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Review of John A. Wood, Perspectives on War in the Bible

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JOHN A. WOOD, *Perspectives on War in the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998). Pp. [vii] + 184. Paper \$17.95.

John Wood is surely correct in defending the importance of his subject by stating that “warfare was at the forefront of ancient Israel’s consciousness and a brutal fact of life” (p. 1). W.’s unique contribution to the literature on war and peace in the Bible is aptly summarized when he states that “throughout the entire biblical period there were several variations of a holy war ideology that existed alongside pacifistic and just war teachings” (p. 3). Thus, W. takes note of the variety of opinions within the biblical canon. His book does not engage in fresh readings of biblical texts; but his goal is rather to “bring together the work of Biblical scholars in a new way” (p. 7).

In chap. 1: “The Concept of Holy War in Ancient Israel,” W. explores warfare as a religious issue in ancient Israel and other ancient Near Eastern societies.

In chap. 2: “Holy War: Ancient Israel Active,” W. summarizes the alleged move toward more conventionalized warfare, particularly in the Deuteronomic Historian (1 Samuel 8, etc.). But what is conventional, and what is “miraculous”? W. cites the story of David and Goliath, arguing that it illustrates “the performance of a gifted . . . young warrior” (p. 39), in other words, that it celebrates human abilities. One could argue that the fictional story presumes David’s inability to defeat Goliath through conventional means (he cannot wear proper armor, 1 Sam 17:39), and 1 Sam 17:47 has the victorious David proclaim that “the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord’s.” This story may be a Deuteronomic criticism of David’s later reliance on conventional warfare, just as 1 Samuel 8 is preceded by a miraculous victory, making the request for a king seem even more faithless. In short, even some “conventional” descriptions of war may reflect an implicit Deuteronomic judgment.

In chap. 3: “Holy War: Ancient Israel Passive,” W. reviews “miracle war,” or “Yahweh war,” a notion that is traditionally seen as an aspect of premonarchical thought in which human involvement is decidedly minimized, if not denied entirely (cf. Exod 14:14). W. could have cited Wisdom of Solomon 12; 18–19, for early discussion of the ethics of the conquest, and of human involvement.

Wood suggests that the Book of Daniel removes conflict to the heavens and invites passivity (p. 64). But apocalyptic literature, and certainly Daniel, did not require a passive withdrawal from society (“stand firm and take action”; Dan 11:32); in it, rather, a new set of metaphors and images was used for speaking of very real conflicts in a very real world. By analogy, Paul’s argument that the early Christians’ “fight” was not “against enemies of flesh and blood” (Eph 6:12) does not intend passivity in the world. This issue of the ethical implications of imagery in the Bible is particularly important when W. moves to consider the Book of Revelation in chap. 4, “War as Vengeful and Total.” W. takes up the debate about Revelation as an example of troubling vengefulness. Why would Daniel’s imagery of “battles in heaven” result in a presumed passivity, while Revelation’s more lurid imagery would reflect a literal militancy that allegedly contradicted the ethics of Jesus? The important problems of modern use of the imagery of warfare must not dictate our assumptions about the way in which the original communities understood them.

In chap. 5: "War as Redemptive and Inclusive," W. summarizes the idea that God is often portrayed as bringing good out of warfare and violence. He refers to Isa 19:24-25 and Isaiah 2, among others. In chap. 6: "Pacifism," and chap. 7: "Just War Motifs," W. illustrates Hebrew and early Christian teachings on peace, proposing that some passages suggest a Hebrew concept of a just war. I remain skeptical of arguments for a Hebraic notion of "just war." Even the author of the *Wisdom of Solomon* seems more interested in justifying tactics (at best, *ius in bello*, not *ius ad bellum*) and seems unconcerned about questioning the right of conquest.

In his "summary and conclusions," after summarizing various approaches to war and peace in the Bible, W. suggests criteria of Christian judgment on the issues that are based ultimately on the gospel portrait of Jesus. I think that W. has admirably defended this as a way of refusing to dismiss or ignore the "troubling" parts of the Bible while accepting the fact that in the Christian tradition some interpretive decisions have clearly been made about how they relate to the Hebraic traditions of war, peace, and nonviolence. This, I think, is a promising approach to a very old problem. W.'s text would be helpful for undergraduates. He proposes an initially difficult notion (diversity within the text) but helpfully unfolds the sensible results.

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RAYMOND E. BROWN, S.S., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (AB Reference Library; New York/London/Toronto: Doubleday, 1997). Pp. xliii + 878. \$42.50.

(The reviewer would like to note that he wrote the following review before receiving the sad news of Father Raymond E. Brown's death on August 8, 1998.)

Contrary to the paradigm which prevailed throughout Christendom for well over a thousand years, in which NT narratives were thought to be literally factual, Brown's *Introduction* assumes a history-based paradigm. Having reached a form-critical high point in the 1960s, it still commands the allegiance of many great scholars. These scholars maintain that the NT narratives, instead of being literally factual, reflect the complex interaction of three stages, three elusive forces—Jesus' life, subsequent oral tradition (including adaptation to local communities), and the evangelists' adaptation of their sources (oral and written). The elusiveness of these three forces is illustrated in attempts at reconstructing Jesus' life. B.'s summary of the quest for the story of Jesus' life from Reimarus to Meier (appendix 1) reflects a discussion which, taken as a whole, is deeply unsure.

Within this paradigm B. is superb. With comprehensiveness and clarity he first discusses preliminary questions (nature and origin of the NT, interpretation, text, political and social background, religious and philosophical background), then, after giving general introductions to the Gospels and Epistles, he reviews the NT books singly. There are two appendixes ("The Historical Jesus" and "Jewish and Christian writings pertinent to the NT") and eight illustrative tables (NT chronology, Q, structure of Luke 1-2, Luke's use of Mark, Paul's activities in the NT, Pauline chronology,