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WAR IN THE BIBLE AND THE QUR’AN A COMPARATIVE STUDY¹

Summary

The “founding texts” of each civilization shape the meaning of important issues for the lives of individuals and entire human communities. Such texts include the “holy books” of the Old and New Testaments and the Qur’an, called the “three laws” or “rules of life”. Each of these “rules of life” outlines a certain idea of war, which is one of the basic human experiences. A short comparative study shows the different emphases. The Old Testament shows Israel’s historical wars in which

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God becomes involved. The New Testament does not deal with the issue of war at all in the military sense, but shifts the emphasis to spiritual warfare. The Quran devotes a lot of space to war, especially religious war, without referring to the specific history of the nation, but points to the rules that a devout Muslim should follow during a conflict, including armed conflict.

Keywords: war, Bible, Koran, Quran, Qur'an, Qur'an, jihad

WOJNA W BIBLI I KORANIE. STUDIUM PORÓWNAWCZE

Streszczenie

„Teksty założycielskie” każdej cywilizacji kształtują znaczenia istotnych kwestii dla życia jednostek i całych wspólnot ludzkich. Do takich tekstów należą „święte księgi” Starego i Nowego Testamentu oraz Koranu, nazywane „trzema prawami” albo „zasadami życia”. Każda z tych „zasad życia” rysuje pewną ideę wojny, która jest jednym z podstawowych doświadczeń ludzkich. Krótkie studium porównawcze skupia się na odmiennych akcentach. Stary Testament ukazuje historyczne wojny Izraela, w które angażuje się Bóg. Nowy Testament w ogóle nie zajmuje się kwestią wojny w sensie militarnym, ale przesuwa akcent na walkę duchową. Koran poświęca wojnie, zwłaszcza religijnej, wiele miejsca, nie odnosząc się do konkretnych historii narodu, ale wskazuje na reguły, jakimi powinien kierować się pobożny muzułmanin podczas konfliktu, także zbrojnego.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna, Biblia, Koran, džihad

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War is an essential element of every civilization and every culture. If a civilization has survived, it is because it has fought for its existence in numerous wars, and has somehow proven to be strong enough to resist all the unfavorable elements lurking for its resources, in the broadest sense: biological, spatial, spreading its beliefs, values and communication strategies². The most famous Chinese strategist and war theorist, Sunzi, emphasizes the importance of the study of war and begins his treatise on the art of war as follows:

Sunzi said: War is the greatest affair of the state, the basis of life and death, the Dao of survival or destruction. It needs to be carefully considered and analyzed³.

² F. Jullien, *Le détour et l'accès: stratégies du sens en Chine, en Grèce*, Paris 2010.

³ “孫子曰：兵者，國之大事也。死生之地，存亡之道，不可不察也。孫子，孫子兵法 *Sunzi Bing Fa*, <http://ctext.org/art-of-war> (accessed April 20, 2019).

Conflict is inherent to human existence and is synonymous with war⁴. The strategies by which individuals, as well as entire communities (nations, states, civilizations, cultures), approach conflict can be considered “war strategies”, which – of course, and fortunately! – they do not always adopt an armed face. The way a given social group conducts war (avoids it, conducts politics, diplomacy, uses economic tools or outright weapons) says a lot about the values it follows. Religious inspirations, which are deeply rooted in the identity of individual people and entire societies, cannot be overestimated in this matter. War is – whether we like it or not – part of human culture. The shape of a given civilization, including the strategies of conducting disputes, is very much determined by the “founding texts”, i.e. “holy books”⁵.

In Europe, Christianity was the religious inspiration for many activities, especially after 313, i.e. since the Edict of Milan granting religious freedom⁶. Judaism also had a strong influence on the mentality of Europeans, but from the 7th century, an important element that Europe began to confront was Islam, the beginning of which is symbolically dated to the Hiġra in 622. Christianity with its Bible and Islam with its Qur'an are great monotheistic religions, Abrahamic, which fought wars with each other⁷. Each of these religions has verses in its holy book dedicated to war that have inspired its participants on each side of countless conflicts⁸.

The Christian concept of war is based on two parts of the Bible: the Old Testament and the New Testament, which are very different regarding war. The Old Testament, strongly associated with the Jewish nation, shows the concept of war as something completely acceptable, harnessed to the victory of Israel, and therefore – the reign of God on earth. Christians, however, read the Bible through the prism of the New Testament, shifting the meaning of war more into the spiritual sphere, and are more interested

⁴ C. v. Clausewitz, *O wojnie*, trans. A. Cichowicz, L.W. Koc, F. Schoener, Warszawa 2022, p. 35–51.

⁵ *Wielkie księgi ludzkości*, eds. A. Landau-Czajka, M. Woźniewska-Działak, Warszawa 2013; D. Klejnowski-Różycki, *Świat Biblii i świat cywilizacji chińskiej*, „Studia Oecumenica” 5 (2005), p. 363–372.

⁶ W. Myszor, *Chrześcijanie wobec świata. Problem wojny i pokoju w pierwotnym chrześcijaństwie*, „Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne” 16 (1983), p. 249–258.

⁷ D. Klejnowski-Różycki, P. Sękowski, *Religie w katechezie i lekcji religii*, in: *Leksykon katechetyczny*, ed. J. Kochel, J. Kostorz, Kielce 2022, p. 589–594.

⁸ J.-D. Thyen, *Biblia i Koran. Synopsa wspólnych tradycji*, trans. M.M. Dziekan, Warszawa 2002, p. 276–283; *Biblia i Koran: miejsca zbieżne*, eds. M. Beerle-Moor et al., trans. M. Pędracki, Wrocław 2016, p. 231–239.

in spreading peace as Jesus Christ did. For Islam⁹, the holy book is the Qur'an¹⁰, although other texts (Sunna¹¹, Sīra¹²) also have great authority.

The topic of war in the holy books is an extensive topic, often elaborated, usually limited to “holy war”¹³, but rarely in a comparative way. This study is not intended to exhaust the topic, but is intended to be a contribution and inspiration for further in-depth comparative research. We will briefly look at the “three laws” or “rules of life”: Old Testament, New Testament and Qur'anic¹⁴. The best approach would be to compare all Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), as well as unrevealed religions, but this is beyond the scope of this study.

WAR IN THE BIBLE

The face of war in the Bible is completely different in the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament usually uses the word מלחמה – *milhalmah*, and only in the Books of Daniel and Ezra it uses the word battle קרב – *hlaw* to denote war. The New Testament uses the word πόλεμος – *polemos*. At the same time, the Old Testament, with the Pentateuch at the forefront, describes war primarily in its basic meaning as an armed conflict, where Israel fights against other nations and God is involved in this fight. In the New Testament there is a shift towards the spiritual: for Jesus and Christians, war will mean the fight against evil.

WAR IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

According to the Torah, waging war (מלחמה – *milhalmah*) was subject to the will of God (Deuteronomy 20), whose advice was sought before starting hostilities (Judg 1:1; 20:18, 27–28; 1 Sam 14:37; 23:2; 30:8; 1 Kings

⁹ M. Eliade, I.P. Culianu, *Słownik religii*, trans. A. Kuryś, H. Cieśla, Katowice 2007, p. 167–184.

¹⁰ K. Kościelniak, *Chrześcijaństwo w spotkaniu z religiami świata*, Kraków 2002, p. 201.

¹¹ B. Warner, *Hadisy: Sunna Mahometa*, Brno 2016; K. Pachniak, *Koran, hadisy i ich obecność w kulturze muzułmańskiej*, in: *Wielkie księgi ludzkości*, ed. A. Czajka, Warszawa 2013, p. 151–170.

¹² B. Warner, *Sira: życie Mahometa*, Kraków 2017.

¹³ R. Firestone, *Conceptions of Holy War in Biblical and Qur'anic Tradition*, „Journal of Religious Ethics” 24, (1996) 1, p. 99–123.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, “*Faith, Reason and the University. Memories and Reflections*”. *Apostolic Journey to München, Altötting and Regensburg: Meeting with the Representatives of Science in the Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg (September 12, 2006)*, 2006, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html.

22:5). At the same time, Yahweh set limits to universal cruelty, forbade senseless demolition, and in specific cases forbade attack (e.g. 1 Sam 11:2; 2 Kings 15:16; Am 1:3; Deut 20:11; 21:10–14; Deut 20, 19; Deut 2:5/9/19; 1 Kings 12:24; Jer 27). The kings of Israel were considered mild in the eyes of their Syrian adversaries. Assyrian descriptions say that many peoples took joy in the cruelties and torments inflicted on their opponents. However, this was foreign to the Bible, and killing a person, even in a war ordered by God, made a person culturally unclean (Num 31:19)¹⁵. David, because of his wars, was unable to build a temple for God (1 Chronicles 28:3).

War in the Old Testament is related to the law of *herem* (הֶרֶם), i.e. curses, which means excluding a person, animal, or thing from the sphere available and permitted to man and placing them at God's disposal. This was usually by destruction. At the same time, it was considered sacred. *Herem* meant being given over to extermination, destruction, exclusion from secular use. The Arabic word harem (حريم – *ḥarīm*)¹⁶ has the same root. In the New Testament, the Greek equivalent is the word *anathema* (ἀνάθεμα).

Although Israel experienced that it owed its victories to God, the politics of pacts played an important role during the period of the kings. However, the Old Testament assesses this as doing more harm than good. War was most often started in the spring (2 Sam 11:1). Battles were strategically and tactically thought out to win even with smaller forces.

Throughout the centuries, Israel has lived in constant wars in which God has been involved. First, there are offensive wars against Sihon and Og (Num 21:21–35; Deut 2:26–3,17), then the conquest of Canaan by Joshua (Joshua 6–12), and then comes the defensive battles against Midian (Num 31) and against the oppressors from the era of the judges (Judges 3–12), and finally the war of national liberation with Saul and David (1 Sam 11–17; 28–30; 2 Sam 5; 8; 10). People fight, but only God gives victory, who on the one hand fights for his people, and on the other hand, fights against sinners, including those who identify with his people.

¹³ And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today,

¹⁵ F. Rienecker, G. Maier, *Leksykon biblijny*, trans. D. Irmińska, J. Kruczyńska, Warszawa 2008, p. 860.

¹⁶ A. Mostfa, *Violence and Jihad in Islam: From the War of Words to the Clashes of Definitions*, „Religions” 12 (2021) 11, p. 966; “הֶרֶם”, in: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, eds. R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, B.K. Waltke, Chicago 1980, p. 324–325; M. Speight, G. Basetti-Sani, A.H. Cutler, “הֶרֶם”, „The Muslim World” 68 (1978) 4, p. 292–293.

you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still.” (Exodus 14:13–14)¹⁷

Ultimately, the struggles of the nation of Israel are only one aspect of God’s wars in human history, because ultimately it is about Yahweh’s victory against the forces of evil. Political fights are a kind of metaphor for the spiritual fight (Dan 7:19–25; 11:40–45), when God will destroy the power of Satan (Dan 7:11, 26; 8:25; 11:54). Such perspectives go beyond the vision of temporal wars and move more and more towards the final judgment, which will put an end to all wickedness on earth (Wisdom 5:17–23), giving rise to the Kingdom of God¹⁸.

WAR IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus is absolutely not at war (πόλεμος – *polemos*) for the kingdom of this world (Luke 22:50; John 18:38). The message of the New Testament definitely transcends the Jewish nation and is not directed at the fight for the survival of any state or nation. There is a radical shift towards the spiritual side, which for Jesus is the fight at the root of all wars and is the most real fight in which one can lose one’s earthly life¹⁹. It is a spiritual battle waged against Satan and evil. Jesus is the one who comes to destroy the power of Satan, hell, evil and death (Mt 4:1–11), and Satan’s final triumph is to bring about the suffering and death of Jesus Christ (Luke 22:3; John 13:2, 27; 14:30). Paradoxically, the cross of Christ becomes a place of victory (John 12:31): when Jesus is resurrected, all the power of Satan falls.

Both the Old and New Testaments see one huge *mysterium iniquitatis* in its various manifestations: evil, sin, death, disease, suffering, Satan, hell... All these elements are manifestations of a reality opposed to God, in which there is no idea of evil²⁰. In Satan, evil manifests itself in a personal form, and his main opponent is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ became incarnate, he became a man, therefore a man becomes at the same time someone who is most affected by evil, someone whom evil hates.

¹⁷ Bible translation according to: <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Revised-Standard-Version-Catholic-Edition-RSVCE-Bible/>.

¹⁸ B. Adamczewski, *Idea „świętej wojny” i jej pokojowa reinterpretacja w Starym Testamencie*, in: „A kimże jest człowiek?” (Ps 8,5) Księga pamiątkowa dla uczczenia 75. rocznicy urodzin Ks. Abpa Henryka Hosera SAC Biskupa Warszawsko-Praskiego, Warszawa 2017, p. 151–158.

¹⁹ T. Dola, *Problem komplementarności współczesnych modeli soteriologicznych*, Opole 1994.

²⁰ J.-M. Garrigues, *Dieu sans idée du mal. La liberté de l’homme au cœur de Dieu*, Limoges 1982.

The war that reverberates in the Gospels has no political, military or economic overtone. Even when Jesus uses the image of battle in his parables, it is only an image illustrating the issue of wisdom and prudence (Luke 14:31). The word "war" in the New Testament is also used in its basic meaning, as armed conflicts, but only when Jesus comforts his Apostles not to be afraid of it, because God watches over them:

⁴ And Jesus answered them, Take heed that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: ⁸ all this is but the beginning of the sufferings. ⁹ Then they will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away, and betray one another, and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold. ¹³ But he who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come. (Mt 24:4–14)²¹

New Testament descriptions of the Church clearly show that it is not a political and military power, as Israel once was, it conducts neither politics nor wars, and at the same time it is in a permanent state of war for as long as the history of the world lasts. The peace that Jesus brought is not the peace of this world, and on the plane of this world Jesus brings a sword in the temporal order (Mt 10:11)²², because the Kingdom of God is subject to violent attacks (Mt 11:12) from evil powers (Rev 12 ,17–13,10, 17).

The New Testament texts about the weapons of Christians are interesting: the weapons brought by Jesus Christ are the Christian virtues, which constitute the armor of light²³. This armor is put on by a soldier of Christ (1 Thess 5:8; Eph 6:11, 13–17). Ultimately, what overcomes evil and the

²¹ Bible translation according to: <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Revised-Standard-Version-Catholic-Edition-RSVCE-Bible/>.

²² M. Lurker, *Słownik obrazów i symboli biblijnych*, trans. K. Romaniuk, Poznań 1989, p. 120–122.

²³ P. Morciniec, *Chrześcijanizm wobec wojny*, in: *Kościół i świat*, ed. A. Napiórkowski, Kraków 2023, p. 131–149.

world²⁴ is faith in Christ, understood as union with Him (1 John 2:14; 4:4; 5:4). When the world persecutes and kills Christians, it seemingly triumphs over them, but it is an illusion and an announcement of the opposite situation, just as the cross of Christ is an announcement of the Resurrection (Rev 11:11, 15–18). The Apocalypse describes the entire history of the cosmos as the triumph of Christ and the final fall of evil.

WAR IN THE QUR'AN

War is often mentioned in the Qur'an as a state of armed and often prolonged conflict between states, tribes or parties. It is usually referred to by the word *ḥarb* – “war” (e.g. against God and the Messenger), but also *qitāl* – “fight” (especially armed, e.g. fighting in the path of God). The Qur'an also mentions *jihad* (جهاد – *ǧihād*), which, although it involves fighting, cannot be reduced only to war, as it is a much more theologically and semantically capacious concept. In many places, the Qur'an describes the battles led by Israel, paralleling the history of the Old Testament, which enjoys great authority in Islam. Most of the warfare described in the Qur'an is carried out by modern believers. Once in the Qur'an there is mention of a fight between the believers of Islam, then peace should be brought between them (Q 49.9), and it also threatens war against usurers (Q 2,278). Elsewhere, the Qur'an encourages fighting against others, variously identified as “those who fight you” (Q 2,190), unbelievers (Q 4,84;9,123;47,4), polytheists in general (Q 9,36), People of the Book who do not believe in God and the Last Day (Q 9,29), hypocrites (Q 9,73), friends of Satan (Q 4,76), imams of disbelief (Q 9,12). When believers win, then hypocrites side with them, but not when believers lose (Q 4,141; 2,190–191; 2,217). In the Qur'an, war is fundamentally about religious and moral issues²⁵.

¹⁹⁰ Fight in the cause of Allah ‘only’ against those who wage war against you, but do not exceed the limits. Allah does not like transgressors.

¹⁹¹ Kill them wherever you come upon them and drive them out of the places from

²⁴ *Słownik teologii biblijnej*, ed. X. Léon-Dufour, trans. K. Romaniuk, Poznań 1990, p. 955–958. The world in a negative sense often appears in the New Testament, as an opposition to the Kingdom of God.

²⁵ J.C. Myers, *The Quranic Concept of War*, „The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters” 36 (2006) 4, p. 108–127.

which they have driven you out. For persecution is far worse than killing. And do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque unless they attack you there. If they do so, then fight them – that is the reward of the disbelievers.

¹⁹² But if they cease, then surely Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

¹⁹³ Fight against them 'if they persecute you' until there is no more persecution, and 'your' devotion will be to Allah 'alone'. If they stop 'persecuting you', let there be no hostility except against the aggressors.

¹⁹⁴ 'There will be retaliation in' a sacred month for 'an offence in' a sacred month, and all violations will bring about retaliation. So, if anyone attacks you, retaliate in the same manner. 'But' be mindful of Allah, and know that Allah is with those mindful 'of Him'²⁶.

In studies on war in Islam, the term “jihad” appears most often²⁷. Meanwhile, jihad is a very deep theological idea, in a way beautiful, where possible military operations are one of the last elements of spreading faith. Although jihad is colloquially translated as holy war²⁸, the meaning of this concept cannot be reduced only to war, because it is making every effort to achieve salvation and comes from Muslim mysticism. Jihad concerns four spheres and is to be waged with the heart, tongue, hands and sword²⁹. The latter is the armed struggle discussed above.

The Qur'an presents an early Semitic approach to war, where the religious system is tribal and conflicts take place between tribes without an extensive state organism.

CONCLUSION

War in the Old Testament and in the Qur'an serves similar functions: it usually has a military meaning, it is a fight of the faithful to defend their faith, and God is involved in it. In the Qur'an, there is also the theme of spreading faith, which is less important in the Old Testament, because Judaism is the religion of the specific nation of Israel. Islam is a universalistic religion which – although its origins are related to Arabs – is addressed to everyone to become Muslims (مُسلِم – *muslim*), i.e. subject to the will of

²⁶ Translation of the Qur'an according to: <https://quran.com/>.

²⁷ B. Sepko, *The Holy War in the Radical Islam. Ujęcie świętej wojny w radykalnym islamie*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Ruchu Studenckiego” 1 (2014), p. 86–103.

²⁸ B. Warner, *Koran w dwie godziny*, Kraków 2017, p. 79–98.

²⁹ K. Kościelniak, „Święta Wojna” w islamie. *Historyczno-teologiczne aspekty dżihadu*, „Polonia Sacra” 53 (2001) 9, p. 181–224.

God (الله – Allāh)³⁰. An important difference between the New Testament and the Old Testament and the Qur'an is that in the New Testament Jesus teaches about loving one's enemies (Mt 5:44), and in the Old Testament the law of retaliation "an eye for an eye" is mentioned (Lev 24:20; Deut 24:20). 19,21), as well as in the Qur'an, evil is punished symmetrically (Q 42,39–42).

The New Testament deals with war only in the spiritual sense, understood as opposition and fight against evil, but without armed weapons, and thanks to the power of union with Jesus Christ, who is the final victor of all evil.

For both the Qur'an and the Old Testament, war is natural. The Qur'an talks a lot about war in a moralizing way: how to wage war, what kind of war should be, what is the relationship between war and religion³¹. Meanwhile, in the Old Testament we have several dozen war stories of Israel, fights that Israel fought against various peoples. Based on these stories, there is also information about the importance of the war.

Another difference that should be emphasized is the fact that in the Old Testament, Israel's wars are related to the expanded state apparatus. In the Qur'an, the approach to war is tribal. And in the New Testament there is no mention of war at all to defend a nation, state or organization. In all "three laws" war has a religious aspect, but only in the New Testament there is no military aspect to spread the faith.

There are accounts of wars in the Old Testament that could be called "miraculous." They consist in the fact that on Israel's side, God suspends the laws of nature, such as the sun stopping, the parting of the Red Sea, etc. There are no analogous descriptions in the Qur'an. In the New Testament, especially in the Apocalypse of St. John, we find prophetic descriptions of "mystical wars" that can be interpreted naturally or supernaturally (spiritually).

Historical interpretations of the issue of war in the Bible and the Qur'an, and their practical implementations, belong to another, broader issue. How the theology of war was developed historically, especially in Christianity and Islam, is a separate, large topic (e.g. the problem of "holy war" or just

³⁰ *The concept of War in the Quran and the Bible*, „Christianity Explained” (blog), December 11, 2017, <https://christianityexplained.net/to/muslims/concept-war-quran-bible/>; P. Sękowski, *L'Editto iconoclasta di Yazīd II (690–724). Autore, contesto di creazione, contenuto e significato*, in: „*I dam wam serce nowe*”. *Księga pamiątkowa dla o. prof. dr. hab. Andrzeja S. Jasińskiego OFM z okazji 70. rocznicy urodzin*, Opole 2023, p. 173–192.

³¹ An exception may be the sura "The Elephant", although it still requires a lot of exegetical imagination to recognize that it is a description of war (Q 105).

war)³². At the same time, the topic of war, appearing in the “three laws”, deserves a separate monograph, with a good exegesis of the source texts.

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