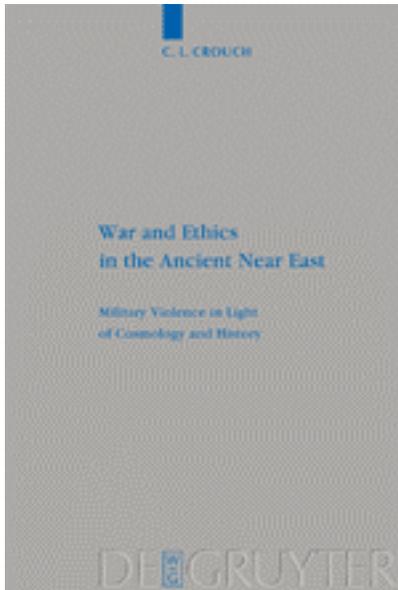


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C. L. Crouch

War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History

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This revised 2009 Oxford D.Phil thesis, supervised by John Barton, represents a historical study of ethics comparing ancient Israel and Judah to Assyria using warfare as the test case. Crouch concludes “that underlying similarities of cosmological and ideological outlook in the societies of Assyria, Judah and Israel have generated significant similarities in their ethical outlooks. In all three societies the mythological traditions surrounding creation reflect a strong connection between war, kingship and the establishment of order” (194).

The book’s introduction helpfully provides a focused history of scholarship alongside a discussion of the critical, methodological issues of this study. Minor issues include the need to distinguish between the literary presentation of a community and the actual community and the propensity of previous scholars to emphasize the differences between Israel/Judah and other ancient Near Eastern nations. Major issues of concern include the necessity of attending to social backgrounds (priestly, elites) of texts, especially when making comparisons to other cultures, and the importance of historical circumstances in shaping ethics. In addition, Crouch defends the chronological parameters of the study: 745 to 612 B.C.E. for the Assyrian Empire, with similar dates for Israel (ending in 721 B.C.E.) and Judah (ending in 587 B.C.E.). The introduction also summarizes the three parts

of the study. Part 1 “addresses the intellectual background of ethical thought in the societies” (10). Part 2 pertains to ethical “variability according to the social context of an informant” (10). Part 3 considers the influence of historical circumstances on ethics as it relates to the warfare case study.

Chapter 2 briefly lays out some theoretical foundations for the study, including Mannheim’s notion of ideology and Berger’s theory of socialization. Crouch ends the chapter with the question, “What happens when the social order (cosmos) of one society ... which has been normalised by the process of socialisation and legitimated internally by religion, comes into contact with the social order of an external group?” and its answer, “It therefore becomes a cognitive necessity to eliminate this threat” (20). The use of the field of sociology of knowledge is fairly uncritical and straightforward here, with only a few hints at how these sociological theories might apply to the ancient societies under consideration. Thus, chapters 3 and 4 extend the discussion of chapter 2 by examining Assyrian cosmology as well as Judahite and Israelite cosmology. Crouch concludes that all three societies have the same general cosmology: the human king uses warfare to defend order just as the divine king did at creation. In this chapter and throughout the book, Crouch understands the Assyrian cosmological tradition’s standard as the *Enuma Elish*.

Chapters 5–7 provide commentary on Assyrian and biblical sources in order to demonstrate the aforementioned cosmology as well as to analyze the practices of warfare. Crouch wishes to emphasize social context as a factor of ethical reasoning; therefore, she uses biblical texts from the Psalms, Kings, and Chronicles as examples of texts from elite society. She finds no substantial difference between the theory of warfare in the Psalms and the practice of warfare in Kings and Chronicles when compared to the ethics of warfare in Assyrian royal inscriptions. Then Crouch examines the book of Amos, particularly its oracles concerning the nations, as a source for ethics of Israel’s nonelite society. Here Crouch finds distinctions between the moral assumptions and practices of Amos and those of the elites in Assyria, Israel, and Judah. For example, Amos does not use cosmological language; instead, the book’s ethical reasoning rests loosely on the legal principle of *lex talionis*. Crouch argues that the preservation of order, and the elimination of chaos, is still needed in the book’s ethical thought, but not by means of a king.

Chapters 8–10 examine the ethical dimensions of warfare in these societies as they developed over time. For example, concerning Assyria, one finds an increase of extreme types of violence during the successive reigns of Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Assurbanipal. However, sources concerning Esarhaddon’s reign do not use as much cosmological language as the previous and following reigns. Concerning the books of Isaiah and Nahum, Crouch finds development in the combination of the earlier cosmological approaches and *lex talionis*. Chapter 10 argues that the concept of *herem*,

found in biblical Deuteronomistic literature, is not unique to Israel, as previous scholars have argued. In spite of no Akkadian root, the concept “is clearly a military action in keeping with the common ancient Near Eastern conception of war as a struggle of order against chaos, even though it represents an extreme manifestation of that struggle” (182).

Chapter 11 provides an excellent and concise conclusion by reiterating the main findings of the book.

Crouch’s study ultimately places before biblical scholars the similarities between the ethical worldview of the ancient Israelites/Judahites and other ancient Near Eastern groups such as the Assyrians. This corrective interpretation is needed for the field of biblical ethics. In addition, the book’s sustained effort to support the ideological combination of warfare, kingship, and order is not only helpful but well proven. One hopes that this study will lead to further exploration of different ethical test cases in order to find additional similarities (and differences) among these ancient societies.