

Divine Warfare and Nonresistance

Gerald Janzen

One of the perpetual questions faced by believers in nonresistance is, "What about the violence in the Old Testament?" This "simple" question is really quite complex because it implies a number of presuppositions. It implies that the person being questioned must have a belief in the divine authority of the entire Bible, as might the questioner. It further implies a need to harmonize data from the two testaments, if the first presupposition is adopted. Both presuppositions imply a third: that the relationship between the Old and New Testaments ought to be a continuous one.

*On the matter of nonresistance, the theme of
spiritual warfare demonstrates a continuity between the
Old and New Testaments.*

However, some respondents may argue for discontinuity between them. Such an answer could posit even a radical disjunction between the two testaments and argue that the ethic of Jesus supersedes the sub-Christian ethic of the Old Testament (OT). In this connection one might propose that the divinely mandated violence of the OT is postevent propaganda by the ancient Israelites. Another explanation might be that the violence mandated by God to the ancient Israelites was justified because of its divine source, but that today no such theocratic nation exists to receive the divine mandate. Indeed, the people of God have been so internationalized that no such nation could exist today.

Each of the above positions or a combination of them has something to contribute to the discussion. This article, however, will present an alternative approach. The writer has a concern for continuity in the

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interpretation of Scripture. At the same time he is committed to the Anabaptist presupposition that the New Testament (NT) has priority over the Old, and that, as a consequence, the new covenant supersedes the old covenant.

Nevertheless, within that context NT themes are intimately linked to OT teaching and history. Thus arguments can be adduced for the existence in the NT of such OT theological themes as the land, salvation, sacrifice, covenant, and others. In the same way one can argue for the theological continuity of the warfare motif.

It is the intention of this author to focus on the implications, for the doctrine of nonresistance, of Paul's use of warfare texts from the Book of Isaiah in Ephesians 6:10-17. This will also necessitate some consideration of the cultural milieu of the material under consideration. The Ephesians text contains allusions to certain verses in Isaiah which are often seen as nothing more than the inspiration for the language used in the NT passage. It is the thesis of this article that Paul proclaimed the divine Warrior of the Isaianic texts to be contending against enemies on behalf of his people, the Church, in the NT setting just as Isaiah so proclaimed for Israel. If that is the case, then the victory won by Jesus at the cross and in the resurrection has closed the era in which God's people engage in secular warfare.

DIVINE WARFARE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN WORLD

Conflict Between Gods

A consideration of divine warfare in general during the OT period is integral to developing an understanding of the continuity between Paul and Isaiah. Israel believed and practiced an ideology of divine warfare that had affinities with that of other peoples of the ancient Near East. In that culture, warfare was generally understood as divine warfare. A number of examples can be cited. One of the Hittite kings, Hattusilis I, after a successful military campaign, had large amounts of booty transported to his palace. The divine statues of the defeated enemy, however, were distributed among the temples of various Hittite gods. In reference to that event the Korean scholar Sa-Moon Kang contends that "in the Hittite context the carrying of the divine statue from the defeated country can be understood as a defeat of the gods of the conquered lands by the gods of the victorious country."¹ Thus the placement of the divine statue of a defeated nation in the temple of a god of the victorious nation must be understood to be a symbol of the defeat of one god by another.

The above practice has been vividly reflected in the text of 1 Samuel 4–6. It is there recounted how the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant in battle. In typical ancient Near Eastern fashion they placed it in the temple of Dagon their god to symbolize his victory over Yahweh. It would appear that in their view there had been a divine war paralleling the earthly war in which Israel and her god had lost. Things were not what they seemed, however. Israel had not engaged in warfare as approved by Yahweh, and so the Philistines were mistaken in thinking that their god had actually triumphed over Israel's god. This became evident as the ark circulated among their cities. Yet the story illustrates how the Bible recounts some of the traditions of divine warfare current in the ancient Near East.

Some believe it was through the city-state of Ugarit that the idea of divine involvement in warfare penetrated into Canaan. At any rate, Ugarit shared the ideological tradition of divine warfare which prevailed throughout the ancient Near East. Patrick D. Miller has provided documentation of this from texts concerning Baal's conflict with the sea god, Yam.

Sixty-six cities he seized
 Seventy-seven towns
 Eighty (took) Ba'al []
 Ninety Ba'al of the sum[mit?]

Baal is the storm god and conquering warrior who puts his enemies to flight, thus establishing his rule. What is of particular interest for our purposes is that the gods engage in conflict with one another, what Miller refers to as "cosmic conflict."³

There is a thread of belief in cosmic warfare which passes through the OT. To be sure it uses mythological language to symbolize the activity of Yahweh, but it has every appearance of seriously referring to spiritual realities. Psalm 89:9-10 states, "You rule over the surging sea; when its waves mount up, you still them. You crushed Rahab like one of the slain; with your strong arm you scattered your enemies" (NIV, *passim*). The crushing of Rahab is of a piece with divine control of natural phenomena and involvement in warfare. Indeed, it seems clear that verse 10b is letting us know that the crushing of Rahab was one element in Yahweh scattering his enemies.

Job 26:12, in language reminiscent of Psalm 89 and of Marduk's conflict with Tiamat in the *Enuma Elish*, says of God, "By his power he churned up the sea; by his wisdom he cut Rahab to pieces." Isaiah also makes mention of Rahab in a warfare context, "Awake, awake! Clothe

yourself with strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through?" (Isa. 51:9).

Rahab and Leviathan may or may not be synonyms. However, both receive the label "gliding serpent" in Job 26:13 and Isaiah 27:1 respectively. It is the position of this author that these references to Rahab and Leviathan reflect real conflicts between Yahweh and his spiritual enemies, the false gods of the nations or demons.

Old Testament references to this reality are not numerous, but they are clear. Deuteronomy 32:17 states, "They sacrificed to demons, which are not God—gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear." Psalm 106:36-37 further states, "They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons."

In the New Testament the Apocalypse picks up the serpent imagery and applies it to Satan. Revelation 13:1 states that the dragon, having been cast from heaven, "stood on the shore of the sea." In Revelation 20:3 he is cast into the Abyss. Thus as the serpent language develops in the biblical revelation, its supernatural reference becomes clearer along with other allusions to false gods (cf. 1 Cor. 10:20).

Human and Divine Interaction in Warfare

In one of the Ugaritic texts, the goddess Anath is characterized as fighting against human warriors. It is not certain why this is so. Its importance lies in the projection of cosmic battle into the realm of human life, a motif that is also encountered in the biblical revelation.⁴ The Song of Deborah in Judges 5, for example, reflects this conjunction of the human and the cosmic. The poem speaks of Yahweh issuing from the territory of the Edomites and the stars fighting against Sisera—along with the very real human involvement of Deborah, Barak, and Jael. In this story, as in other biblical accounts, Yahweh engages in divine warfare within history.

Much of the time when Yahweh fights, he is depicted as fighting Israel's human enemies and them alone. There are other times, however, when this is not the case. The story of the exodus, for example, presents a mixture of both cosmic and earthly warfare, though in both realms Yahweh is the prime actor (there is in fact no human military action whatsoever on Israel's part). Millard Lind comments,

In Israel's foundational event, the exodus, Yahweh the divine warrior overcame Egypt, not by means of human

warfare, but by means of a prophetic personality who heralded a message brought to pass by miracle. There was, indeed, human activity, but it was the action of a prophet, not a warrior.⁵

Yahweh was the warrior and Moses was the prophet. The most dramatic event in the rescue of Israel was the deliverance at the Red Sea from Israel's human enemies. Well before this, on the occasion of the first Passover, Yahweh significantly stated,

On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn—both men and animals—and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. (Exod. 12:12-13)

This prophecy, understood within the mindset of the ancient Near East, foresees both earthly and cosmic events. The judgment of God obviously would fall on the children and animals of Israel's enemies. On the other hand, the deaths of the firstborn of animals would be interpreted by the Egyptians as acts against their animal gods.⁶ In fact, Yahweh himself stated that it was so (Exod. 12:12). Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to interpret the judgment on the gods of Egypt as a judgment against the demons who stand behind their worship.

The false gods of the nations, because of their spiritual reality, constituted a temptation and a threat to Israel and her faith. This would explain why Yahweh takes them so seriously and why they are described as enemies with whom Yahweh does battle. As we will see later in Ephesians, that is why humans are invited, indeed, strongly urged to join the same battle with spiritual armor. In the OT the method of dealing with them corresponded to the cultural understandings of the day. These understandings included the concept that one's gods engaged in cosmic conflict with other gods, and that the battles of the gods were reflected in the corresponding wars on earth between nations. Yahweh revealed his superiority and sovereignty by being victorious, both on the cosmic and on the earthly levels in these battles. In all of this, Yahweh's ultimate goal was to establish his worship and reign on earth, as Micah so clearly states: "In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the

hills, and peoples will stream to it” (Mic. 4:1). To understand how this concept of divine warfare and victory carries over into the NT, we turn now to Ephesians chapter 6 and its use of Isaiah’s writings.

ISAIAH AND EPHESIANS 6

The Parallels

Ephesians 6:10-17 contains allusions to and echoes of four passages from Isaiah. They are laid out in the following columns:

Ephesians 6:14

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist,- with the breastplate of righteousness in place,

Isaiah 11:5

Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

Isaiah 59:17a

He put on righteousness as his breastplate,

Ephesians 6:15

and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

Isaiah 52:7a

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace,

Ephesians 6:17

Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Isaiah 59:17b

[He put] the helmet of salvation on his head;

Isaiah 49:2a

He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,

Appropriateness of the Imagery

Twice in Ephesians 6 we are admonished to “put on the full armor of God” (Eph. 6:11, 13) in order to stand against the devil. Our concern is not precisely “the full armor.” It is limited to those items of the armor which find their literary origins in the Book of Isaiah. Some might consider that not all the items listed here as items of God’s armor are such in Isaiah. This is an important point to clarify, because otherwise one might argue for mere literary influence and therefore more discontinuity than continuity between the two texts.

First of all, in Isaiah 11:5 it is the clothing of the Branch (which

comes from the stump of Jesse, 11:1) which is the source for the “belt of truth.” From a trinitarian standpoint this does not constitute a problem because the Branch has traditionally been understood to be Jesus Christ. Even without that argument, Isaiah 11:2 says of him, “The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him,” in which case the Branch’s attributes have their source in the LORD. It is therefore legitimate to characterize “the belt of truth” as part of God’s armor. There can be no dispute about “the breastplate of righteousness” because in Isaiah 59:17 it unambiguously belongs to Yahweh. The same is true of “the helmet of salvation” from Ephesians 6:17 which also finds its source in Isaiah 59:17.

The “feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace” in verse 15 echoes Isaiah 52:7. There the text speaks of “the feet of those who bring good news.” Armor is not an issue in that text. However, the implication is that the messengers are bearing Yahweh’s message of peace to Zion, and this is what makes their feet beautiful. Since God is the source of the message being brought, it is not inappropriate for Paul to use the imagery.

“The sword of the Spirit which is the word of God” echoes Isaiah 49:2. In that verse the Servant is speaking and states, “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword.” Again, the essential point is that Yahweh is the source of the symbolic sword and the word that issues from it. In the material that follows, this article will discuss two of the Isaianic texts to make the case for Paul’s interpretive use of them.

Isaiah 11:5

Most of the Isaianic texts that Paul uses occur in broader contexts that deal with warfare. The historical context of Isaiah 11:5 is the reign of Ahaz (ca. 742-727).⁷ This king is castigated in 2 Kings 16:2b with the standard condemnation of ungodly rulers, “Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God.” During the Syro-Ephraimite war Ahaz sought help from Tiglath-pileser of Assyria with disastrous religious results. He went to Damascus to meet his new overlord and there observed an altar, a copy of which he then had made within the temple precincts of Jerusalem. He worshiped the false gods of the Syrians, likely because he reasoned they were more powerful than Yahweh.

It is interesting that the postexilic tradition of 2 Chronicles takes the gods of Damascus seriously as supernatural beings and recognizes their role in causing trouble for Ahaz. The text states in 2 Chronicles 28:22-23,

In his time of trouble King Ahaz became even more unfaithful to the LORD. He offered sacrifices to the gods of Damascus, who had defeated him; for he thought, "Since the gods of the kings of Aram have helped them, I will sacrifice to them so they will help me." But they were his downfall and the downfall of all Israel.

Both Ahaz and the Chronicler implicitly understood the active role of divinity in the pursuit of war. One should expect that Paul, with his careful biblical training, had absorbed this viewpoint and had incorporated it into his thinking and, therefore, into his interpretation of Isaiah.

Returning to the immediate context of Isaiah 11:5, in the short run Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel would be defeated in the Syro-Ephraimite War. In the long run Assyria would be destroyed. Only the house of David received a promise of new life in a situation that looked like permanent death. Through the Branch, Israel received fresh hope, described in Isaiah 11 in highly idealized terms. The Branch is described as striking the earth with the rod of his mouth while slaying the wicked. Divine warfare typology operates in this chapter to express the execution of divine will upon the earth and the establishment of God's rule.

Isaiah 59:17

The breastplate and helmet imagery of Isaiah 59:17 and Ephesians 6:14, 17 is also rooted in a warfare context. Israel's political leadership and the nation as a whole are corrupt and decadent. Religion and its ethical consequences were corrupted by the occult, characterized by sorcery, adultery, prostitution, lying, ritual sex, child sacrifice, and the worship of Molech (Isaiah 57:3-9); many, perhaps all of these can be thought of as having demonic components. In response to these socio-economic and occult sins, Yahweh dons his armor—"righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation."

This imagery is a statement about the divine character which in this case directs itself against his enemies. In verses 18 and 19 Yahweh is portrayed as acting against his enemies in wrath and retribution, the result of which will be the revering of his glory. Thus divine judgment on Yahweh's enemies evidently has what one might call an evangelistic result, attracting people from the west and the east. That judgment is rooted, of course, in his character which is also expected to be reflected by his people. Likewise in Ephesians, the consequence of the saints combining their armor with prayer is supposed to result in the furtherance of the gospel (Eph. 6:19).

PAUL'S USE OF WARFARE IMAGERY

The assumption behind Paul's admonition in Ephesians 6 is the victory of Christ and the Church. Earlier in the letter he had made the point that Christ is now seated at the right hand of God (Eph. 1:20) and that the Church is there with him (Eph. 2:6). In short, together with Christ, we occupy a position of rulership within the kingdom of God above all of the evil spiritual beings that exist. Into this framework Paul writes his admonition to the Church:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Eph. 6:10-12)

Beginning in verse 14 Paul makes use of the allusions and echoes from Isaiah which occur chiefly in contexts of divine warfare. This cannot be an accident or a mere fortuitous use of language. Rather I contend that Paul has deliberately chosen language that helps us recognize that the Church's true enemies are similar to Yahweh's enemies in the OT period. In other words the flesh and blood enemies of ancient Israel were her enemies because they were Yahweh's enemies. They were Yahweh's enemies because they served false gods or demons, ultimately Satan, who were in rebellion against him. Divine warfare or Yahweh war was always spiritual in nature at its roots. Its mode of expression in the pre-Christian period was through state-to-state violence.

Beginning with the Christ event, things have changed. The New Testament, with greater clarity than the Old, lets us know who the enemy is. Yet the clearer NT revelation is consistent with Israel's spiritual heritage in which Yahweh battles both human and spiritual enemies. If we accept that the NT provides the perspective from which to interpret the OT, then it is appropriate to understand the armor of God in the OT as spiritual armor which at once belongs to God and is available to his people today because this availability was always pregnant in the text. The apostolic writing is clearer than the text of Isaiah because it expands the understanding of who is able to use the armor of God.

CONCLUSION

The struggle between Yahweh and his enemies always was rooted in the struggle against principalities and powers and spiritual wicked-

ness in high places. This meaning was pregnant in the prophetic references to false gods, idols, and chaos monsters (Rahab and Leviathan). Now that Pentecost has come, it stands to reason that, for the Church, warfare should be seen as spiritual. The evil one still employs his human servants against God's people, but God's people no longer constitute a political entity used by God to battle those servants of the evil one. Or to put it another way, the kingdom of God is no longer represented by a politically constituted nation that could wage war. Insofar as the kingdom of God is of this world, its people exist to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, pursuing his desire to be in relationship with his creation.

Some might argue that the opponents of God's people are worshipers of demonic powers and, for that reason, warfare on the OT model is still justified. However, divine warfare is now pursued spiritually against a defeated spiritual enemy. That victory was won decisively at the cross and in the resurrection as part of Yahweh's progressive repatriation of his constitutional right to rule the world.

Consequently, to use the OT as an apologetic source for Christian support of state-to-state violence is not legitimate. In the light of later NT revelation, that is not its message, nor is it a legitimate application. At the same time, considering broader hermeneutical issues, one can argue that there is not a major discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. Rather, Christ and the New Testament, in this case as well as others, can be seen as having completed the divine revelation by illuminating its fuller meaning. ✨

NOTES

1. Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 71.
2. Patrick D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 34.
3. *Ibid.*, 59.
4. *Ibid.*, 47.
5. Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA, and Kitchener, ON: Herald, 1980), 32.
6. Walter C. Kaiser, "Exodus," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 372.

7. Keith W. Whitelam, "Ahaz," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 106-7.



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