

EDITED BY SHAWN GRAVES
AND MARLENA GRAVES

THE
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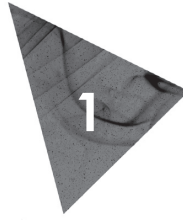
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THE OLD TESTAMENT AS A PROBLEM FOR PACIFISTS (AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT)

Eric A. Seibert

If the waging of war and the military profession were in themselves wrong and displeasing to God, we should have to condemn Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and all the rest of the holy fathers, kings, and princes, who served God as soldiers and are highly praised in Scripture because of this service.

MARTIN LUTHER

WHILE THE SEEMINGLY ubiquitous accounts of violence, killing, and warfare in the Old Testament trouble many modern readers, they present unique—and serious—challenges for Christian pacifists.¹ What makes these accounts especially problematic for pacifists is the presence

¹Portions of this chapter are adapted from Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), and *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012). Reproduced by permission.

of Old Testament passages that sanction, and sometimes even celebrate, acts of war. God is often portrayed as a warrior, and divinely sanctioned warfare is common throughout the Hebrew Bible.²

For some Christians, God's involvement in warfare and killing in the pages of the Old Testament is incontrovertible evidence that the people of God can at times participate in war with God's blessing. Professor Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer reflects on an experience from his student days that illustrates this point. He writes,

As a college student involved in protesting the U.S. wars in Indochina, I wondered why my church, including most parishioners, gave uncritical support to the U.S. war effort. Friends and I who were former leaders of our youth group were shunned when we suggested that saturation bombing, defoliation, napalm, cluster bombs, maimed civilians, destroyed villages, and elevated body counts were hard to reconcile with Jesus, who blessed peacemakers and taught love of enemies. One angry parishioner told me that if I objected to war, I shouldn't be a Christian. To bolster his case, he challenged me to read the Bible. He said . . . it was filled with stories in which a violent God approved of war.³

Truth be told, the Bible—specifically the Old Testament—does contain many stories that portray God approving of war. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God ostensibly initiates, sanctions, and sometimes even participates in numerous acts of violence and war. God drowns Egyptians (Ex 14:26-30), hurls hailstones on Amorites (Josh 10:11), and commands Israelites to massacre Midianites (Num 31:1-3), kill Canaanites (Deut 7:1-2; 20:16-18), and annihilate Amalekites (1 Sam 15:1-3). Certain Old Testament passages also suggest God uses the military might of other nations, such as Assyria and Babylon, to oppress, conquer,

²“Old Testament” and “Hebrew Bible” will be used interchangeably throughout this chapter.

³Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Quran* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), xii.

kill, and exile the people of Israel for sins committed (2 Kings 17:1-23; 24:1-4). Time and time again, the Old Testament portrays God as one who is intimately and actively involved in the business of war.

Many Christians believe God's frequent involvement in war in the Old Testament suggests that war in and of itself is not inherently evil. Since God (reportedly) sanctioned war to punish evildoers and save people from oppression, they believe God must not be categorically opposed to warfare and killing. Following this logic, they conclude that God's (apparent) approval of war in the past suggests that God still approves of war today, at least in certain circumstances. For many Christians, this line of reasoning is very persuasive. Herein lies the Christian pacifist's dilemma. How can Christians claim war is wrong when the Bible frequently seems to say it is right?

The primary purpose of this chapter is to help pacifists, especially Christian pacifists, mitigate the problems raised by Old Testament texts that sanction, justify, and celebrate war. This is no easy task, especially where the Old Testament is concerned. For as Terry Brensinger reminds us, "The Old Testament is clearly not a pacifistic document."⁴ Before I offer some suggestions, it first may be helpful to say a few words about how Christian pacifists have traditionally addressed the problem of divinely sanctioned war in the Old Testament.

HOW PACIFISTS MAKE PEACE WITH WAR IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Christian pacifists have responded to Old Testament war texts and to the image of God as warrior in a number of ways.⁵ Some ignore these

⁴Terry L. Brensinger, "War in the Old Testament: A Journey Toward Nonparticipation," in *A Peace Reader*, ed. E. Morris Sider and Luke Keefer Jr. (Nappanee, IN: Evangel, 2002), 23.

⁵For a general survey of various options, see Dale Brown, *Biblical Pacifism*, 2nd ed. (Nappanee, IN: Evangel), 84-87. See also Willard W. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1983), 112-18.

passages, others defend God's behavior, and some argue that God's use of violence to do justice is precisely what enables them to be nonviolent. What follows is a brief discussion and critique of these approaches, none of which I believe satisfactorily deals with the problem of divinely sanctioned warfare in the Old Testament.

Ignore problematic passages. One way some pacifists "deal with" the problem of divinely sanctioned war in the Old Testament is by choosing not to deal with it at all! Troubling texts are often ignored, and problematic passages are routinely bypassed in search of more peaceful passages. Few churches actually use these passages, and when they do, they typically sanitize them or focus only on "positive" lessons to be learned from them (e.g., that God is a deliverer). Even individuals who have grown up in historic peace churches (Quaker, Mennonite, Brethren) are typically given little if any instruction about how to reconcile their beliefs about nonviolence with the positive portrayals of violence and war they find throughout Scripture. Surely this is a missed opportunity.

Some authors who make a case for Christian pacifism sidestep the problem as well. For example, Mennonite scholar John Roth, in his otherwise excellent book on Christian pacifism, says nothing about the problem of divinely sanctioned warfare in the Old Testament.⁶ Although he devotes about a dozen pages to the Old Testament, emphasizing God's creational intention that people experience shalom (wholeness) and detailing various ways God has worked in Israel's past to invite people into that reality, nothing is said about the problems the Old Testament raises for pacifists.⁷

Other pacifists who write about the Old Testament sometimes acknowledge the presence of violent stories of warfare and killing in the Old

⁶John D. Roth, *Choosing Against War: A Christian View; A Love Stronger Than Our Fears* (Inter-course, PA: Good Books, 2002).

⁷Roth, *Choosing Against War*, 65-76.

Testament and may even express some discomfort with these stories—but they do not linger here. They direct the reader’s attention to other parts of the Old Testament that are more promising for pacifists, such as its critique of conventional notions of warfare and its vision of peace.⁸ While there is nothing wrong with focusing on these parts of the Old Testament (in fact, I think more attention should be given to these passages), neglecting the most troublesome texts fails to address the problems raised by divinely sanctioned warfare in the Hebrew Bible. If pacifists hope to counter the claim that God’s involvement in warfare in the Old Testament legitimates Christian participation in war today, they will need to deal directly with the Old Testament texts used to make that claim.

Justify God’s behavior. Obviously, not every Christian pacifist avoids these troubling texts. Some address them head on. In his book *Fight: A Christian Case for Nonviolence*, New Testament scholar Preston Sprinkle dedicates a number of chapters to violence and war in the Old Testament. One chapter is exclusively devoted to discussing what is arguably the most troubling account of divinely sanctioned warfare in the entire Hebrew Bible: Canaanite genocide (though Sprinkle objects to describing it as such).⁹ According to Deuteronomy 7:1-2, Israel was to “utterly destroy” the Canaanites without mercy (see also Deut 20:16-18). What makes the conquest of Canaan described in Joshua 6–11 especially problematic is the way it has been used to justify subsequent acts of violence and war. As John Collins observes, “One of the most troubling aspects of this biblical story is the way it has been used, analogically, over the centuries as a legitimating paradigm of violent conquest.”¹⁰ This is deeply disturbing. What can be done to counter such a harmful way of using the Bible?

⁸See, for example, Brensinger, “War in the Old Testament.”

⁹Preston Sprinkle, *Fight: A Christian Case for Nonviolence* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013), 73-91.

¹⁰John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 62-63.

Sprinkle's approach, common among evangelical scholars, is to justify God's behavior. Sprinkle works hard to minimize the problems raised by this story in an effort to convince readers that things are really not as bad as they seem. He claims the Canaanites had lots of time to repent, that God intended Israelites to kill only soldiers, and that the language used in Joshua 6–11 is hyperbolic, meaning Israel was to take control of the land, not kill every last Canaanite. Sprinkle also cautions against making contemporary applications of this command to kill. He describes the conquest of Canaan as “a one-time, non-repeatable event whereby God judged a particularly wicked people.”¹¹

To many people, attempts to justify God's behavior in this way seem like special pleading and are unpersuasive to those outside the Christian faith. Though space does not allow for an adequate critique of this approach, these arguments do not really address the crux of the problem.¹² Even if things are not as bad as they seem in this particular story—and that is certainly debatable—they are still very bad for Christian pacifists given the presence of so many Old Testament texts containing divinely sanctioned warfare and violence. As long as we concede that God did in fact issue commands to fight and kill in the past, there will always be those who believe God could do so again. This is precisely what prevented Richard Hays from embracing pacifism earlier in life. He writes, “I, as a young Christian during the Vietnam War era, found myself unable to justify claiming conscientious objector status because I could not claim that I would never fight; God might command me, as he had commanded Saul, to slay an enemy.”¹³

¹¹Sprinkle, *Fight*, 91.

¹²For an excellent critique of attempts to justify genocide in the Old Testament, see Thom Stark, *The Human Faces of God: What Scripture Reveals When It Gets God Wrong (and Why Inerrancy Tries to Hide It)* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 100-150.

¹³Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 336.

Embrace God's warfare as the basis for Christian pacifism. Rather than viewing the image of God as warrior as problematic, some Christian pacifists find it beneficial to their position and regard it as the very foundation of Christian pacifism. "That God is a warrior," writes Old Testament scholar Elmer Martens, "means . . . that his people need not be warlike."¹⁴ As Martens sees it, "The fact that Yahweh our God is a powerful warrior . . . who will deal decisively with evil, means that his followers can afford to leave the righting of wrongs in God's hand."¹⁵ Understood this way, divine violence is neither a problem to be solved nor an obstacle to be overcome. On the contrary, since God uses warfare to stop, punish, and ultimately eradicate evil, God's warring "is not a reality about which to be embarrassed" but rather "a reality to be embraced."¹⁶

While I appreciate the efforts of scholars like Martens who call us to reject violence, I am troubled by the linkage between divine violence and Christian pacifism. Martens's attempt to ground pacifism in the (supposed) violence of God is problematic for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that it runs contrary to the teachings of Jesus. Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, not because we are confident in God's ability to judge them but because loving enemies is precisely what God does! God "is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" (Lk 6:35), and God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Mt 5:45). When we love our enemies, we reflect God's character so clearly that we are called God's "children." Contrary to what Martens suggests, divine violence is not an appropriate basis for Christian pacifism. Instead, we are people of peace who love, forgive, and reject violence because that is what God does.

¹⁴Elmer A. Martens, "Toward Shalom: Absorbing the Violence," in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 53.

¹⁵Martens, "Toward Shalom," 55. Martens cites Deut 32:35 and Rom 12:19 as support.

¹⁶Martens, "Toward Shalom," 53.

AN UNSTATED ASSUMPTION (AND SIGNIFICANT WEAKNESS) OF TRADITIONAL PACIFIST APPROACHES

So far, we have considered three ways Christian pacifists often respond to the problem of divinely sanctioned war in the Old Testament. But we have yet to identify an unstated assumption that governs the way many of these individuals deal with this issue. Simply stated, the assumption is as follows: God actually said and did what the Bible claims. Many Christian pacifists assume Old Testament stories of divinely sanctioned war are both historically accurate and theologically reliable. As they see it, God really did initiate, sanction, and participate in war much as the Bible describes it. This assumption has huge implications for how they address the problems that warfare in the Old Testament raises for them. It forces them to find some way to explain why God's approval of war in the past does not justify a Christian's participation in war today.

But what if this assumption is unfounded? What if God, the living God, never actually sanctioned or commanded warfare in ancient Israel? What if the Old Testament's depiction of God as warrior simply reflects common beliefs about divine involvement in war in the ancient world? If so, then the way many pacifists deal with these challenging texts is fundamentally misguided. *It makes no sense to justify God's violent behavior if, in fact, God never behaved violently in the first place.* Nor does it make sense to base one's commitment to peace on God's ability to use violence if this does not reflect how God actually behaves.

So how might we assess the validity of this assumption? A good starting point would be to place this assumption in its historical-cultural context. It is well known that people in the ancient world believed the gods were intimately involved in their experience of war. They routinely conceived of God/the gods as warriors, and they were convinced that God/the gods commissioned war, participated in it, and determined the outcome of it. People interpreted victory in battle as a sign of divine

favor and defeat in battle as the consequence of divine displeasure. These assumptions about God's involvement in war are evident in many texts from the ancient world, making it unmistakably clear this was a theological given for people in antiquity.¹⁷

Given this historical context, it is unsurprising that Israel shared many of these same ideas about divine involvement in war. Similar to nations around them, Israel believed God sanctioned and participated in its wars, fighting for them when they were obedient and against them when they were not. Assumptions such as these dramatically influenced their view of God and, consequently, the way they portrayed God in the texts they produced. Therefore, when Israel claims that God wills, ordains, sanctions, or otherwise blesses war, it is important to recognize that claim for what it is: a culturally conditioned explanation of divine involvement in warfare that reflected widespread assumptions ancient people had about God and war.

But not every assumption from the ancient world is equally valid today. For example, the Israelites assumed the earth was flat, that people went to Sheol after they died, that it was morally right to own slaves, and that there was religious value in sacrificing animals. Yet Christians no longer share these assumptions. What then of Israel's assumption that God is a warrior? Should Christians accept this view of God? I think not.

While Christians differ over the role God plays—if any—in determining the outcome of modern wars, they realize that wars are won or lost due to a whole host of factors: troop size and strength, the number and technological sophistication of weapons used, the skill of the commanding officers, the ability to form powerful alliances, and so forth. In many significant ways, our beliefs about God's involvement in war differ considerably from those of our ancient counterparts. We therefore need

¹⁷See, e.g., Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989).

to be very cautious about what we can derive about the nature of God from these texts. In many respects, it makes no more sense for us to adopt Israel's culturally conditioned view of God's involvement in warfare than it does to adopt their culturally conditioned views of cosmology, the afterlife, and animal sacrifice. Instead, Christian pacifists need to contextualize the Old Testament's warlike portrayals of God and emphasize the limitations these images have for understanding God's true character.

DEALING WITH DIVINELY SANCTIONED WARFARE: A PROPOSAL FOR CHRISTIAN PACIFISTS

At this point we are ready to return to the fundamental question driving this essay, namely, what can be done to keep the Old Testament from being used to support warfare and killing? Following are a number of suggestions offered as a response to the challenges raised by the presence of divinely sanctioned warfare in the Old Testament.

Differentiate between the textual and actual God. To begin, Christian pacifists need to learn to make distinctions between “the textual and the actual God,” to borrow language from Terence Fretheim.¹⁸ According to Fretheim, the textual God is the God located within the pages of the Bible while the actual God is the God who transcends those pages. One is a literary representation, the other a living reality. As Fretheim observes, “The God portrayed in the text does not fully correspond to the God who transcends the text, who is a living, dynamic reality that cannot be captured in words on a page.”¹⁹ Rather than simply accepting whatever the Bible says about God to be true, a more responsible way of using the Bible involves differentiating between the textual and actual God.²⁰

¹⁸Terence E. Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God: In a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 116.

¹⁹Fretheim and Froehlich, *The Bible as Word*, 116.

²⁰For some discussion about the importance of making this distinction, see Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 171-73.

Representations of God in the Hebrew Bible sometimes reveal and sometimes distort God's character.²¹ This is because the images of God preserved in the Old Testament are best understood as human portrayals of God rather than divine self-portraits. Given the human origins of these portrayals, it is unnecessary to assume that every Old Testament image of God reflects what God is really like. While some certainly do, others most certainly do not. Hence the need to differentiate between the textual and actual God. In fact, I would argue that Christian pacifists will be unable to adequately address the problem of divinely sanctioned violence and warfare in the Old Testament without doing so.

Allow Jesus to guide our thinking about God's character. For Christian pacifists, the revelation of God in Jesus should play a key role in determining how to assess the theological reliability of violent images of God in the Old Testament. Jesus is, after all, "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) and "the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb 1:3). As Jesus himself once said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). To know what God's character is really like, we look to Jesus. When we do, we see a God who is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, not one bent on their destruction (Lk 6:35). We see a God who seeks rather than slays sinners. In short, we see a very different picture of God than the one we find in Old Testament passages that depict God behaving violently. Therefore, when we use the Bible to think about God's character, we need to do so carefully. Not every portrayal of God is equally authoritative. We need to let Jesus guide our thinking about God. Portrayals that correspond to the God Jesus reveals may be regarded as trustworthy, while those that do not should be judged as unreliable.²²

²¹This language of revealing and distorting God's character occurs repeatedly in Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001). See, for example, 16, 61, 65, 80, 88, 137.

²²For a fuller treatment of these ideas, see Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 183-207. Although many scholars acknowledge that not all words and deeds attributed to Jesus in the Gospels reflect

As we begin to see God through the lens of Jesus, we realize that violent portrayals of God do not reveal what God is actually like.²³ As C. S. Cowles observes,

If ours is a Christlike God, then we can categorically affirm that God is not a destroyer. . . . God does not engage in punitive, redemptive, or sacred violence. . . . God does not proactively use death as an instrument of judgment.²⁴

Despite what certain Old Testament passages suggest, God does not behave violently. Since Old Testament images of a God at war do not reflect the character of God revealed in Jesus, these images should be understood as culturally conditioned depictions of God that are fundamentally incompatible with God's true nature.

State clearly and categorically that God is not a warrior. Christian pacifists should state clearly, directly, and frequently that God, the living God, is *not* a warrior. Rather than ignoring these troubling texts or trying to justify God's behavior, pacifists need to declare that God does not act this way. Doing this goes a long way toward mitigating the problem of divinely sanctioned warfare in the Old Testament since it directly challenges the rationale of those who try to use the Old Testament to justify Christian participation in war.

what Jesus actually said and did, there are strong and compelling reasons to believe the historical Jesus was completely and consistently nonviolent. Simon Joseph argues this point forcefully in *The Nonviolent Messiah*, and he believes it is supported by such things as "multiple attestation [evidence of Jesus' nonviolence in various layers of the tradition], the instructional content of Q [thought to be a very early collection of Jesus' sayings], Jesus' nonresistance during his arrest, and the indisputably historical tradition of early Christian pacifism" (*The Nonviolent Messiah: Jesus, Q, and the Enochic Tradition* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014], 39). Such evidence confirms the appropriateness of appealing to the nonviolent traditions about Jesus in the New Testament to critique violent depictions of God in the Old Testament.

²³For some examples of this approach, see C. S. Cowles, "The Case for Radical Discontinuity," in *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 13-44; Gregory A. Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017) and *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

²⁴Cowles, "Case for Radical Discontinuity," 30.

I realize that some Christian pacifists will find it difficult to state publicly their rejection of the image of God as warrior. This is especially true for those who are part of churches and faith-based institutions in conservative contexts. These individuals may discover that being honest about their beliefs has some negative, and sometimes personally costly, repercussions. Other Christian pacifists may find it difficult to deny God's involvement in warfare because of their beliefs about the nature of Scripture. They may be unwilling to deny God is a warrior since the biblical text so plainly states God is. In order to arrive at this theological conclusion, they would first need to rethink their views about the inspiration of Scripture.

Christians who believe God actually behaved in the violent, warlike ways described in the Old Testament typically have a view of inspiration that posits a high degree of divine involvement in the formation of the Bible. While this gets nuanced in various ways, they believe God was very involved in determining the content of the Bible. This leads them to conclude that the Bible faithfully narrates God's past actions, giving them confidence that God said and did what the Bible claims.

But here's the rub. As I have argued elsewhere, these assumptions about God's very active role in determining the content of the Bible do not match the evidence at hand.²⁵ It appears that ancient Israelites were free to write about God in ways that made sense in their particular historical and cultural context and reflected their own perspective and worldview *even when* that resulted in portrayals of God that were inaccurate. The importance of this point cannot be overstated. It reminds us that these writers did not always get God right. This, in turn, opens the door for Christian pacifists to challenge violent images of God and to counter the efforts of those who would use God's involvement in war in the Old Testament to justify Christian participation in war today.

²⁵See Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 267-70.

Demonstrate foundations for peacemaking in the Old Testament.

Finally, although the image of God as warrior is prominent in the Hebrew Bible, it is by no means the only image of God found there. Numerous passages speak of God's grace and love, and these are more helpful to Christian pacifists.

Likewise, while it is true that many Old Testament passages sanction warfare and killing, some actually *critique* violence and others illustrate alternate ways of dealing with strife. Christian pacifists do well to pay special attention to Old Testament passages that promote peace and encourage the nonviolent resolution of conflict. The story of Joseph forgiving his brothers (Gen 45:1-15; 50:15-21) and the account of Abigail preventing a massacre (1 Sam 25) are two notable examples. Stories such as these remind us that the Old Testament is more than just a problem for Christian pacifists to overcome. It is a rich collection of texts containing many valuable resources for those intent on making peace.²⁶

Still, as important as it is to highlight stories such as these and non-violent images of God—and I think more should be done in this regard—I would emphasize that doing this alone is not enough to address the serious problems raised by divinely sanctioned warfare in the Old Testament. The only way to fully overcome the problems raised by God's involvement in war in the Old Testament is to confront these problematic passages directly, as noted above.

CONCLUSION

Old Testament passages that sanction war and justify slaughter have created endless problems for pacifists wishing to use the Bible to critique war and promote nonviolent peacemaking. In this chapter, I have argued

²⁶In addition to the chapter by T. C. Ham in this volume, see also David A. Leiter, *Neglected Voices: Peace in the Old Testament* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2007), and John A. Wood, *Perspectives on War in the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 104-20.

that properly contextualizing the Old Testament's portrayal of God as warrior and letting Jesus guide our thinking about God's character enables us to reject the notion that God sanctioned ancient Israel's wars. Doing this removes any basis for trying to use the Old Testament to legitimize war based on God's supposed approval of it.

One of the ongoing challenges for Christian pacifists who take this approach is to value and appreciate these violent Old Testament texts in spite of the difficulties they raise. It is important to find constructive ways to use these texts even while critiquing problematic dimensions of them.²⁷ Doing so will enable us to read the Old Testament in a manner that encourages life and peace rather than death and war. This, I submit, is a worthy goal for all Christians who take the Bible seriously and strive to read it responsibly.

²⁷For some guidance, see Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 209-22.

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