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CONCEPTIONS OF HOLY WAR IN BIBLICAL AND QUR'ĀNIC TRADITION

Reuven Firestone

ABSTRACT

Scholars have studied the concept of holy war in the Bible for well over a century. Both traditional Muslim and modern Western scholars have likewise studied the qur'ānic view of war, but little has been done to examine scriptural justification for holy war as a cross-cultural phenomenon. A comparison of biblical (primarily deuteronomic) with qur'ānic war texts reveals that, despite historical, cultural, and geographical differences, scriptural justification for mass slaughter in war first appears for the purpose of defense but steadily evolves into divinely encouraged and even divinely commanded offensive war. The differences in the evolving concept between the two scriptures and their exegesis can be explained by the different histories of two religious civilizations.

RELIGIOUS JUDGMENTS ABOUT THE MORAL ACCEPTABILITY of human slaughter in war are complex and vary over time. Contemporary Western scholars typically go to some lengths to disown ancient conceptions of holy war: Michael Walzer, for example, begins his article "The Idea of Holy War in Ancient Israel" with the observation, "For the modern reader, the conquest of Canaan, with all its attendant slaughter, is the most problematic moment in the history of ancient Israel" (1992, 215). While contemporary Christian and Jewish scholars have been gravely tempted to discount the texts, as Walzer does when he writes that "[t]he religious doctrine of holy war does not seem to have any intrinsic connection to Israel's covenantal faith" (1992, 216), modern Muslim scholars have no such option but must cope with the continuing centrality of the idea of *jihād* and its historical application. Abdullah Schleifer describes a pervasive sentiment when he observes that "[a]mong modern Muslims this subject has been one of great sensitivity since the accusations that Islam 'converted by the sword' and is little more than a 'warriors cult' lacking spiritual and ethical depth pervaded so much of the polemical literature . . . in the 19th and early 20th centuries. . ." (1983, 118).

The idea of sanctified war, embedded in both the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān, gives rise to hard moral questions that I do not intend to resolve in this essay. My purpose is simply to insist that discounting scriptural texts that are unattractive or problematic in the contemporary context is not the appropriate means of solving the moral questions. Both scriptures apply a transcendent sanctity to certain acts of war—and not just in the context of defensive or otherwise “just” wars. Where there is sacred justification and/or authority for war, the very act of participating in the violence can take on a hallowed significance. Those who make the ultimate sacrifice of ending their own lives in battle may be viewed as achieving the ultimate goal of an everlasting life in a transcendent world. As James Brundage puts it, within such a framework of thought, war is not only understood as just, but also justifying (1976, 116). It is my conviction that certain notions associated with sanctified war as expressed in the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān are, in truth, intrinsically connected to the faiths deriving from both the biblical and qur'ānic traditions—though not in precisely the way that most assume. It will be my argument that neither the Israelite nor the Muslim notion of sanctified war can be understood apart from religious attitudes toward idolatry and associated concerns about the preservation of a vital but threatened religious community. If we are to put the tradition of holy war in its proper perspective, we must begin by rightly understanding text and context. In considering the two scriptural traditions comparatively, I hope to bring into view features of both that would not otherwise be so readily apparent.

We are, of course, long past the day when the scriptures could be read ahistorically. Not only is historical and exegetical work incumbent on the modern reader, but we must appreciate the degree to which the scriptures themselves contain interpretive reworkings of the ideas they preserve. Whether plumbed for wisdom or analysed for legal principles, Scripture finds meaning only through a history of interpretation. This normal process of adjusting the sense of Scripture informs the very possibility of reconstructing its meaning, and it does this to such a degree that Scripture cannot be read independently of its interpretation. In fact, Scripture appears even to adjust itself in just such an exegetical fashion, and even contemporary scholarly analysis of Scripture divides itself into interpretive schools. Consciously or not, therefore, Scripture as the word of God is shaped and molded in the very attempt to understand its meaning.

A comparative study of holy war in the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'ān is a comparison of both likes and unlikes. Establishing what can properly be compared with what is the first challenge. Biblicist thought coeval with qur'ānic revelation may be found in the Talmud

or church fathers—not the Bible, for the world of biblical Israel had vanished by the time of the revelation of the Qur’ān. However, historical comparisons do not require historical contemporaneity. The object of my study is to trace the ways in which the conceptualization and justification of divinely sanctioned war evolved through the unfolding of Scripture. In the pages that follow, therefore, I will examine the two scriptural traditions separately and then compare the two sets of findings. What I will show is that, in both traditions, divinely sanctioned violence first appears for the purpose of defense and steadily evolves into divinely encouraged—even divinely commanded—offensive warfare. The most important difference between the two is that the offensive warfare of the Israelites is constrained by limits that are, for specifiable historical reasons, absent from the most recent layer of teachings about sanctified war that we find in the Qur’ān.

1. Divinely Sanctioned War in Israel

Despite the often recurring references to divinely sanctioned fighting in the Bible, no consistently recurring term can be found there for what has later been defined as “holy war.” The term “wars of God” (*milhamot YHWH*) does occur occasionally, but it is rare (Num. 21:14, 1 Sam. 18:17, 25:28) and is remarkable only for its absence from most of the many references in the Bible to warring acts. Nevertheless, most Israelite wars are represented as having been fought by God or with God, and indirectly, for God.¹ References to these many wars may be found from Exodus to the latest books of the Hebrew canon. Whether the biblical war texts represent an actual accounting of these wars or are merely interpreted remembrances generations later, most Israelite wars are understood by Scripture to be phenomena which transcend the simple contest of human combatants for the achievement of profane goals.

The biblical depiction of war has been a popular topic of study ever since Julius Wellhausen pointed out its overwhelming significance in his *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* in 1885.² Various approaches and conclusions have been suggested, from Friedrich Schwally’s coining of the term “holy war” (*heilige Krieg*) in his monograph of that name in 1901 to Fritz Stolz’s concept of “Yahweh war”

¹ In the Bible, as well as in many other pre-modern contexts, references to war are often references to what is today considered a battle: a single engagement between warring parties. The biblical term *milhamah* refers to any act of group violence in which a social polity engages against an outside force.

² For a good accounting of the major studies of biblical war since Wellhausen, see Ollenburger 1991 and Sanderson 1991.

seventy years later (1972). The continuing interest in the topic is motivated by religious and political inclination as well as scholarly goals.³ Because of the very long and complicated textual tradition of the Hebrew Bible, most of the scholarly discussion centers around the evolution of the notion of holy war in ancient Israel. Questions are posed such as: When and under what circumstances did the concept first develop in ancient Israel, and as a result of what historical, political, and sociological stimuli did it mature into its latest expressions? Much of the argument regarding these questions rests upon the dating of biblical texts, the reconstruction of historical events, cultic practices, and ancient theological concepts, and the discovery of extra-biblical ancient Near Eastern texts containing literary and conceptual parallels. Because of the variety of scholarly approaches, the acknowledged uncertainty regarding the dating, arrangement, and structure of biblical texts, and the differences in interpretation of the meaning and function of ancient Israelite cultic practice, agreement regarding the question of holy war in ancient Israel remains elusive. Real consensus may be found only in the certainty that the concept of holy war developed and changed as the history of the people of Israel evolved from patriarchal to tribal and then to national organization.

According to the broad outline of this consensus, Israel's God, like the deities of other peoples in the ancient Near East, was seen as fighting on behalf of God's people (Pedersen 1934/1940, 18; Weinfeld 1983; Jones 1989). The biblical concepts of holy war evolved out of the earlier notion of a tribal god associated exclusively with one tribe or people and warring on behalf of its human followers against the peoples and gods of foreign tribes. The notion of God's wars for Israel therefore developed in parallel with both the evolution of Israel's theology and with the self-concept of the people of Israel as it evolved from a loose grouping of ethnically similar migratory tribes to a unified nation in its own land.⁴ God's wars on behalf of Israel or Israel's wars in which God is depicted as fighting or determining the outcome tend to be associated in the Bible with protection of the national unit or the acquisition and sanctification of its divinely ordained territorial inheritance. The spectrum of biblical holy wars may be said to have begun, therefore, with the Exodus from Egypt and destruction of

³ Scholars treat the subject in accordance with their interest in theology, law, or the history of religion; Barrett 1987, Craigie 1978, and Armstrong 1988 are examples of religiously and politically motivated treatments of the topic.

⁴ The term "nation" here applies not to the modern nation-state, but to a relatively unified ethnic people, equivalent to the rather archaic sense of the term "folk."

Israel's first national enemy, the Egyptians (Smend 1970; Lind 1980).⁵ Depictions of these kinds of war may be found primarily in the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, and the books of Samuel. They ended, according to the biblical chronology, with the defeat of those enemies of Israel that tried to prevent the nation from realizing its divinely ordained corporate goals of consolidation and settlement.

It should be noted here that as the history of Israel became mythologized in the biblical record, virtually all wars which profoundly affected that history were understood to have been ordained or determined by God. This included wars destructive to Israel and even included the catastrophic destruction of the kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians (2 Kings 24:1–4; Jer. 21:3–7, 22:6–7, 24–27). Although the defeat of Israel by a foreign power did not really fit the category as holy war, even such defeat was considered a divinely authorized event because God was understood as having ordained the outcome. The Babylonian debacle was seen as an act of divine punishment realized through war, although punishment could also be administered through plague, drought, lack of fertility, or other “acts of God.”

Following the consensus noted previously, most studies assume a linear evolutionary progression in the concept of war as expressed by the various stages of biblical history and presume a unity of belief and worldview within the Israelite polity at any one time. These two assumptions have led scholars to the pursuit of an overarching theory of biblical war. It appears at least as likely, however, that the concept evolved not only chronologically but also geographically, demographically, and/or politically within any one period. The variety of depictions of holy war in the Bible attests to its complexity. The search for a single overarching solution to the problem of biblical holy war would appear, therefore, to be vain.

Nevertheless, an accurate though less universal understanding of the subject may be gained if study is carefully restricted to a specific context rather than applied to all occurrences of the phenomenon. Certain texts, while not representing all of the varied depictions found in Scripture, nevertheless depict points of view which have been considered prominent or dominant within the periods and among the leadership groups and their constituencies represented by the texts. The notions portrayed in such texts provide an intelligible basis for raising questions regarding the meaning and function of holy war as found in general within the Bible.

⁵ Even the very first biblical depiction of war, which, according to the biblical scheme, occurred long before the formation of the nation, is described as divinely determined (Gen. 14:20).

Notwithstanding the many and varied portrayals of direct divine involvement in Israel's wars that can be found in the Hebrew Bible and notwithstanding the likelihood that some other expressions also represent a consensus of opinion at particular times, most scholars agree that the book of Deuteronomy represents the most fully developed and theologically "canonized" expression of holy war in ancient Israel.⁶ Deuteronomy functions as a kind of internal biblical exegesis, providing explanations or reformulating laws, customs, and concepts known from older biblical texts (Zhakovitz 1992; Fishbane 1985, 164, 201–2, 206–8). War is one important item among the many that it treats. Whether scholars consider the deuteronomic expression of holy war to be a late reinterpretation of earlier historical events (Schwally 1901; Pedersen 1934/1940; von Rad 1951/1991; Miller 1973) or the record of an early concept evolving either independently within Israel (Smend 1970; Stolz 1972; Lind 1980) or in parallel with other ancient Near Eastern peoples (Weippert 1972), they agree that a coherent and authoritative formulation may be found there (Jones 1989, 314; Lind 1980, 24–32). The deuteronomic depiction of holy war is the most systematic and comprehensive in the Hebrew Bible. It therefore has the greatest likelihood of representing a consensus within the polity of Israel at any period (in the case of Deuteronomy, late in the monarchic period), despite the probability that, because of its formulation long after the consolidation of the nation, fighting based on its specific formulation may have never actually taken place (Walzer 1992). In fact, Deuteronomy cannot be relied upon exactly as a case study of legislation on war because as a reading back into history, it served more as a guide to what should have been than as a guide to what should be. It nevertheless organized and reworked earlier concepts and ideas in a systematic fashion in order to provide a conceptual model from which later policies could be and have been drawn. As a coherent and clearly interpretive expression of holy war in a text representing the organized polity of Israel (or at least of Israel's political or intellectual elites), the deuteronomic portrayal provides the best basis for comparison across as well as within religious and scriptural boundaries.⁷

⁶ The idealized expression of holy war in the later Prophetic books tends to be seen more as a literary phenomenon than a cultural or religious construct informing policy decisions (see von Rad 1951/1991, 74–114; Lind 1980, 132–44).

⁷ The division of Deuteronomy into parts which can be identified as "original" Deuteronomy and "late Deuteronomic historian" remains unresolved, but scholarly consensus has it that the final form of the book was redacted in the late seventh or mid-sixth century B.C.E. I judge the late redaction of Deuteronomy, which includes earlier layers, to be the best text for purposes of comparison. I make no attempt to separate and identify the layers in this study. For dating and Deuteronomy's connection with the earlier

The classic "holy war" texts of Deuteronomy mention two major aims which served also as justifications for the divinely sanctified wars of Israel. The first was possession of the land promised by God to Israel (1:6–8, 2:25–37, 3:1–22, 6:10–12, 7:1, 9:1–3, 11:23–25, 20:1–18, 29:6–8, 31:3–6). It should be noted that elsewhere in Deuteronomy, adjacent lands were specifically forbidden to Israel because these lands had already been given by God to other peoples (2:4–5, 18–23). The second was ensuring that the national holding would remain free of idolatry, including those peoples practicing idolatry (7:1–5, 7:16–26, 12:1–3, 12:29–13:1, 13:2–19, 16:21–22, 17:2–7, 18:9–14). Deuteronomy called quite explicitly and repeatedly for the destruction of both the idolatrous practices and those people who practiced them within the boundaries of the sacred land. Certain national or ethnic groups were identified as more acceptable than others; although these nations were not permitted a corporate existence within the borders of the land (23:8–9), Israelites could intermarry with them.

Lurking behind the injunction to destroy idolaters within the sacred land was the warning that, despite the fact that God had chosen Israel above all other nations (7:6), even God's own chosen people would be destroyed if it forsook its God and practiced the abominations of the idolaters (7:1–4, 7:9–11, 8:19–20, 11:16–17, 11:26–28, 28:1–68, 29:15–27, 30:17–18). Israel would succeed in possessing its land only if it obeyed God's will (11:22–28).

Deuteronomy thus linked the earlier biblical expressions of holy war in all their hues and shades to the sacred history of Israel and its destiny to possess the land of Israel. The command of possession, in turn, was intimately linked with Israel's special relationship with God. The subsequent command to destroy all traces of idolatry within the consecrated land, including all of the peoples therein whose religious practice is idolatrous, was a direct result of that relationship and was a modernizing reformulation of the older concept of the tribal god fighting opposing peoples and their gods.

It must not be overlooked, however, that destruction of the idolatrous peoples was enjoined only within the consecrated land. No deuteronomic command extended this ruling beyond the boundaries of the land of Israel, and Deuteronomy 20:10–18 specifically limited the wholesale destruction, known in the Bible as the *herem*, only to the

Josianic reforms (2 Kings 22:8), see especially Noth 1981, 1–110, and Lind 1980, 145–46. For suggestions of an earlier dating, see Adam C. Welch 1924 and Kitchen 1966.

consecrated land (10:16).⁸ Moreover, the capital prohibition against idolatry in the sacred land was directed as harshly against Israel as it was against the Canaanite nations. Individual Israelites or even entire Israelite cities must be destroyed if they were found to be involved in idolatrous practices (13:2–9).

In contrast to Exodus 14–15 and some of the earlier depictions of war in the books of Joshua and Judges, the late and distilled view of holy war depicted in Deuteronomy virtually eliminated the early justification of the physical defense of the still-forming polity of Israel. This was because, by the time of Deuteronomy, the Israelite people had become a consolidated national-religious entity, had evolved into a monarchic form of governance, and had established a long history of settlement in its land. Israel was confronted at this time, however, by the dangers of religious syncretism and political strife which threatened to destroy the unity of the nation. The context of deuteronomic holy war therefore continued to presume, and, indeed, stressed, the divinely ordained possession of the land. The subtext, however, was the syncretistic and idolatrous practices which continued to thrive within the consecrated land long after the successful establishment of Israelite political hegemony there (2 Kings 23:4–24). The allure of idolatry and its symbolism as an expression of the attractiveness of foreign cultural practices represented a powerful threat to the Israelite religious system and to the unity of the Israelite polity. The nation, which was by this time already divided into two separate and fractious political entities, was in a position of cultural and military decline. A major message imbedded within the deuteronomic expressions of holy war, therefore, was that if the nation of Israel would obey God's religio-national dictates, then God would continue to fight on behalf of the nation and ensure its viable existence in its own land (4:1–40, 6:1–25, 7:1–8:20). The land given to Israel was inviolable only as long as it was free from foreign or syncretistic religious practices.

According to the deuteronomic view, and consistent with what is known of late monarchic history, God's dictates regarding war on behalf of Israel did not represent a universalist stance. They denoted, rather, the opposite by serving to secure Israel's unity in relation to other human groups, but only if the nation would refrain from following the abhorrent religious (which includes cultural) practices of other

⁸ "In the towns of the latter peoples, however, which the Lord your God is giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive. No, you must proscribe them . . ." (*lo t'hayeh kol n'shamah ki haharem taḥarimem. . .*). For a summary of the scholarly views on the *ḥerem*, see Stern 1991.

nations. Israel would enjoy God's protection in its land only so long as it remained true to God's religio-national dictates.

According to Deuteronomy, idolatry within that sacred land was worse than the act of killing—even the mass killing—of idolaters, because the existence of idolatry there nullified the very right of Israel to possess it (7:1–4, 12:29–13:19, 17:1–7). Moreover, the existence of idolatry (that is, religio-cultural syncretism) in the land would eventually bring about the destruction of the Israelite polity and its people. The death, therefore, of any and all idolaters, whether Israelite or foreign, was enjoined upon the nation upon pain of its own destruction.

Holy war as expressed in Deuteronomy, therefore, would not have been intended to “propagate the faith,” the commonly assumed purpose of holy war envisioned by the West. It was not outward looking and had no interest in seeking converts, either through physical force or through persuasion. It served, rather, as a conservative means to unify and strengthen a minority people and its religio-political system through withdrawal and isolation from other (presumably more culturally advanced) peoples. The concept of deuteronomic holy war, then, was quite limited geographically and could only exist in relation to a particular locale consecrated to the survival of its own religio-cultural expression.⁹

2. Attitudes toward Aggression in the Qur'ān

In contrast to the long and complex textual history of the Hebrew Bible, the universal Islamic view holds that God revealed the Qur'ān serially to the prophet Muhammad during his twenty-two-year mission from about 610 C.E., when he was forty years old, until his death in 632. Although Muhammad did not receive revelation “upon demand,” divine instruction would nevertheless be brought down (*nuzila*) in relation to the changing historical circumstances faced by the fledgling Muslim community. Muhammad was commanded to make each divine message public to the community after having received it, and *iqra'* —“recite”—is a common introductory command initiating revelatory messages. In fact, the meaning of the Qur'ān is “the Recitation.” Remaining largely in oral form among the overwhelmingly non-literate Arabs of Muhammad's generation, the text of the Qur'ān “whether written on palm branches or thin stones or preserved

⁹ The one exception to this is the case of the Amalekites, who were condemned to destruction for their insidious acts against the Israelites when they were trying to escape the wrath of the Egyptian Pharaoh by fleeing into the desert (Exod. 17:8–16, Num. 14:43–45, Deut. 25:17–19). The case of the Amalekites most likely retains an earlier or dialectical concept of holy war than that typified by Deuteronomy (Jones 1989, 307).

in the hearts of men” was only collected and assembled by Muhammad’s closest companions after his death. The product of this enterprise is considered by Muslims to be the perfectly accurate account of divine revelation, and Western scholars have largely accepted the chronology of this traditional view despite their skepticism regarding its divine origin (A. T. Welch 1986, 404–5). The organizational principle of the qur’ānic text, however, has defied traditional Muslim or modern Western understanding. That is, its organizing principle can be described as neither chronological, topical, literary, nor legal. Adjacent verses seem to have been revealed at widely separated intervals, many appear to repeat one another or to contradict one another, and the context or intent of much of the finished product remains obscure. This textual complexity can be readily observed by examining the qur’ānic pronouncements on war.

The divinely sanctioned obligation to wage war in Islamic tradition is known as *jihād* (striving) or *qitāl* (fighting) “in the path of God” (*fi sabīl Allah*), with the latter phrase the defining element of the idiom.¹⁰ Despite the Western stereotyped association of holy war with the term *jihād* and despite the frequent occurrence of that term in the Qur’ān, the qur’ānic concept of holy war has been far less popular as a topic of study among Western scholars. Those (including biblical scholars such as Wellhausen and Schwally) who have examined the references to fighting in the Qur’ān have tended to employ a type of biblically oriented “form critical” methodology in an effort to untangle their complicated textual history (see especially Schwally 1916). The references to war in the Qur’ān occur in dozens of chapters among widely differing contexts, and they employ a broad vocabulary including words with rich and sometimes ambiguous meanings.

It has been noted by early Muslim exegetes as well as modern Western scholars that the qur’ānic war-verses offer such a wide range of ideas that they tend to contradict one another. One verse demands total restraint while another prescribes total war. No Western scholar has, to my knowledge, collected all of the many war references and examined them thoroughly. Nevertheless, the general consensus regarding the qur’ānic pronouncements on war—a consensus which was

¹⁰ *Jihād* is an Arabic verbal noun which, in its most basic sense, means “striving” and is associated in the Qur’ān with striving on behalf of religion. Although the term does not carry the meaning of war or aggression, fighting on behalf of religion became associated with religious striving, and the term often means striving against other humans through war on behalf of the Muslim community. There are, however, peaceful means of striving for religion: *jihād al-lisān* (“striving with the tongue”), *jihād al-da’wa* (“striving by propagating the faith”), *jihād al-tarbīya* (“striving through education”). For more on *jihād* and its semantic meaning, see Khaduri 1955, 55–82; Tyan 1983.

first established by Muslim scholars as early as the eighth century and has been accepted virtually without criticism by Western scholars—holds that the qur'ānic view of war can be traced through a number of stages. In the earliest period, when Muhammad and his followers were weak and living in the hostile town of Mecca, revelation provided no authority for fighting in support or defense of religious belief or of the believers who espoused it.¹¹ Later, after the emigration (*hijra*) of Muhammad and his community to a more supportive community in Medina, revelations sanctioned fighting as a means of defense against the aggression of their Meccan adversaries.¹² With the subsequent institution of the Muslims' raids against the Meccans and their caravans, the initiative in attack was enjoined as long as it did not contradict the commonly accepted "rules of engagement" established by the Arabs during the pre-Islamic period.¹³ Finally, in parallel with the growing power of the Muslims, Scripture enjoined attack against Muslim opponents at all times and in all places.¹⁴

This schema, which looks like a classic Western critical historical analysis, is found in traditional Islamic exegesis of the Qur'ān dating from the earliest available commentaries to the present, although

¹¹ In the earliest period, Muhammad was warned to avoid conflict by Qur'ān 15:94–95: "Profess openly what you have been commanded, and turn away from the polytheists. For We are sufficient for you against the scoffers." He was subsequently ordered to argue and discuss with the unbelievers (but not to fight) with Qur'ān 16:125: "Summon to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good admonition and argue against them with what is better, for your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path and who has been guided" (see Muqātil 1979, 2:437; Ṭabarī 1984, 14:69f., 194f.).

¹² This stage is represented by Qur'ān 22:39–40a, "Permission is given to those who have been fought against in that they have been wronged; those who have been wrongly expelled from their homes only because they say, 'Our Lord is Allah,' for God is most powerful for their aid," and Qur'ān 2:190, "Fight in the way of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits, for God does not love transgressors" (see Wāḥidī n.d., 29, 177; Naḥḥās 1991, 1:233, 1:301, 1:516f., 2:525; Muqātil 1979, 1:167, 3:129f.).

¹³ These rules would include the prohibition of fighting during the "sacred months" and the prohibition of fighting within the confines of the Meccan sanctuary. The exegetes cite a spectrum of views ranging from the opinion that the following qur'ānic verses uphold these rules to the view that they abrogate the old customs. Qur'ān 2:217: "They ask you concerning fighting in the Prohibited Month (*al-shahr al-ḥarām*). Say: 'Fighting during it is a grave (offense); but preventing access to the path of God, disbelief in God, and expelling His people from the Sacred Mosque is worse in the sight of God.'" Qur'ān 2:191: "Slay them wherever you catch them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out, for idolatry (or temptation [*fitna*]) is worse than killing. But do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there. But if they fight you, then kill them. Such is the recompense for the unbelievers" (see Wāḥidī 35–38; Naḥḥās 1991, 1:223, 520, 535–38; Muqātil 1979, 1:184–87).

¹⁴ Qur'ān 2:16, 9:5, 9:29 (full texts are provided below). See Tyan 1983; Peters 1979, 13–14; Watt 1976.

with some variation and in less systematic form than presented here. It is, however, like Western critical interpretation, a reading of the scriptural data according to certain preconceived ideas and points of view (different, of course, from Western points of view). For example, because the Qur'ān was assumed to have been communicated to Muhammad partly in response to the real exigencies of his prophetic career, God was assumed to have dictated specific responses on the part of Muhammad to the particular events confronting him. Certain behaviors required of Muhammad and his followers in the early period of his mission would therefore be unnecessary or even inappropriate in later years. That is, the fluid behavioral requirements of real life were understood to have necessitated changes in Muhammad's and his community's conduct among themselves and toward outsiders. The Qur'ān served not only as a timeless revelation, therefore, but also as divine guidance for Muhammad and his community with regard to specific historical occasions. Because revelation remained intimately in touch with the changing circumstances of Muhammad's mission, its legislation had to change along with those circumstances.

This view explained the problem of apparent contradiction in general terms, but it needed to be refined in order to deal with the intellectual, philosophical, and political problem of which verses were overruled and which verses remained in force. Because of the divine nature of revelation and because scholars working on the problem did not agree about which verses overruled which, even those verses that were considered by the large majority to have been abrogated were never eliminated from the canon of scripture. Reading specific verses in relation to temporary historical situations for which they were assumed to have been revealed placed a value on their message only in relation to those events, thereby limiting their authority or relevance to the confines of specific historical occasions. The verses that most authorities considered to have been abrogated remained in the sacred canon but were regarded as unauthoritative as a general rule. The abrogating verses, on the other hand, were regarded by exegetes and, later, by jurists as having universal authority for the Muslim community.

Specific types of Qur'ānic commentary evolved from as early as the eighth century to provide the necessary tools for organizing the rules and cases of abrogation. The works which sought to determine the historical nexus of individual revelations came to be categorized within a genre known as *asbāb al-nuzūl*—"the occasions of revelation" (Rippin 1985, 1–15). A second genre evolved to treat the internal contradictions of the Qur'ān by establishing which verses were abrogated

and which verses were abrogating.¹⁵ This group of commentaries is known as *al-nāsikh wal-mansūkh*—"the abrogating and the abrogated" (Powers 1988; Burton 1990). The most basic rule of abrogation held that chronologically later texts abrogated earlier texts which were deemed contradictory. The result was that the accepted formulation was the one determined by most religious scholars to be the latest. Despite the lack of complete consensus, the major schools of Sunni legal tradition reached a basic agreement by the ninth century regarding the authoritative qur'ānic message on war.¹⁶

As noted previously, the qur'ānic verses on fighting are located in disparate chapters throughout the Qur'ān. The largest fields of material, however, can be found in Suras 2 (verses 190–217), 8 (verses 15–19, 38–45, 59–66), and 9 (verses 1–33, 119–23).¹⁷ The verses generally cited by traditional Islamic scholars as the final and most definitive qur'ānic expression of fighting are 2:216 and the two verses commonly known as the *ayāt al-sayf* or "the sword verses": 9:5 and 9:29 (Ṭabarī 1984, 2:189ff.; Naḥḥās 1991, 1:530–34; Nasafī n.d., 1:137–38; Ibn Kathīr 1985, 3:365f.; Peters 1979, 175 n. 13), although others such as 9:73, 49:9, and the first five verses of Sura 9 (called *al-barā'a*) are also cited in the literature.

Qur'ān 2:216 reads: "Fighting is prescribed upon you, (though) you dislike it. But it is possible that you dislike a thing which is good for you, and that you love a thing which is bad for you. God knows, and you know not." This has traditionally provided support for the absolute command to engage in fighting for the sake of God, whether or not the command was easily carried out by the Islamic polity (Ṭabarī 1984, 2:346; Ibn Kathīr 1985, 1:446–47; Peters 1977, 9).

Qur'ān 9:5 became the most oft-quoted war verse and was said to have abrogated as many as 124 qur'ānic verses (Ibn al-Jawzī n.d., 173): "When the forbidden months are past, fight and slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie

¹⁵ The Qur'ān itself supports the notion that certain revelations supersede others: "We shall cause you to recite, and you will not forget, except as God wills . . ." (87:6–7); "None of our verses do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, unless We substitute something better or similar to it . . ." (2:106); "When We substitute one verse for another—and God knows best what He sends down—they say, 'You [Muhammad] are simply a forger!' but most of them do not know" (16:101). See also Qur'ān 18:24, 13:39, 17:41, 17:86.

¹⁶ They differ in the details, but even the various Shi'ite approaches find general agreement in most areas (Peters 1979, 9–37).

¹⁷ Despite the fact that these verses are found mostly grouped together in the sections enumerated, they do not necessarily belong together. For an overview of the problem of verse proximity and relation in the Qur'ān, see Bell and Watt 1970, 86–110.

in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent and establish regular prayers and pay the alms tax (*zakāt*), then open the way for them, for God is oft-forgiving, most merciful." This verse was understood as eliminating most of the previous limitations to fighting. At the same time, it was interpreted as supporting the notion that idolaters may not be slain wantonly but must always be given the opportunity to convert to Islam and survive as Muslims. The command to give idolaters the choice of conversion or the sword was understood from this verse to be limited neither by time nor by geography (cf. Nahhās 1991, 1:222).

Qur'ān 9:29 reads: "Fight those who do not believe in God or the last day, nor hold what has been forbidden by God and his messenger to be forbidden, nor acknowledge the religion of truth from among the peoples of the book, until they pay the *jizya* (a kind of tax) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued." This verse provided support for the policy allowing scriptuaries, which originally meant Jews and Christians but was extended early on to include other religious groups as well, to live with basic religious and economic rights within the Islamic polity so long as they paid a poll tax and publicly recognized the hegemony and superiority of Islam.

It must be made clear at this point that while the increasingly militant positions sanctioned through divine revelation corresponded with the growing strength of the early Muslim community and its ability to wage war, an important attendant development was the increasingly aggressive effort of the Meccan enemy to weaken or destroy the Muslims. The years during which the Muslim community was centered in Medina under the leadership of Muhammad exhibited an escalating cycle of aggression. As the Muslims gained in strength and expanded their raids against Meccan caravans, the Meccan reaction gained in intensity, thereby heightening military preparations and, in turn, encouraging greater militancy among the Muslims (Watt 1956, 1–39). The revelations emphasizing defense or counterattack are generally dated in the early part of this Medinan period, or about 622–625 C.E. (*Qur'ān* 2:190–94, 2:217, 8:39, 9:13, 22:39), but the Muslims were subsequently authorized to take increasingly militant positions.

It must be remembered that the scenario sketched here is an interpretive ordering of disparate *qur'ānic* verses by exegetes living at least two or three generations after the death of Muhammad. Nevertheless, materials available to us suggest that it was accepted immediately.

When the Muslim community was small and weak in Mecca, the idolatrous religious practices of the surrounding non-Muslim Arabs were clearly the norm throughout the region. Although obviously considered wrong by the Muslims, these practices did not threaten the

self-concept of the young Muslim community. The early Muslim community living in Mecca was forbidden to fight its opponents, even in defense. This is understood by the tradition as a protective measure, given the overwhelming superiority of the opposition. At this early stage, in fact, the solidarity of a small *avant-garde*, an oppressed yet elite minority surviving against the mass of misguided idolaters of Mecca, may have added strength and cohesion. However, as the Muslim community grew in size and strength in relation to its major source of opposition, and especially later on in Medina as it established a more coherent and organized religious system upon which it increasingly relied for its cohesion, it eventually viewed the refusal to go along with its religious values and expectations as existentially more threatening.¹⁸ As it grew in strength, therefore, the Muslim community ironically came to regard the continued existence of polytheism and non-Muslim expressions of monotheism as a growing threat—at this stage, not so much a threat to its physical survival as a threat to its prestige and self-concept as the religion of truth.¹⁹ The motivation for violence against non-believers therefore changed from defense to offensive maneuvers and, eventually, to the destruction of polytheism. What began as raids against the Meccan caravans became battles for religio-political prestige and, ultimately, religious and political hegemony. It is, of course, true that the strengthened and aggressive Muslim community constituted a threat to the Meccans and, indeed, invited a military response which, in turn, physically threatened the Muslims. However, even after the Muslims triumphantly entered Mecca, thereby neutralizing their major opposition, no additional revelations moderated the harshly militant passages revealed in the period leading up to that time. On the contrary, the Qur'ān seems to insist on continued Muslim militancy in 47:35: "Do

¹⁸ This change begins to be noticeable as early as in the qur'ānic material reflecting the so-called "third Meccan period," shortly before Muhammad's "emigration" (*hijra*) to Medina in 622. For a brief overview of the issues, see Bell and Watt 1970, 108–20, and on the connection between the growth of opposition to Muhammad and the revelation of passages criticizing or condemning idol-worship, see Bell and Watt 1970, 116–18.

¹⁹ The suras representing the earliest period of revelation did not condemn idolatry (*shirk*) *per se*; they simply lacked any mention of polytheism. Unbelief and idolatry, concern about which ultimately takes up a great part of qur'ānic revelation, became topical issues only later on during Muhammad's mission in Mecca and in parallel with the increase in hostility between unbelievers and Muslims (See Bjorkman 1987). It was later still, during the Medinan period, that the Muslim community became clearly distinguished from other expressions of monotheism—particularly Judaism—through ritual and ideological separation as it became more consolidated as a distinct religio-political entity (Hodgson 1974, 1:172–86; Watt 1980, 98–101; Rodinson 1974, 170 ff.).

not weaken and cry out for peace when you are the uppermost and God is with you. He will not cheat you out of your actions.”

The three late qur’ānic verses examined above also exhibit a change in the quality, nature, and limits of war. At the stage when fighting was justified as a purely defensive act, war was restricted and included no ideological component beyond the survival of the polity and the religious ideology it espoused. God sanctioned defensive fighting as a means of protection. As the destruction of idolatry replaced defense as the revealed justification, however, fighting for the faith took on an ideological and sanctified sense that eventuated in raising the status of war to a holy act (Qur’ān 3:157–158; 4:74–76; 9:20–22, 73; 47:4c–8). One of the operative principles, repeated in what are considered the later verses, was that *fitna*, which was generally interpreted by the Muslim exegetes to mean “idolatry” in these texts, was worse than killing (*al-fitna akbar min al-qatl*).²⁰ Although *fitna* carries the basic meaning of “testing” or “temptation,” such qur’ānic contexts as 8:38–39 demonstrate the emphasis that the final layer of qur’ānic proclamations placed on justifying unrestricted violence against idol worship and its practitioners: “Say to the idolaters: ‘if they cease, their past will be forgiven them; but if they return [to their prior behavior], then the example of the ancients [should be a warning to them].’ So fight them until there is no more idolatry (*fitna*), and religion is entirely God’s.”

3. From Defense of the Polity to Destruction of Idolatry

The emphasis on the two issues of defense and the elimination of idolatry in the qur’ānic concept of holy war closely parallels the biblical treatment of war in Deuteronomy. In both systems, the divine command to wage war was depicted as evolving first as a means of rallying physical defense of the polity against (idolatrous) clans and tribes which threatened its very survival. Even after physical survival was no longer at stake, however, idolatrous practices and peoples continued to be perceived as a threat—now to the unity of the polity. Idolatry as a negation of the *raison d’être* of monotheism had to be eradicated. Idolatry itself became a proper justification for killing (cf. Deut. 7:1–4, 17:2–7, and Qur’ān 2:191, 2:193, 2:217, 8:39).

As in the Bible, idolatry was viewed in the Qur’ān as far more menacing than simply the philosophical negation of monotheism. The very existence of idolatry among the local Arab population came to be

²⁰ Qur’ān 2:191: *al-fitna ashaddu min al-qatl*; 2:193: *Waqātilū hattā lā takūn fitna*; 2:217: *al-fitna akbaru min al-qatl*; 8:39: *Waqātilūhum hattā lā takūn fitna*.

perceived in cosmic terms as threatening to the very existence of the Muslim community (cf. Deut. 7:1–4, 12:29–13:19, 17:1–7). According to the historiographic perspective of the Qur’ān, God sent prophets and/or scriptures to all ancient peoples. Those nations that did not respond positively to God’s demands were destroyed.²¹ In like fashion, the existence and continued practice of idolatry among the Arabs in the vicinity of Mecca and Medina threatened the physical destruction of all Arab peoples, including Muslims, through an act of God.

In contrast to the deuteronomic legislation, however, the Qur’ānic injunction to kill idolaters was not confined to a specific geographic area. Rather, it was to be applied universally.²² Destruction of idolatry *per se* therefore became a primary justification for war. In contrast to the biblically sanctified purpose of conquering a specific and limited geographic area and eliminating idolatry from it in order to establish a new type of theocentric polity, the expressed purpose of the Qur’ānic wars was universal Muslim hegemony and the total elimination of idolatry.²³

The deuteronomic obligation to destroy idolatry only within the confines of the consecrated land of Israel (20:10–18) is consistent with the Israelite view of itself as a small and religiously beleaguered people set apart from those of the surrounding areas—a people required to live out God’s religio-legal demands separately and within its own territory. The unlimited scope of the final Qur’ānic injunction on war, on the other hand, is due partially to the fact that the Arab tribes did not see themselves historically as a unified nation, nor did the Muslims share a concept of a limited and sacred geographic area in which the people receiving the revelation were required to live.²⁴

²¹ A brief outline is given in Surah 26 of the destruction of the peoples of Moses, Abraham (future destruction), Noah, Hūd, Šāliḥ, Lot, and Shu’ayb for not obeying God. The theme in narrative form recurs repeatedly the Qur’ān. General statements about what happened to the “peoples which have passed away” (*al-umam al-khāliya*) can be found also in Qur’ān 22:42–45, 6:42–49, 7:34–36, 13:32, 29:39–40, 30:9–10, 40:21–22, 40:82–85.

²² The use of biblical sources to justify war without geographic limitations was also taken up by Christianity, which came to understand the holy war idea in universal terms parallel to the Islamic concept, but this important development extends beyond the scope of this study.

²³ This is not meant to suggest that Islam no longer contains a purely defensive component in its conception of holy war. Holy war as a defense of Islam has remained a guiding principle and is often invoked today among militant Muslims in the context of the modern Middle East.

²⁴ The Qur’an does use the term “holy land” (*al-arḍ al-muqaddasa*), but only in reference to Moses speaking to the Israelites of their being led to it by God (Qur’ān 5:21). The term *al-wādi al-muqaddas*, referring to some sanctified geographical location, is

What is most important in explaining the contrast, however, is the tremendous spread of Judaism and Christianity throughout the Middle East by the end of the sixth century. By the time of Muhammad, the concept of monotheism was far more universal and was known to the majority of Middle Eastern peoples. It was no longer an exceptional or strange outlook. It was a "natural," even expected position, and all truly civilized peoples were assumed by the early Muslims to be monotheists.²⁵

Moreover, within a very short period after its inception, Islam became a religious civilization enjoying an unprecedented history of military, political, and intellectual success. The extension of divinely sanctified fighting outside of the Arabian Peninsula, based on the latest *qur'ānic* expressions on the topic, became quite natural given what was considered, by some Jews and Christians as well as Muslims, to have been a divinely decreed conquest of most of the known world (Yohay 1915, 2:550–51; Lewis 1974a; Perlmann 1974, 134 n. 17a; Waugh 1986, 44; Suermann 1994).

Differences between the two formulations can also be explained by the substantially different histories of the two peoples. The final deuteronomic formulation evolved during a period of Israel's decline and served to rally a small community in defense against the powerful religio-cultural influence of the peoples among which it lived. It was necessarily concerned with the preservation of a unique religio-cultural system in order to preserve its unity and, by extension (as the text itself conveys), its corporate existence (7:1–4). In contrast, the *qur'ānic* formulation established by early exegesis evolved into its form during a period of growth and expansion when the community was being rallied for a series of exploits that brought most of the known world under its control. Its vision was therefore broader and its horizons further extended.

The respective historical situations would also explain the radical difference between the two views regarding conversion. As noted previously, the view expressed in Deuteronomy not only forbids associating with idolaters, it also calls for their extermination within the borders of the sanctified land. Whether or not the extermination of

associated with Moses' experience of the burning bush (*Qur'ān* 20:12, 79:16). Later, however, under the caliphate of 'Umar, all non-Muslim scripturaries were to be expelled from Arabia in an act which may draw a parallel with the deuteronomic view (Lewis 1974b, 182; Hitti 1985, 169; Brockelmann 1980, 61).

²⁵ This association between high civilization and monotheism may have been applied to the Zoroastrian government of Persia even before the official extension of "protected" (*dhimmi*) status to that religious community. On the status of the scripturaries under Islam, see Cahen 1983.

idolaters ever actually took place, there is no evidence that the option of religious conversion existed before the Hellenistic period (Rosenbloom 1978, 3–31). There was certainly assimilation of individuals and even tribes or larger social groups into the Israelite system, but this was a process of social and cultural integration which took place gradually and over an extended period of time. Becoming an Israelite was a result of social proximity and its resultant cultural assimilation—not conversion of faith. Although circumcision was a necessary requirement in order for the assimilation to have been considered complete, as far as can be discerned from the biblical text, no ritual act existed which could formally convert the status of a non-Israelite to membership in the religio-political entity that was Israel.²⁶ Conversion of idolatrous Canaanites to the Israelite system therefore could not have been an option.

In the days of early Islam, however, conversion, as we know it, was very much a reality and known to both Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs. Moreover, there was no distinct ethnic separation between Muhammad, his followers, and the idolatrous native inhabitants of Mecca and Medina. The only real distinction between them was the profession of faith and the responsibilities that that entailed. Conversion of non-Muslims, therefore, was not only an option during the consolidation and growth of the early Muslim community; it was the only means of gaining numerical strength in the face of Arab opposition in the early period. After the initial conquest and the establishment of Muslim control over foreign populations many times larger than their own, conversion, although not always encouraged, eventually served as a means of preserving the hegemony and dominance of Islam even as the strength of the caliphate declined (Bulliet 1979).

Let me conclude, then, with a summary: We have noted how both the deuteronomic and early Muslim exegetical ordering of scripture provide expressions of aggressive holy war which evolved out of divinely sanctioned fighting in defense of the polity. Holy war evolved differently between the two traditions due to the different social and historical situations each encountered, and these different contexts were reflected in the different attitudes toward conversion and the geographical limitations to acts of holy war. Both traditions, however, were absolutely uncompromising about monotheism, and neither

²⁶ Cf. Deuteronomy 21:10–13, which describes a required procedure that was applied to certain female prisoners of war who were attractive to Israelite soldiers. This appears to be more a means of protecting the prisoner (and, in the biblical worldview, the soldier from the negative results of overly hasty physical attraction to a foreigner) than a formal means of altering a foreigner's status to that of Israel.

could accept any encroachment on the singular idea of one God. In both systems, the threat of idolatry was fearful enough in and of itself to sanction war. To the weakened and defensive perspective of Deuteronomy, this justification was restricted to a limited and defined area and may never have resulted in the implementation of policy.²⁷ According to the positive and forward-looking perspective understood from the last qur'ānic layer, however—a perspective which acknowledged the existence of monotheistic systems elsewhere in the world, however flawed they might be (Qur'ān 2:63–64, 2:75–85, 2:111–13, 4:44, 4:171, 5:72)—actual war against unbelievers, whether idolaters or peoples of the book, had no theoretical limit and was most certainly implemented. The self-assured and positive perspective of these qur'ānic pronouncements contributed to a remarkable feeling of “manifest destiny” that naturally grew out of the Muslims’ successes on and off the battlefield as they expanded far beyond the limits of Arabia.

²⁷ That is, policy contemporaneous with Deuteronomy, although it probably influenced the policy of later Jewish groups such as the Hasmoneans and the Zealots, and later on, Christians as well.

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