CHAPTER XII

THE HOLY WAR AS PUNISHMENT AND PROTECTION

The scope of this study, its comprehensiveness, and the comparisons and contrasts that have been made with the ancient Near East, have unavoidably led to some systematization and harmonization of historically and even theologically diverse material. But it has still been possible for much of the time to avoid a propositional style of biblical theology that would not have done justice to the particularity of the texts considered. In analyzing individual passages or sections we have taken account of their historical setting and literary features in order to allow for the experienced event on the one hand and for the focus of reflection on the other. The role of Israelite particularism is conspicuous, not only because the Hebrew Bible says far more about Israel’s election and covenant than about nations and human beings in general, but also because the issue of the universal moral order is most often illustrated in the stories and thinking of individual historical personalities, in the typology of historical situations, and especially in the practices of ritual events.

It is impossible to review all the territory covered in various studies about the issue of holy war. Our principal concern at this stage must be to point out the connotations of the most significant divine epithets and corresponding metaphorical expressions, similes, stereotyped attributives and formulas, and typologies of a cosmic or historical nature. Such features recur throughout the Hebrew Bible, in prose and poetry, in early and late material alike, and so constitute the most reliable key to the theological dimensions involved and the scope of the relationship between myth and history. In dealing with fundamental divine epithets and symbols we enter into the great common cultural tradition of the entire ancient Near East. Most striking are the common characteristics shared by the Canaanite literary tradition and biblical literature: the same epithets, motifs and theological imagery, the same idioms and literary expressions, the same or similar words, forms and usages. The Hebrew Bible bears witness to a natural and spontaneous literary continuity achieved by integration and assimilation. All the more striking is its discontinuity in terms of content and spirit with the religious world of which it was a part. Comparisons of corresponding divine epithets, symbols, and actions in various contexts show most clearly how far-reaching are the implications of contrasting religions for the concepts of reward, punishment, and forgiveness. Everything depends on manifestations of the divine authority, might, and attitude to the world and the human race in general and to Israel in particular.
1. Conflict between God and Other Forces

Historical and religious documents of the ancient Near East reflect extraordinarily realistic views on the structure of the universe and the authorities that govern it. The central model to be used in understanding the nature of the world and the meaning of this tradition is conflict between opposing tendencies or forces. Heraclitus underlined the importance of the conflict motif thus: "One must know that war is common and right is strife and that all things are happening by strife and necessity." The traditional mythology and imagery of divine war must be understood against a background of experience and belief that there is a cosmic conflict between the forces of order and chaos and a moral conflict between just and unjust rational beings. God or gods are warlike in character and act as warriors against opposing forces. This suggests two crucial questions: what is the motivation or reason for conflict? And what correspondence is there between the form and function of the motifs of divine war in particular cases? These issues are at the heart of any consideration of the religions concerned, and their contrasting ways of justifying divine war are exactly what makes manifest the radical difference between non-biblical and biblical documents.

1.1 Wars of the Gods in the Cosmic Realm and the Role of a Divine Assembly

The cosmic elements that occasionally characterize the activities of the God of Israel are often strongly reminiscent of the stories of cosmogonic battles found in ancient neighbouring cultures. Cosmogonic myths recount a purely mythical, primordial struggle between cosmic order and chaos, both personified in various divine beings. The issue at stake is: who will emerge as supreme authority, control the forces of chaos and other gods, and establish dominance in heaven and earth? In this context we find the best ground for evaluating reasons for the conflict, and therefore present (in summary form) two examples of material from the non-biblical field that probably exerted a direct or indirect influence on biblical literature: the Akkadian "Epic of Creation" (Enûma Elish) and the Ugaritic cycle of Baal myths.¹²


² Enûma Elish is by some scholars assigned to the 1st Babylonian dynasty (1894–1712 B.C.) and by others to the Kassite period (c. 1750–1171). Ugaritic documents, unearthed from the archives and libraries of the ancient trading city of Ugarit on the North Phoenician coast in eleven campaigns between 1929 and 1939, must have been written down between c. 1400 and 1350 B.C. It is generally recognized, however, that the legends and myths may go back in some form or other to a much remoter antiquity. Mythical and epic texts are of the utmost significance for the history of religion in ancient Canaan and Israel. For translation and bibliography of the epic, see