

Biblical roots of peace and peacemaking

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Shalom, the Hebrew word for peace, occurs about 250 times in noun and verbal forms in the Old Testament. David Leiter identifies fourteen different meanings (in numerous genre types), though all relate to its core meaning: wholeness or well-being.¹

Old Testament shalom roots for New Testament peace teachings

Some Old Testament shalom texts are the roots of New Testament peace teachings. According to Isaiah 32:17, “The effect of

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righteousness will be peace.” James 3:18 reverses the order: “A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”² This shift illustrates how the Old and New Testaments complement each other’s way of framing the relationship between peace and justice.

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’” (Isa. 52:7). In the Aramaic, “Your God reigns” reads “The kingdom of God will be revealed” (so also for Isaiah 40:9: “Behold your God”). Since Aramaic was the language of Jesus’s culture, Jesus’s proclamation of the kingdom of God is rooted in this text proclaiming the gospel of peace and salvation. The exact phrase in the Septuagint for “gospelizing peace” (a literal translation of the Greek) appears in Acts 10:36, summing up the content of Jesus’s proclamation: “You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.” The same term occurs in Ephesians 2:17 and 6:15.

Notably, 1 Peter 2:22 quotes Isaiah 53:9—“And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although

he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth”—for warrant, and 1 Peter 2:24 uses Isaiah 53:5—“But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed” (ESV). First Peter 2:18–25 thus draws on Isaiah 53 to warrant instruction to undergo suffering in the face of injustice rather than repay evil with evil. To authorize his

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admonition “Do not return evil for evil, or abuse for abuse; but on the contrary, repay with a blessing,” 1 Peter 3:9–12 quotes Psalm 34:12–16a, which includes the words “let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it” (1 Pet. 3:11).

“I will make with them a covenant of peace. . . . I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing” (Ezek. 34:25–26; compare Ezek. 37:26 and Isa. 54:10; all three texts promise a covenant of peace). My major study of peace in the New Testament, titled *Covenant of Peace*,

highlights this crucial link between the Testaments. I explain how each New Testament book or corpus contributes to peace theology.³

Many other Old Testament texts are crucially relevant for peacemaking, even though the word *shalom* does not occur in them. These stories also build the bridge between the Testaments. The first is the creation portrait of Genesis 1 and 2. God creates a paradise, a “peaceable ontology of creation,” as David Neville describes it.⁴ But human sin (Genesis 3) disrupts this peaceable ontology. That peace is regained only through the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation-reign of Messiah Jesus, envisioned fully in Revelation 21 and 22. The long narrative between these peaceable bookends is filled with murders, warfare killing, and many sinful deeds (lies, deception, rapes, torture, and infidelities—both in worship of false gods and to sexual covenants). Jesus predicts that “wars and rumors of wars” will continue until the end (Mark 13:7; compare Luke 21:9).

Also in the Old Testament are many stunning peacemaking stories, most notably the related stories of Elisha healing Naaman

and throwing a banquet for the invading Arameans (2 Kings 5 and 6). Other stories exemplify peacemaking: Isaac's handling of disputes over wells (Gen. 26:12–22), the welcoming of Ruth into the messianic Boaz lineage, and the Jonathan-David bond of covenant loyalty, in which Jonathan risks his life to protect David from Saul's efforts to kill him.

Shining just as brightly are numerous prophetic oracles that envision a peaceable future, most notably Isaiah 2:1–4 and Micah 4:1–5. These similar visionary texts of “beating swords into plowshares” stir the people's hope for universal shalom. Many nations will stream to Jerusalem, for from Zion the “word of the LORD will go forth: nations will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” What a vision! When will it come to pass?

Israel, meanwhile, secured its borders, stockpiled weapons, and marginalized the prophets, achieving a situation quite the opposite of sitting under fig trees in peace (Palestinians today, losing their fig trees, know). Isaiah reprimands King Ahaz as he musters troops for war: “If your faith is not sure, you will not be secure” (Isa. 7:9b).⁵ What Israel lacked then, and nations lack today, is

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trust in the LORD and the prophetic word. Where does fulfillment of these prophetic hopes come from? How do we get to a restored ontology of God's creation peace?

In short, the answer is through Jesus Messiah, fulfiller of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus does not bring a theory of pacifism or nonviolence. Rather, he intervenes in the cycle of violence by exposing it. He inaugurates God's reign and promises eternal life to believers. New Testament literature is laced

with Old Testament citations, for it is only in the light of the Old that the New shines. In one sense, Rudolf Bultmann was correct when he spoke of the relation between the Testaments as miscarriage. But in a deeper sense he was profoundly wrong. For without the Old, the New is unintelligible. We end up with a different gospel (as occurs in most of the second-century “gospels” that are unhooked from the Old Testament).

Peace in the New Testament

In the New Testament, *eirēnē* in its noun and verbal forms occurs 100 times, appearing in every book except 1 John. Numerous correlative teachings support the peace emphasis.

Peacemaking and love of enemies. Jesus blesses peacemakers (Matt. 5:9), naming them children of God. The term *peacemakers* connotes positive action. It does not point to thinking about peace or avoiding evil but proactively seeks to make peace.

This seventh Beatitude is linked to one of Jesus's most distinctive teachings—namely, his command to love enemies (Matt. 5:44–48; compare Luke 6:27–36). The two texts are linked by an identity mark: children of God. Those who love enemies do so because “your Father in heaven” does. Jesus links peacemaking to God's moral character. Children bear the image of the parent. Being children of peace is the gospel's identity-mark for those who follow Jesus. Jesus called disciples in order to train them in this new identity and action; see Mark 9:50: “be at peace with one another.” This is Jesus's catechism of the disciples.

Loving enemies is beyond human capacity. The natural human response to enemies is to avoid them, tolerate them, or scheme to wipe them out. Rarely do people respond to an evildoer with intent to convert the enemy into a friend. But this is at the core of Jesus's gospel. Its uniqueness shines!

Do not resist one who does evil, but overcome evil with good; do not return evil for evil (Matt. 5:39–41; Rom. 12:17, 19–21; 1 Pet. 3:9; 1 Thess. 5:15). Jesus and apostles Paul and Peter together command nonretaliation. Paul adds the positive initiative: overcome evil with good.

It is not clear how Matthew 5:39 should be translated. The descriptor “the evil (one)” is in the dative and could mean “by evil means”; thus, “Do not resist by evil means.” Some interpreters (John Ferguson, Clarence Bauman) propose this translation. But this leaves “Do not resist” without a direct object (whom or what is to be resisted?). Walter Wink retains the direct object: the evildoer. Jesus's command is followed by five specific examples (5:39–42): turn the other cheek, go the second mile, give your cloak as well, loan and don't expect return, and give to one who begs. How would the hearers respond to such novel steps toward peacemaking? Living under Roman occupation, many undoubt-

edly developed “a rankling hatred for a system that subjects them to humiliation by stripping them of their lands, their goods, finally their outer garment.”⁶ This novel response to evil intends to disarm enmity in social relationships, even in a sociopolitical system in which injustice abounds. The shock tactics expose the indignity of the oppression.

According to Wink, “do not resist” (*antistēnai*) means “do not resist violently.” The examples show a form of nonviolent resistance whereby the poor and oppressed ones claim their dignity and open the door to a new relationship between oppressor and oppressed. The enemy is disarmed by a surprise response: turn the other—left—cheek to one who insultingly hits you with his

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backhanded right-fist slap on your right cheek; when sued for your coat in court give your undergarment also, and thus stand naked; and offer to go a second mile when required to carry a Roman soldier’s load one mile.

Such response throws the opponent off balance, introducing a third way response to instinctive fight or flight reactions; the situation is radically redefined. This approach of nonviolent resistance does not guarantee that the other party will refrain from violence or

that there will be no casualties. It rather creates a new paradigm by using “moral jujitsu” to disarm the enemy. Wink’s insight is valid as long as the third way response is not tactical, used in order to win, but arises from a genuine interest in the other’s welfare, expressing love of enemy.

Luise Schottroff connects not resisting evil with love of enemy—key to proper interpretation of “do not resist,” I believe. She writes that Matthew 5:38–41 “commands the refusal to retaliate as well as prophetic judgment of violent persons. . . . As imitators of God, Christians are supposed to confront the enemies of God with his mercies. . . . Loving one’s enemy is the attempt to change the violent person into a child of God through a confrontation with the love of God. That is, love of one’s enemy can be concretely presented as the prophetic proclamation of the approaching sovereignty of God.”⁷ Especially persuasive is

Schottroff's connecting "not resist" and "love your enemy" to another important strand of New Testament teaching: God alone in sovereign justice and mercy bears responsibility to deal with those who do evil, through either judgment or mercy that transforms the heart of the evildoer. Our human task is peacemaking, a daunting but life-giving challenge.

Jesus taught against the use of the sword (Matt. 26:52–53; Luke 22:49–52; John 18:10–11, 36; compare 2 Cor. 10:4). When Peter uses a sword to cut off the ear of the high priest's servant with the intention of defending Jesus, Jesus's response is clear and definitive: "No more of this!" (Luke 22:49–51). Rather than responding with violent self-defense, Jesus heals the ear, an act more broadly symbolic of healing the evil of violence. In his arrest, trial, and crucifixion as a criminal, Jesus remains defenseless (Luke 23:35), though in John's Gospel Jesus's response to the high priest's query evokes a violent response from one policeman. Jesus renounces the sword as a weapon to defend justice. His defenselessness seeks to make peace (Matt. 15:18–19; 5:21–22; 1 John 3:15). In John, Jesus's extended verbal tiff with Pilate, while not violent, is politically stunning: Pilate, more than Jesus, is on trial.

New Testament writers do teach standing against evil, through means similar to that of Exodus 14:14: trust in God and clothe yourselves with God's armor. Stand against all the wiles of the devil with truth, righteous justice, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and "the word of God" (Eph. 6:10–18). In his third temptation (Matt 4:8–10), Jesus resists the devil's offer to give him the kingdoms of the world. At his arrest he refuses to call twelve legions of angels to defend himself against the Romans who arrested him. Jesus proclaims the enduring kingdom of God; earthly kingdoms propped up by military power are doomed to pass. God's kingdom is of a different order ("from above," in John); in it, love and peacemaking mark the path to God's peace for the church and the world.

Paul's distinctive contribution. Paul contributes a novel and significant title for God: "God of peace," occurring seven times. Four are in benedictions (1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Thess 3:16; Rom. 15:33; Phil. 4: 9; also Heb. 13:20); two more are assurances (Rom. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11); and one is a moral descriptor of God (1 Cor. 14:33).

On this basis of this unique title for God, Paul calls believers to be agents of reconciliation that is initiated by, grounded in, and empowered by God's own initiative of reconciliation in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17–20). Peace and reconciliation are linked to Jesus Christ, anchored in Jesus's death on the cross (Eph. 2:11–22). No separation can be made between establishing peace with God and establishing peace between alienated Jews and Gentiles. The cross welds together the vertical and horizontal. Reconciliation is God's work in accordance with Jesus's way of peacemaking that exemplifies suffering servanthood. The "God of peace" commissions Jesus's followers to be ambassadors of reconciliation, to follow the path of suffering for the gospel, and to imitate Jesus's peacemaking.

Jesus's call to discipleship and Paul's "in Christ" identity of believers (compare Jesus as vine and believers as branches in John 15) are both anchored in God's purpose of salvation for all people and the unity of all in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). The

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nature of the church as one body in Christ means that Christians don't fight against other Christians in nationally authorized wars. Objection to participate in war is not an add-on to the gospel but is the gospel in the face of warring nations. Further, it is through uniting in Christ those who had been enemies (Eph. 2:11–22) that the church witnesses to the powers (Eph. 3:9–10). God's redeemed people are to be the conscience of the world, being one in Christ and renouncing desires that lead to violence and war. From this context of moral discernment, the church

witnesses to the principalities and powers, to beckon them to strive toward the decisions that decrease violence and human suffering and maximize the shalom well-being of the nations with compassionate justice for all.

Peace through justification by faith (Gentile inclusion). This distinctive Pauline thesis is often misconstrued as only a personal relationship with God. But Romans 5 is addressed to the believing community. Yes, peace with God is personal, and justification is also personal. On the one hand, Paul's extended exposition of

justification by faith appeals to Abraham's faith (Gen. 15:6) for Old Testament warranting, and it also readily incorporates a more political text, Psalm 85:10: "justice and peace will kiss each other." Why so? Because the Greek New Testament has only one word (*dikaiosynē*) for "justice" and "righteousness." Wherever one occurs, the other could substitute. The impetus driving Paul's view of justification is the inclusion of Gentiles (compare God's promise to Abraham to make of Abraham's descendants a blessing to the nations). Because justification is by faith, and not through the law or by works, the two peoples become one. The wall falls and kills the enmity.⁸ This peace is precious, made possible by Jesus crucified via the collusion of Jews and Gentiles (Pilate). While that event exposed violence from both sides, God's resurrection vindicates Jesus's peaceable life and forms faith-unity of former enemies. Was Jesus scapegoated? Yes, but this cross— Paul proclaims—is the power of God unto salvation, the greatest subversion of symbol in all history (but horrors! when the cross reverted to become a fighting symbol). Indeed, justification is a social doctrine, a powerful theology empowering peacemaking between enemies.

Peace and mission in John's Gospel. John's "great commission" interweaves peace, mission, and forgiveness of sins (John 20:19–23). The same is implied in Jesus's journey through Samaria (John 4).⁹

Peace at last, in the new heavens and earth. Revelation, despite its terrifying apocalyptic imagery, has its interpretive key in the Lamb slain for the sins of humanity. Seven times choirs praise God and the Lamb for triumph over evil. The slain Lamb as peacemaker conquers evil. Those who through patient endurance faithfully resist the empire's idolatries witness to the Lamb, at the risk of martyrdom. Faithful witness to the Lamb climaxes in God's gift of a new city come down from new heavens to a new earth.

Conclusion

The biblical roots of peace are many and deep. Of the many texts referred to here, Acts 10:36 (with Eph. 2:17 and 6:15) describing Jesus's ministry as preaching peace (echoing Isa. 52:7) may be the central root growing down to the water. The promised "covenant of peace" fulfilled in the New Testament (new covenant) is

another. Paul's "God of peace" title is a strong, lateral root. John's account of Jesus's great commission ("so I send you") framed by "Peace be with you" (20:19, 21) is another lateral curving down deep. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." This, with "love of enemy" and "do not resist violently the evildoer," are roots that nourish our faith in God's peaceable reign and anchor our growth as people of reconciliation.

Notes

¹ David A. Leiter, *Neglected Voices: Peace in the Old Testament* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007), 21–32.

² My translation.

³ Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

⁴ David J. Neville, *A Peaceable Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) 190–91. Neville connects John's prologue to Genesis 1–2.

⁵ My translation.

⁶ Walter Wink, "Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus' Third Way," in *Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 104–11.

⁷ Luise Schottroff, "'Give to Caesar What Belongs to Caesar and to God What Belongs to God': A Theological Response of the Early Christian Church to Its Social and Political Environment," in *Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation*, ed. Swartley, 232. Schottroff correlates this teaching with Paul's in Romans under the topic, "Make Room for God's Wrath: Romans 12:14–21," and she takes up a study of Romans 13:1–7. She presents a persuasive case that Matthew 5:38–48 and Romans 12–13 are entirely compatible and represent a consistent pattern of early Christian response to evil.

⁸ See Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), ix, 90.

⁹ This subject deserves a longer discussion; see Willard M. Swartley, *John*, *Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2013), 134–36, 139–41, 457–63, 467–69; and Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, chapter 11.

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