

# National Defense and the Bible

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## Is war Biblical?

We can find hope in Isaiah's prophecy that as the knowledge of the Lord continues to flow over the earth, the nations will flow into His kingdom desiring to be instructed out of God's Law how to walk in His paths (Isa. 2:2-4). As a result, "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore," securing "an abundance of peace that shall endure until the moon be no more" (Psalm 72:7). Although war will continue to be a part of life under the curse on our fallen planet until the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, we are not left without guidance in this area, as God has much to say about it throughout Scripture.

### "Just War" theory:

There is a popular tradition, developed from Augustine through Thomas Aquinas to the present, that attempts to set forth the parameters for a just war. Some of this reasoning holds Biblical water, and some of it does not. This paper affirms the Biblical parameters solely and owes nothing to the traditional construction, except where it intersects the Scriptures. Augustine was steeped in Aristotle and humanistic ethics and didn't entirely shake their influence, but we should be able to do better.

### Self defense:

Although some Christians decry all war, even defensive war within our nation's boundaries after those boundaries have been violated, the failure of the civil magistrate (or in modern terms, the civil government) to defend its citizens from invading attackers is a transgression of God's eternal Law. We are commanded, "Thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor" (Lev. 19:16). Psalm 50 further expands on the idea of "standing idly by," indicating that it constitutes *actual consent* to the evil being perpetrated. And to consent to murder is regarded by God as being a party to that murder, based on (1) Psalm 50:18's elaboration of Lev. 19:16; (2) Saul of Tarsus's consent to Stephen's stoning at Acts 8:1 and his later application of this law to himself at Acts 22:20 when he confessed that "when the *blood* of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was *standing by*, and *consenting* unto his death" (to stand by Stephen's blood was to consent to his death); (3) Christ's charge to the scribes that, "you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed the prophets and you build their tombs" (Luke 11:48 ESV), which is the ground upon which He added, "the blood of all the prophets shed from the foundation of the world will be charged against you" (Luke 11:50 ESV), proving that consent to murder is to be party to murder, for which reason Christ imposed the penalty for murder on the consenters in this passage. It further follows that to fail to defend oneself is to consent to and be a party to one's own suicide, for (1) we are not to stand idly by the blood of our neighbor, and (2) we are to love our neighbors as ourselves; therefore, (3) we are not to stand idly by our own blood. The only exception is when we lay our lives down to save another (evidencing the greatest love possible in so doing).

## War according to God's Law

The Bible provides the moral parameters for self-defense at the national level.

### The civil magistrate & internal justice:

Rom. 13:4 speaks of the sword wielded by the civil magistrate that is to be a terror to evildoers. The context and wording *limit* precisely *where* that sword can act: *inside* the borders of the nation. The sword does not have *international scope*, because the sword of the *other* nation was *just as fully appointed* to execute justice on its *own* citizens (the precise teaching of this verse). The word for sword in Greek is *machaira*, the Roman short sword used for execution of Roman citizens *inside the empire's borders*. Paul himself was killed by one. *This* sword is the Biblical symbol for *internal justice*.

### Foreign conflict:

Rom. 13:4, Gen. 14:14-16, and Esther 9:2ff have been appealed to as justifying other than defensive war. Rom. 13:4 was examined above. In Gen. 14 Abram launches a private rescue of a kidnap victim (his nephew Lot) and restores stolen property, while in Esther 9 the certainty of the coming attack is backed by the king's irrevocable order and is thus *entirely actual*, not *merely hypothetical*. The truth is that the Bible forbids a nation from having the apparatus necessary to launch a foreign war. Deut. 17:6 forbids the king from "multiplying horses to himself," which in that culture banned the capability of conducting foreign war because a cavalry was needed to invade foreign lands, whereas an infantry (Ex. 17:9-10, Num. 1:2-3) was more than adequate to defend the homeland from outside attacks. On the principle that "the things that happened to them [Israel] are examples written down as warnings for us" (I Cor. 10:11), we must remember that all of Israel's military campaigns that she initiated independent of God failed and that all of Israel's legitimate wars were either defensive or involved the unique one-time disinheritance of Canaan (where God destroyed societies that had become exceedingly wicked after having rejected Him completely over many generations; God warned Israel: "Defile not ye yourselves in any of these things: for in all these the nations are defiled which I cast out before you: ... and the land itself vomiteth out her inhabitants," Lev. 18:24-25). The greatest and most righteous king in Israel's entire history, Josiah, was killed when he mounted a preemptive war against Neco II, Pharaoh of Egypt. In terms of domestic policy, Josiah did everything required in God's Law, putting in place the most amazing religious reformation Israel ever experienced. His undoing came when he indulged the presumption that military aggression against Egypt for the purpose of aiding Carchemish was a legitimate action. The tragic tale unwinds at 2 Chron. 35:20-25, where we learn that all the good Josiah had accomplished within Israel (2 Chron. 34:1-35:19) was undone by his initiation of this Biblically unjustifiable war. He died, and his nation went into exile shortly thereafter, ironically at the hand of a nation other than the one Josiah had wrongly feared as being a threat to Israel.

### Limitations on how war is waged:

God's Law articulates detailed instructions for waging defensive war that forbid total war and wanton destruction. Deut. 20:19-20 specifies that even fruit trees and nesting birds must be protected in a military campaign. General Sherman's campaigns against civilians and property during the Civil War were a deliberate breaking of these laws. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, America set the minimum age for soldiers at 18 years, violating God's command in Num. 1:3 that the minimum age to wage war is 20 years old. In these cases and others, American actions set ungodly precedents that she and other disobedient nations now continue routinely to follow.

#### **Conduct of soldiers:**

We read at Deut. 23:9 that when soldiers are called to action, they are "to keep from every wicked thing," to be extra punctilious to avoid evil actions, for the military camp is holy (v. 14). John the Baptist used this law to instruct soldiers in personal righteousness (Luke 3:14).

#### **Modern War Policy**

Modern states engage in power politics, power balancing, so-called "Realpolitik," to secure manipulative goals that are Biblically illegitimate. A prime example of the Bible's repudiation of such policies is provided at 2 Kings 13:14-19, wherein Elisha gave Joash the God-guaranteed opportunity to fully defeat invading Syria in five or six military campaigns (symbolized by Joash driving five or six arrows into the ground, each arrow symbolizing a military victory). Joash deliberately drove only three arrows into the ground, choosing not to defeat Syria but to keep it intact as a buffer state against Assyria, on the other side of Syria. Joash was playing modern power politics, and Elisha condemned his manipulation in the harshest terms possible (in fact, Elisha was *furiously* with him, vs. 19). In other words, *fear of Assyria* motivated Joash's refusal to *fear God* and do what was right, motivated him to act in terms of *international politics* and power balances rather than to trust and obey God in the interest of his own people. His fear of Assyria revealed his disbelief that God alone is sovereign, and was unfounded in light of God's commandment that all nations, as nations, are to become Christ's disciples (Psalm 22:27, Isa. 45:22-23, Matt. 28:18-20). In Isa. 19:23-25, the prophet foretells the future conversion of Israel's two bitter enemies, Egypt and Assyria, putting them on an equal footing with Israel as followers of God; Paul elaborates on this in Rom 11:25-26.

#### **National armed forces:**

Lev. 26:6 informs us that when a nation keeps God's Law, "the sword shall not go through your land." The citizens' militia referred to in the Second Amendment was based on Biblical precedents followed by ancient Israel when her kings were not apostate (e.g., 1 Sam. 11:8). America today needs the large number of armed forces we have *because* we have forsaken God, exchanging divine sovereignty for state sovereignty (Jer. 2:11) and self-reliance for reliance on the state (a vastly more costly and less effective course). And to this, Scripture attaches a curse: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man, who makes flesh his arm" (Jer. 17:5). The verse concludes by calling such an attitude "turning our heart away from the Lord." It takes strength of character to keep one's heart stayed on God, as the scribe Ezra testified when he led a perilous expedition to Jerusalem: "I was ashamed to

ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, 'The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him, but his great anger is against all who forsake him.'" (Ezra 8:22). God protects the nation that leans on Him (Isa. 4:5: "upon all the glory shall be a defence") while calling upon the civil magistrate to exercise its rightful jurisdiction *inside* the nation's borders. "Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain" (Ps. 127:1), for "horses and chariots" aren't sufficient protection (Psalm 20:7).

#### **Global war on terror:**

Biblical Law offers nations a basis for establishing extradition treaties for the pursuit of justice and prosecution of criminals crossing international borders. Extradition treaties exist primarily *because* nations recognize one another's spheres as inviolable, and because their signatories share a common notion of *justice* sufficient to undergird such treaties. America's pursuit of terrorists across international borders undercuts the basis for establishing Biblical extradition treaties in the future. Christians are commanded not to fear anyone or anything but God and by so doing are set free (Heb. 2:15) to think and act toward furthering Christ's kingdom. When we wage war based on fear of *terror*, which is an abstraction and not an actual enemy, we disobey God's Law, risk interfering with Christ's redemptive work on Earth, and remove our nation from His protection and covering.

#### **The way to peace:**

Most modern nations transgress God's Law by both maintaining the forbidden means of making war for purposes other than national self defense, and by seeking their own ends. This will never bring about peace. The only way to end international warfare is by spreading God's Law into all lands and making disciples of all nations through proclaiming the gospel (Isa. 2:2-4, Matt. 28:18-20). Zech. 9:9-10 tells us that the Messiah "shall speak peace to the nations." Since all power on heaven *and* earth is given unto Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:18), the strongest defense for any nation is to obey Him. "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord" (Zech. 4:6). Psalm 127, which is actually about national defense, teaches that *godly homes and children* (likened to *arrows*) are a nation's best defense, so that "the sword shall not go through your land" (Lev. 26:6). Psalm 2 puts it very clearly: "Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for His wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in Him." No wise and God-fearing nation would knowingly desire to stand in opposition to the Messiah's omnipotent work by engaging in international conflicts and wars. Any nation that recognizes its true King, and obeys its true King, will liberate itself from the enslaving doctrines of international power politics and international wars. One day, "the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). Godliness and national obedience are *by far* the strongest defense for any country.