

## **'Food For Thought' Article: Biblical Perspectives on War.**



### **An Introduction to the Complexity of War.**

Because of the complex ethical and theological aspects of war, as well as its sheer brutality, war does, and should, create difficulties for both Bible-believing Christians and non-Christian seekers alike. The confusion has not been helped by the Church's voice often being absent or ambiguous on this topic, and perhaps even more so because the Church itself has been implicated and involved in various wars down through the centuries.

And many 21<sup>st</sup> century people find that reading the Old Testament in particular (which has a lot to say about war), presents a stumbling block to belief in a God of love who became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Some even find it downright offensive. Cyril Rodd writes: 'In the Old Testament, war was not only accepted but religion commonly both justified it and intensified its evil. This view of war is irredeemable.' (1)

In order to avoid such difficulties, many are prepared today to say that the Bible is errant and doesn't actually represent God's view of war at all. However, deciding which parts of the Bible to accept or reject, quickly becomes a subjective, disputed and ultimately futile exercise. It is also simplistic and fails to deal with the complexity of war itself and also with the nature and character of God and His purposes.

But there is no denying the challenge to our Christian faith that war brings. The two world wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century killed many people's faith, especially that of men. I used to discuss this with my father whose faith managed to survive, even though he spent his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday being bombed on the beaches of Dunkirk and later on was in north Africa at the decisive Battle of El Alamein.

War is a terrible scourge and has become even more objectionable with the technological advance of weaponry. In Old testament times, weaponry was 'limited' to horses and chariots, bows, arrows, slings, battering-rams, armour, shields, swords and spears made of bronze or iron.

Today there are tanks, armoured vehicles, shells, cruise missiles, rocket launchers, cluster bombs, laser-guided bombs, barrel bombs, drones, attack helicopters, AK47's etc. And if these should fail to produce the required outcome, then warring armies can resort to the so-called 'weapons of mass destruction' i.e. chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

Moreover, all of the blood, mud, pain, death and destruction come into our living rooms in vivid technicolour with a warning that we may be disturbed by what we see. We are embedded with the reporters of war, can accompany those actually fighting the war, and share something of the experience of those innocent civilians caught up in the war. There is no escape; unless we choose to maroon ourselves on some escapist tropical island.

War also leaves a terrible legacy: buildings shattered, communities devastated, environments polluted, families grieving, bodies disabled, bitterness and hatred stored up for present and future generations, and mental scarring of the worst kind. More American servicemen and women committed suicide after the end of the Vietnam War than died fighting in it. The same was true for the British forces who fought in the Falklands War.

No amount of preparatory in-service training can fully prepare men and women to cope with the horrors of actually participating in real warfare.

From a human perspective, war produces its own 'fog' in that every war has a complex mix of causes, produces moral ambiguity on both/all sides however 'right' the cause may be, and is usually accompanied by a 'war of words' which can make it difficult to get at the truth of what has happened/is happening. Indeed, deliberate deception is one of the instruments of war.

Although, in a strange way, war can bring out the best in people, e.g. kindness, it also provides an opportunity for wickedness and brutality to be multiplied. Rape, for example, where the male penis is used in sexualised aggression, becomes a weapon of war. Some historians estimate that Russian soldiers raped up to 2 million, mainly German, women and girls at the end of WW2. If the victim becomes pregnant, then the conquerors can even see this crime as a way of propagating the desired race or ethnic group through the patriarchal line.

Jesus warns us that it is the 'multiplication of wickedness' before he returns, that will cause 'many to turn away from the faith' and cause 'most people's love to grow cold' (Mt. 24:6-13). We neglect Jesus' warning at our peril.

### **The Inevitability of War**

One of the first things to notice about war in the Bible is that there is an inevitability about it; it seems that war, like the poor and temptation, will always be with us.

Knowing how abhorrent war is, and how much it is an aberration of God's original plan for humankind, makes this statement about its inevitability all the more shocking.

But we only have to travel 14 chapters into the book of Genesis to see various Kings in active territorial warfare; fighting, fleeing, training special forces, capturing and taking away people and possessions etc.



In Old Testament times, Kings were expected to lead their people into battle. Every Springtime, they summoned their forces and went off to war. They waited for the warmer, dryer weather when their horses and chariots wouldn't get bogged down in the mud and harvest time would provide food for the troops (2 Sam. 11:1).

Another point worth mentioning is that a King was a representative of the nation. Good Kings maintained justice and were a focus for the cultural identity of the people; bad Kings led their people into idolatry, defeat, poverty and destruction.

So often today we see, or have seen, one King/ a Queen/ a President/ a Prime Minister who has set the tone for the whole nation, for good or for ill. Hitler, Churchill, Queen Elizabeth II, Mugabe, Putin, come to mind.

Most of the Old Testament Kings were bad. One of the exceptions was King Solomon whose name means 'Peace'. Although he too was a flawed character, for the 40 years of his reign, there was 'peace on all sides'. But even he, when he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, assumed war to be part of the normal rhythm of life as he muses, 'He [God] sets the time for love and the time for hate, the time for war and the time for peace.' (Eccles. 3:8)

Jesus himself underlined the inevitability of war when he said to his disciples, 'You will hear of wars and rumours of wars', and 'nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom' (Mt. 24:6&7).

This is why, I myself, have never been able to pray with any real conviction for 'world peace'. In this world, using human resources, it simply isn't going to happen. Only when the Lord returns as Judge to finally and fully settle disputes, will 'swords be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks'; only then 'will nation not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more' (Is. 2:4). World peace requires Divine intervention.

For now, we have to accept the words and wisdom of James, 'What causes wars and fighting among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members. You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war.' (James. 4:1&2)

Many wars, if not all of them, are caused by the fusion of national and religious identity, together with a desire for supposed racial, ethnic or tribal purity. This was at the heart of the two world wars, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, the Rwandan genocide, Yemen, the troubles in Myanmar and the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine. This gives rise to much 'killing in the name of God' with both/all sides claiming God is on their side. Even Putin quoted the Bible at one of his rallies recently.

However, all of this doesn't mean that we should not oppose war or not do all we can to avoid it. After all, Jesus said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be call sons of God'. But it does mean that war, unfortunately, is a fact of life in this present world. Peacemakers are only needed in the context of conflict and warfare.

**So although the reality and inevitability of war may be a problem for us, in both the Old and the New Testaments it is simply assumed to be the inescapable order of things.**

## OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES ON WAR.

Let's look now at some of the passages in the Old Testament which give us some unique and varied perspectives on this topic.

### A. The Song of the Sea - Exodus Chapter 15:1-21

- This is the celebration of the military victory of the Lord ('YHWH') over Pharaoh, of Israel over Egypt. It is written in the form of an extravagant praise poem which was sung by Moses and all the Israelites and danced to by Miriam and all the women.

The first and last verses mirror each other: "I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he hurled into the sea."

- Next, notice how YHWH is described in verse 3 as a 'man of war' (the literal translation of 'ish milchama). The Israelites always understood that, on this occasion, the Lord **fought for them** (Deut. 1:30) and the Egyptians realised that the Lord was **fighting against them** (Ex. 14:25).
- This military victory was achieved without any actual fighting by the Israelites themselves. They never engaged the enemy militarily at all. Moses had instructed them to 'stand firm' and to 'be still'; it was the Lord who would give them the victory (Ex.14:13&14).

The victory was achieved through a natural/supernatural meteorological event (the weather often being decisive in the outcome of battles) i.e. a strong east wind which drove the Red sea back so the waters were divided and the Israelites could cross on dry land. But just as the Egyptians were passing through the sea, the Lord caused the wind to die down, the waters flowed back into place, and the pursuing Egyptians were drowned.

There was also important angelic involvement (Ex. 14:19&20).

- This event demonstrates the Justice of God. This whole story begins with the oppression of a nation (Israel) in Egypt, an oppression that had gone on for 430 years and was escalating. Pharaoh had given instruction that every Hebrew baby boy should be drowned in the Nile. God was not going to allow this situation to continue any longer.

- It is vital to see and understand the spiritual dynamics of the battle that was taking place in the Exodus events. War, in the Bible, has both human military aspects and Divine spiritual realities. It is possible to understand the plagues leading up to Ex. 15 as a contest purely between the Lord (the man of war), with his representative Moses, and Satan, represented by Pharaoh. Pharaoh summoned up all of his occult advisors, sorcerers, magicians etc who were able to perform the first two of the 10 plagues (Ex.7:22 & 8:7). But then their power drained away and they realised that God was behind what Moses was doing and they couldn't compete. Unfortunately, Pharaoh didn't realise this.
- The Exodus events, celebrated in chapter 15, are the Old Testament equivalent of the New Testament gospel, the central story of God's saving work. The Exodus pattern is repeated and remembered throughout the Bible culminating in our deliverance through Jesus' death on the Cross, his victory over Satan, and his resurrection, ascension and glorification. The importance, therefore, of this Ex. 15 passage cannot be overstated.

## **B. The Rules of War - Deuteronomy Chapter 20.**

Because war is such a destructive activity and encourages the worst expression of human behaviour, attempts have been made to draw up rules of war which set clear boundaries and limit the destructive potential of war.

Just war theory deals with the justification of how and why wars are fought. The Geneva convention and protocols are designed to provide minimum protections, standards of humane treatment and fundamental guarantees of respect to individuals who become victims of armed conflicts. The International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Hague tries individuals for genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and aggression. It did, however, take them 12 years to capture, try and convict Ratko Mladic, the Bosnian Serb Colonel-general found guilty of war crimes and genocide in 2017.

The original Geneva Convention was adopted in 1864 to establish the Red Cross emblem signifying neutral status and protection of medical services and volunteers. As I write this, the Red Cross are trying to extricate civilians from Mariupol in Ukraine and other cities. Some of their staff were detained at a checkpoint by Russian soldiers who had never heard of the Red Cross.

When we turn to Deut. 20, it is no surprise that here we have emotional, personal, practical, environmental, ethical and theological guidelines for how and why war is to be conducted.

There are 5 things I would like to draw attention to from this chapter: -

1. One of the emotions that war engenders is fear, so this chapter begins with a reassurance from God that, because he is with them, there is no need for them to be faint-hearted, or to be afraid, or to have panic attacks when they are going out to do battle against their enemies. This calmness, however, is not something we may always find it easy to access in the face of threats!

Despite the daunting sight of superior forces, numerically, physically, militarily and defensively (Deut. 9:1&2), Israel was not to fear.

2. Provision was made for certain men NOT to go into battle. Anyone who had just built a new house, or just planted a vineyard or had just been betrothed to a woman or who was not prepared for courageous self-sacrifice on the battlefield, could go home.

This seems like military madness and certainly hasn't been adopted in the Russia-Ukraine war! But God's people often fought from what looked like a weak and vulnerable position and this reminded them of the necessity of God being with them and of him giving them the victory.

3. What we might call 'rules of engagement' were drawn up when Israel was to confront nations and cities that were outside of the area of the Promised Land (Deut. 20:10-15). First of all, an attempt at a peace treaty should be made through discussion. As Churchill once said, 'Jaw-jaw, is better than war-war.' Nevertheless the terms of acceptance were that the 'conquered' people would be subject to the Israelites, but there would be no bloodshed.

If they refused these terms then the Israelites would lay siege to the city with victory being assured. Under these circumstances all men were to be killed, but women and children, cattle and booty could be taken as spoil.

4. However, it is perhaps verses 16 and 17 that presents us with the greatest challenge when it comes to instructions from the Lord to 'completely destroy' the opposing nations who were occupying the Land promised to Abraham and his descendants - 'do not leave alive anything that breathes'.

This total ban (a giving over to the Lord of all things and persons, usually by destroying them) was limited to these 7 nations, the Hittites, Amorites, Girgashites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites who were ripe for judgement.

**We may ask the question, ‘Why were these nations singled out?’ and the answers seem to be: -**

- a. Because of their extreme perversion and the detestable things they did in worshipping their gods.

Sometimes I find that Christians can be very naïve when it comes to understanding the depravity of some human beings. You may wish to avoid reading what I am going to write next and go on to b., though these things are mentioned in the Bible.

I myself have counselled men and women who have suffered all kinds of physical and sexual abuse, sometimes tortured as children by their parents.

The people of these 7 nations were involved in vile, sexual, occult practices as well as sometimes throwing their children into the fire as sacrificial offerings. Incest and bestiality were rife. Their phallic symbols (Asherah poles) were everywhere (Deut. 7:5).

And so it was that God used his people as his instruments of judgement to eradicate this evil: -

‘Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practises divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritualist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord.

(Deut. 18:10-12).

‘Do not have sexual relations with an animal and defile yourself with it.’

‘No-one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations.’

(Lev. Chapter 18)

Some other reasons why these 7 nations were singled out for complete destruction: -



- b. Because of the influence the people of these nations would have on God's people, if they were allowed to remain. They might intermarry with them or begin to worship their gods (Deut. 11:16; 20:18).
- c. Because God's people are to be holy, set apart for the Lord as his treasured possession (Deut. 7:6).
- d. Because unless there was a complete break with the culture and practises of those nations, then Israel's covenant faith would be threatened with extinction.

Sadly, the Israelites didn't always follow the Lord's instructions for the conduct of war; sometimes failing to completely destroy the enemy (who later came back to bite them) and sometimes taking the spoils of war for themselves when God had instructed them to destroy everything. (See 1 Sam. 15)

And if we look at our own nation today, we see many of the sins God detests being openly promoted ~ abortion and immoral practices fuelled by pornography, to name but two. But it seems that the reality of judgement is hard for us to hear, it is an unpopular concept. Elaine Storkey writes: -

**'Many, even in the church, exclude God's judgement from their thinking and focus only on love. Yet God's love for the vulnerable is expressed in judgement on the evil that harms them.'** (2)

The essence of idolatry is that we construct a god we prefer rather than worship and obey the Holy God revealed in the Bible. And the tragedy that can come upon us all if we are not careful, is that even while we are worshipping the Lord, we can be serving our idols. (2 Kings 17:41)

- 5. The fifth and final thing I just want to mention briefly from Deuteronomy chapter 20 is that total war on the environment is prohibited. Fruit-bearing trees were not to be cut down and their wood used in siege works.

The unscrupulous devastation of the environment is another of war's tragedies.

### **C. David and Goliath – 1 Samuel 17**

This single fight between David and Goliath reminds us that the outcome of all Biblical battles is determined purely by the motivations of the participants and their relationship to God. Superior numbers or military equipment are not what matter.

The important thing here is that the Lord is with David who said to Goliath, 'You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.' (vs. 45)



And the motivation and purpose of what David was doing was so that 'the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel' (vs. 46). The Philistines, of course, had their own gods, chief of whom was Dagon, but they were no match for YHWH tseva'oth, the Lord of hosts.

#### **D. Spiritual Gifts, Non-Violence and Hospitality, in the Context of War – 2 Kings 6:8-23**

If you go to Bletchley Park, home of the code-breakers in WW2, you will see a plaque on the wall with a quotation from Shakespeare's Henry V. It says this: "The King hath note of all they intend, by interception which they dream not of."

In warfare, it is absolutely vital, if possible, to know in advance what the enemy is planning to do. To be forewarned is to be forearmed. The codebreakers at Bletchley Park were able to break the Enigma Code which was a cipher device used by the German military command to encode strategic messages. This proved to be especially helpful in knowing where German submarines were in the North Atlantic. They reckon this information may have actually shortened WW2 by a couple of years. Today, we use drones, spy satellites and cyberspace to inform us of what the enemy is up to.

In 2 Kings 6:8-23, Elisha, using his prophetic spiritual gift of knowledge, told the King of Israel time and time again what the invading king of Aram (Syria) was planning, and where he and his troops would be. So much so that the king of Aram thought there was a traitor among his officers who was 'leaking' information. He was not best pleased and sent a strong contingent to surround the city of Dothan, where Elisha was staying.

Early the next morning, Elisha's servant got up, saw the surrounding enemy forces and said something you often hear folks say today, 'O my lord, what shall we do?' But for Elisha himself, there was another reality that the servant couldn't see. Elisha saw that a greater army of God's horses and chariots was with them for protection and they had more 'firepower'!

The lack of perception on the part of Elisha's servant did not make the reality of the spiritual army any less real; it just meant that the servant couldn't see what Elisha could see.

**The point I want to make here is that warfare can either blind people to spiritual realities or it can provide opportunities for spiritual growth and the development of faith.**

George Campbell Morgan, commenting on this passage says, 'Faith is never the imagining of unreal things. It is the grip of things which cannot be demonstrated to the senses, but which are real. The chariots of horses and fire were actually there.'

In order to 'see', we need God by his Spirit to open our eyes; unless he does that, we remain blind. Today, as in Jesus' time, it seems to me that we have many 'blind guides'; people who are all the more guilty because they claim to be able to see.

Elisha prayed that his servant would be able to 'see'; he also prayed that the enemy would be struck with 'confusion of sight', that they would 'misperceive' the reality of things. God answered both prayers.

Elisha was then able to somehow lead the forces of Aram right into the heartland of Israel's northern kingdom, Samaria. Once he arrived there, he prayed again that the forces of Aram would be able to see the reality of things and where they had actually ended up! Sometimes there can be humour in war! When the forces of Aram recovered their perception and saw the reality of things, they must have been petrified; especially when they heard the King of Israel, Jehoram, repeatedly asking Elisha for permission to kill them.

And then here comes Elisha's amazing response. He says, 'No, don't kill them, instead, prepare a great feast for them and then send them back home.'

**So this passage also teaches us that the lives of our enemies are not expendable; the lives of enemy soldiers are no less valuable than our own. Even in warfare, the welfare of prisoners of war must be respected.**

Elisha found a way of ending this particular war without resorting to violence, and this practice of answering evil with good and showing mercy successfully changed the policy of freelance raiders from Aram towards Israel.

**E. The Lord of Hosts, the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the Lord of Military Forces (YHWH tseva'oth) – Psalm 46.**

God has many names in the Bible but one that we tend to avoid is 'YHWH tseva'oth'. Why this should be I have no idea, since it occurs more than 240 times in the Old Testament! Sometimes it is wrongly translated 'God Almighty' or 'the Lord Almighty', but it is a militaristic term meaning Lord of Hosts, Lord of the Services, Lord of the Armies.

These can be earthly armies e.g. God of the armies of Israel, or heavenly armies e.g. 'Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing round him on his right and on his left' (1 Kings 22:19) and, in the throne room of heaven, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts' (Is. 6:3).

And who can forget Jesus' words when, as he was about to be arrested, exclaimed, "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Mt. 26:53)

'YHWH tseva'oth occurs in verses 7 & 11 of psalm 46 (alongside the more familiar words for God - 'Elohim'- and Lord - 'YHWH') and they occur in the context of war. The nations are in uproar, kingdoms are falling and it is into this tumult that God breaks in as the Lord of hosts/armies to restore order and peace.

We are encouraged to take refuge in him and to be still and know that he is God.

**F. Warfare, Tears and Questions for God – Psalm 74; Psalm 79; the Book of Lamentations.**

I have just been watching a woman pouring out her grief over the death of her son in Ukraine. Through her tears she said, 'What kind of God would allow this to happen? What kind of God would allow this war to continue?'

These are good questions to ask, and they have been asked many times down through the centuries. They are validated in the Bible by the psalms, songs and poetry of lament, a genre of spirituality and revelation often missing from those who proclaim a happy, prosperity gospel and are caught up in one of the crises of our Western churches, superficial triumphalism.

Listen to how well some of these verses of lamentation replicate what we are currently seeing and hearing on our screens.

“They have given the dead bodies of your servants as food to the birds of the air, the flesh of your saints to the beasts of the earth. They have poured out blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there is no-one to bury the dead. We are objects of reproach to our neighbours, of scorn and derision to those around us.” (Ps. 79:2-4)

“We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be.” (Ps. 74:9)

“People have heard my groaning, but there is no-one to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my distress; they rejoice at what you have done.” (Lam. 1:21)

“Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.” (Lam. 3:8)

“You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through.” (Lam. 3:44)

One of the tactics of war down through the ages has been the deliberate targeting of cities: Dresden, Leningrad, Aleppo, Kharkiv, Mariupol etc.

Lamentations chapter 1 focuses on the destruction of the city of Jerusalem: ‘How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations.’ (verse 1a). Today, this tactic is called ‘Urbicide’.

Of course, all of the psalms, poetry and songs of lament also offer compassion and hope for the future, but if we simply take those verses and promises out of the context in which they are embedded, (e.g. ‘compassions never fail’, ‘new every morning’), we are guilty of misusing scripture and are even likely to alienate all those who are experiencing the trauma of war, or any other trauma.

### **G. When God Fought Against the Israelites – Jeremiah chapter 21**

The chapter begins with a request from King Zedekiah to Jeremiah the prophet, ‘Enquire now of the Lord for us because Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon is attacking us. Perhaps the Lord will perform wonders for us as in times past so that he will withdraw from us.’

However, Jeremiah had the unenviable task of announcing Israel’s Divinely ordained defeat at the hands of the Babylonians, the superpower of his day.

“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I am about to turn against you the weapons of war that are in your hands, which you are using to fight the King of Babylon and the Babylonians who are outside the wall besieging you..... I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm in anger and fury and great wrath.’

And then God offers a way out for the people besieged in Jerusalem. Even now, at this late stage, they have a choice: stay in the city and die, or surrender to the Babylonians and live. Even in judgement God is prepared to show mercy, but nevertheless there are inevitable consequences whenever sin is endemic in the lives of individuals and systemic in community and national life.

So four of the things we can learn from this chapter are: -

- Ongoing unconfessed sin compromises the Lord’s assurance of his saving presence in war;
- God is free to fight against his people if they reject his judgement;
- God can use other nations to execute that judgement;
- The God of Israel is first of all a God of justice, mercy and compassion who desires life and peace, not war and death.

### **NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES ON WAR.**

As we move from the Old Testament to the New, there is both discontinuity and continuity in how war is regarded. This gives rise to some paradoxes which we have to hold together.

#### **Discontinuity**

- The coming of Christ has transformed some of the key elements in the identity and expectations of the people of God. No longer are we defined by race or by land, but by faith in Jesus Christ.
- The Kingdom of God cannot be established here on earth by military means (Jn. 18:36) and there is no warrant for applying nationalistic aspects of the Old Testament to the New Testament church.
- Jesus was a man of peace who forbade the use of swords (Mt.26:52). He also taught us to ‘Love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us’ (Mt. 5:44). Verses like these have been used to justify a Christian pacifist and conscientious objector standpoint and these views should be respected.

## **Continuity**

- Although the word 'war' or 'battle' occurs much less frequently in the New Testament than in the Old ('polemos'- 18 times as opposed to 'milchamah'- 313 times), the whole of the New Testament seems to demonstrate again the inevitability of war written, as it is, against a threatening militaristic background.

When John the Baptist was preaching, some soldiers came up to him and asked him what they should do to 'produce fruit in keeping with repentance'. John didn't say to them 'You must leave the army immediately', what he did say was, 'Don't extort money, don't accuse people falsely, and be content with your wages.' (Lk. 3:14)

As we have already seen, Jesus prepared his disciples with these words, 'You will hear of wars and rumours of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen.' (Mt.24:6)

Paul used military illustrations in his teaching, 'Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No-one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer' (2 Tim. 2:3&4).

And one such commanding officer was 'Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.' (Acts 10:1&2)

Much is made of the ***Pax Romana*** during which the whole of the known world was, for the first time, under the effective control of one power – Rome. But it only came about after a succession of wars and assassinations and it was only maintained by means of a ruthless army. The Romans believed that the pacification of the nations through massive military force was the god-ordained goal of history. Perhaps we should also remember that it was under the Pax Romana that Jesus was crucified.

By the time the written gospels appeared in the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., there was a massive crisis in Palestinian Judaism that came to a head in the Roman-Jewish war of 66-70 A.D. The Jewish historian Josephus describes scenes of horrific violence in and around Jerusalem.

Mark certainly wrote his gospel during the darkest days of that conflict and it very much shaped his work.

- There would seem to be a sense in which God continues to use military means to bring judgement on nations. This is borne out of Jesus words to his disciples that because the Jewish nation in general had rejected him, Jerusalem would be destroyed and 'not one stone would be left on another' (Mt. 24:2). It was the Roman General Titus, the son of Emperor Vespasian, who fulfilled Jesus' prophecy when he laid siege to Jerusalem in A.D. 70, set it on fire, demolished it, and 1 million Jewish people died.

However, it seems to me to be very unwise for us to decide today which nations are being used to judge/punish other nations. Not unless the Lord gives us some specific revelation.

The prophet Habakkuk was in this dilemma. When God told him that He was going to use the Babylonians as His instrument of judgement on Habakkuk's own nation of Israel, Habakkuk said, 'You can't use them, they are worse than we are, they are completely immoral.'

But God said, 'I **will** use them as my instruments of judgment against you.....**and then** I will judge them for all **their** sins.'

When God was giving the Israelites the promised land, He specifically emphasised that He wasn't doing so on the basis of their own righteousness (for they were 'a stiff-necked and stubborn people'), but on the basis of the extreme wickedness of the 7 nations living there and also in fulfilment of His promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Deut. 9:4-6) God always fulfils His promises.

- Within any nation, God appears to take responsibility, through his appointed ministers in positions of authority, for maintaining law and order. If we obey the laws of the land and do good, then we have nothing to fear. But if we do wrong, be afraid, for the governing authorities do not bear the sword ('machairan') in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer (Rms. 13:4).
- Sometimes military force is the only language that will be understood and sometimes it is justified. Most people would acknowledge that it was right to fight against the evils of the Nazis in the second world war and most people, I imagine, would acknowledge that it is right for the people of Ukraine to fight to defend their nation against the Russian invasion.



- Adherence to the rules of war and the moral integrity of Leadership in times of war continue to be paramount.
- There may be a continuing paradoxical distinction between our own private, peaceful ethics (as laid out in the Sermon on the Mount for example), and our public national duties in times of war where the survival of our own nation, or that of vulnerable other nations, may be at stake.
- God, it seems, continues to call people to the vocation of serving in the military. Many of the heroes of faith listed in the book of Hebrews were warriors who 'became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.' (Heb. 11:32-34). As far as I can see, the Bible never abrogates that calling; for some men and women, say in the United Kingdom, their vocation is to serve God, Queen and country in the Armed Services. Indeed, down through the ages, Christians have often occupied top positions in the Armed Forces.

Here are some quotes from Omar Bradley (1893-1981), a 5-star American General who led the American landing at Omaha beach on D-Day, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1944, and who was a Christian: -

"War: A wretched debasement of all the pretences of civilisation."

"We have too many men of science, too few men of God. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom and power without conscience."

"We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount."

"Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we do about peace, more about killing than we know about living."

You may want to look at the website of the Soldiers and Airmen's Scripture Readers Association (SASRA)



- The spiritualisation of war. Although there is a special emphasis in the New Testament on the reality of spiritual warfare, I have put this in the 'continuity' section here as we have already noted that spiritual warfare was always a reality in Old Testament times too.

Warfare in the Bible has always had spiritual and military dynamics involving heavenly and earthly conflict, with angels often playing an important role e.g. Daniel 10:12-11:1 and 12:1; 2 Chron. 32:20&21. Prayer and praise were also key features in some Old Testament victories e.g. Ex.17:8-16; 2 Chron. 20:1-30.

And we have these two reminders from Paul: 'For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds' (2 Cor. 10:3&4). Also, 'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6:12).

- 'Peace' is one of the main words in both the Old and New Testaments ('shalom' and 'eirene'). However, it means much more than the absence of war; it is more to do with the presence of wellbeing, wholeness, completeness, fulfilment, safety and security.

The Old Testament prepares the way for the first coming of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. He is our peace (Eph. 2:14). However, the peace he brings is reconciliation to God and to one another through the offering of himself on the Cross. He hasn't yet promised 'world peace' or the 'absence of war'; this is still in the future when he comes the second time. Nevertheless, both Testaments reveal that God is a God of Peace and that we can know the peace of God (Judges 6:24; Rms. 15:33 & 16:20; Heb. 13:20; Philipp. 4:7).

Jesus said, 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid' (Jn. 14:27). The ***Pax Christi*** is very different from the ***Pax Romana***.

The peace of Christ comes to us in the context of wars, storms and all other traumas.

## **CONCLUSION: THE WAR TO END ALL WARS**

For the account of the 'War to end all wars' we have to turn to the book of Revelation: - "Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon." (Rev. 16:16)

"They (10 Kings) will make war against the Lamb ((Jesus), but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings – and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers." (Rev. 17:14)

"I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war.....He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.....On his robe and on his thigh, he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS." (Rev. 19:11, 13&14, 15a &16)

Armageddon and what follows seem to represent an occasion and a location for the grand decisive, and final conflagration between God and Satan, played out in a world war to end all wars. Some regard the hill 'Har Megiddo', in the valley of Jezreel, as but the gathering point for the final battle which will be waged in and around Jerusalem.

However, what we can all take courage, inspiration and hope from, is Jesus' victory over all opposition, guaranteed at Calvary, coming to ultimate and complete fruition. Jesus simply destroys all the enemies of God with his words.

I hope and pray this article helps you to formulate your own thinking about the complexities of war and to bring together perspectives from both Old and New Testaments. As Philip Jensen reminds us, 'This prophetic task is required of those who confess the God of the Bible as one who is sovereign over the nations and the righteous judge of all that takes place, both in war and in peace.' (3)

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George Irving – April 2022

- (1) CS Rodd, Glimpses of a Strange Land in Old Testament Ethics (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000)
- (2) E Storkey, Encounter with God (Scripture Union, Jan.- Mar. 2022, p. 111)
- (3) P Jensen, The Problem of War in the Old Testament (Grove Books Ltd., Cambridge, 2002)