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Elmer A. Martens

Voices for Peace in the Old Testament

The King of Syria was getting frustrated. He was trying to fight Israel, but every time he came up with a good battle plan, a prophet in Israel by the name of Elisha would miraculously reveal it to the Israelite army. The Syrian king with his army set out to capture Elisha at Dothan. But as the Syrians approached the city, God struck them blind in answer to Elisha's prayer. When the king of Israel saw that the enemy soldiers were now sitting ducks, he asked Elisha, "Shall I kill them?" The prophet said, "Forget it, king. Do not kill them. Give them something to eat and drink, then send them back to their master" (2 Kings 6:22). The advice of Elisha didn't amount to much in terms of military strategy, but it worked anyway. It produced peace. The Bible reports, "So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory."

It is quite easy to see that Jesus wanted his followers to be a people of peace. But what about the Old Testament? What does it have to say about the question of peace and war?

Bible-believing Christians must face the Old Testament squarely. When Paul wrote that all Scripture is inspired by God, he had the Old Testament in mind. Paul wrote that the Old Testament teaches, rebukes, corrects and trains people in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). Jesus certainly never put down the Old Testament.

War and peace

Many wars are reported in the Old Testament. Under Moses' command, Israel fought the Amalekites. Under Joshua's command, the Israelite army defeated the Canaanites. The prophet Samuel hacked Agag, a king, to pieces (1 Samuel 15:33). Who hasn't heard the stories of David and Goliath and the victory of Israel over the Philistines?

Are these reports meant to be instructions for us? In the Old Testament God commanded his people to fight. Doesn't that mean that he could also command Christians to fight today?

Under what circumstances did God command people to fight? Did he always command war? Were there any times when he gave instructions about peace?

There are voices for war in the Old Testament, but there are also voices for peace. Could it be that we have listened so closely to the war voices that we have missed the voices for peace? Before we tackle the hard question of wars in the Old Testament in the next chapter, let's gather information about God's will for peace.

Some of the voices for peace were prophets, and others were the wisdom teachers. The historical books of the Old Testament tell stories of people who followed the way of peace. One way or another, at various points in Israel's history God said a strong "no" to war.

Advice to follow peaceful ways

About 600 years before the time of Jesus a prophet named Jeremiah was asked for advice. The Babylonians had invaded Israel. The enemy had destroyed Jerusalem, burned the temple, and taken Israel's ruling class captive to Babylon 700 miles away. Jeremiah, however, stayed in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah wrote a letter to these exiles on how to conduct themselves in the foreign land. The exiles were nervous: apparently some of them even wanted to revolt against Babylon. Jeremiah's advice must have come as a surprise. He advised the exiles to settle down, build homes, plant gardens and "seek the peace and prosperity

of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers you too will prosper" (Jeremiah 29:7).

Jeremiah counseled the exiled Israelites to pray for the enemy—but how could they pray for Babylon if they hated it? Surely such counsel is a hint of what Jesus would say later: "Love your enemies."

Zechariah, a prophet who lived in Jerusalem after the return of the exiles, also counseled peaceful ways. His words, spoken in the name of God, asked the people to "speak the truth to each other and render true and sound judgment in your courts" (Zechariah 8:16). Zechariah then gave the crisp instruction, "Therefore love truth and peace" (8:19).

The book of Proverbs, likely written long before Jeremiah, gives advice on peaceful living. One example is Proverbs 25:21: "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink"—an instruction that goes against a person's normal impulses.

Examples of helping the enemy

One incident in which this kind of advice was applied during an international war occurred in the story of Elisha, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Another application came during a civil war between Israel and Judah.

Israel had won the war, but when the victorious officers returned to Samaria, their capital city, the prophet Oded had a message for them. Oded admitted that Israel was God's agent in punishing Judah, then added, "But you have slaughtered them in a rage that reaches to heaven" (2 Chronicles 28:9). Oded advised them to return the prisoners of war, "for the Lord's anger rests on you" (2 Chronicles 28:11).

In response, the leaders "took the prisoners, and from the plunder they clothed all who were naked. They provided them with clothes and sandals, food and drink and healing balm" and led them in peace to Jericho, a city in Judah. Didn't this match the teaching from Proverbs, "if your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat"?

These two stories illustrate the advice of Psalm 34:14: "turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it."

Prophets saw peaceful days ahead

While wisdom teachers counseled peace, God's prophets envisioned an age of peace. Isaiah, for example, painted an attractive picture of a peaceful era which differs sharply from the usual ideas of how to get to the ideal society.

It is from Isaiah's pen that the well-known verse comes:

*They will beat their swords into plowshares
And their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
Nor will they train for war any more (Isaiah 2:4).*

Isaiah's vision of peace is special because it pictures people streaming to the temple to learn about God's ways. Isaiah describes how "the mountain of the house of the Lord"—Jerusalem where the temple stands—will be raised higher than the hills.

By this Isaiah doesn't mean that Jerusalem will rise into the sky, but that it will be a major center of interest and that out from it will go God's word. Nations from all over will come to learn about God. What they learn will cause them to change their weapons of war into tools of agriculture.

This drastic change will come about because the world's people will turn to God. His will will now dominate and there will be no war. Obedience to God's teaching will bring about a warless society.

Many Christians feel that such a time of peace is predicted for the future millennium. And it's true that when God reigns in the millennium, war will be no more. But Isaiah's vision is not only for the end times. Isaiah explains that *whenever* and *wherever* people will seek God and his ways, they will, in obedience to God, lay down weapons and not learn war anymore.

The prince who suffers

There is a further difference between Isaiah's picture of the peaceful age and that given by philosophers and dreamers. Isaiah's peaceful age is linked with a person.

In his vision Isaiah sees the wolf lie down with the lamb and the

cow and the bear graze together (Isaiah 11:6-9). A baby grabs a snake to play with and doesn't get bitten. In the animal world, just as in the world of people, "they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain." Beautiful!

But that peaceful scene is preceded by a description of the "branch of Jesse," a reference to the Messiah, who is described as one upon whom rests "the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord" (Isaiah 11:2). He will judge people fairly. Indeed, "righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist" (Isaiah 11:5).

It is the Prince of Peace who will make the peaceful age possible. At Christmas especially, we hear of the promise of a child to be born whose name is Wonderful Counselor...and Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Isaiah describes the Coming One as a royal figure but says—and this seems like a contradiction—he is also a suffering servant.

Easter reminds us that the Prince of Peace bore our griefs and sorrows. God loaded our sins on him, and he carried them, says Isaiah, "like a lamb led to slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7). This servant was mistreated, but he did not fight back. The aim of his suffering was peace: "The punishment that brought us peace (*shalom*) was upon him" (Isaiah 53:5).

A great new word—"shalom"

Isaiah uses a word for peace that is very rich in meaning—*shalom*. This word is used in Isaiah 26 times; it is found elsewhere in the Old Testament a total of 240 times.

To translate it as "peace" is correct but not enough. *Shalom* has to do with a state of wholeness and well-being. *Shalom* speaks of harmony, health and a satisfying life. It means much more than the absence of war, though it includes that too. *Shalom means that all is well between a person and God and also between a person and his neighbor.*

When we read about *shalom* in Isaiah 53, we usually think particularly of the peace that individuals can have with God. But

Isaiah is thinking about society as well. Elsewhere he pictures a time when the Spirit will be poured out, when justice will live in the wilderness and the work of righteousness will be peace, and “my people will dwell in a habitation of *shalom*” (Isaiah 32:18, literal translation).

Nothing less than God’s Spirit will bring about this large transformation. The Holy Spirit works towards *shalom* on a broad scale. It must have been this passage that led one Christian leader to conclude, “You can’t have the Holy Spirit and work for war.”

Shalom and war?

This language about *shalom* speaks to the question of war in the following ways. First, God’s larger goal for his people, Israel, is *shalom*. But Israel was never only one ethnic group. Ruth, a Moabitess, Caleb the Kenizzite and Rahab the Canaanite became part of God’s people. The prophets see large numbers of Gentiles joining God’s people in the future (Amos 9.11-12; Isaiah 49.6). Further, God wants *shalom* not only for his own people, but also for all the people on earth (Zechariah 9:10).

Second, God gives peace because he is the source of peace. Wars come, as James explains, from human greed and sin (James 4:1-2). God, as we shall see later, is not outside the human tragedy of war, but his gift is peace.

The familiar benediction at the end of a church service begins, “The Lord bless you and keep you” and ends “the Lord lift up his countenance on you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:26). The Psalmist states, “The Lord blesses his people with peace” (Psalms 29:11). God offers *shalom*.

The way of peace follows directly from God’s gift of peace. Approaching the question of war from the viewpoint of God’s gift (*shalom*) and God’s goal (*shalom*), we have to conclude that human warfare contradicts what God is about.

The statements about *shalom* must be read together with the reports of war in the Old Testament. When a person has to decide whether to participate in war today, on what basis will he or she decide—on the war reports or on the goal and vision for peace? Which

of these is God's true, ultimate goal for human kind?

Given the whole story of God's dealings with the world from Genesis to Revelation, war is not the goal. On the grand scale of things, war is an "interim" activity. The ideal for believers is not something temporary but rather God's ultimate objective— *shalom*. Violence and destruction are contrary to God's larger purpose.

God says "no" to war

There are so many war stories in the Old Testament that the reader can miss the times when God says "no" to war.

An illustration of God's direct disapproval of war comes from the life of David. King David was a military king who fought numerous battles. Being a very religious man, he wanted to build a temple to honor the God whom he served. But the Lord didn't let David build the temple, for "You have shed much blood and have fought many wars. You are not to build a house in My Name because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight" (1 Chronicles 22:8). David's military campaigns disqualified him.

In a related story God said "no" to trusting in military might. David tried to count his troops, against the advice of his commander Joab. It took him 10 months, and by that time he knew he had sinned. A prophet named Gad came in the name of God to offer him a choice between several forms of punishment (2 Samuel 24:13). David's sin was to rely on his army for security.

At the very least, these two examples show that war in the Old Testament did not have God's unqualified support. It is simply not true that God thirsts after war.

Don't bet on horses

More than once Isaiah warned Israel not to rely on military strength. One time Ahaz, king of Jerusalem, and his people feared an attack from two northern countries. Apparently Ahaz wanted to get help from Egypt. But Isaiah challenged him to trust in God alone, saying, "have firm faith or you will not stand firm" (Isaiah 7:9, NEB).

Isaiah also pronounced “woe” on Israel when they depended on Egypt for the military help of horses, their equivalent to the MX missile. God said their strength should lie in quietness and trust (Isaiah 30:1-2, 15-16).

The Psalmist wrote that military might is limited:

*No king is saved by the size of his army;
No warrior escapes by his great strength.
A horse is a vain hope for deliverance;
Despite all its great strength, it cannot save (Psalm 33:16, 17).*

These warnings against relying on military might do not rule out some form of participation in war, but they do give a perspective. Though God sends Israel to war at times, he also speaks against war at other times.

One more thing. Stories written among nations surrounding Israel often glorify war heroes. By contrast, except for Joshua, the Old Testament does not hold up war heroes for praise in the way that other nations do. Israel made no war monuments to commemorate victories over foes. Instead, they put up ten stones to mark the spot where God performed a miracle in leading them across the Jordan (Joshua 3:17-4:9).

Stories of peaceful living

War comes from tension and conflict. Self-defense, vengeance, differences of opinion, economic imbalances or uneven access to resources, and conflicting beliefs are the things that lead to war. But differences can be settled without war.

Abraham and Isaac provide examples of how explosive situations can be handled peacefully. Abraham’s herdsmen had trouble getting along with Lot’s herdsmen. Abraham’s solution was to offer his nephew Lot the first choice of the most desirable grazing areas. Abraham was taking a risk, and it turned out that he ended up with the hilly area while his nephew took the lush Jordan valley (Genesis 13:5-11). He had the courage to surrender his rights in order to avoid conflict.

Isaac's story also involves a sticky situation. Two parties wanted the same waterholes. Abraham's servants had dug wells and apparently irrigated the area, making it productive. The envious Philistines closed one of the wells. When Isaac's servants reopened the well, the Philistines at Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen, claiming, "The water is ours." Isaac was rich and powerful and could have put those Philistines in their place. Instead he moved on and dug another well. Even when the Philistines harrassed him a second time, Isaac did not fight but moved on once more. Finally the Philistines stopped bothering him (Genesis 26:12ff.).

Did these patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac, perhaps understand better than modern "civilized" nations that war rarely settles anything?

Jeremiah preaches nonresistance

Jesus taught his followers, "do not resist an evil person." But long before Jesus walked the earth, Jeremiah preached nonresistance.

The world-conquering Babylonians were headed west, and Israel was just one more nation to conquer. Jeremiah advised Judah's kings not to resist the enemy (Jeremiah 27:11-12). Even worse, he told Zedekiah the king to *surrender* to the invading army.

It's not hard to guess what any patriotic Israelite would have thought of this suggestion. Government officials labelled Jeremiah a traitor, arrested him, and put him in a dungeon.

An unpopular position in the name of God and against government is sometimes necessary. In his day, Jeremiah represented a call for peace in the face of imminent destruction. Such a call is not unlike the modern call for peace in the face of communist advance or nuclear threat. Some have called Jeremiah the first pacifist.

Jeremiah, like Abraham and Isaac, wanted to meet the opposing party not with violence, but with peace. The rulers of his day didn't listen—and they perished.

There are voices for peace in the Old Testament, but you have to listen closely for them because they frequently get drowned out by stories of war. These voices tell us that God's ultimate goal is *shalom*,

and that war is only an “interim” activity. They tell us that when people want to obey God, they will lay down their weapons and not learn war anymore. Can you hear the voices for peace?