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Total War as Hyperbole in Israel's Eschatological Reflection

Like the biblical narrators, the Hebrew prophets often used “total war” language to portray either the destruction of Israel or of other foreign nations. Instead of holding onto a literal framework, as many Christians seem to do, we ought to embrace this material as hugely exaggerated or hyperbolic in its expressions. The prophets frequently speak of the demise of certain peoples or nations with rhetorically inflated language that was never intended to be literal. Numerous examples demonstrate the ease with which the prophets engage in “total war” language to depict in hyperbolic form the destruction of various nations or people groups:

1. *Israelites*: “Not one will get away [from death by the sword], none will escape” (Amos 9:1-4); an attack against the city of Jerusalem will completely wipe out all its inhabitants, even the survivors of the siege will meet with death: “the rest of them [the remnant of survivors] I will give to the sword before their enemies” (Jer 15:9).
2. *Assyrians*: “Whoever is captured will be thrust through; all who are caught will fall by the sword” (Isa 13:15); the nation will be “overthrown like Sodom and Gomorrah” (Isa 13:19); “I will cut off from Babylon [= Assyria¹] her name and survivors, her offspring and descendants” (Isa 14:22).
3. *Babylonians*: “Attack the inhabitants of Pekod and utterly destroy the last of them” (Jer 50:21); “pile her up like heaps of grain, and destroy her utterly; let nothing be left of her” (Jer 50:26); “encamp all around her; let no one escape” (Jer 50:29); “spare not her young men; utterly destroy all her host” (Jer 51:3).
4. *Philistines*: “I will make your root die of famine, and your remnant I will kill” (Isa 14:30). Cf. NIV, “it [the famine] will slay your survivors”. “The day that is coming to destroy all the Philistines” (Jer 47:4); “the remnant of the Philistines shall perish” (Amos 1:8). “I will destroy you until no inhabitant is left” (Zeph 2:5).
5. *Arameans*: “They will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm. At evening time, lo, terror! Before morning, they are no more” (Isa. 17:13-14).
6. *Cushites*: “They will *all* be left to the mountain birds of prey and to the wild animals” (Isa. 18:6).
7. *Moabites and Ammonites*: “Moab shall become like Sodom and the Ammonites like Gomorrah [an idiom for total destruction with no survivors²]” (Zeph 2:9); “I will cut you [Ammon] off from the peoples and will make you perish out of the countries; I will destroy you” (Ezek 25:7); Edom will “be remembered no more among the nations” (Ezek. 25:10).

¹ Both the Assyrian and Babylonian empires are referred to in different texts under the same city name of “Babylon”.

² See Isa 1:9.

8. *Edomites*: “As when Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbors were overthrown, says the LORD, no one shall live there, nor shall anyone settle in it” (Jer 49:18); “there shall be no survivor of the house of Esau” (Obadiah 18).
9. *Phoenicia/Tyre*: “When I make you a city laid waste, like the cities that are not inhabited, . . . I will bring you to a dreadful end, and you shall be no more; though you be sought for, you will never be found again” (Ezek 26:19-21); “all your warriors within you, with all the company that is with you, sink into the heart of the seas” (Ezek 27:27); “you have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more for ever” (Ezek 28:19).
10. *Elamites*: “All of them are slain, fallen by the sword” (Ezek 32:24).
11. *Meshech/Tubalites*: “All of them uncircumcised, killed by the sword” (Ezek 32:25).
12. *Egypt*: “I will drench the land even to the mountains with your flowing blood” (Ezek 32:6); “when I blot you out, I will cover the heavens” (Ezek 32:7); “I will cause your multitude to fall by the swords of mighty ones . . . and all its [Egypt’s] hordes shall perish” (Ezek 32:12); “I will destroy all its [Egypt’s] beasts [cattle]” (Ezek 32:13); “when I smite [literally, “strike down”³] all who dwell in it” (Ezek 32:15).

The reason we know that this “total war” language is hyperbolic and not literal is because at certain points the prophets themselves speak of continuing remnants of people *after* these “complete kill” battles (Isa. 1:8-9; Ezek 29:13-16; Amos 9:12). Also, as far as we know, no total war destructions ever took place against any of these nations. Yes, these nations encountered major “shift in power” battles and they generally fell from prominent positions. But, total war destruction was simply not accomplished in a literal sense.

The hyperbolic total destruction language was intended to communicate on an emotive level just how displeased Yahweh was towards a nation’s behavior. While the “total war” rhetorical spoke of a complete destruction of every living human being, the reality of these prophetic statements was much more a matter of losing some/many people in war and losing their former power, dominance and prestige within the ancient world. So, clearly the language is that of emotive hyperbole not to be taken in a strictly literal sense.

³ In context the meaning of “strike down” the living is probably the idea of death by the sword (cf., Ezek 32:6, 12).