

## CHRISTIANS AND WAR

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We Christians like to think that our stance on war rests upon "what the Bible says." There are two problems with this: (1) the issue may be settled beforehand on other grounds, with appeal to the Bible only to justify the position already taken, and (2) the Bible says many things, some diverse and even competing. We all "pick and choose" our texts, differing only in what we pick and how we do it. Our use of the Bible is no better than our understanding of its nature and hermeneutic employed.

Christian hermeneutic requires the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the Bible as well as over Church and world. Where Christ is Lord, war is not an option. It is one thing to justify war on our terms, like "the lesser of two evils"; but it is entirely another thing to presume to justify war in Jesus' name.

### I. Dual Legacy from Judaism

The Old Testament has two perspectives on war, one justifying and one opposing. These diverse and competing perspectives on war reflect the pluralism of all communities, including Judaism. Only under tyranny is there the appearance of a monolithic community, and there differences are only suppressed.

#### 1. *Vengeance, Violence, and War (OT quotes from RSV).*

Vengeance and violence are explicit in the Torah, the oldest stratum of the Hebrew Bible. Applied to a domestic situation, Lex talionis, law of retaliation, appears in Exodus 21:22-25: "When men strive together, and hurt a

woman with child, so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no harm follows (!), the one who hurt her shall be fined . . . If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." When one neighbor disfigures another, ". . . as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth . . ." (Lv. 24:19f). For malicious conduct, "Your eye shall not pity; it shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Dt. 19:21).

War is condoned and prescribed in the OT, even genocide and virgins taken as booty. Of Og, king of Bashan, "So they slew him, and his sons, and all his people, until there was not one survivor left to him; and they possessed the land" (Num. 21:35). Concerning Midian, the orders were: Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him. But all the young girls who have not known man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves" (31:17f). After Israel defeated Midian, the report was, "Now the booty remaining of the spoil that the men of war took was 675,000 sheep, 72,000 cattle, 61,000 asses, 32,000 persons in all, women who had not known man by lying with him" (31:32f).

The picture in Deuteronomy is like that in Numbers. Against Sihon was the boast: "And we captured all his cities at that time and utterly destroyed every city, men, women, and children; we left none remaining" (Dt. 2:34). Genocide?? Of Og, "So the Lord our God gave into our hand Og also, the king of Bashan, and all his people; and we smote him until no survivor was left to him. And we took all his cities at that time--there was not a city which we did not take from them--60 cities, the whole region of Argob, the kingdom of Og in Bashan . . . And we utterly destroyed them . . . every city, men, women, and children. But all the cattle and spoil of the cities we took as our booty" (3:3-7).

Scorched earth and booty are prescribed for dispossessing the natives in Canaan: "When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, and Amorites, and Canaanites, the Perizzites, and Hivites, and the Jebusites . . . then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them" (Dt. 7:1f). Of a city rejecting peace, ". . . you shall put all the males to the sword; but the women and their little ones, the cattle, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty to yourselves; and you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you . . . you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall utterly destroy them . . ." (Dt. 20:13-18).

Even the Psalms, with their diverse perspectives, include this lament: "O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall he be who requites you with what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (137:8f).

2. *Prophetic call to non-violence.*

A vision of universal peace, where the weapons of warfare are turned into useful tools and war is learned no more, appears in Micah 4:1-4 (=Isa. 2:1-4). Both prophets foresee "the latter days" in which "the house of the God of Jacob" is established on the highest mountain, where God may "teach his ways" so that "we may walk in his paths". Under God's law and word and judgment, the peoples will ". . . beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

In Isaiah 11:1-3a, 6-9 is an equally beautiful promise of a new order of peace under "a shoot from the stump of Jesse," one upon whom rests "the Spirit of the Lord." Under this one "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like an ox. The suckling child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of

the Lord as the waters cover the sea." Highly poetic, this is a vision and the promise of what could be, where Jesus Christ, as the "shoot from the stump of Jesse," is Lord.

## II. The Legacy of Jesus Christ

### 1. *Jesus in the Gospels (New Testament translations*

*mine)*

Jesus rejected war when he rejected the prevailing Jewish understanding of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom restored to Israel (Acts 1:6) as the crowning work of Messiah. From Jewish literature, Jewish wars with the Romans, and the witness of the New Testament, Messiah's vocation was seen as delivering Israel from Roman rule, by military might, restoring a kingdom like that of David. The Dead Sea Scroll, "The War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness," expresses such messianic expectation. The Jewish/Roman war of A.D. 66-73 (Jerusalem fell to the Romans in 70 and Massada in 73) was a Holy War to the Jews. The war of A.D. 132-35 was likewise a Holy War, where the General of the Jewish armies, known as Bar Chocheba, was acclaimed a messiah by Rabbi Akiba, the leading rabbi of the time.

Jesus' earliest disciples, including the Twelve, held firmly to the view that Christ would restore to Israel such a kingdom. When Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ (Mk. 8:29), he and his fellow-disciples were sternly commanded not to tell this to anyone (v 30)! Jesus then declared his identity and vocation in terms of "the Son of Man" who

would suffer, be rejected by the power figures of Jewish piety, be killed and then arise on the third day (v 31). This so contradicted the understanding of Peter that he rebuked Jesus, holding that such suffering would be impossible to the Christ. Jesus then rebuked Peter and declared his vocation and ours in terms of self-denial and suffering servanthood. The very heart of Jesus' message appears in his revolutionary claim: "If anyone wishes to follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (v 34).

Jesus established the Kingdom of God with a Cross, not a sword; and he did so by giving his life, not by taking lives of others. "Christian" commitment to war is a betrayal of the heart of what Jesus taught and practiced. Also, in preferring the term "Son of man" to "Christ," Jesus freed the idea of the Kingdom of God from nationalism in favor of all peoples.

The Beatitudes in Matthew close with the peacemakers and those persecuted for righteousness (Mt. 5:9-12). God's children are recognized as "peacemakers," not hawks. His people follow in the prophetic tradition of suffering persecution, not that of persecuting other people.

Jesus explicitly and emphatically rejected Lex Talionis, the law of retaliation (Mt. 5:38-42), a law appearing in three books of the Bible, (Ex. 21:23-25; Lv. 35:30; Dt. 19:21). He replaced it with "the Golden Rule" (Mt. 7:12).

Addressing Pilate, Jesus dissociated himself from any nation or worldly kingdom: "My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, that I not be delivered to the Jews; but my kingdom is not from this world" (Jn. 18:36). Civil religion is a linkage of God and country, and Jesus rejected such.

In Gethsemane, when Peter drew his sword in defense of Jesus, he was told, "Return your sword to its place; for all those taking the sword will be destroyed by the sword" (Mt. 26:52). This may simply warn that one taking the sword may die by the point of another's sword, but another interpretation is likely. All who take the sword are destroyed by that sword! With the point of one's sword one may take the life of another at the physical level, but with the handle in one's hand one takes one's own life at a deeper level. To kill another is in fact to self destruct.

Jesus' last-recorded miracle was the healing of he wound from Peter's sword. Jesus is a healer, not a killer.

As he approached his own death, Jesus declared: "Peace I leave with you; not as the world gives do I give you" (Jn. 14:27). Augustus Caesar boasted of Pax Romana, but the peace Rome gave was merely military dominance suppressing rebellion. Jesus offered Pax Christi, an inner peace where ego needs do not require that one person dominate another.

While Jesus hung on the cross, "One of the soldiers with his spear pierced his side, and immediately there came out blood and water" (Jn. 19:34). Jesus died with the point of a spear in his side, not with handle in his hand! War in the name of Jesus is nothing less than slander

2. *Some misapplied passages.*

Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to cast peace upon the earth; I did not come to cast peace but a sword" (Mt 10:34). The context shows that Jesus referred to result, not intention. Jesus thus warned that his followers may expect conflict and division, even within the family.

Again, Jesus warned of the cost of discipleship in saying, "Let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one" (Lk. 22:36). This is metaphorical usage. Taking him literally, the disciples replied, "Lord, here are two swords." Jesus replied "That's enough!" He did not say, "They are enough." He meant, "That's enough of that talk!"

Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is used to defend violence, in particular Jesus' making a whip from cords. Green syntax is unambiguous. He used the whip to drive out "both the sheep and oxen" (Jn. 2:15). Jesus did not strike people.

3. *Paul, Persecutor who became persecuted for Christ.*

Paul spoke directly to our question, "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to flesh--for the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly but mighty to



God for bringing down strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:3f). As a zealous rabbi, Saul of Tarsus held the garments of those who stoned Stephen to death (Acts 7:58; 8:1); and he used physical force to arrest people and bring them to trial. As a follower of Jesus, there is not a trace that Paul ever used physical force against anyone. He renounced violence and endured it at the hands of others (2 Cor. 11:22-33).

#### 4. *The Book of Acts.*

The early church in Jerusalem suffered intense persecution, but its response was non-violent, open resistance, and courageous proclamation and practice as followers of "the Way".

Peter and others were arrested, publicly flogged, and jailed. When ordered not to preach further in the name of Jesus, they boldly declared: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (4:19f). This is civil disobedience, putting the claims of God above those of state or religious structures. It accepted the consequences of non-violent, civil disobedience. This is the Christian answer to injustice, not war or violence but servanthood prepared for whatever the cost.

#### 5. *The Book of Revelation*

Revelation is a powerful drama addressed to Christians under persecution, with a call to non-violent resistance, assuring them victory through martyrdom (11:15;

12:11). The Lamb conquers the Beast through the "sword in his mouth" (1:16), not in his hand.

### III. The Legacy of Constantine

Until Constantine's alleged conversion to Christianity early in the Fourth Century, Christians suffered persecution under Emperors Nero, Domitian, and others; but they did not persecute others or engage in war. Involvement in the military was rare, the earliest clear trace in A.D. 173. Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian spoke against Christian involvement in war. Eusebius (A.D. 313) opened the way by a double standard for the laity (who might participate in just wars, pure marriages, civic pursuits, etc.) and clergy (celibacy, poverty, aloofness from the world).

Constantine credited his victory at the Mulvian Bridge to a vision of a circle in the sky enclosing words in the form of a cross, "In this sign conquer." Whether fact or legend, his boast reversed the Cross by 180 degrees, from the sign under which one may follow Christ in giving life to the sign under which one may take life. In this the Christian movement was more perverted to Constantine than he converted to Christianity.

Under Constantine, Christianity was granted toleration (311) and made a legal religion (Edict of Milan, 313), subsidized by the State. It soon adopted coercive creeds and persecuted "heretics" and then pagans, Jews, and Muslims. Having entered into Civil Religion," the

theologians adopted the pagan idea of "just wars." The first trace of the term "just war" appears in Aristotle, for wars compelling those "designed by nature for servitude" to accept their slavery. The Stoic Cicero added qualifying conditions for a "just war"; Ambrose and Augustine tried to Christianize such wars (love as motive, just in intent, just in conduct, exemption of monks and priests, etc.).

Once embarked on the road of civil religion and the pagan idea of "just war," there followed easy steps to Inquisitions, Holy Wars, Crusades, and even military support for the slave traffic. Even Hitler had massive church support, including the Vatican, Lutherans, and German Baptists. For the most part, the Church has made peace with war.

To the credit of the Roman Catholic Church, it has begun to reassess its centuries-old endorsement of the idea of "just wars," beginning with John XXIII and Vatican II. See Thomas A. Shannon, War or Peace? The Search for New Answers (Maryknoll, New York, 1980) for a Catholic debate on the issue. In Pacem in Terris (1963), Pope John said, "Justice, then, right reason and humanity urgently demand that the arms race should cease; . . . that nuclear weapons should be banned" (n. 112). From Vatican II Gaudium et Spes (1965), in view of the horrors of weapons today, comes the call, "All these considerations compel us to undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude" (n.

80). Paul VI, addressing the United Nations in 1976, said of diverting wealth from human need to armaments, "It is an age of aggression which amounts to a crime, for even when they are not used, by their cost alone armaments kill the poor by causing them to starve (italics original)."

Following the best of Anabaptist heritage, the Mennonites, Quakers, Brethren, and others have been speaking out against war, although largely ignored. When 91% in the USA approved "Desert Storm," it appears that Christians generally have made peace with war. Opposed openly by John Paul II and others, it was supported by the "court Chaplains" of Civil Religion. "Desert Storm" was even sanitized by terms like "collateral damage" and "infrastructure." Six months of insulting ultimatums were rebaptized "negotiation," even though our government publicly declared, "No negotiation, no linkage, no saving face." Unnoticed or unchallenged, the nation swallowed the anomaly, "We must show Saddam that might does not make right!" We did it by might, and thus validated violence as a means.

Once Pax Christi challenged Pax Romana, the Cross vs. the Sword! Now what prevails is Pax Americana, imposed by the world's mightiest military ever. The peace of Christ is yet an option, but only if Christ is Lord!

