Book Reviews

Writing and Reading War: Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts. Edited by Brad E. Kelle and Frank Ritchel Ames. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008. Pp. xii + 265; and


War and animus—two interrelated concepts as old as humankind yet with no mean relevance for contemporary human existence. Still, little biblical studies literature has explored this multi-faceted side of war rhetoric, much less the animus fueling it. Both of the aforementioned edited volumes do just that, however, by focusing on the contexts wherein war, animus, and their diverse permutations manifest, especially that of the Bible and its contributions to these global problems. Each volume contains independent essays drawn originally from presentations at professional meetings (the Consultation on Warfare in Ancient Israel at the Annual SBL Meeting [2004] for Writing and Reading War, and the International SBL Meeting [2004] and European Association of Biblical Studies [2004-2006] for Animosity, the Bible, and Us) by notable scholars, in addition to providing a Preface/Foreword, Bibliography, a Contributors section, and Modern Authors and Ancient Sources indices.

Writing and Reading War organizes its twelve discrete essays around three broad headings: rhetoric of war, gender of war, and ethics of war. After a Foreword by Susan Niditch, Victor Matthews introduces the complex nature of warfare—its perspectives, theoretical aspects, depictions, costs, and effects—that this volume’s essays address. Its essays reflect diverse reading strategies of a comparative, literary (limited to rhetorical, redactional, and structuralist), ideological (three feminist and one reception history), and historical nature whereby to elucidate theoretical aspects of warfare—its gendered language, ethical implications, and effects—yet all in the ancient world. The contribution to biblical scholarship of such a volume undoubtedly lies in the breadth of topics that its comprehensive treatment on warfare in the ancient world demonstrates, and for doing so without being cumbersome.

Frank Ames’s essay “The Meaning of War” sets the tone for subsequent essays with its lucid evaluation of descriptive, moral, and theory-laden definitions as well as their applicability to studies of ancient Israelite warfare. After exploring the difficulties of providing a satisfactory definition to war, in part because value always accompanies a definition, Ames concludes, “war is a construct of the academic imagination” (29)—an
emphasis featuring, as pointed out in Megan Moore’s essay “Fighting in Writing,” a still often-neglected consideration. Ames continues to suggest that despite the pervasiveness of war in the historical evidence of Israel, it is “potentially everywhere yet often nowhere in histories of ancient Israel” (65).

*Writing and Reading War* will appeal to a diversity of reader interests in ancient warfare. Military historians will especially find Michael Hasel’s and Jeremy Smoak’s treatment of Assyrian warfare strategies (e.g. siege works, destruction of fruit trees, mass deportations) and iconography of extreme interest. Their examination of Assyrian inscriptions and iconography enable a modern glimpse into ancient first millennium warfare practices otherwise unobserved. However, Hasel and Smoak provide different conclusions on the evidence concerning fruit trees, an indication that even hard evidence yields no univocal interpretation. Smoak argues that cutting down fruit trees was part of Assyrian military strategy to destroy a town’s agricultural support relative to besieging a city; Hasel contends that the few instances of such a practice was merely punitive, and that only after a city’s destruction or abandonment but not in relation to its siege.

Essays by Brad Kelle, Alice Keefe, and Claudia Bergmann broach the matter of feminine representation in war rhetoric that will appeal to feminists. Bergmann’s essay “We Have Seen the Enemy” examines the warfare rhetoric of two groups of texts—those that compare warriors to women in general, and those that compare warriors in battle to women in labor—that employ taunting as a strategy to demean an enemy. Unlike the first group of texts, the second relies heavily on stereotypical ideas of differences between the genders (e.g. women as weak and subjugated). Kelle’s “Wartime Rhetoric” complements Bergmann’s work by examining feminine labels used during warfare, especially those in prophetic texts that personify cities as feminine. Such texts exploit the actual warfare practices of humiliating and abusing women with gendered, metaphorical language to shame males of the elite political, social, and economic classes. Keefe’s essay, “Family Metaphors,” examines Hosea’s imagery of the female figure, which, she claims, functions as a symbol of Israelite society. Graphic metaphors such as slashing open pregnant mothers, breached birth and female sterility, and the death of children with their mothers in the “construction” of woman altogether work rhetorically “as a chilling trope of the death of a nation” (127).

Ethicists and theologians alike will find Frances Flannery’s socio-political foregrounding of activist and pacifist Yahwism, and Brian Kvasnica’s interpretations of the command “Do Not Covet” during the Second Temple period vis-à-vis unrestricted plundering critically insightful. Flannery’s essay, “Go Back By the Way You Came,” analyzes two chiastic structures in 1 Kings 18-19, assumed as pre-deuteronomistic though heavily redacted, that simultaneously critiques Elijah’s bloody solution and defends Obadiah’s pacifism. Kvasnica’s “Shifts in Israelite War Ethics” makes the case that culturally heightened piety and sensitivities to ethical questions prompted Hellenistic exegetes to prohibit plundering in their interpretations of this Decalogue commandment, thus amplifying its meaning to apply “to enemies as well as neighbor, to situations of war as well as peace” (196).