

A BAPTIST PACIFIST LOOKS AT THE BIBLE

The Old Testament

We don't need any Bible references to prove that there is warfare in Old Testament stories, in which violent widespread death occurs, carried out by the people of Israel acting as God's people.

Christians have always been of this and felt a contrast with the way they were called to follow Jesus. Origen was one of the foremost thinkers of the early Church (living c. A.D. 230), and his comment was to the effect that while warfare was allowed to the Jews of the old covenant era, it was not permitted to Christians under the new covenant.

Sometimes people try to dismiss the Old Testament as entirely made up of bloodshed and carnage. That is to ignore the insights that increasingly appear from one source after another, leading to another way of dealing with differences between people groups.

Among the laws for Israel in the book of Deuteronomy there are curbs on the worst aspects of warfare in chapter 20: "Do not chop down the fruit trees; they are not your enemies." No indeed, they are part of the future for food and prosperity. Destroying them would be vindictive out of all proportion to any reason for violent action. By this sort of standard the escalation of our modern means of war into such thoroughgoing destruction of the infrastructure of roads, water supplies, and food sources is quite beyond what even the Old Testament allows.

Old Testament warfare was frequent in the times of the kings of the two Hebrew kingdoms, Judah and Israel. Even then a glimpse of something better emerges in 2 Kings chapter 9, verses 18-23. Elijah was suspected by the Syrians of being able to tell the king of Israel what their military plans were. When they sent a war-party to snatch him, they became blind and confused. Elijah led them to his king who was so excited by this capture that his adrenalin ran high and the king wanted to kill the captured invaders. No, said Elijah, you wouldn't do that to soldiers you captured in battle. So feed them and give them something to

drink, and send them home to Syria. Generosity to enemies instead of wreaking as much vengeance as possible is emerging even in the violent atmosphere of 9th century B.C. Palestine.

The Psalmists' Enemies

Worship can be infected with a military spirit. Some Psalms are vigorous in the way they want to deal with 'enemies'. The Psalter includes songs and prayers for all sorts of moods and predicaments. A common situation is the feeling of having everybody against you, with people waiting to humiliate and take advantage of you. These awful feelings can be expressed to God – and it is far better that destructive feelings go that way instead of hitting out at other people. The black thoughts expressed are for God's action – and he absorbs them into himself says Isaiah chapter 53 as well as the New Testament as it looks at the cross where Jesus absorbed evil without passing it on.

The Psalmists' enemies are not only personal ones. When they are more obviously enemies of the Israelite state, we must as Christians look again at them as the New Testament does. Psalm 110 verse 1 speaks of 'enemies being put under his feet', the feet of God's representative on earth. The New Testament sees this as fulfilled in Jesus. The enemies to be put under his feet are spiritual powers, not earthly politicians, and the last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15, verses 24-27). We don't pretend that the Old Testament has no violent thoughts and actions, but nor should we override the way the New Testament takes such language to deeper meanings and never to the level of physical military action by nation-states.

Not by Might, nor by Power

In fact there is a theme in the Old Testament that sees military might as the last thing God will use, even while reporting warfare. The story of Gideon is not the story of a successful arms race, but of the use of an insignificant but alert group (Judges chapter 7, verses 2-8). Goliath is not defeated by someone stronger with superior weapons, but by a slim youth with pebbles in a sling who

emphasises his trust in God (1 Samuel chapter 17, verses 37, 45, 47). Further on in Israel's history comes the warning not to trust in the latest military prowess such as world-power Egypt then possessed, but to trust God (Isaiah chapter 31, verses 1-4).

Jeremiah goes even further and advocates non-resistance to the invading Babylonians. This may be seen as pragmatic advice: how can a small nation resist a world-power on the crest of a wave of military success? But Jeremiah was so convinced of the principle he was stating, and not just a temporary expedient for that moment, that he risked death himself as a traitor (Jeremiah chapter 27, verses 1-18).

Psalms 46 develops this trend. Verse 10 is in the midst of pictures of God destroying the means that humans use to violently destroy each other. "Stop fighting," he says, "and know that I am God" (*Good News Bible*) is a translation that fits the context, however comforting and useful to us is the traditional "Be still, and know that I am God." It is the stillness of abandoning the use of destructive weapons

The Vision of Peace

The Old Testament reaches a highwater mark in this area in a passage repeated in Isaiah chapter 2, verses 2-6 and Micah chapter 4, verses 1-4. This looks like a song of peace that already existed by the 8th century when these two prophets were inspired to include it among their messages:

"He will settle disputes among great nations. They will hammer their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning knives. Nations will never again go to war, never prepare for battle again."

The language is now clear. The only question is, Can this be expected to start to unfold in this world, or is it only to emerge in the life of a world to come after the end of history as we know it? Classic modern Christianity supporting their states when at war has put these prophecies as ideals that cannot come to pass in our world. But the early Church thought differently:

"Nation shall not lift sword against nation nor ever again be trained for war.' You can be convinced that this has happened . . . We who used to kill one another, do not make war on our enemies. We refuse to tell lies or deceive our inquisitors; we prefer to die acknowledging Christ." (*Justin Martyr c.140*)

"We who were filled with war and mutual slaughter and all wickedness have each and all throughout the earth changed our instruments of war, our swords into ploughshares, and our spears into farming-tools, and cultivate piety, justice, love of mankind, faith and the hope which we have from the Father through the Crucified One." (*Justin Martyr*)

"The law of liberty, that is, the Word of God, proclaimed to the whole earth by the apostles . . ., has achieved a revolution of such magnitude that the very peoples have made their warlike lances and swords into ploughs and changed them into sickles for reaping corn, and now do not know how to fight, but when struck offer even the other cheek." (*Irenaeus c.180*)

"We no longer take sword against a nation, nor do we learn to make war any more, having become sons of peace for the sake of Jesus, who is our commander." (*Origen c.230*)

The vision of peace is not for dreams or poetry, but for commitment from those who sincerely follow God, and even more so for those who belong to the new era begun by Christ and set in full motion by the converting and life-changing power of his cross, resurrection and gift of his Spirit.

One of the central words and concepts in the Old Testament is *shalom*, 'peace'. Modern speakers often point this out to us, and usually add, "But peace is not just the absence of war." From that point on, no reference is made to warfare, its weaponry or its effects; the discussion revolves around 'wholeness' in human lives and communities, in justice being properly administered, in healthcare, education and food supplies being fairly shared around the world, in the mutual acceptance of different people-groups who live in close proximity, in the protection of the vulnerable from abuse, and in the support of healthy family

relationships – and perhaps you can add more areas for *shalom*. All of these are matters for lasting costly Christian concern, prayer and action. As warfare itself is a major destroyer of many of these aspects of *shalom*; it is amazing that war gets sidelined in such holistic talk and rarely becomes the focus of action to get rid of it as a human activity.

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In the **New Testament** it is to the teaching and life of Jesus we go first, to learn how to follow him in a violent world. Many people who sit loose to public worship or any open display of Christian faith still say that they want folk to follow the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7).

Love your enemies

Chapter 5 verses 43-46 records Jesus as saying, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your friends, hate your enemies.’ But now I tell you: Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven.”

This is the passage most often quoted by those who renounce war. The Old Testament doesn’t say, “Hate your enemies”, but it had become normal to view the ‘neighbour’ of Leviticus chapter 19, verse 18 as a fellow-Jew, and to take a hostile view of oppressive nations, like the Roman Empire in Jesus’ day. Jesus redefined ‘neighbour’ in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke chapter 10, verses 25-37). It was anyone in need who crosses your path, including people from a traditionally despised or contrary people-group (as the Samaritans were *par excellence* to the Jews). All of this alerts us to the significance of the word ‘enemy’, *echthros* in Greek. Supporters of the legitimacy of war for Christians have claimed that the word means ‘personal enemies’ and does not concern those who belong to an enemy state or organisation. However, this word occurs in for national enemies (as in Luke chapter 19, verse 43) and doesn’t make sense here if restricted to personal enemies.

Jesus’ response to Peter’s impetuous attack on Malchus, one of the crowd sent to arrest Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, was “Put your sword back in its place. All who take the sword will die by the sword.” (Matthew chapter 26, verse 52) This was picked up famously by Tertullian c. A.D. 200:

“Although soldiers had come to John and received the form of their rule, although even a centurion had believed, the Lord in disarming Peter, ungirded every soldier.”

As with the early Church quotations using Isaiah chapter 2 and Micah chapter 4, this use of Matthew chapter 26, verse 52 shows how straightforwardly pacifist was the Christian Church in its first 200 years and more, using Scripture as a basis. Their pacifism was on the basis of it being wrong for Christians to be involved in taking the lives of other human beings. It was not on the basis of refusing army service because of the pagan vows to be made by soldiers to the Emperor as a god, wrong as that would be too.

What about Jesus’ statement to his disciples just before his arrest that “whoever has no sword should sell his coat and buy one” (Luke chapter 22, verse 36)? It comes with remarks from Jesus about their needing to acquire purses and bags, things they needed for ordinary everyday life as they had before being called to be part of his band of disciples. The ‘sword’ then is something for everyday life, not for aggressive behaviour which was never meant to part of everyday life among Jews, Old Testament or New Testament. Many everyday tasks required a cutting implement in Palestine, just as the machete is a vital tool for farmers and manual workers in many parts of today’s world. The fact that we need to acquire small and large tools with sharp edges does not mean that their use to hurt other people is condoned.

What about the soldiers?

The role of centurions, Roman army officers, in the New Testament is the strongest argument for Christians being involved in violent warfare. Whenever centurions occur in the New Testament they are seen in a good light. In Matthew chapter 8,

verses 5-13, Jesus not only heals the officer's servant, but comments about him, "I tell you, I have never found any one in Israel with faith like this." Luke's account (chapter 7, verses 1-10) adds the approval of Jews in Capernaum, "This man really deserves your help. He loves our people and he himself built a synagogue for us." The first three gospels all record the favourable comment of the centurion who witnessed the death of Jesus at Calvary: "The army officer who was standing there in front of the cross saw how Jesus had died. 'This man was really the Son of God!' he said." (Mark chapter 15, verse 39; see also Matthew chapter 27, verse 54 and Luke chapter 23, verse 47)

In Acts chapter 10 Cornelius the centurion is commended (verses 2, 4, 22: "a good man who worships God and is highly respected by all the Jewish people"). He responds to the gospel, is baptized as a believer with others in his family who hear and believe (verses 44, 47; chapter 11, verses 14-18). The point at issue, involving one and a half chapters, is whether Gentiles can be accepted by God and his church on the same terms as Jewish believers. The question of his being a soldier is not raised.

Later Christian writers did comment on this, however. Tertullian again:

"Is it right to occupy oneself with the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? . . . Of course the case is different if faith comes subsequently to any who are already occupied in military service . . .; all the same, when faith has been accepted and sealed, either the service must be left at once, as has been done by many, or else recourse must be had to all sorts of quibbling, so that nothing may be committed against God."

"How shall the Christian wage war – no, how shall he even be a soldier in peace-time, without the sword which the Lord has taken away?"

A century later Lactantius wrote:

"When God prohibits killing, he not only forbids us to commit brigandage, which is not allowed even by the public laws, but he

warns us not to do even those things which are regarded as legal among men. And so it will not be lawful for a just man to serve as a soldier – for justice itself is his military service – nor to accuse anyone of a capital offence, because it makes no difference whether you kill with a sword or with a word, since killing itself is forbidden. And so, in this commandment of God, no exemption at all ought to be made to the rule that it is always wrong to kill a person, whom God has wished to be a sacrosanct creature."

Church rules in Egypt and Syria at the same time said:

"A believer who wishes to become a soldier shall be rejected, because it is far from God." "They shall not receive into the church one of the emperor's soldiers. If they have received him, he shall refuse to kill if commanded to do so." "If soldiers wish to be baptized to the Lord, let them cease from military service, or from the position of authority, or else let them not be accepted."

Soldiers who became Christians c.A.D. 300 gave these testimonies, based on the wrongness of taking another person's life:

"Because I am a Christian, I cannot serve as a soldier; I cannot do evil."

"I threw down my weapons; it was not right that a Christian man, who renders military service to the Lord Christ, should render it by earthly injuries."

The policing work of the Roman Empire is commended in Romans chapter 13, verses 1-5. The Christian's contribution is not solely obedience to the Empire's laws, nor is it fulfilled by paying one's taxes (verses 6-7), but in putting into society a radically different life-style, described in the previous chapter of Romans. This includes "Ask God to bless those who persecute you" (verse 14), "If someone has done you wrong, do not repay him with a wrong" (verse 17), "Do everything possible on your part to live in peace with everybody" (verse 18), "As the Scripture says [in Proverbs chapter 25, verses 21-22]: 'If your enemies are

hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty give them a drink; for by doing this you will make them burn with shame.' Do not let evil defeat you; instead, conquer evil with good" (verses 20-21). This hardly agrees with taking the very next sentence (chapter 13, verse 1) to support Christian involvement in violence at the direction of the State. Indeed, the role of the Roman Empire at the time was more like that of an international body facilitating peace between different people groups or nations who lived in close proximity with each other.

The Armour of God

No one could ignore the existence of the Empire's armies any more than people could ignore the role of farming in everyday life. So military metaphors are used, and their very use is such that physical soldiering is put out of mind. Paul's famous "Armour of God" in Ephesians chapter 6, verses 10-20, is quite clear: "We are not fighting against human beings, but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age" (verse 12). These 'forces' may well entrench themselves in political systems in this world, but the Christian's response is also clear: truth, righteousness, the gospel message, faith, salvation, and the word of God are the Christians' resources, all carried through with prayer, praying on every occasion (verse 18).

A few years earlier to a quite different church Paul wrote similarly about the Christians' military involvement. "We do not fight from worldly motives. The weapons we use in our fight are not the world's weapons but God's powerful weapons, which we use to destroy strongholds" (2 Corinthians chapter 10, verses 3-4).

Paul's language was taken seriously in the first Anabaptist manifesto, the Schleithem Confession of 1527:

We have been united as follows concerning the sword:
The worldly are armed with steel and iron but Christians are armed with the armour of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and with the Word of God.

Walker Knight put it as "Peace, like war, is waged":

Peace plans its strategy and encircles the enemy.
Peace marshals its forces and storms the gates.
Peace gathers its weapons and pierces the defense.
Peace, like war, is waged.
But Christ has turned it all around;
The weapons of peace are love, joy, goodness, longsuffering.
The arms of peace are justice, truth, patience, prayer.
The strategy of peace brings safety, welfare, happiness.
The forces of peace are the sons and daughters of God.

Those who Work for Peace

Jesus' word to Peter in Gethsemane has influenced many people, including Martin Luther King as he led the struggle for civil rights in the USA:

Violence brings only temporary victories; violence, by creating many more social problems than it solves, never brings permanent peace. I am convinced that if we succumb to the temptation to use violence in our struggle for freedom, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and our chief legacy to them will be a never-ending reign of chaos. A Voice, echoing through the corridors of time, says to every intemperate Peter 'Put up thy sword'. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations that failed to follow Christ's command.

Pacifism and non-violence are not ways of life that opt out of the world's problems and withdraw from human affairs. One of the most active of the Beatitudes is "Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children!" (Matthew chapter 5, verse 9).

The Book of Revelation

Some have seen that they are prohibited from physical violence that degrades or endangers human life, but still believe that the book of Revelation predicts a final military campaign led by Jesus. This is the theme of chapter 19, verses 11-21. “The armies of heaven” (verse 14) follow one who is “Faithful and True”, “The Word of God”, who must be Jesus. The armies of the nations are defeated by the sword that comes out of his mouth, which indicates the Word of God and his gospel of grace and pardon rather than destructive or explosive physical weapons. Then chapter 20, verses 7-9 very sketchily describes a final battle against the enemies of chapter 19 who have been revived following Christ’s 1,000-year reign on earth. Revelation chapter 16, verse 16 is the only place to mention Armageddon, a Hebrew name that reminds us of the hill of Megiddo on the north-south route through Palestine. It was the area where crucial battles took place, notably Josiah’s doomed attempt to throw back Egyptian pharaoh Neco in 609 B.C. (2 Kings chapter 23, verse 29).

‘Revelation’ is a series of visions which owe a lot to Old Testament characters, events, and pictures. We take the Bible seriously, but the type of literature it is varies from passage to passage. So numbers, beasts, trees, water in different configurations, fire, etc. are not to be restricted to literal readings, but seek to convey truth about God’s ways and kingdom that are in fact beyond adequate description by us. So it is with battles in the book: it is not just a continuation of earthly armies at war. Notice that when the ascended Jesus enters heaven, he is announced as “the Lion of Judah” (chapter 5, verse 5), but then is described as “a Lamb” that “appeared to have been killed” (verse 6), willing to be killed instead of setting out to kill others. The paradox of God’s victory over evil in his world lies in that contrast.

The Mennonite John Yoder wrote:

To follow Jesus is not to withdraw from society or to be ineffective. In the end truth-telling and loving enemies are the Lamb’s way of ruling the world. Martyr-churches still outlive governments.

Following Jesus in a Violent World

It is in dying with Christ, being identified with him in his sufferings, and following this example of his, that Christian discipleship is lived out in a violent world: “If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget self, carry his cross, and follow me.” (Mark chapter 8, verse 34) This was not just for the special group of first disciples. Peter addresses far more Christians when he says (1 Peter chapter 2, verses 20-23):

If you endure suffering even when you have done right, God will bless you for it. It was to this that God called you, for Christ himself suffered for you and left you an example, so that you would follow in his steps. When he was insulted, he did not answer back with an insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but placed his hopes in God, the righteous Judge.

This is the sort of sacrificial love that Jesus displays and calls us to. When he says in John chapter 15, verse 13, “The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them.” But that is not a text for going into battle, prepared to kill others. As Ken Sehested of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America said, “There is much worth suffering for, maybe dying for. But nothing worth killing for.”

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