was not simply giving them up as a lost cause. Rather, God's judgment was the necessary means by which He could later restore and rebuild His people. As is so clearly demonstrated in the prophetic literature time and time again, there was grace and mercy on the other side of judgment. As Dearman puts it, "Yahweh's zeal would make judgment a fact but also--and this is the crucial point--this same zeal would make a new beginning in peace and justice

possible."²⁴ To be sure, Yahweh as warrior fights both to save and to judge. Yet even in judgment God provides the possibilities for new beginnings.

A Critique

In spite of the popularity of this interpretive approach to the divine warrior imagery in the OT, it is by no means without its detractors. Hobbs is especially critical and argues that this approach "is predicated on a crude, literalist understanding of the text of the Old Testament. . . . It is an approach associated with extreme fundamentalism."²⁵ Carol Christ is also deeply troubled by this interpretation of the war texts precisely because it highlights God's dual-purposes of delivering *and* destroying in war. Thus, in the Exodus account, her sympathies lie with the Egyptians, and she finds their destruction at the hands of God utterly repulsive.²⁶

Many people are troubled deeply by the Bible's portrayal of a warrior God who kills and destroys people, even sinful ones! It is this aspect of God's warring activity more than any other which generates the most heated debate. To suggest that God has commanded the total extermination of certain groups of people, an activity which sounds frighteningly like ethnic cleansing, makes God appear both intolerant and unmerciful. While conceding the former, the latter must be firmly resisted. It is true that God is intolerant where sin is concerned. He does not tolerate sin nor does He allow it to go unpunished. Rather, he visits "the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations" (Exod. 34:7). However, it is simply not true to suggest that God is unmerciful. Instead, He is the God "who keeps lovingkindness for thousands" (Exod. 34:7). God is patient and gracious. He is not looking to pick a fight with anyone. When he does go to war against a nation, He does not act rashly or in

²⁴Dearman, 11.

²⁵Hobbs, "War in the OT," 8.

²⁶Christ, 207.

haste. He gave the Amorites over four hundred years of grace before punishing them for their wickedness since their iniquity was "not yet complete" until that time (Gen. 15:16). He would not allow the people of Israel to execute His wrath upon them until they had become intolerably wicked. Thus, we can say with Kaiser that "war . . . is God's ultimate, but reluctant, method of treating gross evil that resists every other patient and loving rebuke of God."²⁷

That notwithstanding, we have seen that many believe that the Israelites simply projected their nationalistic aspirations upon God in the attempt to give their quest for land divine sanction. It is thought that the Biblical writers simply portrayed the Canaanites as totally depraved and without hope of "rehabilitation" to ease their consciences and to legitimate the wholesale slaughter of these people who had the misfortune of living on land Israel thought belonged to them.²⁸ This argument, when carried to its logical conclusion suggests that the Canaanites were really no worse than any other nation. They simply happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Niditch argues that this was one of many war ideologies present in Israel over the course of her history. She explores this concept in her chapter "The Ban as God's Justice" and writes, "In the ban as God's justice a sharp line is drawn between us and them, between clean and unclean, between those worthy of salvation and those deserving elimination. The enemy is a monster, unclean, and diseased. The ban as God's justice thus allows people to accept the notion of killing other humans by dehumanizing them."²⁹

The weakness of this position is its underlying assumption that the Bible is nothing more than a human accounting of Israel's religious history representing what Israel thought about God. Such a conclusion leaves us with no means of evaluating whether

²⁷Kaiser, "Toward Old Testament Ethics," 178.

²⁸Christ writes, "In order to justify this action by Yahweh, the inhabitants of the land are portrayed in other parts of the Bible as evil or idolaters" (206). Hobbs, in "War in the OT," writes, "The vilification of enemies in the Old Testament which are a prelude to, and an encouragement for war, is something which we can no longer afford. The costs of this artificial antagonism are far too high" (12-13).

²⁹Niditch, 77.

these "thoughts" were true or false. It denies the revelatory nature of the Bible and rules out a priori the possibility that God actually used Israel as His agent of divine judgment to execute His wrath upon the sinful Canaanite population.

Yet, simply saying that certain Biblical events did not actually happen does not move us any closer to a workable solution. For regardless of whether they really happened or not, we still must reckon with the fact that this is the sacred story that has been preserved for us in the Biblical text. As Miller rightly points out regarding the practice of the ban, "Whether in fact the ban ever took place at all--and there is no real question that it did--the Old Testament is explicit in affirming that God demanded it and was for it."³⁰ Hence, all such approaches which deny the historicity of the Biblical record ultimately bring us no closer to a solution. There is, however, a problem which more seriously threatens the integrity of this interpretive approach, and we now turn to consider it.

A Perplexing Question

If this approach is to be viable, it must be maintained that in any event of war those who got judged and destroyed by God deserved it. Otherwise, we will feel that there is no justice in God's warring and will need to look elsewhere to make sense of this martial material. In light of this, it behooves us to take the time to see whether those whom God fought against were wicked. We shall do so by focusing our attention particularly on the Conquest narratives and asking the question, "Were the Canaanites really all that bad?"

Some scholars have argued that the Canaanites really were not so bad, certainly no worse than anyone else. For example, Wright argues that Israel was merely an agent of God and as such held no "superior goodness" over the Canaanites whose land they took.³¹ Knierim asks,

Why are they [the Canaanites] "punished?" . . . They had to be expropriated of their land because

³⁰Miller, "God the Warrior," 41.

³¹Wright, 126.

Yahweh had promised their land to Yahweh's own people. Yahweh was going to fulfill this promise to make the land Yahweh's own land, but not because of the Canaanites' 'depravity.' Had their "depravity" been the legitimate and basic reason for their expropriation, all nations existing in the same sinful condition should have been expropriated, and Yahweh's people could have settled anywhere rather than only in the land of Canaan. They could have possessed the earth.³²

Stone argues along these same lines and repeatedly stresses the fact that "the Book of Joshua does not stress Canaanite decadence."³³ Instead, he contends that the Canaanites were destroyed because "they have resisted the action of Yahweh and thus have perished."³⁴ He points out that all the battles in which Israel was engaged after Jericho and Ai, the first two battles of the Conquest, were defensive in nature. Because of this Stone contends that, "the Israelites are depicted not as a savage, unstoppable war machine blazing over Canaan, but as reacting to the Canaanite kings' opposition to Yahweh."³⁵ According to Stone's explanation, the Canaanites were killed because they resisted Yahweh, evidenced by their resistance of God's people in the land.³⁶ As such, they were not killed because Israel was fighting a holy war, pro-actively purging the evil from the land.³⁷

While Stone's is certainly a convincing argument,³⁸ it leaves unanswered the

³²Knierim, 13-14. In response to this one must appeal to divine foreknowledge. We must affirm that the God who stands outside of time is able to see and know how all will respond to whatever gracious overtures He might send to them in any form. As such, it can be argued that it is only because He foreknew that the Canaanites would become wicked that He promised His people that particular land. We cannot believe that God just choose that land for His people and then simply had to move the Canaanites out of the way irregardless of their moral condition.

³³Stone, 26.

³⁴Ibid., 34.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Cf. 1 Sam. 15:1-3 which supports this view.

³⁷While agreeing with Stone's basic conclusion that the Canaanites were destroyed because they resisted Yahweh, and while conceding that the Book of Joshua does not stress the depravity of the Canaanites, this writer feels that the larger Biblical witness will simply not allow us to deny that the Canaanites were wicked and that their wickedness was, in large measure, the reason for their destruction.

³⁸Unfortunately, Stone's article is only as strong as his redactional reconstruction of the Book of Joshua, an enterprise always open to a fair degree of subjectivity.

question of what to do with passages like Lev. 18:24-28; 20:22-23; and Deut. 9:4-5 which explicitly state that God drove the Canaanites out of the land because of their wickedness. Norman Gottwald offers one interesting solution to this problem in an article which looks specifically at the use of herem in Deuteronomy.³⁹ He believes that it is best to understand the function of "holy war" in Deuteronomy to be a literary and rhetorical device aimed at keeping the people cultically pure and argues that the "wickedness" of the Canaanites amounted to nothing more than cultic difference. As the argument goes, there was nothing inherently evil about the religion of the Canaanites. In fact, God had given all the trans-Jordanian peoples land and had established the lesser deities to be worshipped by them. But Israel must only worship Yahweh. Yet, if the Israelites lived beside the inhabitants of Canaan they would be tempted to switch their allegiance to the gods of that people. Hence holy war was called for to exterminate the Canaanite population not because of any inherent moral evil, but because of this cultic threat that they posed. As attractive as this explanation may be, it is highly speculative and hypothetical and, once again, fails to come to terms with the Biblical witness.

Since these attempts to deny the Canaanites' wickedness as the reason for their expulsion from the land fail to do justice to the Biblical record, we must now look more carefully at the Biblical data to determine precisely what the Bible does tell us about the Canaanites' wickedness and their removal from the land. While we have already partially answered this question in the first half of the study, we will look at the issue here in more detail. We begin by examining those references in the Pentateuch which more or less explicitly refer to the wickedness of the Canaanites. The first of these occurs in Gen. 15:16. Abraham has had a "bad dream" in which he was told that his descendants would be enslaved for four hundred years, after which they would return to the land of Judah (apparently Abraham is in Hebron when he has this dream). The reason they are not able

³⁹Norman K. Gottwald, "'Holy War' in Deuteronomy: Analysis and Critique," Review and Expositor 61(1964): 297-310.

to enter the land sooner is because "the iniquity of the Amorite⁴⁰ is not yet complete." This implies that God will not give the Israelites permission (not to mention the ability) to destroy the Canaanites until a specified time when the great wickedness of the people of Canaan absolutely requires it.

More substantial are two passages in Leviticus which actually describe some of the wicked deeds of the Canaanites. The first of these is Lev. 18:24-28. Leviticus 18 begins with a rather lengthy catalog of sexual sins to be avoided as well as a brief word about the prohibition against offering children to Molech. Out of this context God then commands His people thus: "Do not defile yourselves by any of these things; for by all these the nations which I am casting out before you have become defiled. For the land has become defiled, therefore I have visited its punishment upon it, so the land has spewed out its inhabitants" (18:24-25). This passage makes a rather clear connection between the Canaanites' wickedness and their removal from the land. The content of this wickedness is understood to include gross sexual aberrations as well as the practice of child sacrifice, all of which the Israelites were warned against imitating.

While the second passage, found in Lev. 20:22-23, is quite similar to this, Lev. 20 begins, however, with a more severe warning against sacrificing children to Molech, as well as prohibitions against visiting mediums and spiritists, and against cursing father and mother. These are then followed by several prohibitions against a wide variety of deviant sexual behaviors. Once again, it is out of this context that God commands His people: "You are therefore to keep all My statutes and all My ordinances and do them, so that the land to which I am bringing you to live will not spew you out. Moreover, you shall not follow the customs of the nation which I shall drive out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I have abhorred them." Once again, the wicked behavior of the Canaanites is clearly understood to be the reason why they are driven from the land.

The final Pentateuchal reference occurs in Moses' speech to the people just prior to their settlement of the land.

⁴⁰Sometimes the land of Canaan is referred to as the land of the Amorites.

Do not say in your heart when the LORD your God has driven them out before you, "Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land," but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is dispossessing them before you. It is not for your righteousness or for the uprightness of your heart that you are going to possess their land, but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God is driving them out before you, in order to confirm the oath which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Deut. 9:4-5).

While these verses create yet another unavoidable link between the Canaanites' expulsion from the land and their wickedness, it should be noted that the broader context suggests that the main purpose of these verses is not to emphasize why God drove the Canaanites out, but rather to suggest why He brought the Israelites in. The bulk of Deut. 9 consists of a depressing list of Israel's failings, thus emphasizing that Israel's acquisition of this land was in no way the result of her own righteousness. The main point of Deut. 9 is to emphasize the fact that God is the one who brings the people into the land in spite of their hard-heartedness. The emphasis is on God's faithfulness, not the Israelites "goodness" or, for that matter, the Canaanites' wickedness. In fact, after verse five, no further mention is made of the wickedness of the Canaanites and, were it not for the references in Leviticus, we might wonder, "In what sense were they wicked?"⁴¹ Still, Deut. 9:4-5 stands as yet another convincing witness to the fact that the Canaanites were wicked and that their wickedness was what precipitated their removal from the land.

Surprisingly, connections between the wickedness of the people of Canaan and their expulsion from the land are less explicit in the Historical Books than in the Pentateuch. For example, the Book of Joshua gives us no indication that the Canaanites were exceedingly wicked. The Book of Joshua is surprising silent on the matter in spite of the fact that this book actually records the killing and removal of the Canaanites from the land. As noted in Chapter 3 of this study, there are, however, certain passages which compare Israel's wickedness to that of the nations who were driven out before her. Since such references certainly imply that the reason the Canaanites were driven from the land

⁴¹Perhaps the more disturbing question is "Why did their wickedness merit total annihilation while the wickedness of many of the other surrounding nations went unpunished?" While we can speculate about why this was the case, there is no conclusive extra-Biblical evidence which suggests that the Canaanites were any more depraved than their neighbors.

was because they were equally wicked, they provide additional evidence of the depraved condition of the Canaanites. Thus, when all the data are assembled, even though there is certainly not a plethora of Biblical material to support the claim that the Canaanites were dispelled from the land because they were wicked, the cumulative force of the various references which have been marshalled does not allow us to escape the conclusion that the Canaanites "really were that bad!"⁴²

Having said that, one must hasten to add that such a statement is certainly something of a generalization. Not every last Canaanite was bad to the bone. Some were more "righteous" than others and those who choose to align themselves with Yahweh's plans and purposes were certainly spared. The harlot Rahab serves as case in point (Judg. 2).

We are left now with one final question. What about the young children? What about infants? How could they be held morally responsible? Was God just in commanding them to be destroyed along with the Canaanite men and women? One way to make sense of this is to appeal to the fact that because humans live in a fallen world none are immune to "collateral damage."⁴³ No one sins in a vacuum. Our sin has consequences not only for ourselves but also for others around us. This means that sometimes the innocent suffer for the deeds of the guilty. For example, when the Babylonians broke through the walls of Jerusalem and carried the people into exile, we can be sure that some who were killed and carried away were God-fearing Jews. Nevertheless, they got swept away right along with the wicked. Although we do not know all the miraculous ways God must have protected and provided for some of those

⁴²For those who are concerned that such a conclusion reflects a dehumanization of the enemy which is intolerable to our modern consciousness, it should be remembered that the Biblical writers do not *emphasize* the wickedness of the Canaanites. That the Canaanites were wicked is simply stated as a matter of fact. It is not dwelt upon nor celebrated in any way. Instead, these ancient writers were far more concerned about the need for God's people to be good than they were about the need for God's enemies to look bad. Likewise, they were more eager to highlight God's faithfulness to His promise of giving His people the land than they were to discuss at any great length the abominable practices of the Canaanites.

⁴³I am indebted to Dr. Joe Dongell of Asbury Theological Seminary for this phrase.

who were righteous, He certainly did not do that for all of them.

Another way to approach this question is through the OT's notion of community solidarity which views the individual in light of the community. Hence, what is true of the community is also true of the individual. Even if an individual has not overtly participated in certain sinful practices, if the community of which he or she is a part has, there is a sense of collective guilt. This can be seen in numerous OT passages where godly persons confess the sins of the nation and include themselves among the guilty.⁴⁴ The individual was culpable for the actions of the community at large. In this way it was justifiable for the people of Israel to kill the Canaanite children and infants since they were at least "guilty by association."

The concept of the herem provides us with one final vantage point from which to approach this question. In the herem everything was to be devoted to Yahweh. This meant that when the Israelites went to war, not a single person was to be spared and no booty was to be taken for personal use. Absolutely everything was to be devoted to God. This practice emphasized the fact that the battle was the Lord's and that the victory had come from Him. The practice of the herem in the Conquest and afterwards served as a poignant reminder that such battles were not being fought for nationalistic self-interest but in response to the divine command to execute judgment upon the wickedness of the Canaanites. Such thoroughness would also warn the Israelites of the danger of opposing the will and purpose of Yahweh and would remind them of what would happen to them if they did likewise. Since these lessons could only be communicated by total annihilation of the Canaanite population, and since young children and infants were necessarily a part of that population, they were not to be spared.

In the final analysis, we must humbly admit a certain amount of ignorance in regard to this difficult question. While the above suggestions should help us make better sense of the data, "we need to recognize the narrow limits of our knowledge . . . of the complexity of God's ways in testing, punishing and shaping one imperfect nation by means of

⁴⁴See e.g. Ezra 9:5-15; Neh. 1:4-11a; Isa. 59:9-15a; Dan. 9:3-19.

another."⁴⁵

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have focused upon two of the most common ways in which the divine warrior image in the OT is interpreted. We noted that since Yahweh was understood as a warrior-king it made sense to think of Him as the Sovereign one. This notion was also supported by the Hebrews' notion that whatever happened happened because of God. He was seen as the sole and sovereign actor in all things, not the least of which was war.

We then focused rather extensively upon the notion that Yahweh as warrior can be helpfully understood in terms of salvation and judgment. We emphasized the dual nature of Yahweh's warring, both to save and to judge. We also explored the question of the Canaanites' "wickedness" and argued that although this theme is not as extensive as might be expected, nevertheless, God's command that they be expelled from the land was indeed justified because of their wickedness. In support of this point is the fact that those who aligned themselves to the will of Yahweh were spared. Finally, we offered some suggestions about how the divine command to completely annihilate all the Canaanites, even young children and infants, could be justified. These included the ideas of collateral damage, community solidarity, and the herem.

Before exploring some hermeneutical guidelines to be considered when wrestling with this OT image of the divine warrior and suggesting some ways this imagery might be used by the Church today, it will be profitable to state our conclusions thus far from the second half of this study. First, we argued that certain prior questions necessarily determine to a large degree how this image will be interpreted. Those approaches which deny revelation or give little place to it and which view the Scriptures as primarily a product of human initiative inevitably generate inadequate interpretations of the divine

⁴⁵Kidner, 101. I have used this slightly out of context, as Kidner makes this comment in reference to the wars of aggression Israel initiated.

warrior. The reason for this is that such approaches are often the result of prior ideological agendas and certain historical reconstructions which tend to skew the data by superimposing a foreign framework upon the text. Hence, the OT theme of God as warrior can only be rightly understood when revelation is affirmed and the inspiration of the text is not undermined.

Second, we argued that any rejection of the divine warrior imagery does not do justice to the OT text in which the image emerges repeatedly from beginning to end. The Biblical record simply will not allow us to relegate the image to a footnote or a thing of the past. Its ubiquitous presence in the Scriptures requires our careful interpretation and application in our day.

Third, we have argued that God's involvement in warfare was morally justifiable in the OT. We intentionally began working toward this conclusion in Chapter 8 but only arrived at it in this present chapter. Here we discovered that God is justified in His warring especially as that activity is viewed as a means by which God executes His judgment and offers His salvation. Thus, the response of those who are rightly related to the divine warrior should be one of praise and thanksgiving. With these thoughts in mind, we are now ready to make some final comments.

CHAPTER 10

CONCLUSIONS: MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

We have come a long way since Chapter 1 and have covered considerable ground. The task which remains is to provide some hermeneutical guidelines for the Yahweh as warrior motif in the OT and to suggest some ways in which the divine warrior imagery might be rightly appropriated in a Christian context. To these goals we now turn our attention.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

We begin by asking, "What is the appropriate starting point for interpreting the divine warrior motif in the OT?" To answer this question we must return to the very beginning of the OT, Gen. 1:1. Even if one grants the late dating of Gen. 1, it cannot be denied that the canon has been deliberately shaped so that it begins with the creation story. This is of the greatest importance and cannot be overemphasized. It is crucial to realize that the starting point in any discussion regarding warfare in the OT is not with the wars of Israel, but with Gen. 1. It is extremely significant that the OT does not open with the words, "In the beginning God waged war." Instead, the Biblical story begins by recording the action of a God who creates the world and who does so without conflict. If we are to rightly understand the image of the divine warrior we must first remember that God is primarily one who creates and only secondarily one who destroys. It is only once sin enters into the equation that the need for salvation and judgment become necessary. Had humanity not gone awry, there would have been no need for a divine warrior either to deliver or to destroy. As such, warring is not an inherent character trait in the person of God. There was a time when he was not a warrior, and there will be a time when he will cease from being a warrior.

Related to this is the fact that the world as God intended it to be was a world of peace. Not only does the Creator not create via conflict, there is no conflict inherent in the original created order. All was peaceful and harmonious. All was "good." At every

level of creation there was peace and stability. This is the Biblical vision of the world as God intended it to be.

While most works dealing with the question of war in the OT do make some reference to Israel's concept of peace, it is often cited as the very last part of their discussion, as admittedly it is here. Yet, at least in the present instance, this is not meant to undermine the fact that in Israel's conception of reality peace is foundational. In light of these comments, we may safely say that no discussion on war in the OT and no description of the divine warrior is adequate if it fails to reckon with the context of Gen. 1, standing as it does at the head of the entire OT.

Secondly, it is instructive to note that the first time God "destroys" people it is due to the fact that they are utterly wicked and evil (Gen. 6:1ff.). It is fascinating to observe that in this very act of destroying the wicked world God saves righteous Noah and his family. This twin theme of salvation and destruction is repeated time and again throughout the Bible as we have discussed at some length at various places throughout this study. Thus, when interpreting the image of Yahweh as warrior in the OT, these two emphases must be held in tension. To overemphasize one or the other will lead to a distorted picture of the divine warrior. While some accounts may tend to emphasize one aspect over against the other, both are present in every event of war and provide us with perspective and balance when interpreting this image.

Third, when considering the theme of Yahweh as warrior one must interpret this image in light of the whole of the OT. Craigie rightly says we are mistaken if we only look at once slice of the Biblical material concerning war in the OT.¹ Thus, it is not helpful to attempt to interpret the conquest narratives apart from those accounts in which Israel was defeated. To do so leaves one with a skewed picture of the data. A wholistic approach to the OT is necessary. Even more significant, to fully mine the depths of the divine warrior imagery one must observe how this theme is continued in the NT, a task which regrettably lies outside the scope of this present work.

¹Craigie, Problem of War, 97.

Fourth, and related to the foregoing, one must keep in mind that the warrior imagery, as frequent as it is in the OT, is only one of a host of other images used to describe the nature and character of God. The OT also describes God as one who is exceedingly patient and compassionate.

WHAT DOES THE DIVINE WARRIOR IMAGERY MEAN?

Meaning for the Hebrews

Keeping the above hermeneutical guidelines in mind, we shall now attempt to explain the meaning of this complex image. At the heart of the meaning of the divine warrior imagery is the idea that God is sovereign. Yet, as we noted in the previous chapter, this leaves unanswered certain ethical and moral questions. Thus, we must add to this the notion that the divine warrior who is sovereign uses war both to save and to judge. This seems to be the way in which the Hebrew people understood the divine warrior imagery. Those who resisted the will of Yahweh felt the power of His sword for harm, while those who were obedient to Him could expect His protection and deliverance. The crux of the matter then was how one was related to Yahweh. The divine warrior was to be trusted without reserve and without recourse to a stockpile of military goods or alliances. By looking to Yahweh as their divine warrior, the Hebrew people learned to put their trust in God rather than in their own strength or ability to deliver themselves. If Yahweh was the sovereign divine warrior who always fought on the side of right and against the wicked then He could be trusted completely.

Meaning for Christians Today

How are we, as twentieth-century Christians to understand this imagery? Is God still the sovereign divine warrior who uses historical armies to bring about His salvation and His judgment? Does He still reveal Himself in that way on the field of battle? Or is there some other significance to the image of the divine warrior for us today? These are not easy questions, but we must attempt to answer them.

To begin, we believe that while God is still controlling history and using nations

and peoples to accomplish His purposes, one must be exceedingly cautious about trying to say with any degree of precision which nations God is leading and which He is destroying. While God may still use certain wars to accomplish His will, there is no evidence that God divinely commands and directs one nation to destroy another as He did in ancient Israel. That is to say that no soldier going into battle today can be absolutely certain that God has sanctioned their killing and is "on their side." What often happens is that both sides think the same God is fighting for them. Craigie cites the American Civil War as an example, noting that "both sides drew freely upon the Old Testament in the attempt to justify their cause."² More recently one might also note that the German soldiers fighting in World War II had on their belt buckles, "Gott mit uns."³ Yet did not the allies also believe that God was with them in the cause they were fighting. Who was right? In light of these ambiguities one must be extremely careful in suggesting that certain activities are from the hand of God, either to punish or to save.

More significant, however, is the simple fact that there is no such thing as a theocratic state any longer. Here we return to an argument we looked at in Chapter 8 under the heading, "A Different Dispensation." In OT times, God's plan was to bless the world through the one nation Israel (Gen. 12:1-3). Yet today, ethnic Israel is no longer the special vehicle of blessing to the world. Instead, to recall the words of the apostle Paul, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:28-29). We stand at a different point in salvation history than did our Hebrew counterparts. Since God is no longer revealing Himself through the wars of a theocratic state, He no longer gives divine sanction to war as He once did. The people of God today are not a nation, they are the Church, and the Church is dispersed throughout the world. How then could God command brothers and sisters in Christ to sanction and kill one another?

²Ibid., 28.

³God with us. Khodr, 408.

How then are we to understand the relevance of the war texts for today? It seems best to understand God's involvement in Israel's wars as something of an object lesson, much like the laws of clean and unclean in the OT were object lessons. In the latter case, these laws were intended to teach the people something of the nature of God, that God was pure, or unmixed, and that they were to be likewise. Once this lesson was grasped, the need for the object lesson became obsolete.

In much the same way, God's use of war in the OT taught the people certain truths about their God. As we have noted above, the Hebrews' understanding of God as warrior led them to understand that God acted as the sovereign one, that He punished sin by death and rewarded righteousness with life, and that He was totally trustworthy. As people began to understand these lessons in more concrete ways, the object lesson of warfare was no longer needed. Nevertheless, the lessons and truths communicated in and through those events remain just as relevant for our day as for theirs. We too must recognize that God is sovereign over all the world and wants to be in control of every dimension of our being. This should challenge us to order our lives accordingly. Moreover, we can be certain that we will be judged by God if we refuse to obey Him and saved by God if we walk with Him in truth and righteousness. Finally, we too, like the Hebrews of old, must learn to trust God unreservedly in all our circumstances and must constantly refuse the temptation to create our own solutions apart from God.

Thus, while we have argued that God no longer calls His people to engage in armed struggles as He did with the people of Israel, this certainly does *not* mean that God has ceased to be sovereign or that He no longer saves or judges people. It simply means that we live at a time in salvation history when God does not normally act in such an immediate and dramatic fashion. Nevertheless, because He has acted that way before on the plane of history, we can be certain that He is operating that way presently and will continue operating that way in the days to come, even though that may (or may not) be more behind the scenes. Thus, we can rest assured that there will be a "day of the Lord" in which the righteous will be saved and the wicked will be judged precisely because this is the way God has acted through Israel's experience of war. Our response, therefore,

should be one of faith and obedience to the divine warrior.

Additionally, when dealing with the meaning of God as warrior in the OT we must simply rest content to let God be God. We must realize that there are some things that it is OK for God to do that it is not OK for us to do. There are certain activities in which God may engage which are off limits to us. For example, while we are told, "be angry, and yet do not sin" (Eph. 4:26), we are never told to be wrathful. Only God can manifest this characteristic without doing so for sinful or self-serving reasons. In fact, we are instructed *not* to take our own revenge but to leave such matters to the Lord (Rom. 12:19). God may act in certain ways which are off limits to us because He alone is able to act in ways which are *always* in the best interests of His creation purposes.

Finally, rather than being an embarrassment or a source of confusion, the image of God as warrior in the OT should be thought of as a source of praise for the people of God today. Instead of viewing the image of the divine warrior negatively as something to be downplayed or ignored, it can be embraced since it is actually an extremely positive image. Believers can take great comfort and joy knowing that the God they serve is controlling the events of history. The world is not simply a random ball of chaotic matter trapped in a meaningless circle of time. Instead, God the warrior, the sovereign one, has a plan and is guiding history accordingly by saving and judging people. Just as God has saved and judged in the past using warfare, He will continue to save and judge, although not necessarily through warfare, in the days ahead and at the end of time.

Understanding the Biblical description of the divine warrior should also call forth our praise since it convincingly demonstrates that God is neither arbitrary nor capricious in His dealings with us. God as warrior does punish the wicked, and He does save the righteous. The warrior God is one who relates to all people fairly and earnestly desires that everyone know Him and be in relationship with Him.⁴ As such, the Biblical portrait of the divine warrior is of a God who is both gracious and just.

Additionally, believers can praise the divine warrior for His ultimate triumph over

⁴Recall the recurring refrain in the Exodus event that people might "know" the Lord.

evil. The concrete expressions of Yahweh's triumph over evil in the OT find their fullest expression in His victory over death and the forces of evil in the NT.⁵ As such, the divine warrior is the guarantor of life and peace. Those who are rightly related to God as warrior can rejoice that they are on the winning side and can live confidently with the knowledge that the divine warrior is present with them. Because the divine warrior fights on the side of right, He can be called upon to save and defend those who are oppressed or persecuted. Yet regardless of the trials we are permitted to undergo in this life, ultimate victory and life eternal lie ahead for all those who have aligned themselves to the will and purpose of the God whom the Israelites praised as "a man of war." For these kinds of reasons, the image of God as warrior should also call forth our praise and adoration and should be viewed much more positively than is often the case.

APPLICATION

While the Bible gives us ample precedents for using this imagery in the context of worship (e.g. Exod. 15; Judg. 5; Ps. 24), we are left wondering how we are to use that image today. How are we to apply this imagery in the context of Christian faith and practice? How is it to be used in and by the Church? What follows are a few modest suggestions as to the way in which this material might be used in a Christian context.

Before exploring these suggestions, however, it must be emphasized that any use of the divine warrior materials must be careful and responsible. As we have noted, the history of interpretation on this theme in OT theology has been largely one of abuse. We believe the OT texts give no warrant to argue that God sanctions warfare for us today. Let this be clear first and foremost. Any use of the martial materials in the OT to justify violence and killing in today's world certainly misses the mark and *misappropriates* the Biblical material. So then, how are we to use this imagery today?

First, we should use it to teach certain truths about God, truths which we have noted above. We can preach from the war texts to demonstrate that God as warrior is

⁵See e.g. 1 Cor. 15:20-28.

sovereign. We can use this material in Sunday School to demonstrate how these texts affirm that God is the one who does right and who brings salvation and judgment to all. By looking at the way the people related to the divine warrior we too can learn that He is worthy of our trust, devotion, and allegiance.

Secondly, images of the divine warrior should *not* be excluded from our liturgies but should, in fact, be added so that there will be opportunity to explore the topic. This should not be misunderstood. This writer does not for a minute suggest we should change the words of "Jesus Loves Me" to:

God's a warrior, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,
 Yahweh fights with His great sword, so that I will know the Lord.
 Yes, God's a warrior,
 Yes, God's a warrior,
 Yes, God's a warrior,
 The Bible tells me so.

Despite the theological truth of those lyrics, the possibility for misunderstanding is so great as to render such a song unhelpful at best, and destructive, at worst.

Nevertheless, the minister should be aware of the rich imagery of the divine warrior which may already be present in their books of worship. There are some traces of the divine warrior imagery in the hymns with which we are already familiar. The alert pastor or worship leader can utilize these and create teachable moments in the context of Christian worship. What better way to teach the true meaning of the divine warrior than in and through those forms which are already known and acceptable. For example, the second stanza of the hymn, "O Worship the King" reads as follows:

O tell of his might, O sing of his grace,
 whose robe is the light, whose canopy space;
 his chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form,
 and dark is his path on the wings of the storm.

Or take for example, the less well known chorus

The Lord is a warrior, the Lord is mighty in battle,
 The Lord is a warrior, Lord of hosts is He.

These and other examples give the thoughtful minister opportunities to teach his or her congregation the meaning and message of the divine warrior.

AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Where do we go from here? The following suggestions represent some avenues which could be profitably explored to supplement the work done in this study. First, it would be helpful to observe the specific ways the OT theme of Yahweh as warrior is continued in the NT, noting differences and similarities as they emerge. Second, more could be done to compare and contrast the way Yahweh fights and the way(s) the other gods of the ancient Near East fought. As we have noted, the trend today has been to emphasize the similarities between Yahweh and other contemporary deities. Not enough has been done to point out the difference between wars in Israel and those in the ancient Near East. The focus is often on superficial similarities which miss the essential differences. For example, which ancient Near Eastern country boasts in a god who repeatedly gives them victory over their enemies even though they are underequipped and outmaneuvered at every turn? Or which ancient Near Eastern deity fights against his or her own people as a direct response to that people's moral wickedness? What do such unique features of warfare in Israel suggest about the character of her God? If more serious attention were given to these and other related issues perhaps the tendency to see Yahweh as little more than a glorified Baal could be stemmed. Finally, more attention could be given to certain related themes to the divine warrior motif such as the place of herem in ancient Israel and the nature of warfare in ancient Israel.

SUMMARY

This chapter has attempted to provide a usable framework in which the divine warrior motif in the OT might be interpreted. Several guidelines were given. First we emphasized the need to interpret the divine warrior image in light of Gen. 1, noting that He is the Creator before He is the Destroyer. Then we observed that God's acts of salvation and judgment go hand in hand. We also noted that one needs to interpret the divine warrior image in light of the whole of the OT, keeping in mind that the image of a warrior is only one of many images which can be applied to God.

We then looked more specifically at what this image meant to the Hebrew people

and what it means to us today. For the Hebrews, this image implied that God was sovereign one and that He got involved in military battles both to save and to judge. Contemporary Christians should no longer think of God giving divine sanction to wars since He no longer operates in that way. Instead, the war texts in the OT are to be understood as something of an object lesson, reminding us of the character of God and assuring us that a day of salvation-judgment will come to all.

We also explored some of the possible ways in which this image could be applied in Christian worship by using it for teaching and in the liturgy. Finally, we ended our discussion with some areas for further study which would enhance and compliment this study.

It is hoped that these pages have been helpful in the observation and interpretation of the divine warrior image in the OT and will encourage the reader to study this subject further. It is believed that the following bibliography will give ample guidance to those wanting to explore this topic more fully. The conviction of this study has been that the divine warrior image in the OT is a rich image and one which, rather than being a source of perplexity to the Christian, can become a source of praise. If this end has been achieved in some small measure than this work will have accomplished its goal.

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