War in the Old Testament

Obviously, the OT and pacifism make uneasy bedfellows – but so do the OT and vegetarianism, feminism, evangelicalism, catholicism or any other -ism (even Judaism). There are strands of the OT that resonate with the -ism, but there is much else that is an embarrassment. Admittedly things are not so different with the NT and pacifism. There God does achieve things through accepting crucifixion, but God combines that acceptance with announcing the intention to spill much blood in the course of judging the world.; and in the OT, God is letting himself be crucified throughout the story.

What is war and what bothers us about it? War involves solving group conflicts, especially regarding sovereignty over peoples and land, by violence rather than (e.g.) by argument before peers in a context of law. It usually involves killing people, and it is this in particular that bothers people in the modern age. We do not like the idea of killing people any more than we like the idea of God sending people to Hell. Accounts of war in the OT did not trouble people before the modern age in a way that they came to do in the context of modernity and the Enlightenment, but they do now bother peoples, especially in nations whose own existence is based on war or that frequently go to war, such as the United States. In the twenty-first century in the West, there are a number of Christian attitudes to war:

1. We are called to peacemaking (the Mennonite view).
2. The question is whether a war is just (the Catholic and Reformed view)
3. We haven’t really thought about it (the Pentecostal view; this is a cheap jibe, but some Pentecostals agree).
4. We recognize that it is a continuing reality.

In connection with the Book of Numbers we noted that war is not one things, in the OT or in our own world. There is liberative war, war designed to free other people, like Abraham’s rescue of Lot (Gen 14) or the British and American intervention in Kosovo. There is punitive war, war designed to effect retribution on people who have done wrong, like the British and American intervention in Iraq or Saul’s attack on Amalek. There is defensive war, war in response to threatening attack, like the American response to Pearl Harbor or Israel’s original war with Amalek (Exod 17). There is aggressive war designed to gain territory, like that of immigrant Americans on native Americans or Israelites on Canaanites (though both these are also seen as retribution on people who have done wrong). There is also war-avoidance like that of European powers in the 1930s or the USA before Pearl Harbor, or Israel when facing Edom’s hostility (Num20:14-21). And there is what you might call spectator war, when God’s people concentrates on watching God look after the violence and does little itself (e.g. Ex 14; Num 13-14; Josh 6; Revelation).

Genesis assumes that the world was not war-like when it was created. This assumption is not the truism it might be on our lips, because Genesis tells its creation story in such a way as to confront the creation stories of the culture around. In Babylon, creation issued from war in heaven. War was written into the fabric of life, not just among human beings but among the gods. The NT does talk about “war in heaven” and thus sees war as more deeply part of the fabric of reality than the OT generally does (though passages such as Ex 17 imply that awareness). But even in the NT, war is not traced back into the Godhead itself.

By implication the violence that emerges in Genesis 4 in the actions and words of Cain and Lamek is one of the ways in which human beings spoiled God’s world. Genesis 4 is part of the portrayal of the gradual fall of the world that runs through Genesis 1—11 as a whole. This process of decline continues with the emergence of the Nephilim, who were renowned warriors who apparently came into being through some wrong-headed boundary-crossing on the part of heavenly beings (Gen 6:1-4). The latter’s problem was sex not violence, but it accelerated the process of decline whereby the earth became filled with violence, and it is this decline that leads to God’s decision to kill all the world’s people (6:5-13). But that action leads nowhere, because violence is the fruit of a fatal flaw in the makeup of humanity (8:21). In a development parallel to that in Genesis 4, there is soon arising a warrior like Nimrod, an impressive warrior even by Yahweh’s standards (10:9).

When Yahweh sets about a plan to restore the flawed world by making promises to Abraham, in general the early stages of this plan exclude war-making. It can work this way because Israel’s ancestors in Genesis are a pastoral people who live outside the power structures of their day. Things will be different in Egypt when they become something more like a nation and have to relate to nations like Egypt itself, and there war-making follows. Indeed it is already a feature in one of the opening stories about Abraham. Matter-of-factly Genesis 14 tells us how a conflict arises among a number of Middle-Eastern kings. Lot gets caught in the crossfire and is taken as a prisoner-of-war. Abraham hears of it and sets off with a posse to rescue him. What else was he supposed to do? He routs the army of the victorious kings, pursues them to the north of Damascus, and recaptures their captives. “God On High has delivered your enemies into your power” is the king of Salem’s later theological reflection. It is where God learns how to make war.

God does not forget this lesson, but Abraham is able to forget it, because his vocation does not require it again. Unlike God, in general Abraham is something of a wimp, not inclined to stand up to anyone. For the sake of a quiet life he will defer to anyone—God, Pharaoh, Lot, Sarah.... I am not sure it makes him a preferable male model, but certainly he stands in contrast with the stereotypical male model of aggressiveness, decisiveness, and violence that runs through 1 Samuel. It is embodied in different ways in Saul, Jonathan, and David, and is by implication enjoyed and affirmed by the Israelite readers of this book. It has also had more prominence in Sunday School. On the other hand, in the Bible itself the Abraham story comes first, and in adult church it has had higher status. Perhaps this fact explains why Christian men also tend to be wimps, though it does not answer the question whether it is wimps who come to faith in Abraham’s God or whether it is coming to that faith that turns us into wimps.

The story that begins in Genesis thus seems to imply the obvious assumption that war is a non-ideal thing but that East of Eden it is a fact. God and people therefore have to shrug their shoulders and gird up their loins and get on with it when necessary. What God then does is make a virtue out of a necessity and use warfare in various ways. It can be a way of exposing lies. Pharaoh claims ultimate significance for his own rule and that of his gods, so Yahweh makes war on him and shows that his claim is false. It can be a way of putting in their place people who oppose Yahweh. It can be a way of removing people who have become so offensive that Yahweh no longer wishes to tolerate their existence. It can be a way of making room for other people whose cause Yahweh wishes to prosper. It can be a way of people defending themselves rather than letting themselves be killed. What the OT story as a whole goes on to imply is that war is inevitable but pointless. It persists but it gets no one anywhere.

Jesus commends peacemaking and urges people to love their enemies. At the same time, the NT recognizes that war will be a continuing reality and it recognizes the way God has been at work through war. Thus Hebrews 11:32-34 commends the faith expressed by people such as Joshua in making war. In Acts 7:45, Stephen (himself about to die with a prayer for the forgiveness of his killers on his lips) rejoices in the way God drove the Canaanites out of the land in order for Joshua to capture it. Many parts of the OT enthuse about David, the Israelite war-maker par excellence. In Romans 13:4 Paul sees the imperial authorities as God’s servants in punishing evil. So the NT does not infer that Jesus’ words about loving enemies or peacemaking cast aspersions on the wars fought by Israel.

Yet the way the OT tells stories about war without feeling uncomfortable about doing so makes modern Western people themselves feel uncomfortable. We wish these stories were not in Scripture. Why would God have wanted these stories about war to be included there? As is the case with the material in Exodus on God and Pharaoh, on the presence of God, and on God’s response to the waywardness of the people of God, these stories are an exercise in narrative theology. The way scripture sometimes helps us to find God’s mind is by providing us with various ways of looking at an issue so that we can imagine working with them or can dream of others.

When we find we don’t like what Scripture says, we are wise to assume it has important things to say to us. It can seem worrying that the Torah can seem to give license to ethnic cleansing, but it is not doing so, and one may doubt whether nations have ever committed genocide simply because they believed the Bible told the to do so (though Britain and the United States have used stories in the OT to justify acts they would have undertaken anyway). We have noted that Israel itself seems to have taken the devoting of the Canaanites as a one-time act; it was never repeated in Israel’s story. Israel did not take it as a pattern for its later relationships with other nations. This consideration points to a further reason why we are wise to be uneasy about these stories. They are a threat to us. We, like the Canaanites, are due for annihilation.

Our unease with war in the OT likely reflects unresolved issues in our own spirits, as people who are much involved in war. “Americans, traditionally, love to fight. All real Americans love the sting of battle” (General Patton). The OT and the NT imply that there are occasions when war is okay, but that we need to think about how and why and when this is so, rather than avoiding doing so. Simply declaring that war is wrong leaves the decisions about war-making to people who do not think in light of the scriptural material.