

Transcript of “Peace/Nonviolence”

A lecture delivered by Sarah Ruden at Pendle Hill, April 22, 2019,
as part of a three-part series of lectures, “Three Great Themes of the Bible”

Last week I was stuck as to how exactly I would talk about such a complex subject as peace both according to the Bible and according to our very pressing need for calming guidance and inspiration during these present difficult days. But in the end, all I had to do to get started was to open a Hebrew dictionary to the entry for *shalōm*, which nearly all of us are used to translating as “peace.”

Now, entries in dictionaries for ancient languages are set up in the way familiar to us from English dictionaries. The older, more literal, and more fundamental meaning of a word is dealt with first, and then the specific developments of the word. The Hebrew word *Shalōm* has seven numbered entries, and the absence of war doesn’t come in until number six. Number seven is just a rare, adjectival use of the word, meaning “in peace.”

The definitions of *shalōm* are a good indication of the problems we face in merely asking the Bible to tell us how to make and keep peace. If we’re talking about what we think of as the essentials, that is, pacifism, peacemaking, and nonviolence, the ancient world overall really doesn’t know what we’re talking about. War was, as a rule, like the weather: it happened, at given times of the year. There wasn’t anything

you could do about it happening; and there were quite few ways of dealing with it when it happened.

Just as for pastoralists there was a migration season during which to travel with the herds, and for farmers planting and harvest seasons with all their urgent work to do; so for communities of a minimal size and organization, there was a military campaigning season, for seizing or defending territory, and optimally for obtaining captives to ransom, sell, or use as slaves. Historians of the ancient world are unanimous: war was a productive activity, a regular industry. It was in fact *the* industry, the main way to get beyond the grinding hardships of agriculture and pastoralism,

As such, war was an integrated part of ancient societies. Many tribal societies today refuse to integrate teenage boys into their institutions unless they perform a raid on a neighboring tribe and bring back livestock or young women. If you can't deploy violence effectively to help your own group survive, you can't be initiated as a man; you can't marry and beget and bring up children; you can't own and use and trade and bequeath property; you can't speak in the assembly; you can't die respected and be missed and commemorated.

Ironically, if you're not properly violent, you don't have any of the qualities of *shalōm* in dictionary definitions one through five. 1) You are not whole or complete. 2) You are not safe and sound in body. 3) You do not have welfare, health, or

prosperity. 4) You do not have quiet, tranquility, or contentment. 5) You do not have the balanced and productive relationships you need, either with your fellow human beings or with God.

The story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11) gets its horror-story beginning, its eerie music of doom to ancient ears, when it records that David doesn't go to war during the time of year when leaders take their armies out, but sends surrogates to conduct a siege. While other men lead and fight in his stead, the king is walking around idle on his roof in the evening when he spots Bathsheba—the wife of one of these men—bathing, and sends for her.

His refusal to sustain his responsibility in making war underlies the whole sequence of events that turn his kingdom and his kingship inside out. Instead of winning a woman from the enemy (this is the proper way to staff a harem), he steals one from a key ally and lieutenant, Uriah. Instead of benefitting from this man's loyal and efficient services, he murders him. He reduces an able general, Joab, to a fearful, contemptuous co-conspirator in the murder, and sets him on a path of serial assassinations and rebellions; Solomon, David's heir, ends up having Joab killed in the Tabernacle. Instead of God blessing David with a son from his appropriation of Bathsheba, the couple's first baby dies, a punishment from God. It's only by going back to war that David can restore his position, the royal succession, and the power and stability of the whole kingdom, which will reach a culmination in Solomon's reign.

This story is based on events in the ninth century B.C. What began to change attitudes in the age of the prophets, starting in the eighth century, was—I think—a sense of how absolutely outmatched the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (now divided and working at cross-purposes) were by the war machines around them: the Philistines and Phoenicians, great sea powers; and on land the Egyptians, the Hittites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians—and eventually the Greeks and the Romans. The prophets as poets, preachers, and/or pundits were nearly all men, and men of position and education, but in the almost comical vulnerability and hopelessness of their small nation, they were moved to rethink what war meant for the people standing in the path of warfare and with no means to get away: women, children, the elderly, the poor, subsistence farmers and other laborers, common soldiers.

This reality jumped to my eyes right when I started to read the dictionary definitions for *shalom* sequentially. The very first example of a use of the word in the Bible, under the heading “completeness, soundness, welfare,” is Jeremiah 13:19. The quotation is translated, “Judah is wholly carried captive.”

Here how that line of poetry is done literally:

1540 [e]	הַגָּלַת hā-gə-lāṭ	shall be/is carried away captive	V-Hofal-Perf-3fs
3063 [e]	יְהוּדָה yə-hū-dāh	Judah	N-proper-ms
3605 [e]	כֻּלָּהּ kul-lāh	all of it	N-msc 3fs
1540 [e]	הַגָּלַת hā-gə-lāṭ	shall be/is carried away captive	V-Hofal-Perf-3fs
7965 [e]	שְׁלֹמִים: šə-lō-w-mîm.	wholly	N-mp

The sub-meaning under which this quotation falls, to start this section of definitions, is “complete in number.” The most literal way to translate *shalomim* here is as the plural that it actually is, “the whole people,” or every individual. Jeremiah is writing about the Judah’s defeat by Babylon, completed in 587, which, historically, he appears to have predicted and lived through. Babylon gave the final, climactic stomp

in the Jews' early history. The Babylonians destroyed the Temple. They appropriated and took home with them a large portion of the Jewish elite, much of this "Babylonian Exile" happening, in waves, even before Jerusalem was taken and its great shrine flattened.

Jeremiah didn't go to Babylon; he ended up in exile in Egypt. But his sense of the comprehensive destruction of the nation is very striking – *everybody* taken captive, an everything- must-go-clearance ending the business of warfare, and the big-box store left empty, with the wind blowing through it. When ancient conflict was on a more equal basis, it was normal for rich and influential people among the defeated to be spared, ransomed back, or incorporated in the conquerors' system of governance. Jeremiah might not have cared so much—his anger and grief in fact became legendary—had his own *cohen* or priestly class not been included in the scorched-earth treatment of Jewish culture. Judaism probably would have ended had not the Persian Empire defeated the Babylonian Empire in 539 and allowed the Jews to return the following year, taking with them the precious books that were to form the Bible. Later, the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt under Persian sponsorship.

Jeremiah wasn't around to see this renaissance; his experience of total war and near-genocide was one of near-total despair and abiding rage. And his influence helped start a seismic change in religion, a change that was eventually to affect how nearly the whole world viewed violence visited on fellow human beings. To really

get into Jeremiah's mind on this score, the Book of Jeremiah itself isn't as useful—I think—as another Book of the Bible attributed to him, Lamentations.

I read this poem in Hebrew when I was learning the language, in a wonderful course given by Joel Baden at Yale. He spoke of the power, the shocking immediacy of this poem, and I agree wholeheartedly. It's one of those Bible texts which does quite fine in translation, doesn't need a lot of special adjustment in any modern language, because its concerns are so deeply universal—though this became so only afterwards; it wasn't true at the time the book was written.

Up until them, literature had had almost nothing serious to say from the point of view of the conquered and the helpless. Lamentations was revolutionary in describing, relentlessly, heart-rendingly, what it's like to lose a war for good, and to lose it to a pitiless, contemptuous enemy bent on revenge for the trouble the conquest took: what it's like to be raped, to starve, to be homeless, enslaved—all without any recourse. I

Here's how Lamentations goes:

1⁸ Jerusalem has sinned greatly

and so has become unclean.

All who honored her despise her,

for they have all seen her naked;

she herself groans

and turns her face away.

⁹ Her filthiness clung to her skirts;

she did not consider her future.

Her fall was astounding;

there was none to comfort her.

“Look, Lord, on my affliction,

for the enemy has triumphed.”

¹⁰ The enemy laid hands

on all her treasures;

she saw pagan nations

enter her sanctuary—

those you had forbidden

to enter your assembly.

¹¹ All her people groan

as they search for bread;

they barter their treasures for food

to keep themselves alive.

“Look, Lord, and consider,

for I am despised.”

¹² “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?

Look around and see.

Is any suffering like my suffering

that was inflicted on me,
that the Lord brought on me
in the day of his fierce anger?

13 "From on high he sent fire,
sent it down into my bones.

He spread a net for my feet
and turned me back.

He made me desolate,
faint all the day long.

14 "My sins have been bound into a yoke;
by his hands they were woven together.

They have been hung on my neck,
and the Lord has sapped my strength.

He has given me into the hands
of those I cannot withstand.

15 "The Lord has rejected
all the warriors in my midst;

he has summoned an army against me
to crush my young men.

In his winepress the Lord has trampled
Virgin Daughter Judah.

16 "This is why I weep
and my eyes overflow with tears.

No one is near to comfort me,
no one to restore my spirit.

My children are destitute
because the enemy has prevailed.”

¹⁷ Zion stretches out her hands,
but there is no one to comfort her.

The Lord has decreed for Jacob
that his neighbors become his foes;

Jerusalem has become
an unclean thing among them.

I think it's a mistake to read as wrongheaded, offensive, and unenlightened the author's insistence that God *is* the enemy, the raging, punishing invader, and that those defeated in war are suffering terribly because of their own sins. Of course these are disturbing images, and we don't subscribe to the message in any literal sense. But the drama fits perfectly into Jeremiah's bigger message, which, along with similar messages of other prophets, is the basis of the main proposition through which we have developed human rights. The proposition is that every individual, no matter how weak and vulnerable, is a beloved creation of God, to be loved with our best imitation of God's love, not killed, not hurt, not exploited, not ignored, not trampled over in a military conquest. In the whole of his writing, with its most intense scenes occurring in Lamentations, Jeremiah is dramatizing that we must do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

The background, the big story of the time for Jeremiah, which he lays out quite explicitly in the Book of Jeremiah, is that the nations of Israel and Judah were at this point in their history still separating themselves from paganism. One very nasty and persistent habit was the worship of Moloch, a Canaanite deity to which children were sacrificed by fire. The burning of a beloved child as a supreme sacrifice—in practical terms, it was meant as a bribe for the god, to buy riches and power and impunity—is alluded to in the shattering Binding of Isaac story in Genesis (22). For everything distressing and ambiguous about the story, the upshot is clear: the real God, the all-powerful God, does not require such a sacrifice but rather stops it. No loving God, no protector or guide for his people, would allow anyone to go through with such an act.

The burden of Jeremiah's message can thus be seen as quite simple: the nation that destroyed helpless children, as a sort of commerce, can't grasp what it has done until its people are made equally helpless, until they themselves suffer from the commerce of all-out war; until they learn what it is to be mere objects used for what other people want—whether that's sex or power or material wealth, or just the freedom from the annoyances other people can create by existing. Until the citizens of Israel and Judah are comprehensive victims, they can't understand the horror of what they have done and the care they must take never to behave this way in the future.

This is the foundation of the Jewish concern with law and morality, which came to be widely admired in late antiquity. That's how the *shalōm* of being whole and well and intact came to be the *shalōm* of not being at war. If God was the ultimate whole, a Oneness, and meant the same for the creation, then obviously the highest, most self-determining part of creation, human beings, couldn't be at each other's throats, or at least not for mere materialistic and frivolous reasons.

If war had, at a minimum, to follow strict rules, to be part of the law, then peace was part of the law too. On a civic, interpersonal level, you didn't brain your thieving neighbor with a rock and take your goat back, but went to court, On a national level, you went to war only against someone like the Greek tyrant who defiled the Temple, as the Maccabees did in the mid-second century B.C.

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Okay, now we fast-forward to the early first century A.D., a very interesting time for the development of ideas about nonviolence. In some ways, it's the most unpropitious time for this in the history of the world, because of the tremendous prestige of warfare in the dominant Greek and Roman cultures.

Warfare was a normal productive activity all around the Mediterranean, but Greece and Rome had taken it to a new level. Powerful new techniques and equipment had turned sniping gangs into something closer to tanks. Greek hoplites (literally "armed," meaning heavily armed soldiers), who fought in an interlocked line several layers deep, championed city states, and when there was no opportunity for that,

hired themselves out as mercenaries. Under Alexander the Great, they conquered much of the known world. Roman soldiers, with similar armor but more flexible formations, conquered practically all the known world.

What's more, warfare was pretty comprehensively credited with law and order, prosperity, and functioning societies. The Romans had had about a hundred years of civil wars before Octavian put a stop to them with the Battle of Actium, in 31 B.C., defeating his remaining rivals and beginning the reign of the Roman emperors, in which commerce and culture and public amenities were spread in every direction. Now there needed to be wars only on the outskirts of the Roman Empire, to put down marauding "barbarians," because the Romans had effective control of everything within very extensive borders.

Except, whoops, Palestine. The Palestinian Jews drove the Greeks and then the Romans nuts. They weren't militant migrating tribes or raiders from the wilderness. They didn't have an army at the time of Jesus, or allow their young men to serve in the Roman one (and the Romans, picking their political battles, didn't force them). But neither would they conform as all the other provinces did, worship the emperor, build temples to Roman gods, exercise in the nude, adopt the whole panoply of Classical culture. Their attitude was "You'll just have to kill us," and by 70 A.D., when the Romans put down a major rebellion and destroyed the Second Temple, the Romans took them up on that in a pretty far-reaching manner. The Jews' answer to *that* was eventually to develop a quietist, rabbinical culture, concentrating on

scriptural interpretation and internal lawfulness and order in the face of never-ending waves of fresh persecutions.

I could say a ton, a couple more millennia worth, about the difficulties that Christianity had, in the face of this situation and in its aftermath, positioning itself on the use of violence, but I think I can make the most sense if I start with the Christian scriptures as their authors and early readers likely understood them. I'll start with the Beatitudes.

In the version that appears in the Book of Matthew only (Verse 9), there's a word familiar to us, "peacemakers" ("Blessed are the peacemakers"). The word occurs also in the Book of James (3:8). The trouble is that, in its Greek form, the word is a near-singularity and a puzzle. The big Greek dictionary lists only one previous instance, which is not much help here: in this historic account, a member of a diplomatic mission boasts that he and his colleagues are equally trusted as generals and as "peacemakers" should peace be desirable—that is, strategically desirable for the moment (Xenophon *Hellenica* 6.3.4). In the author's and the speaker's mind, peace carries no special value as opposed to war, as it tended not to for the Greeks. (The Romans at least celebrated the peace imposed by their dominance over the world, but they could be ironic and cynical even about their achievements in "pacification." One great Roman author put into the mouth of a rebellious provincial the words "*Solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant,*" or "They create a wasteland and call it peace" (*Agricola* 30). In Greek and Roman civilization, there was, plainly and

simply, no known function, public or private, of violence diffusion for its own sake. Neither in fact did Jewish civilization deploy “peacemakers”: there’s no such word either in the Hebrew Bible or its widely used Greek translation, the Septuagint.

So what on earth does the word mean? As usual in questions about early Christianity, it makes sense to look first to Paul of Tarsus, who in his Epistles or Letters, writing before the Gospel authors, set many of the priorities and laid down the basic theology. On the inviolability of the human person, he is certainly strong, but his big interest is sexual purity. As for violent crimes, he only rattles them off among many other offenses. Murders—that is, private, unlawful killings—are wrong. What was Paul’s first clue? Probably the Ten Commandments, a legal code dating back at least to the seventh century. *Kōmoi*—the traditional Greek riots that happen when a drinking party spills over into the street—are wrong, writes Paul: brilliant.

What’s more, Paul used metaphors of military deployment very approvingly, as in Romans 13, apparently helping set the stage for Christians, unlike Jews, to serve in the Roman army—an early example is Cornelius the centurion in Acts 10:13.

At least the Hebrew *shalōm* is a coherent word! *Eirēnē*, “peace” in Greek, is many times more vague when it appears in Christian scripture: it does occur many times, but it usually means only inner peace or the absence of squabbling, particularly as a mysterious gift from God. The word takes us no further than the Latin *pax* as used

by Augustine of Hippo three and a half centuries later. Oh, blessed peace—which is perfectly compatible with whipping a disobedient slave silly, with waging a just war, or with executing a soldier who refuses to kill on orders.

I can however, find in the so-called New Testament something more useful and more dynamic, and this something is inherent in the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount, but even more so in the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection. I'm talking about a holy negative, a space into which someone is afraid to go, because it seems to belong to God.

Quakerism had a role in developing this idea toward modern pacifism. The founder of Quakerism, George Fox, knew the Bible forward and backward; but, as regarding the Christian scriptures, he was a Gospels man and not a Paul man, and he was very impressed by the Sermon on the Mount. (or the Plain).

Now, the command in this discourse to offer the other cheek to a person who slaps you is less a command not to resist violently as to not presume you are right in a disagreement, whether it's a lawsuit or a personal quarrel. The whole set of strictures (Matthew 5:38-42, Luke 6:27-31) on this score is humorous, indicating that you should actually make fun of your opponent's certainly that he can settle this and be "proven" right. So, for example, when he wins a lawsuit and takes your outer garment, hand over your inner one and stand there naked in court.

But violence in particular takes the issue of standing back and not presuming on God's will to its logical conclusion. What can be a greater moral responsibility to take on than the act of ending a life or changing it permanently for the worst in a second? This is exemplified most tellingly in Jesus' own behavior in his suffering and death. He does not want to go through it, and prays to God to be spared, but concedes that God's will, not his own, must be done. Before and during the arrest, he does not run away or hide, does not call on help from his followers or anyone else, rejects Peter's defense with a sword, and goes quietly. At the trial he barely acknowledges his interrogations, and afterwards stands passively when he is being physically abused and humiliated. He does not protest, at least not to any mortal, when he is nailed to two crossed wooden beams and left to die slowly.

Sometimes, earlier in the Gospel narratives, he seems to predict his resurrection. resurrection. But in all the passion narratives, Jesus does not die cheerfully or defiantly, as if he knows what this is all about. At this stage, the story is written as if the resurrection is as much a surprise to him as to the women who come to care for his corpse and find the tomb empty. This would make him extra-alarmed that his arrest threatens to turn into brawl and the high priest's slave has his ear cut off. No one must get in the way of God's purposes in such a forceful, arrogant fashion, but instead leave the whole space open in which God can act.

The Quaker religion was more or less founded on such a negative. Early Friends felt that the rigidly fixed rituals and prayers of their time were a human presupposition

that, in the face of God's infinite power and love, could not be justified. They decided therefore merely to sit in silence and see what they would be led as individuals to say, and as groups to accept and act on.

Their turning away from violence, especially war, was a decision along the same lines. The reasoning seems to have gone thus: If we give ourselves license to do something as momentous as taking a life, or a limb, as God takes one, how could we be confident that we ever make the right choice? Therefore we never kill or use weapons, just as no one stands up in Meeting and says, "Here's what's *most* important!" or "*I* know the truth!" or "*This* is what the Bible means!"

The origin of the word Quaker is said to rise from this very fear of acting: George Fox yelled at a judge, who was considering condemning and punishing him for his religious dissent, that he, the judge, ought to "quake in the presence of God." The judge sarcastically called Fox a "quaker." This name stuck, as a description of the characteristic holding back of members of this religious group. They were afraid of trying to take God's providence out of God's hands.

Quakers, of course, aren't alone in this position. In general in the modern world, exemplary imitators of Jesus have not so much called on God to justify their causes as handed the judgment to God. Quaker and Evangelical Abolitionists would have grabbed guns if they were certain they straightforwardly represented God against slavery. Martin Luther King, Jr., would have given his restless lieutenants permission

to strike back against racist thugs, and keep striking, if he had thought he was, plainly and simply, God's instrument of justice; instead of the sacrifice by which his understanding of God's will could be tested, and his faith in God's love would at least be demonstrated.

But certainly, Christians don't have a monopoly on this ethic—in fact, the most striking thing about Christian pacifism is its very slow development; humiliatingly so in the fact of Jewish nonviolence through many centuries of persecution. But the very encouraging direction of pacifism in this violent and chaotic world is that it is an increasingly shared, increasingly accepted way of thought and belief.