ON THE SUBJECT OF WAR IN OLD TESTAMENT
AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

in Honor of Hans Eberhard von Waldow

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INTRODUCTION

In an important article on “The Concept of War in the Old Testament,” H. Eberhard von Waldow writes in his conclusion that “three statements appear to be . . . important for further study” (44):

One: “All Old Testament accounts of war . . . are subordinate to the basic concept of order and the understanding of life” (45).

Two: “The discussion of peace in the Old Testament must take into account what the Old Testament believes about war.” War is “the most effective means to destroy šālôm,” whereas peace “is a matter of faith in the fact that God is in charge who wants peace on earth” (45).

Three: “Today’s binding Christian teaching . . . must be based on the unequivocal and clear biblical message: ‘War is sin,’ ” whereby the choice for us today is not “between good and evil,” but rather one “between evil and the lesser evil” (45).

The following thoughts are belatedly written in honor of my wonderful colleague and trusted friend on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of his birth in December, 1993. When taking up von Waldow’s invitation to further study, I am confident that he will permit me to discuss issues addressed in his entire article rather than only those in his conclusions.

No apology is necessary for addressing the issue of war. Even apart from the nuclear threat, there were at the time of von Waldow’s 1993 birthday some forty wars raging on this planet. And one cannot say that religion, any religion, has the power to contain, let alone prevent, war. In fact, religion is all too often one of the forces reinforcing and legitimizing war. And the Bible of both Testaments remains one of the sources for supporting these forces.
Our discussion of war in biblical theology should not be kept separate from our personal biographies which contribute not only to our outlook on reality but also to what we are looking for when studying the Bible. For years von Waldow was a soldier on the German side of WWII, as I was too, five years younger, as a fifteen year old air defense artillerist (Luftwaffenhelfer) during the war’s last fifteen months on the western front. When speaking about war in the Bible, we, as many, encounter the biblical texts about war as references to the destructive side of reality which resonate with our own experiences in life. Of course, we belonged to the losing side which, in this case, for very good reasons also turned out to have been the wrong side. These experiences, followed by the impact of the holocaust, or shoah, profoundly influenced the direction of our lives, including our commitment to Old Testament studies. These decisions were not based on market research.

Still, that was only WWII in Europe. It was not Hiroshima, Korea, Vietnam, or any of the other barbaric wars during the past decades. And today one reads and sees (without personal experience) how among all involved parties in the former Yugoslavia, women are warriors more fierce in battle than men, and that for those parties this war is the only thing in their lives that matters at all, ethically, ethnically, religiously, beyond which no future is of interest. When one reads these things, one must ask who of us not directly involved in this or similar situations has any access to a mentality for which totally destructive war has become the ultimate value and reason for living or dying. Compared to this kind of experience, our WWII experiences are outdated. Nevertheless, they still remind us that writing about war or studying war in the Bible is different from experiencing it, and that no judgment about the nature of war can afford to reflect a judgmental moralism even where one disagrees, especially with the Bible.

I. REVIEW OF VON WALDOW’S ARTICLE

Von Waldow’s article is especially important because it focuses on the theological problem of war in the Old Testament, rather than on the exegetical description of Old Testament texts about war. At issue