

The Ideology of War and Peace in Deuteronomy 20:10-15

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Abstract

The text of Deuteronomy 20 presents the conditions for different kinds of war in Israel's tradition. The text in 20:10-15 stipulates the conditions for engaging a foreign territory in warfare. The two significant terms of negotiation in the context are war and peace. There are conditions for war and there are conditions for peace. But each of these conditions presents its own perplexities and difficulties. Whether the foreign territory opts for war or peace, it will still be subjugated. So the peace option seems as difficult as the war option. The text is read in this study as an ideological presentation of Israel's superiority over the foreign nations. As an ideological text, the terms of agreement for war or peace are tailored to project Israel's superiority and the underdog status of the foreign territory. The text also presents the ideological position that when Israel goes for war, usually a holy war, the option before the other party is either total surrender or total or partial elimination. The essay critically reads the text in the light of contemporary discussions regarding the menace of war and the values of peace in human relations.

Introduction

War is one of the ways human beings and political entities express their conflict and enmity with one another. The history of humanity is replete with wars and accounts of war. The Bible is full of accounts of war, and in these accounts, one often meets God himself commanding the act of war. This is

The Ideology of War and Peace in Deuteronomy 20:10-15

what is seen in Deuteronomy 20. The whole chapter is about war, but the point of focus for this essay is the text of 20:10-15 where the conditions for engagement in warfare and the mode of its execution are spelled out. The essay addresses the ideological dimension in the presentation of warfare in the text and the problem of God's direct involvement in it.

The problematic fact in the biblical text is that the biblical God endorses the act of warfare and often commands it. The biblical text often presents God as a fighter who marches in battle with His people. This is very common in the Pentateuch, and Deuteronomy presents many legal backings for it.¹ As a matter of fact, the book of Deuteronomy is strategic for the understanding of holy war in the Old Testament. Contemporary studies of holy war require adequate understanding of the ideological background of the Deuteronomic perspective so as to arrive at better interpretation of the biblical position on war and holy war.

Meaning of War

In normal parlance, war is often used synonymously with warfare. In some other settings, the term war is slightly distinguished from warfare in the sense that war refers to the general form of political violence between parties while warfare refers to the activity of fighting which also involves the use of diverse weapons. But when one speaks of war or warfare, what really is one talking about? What is being talked about is not conflict in general or violent conflict in general,

¹ See Eben Scheffler, "Reflecting on (Non-) Violence in the Book of Deuteronomy in [Old Testament] Canonical Context", *Old Testament Essays* 27 no. 2 (2014) 579-576, in <http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?> – (Retrieved – 25/07/2024).

unless in metaphorical terms. War or warfare goes beyond the ordinary idea of conflict. A. C. Emery gives a general understanding of warfare as “armed conflict by one political unit against another with the purpose of destroying either the opponent or its will to resist.”² From this definition, it can be seen that war is a political act and its aim is always to destroy something. This destructive dimension of warfare has made it to remain very repulsive to all genuine lovers of humanity and the created world.

The preponderance of war in the texts of the Old Testament often creates problems for interpreters, more especially when such wars are given a positive portrait in the text. According to Bruce Birch, “These texts are rooted in a cultural context utterly unlike our own, with moral presuppositions and categories that are alien and in some cases repugnant to our modern sensibilities.”³ In the biblical text, war is often presented positively as a means of re-establishing order and justice. War is seen positively when God uses it to do a saving work for His people. Consequently, the psalmist prays thus: “Blessed be Yahweh, my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle” (Ps 144:1).

Ideological Nature of Deuteronomy 20:10-15

The text of Deut 20:10-15 is set within the second address of Moses to the people of Israel, which runs from Deut 5:1b to 28:68. The principal content of the second address is the group

² A. C. Emery, “Warfare”, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander & D. W. Baker; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) 877.

³ Bruce C. Birch, “Old Testament Ethics,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Leo G. Purdue; Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 297.

The Ideology of War and Peace in Deuteronomy 20:10-15

of texts called the Deuteronomic law in 12:1-26:15. What it means is that the whole of Deut 20:1-20 belongs to the Deuteronomic law, which is the centre of the Deuteronomic reform. The text establishes the rules for warfare. It establishes the ideological ground for Israel's wars by making them the wars of YHWH. We treat the entire text of Deuteronomy 20, and particularly 20:10-15, as ideological.

But what do we mean when we say that a text is ideological? The term "ideology" can mean various things depending on the context of its usage.⁴ However, ideology generally denotes a system of ideas that influences one's perspectives and actions. It can be the writer's point of view or the reader's point of view. Writers can be interested parties just as the readers can be influenced by a system of ideas that works for their interests.⁵ The book of Deuteronomy has the nature of a reform document,⁶ and from this perspective it is ideological. The

⁴ See M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985); D. M. Gunn and D. N. Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); D. J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); J. Berlinerblau, "Ideology, Pierre Bourdieu's Doxa, and the Hebrew Bible", *Semeia* 87 (1999) 193-214; J. Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament. Biblical Studies at the End of a Millennium*, The Hensley Henson Lectures for 1997 delivered to the University of Oxford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); N. P. Lemche, "Ideology and the History of Israel", *SJOT* 14 (2000) 165-193.

⁵ See J. Berlinerblau, "Ideology, Pierre Bourdieu's Doxa, and the Hebrew Bible", *Semeia* 87 (1999) 193-214.

⁶ See discussion in A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1979); E. Nielsen, *Deuteronomium* (HAT 1/6; Tübingen: Mohr, 1995); A. F. Campbell, – M. A. O'Brien, *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic*

book was written to serve as a constitution for Israel's life as the people of YHWH as they dwell in the land of Canaan. Thus, Joseph Blenkinsopp says of Deuteronomy: "Its intent is to provide a binding and comprehensive blueprint for the Israelite commonwealth, defining *inter alia* the scope and function of public offices, the operation of the judicial system and the cult, and qualifications for membership."⁷

It needs to be stated that the perspective of the authors of Deuteronomy on warfare is not necessarily the same as in other literary sources of the Bible. Norbert Lohfink expresses the position that the priestly document rejects war and does not relish in the description of military conquest.⁸ In like manner, the revision of the sacred history in the Chronicler's account does not share the Deuteronomistic theology of war.⁹ All these show that the Deuteronomic perspective is an ideological position peculiar to the Deuteronomist. The idea is that God is the one who leads His people to war. So when Israel fights, it is God who is fighting for them. All that the people need to do is to follow the instructions of the Divine Warrior and Commander. This ideology is called the ideology of holy war.

Holy War Ideology

In many situations in the Old Testament, war is presented as a type of violence commanded by God and, thus, regarded as

History. Origins, Upgrades, Present Text (Minneapolis 2000) 39-41.

⁷ J. Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch. An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 233.

⁸ N. Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch. Theme of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1994) 174.

⁹ Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch*, 173-174; see also S. Japhet, "Conquest and Settlement in Chronicles", *JBL* 98 (1979) 205-218.

The Ideology of War and Peace in Deuteronomy 20:10-15

holy war. In such acts of warfare, consideration seems to be more on the religious dimension, but they are still very destructive. Most of the time, the religious interpretation of the war is an ideological interpretation. In other words, an ordinary war can be given a religious colouration. This is, of course, not peculiar to Israel or to the Old Testament. In fact, many ancient political entities interpreted their wars as religious wars involving their gods and goddesses.

The biblical idea of holy war has attracted much controversy among scholars in recent times, and at the centre of the discussion is that problematic fact that such a battle is claimed to be the war of YHWH.¹⁰ Many critical studies tend to deemphasize the historicity of the holy war accounts in the biblical literature. But however one thinks of it, many such issues in the Bible continue to influence the actions of believers and non-believers alike. Thus, the adequate response is a responsible interpretation that takes into consideration the ideological nature of such texts. In fact, scholars since Julius Wellhausen have tried to explain the phenomenon from different perspectives.¹¹ According to Wellhausen, Israel's

¹⁰ Some representative studies in this new discussion include: Robert M. Good, "The Just War in Ancient Israel." *JBL* 104 (1985) 385-400; Norman K. Gottwald, "War, Holy." *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*, 942-44; Gwilym H. Jones, "'Holy War' or 'Yahweh War'?" *VT* 25 (1975) 642-658; Rudolf Smend, *Jahwekrieg und Stämmebund. Erwägungen zur ältesten Geschichte Israels* (Göttingen ²1966); Lawrence E. Toombs, "War, Ideas of." *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4:796-801; Manfred Weippert, "'Heilige Krieg in Israel und Assyrien: Kritische Anmerkungen zu Gerhard von Rads Konzept des Heiligen Krieges im alten Israel.'" *ZAW* 84 (1972) 460-293.

¹¹ See the new edition of G. von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Original in German Göttingen 1958; Grand Rapids 1991). Of particular relevance is the review of scholarly views in introduction to this new edition by B. C.

identity is defined by its religious character, which can be summarized as, YHWH is the God of Israel and Israel is the people of YHWH.¹² At the heart of this religious identity is the question of warfare. Israel's identity as people of God is interpreted by Wellhausen in the sense that Israel is YHWH's military camp. YHWH is the warrior God and Israel modelled its life on Him.¹³

Wellhausen's view that Israel's origin emanated from warfare is further developed by Friedrich Schwally, who came up with the anthropological explanation that the primitive stages of any religion are characterized by the incorporation of other spheres of life to the religious sphere.¹⁴ Because of this nature of Israel's origin, warfare is given a religious character, as war becomes a religious phenomenon. According to Schwally, the term covenant expresses the federation based on warfare, and in Israel's covenant with YHWH, there is expressed Israel's relation to YHWH as a warrior God. Israel thus functions as the army of YHWH and war is undertaken in defence of the federation or covenant. War is an aspect of the cult and is conducted in a cultic way. This means that Israel's wars are by nature holy wars.¹⁵

What has remained the most classic interpretation of holy war in ancient Israel is that of Gerhard von Rad who saw the holy

Ollenburger, "Gerhard von Rad's Theory of Holy War", 1-33.

¹² J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Original in German, Berlin 1878; Atlanta 1994) 433.

¹³ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 434.

¹⁴ F. Schwally, *Der heilige Krieg im alten Israel*, vol 1 of *Semitischer Kriegsaltertümer* (Leipzig: 1901).

¹⁵ See B. C. Ollenburger, "Introduction: Gerhard von Rad's Theory of Holy War," 5.

The Ideology of War and Peace in Deuteronomy 20:10-15

war as a battle conducted by YHWH himself on behalf of his people who also joined as a mark of faith.¹⁶ Von Rad attributes to Deuteronomy the origin of this war ideology: “From Deuteronomy therefore came that war ideology which through the Deuteronomistic editing of many historic books-virtually the entire Old Testament-contributed that additional element of militant spirit and programmatic irreconcilability which has so frequently alienated people.”¹⁷ According to von Rad, holy war served as an instrument of prophetic opposition against the monarchic institution. The prophets championed the revival of the holy war tradition as it offered them the opportunity to emphasize the point that YHWH alone could deliver and lead his people and since the prophet was YHWH’s messenger, the role of the human king becomes diminished.¹⁸

This recalls the position of Max Weber who argued that YHWH functioned as the sovereign of Israel’s confederation and consequently as its military defender.¹⁹ For Weber, the confederation is a war confederation under the leadership of YHWH. Weber identifies three such holy wars, namely, wars of Deborah and Barak (Judges 5), war of the tribes against Benjamin (Judges 20) and Saul’s war in defence of Jabesh (1 Samuel 11). The charismatic prophets exercised the role as war leaders for the confederation, and even when the monarchic system transformed the social and political structures, the

¹⁶ Von Rad, *Holy War*, 41-51.

¹⁷ G. von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel* (Original in German Göttingen 1958; Grand Rapids 1991) 116.

¹⁸ Von Rad, *Holy War*, 94-114.

¹⁹ M. Weber, *Ancient Judaism* (Original in German, Tübingen 1931; New York 1952) 17.

prophets continued to act as the ideological propagators of the holy war institution.²⁰

Many studies since von Rad have taken seriously his interpretation of the holy war, but most of these have called for the outright re-evaluation of the concept. For instance, Manfred Weippert considers the very notion of “holy war” as an anachronism, and according to him, the texts do not offer any valid proof for the distinction between holy and profane wars.²¹ He objects to von Rad’s interpretation on the ground that the way Israel conducted its wars with religious ritual was not different from the ways other neighbouring nations and cultures within the ancient Near East conducted theirs.²²

Most modern critical studies see the idea of “holy war” as an anachronism which serves the ideological interests of the biblical writers concerned. The tendency today to class Israel as part of the ancient Canaanite society makes it very difficult to argue for any religiously distinctive element in Israel’s historical conduct of war. So, the issue of holy war can be seen as a literary idea and a very problematic one that should not play a central role in modern discussions of just or unjust wars. The idea was most probably older than the Deuteronomists, but it was the Deuteronomistic movement that resuscitated it.²³ Most scholars underscore the view that the Deuteronomists, while relying on earlier traditions, created the ideology of

²⁰ See Ollenburger, 6-9.

²¹ Weippert, “Heilige Krieg,” 490.

²² Weippert, “Heilige Krieg,” 490-492.

²³ R. E. Clements, “The Book of Deuteronomy: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume II (ed. Bruce C. Birch; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 439-440.

The Ideology of War and Peace in Deuteronomy 20:10-15

warfare found in the book.²⁴ As a regulation, it was utopian in its time and could not have been implemented. But it rhymed with the spirit of the religious reforms as it gave the impression that Israel had always, even in the ancient past, been guided by religious rules in all affairs of life.

The Text of Deuteronomy 20:10-15

10 When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. 11 If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labor. 12 If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; 13 and when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. 14 But the women, children, livestock and whatever the town contains by way of spoil, you may take for yourselves as booty. You will feed on the spoils of the enemies whom Yahweh your God has handed over to you. 15 Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here.

Structure of the Text

The text of Deut 20:10-15 is a subunit within the macro unit of 20:1-20 which deals with the conduct of wars. These wars are regarded as holy wars as YHWH is presented as the One fighting for His people. The text of 20:1-20 is well structured into three parts. The first part (20:1-9) deals with the preparations for the war, while the second part (20:10-15) deals with the execution of the war with a foreign city. The third part (20:16-20) deals with the mode of waging wars against the cities within the promised land. The structure of the second

²⁴ See Clements, "The Book of Deuteronomy," 440.

part (20:10-15), which is the subject of the present discourse, is structured as follows:

Vv. 10-11: Peace Negotiation before Battle

Vv. 12-14: Mode of Execution of the War

V. 15: Summary: How to Treat Foreign Cities in Battle

Analysis of the Text

Vv. 10-11: Peace Negotiation before Battle

v. 10. “When you draw near to a town to fight against it, you shall offer it terms of peace. 11 If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labor.”

The first part of this text in vv 10-11 offers the conditions for a peace accord so as to avoid war. The text of v. 10 shows that the battle is with a city that lies outside the Israelite territory. No reason is given for the impending war, no *casus belli*. What appears is that Israel has to approach (*qārab*) the city for war before opting for peace. This is itself a show of force. The terms for peace (*shālôm*) are to be given by Israel herself while the enemy city has only to accept.

The word *shālôm* in the text is used in the sense of peace agreement, which means agreed terms for absence of war. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew *shālôm* has such senses as peace, completeness, wholeness, perfection, well-being, prosperity, safety. Generally, the idea of peace has to do with totality and sufficiency, and this involves a state of both external and internal sufficiency.²⁵ To put it another way, peace

²⁵ Cf. G. Gerleman, “šlm” *TLOT* 3, 1343.

The Ideology of War and Peace in Deuteronomy 20:10-15

in the OT expresses the state of affairs realized when things are working in perfect harmony. According to P. A. Barker, “It is a state of positive friendship and security between two parties, often the result of restitution and reconciliation.”²⁶ In some of its occurrences, *shālôm* refers to an agreement between parties, who are said to make peace (Josh 9:15; Isa 27:5). People make peace when they agree to a contract of relationship. In this sense, peace is understood as the state of affairs realized as a result of a covenant or treaty. This is the sense of the term in Deut 20:10. The important thing is that war is not the first option. In all cases, the peace option must precede.

In v. 11, the city’s acceptance of the peace terms is interpreted as surrender (*pātaḥ*). The surrender is expressed by word *pātaḥ*, which has such senses as “to open, conquer, surrender, set free, loosen, break up.”²⁷ In the present context, it involves the city opening her gates to the Israelite forces. The city gate was usually the symbol of a city’s security and protection. The possession of the gate of a city means the conquest of the city.²⁸ The fact that the city inhabitants open the gate themselves is a sign of surrender.

The consequence of such opening or surrender is enslavement to forced labour (*mas*). The Hebrew word *mas* means “forced labour” or “compulsory service”.²⁹ It was the type of labour that Israel suffered in Egypt. It also expresses the type of labour that King Solomon subjected the surviving descendants of the original inhabitants of the land, identified as the

²⁶ Barker, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 690.

²⁷ V. P. Hamilton, “*pṯh*”, *NIDOTTE* 3, 716.

²⁸ R. S. Hess, “*ša‘ar*”, *NIDOTTE* 3, 209.

²⁹ C. Dohmen, “*mas*”, *TLOT* 8, 428.

Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites (1 Kgs 9:20). Forced labour, as used in the texts, expresses a condition of subjugation. Here in Deut 20:11, the forced labour (*mas*) is prescribed as the manner of treating the inhabitants of a city that accepts the peace conditions.³⁰ In other words, the negotiation for peace places Israel as the superior partner, and the peace agreement implies the partial loss of freedom for the besieged city.

Vv. 12-14: Mode of Execution of the War

12 If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; 13 and when YHWH your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. 14 But the women, children, livestock and whatever the town contains by way of spoil, you may take for yourselves as booty. You will feed on the spoils of the enemies whom YHWH your God has handed over to you.

The second part of the text's structure (vv. 12-14) gives the procedure for the conduct of the war. According to v. 12, in the case that the city refuses the terms for peace, war becomes inevitable. The failure of the negotiation is signaled by the city coming out to make war (*milhamah*) against Israel. So the offensive is launched by the city. Israel's supposed response is expressed by the verb *šûr* (*šartā*) which means to enclose, besiege, confine.³¹ Israel is to barricade the city from all sides. In this way, the city is starved of food and all external supplies and supports. It is a sort of psychological warfare. This is the first step in the invasion of the city. Here one recalls the story

³⁰ See Gerald A. Klingbeil, "*mas*", *NIDOTTE* 2, 993.

³¹ See P. P. Jensen, "*šwr*", *NIDOTTE* 3, 790.

The Ideology of War and Peace in Deuteronomy 20:10-15

of the conquest of Jericho in the book of Joshua. For a siege to succeed, it has to be in accordance with the divine will and the people must be ready to obey.³² The execution of the war is strictly according to the divine will. The initiative is not that of Israel.

In v. 13, YHWH is said to be the one to give (*nātan*) the city into the power of Israel. This means that YHWH is the one to do the battle (cf. Deut 3:21-22; 7:23). How YHWH does it is not recounted. All that the forces of Israel have to do is a mopping up operation. This involves putting all the male population of the city to the sword as the first level of operation. The second level is mentioned in v. 14, and this involves taking all that belongs to the city as war booty. These include women, children, livestock and other possessions of the city. The interesting thing in this text is that YHWH is the one who commands it. The Israelite army acts at YHWH's behest. The war functions as divine judgment on the foreign nation.

V. 15: Summary: How to Treat Foreign Cities in Battle

v. 15 “Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here.”

What the text of 20:15 implies is that the option of peace treaty and the mode of executing the war and treatment of the war booty are supposed to be only for cities outside the promised land. Most of what has been seen so far is a normal treatment of conquered cities in the ancient Near East. The male population is usually killed while the women and other belongings of the city are appropriated. The special thing in

³² Cf. Jensen, *NIDOTTE* 3, 790.

this case is that it is commanded by YHWH, Israel's God. The text of v. 15 endorses it as the divinely approved mode of treating foreign nations that are outside the territory given to Israel for inheritance.

Significant Points from the Text

1. The text presupposes that Israel is the superior force. This superiority is not based on the possession of superior weapons or greater number of combatants, but mainly on the fact that YHWH fights for Israel. This is why obedience, faith and courage are important ingredients for success in the battle. Obedience is a *sine qua non* for success.
2. The use of the term peace in the text raises some curiosity. The peace talked about does not bring freedom to the inhabitants but robs them of their freedom. The only thing they enjoy is absence of physical battle. They still suffer the enslavement of forced labour. So, peace in this context can hardly be understood as wellbeing.
3. The text betrays a cultural mindset that sees war and violence as means of resolving conflicts. It also betrays a culture that sees the Deity as a combatant in warfare.
4. In reading the texts of the Bible, especially such texts like this one where violence and war are justified, one has to take cognizance of the cultural factors that undergird such approaches to war and violence. What is normal to the writer in a particular culture in the past may become abnormal to human culture in a different historical moment. This imposes a caveat on the reading, interpretation and application of the biblical text.

Conclusion

The Ideology of War and Peace in Deuteronomy 20:10-15

The text of Deut 20:10-15 is presented in this essay as an ideological literary construct. While giving what appears as just rules for the conduct of war, the text is also an ideological expression of Israel's superiority to its adversaries as well as the superiority of Israel's Deity. Since it is an ideological text, it also means that it was probably never applied on the historical level exactly as written. This is, however, not the same as saying that the text could not have inspired similar actions in a later setting. In fact, an uncritical reading of the text has the likelihood of influencing some modern processes. Some readers could see it as a model for war between God's people and some foreign nations. However, one can also see a positive aspect of the text, as it subjects Israel's approach to warfare to the divine will. Since war involves the destruction of human life, it is God alone who decides how it should be waged.