

Fall 2000

Book Review: Perspectives on War in the Bible

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Recommended Citation

Tarwater, John, "Book Review: Perspectives on War in the Bible" (2000). *Business Administration Faculty Publications*. 142.
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Perspectives on War in the Bible, by John A. Wood. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998. Pp. 184.

In this text, John A. Wood, professor of religion at Baylor University, struggles with different “perspectives on war in the Bible.” He notes in the introduction that a reader of Scripture will discover Israel responded to conflict in

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three different manners: pacifism, holy war, and just war. He writes this book “to illustrate one reason why these views have persisted” is because “each of them is firmly rooted in the biblical texts” (p. 2).

Wood divides his text into eight chapters with an appendix on modern methods of warfare. In each chapter, Wood seeks to “bring together the work of Biblical scholars in a new way” (p. 7). Areas which Wood investigates include “The Concept of Holy War in Ancient Israel,” “The Holy War: Ancient Israel Active,” “The Holy War: Ancient Israel Passive,” “War as Vengeful and Total,” “Pacifism,” and “Just War Motifs.” Within each area, Wood clearly demonstrates a familiarity with various works in biblical and theological fields.

Several aspects of Wood’s work are commendable. For example, he aptly recognizes various strands with Scripture regarding war. Even a cursory reading of the Bible reveals references that can be appealed to by an individual regarding holy war, pacifism, and just war. In light of this recognition, Wood seeks to discover which idea the church should follow today. He correctly dismisses two erroneous paradigms. First, he rejects the notion that identifies the Old Testament with holy war and the New Testament with pacifism and views just-war doctrine as developing after the biblical period. Second, he rejects the notion that the Old Testament begins with a “primitive, warlike ideology that gradually develops into a more pacifistic view by the time of the eighth-century prophets.” Rather, he demonstrates, correctly I might add, that “throughout the entire biblical period there were several variations of a holy war ideology that existed alongside pacifistic and just war teachings.

A second strength of this text is Wood’s attempt to deal exegetically with the vast amount of biblical material on the subject. That is, throughout the book Wood either engages in exegesis or cites the works of others who have dealt with the passage at hand. Although evangelicals may disagree with much of his exegesis, it is to his credit, nonetheless, that he sought to develop much of his argument from Scripture.

However, the manner with which Wood treats Scripture is, at least for this reviewer, the first area of concern. Wood locates the locus of revelation in the event behind the text rather than within the text. He notes that “a single focus on the text is not enough.” Thus, he works diligently throughout the book to locate each passage within history. Then, based upon this reconstruction, he can make moral claims. Although numerous evangelicals practice similar exegetical practices, its weakness is made apparent in the field of ethics. Because the scholarly field fails to reconstruct

passages unanimously, each reconstructed event spawns a different moral claim. What is clear from Scripture is that inspiration is in the text (2 Tim. 3:16).

Not only does Wood locate revelation in the event, rather than the text, he also treats Scripture's own testimony with suspicion. Citing David Tracy, he advocates using a "hermeneutics of suspicion." For example, even though the Bible may say that Israel engaged in a holy war because God commanded it, Wood says this is doubtful. He writes, "We have been suspicious of those places in the texts where the authors understand Yahweh as commanding the annihilation of entire groups of people" (p. 171). Instead, he insists, "Most Israelites did what they did because their families, clans, tribes, or nation expected them to do it" (p. 156).

Another area of disappointment in the book was the disproportionate amount of time spent on holy war and not on just war. Despite the fact that the history of Western understanding regarding war has been just-war doctrine, Wood spends the first 103 pages on holy war and only allows for eleven pages on just war. Within just-war doctrine, he fails to address either jus ad bellum or jus in bello. Such disproportion renders the text less than admirable for an introduction on the ethical understanding of war within the Christian tradition.

Despite the areas of concern noted above, Wood's work nevertheless demonstrates tremendous research. As a result, one seeking to do greater research into the area of war would benefit greatly from his footnotes and interaction with other literature. However, the format of the book and the manner with which Wood treats Scripture leave little merit for the pastor who is seeking assistance regarding the issues surrounding war.

John Tarwater