

Book Review

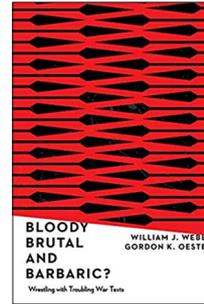
William J. Webb and Gordon K. Oeste.
Bloody, Brutal, and Barbaric?

Wrestling with Troubling War Texts

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019. Paperback. Pp. 1-397.

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Christians throughout the ages have struggled with aligning the ethics of the Old Testament with the ethics of Christ and the New Testament. The events of 9-11 and criticisms of the New Atheists have renewed interest in the intersection of religion and violence (p.11). Put simply, “How are Christians to understand the Old Testament’s teaching on war?” Though recognizing various nuanced ways to understand the violence in the Old Testament (p. 20), they essentially fall around two main poles, anti-traditional and traditional. The antitraditional view says the war texts exemplify dark or evil ethics. Webb and Oeste, adjunct biblical studies professors at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, Ontario, contend that the antitraditional view, though recognizing the moral tension, fails because its criticisms are anachronistic and ignore important cultural realities (p.37). In contrast, the traditional view holds that even though holy war required the killing of non-combatants and combatants alike, there is no real moral problem because a righteous God commanded the killing. Webb and Oeste argue that the traditional view is not adequate because it does not seem just. Since the traditional view dominates contemporary Christian thinking, the authors spend their time explaining why the traditional view is inadequate and should be replaced by their incremental ethical view.

Webb and Oeste argue that the traditional view employs four main theses: 1. God’s commands are just, 2. God had a good purpose for holy war, 3. Canaanites were not innocent, and 4. Holy war foreshadowed God’s eschatological judgement. As strong as these arguments may appear, Webb and Oeste point out that they fall short under closer scrutiny. They suggest that thesis #1 does not take into consideration the highest ethical principle. Thesis #2 is inadequate because it employs an ends-justifies-the means-ethic which no Christian could support. Thesis #3, though true, neglects the effect on infants and others unable to participate in the sins of the adults. Lastly, thesis #4 fails because God’s judgement in the eschaton will be pure and just and inflicted by the word of Christ’s mouth.

At this point, readers may suspect that the old pacifist trope will be repeated in this text. But they would be wrong. (It should be noted that the authors are about as close to being pure pacifists as possible, but nevertheless could not bring themselves to reject the legitimate role of some violence (pp. 318ff). Webb and Oeste use the concept of sacred space to explain how the traditional view justifies holy war in the Old Testament. The authors detail how God’s judgement/commands can be understood in terms of maintaining the integrity of sacred space through numerous examples of how

evil (what the authors designate as literary Canaanites, i.e. those opposed to God's law) is driven out of sacred areas as an expression of God's judgement. If God judges literary Canaanites (e.g. Adam and Eve) by evicting them from the Garden (sacred space) then how much more should the actual Canaanites (i.e. flesh and blood Canaanites) be driven out of the promised land? In the end, the authors conclude the traditional view answers the question, "Why did God command Israel to drive out the Canaanites?" Answer, to maintain the integrity of sacred space.

If the traditional view only answers Israel's moral question, how do we answer contemporary moral questions? It is here the authors spend the majority of the book's space. In brief, they argue that God employed an incremental ethic in his dealings and commands with Israel. In effect, God is/was not a blood thirsty warrior God but a weeping warrior showing Israel a higher way.

The authors argue their case by inviting readers to read the bible "redemptively." This means that the reader must not simply read the bible from his/her contemporary moral perspective but rather to read the bible from the perspective of Israel's historical and cultural setting. In this way, the reader can appreciate both the horror of the war texts but also to appreciate how God sought to establish rules to soften and improve those actions and thereby place them on a higher ethical trajectory. The authors demonstrate this by engaging the topic of war rape before discussing mortal combat. War rape is the umbrella term for the actions of soldiers during and after a battle of requiring non-consensual sexual acts of captured women. I was initially dismayed by the authors' use

of war rape to describe the Israelites actions portrayed in Numbers 31 and Deuteronomy 21. But their detailed discussion of the texts and, albeit limited, recognition of the practices' redemptive qualities softened my concern.

The authors then proceed to address the graphic language of God's command for Israel to exterminate the Canaanites. They argue that war language in the ancient world tended toward being hyperbolic. So, it should come as no surprise that God likewise used language that was also hyperbolic. In other words, God did not command Israel to kill all the Canaanites. He commanded Israel to create a monotheistic land (sacred space, p. 249ff). Whether that occurred by killing or eviction does not matter (p.252). The goal is what mattered not the specific means. The authors' arguments in these chapters are careful and rather convincing. I was particularly thankful that their arguments did not require the existence of contradictory sources or a denial of inerrancy. I was surprised, however, that the authors did not pay significant attention to the idea of evangelism and conversion. For example, is it possible that God wanted Israel to march around Jericho for seven days to prove that a relief force would not come (i.e. Jericho was abandoned by their fellow pagans) and to provide Jericho the opportunity to surrender (i.e. convert) like Rahab did?

The authors move readers through the bible showing how God was a reluctant warrior and how the process of divine revelation continued to show God's ultimate bias toward redemption and forgiveness. God's forgiveness bias is fully and most graphically revealed in the person and work of Christ on the cross. The authors explicitly thank Moltmann's theology of the

cross as helping them fully appreciate the God who loves is the God who suffers. But what about the violence in the book of Revelation? The authors simply contend that the violence is metaphorical. They do not believe the language used by the Apostle John should be understood in any literal way. For example, they contend that warriors hold swords in their hand, but Jesus' sword is in his mouth, suggesting that Christ's speech is doing the fighting. In addition, God's judgement is pure and just, as He perfectly rights the wrongs, which is categorically different than the war in the Old Testament.

The authors have written a compelling work. I think they have correctly situated holy war within the sacred space theological theme and rightly noted the hyperbolic nature of Old Testament war language. Similarly, they properly demonstrated that God's support for war was qualitatively different than that of Israel's neighbors. I commend the authors for bringing proper historical context to this highly emotional issue.

As important as their arguments are, however, I think the authors' case has a few remaining problems that fall into two categories. The first category is exegetical/hermeneutical. God may be a reluctant warrior, but God's actions in the flood and the Egyptian plagues reveals He is not afraid to kill the "innocent" with the guilty. So, the ethical challenge surrounding holy war is not eliminated, only softened. Likewise, how should Deuteronomy 4 be understood? There God argues that the laws He has given Israel are good and righteous. {As a side note, it is ironic that in verse 34, God takes responsibility for using war against the Egyptians.} If God's laws are good and righteous how does this compare

with the authors' incremental thesis claim? Are the New Testament teachings more just? Or is it possible that the authors' have confused interpersonal morality with the morality that governs states?

The next exegetical/hermeneutical problem considers the place of the Jewish people in the eschaton. Certainly, the authors are correct that there is much in Revelation that is figurative and universal. However, can Old Testament promises of the restoration of the Jewish people (ethnically) in their land (geographically) be completely spiritualized and universalized? Would the prophets even have understood or conceived of that future? I do not think so. Plus, allowing gentiles to be adopted as children of Abraham, allows for universalization without ignoring the concrete promise of God to His chosen people. Finally, the authors correctly observe that Israel's war-making ability was divinely restricted (e.g. warnings on chariots). However, I do not believe that these restrictions were pacifistic in nature designed to reduce Israel's fighting or imply God's reluctance to fight. Rather the restrictions were intended to toughen Israel's fighting spirit (cf. Judges 3:2) and to encourage Israel's reliance on God (i.e. faith). If we accept that there was a distinction between Israel's holy wars and wars outside the land of Israel, then I would concur that the restrictions would have reduced Israel's war making ability beyond the land. But I am not aware of anyone who thinks that God intended Israel to be a regional superpower on par with Assyria or Egypt.

The second category is pragmatic. Despite the authors' acknowledgement that the ethical problem of these war texts has not been

eliminated, I suggest the solution only begs another criticism. For instance, even if Israel only needed to evict the Canaanites, how does this absolve Israel (or God) from the charge of ethnic cleansing? If not ethnic cleansing, could not the argument be cultural cleansing? It seems to me that the authors only forced the Bible's critics to recharacterize their moral complaint. Which leads me to suggest, that perhaps the problem is not the ethics of scripture, but the heart of the critic which will use any reason to reject any overreaching authority beyond themselves. Please understand that the authors have helped diminish the ethical problem, but I think in the end the problem lies with our rebellious desire to judge God rather than to be judged by Him.

Despite these challenges, I commend the reading of this book. Instructors teaching on ethical issues should consider including this book as required reading. The book is thoroughly student friendly as demonstrated by its straightforward organization, step by step argument, and helpful summaries. Students will also appreciate the authors' clear writing style that avoids the hyper arcane and tedious writing contained in too many academic works. Finally, the authors provide additional information in appendices available as a free download from the IVP website.