

Holy War in Judaism: The Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea, by Reuven Firestone (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), xvi + 365 pp., ISBN: 978-0-19-986030-2, £27.50 (hb)

Admirers of Reuven Firestone will not be disappointed with this book, and its intriguing title and subtitle accurately outline its main thesis. There is indeed a theory of when war is allowed and indeed compulsory in Judaism, and it developed out of the Bible and the texts connected to it such as the Apocrypha, and most significantly the commentaries of the Mishnah and the Talmud. Yet since the commentary stage occurred so late in the day, comparatively speaking, what it had to reflect on was not so much the glories of conquest at divine command of the Holy Land, but the bitter defeats at the hands of the Romans and the total devastation of the Jewish polity in what could loosely be called Israel. Firestone suggests that this gave rise to the idea that talking about violent resistance to enemies, let alone war, was a very dangerous enterprise and not to be sanctioned except in very exceptional circumstances. It went along with the very special status of living in Israel, which was in theory desirable but in practice was so full of difficulties that many rabbinic authorities seemed to discourage it. Although the Bible itself is full of references to the Land of Israel and its ownership by the Jews, when this was no longer feasible the idea of living in Israel, and certainly the idea of fighting others in order to live there, became largely irrelevant. As Firestone comments, a long debate was set off by Maimonides and his predecessors, and his rather dismissive remarks about the significance of Israel and the idea of fighting to live there, by contrast with the later Nahmanides who not only set out to refute Maimonides but even moved to Israel himself, with not entirely happy consequences. For Nahmanides living in the Land is of immense significance for Jews, and any obstacles that are in the way must be removed, sometimes violently if necessary.

For much of the last two millennia these debates were more academic than anything else, since the idea that the Jews would return to the Land before the arrival of the Messiah was regarded as far-fetched, and indeed some Jews persist in arguing that a state should not be established before the messianic age. Firestone is quite right in emphasizing that the theological debates that developed over the

acceptability of war has little to do with the thinking of most Israelis, who are profoundly secular. On the other hand, as Firestone shows in what I thought was by far the most interesting part of the book, the religious narrative was often used by the secular in order to establish as wide a consensus among the Jewish public for the measures undertaken by the state, especially measures involving violence. Here the establishment of a state, and its being inhabited by what is today probably a majority of the world's Jewish population, raised again the issue of when violence is justified. From its earlier near-consensus that violence and war ought to be avoided at all costs, a significant number of Religious Zionists have made much of the idea that in certain circumstances war is not only desirable but in fact compulsory, and to oppose it is a sign of a lack of commitment to Judaism and its law. This is not a reflection on what is pragmatically appropriate, but on what should be done because God wants it to be done, and of course the commentator is aware of what the divine opinion of the issue is. Anyone who disagrees is to be regarded perhaps in very stark terms as a *rodef* or aggressor against the Jewish people.

I could not help wondering whether theology and law in this case is to be praised or criticized for its flexibility. One sometimes feels that theology is rather a loose discipline since it can react to any change in circumstances with some appropriate form of words, in that within the commentary tradition a respected authority can be found to have made a comment that can be used eventually, when the conditions are appropriate. The idea that war could be compulsory, a dormant idea for much of Jewish history when in exile, suddenly came to the fore again when war became more of an option that looked like it might produce results. The way theology works is to assess the relevant scriptural passages and the commentaries on them and develop a plausible interpretation of how the law should go as a result. At different times different interpretations come to the fore, and that makes it look very much as though whatever the circumstances, some theoretical argument can be found to justify or condemn what at that time is appropriate. Yet Firestone seems to be critical of the recent popularity of the idea among Religious Zionism that war is compulsory to protect or even expand the territory of the State of Israel, but why? The fact that until recently it was very much a minority view hardly establishes that it is wrong, and he shows how plausibly they can establish a narrative to support their view. One of the problems that emerges is that although the modern commentators

seem to be basing their rulings on “traditional” views, they in fact eschew the sort of careful weighing of different texts and alternative opinions and arguments. Often what seems to take place is a more mystical process, and here the influence of Abraham Kook is surely significant, but it is difficult to know how to assess a legal ruling which apparently comes about through some sort of intuition and poetic grasp of reality that sounds very moving to the right sort of audience, but dubious to anyone else.

This is in every way an excellent book, detailed and accurate and well-argued throughout. It is always difficult to maintain balance when dealing with a controversial topic, and Firestone is measured throughout, although it is clear where his sympathies lie. The book is certainly now the standard text on the topic and I am sure will remain so for a very long time. A sign of its excellence is that it raises many issues which it does not settle, and readers will find it a stimulating and inspiring read.

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