

Book Review: Holy War in Judaism: The Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea

by blog admin

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*Holy war, sanctioned or even commanded by God, is a common and recurring theme in the Hebrew Bible. Rabbinic Judaism, however, largely avoided discussion of holy war in the Talmud and related literatures for the simple reason that it became dangerous and self-destructive. **Holy War in Judaism** is the first book to consider how the concept of 'holy war' disappeared from Jewish thought for almost 2000 years, only to re-emerge with the rise of Zionism. **Catherine Hezser** finds the book is written in a clear, explanatory style, which effectively clarifies the intra-religious tension over military action within Israel today.*

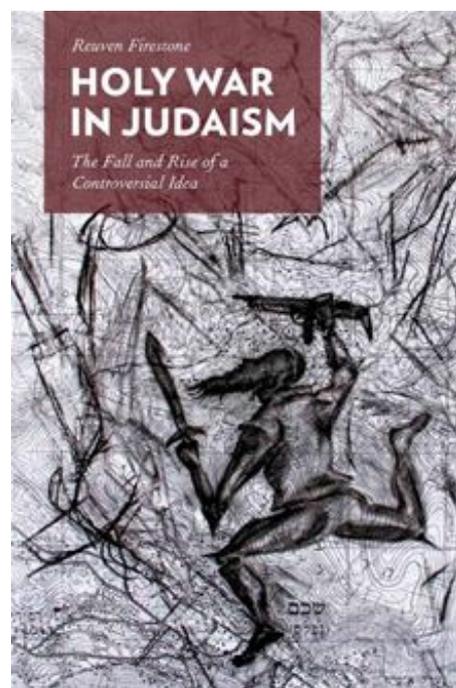


Holy War in Judaism: The Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea. Reuven Firestone. Oxford University Press. June 2012.

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Images in the media of aggressive Israeli soldiers, Jewish settlement building, the destruction of Arab houses and brutality against Palestinians at checkpoints, do much to inform perspectives on Israel's attitudes to 'holy war'. The book *Holy War in Judaism* provides a more complex and ambivalent survey of Jewish perspectives on military action by taking a closer look at this notion of 'holy war' in traditional Jewish texts and in Jewish history from ancient to modern times.

Throughout much of Jewish history, religious leaders recommended a life of Torah study and observance, delegating victory over Israel's enemies to God in future messianic times. It seems that the notion of 'holy war', that is, the belief in divinely legitimised military action against one's enemies, was limited to periods of political sovereignty and to religious fundamentalists. For most of the time and for most Jews, war was neither a reasonable option nor an action for which they would claim divine support. On the basis of the Jewish literary tradition and centuries of subjection to foreign imperialism, Jewish attitudes towards military action appear in a very different light: author Reuven Firestone states, "among the religious systems I have studied, Judaism has the least developed and least politicized ideology of holy war, and when it is invoked, it has always applied to an extremely limited geographical scope" (viii).



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Reuven Firestone is Professor of Medieval Judaism and Islam at the Reform-Jewish Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. He has written this book as a corollary to his earlier book *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*. He traces the understanding of and actual engagement in war from the biblical period to contemporary Israel, with a close examination of the various interpretations of war by Jewish religious authorities of the respective time periods. Although the Hebrew Bible, the most revered Jewish religious text, lacks a specific term for 'holy war', references to divinely sanctioned military actions against so-called idolators and against Israel's enemies are as prevalent here as they are in the literatures of other ancient Near Eastern people and other monotheistic religions (Christianity and Islam). At the same time, biblical texts stress that God supported Israel only as long as Israelites obeyed his commandments. In retrospect

– the biblical texts were written long after the events they relate and exhibit the ideology of their later editors – the divine sanctioning of military action appears as one aspect of the belief in God’s determination of history.

In the following, three post-biblical Jewish military actions are presented as “Jewish holy war in practice”: the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus IV Epiphanes’ persecution of Judaism in the second century B.C.E. and the two Jewish revolts against Rome in the first and second centuries C.E. (ch. 2 and 3). Whereas the Maccabean revolt was successful, the latter two were not. All three were meant to recreate conditions in which Jewish religious observance could be carried out unhindered by foreign (Hellenistic and Roman) imperialist rule. Firestone does not examine the sources pertaining to these revolts in much detail and does not point to the complex combination of religious and political motivations. He stresses that not all Jews supported these revolts and that many, or most, preferred quietist stances towards the foreign rule, even when it became oppressive. The survival of Judaism was the goal, but how this goal could be achieved was heavily disputed amongst Jewish leaders and intellectuals.

After the failed Bar Kokhba revolt in the first half of the second century C.E., Jews did not engage in military actions until the British Mandate period and the establishment of the State of Israel in the mid-twentieth century. Throughout late antique, medieval, and modern times rabbis took quietist stances, advocating Torah study and piety in the present and hoping for divine redemption in the future. This “quietist messianism” (62) condemned human military action as interfering with God’s plans. Firestone views this rabbinic “re-alignment of priorities” (x) as a watershed in Jewish history and thought: Rabbis “made it virtually impossible for holy war to be an *operative* category in Judaism” (4). Nevertheless, they did not adopt a pacifistic stance and “holy war” remained a theoretical concept discussed by medieval Jewish scholars such as Nachmanides and Maimonides. Firestone’s focus on Jewish religious thinkers seems to neglect the real historical and political context of foreign dominion and Diaspora existence, which made further Jewish rebellions virtually impossible throughout these time periods. It seems that rabbis adapted their religious thinking to the changed circumstances Jews found themselves in: for a religious and ethnic minority under foreign rule a quietist stance seems to be the wisest possible option.

The situation changed with Zionism and the eventual establishment of the State of Israel, when war against political enemies became a reality again. From the 1930s onwards some religious Zionist rabbis began to revive the issue of holy or commanded war. This terminology was applied to the Israeli War of Independence (1947-48), the Six Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973) on the basis of R. Abraham Kook’s teachings, which were reinterpreted by R. Tzvi Yehudah Kook, combining ultra-Orthodoxy with an “ideology of human activism inherent in modern nationalist movements” (283). Although the experience of the Holocaust constituted a turning-point in Jewish attitudes towards self-defense, many (ultra-) Orthodox rabbis continued to oppose human attempts to determine history by fighting against Israel’s enemies. They therefore advise their *yeshiva* students not to join the Israeli army which is a secular institution. The original Zionist leadership of the state was secular and would therefore not justify military actions as divinely commanded. The ‘holy war’ ideology and rhetoric has been revived only within the camps of fundamentalist religious Zionists, who became more outspoken after the successes of the 1967 and 1973 wars and stand behind the settlement building activities. Radical right wing groups such as Gush Emunim even view terrorist activities against Arabs as ‘holy war’ meant to advance the coming of messianic redemption. Firestone emphasizes at the end of his study that a peaceful solution to the Middle East conflict can be implemented only when fundamentalist radicalism and ‘holy war’ ideology cease on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides.

Holy War in Judaism is written in a very clear and explanatory style and is therefore also suitable for non-expert readers with an interest in Judaism, Israel, peace and violence, and holy war. Students and scholars of political and social sciences, history, and religious studies will benefit most from its detailed discussion of Jewish religious thinking on divinely sanctioned military action.

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