

Texts of terror: Warlike passages

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 23, 2005](#) issue

CREDO: I am a Christian for the reasons stated in the Letter to the Ephesians, especially wherein “Christ is our peace.” I believe that the Bible as a whole (see Second Isaiah) and the New Testament especially culminate in a vision of reconciliation.

CONFESSION: I am more scared than many of you about the menace of fanatic, fundamentalist, low-life hijackers of Islam, having studied them in a six-year, five-volume effort called “The Fundamentalism Project.”

APOLOGIA: I am put off by Christians who reproduce pages of the Qur’an that celebrate militancy and believe they have demonstrated how evil Islam is in contrast to Christianity, which is always on the side of reconciliation. They are unfair and unhelpful.

ILLUSTRATION: On a summer day when I had been reading militant Christian boasts that our Book is better than their Book because ours is about shalom and theirs is about war, I had the thrill of attending a performance of Handel’s *Israel in Egypt*, a beautiful and stirring work based entirely on texts from Exodus and Psalms—our Bible, not theirs.

When baritones Douglas Anderson and Peter Van De Graaff sang a bass duet, I paid special attention. The papers the next day said the moment was charged with testosterone. The song boasted: “The Lord is a man of war: Lord is his name. Pharaoh’s chariots and his host hath he cast into the sea.”

The chorus took over: “Thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy . . . Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods?” Oh, yes, we are not aggressive—as we take the promised land. “All the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away.” And “we” were later commanded to commit genocide, and more. Our Bible contains 1 Samuel 15:2-3: “Thus says the Lord of hosts . . . Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” How’s that for jihad?

In *The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Herald Press, 1980), Millard Lind faces up to such texts in chapters titled “Yahweh as Warrior,” “The Conquest as Yahweh’s War,” and “Warfare Theology in the Deuteronomic Writings.” Peace-church theologian Lind offers some mitigating factors and theological nuances, yet he cannot get away from the fact that warriors of Christendom and Yahwehdom—like those of Islamdom—cared little for the innocent victims in their path, and were *told* not to care.

He points out that most of the pre-Mosaic traditions of Israel featured a “politics of promise.” The language of holy war developed after the Exodus and during the conquest of the land. In those narratives, Lind says, Yahweh is the agent; the victories are not those of humans, who merely act out the war stories.

Usually I do not like sentences that begin “As a,” but here I have to say that as an heir of ancient Israel and the prophets, I sing the Psalms that rejoice in the fruits of victory in the holy wars that gave birth to Israel. But I want to disidentify with those who find in the holy books of other religions warlike passages analogous to those in Exodus and the Psalms and act as if those books never inspired anything but war. The same rules of the game should apply, shouldn’t they, to the judged and the judges?

Until we are just short of the eschaton, or in the eschaton, we can sing only, “The Lord is a man of peace.” Come to think of it, we already do sometimes say and sing that. It is simply muffled when we let pride and macho self-righteousness take over.