

WARS IN THE BIBLE

A Scandal or an option for the oppressed ?

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I. WARS AND THE BIBLE

1. Wars in History

The history of humankind can be said to be a history of wars. Winners in war have written history from their point of view, extolling themselves and hiding all their weaknesses, cruelty, barbarity etc. The losers in wars have often enough been erased from history.

Towards Destructive Omnipotence...

Though throughout centuries history has been a mixture of war and peace, twentieth century alone has witnessed two wars on a global scale which brought in untold misery and loss of life to several hundred millions of people. It is estimated that in the Second World War alone over 50 million people have perished! The use of atom bomb over Hiroshima on 06.08.45 and over Nagasaki three days later have opened a new era of destructive omnipotence of man ¹

¹ Cf P.C.Craige, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1986) 17f.

Can Wars be Really Just?

Wars are evil. They are mostly concrete expressions of human wickedness and greed for wealth and power. Though they may be 'justified' they can hardly ever be 'just', much less 'holy', as is claimed in some religious traditions. They are expressions of human cruelty and sadism.

Wars bring fear, starvation, death, destruction, desolation etc. They are accompanied by killing, looting, raping etc. They produce widows, orphans and people handicapped for life. They wipe out entire cities and populations. War is horror and, at times, turns out to be a holocaust!

Hence one wonders whether we can speak of a 'just war' in our times.² Every war looks to be just to one who starts it. Moreover for the winner it is always a just war. For President G.W.Bush the Iraq war has been just, though much of the world saw it clearly unjust. Having witnessed so many wars, we also become insensitive to war till it comes on us. This insensitivity may lead us to consider war as a matter of fact in life. Thus there is a danger of regarding war as a sort of 'game' and our attention focussed on the observance of the rules of war (as the Geneva Convention etc., which are the "will" of the winners) than the horror of war itself.

A war could be 'just' if it is waged as the last resort on one who is a real threat to everyone else. But how to judge that someone is a real threat to everyone else? What are the criteria? Who makes the criteria? And who is the judge? In concrete, many in the West think along with the American President G.W.Bush that Saddam Hussain was a threat to everyone else. But there are also many people all over the world, who think that it is precisely the American President, with his fundamentalist outlook, warlike words and utter disregard to world opinion, who is the real threat to peace. In such a situation of uncertainty, it is best to use all

² Cf J.H. Yoder, *When War is Unjust : Being Honest in Just - War Thinking* (New York . 1996) 19 - 31.

means available to avoid war, knowing that *war can hardly ever be really 'just'*. But unfortunately today we are witnessing a return of the law of the jungle: 'might is right'.

2. Wars in Bible

One would think that God and war don't go together. War is destruction and death whereas God is salvation and life. They are opposed to each other. Yet in the Bible wars are closely associated with God. God often commands Israel to fight against nations. His command implies killing and destruction. It gives victory to the Israelites and disaster to their enemies.

The holy book of God's revelation speaks of so many wars.³ Some are scandalized at this. They don't expect accounts of brutal wars in the holy book of life. Many honest readers of the Bible are shocked by the killing, brutality and wars in the Old Testament. Some of them are so much disturbed that they never read it again. Some have developed a dislike for and even hatred towards the Bible itself.

War with Pharaoh - God

The number of pages devoted to warlike events in the Bible is really amazing! The history of the people of Israel begins with a war fought by God Himself on behalf of His people, the Hebrews, a war in which the Pharaoh was defeated and the Egyptian army drowned. It gave the Hebrews independence (Ex 15:1-12).

Wars during Wandering - Moses

Before entering the Promised Land the Israelites undertook several military expeditions. They defeated Sihon, king of Heshbon and Og, king of Bashan (Num 21:21-35). They had also a fight against the Medianites (Num 31:1-12). In all these battles the Israelites emerged victorious and inflicted heavy damages on their enemies.

³ The Hebrew word *milhamah* meaning war occurs more than 300 times in the Bible. It is found all over the Bible. There are also other words, besides *milhamah*, associated with war.

Wars of Occupation - Joshua

The military exploits under Joshua are certainly highly exaggerated. Canaan is said to be occupied in a swift action of three stages: 1. Chs.1-9 speak of crossing the Jordan and cutting across the very heart of the land; 2. Ch. 10 speaks of the defeat of the coalition of five kings of the South, and 3.Ch. 11 speaks of the fall of the Northern kings and their cities. Thus Israel is portrayed to have achieved spectacular victory over all the enemies and occupied Canaan with ease. Of course, one remembers that this account gets its present shape centuries later. In reality occupation of Canaan was a very slow and painful process.

Wars of Defence – Judges

The period of Judges witnessed several wars. Othniel defeated Cushan-Rishathaim (Jgs 3:7-11). Ehud fought against the Moabites (Jgs 3:28-30). The war of Deborah and Barak against Sisera is legendary (Jgs 4:6-24). Gideon defeated the Medianites (Jgs 6-7). Jeptah fought war against the Ammonites (Jgs 11:32-33). All these were mostly defensive wars and Yahweh gave victory to the Israelites in all these battles.

Wars against the Philistines – Saul

Much of the reign of Saul, the first king of Israel, was spent in wars with the Philistines, a new people coming from the coastal plains. Just before Saul took over as king, Israel had lost two battles with the Philistines (1 Sam 4:1-2, 10-11). In these two battles, four thousand and thirty thousand Israelites respectively are reported to have been killed. In the beginning of Saul's reign, he is reported to have fought and defeated the Ammonites (1 Sam 11). The first battle of Saul against the Philistines was an utter failure (1 Sam 13:5-7). But in the second battle he is able to rout them (1 Sam 4:6-23). The battle against the Amalekites brought Saul a great victory and unfortunately it became also the cause for the forfeiture of his kingdom, since he did not observe the rules of war strictly (1 Sam 15).

Wars of Expansion – David

David fought several wars to reconquer and expand his kingdom. He fought with the Moabites (2 Sam 8:2), the Edomites (2 Sam 8:13), the Ammonites (2 Sam 10-1-15) and the Aramaeans (2

Sam 10:16-19). The continuous victories of David and his increasing power made the neighbouring states panic-stricken. By the time of David's death his kingdom was well established and his son Solomon did not need to fight even a single battle. He focussed his attention on literature, arts and architecture.

Wars between the Divided Kingdoms

After the division of the kingdom into North and South conflicts arose between these kingdoms themselves. There were battles between the North and South during the reign of Basha and Asa (2 Kgs 15:16-22), Joash and Amaziah (2 Kgs 14:8-14) and Pekah and Ahaz (2 Kgs 16:5; 2 Chr 28:5-8).

Wars of the kingdom of Israel

The divided kingdoms fought not only among themselves, but also with other nations to safeguard their frontiers. Nadab (2 Kgs 15:27) and Omri (2 Kgs 16:15) besieged Gibbethon, a Philistine stronghold. The Aramaeans of Damascus were at war with Israel almost all through the 9th cent. B.C. Twice did the Aramaeans lay siege to Samaria (1 Kgs 20:1; 2 Kgs 6:24f). Hazael almost took control of Israel (2 Kgs 10:32-33; 12:18; 13:3,7). The Assyrians, a super-power in those days, occupied a great part of the territory of Israel without much of opposition (2 Kgs 15:29). Finally, Shalmanesar V laid siege to Samaria and the deportation of Assyria took place in 721 B.C.

Wars of the Kingdom of Judah

Judah had to fight with the Philistines quite often. Joram (2 Kgs 8:22; 2 Chr 21:16), Uzziah (2 Chr 26:6), Ahaz (2 Chr 28:18) and Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:8) waged wars with them. At times Judah was the winner and at other times, the loser. Judah fought also against Edom for the possession of Elath (2 Kgs 14:7, 22; 16:6). During the Syro-Ephramite war Judah became the vassal of Assyria (2 Kgs 16:5-9; Is 7-8). When Hezekiah revolted against Assyria all the cities except Jerusalem were captured (2 Kgs 18:13-19; 37; Is 36-37). Josiah fought with Pharaoh Necco at Meggido in an attempt to stop him from proceeding to help Assyria. In the battle, however, Josiah was killed (2 Kgs 23:29-30; 2 Chr 35:20-25). Judah became a vassal of Egypt. But since the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians in the battle of Carchemish (605) Judah became a vassal of Babylon.

Incensed by the attempt of Jehoiachin to break away from Babylon, Nebuchednezar laid siege over Jerusalem in 597 B.C. The final destruction of Jerusalem took place in 587.⁴

Thus much of the history of Israel is a history of wars. Whether one likes it or not, the holy book of the Bible contains fights, bloodshed, destructions etc. It is the way the history of God's people unfolded; it is the way they survived in a world hostile to them. We shall try to understand this phenomenon in the later part of this article.

II. THE WARRIOR GOD OF THE BIBLE

1. God is a warrior

God is called a Warrior

For the people of Israel God is basically a warrior. Wars were unavoidable for survival in those days. We have listed in the above pages the number of wars that Israel had to fight to survive. Israel was a tiny nation. It was not an equal to their neighbours. Hence they put their trust in their God, Yahweh to fight for them. The unforgettable experience of Yahweh fighting for them and delivering them from the Egyptian super-power made them believe that Yahweh will fight for them in every situation.

This firm faith is expressed all through the Bible. Ps 24:8 gives a clear expression to this faith of theirs:

Who is the King of glory?
the Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle.

This psalm and similar biblical texts have inspired Christian military commanders for generations.⁵

In the victory song of Moses in Ex 15:3, Yahweh is described as a "warrior":

The Lord is a warrior;
The Lord is his name.

⁴ Cf R. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel : Its Life and Institutions* (London, 1973) 247-250.

⁵ Cf P.C.Craige, *The Problem of War*, op.cit. 33ff

The Hebrew original for the warrior is *is milhamah*. The literal translation of *is milhamah* is "a man of war".⁶ The same idea is also found in Is 42:13:

The Lord goes like a soldier,
like a warrior he stirs up his fury;
he cries out, he shouts aloud,
he shows himself mighty against his foes.⁷

Lord of Hosts is His Name

One of the prominent titles of God in the Old Testament is *yahweh seb'aot*, i.e. the Lord of Hosts. This title occurs 284 times in the Old Testament and twice in the New Testament. This term is mostly used in military contexts. Though *seb'aot* can mean celestial armies, luminaries in the sky, celestial beings etc. it is primarily used in the context of warfare.

This title is used for the first time in 1 Sam 4:4. It is used in association with the ark of the covenant at Shiloh. It is used in the context of the war with the Philistines (1 Sam 4-6). The bringing forth of the ark meant the presence and the involvement of Yahweh in the war. It gave a clear message that Yahweh is fighting on Israel's side against its enemies. Thus it was a great impetus and support to the Israelites for a spirited battle against their enemies.

Yahweh seb'aot is also used in connection with the war against the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:2). David too invokes it against Goliath:

You have come to me with sword and spear and javelin;
but I have come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts,
the God of the armies of Israel (1 Sam 17:45).⁸

⁶ But the Samaritan text has it as *gibbor* meaning a warrior. The LXX changes its meaning to "one who destroys war". Cf also B. Halpern, *The Constitution of Monarchy in Israel* (Ann Arbor, 1981) 95ff.

⁷ Besides the above two occurrences, this expression is also found in Jdt 9:7 and 16:3.

⁸ Cf C.L.Seow, "Lord of Hosts" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 3 (New York, 1992) 304-307.

It is interesting to note that God's name reflects the nature of His people. A sizeable section of the ancestors of Israel, in all probability, were *Habirus*. These *Habirus* were lawless, landless mercenaries found all over the Middle East⁹. By nature they were a fighting people. It is only proper that their God too is a warrior God. It is noteworthy that the expression *yahweh seb'aot* is used for the first time in the context of the struggle with the Philistines, when they disparagingly call the Israelites as 'Hebrews'. They remind the Israelites of their former days of slavery when they were *Habirus* by saying:

Take courage and be men, O Philistines,
in order not to become slaves to the Hebrews
as they have been to you (1 Sam 4:9).

Though this term is used for the first time in 1 Samuel 4, it should have belonged to the earliest *Habiru* traditions.

The Book of the Wars of the Lord

There are a few references to the book of the Wars of the Lord (Num 21:14; 1 Sam 18;17: 25:28). This biblical book is non-existent now. But it is certain that the belief that Israel's God is a warrior is very ancient. That is why they seem to have collected and written accounts of the wars waged by their God, Yahweh. It must have been an anthology of old war poems dealing with the conflict between the invading Israelites and the inhabitants of Canaan.¹⁰ Though we don't have details of these wars, one thing is certain that for the Israelites their God primarily was a warrior God. That is why they speak of their liberation from Egyptian slavery (Ex 15) and creation itself (Job 9:13; Ps 74:13-14; 89:10; Is 27:1) as a warfare.

The experience of God as a warrior gave the Israelites a new dimension of Yahweh. They realized that their God is a fighting God, fighting for the lost rights of his people. He is one who fights

⁹ Cf Cruz M. Hieronymus, "Nation-Building in the Bible" in *Christian Commitment to Nation-Building*, ed. Anthoniraj Thumma-Alphonse D.Sahayam (Bangalore, 2003) 61

¹⁰ Cf D.L.Christensen, "Book of the Wars of the Lord", *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 6 (New York, 1992) 880.

against those who oppress his people. Having experienced their God as a fighting God the Israelites themselves appropriated this quality of fighting in themselves. All through history they were and are militant.

2. God waging war

God of Israel is a warrior. Warrior is not just a decorative title. He acts as a warrior. He fights on behalf of his people. The various wars we have enumerated above have been, according to the Israelites, fought by their God. The people of Israel did not see any conflict between the notion of God and that of war. In fact for them, as we shall see below, these two were closely linked with to other.

The link between the warrior God, Yahweh and his people is so close that the people were called "hosts (troops) of God" (1 Sam 17:26) and "armies of God" (Ex 12:41; cf 7:4). The enemies of Israel were the enemies of God himself (Jgs 5:31; 1 Sam 3:26; cf 17:16). Hence no wonder that God fights on behalf of his people.

God's Role before the War

Yahweh is consulted before the war begins (Jgs 20:23,28; 1 Sam 14:37; 23:2,4). Jonathan is given a sign that Yahweh has handed over the enemy even before the war began (1 Sam 14:10-12). This consultation normally takes place through ephod and sacred lots (1 Sam 23:9f; 30:7f). Before marching out to battle, sacrifice is offered to Yahweh (1 Sam 7:9; 13:9,12). The combatants who take part in the war have to be in a state of ritual cleanliness (Jos 3:5; cf Is 6:4; 22:7) because the war that Yahweh is going to wage is a "holy war".¹¹

Yahweh himself is going to decide the time of launching the war. He assures victory even before the war begins. The fighters are sure that Yahweh has already given their enemy into their hands

¹¹ Though the expression "holy war" has been articulated by renowned biblical scholars like G. van Rad (Studies in Deuteronomy [London, 1953] 45-59) and others, still it is avoided by most scholars, since no war can be holy. At most they could be termed as 'religious wars' or 'Yahweh wars'.

(Jos 6:22; 8:1,18; Jgs 3:28; 6:7; 7:9,15; 1 Sam 23:4; 25:5). In the fight of Deborah and Barak against Sisera, Yahweh hands over Sisera to Barak even before the fighting begins (Jos 4:14-16). Thus the Israelites went to war with full faith and without any fear (Jos 8:1; 14:8,15).

God's Role during the War

God himself marched before Israel (Jgs 4:14; 2 Sam 5:24). It is God who commands the army. Yahweh gives orders to Barak to march against Sisera (Jgs 4:6-7) and he himself marches ahead of Barak (Jgs 4:14-16).

The ark of the covenant is the concrete sign of God's presence in the battle-field. When the ark was taken to the battle-field the following or similar battle cries were raised:

Arise O Lord, let your enemies be scattered,
and your foes flee before you (Num 10:35).

During the battle, Yahweh fought for Israel (Jos 14:42; Jgs 20:35). He called the elements of nature to fight with him (Jos 10:11; 24:7; Jgs 5:20; 1 Sam 7:10). He went forth in the earthquake and in the rending of the skies (Jgs 5:4; 1 Sam 14:15). The stars fought on his side (Jgs 5:20)¹² The enemies were thrown into confusion (Jgs 4:15; 7:22; 1 Sam 7:10) and annihilated (Jgs 5:31).

God's Role at the Conclusion of the War

Since it is Yahweh who fights on behalf of Israel, the victory in war was also ascribed to him. It was Yahweh who delivered Midian into the hands of Israel (Jgs 7:2,7,14-15; 8:3,7). It was Yahweh, and not Israel, who emerged victorious (Jgs 7:22). There were only very few people with Jonathan in his war against the Philistines (1 Sam 14:6f). No matter how many are there to fight and no matter how strong is the enemy, victory is sure because it is

¹² God fighting to establish order in the cosmos against the powers of the chaos comes from the Mesopotamian tradition. *Enuma Elish*, the Mesopotamian creation epic speaks of Maduk waging war against Tiamat, the goddess of chaos and established cosmic order. Cf F.R. McCurley, *Ancient Myths and Biblical Faith: Scriptural Transformations* (Philadelphia, 1983) 26-57.

Yahweh who fights! That is why this account of Jonathan's battle ends with the words: "So the Lord gave Israel the victory that day" (1 Sam 14:23).

Since victory belongs to Yahweh, the fruits of victory too belong to him. The fruits of victory here includes soldiers caught in war, the people of the lands which are conquered (women, children) and their belongings (cattle, gold, silver etc). All these fruits of victory were believed to have been consecrated to God. In other words, they were "separated" or "set apart" for God. The technical term for this is *herem*. What is thus set apart for God has to be destroyed. Human beings have to be put to death and other things have to be destroyed; the metals, however, have to go to the treasury of the Lord, i.e. to the temple (Jos 6:18-24). Thus all these things were forbidden under a ban (*herem*). This ban could be extremely harsh and inhuman. It is very difficult to reconcile this concept with a loving God. We shall discuss about in section III.

3. GOD WAGING WAR:

A Scandal or an option for the oppressed?

War, no doubt, is a scandal. Wars in the Bible are certainly more of a scandal for many. How could a loving God command and lead a war which implies death, destruction and devastation? How to reconcile the God of compassion, forgiveness and boundless love as narrated in the New Testament with a God in the Old Testament who commands as follows:

When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labour. If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; and when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, live stock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you. ... But as for the towns of the these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them - the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and

the Jebusites – just as the LORD your God has commanded (Dt 20:10-14; 16-17).

Many would say that though wars are a fact of history and books of history narrate them in detail, a book of life, which is God's revelation of love should not devote so many pages on destructive wars. Besides, some of the words attributed to God, as in the verses above, are certainly scandalous to us. While an attempt will be made in the next section to understand such words, the fact remains that the accounts of war are a scandal to a number of readers of the Bible.

But there is another way of looking at these wars of Yahweh. Yahweh is the God of the oppressed and enslaved *Habirus*. He has chosen to liberate them from the slavery of the Egyptians and restore them their dignity as God's children and human beings.¹³ But the Egyptians are not, by themselves, going to grant freedom to the slaves. Slavery was the backbone of their economy and they could not imagine a social system without the slaves.

The *Habirus* being slaves themselves, could not fight against the Egyptian power to get themselves freed. They were a powerless group. They were helpless. It is in this context that Yahweh enters the scene. He comes to help the helpless; he engages himself to restore the freedom and dignity of his children. His action is basically an empowerment of the powerless. This is not going to come about with requests, exhortations or persuasions. This necessitates the use of force. A struggle – battle – becomes unavoidable to achieve freedom¹⁴ to his oppressed and enslaved people. Seen in this perspective, Yahweh's war with the oppressive Pharaoh of Egypt need not be seen as a scandal. It can very well be seen as an option in favour of the oppressed people.

¹³ Cf Cruz M. Hieronymus, *Nation Building*, op. cit. 63.

¹⁴ The opening words of Ps 94:

"O Lord, you God of vengeance,

You God of vengeance shine forth!

Rise up, O judge of the earth;

Give to the proud what they deserve!"

have to be understood in this context of God restoring the lost rights of his oppressed people. Cf G. Mendelsohn, *The Tenth Generation* (Baltimore, 1973) 69-100.

The subsequent wars of the Israelites too can be seen from this perspective. The Israelites were the original inhabitants of Canaan and other areas of the Middle East. In course of time they were oppressed and enslaved by the subsequent invaders. Many of them had fled to Egypt in times of famine and the Egyptians made them their slaves. Others were taken as prisoners of war¹⁵ and ended up in slavery.

It is these enslaved people that Yahweh opted to liberate. God's promise to restore them their lost freedom included also a promise to restore their lost nation, i.e. Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey. This Promised Land is not going to be given to them in a platter. The new settlers are not going to 'give' them the land they are now living. It necessarily involved struggles and battles. This, therefore, can be looked upon as a battle for their God-given right, for their most basic right to have a land of their own. It is a fight to get back what was once their land. In this fight, God is certainly with the oppressed who want their lost land back. It is a fight for restoration of the lost human dignity and human rights. Thus Yahweh's wars can be seen as consequence of his option for the oppressed.

Of course all the battles spoken of in Bible do not fall under the above category. In later days there have been also wars of aggression and expansion. Besides, the brutality and inhuman sufferings inflicted through those wars cannot have anything to do with God. That was the way in which wars were waged in those days. About this aspect of brutality we shall speak in the following section.

One should also be aware of the danger in the above way of looking at war. All wars may be seen as waged for restoring one's lost rights. In the several wars fought between Christians and Muslims each side was convinced that they were fighting for their

¹⁵ There are numerous references to the fact that *Habiru* men and women gave up their freedom and placed themselves at the service of rich persons. Pharaoh Thutmose engaged *Habiru* slaves for producing wine. Pharaoh Amenhotep II brought 3,600 *Habiru* slaves from Syria - Palestine. Pharaoh Ramses II engaged them in building of his store cities of Ramses and Pithom (Ex 1:11).

own rights.¹⁶ The tragedy of the crusades is a grim reminder of each party being convinced of its fighting for its own rights. Yet this danger should not prevent us from realizing that there can be occasions when a war may become the only option to eliminate an enslaving evil power.

III. BRUTALITY OF GOD'S WARS

1. Brutality of wars in the Bible

In modern warfare the rights of the prisoners of war are respected. As a rule, they are not tortured. There are several conventions to protect them. But in ancient times the lot of the captives was much worse. They were ill-treated, tortured and killed. Even women and children were put to death. Quite often the animals too were killed. The cities were razed to the ground.

We have several examples of such ill-treatment and brutality in the Bible. We just need to read a few passages from the various books of the Bible especially from Joshua and Deuteronomy to realize this: "Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword, all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys..." (Jos 6:21). "...Israel struck them down until no one was left who survived or escaped" (Jos 8:22).

In Jos 10:26-40, a horror filled passage, Joshua put to death the five kings of the Amorites and hanged them on five trees (v. 26). He killed the king of Makkedah with the edge of the sword and 'destroyed every person in it'; He left no one remaining (v.28). The same thing is done in Libneh (v.30), Lachish (v.32), Gezer (v.33), Eglon (v.35), Hebron (v.37) and Debir (v.39). The passage concludes with the following words: "So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and all the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded" (v. 40).

¹⁶ Cf. P.C. Craige, *The Problem of War*, op.cit., 27f.

Joshua takes Hazor and "put to death all who were in it, utterly destroyed them; there was no one left who breathed and burned Hazor with fire". He did the same to all the towns he took (Jos 11:10-14). "David struck the land, leaving neither man or women alive, but took away the sheep, the oxen, the donkeys, the camels..." (1 Sam 27:9). Menahem "ripped open all the pregnant women in Tiphseh" (2 Kgs 15:16). When Shalman destroyed Betharbel, "mothers were dashed in pieces with their children" (Hos 10:14). According to Dt 20:10-18, if a town does not want to make peace with Israel, Israel can capture it and "put all males to the sword" (v.13). They take the women, the children, livestock and everything else in the town as spoils (v.14). The above rule applies to the remote towns. But in the towns that are within Canaan, "You must not let anything that breathes, alive (v.16). They "shall annihilate them: the Hittites and the Amorites the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites" (v.17) as the Lord had commanded.

From the above passages it is clear that wars in the Bible were indeed brutal. Joshua trampled underfoot the five kings he had conquered (Jos 10:24-26). Adonibezek had cut off the thumbs and the big toes of the seventy kings he had defeated (Jgs 1:6). Very often those who were defeated in war were beheaded. As we said above, at times, the winners killed every living being of the land they had captured. David was merciless in his warfares. He killed every single man and women in the Negeb (1 Sam 27:9-11). He massacred all the Amalekites who were defeated (1 Sam 30:17) and put to death two thirds of the population of Moab (2 Sam 8:2).¹⁷

2. Brutality consequent to God's command

What is still worse is that it is God who commands such brutal acts to be perpetrated! It is his command that Moses carries out! In Jos 11:15 it is clearly stated that Joshua put to death every human being till no one was left who breathes. "As the Lord had commanded his servant Moses, so Moses commanded Joshua and so Joshua did: he left nothing undone of all that the Lord had commanded Moses". Jos 15:20 also reiterates the same command

¹⁷ Cf. R.De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, op. cit. 254ff.

that the enemies "be utterly destroyed, and might receive no mercy, but be extrminated, just as the Lord has commanded Moses".

According to Dt 7:1-2 it is God who eliminates the enemies, namely, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Cannnites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites and Israel had to utterly destroy them. In Dt. 20:16-17 God explicitly commands the annihilation of the enemies of Israel: "You shall anihilate them – the Hittites, the Amorites, the Cannanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – just as the Lord your God has commanded".

Apart from being so inhuman, what is more shocking is that the non-compliance with this command meets with very serious consequences. Achan, son of Carmison, did not destroy all he had taken as spoils. He kept with himself a mantle, 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold. This was a grave sin and therefore Achan was stoned to death (Jos 7). In the same way Saul spared some of the spoils of his war with the Amalekites. He spared the best of the sheep and cattle, with the view of sacrificing them to the Lord. But, sparing the sheep and cattle, even for the purpose of sacrificing to the Lord, is a trangresion. Hence Saul was punished. It cost him his kingdom (1 Sam 15).¹⁸

1. An attempt to understand the brutality of wars in the Bible

Brutality of Wars in the Ancient Near East

Any war is brutal. Any war is destruction and devastation. As described above, today there are regulations and conventions which attempt to mitigate the damages and respect the rights of the captives. But in the ancient days such a rule hardly existed; hence brutality of wars was more evident, as one can see in the biblical war accounts themsleves.

¹⁸ It would be too simplistic to take this event literally and believe that God took away Saul's kingdom and gave it to David because of this transgression. In reality David outmanoevered Saul and occupied his throne. Later history, drafted by the loyalists of David's dynasty, which sees God as a source of every action, found this event good enough to be presented as the cause of Saul's forfeiture of the kingdom.

One should not imagine that only wars in the Bible were brutal! Wars anywhere, especially in the Middle East, were brutal. The wars of Israel were conditioned by the cultural and historical context of the Near East.¹⁹ We have records of wars of Assyria which are equally, if not more, brutal. We read constantly of wars and ensuing killings, destructions, burning of cities and reducing them to a heap of rubble. As we read in the Bible itself the way the enemies of Israel do to the captured cities of Israel is no less severe than what the Israelites do to the cities of their enemies. It was the accepted way of the warfare of those days in the Middle East.

Biblical Accounts of Brutality are Later Formulations

We should be aware of the fact that the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1, 2 Samuel and 1, 2 Kings, which contain most of the passages concerning brutality of war, get their present form several centuries after the events took place. The age of conquest and foreign wars were long past by the time these books were given their final shape. These books were the fruit of the editorial work of the Deuteronomists and they give the Deuteronomic view of history. According to the Deuteronomic view of history, God gives glorious victory to those who heed and obey his laws. On the other hand, failure is bound to come to those who don't obey God.²⁰ All the enemies of Israel are enemies of God and therefore they can't escape from being punished severely. Thus, description of victory and punishment are marked by this view and hence exaggeration can't be avoided. The occupation of Canaan by Joshua was not certainly swift as described in the Book of Joshua. It took very many decades for them to occupy several areas in Palestine, as various passages of the book of Joshua themselves show. Hence some of the victories and brutal destructions are what should have happened from the Deuteronomic Historian's point of view, than what actually happened.

¹⁹ Cf. P.C.Craige, *The Problem of War*, op cit. 115-122.

²⁰ Cf. D.M.Howard, J.R. *An Introduction to the Old Testament: Historical Books* (Chicago 1993), 77-78: 179-182.

Some Accounts of Brutality are Later Additions

In some cases, we can detect an earlier stratum which is more lenient and human and a later stratum which is extremely harsh, corresponding to the ideology of the time of composition. In the laws concerning war in the book of Deuteronomy we can observe this. Dt 10:10-14 is far more lenient than the verses that follow. In these verses, it required to work for peace before the starting of the war. Only if the peace efforts failed, war can begin. Destruction of those who are defeated is much less grave than that of the following verses. Here the destruction is limited only to men, presumably who were engaged in the war.²¹ Lives of women and children are spared. In verses 16-18 the whole tone changes. According to these verses one must not let anything that breathes alive. Everyone, including women and children, should be killed. And this is said to be the command of the Lord. These harsh requirements correspond to the time of the final edition in which the separation of the clean and unclean was total and there was no toleration of anything that is impure and evil.²² This is the work of D2 (Second Deuteronomistic edition) whereas the earlier stand was the work of D1 (First Deuteronomistic edition).²³

The earlier laws on war were more lenient in several other ways too. As we saw earlier, it prescribed an attempt at peace making. Besides, women caught in war can be married by the captor, after 30 days of capture (Dt 21:10-14). Even if she was divorced later, she will not any more be a slave. These laws are much more lenient than those of earlier verses in which all have to be annihilated.²⁴ The final editor of Deuteronomy incorporates both these laws in his work. But he avoids contradiction by saying that the first – lenient – laws concern the distant nations whereas the

²¹ Cf. A. Rofe', "The Laws of Warfare in the Book of Deuteronomy" in *The Pentateuch: A Sheffield Reader*, ed., J.W. Rogerson (Sheffield, 1996), 136

²² Cf. "War in the Hebrew Bible and Contemporary Parallels" in *Word and World XV* (Saint Paul, 1995), 406.

²³ Cf S.L. McKenzie, "Deuteronomistic History" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol.II (New York, 1992), 163.

²⁴ Cf. A. Rofe', *The Laws of Warfare*, op cit. 128-149.

stringent laws concern those people who lived within the territory of Canaan.

Some Accounts of Brutality arose out of Concern to do away with Idolatry

The second Deuteronomic editor (D2), in his understanding that the destruction of the nation came about because of the idolatry of the people, is decidedly intolerant towards idolatrous practices among the Israelites. It is he or his group that produced laws prohibiting the Amorite practices (Dt 12:29-13:1; 16:21-17:1) and idolatry (Dt 17:2-7; 13:2-19). It is this group that advocated death penalty to anyone – Israelite or foreigner – who committed these sins.

It is this Deuteronomic editor (D2) who, while giving accounts of ancient wars, speaks of the harsh and stringent measures against the defeated nations. Since any person practicing the above sins and abominations has to die, it is logical that nations which practice such abominations have to be totally annihilated. No one among them can be left alive. So, accounts of such inhuman killings are more the 'logical happenings' in the mind of the second Deuteronomic editor, than 'actual happenings' in history. In Dt 20:18 he himself betrays this 'logic': "You annihilate them so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God."²⁵

Brutality as the Logic of the Principle of *Herem*

We already spoke of *herem* in the section: the warrior God of the Bible. As it was said, there was the belief among the Israelites that the fruits of the war, namely the spoils of the war are 'set apart' or 'consecrated' to God. They are a sacrifice to him. Hence they must be destroyed. As we said above, human beings – regardless whether they are soldiers, women or children – must be killed. Several readers of the Bible ask themselves whether such a stipulation from God can go along with his kindness and life-giving nature.

²⁵ Cf. A.Rofe', *The Laws of Warfare*, op. cit 136f.

The people of Israel have seen several of their wars as 'wars of Yahweh' or 'holy wars' as some term it, and hence applied the principle of *herem* with regard to the spoils of war. As required of a 'holy war', the spoils – men and things – have to be destroyed. This was a very strict regulation. They simply could not think of letting any human being, captured in war, live because that could be a transgression, calling for severe punishments. In fact, as we have mentioned earlier Achan was stoned to death because he kept a mantle and some shekels of silver and gold (Jgs 7) and Saul, the first king of the Israelites, lost his kingdom (1 Sam 15).

Thus, quite often, atleast in wars considered 'holy', the brutality is the logical consequence of the principle of *herem* than actual occurrence.²⁶ In fact it would be quite unthinkable that every time everyone in a land was massacred. If that was the case those nations should have ceased to exist. Moreover the Israelitic army, except in the time of David, was so small, untrained and without proper weapons²⁷ that they could have hardly inflicted the severe damages, described in the Bible, to the nations which were by far better equipped and numerous.

Besides keeping captured men and women alive would have been very beneficial to Israelites themselves. They normally were made slaves and thus they could have had much more workforce for themselves. Keeping the cattle alive would have made them richer. Moreover the kings of Israel were known for their kindness and mercy (1 Kgs 20:3) and, at times, they were reported to have spared the captured and given them festive dinners (2 Kgs 6). Thus not all the accounts of brutality in the Bible are to be understood literally.

Conclusion

Our study has shown that the numerous wars in the Bible disturb the conscience of very many people all over the world. A 'warrior-God' looks very different from a 'Christian God'. We have attempted to show that the God of the Bible is a 'fighter' on behalf of the oppressed and enslaved people. This understanding

²⁶ Cf. T.Hiebert, "Warrior Divine" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol VI (New York, 1992), 878.

²⁷ Cf R. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, op.cit.216ff.

should be popularised, though it might not be kindly taken by the oppressing and enslaving forces.

The brutality of wars in the Bible has hurt the Christian sentiments of many people. As said above, any war is brutal and hence biblical wars too. We have attempted to explain that this brutality should not be literally understood. Quite often the accounts of brutality are later exaggerations or results of later Deuteronomic editions, in the context of abolition of the abominable practices of the nations. Some of these were not acts that actually took place but rather 'logical consequences of the later *herem* concept.

All having said, war still remains a horrible reality. As said above it can hardly ever be justified. Yet we hear of new wars every now and then in some or other corner of the world. It is a sad thing. War has to be eliminated from the face of the earth. But we are far away from such an ideal situation. The nations of the world gladly follow the words of Joel:

"Beat your plowshares into swords
and your pruning hooks into spears" (3:10)

But they are so reluctant to listen to Isaiah and Micah who proclaimed:

"...they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more" (Is 2:4; Mic 4:3).

Such an ideal situation may not come as long as human nature is what it is. But definitely the number of wars can be drastically limited and brutality very much reduced, if only there is a more equitable distribution of the God-given resources of the world. The unjust socio-economic structure calls for and nurtures dissensions, fights and wars. A genuine attempt to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor (not just throwing a pittance, as is done most often) and openness to allow participation of all in every major decision, affecting humankind, will go a long way in reducing the number and brutality of wars. The lack of trust in human beings has resulted in the growth of trust in armaments and billions of dollars are spent for weapons even by poor countries! Nations close their ears to the words of Jesus: "...all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt 26:52).