



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 War in the Old Testament  
(*Peace and War*, pp. 11-17)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Kingdom Come  
(*Peace and War*, pp. 46-47)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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### Christian Reflection

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# War in the Old Testament

Can God be both a God of peace and a God of war? The ancient Israelites reached no consensus about holy war, just war, and pacifism. Yet Scripture faithfully records their long and difficult debates, for they arose out of a deep faith in God who had brought the people out of the land of Egypt.

### Prayer

**Scripture Reading:** Isaiah 30:27-28; 31:1-5

### Responsive Reading<sup>†</sup>

There shall come forth a shoot from the branch of Jesse,

**and a branch shall grow out of his roots.**

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,

**the spirit of wisdom and understanding.**

The wolf shall live with the lamb,

**the leopard shall lie down with the kid,**

the calf and the lion and the fatling together,

**and a little child shall lead them.**

They shall not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;

**for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea.**

### Reflection

“War was almost a daily part of ancient Israelite life,” John Wood notes, because their land was a corridor between powerful Egypt to the south and the successive Mesopotamian empires to the north-northeast. These violent neighbors coveted the Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judah “as a buffer zone to protect themselves from encroaching armies bent on conquest and pillage.” Not surprisingly, a deep tension between the holy war tradition and pacifism pervades the Old Testament. (Less frequent are examples of the just war view, which says warfare is sometimes justified by nations’ shared moral standards.)

This tension is evident in Isaiah’s prophecies during the eighth century B.C. In one terrifying vision, God is a holy warrior descending on the people’s enemies – in this instance, the brutal Assyrian Empire – like a consuming fire, a raging river, a sieve of righteous judgment, and a divine rider reaching to bridle and lead them away to destruction (30:27-28). Yet this does not mean God’s people should prepare to make war, the prophet urges; rather they should trust entirely in God’s deliverance. Don’t count on horses and chariots, and don’t make a military alliance with the Egyptians, he warns, for God alone “will rise against the house of the evildoers” as a lion or like hovering birds of prey (31:1-5). Juxtaposed to these images of a warrior God is Isaiah’s amazing visualization of a peaceful kingdom (11:1-9). A messianic king from David’s family will rule with righteousness and judge the wicked. Everything will be mended by the king’s powerful testimony, not with a destructive blow (v. 4); and the whole earth will be flooded with the knowledge of God (v. 9).

The diverse biblical texts about war stirred debate in Christian history. A holy-war mentality, just-war tradition, and pacifism



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persisted because each is rooted in Scripture. “The pacifist and just-war positions are more biblically and theologically responsible... [since] they share a presumption against violence,” Wood says. “Pacifists urge that there is *always* a non-violent way to respond to conflict. Just-war theorists...insist that violence, when it is truly justified at all, must be the last resort, carried out in a restrained manner, and used with humility and grief.”

### Study Questions

1. What was ancient Israel’s experience with war, according to Wood? How did its approach to war compare with the neighboring empires’ practices (*Peace and War*, pp. 12-14)?
2. Isaiah critiqued the “mystique of violence” that permeated Israelite society in the eighth century B.C., Wood notes. How does the prophet do this in each text in this study?
3. Edward Hicks’ popular series, *Peaceable Kingdom*, was a “painted sermon” from Isaiah 11:1-9. Who needs to obey this startling vision, according to Hicks (*Peace and War*, p. 47)?

### Departing Hymn: “God, Whose Love is Always Stronger”

God, whose love is always stronger  
than our weakness, pride and fear,  
in your world, we pray and wonder  
how to be more faithful here.  
Hate too often grows inside us;  
fear rules what the nations do.  
So we pray, when wars divide us:  
give us love, Lord! Make us new!

Love is patient, kind and caring,  
never arrogant or rude,  
never boastful, all things bearing;  
love rejoices in the truth.  
When we’re caught up in believing  
war will make the terror cease,  
show us Jesus’ way of living;  
may our strength be in your peace.

May our faith in you be nourished;  
may your churches hear your call.  
May our lives be filled with courage  
as we speak your love for all.  
Now emboldened by your Spirit  
who has given us new birth,  
give us love, that we may share it  
till your love renews the earth!

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (© 2003 All rights reserved.)

Suggested Tune: BEECH SPRING

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<sup>†</sup>Isaiah 11:1-2a, 6, and 9

# War in the Old Testament

## Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i>  | <i>Standard Plan</i>      | <i>Dual Session (#1)</i> | <i>Dual Session (#2)</i>               |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Prayer                | Prayer                    | Prayer                   | Prayer                                 |
| Scripture Reading     | Scripture Reading         | Scripture Reading        | 2 Kings 6:8-23                         |
| Responsive Reading    | Responsive Reading        | Responsive Reading       | Responsive Reading                     |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) | Reflection (skim all)    | Discuss members' questions on passages |
| Questions 1 and 2     | Questions (selected)      | Questions 1 and 2        | Question 3                             |
| Departing Hymn        | Departing Hymn            | Departing Hymn           | Departing Hymn                         |

## Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the diversity of biblical texts concerning war and the role of God in warfare.
2. To explore the pacifist tradition that emerges in the Old Testament.
3. To consider how the peaceable kingdom envisioned by the prophet Isaiah becomes, for Edward Hicks, a "painted sermon" for American churches.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Peace and War (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn, "God, Whose Love is Always Stronger," locate the familiar tune BEECH SPRING in your church hymnal.

## Begin with an Observation

"It is difficult for Americans to fathom what it must have been like for citizens of [ancient Israel and Judah] to live with the prospect of large, invading armies camped out on their doorstep on a regular, unrelenting basis. Consider that Bethel, an important city to ancient Israel, was destroyed four times in the two-hundred-year period from the time of the Judges to the establishment of the Davidic monarchy. For comparison, consider the city of Philadelphia being destroyed four times since the Declaration of Independence" (*Peace and War*, p. 12).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that the Spirit of God will guide members as they reflect honestly and faithfully on the roles of God in war.

## Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Isaiah 30:27-28 and 31:1-5 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

This is an opportunity to introduce the diversity of Old Testament texts concerning war. The lesson simplifies this large subject by (1) focusing on the work of one prophet, Isaiah of Jerusalem in the eighth-century B.C., and (2) stressing the emergence of the pacifist tradition in the Old Testament, since it is often overlooked.

The suggested plan for a second session is to explore the pacifist tradition more carefully, beginning with 2 Kings 6:8-23, an account of Elisha's dealing with an invading army of Aramaeans. Members might study the other pacifist texts listed in Wood's article (p. 15). Members may have many other questions about war in the Old Testament. Additional study sessions might be developed to explore the holy war tradition in texts like Joshua 1-8 and the just war perspective in the passages mentioned by Wood (pp. 15-16).

Good resources for further study include John Wood, *Perspectives on War in the Bible* (Mercer University Press, 1998), Tremper Longman III and Daniel Reid, *God is a Warrior* (Zondervan, 1995), and Walter Brueggemann, *Peace* (Chalice Press, 2001). Members are familiar with Wood's good work through his article, "War in the Old Testament"; the latter two books are reviewed in "Peace and the Divine Warrior," *Peace and War*, pp. 83-87.

### Study Questions

1. Living in the Syrian-Palestinian corridor between Egypt to the south and the successive empires along the Euphrates River to the north-northeast, the ancient Israelites were along a military highway running through "no man's land." Warfare, consequently, was mostly defensive and "a constant and brutal fact of daily life." Without the resources, war technologies, or large armies to protect their people and property, over the years the Israelites entered unstable and shifting defensive alliances with small nations in the corridor, and sometimes sold themselves as vassals to the larger empires.

Israel, like its neighbors, developed the idea that their God fought *with* them, in a synergism that included wise human strategy and courageous fighting. Yet, in a remarkable development, Israel went further and concluded that God fought *for* them, and that the people's role was to wait patiently for God to decide the issue.

Wood points to three other important contrasts: (1) Israel "did not glorify warfare as did their neighbors, refusing to engage in hero worship or erecting great monuments commemorating battles"; (2) "Israel's war methods...were relatively mild in comparison to other ancient cultures" (see 1 Kings 20:31); and (3) "Israel's God, Yahweh, is never viewed as merely a tribal, victory God of Israel. Yahweh is the God of *all* nations, demanding righteousness and justice for all, and punishing Israel as well as other nations for any evil and injustice." This injects humility into Israel's understanding of war. Even the securing of the Promised Land is seen as a gift, not a result of the nation's military prowess (Deuteronomy 8:11-18).

2. Members may point out how the messianic King in Isaiah 11:1-9 wields a word of testimony rather than a military weapon, and wears righteousness and faithfulness as a belt rather than a military sash. [The passages in Isaiah are complex, but as Christians we focus on certain aspects through the lens of Jesus' life as the ultimate fulfillment of these messianic promises. If members read ahead, they may notice that the King reunites Israel with Judah and leads them in a united campaign against the smaller nations in the region (11:13-14). Yet, the people will wait for God to deal with Egypt and the Assyrian Empire (11:15-16).]

Isaiah 30:27-28 and 31:1-5 surprise us with the violent image of a warrior God. Yet it is important to understand the function of these passages: the people of Israel are to wait for God to deal with the Assyrian Empire, rather than them seeking a vassal alliance with Egypt and building a military machine (31:1).

3. The artist relates Isaiah's startling vision to peace between warring nations. In many versions of *Peaceable Kingdom*, like this one from Philadelphia, Hicks depicts in the background Englishman William Penn signing a treaty with the Leni-Lenape Indians in 1682. Encourage members to list warring people groups and nations the artist might include in this "painted sermon" today as needing to obey the prophet's vision.

Hicks addressed discordant groups in the church. "He traveled widely and saw the division between orthodox Quakers in England and more liberal-minded American Quakers," Hornik notes. "The innocence of the child, hugging the neck of the lion, is Hicks' powerful statement of peace. In later versions, the animals represent different factions in the Quaker unrest." What church groups today need to heed the call to be united in peace?

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.