

Milhamah: The Bible and Military Service

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These are the main issues I will address:

1. Does the Bible view all killing as murder?
2. How does the Bible view war and the role of the people of God in war?
3. Does the New Testament speak positively or negatively of military service?

I. Does the Bible view all killing as murder?

Thou Shalt Not Kill

Does the Bible equate all killing of humans with murder? Let's look at the data:

Deut 5:17; Exod 20:13: *You shall not ever commit murder.*

- The term רצח means murder, not all types of killing. The punishment for murder was execution.
- The term is also used to mean accidental, personal, non-willful killing, such as when an ax-head flies off and accidentally strikes one's friend. (Deut 19:4-6; Josh 20:3). Cities of refuge were established for the protection of those who accidentally killed someone else.

Are there any killings of humans which are authorized or not condemned in the Bible? Yes. Here are some examples:

1. Capital punishment for a variety of crimes. This could be carried out in a variety of ways, and Israel was instructed to carry this out.

- A relative of a murder victim was expected to kill the murderer
 - The "blood-avenger" was not a murderer when he killed the murderer. (Num 35:30)
 - If someone who accidentally killed someone leaves a city of refuge, the blood-avenger may kill him without guilt (Num 35:27).

2. Killing a thief who invades your home at night. (Exod 22:2-3a)

- You were not permitted to kill a thief who invaded your home during the day.

3. Someone who falsely accuses someone of a capital crime was to be executed as if they had committed that crime.

4. A wide variety of military activities, including

- Using trained fighting men to deliver people. (Abraham [Gen 14:14f])
- Fighting in behalf of the nation as part of an organized (or even disorganized) military. This could be to defend the nation or even take more territory (i.e., the Conquest [Joshua; early Judges]).
- Individual guerilla activities to harrass and weaken oppressing powers. (Samson [Judg 13-16], Shamgar [Judg 3:31; 5:6]).
- Assassination of foreign oppressors (Ehud to Eglon [Judg 3:15-30]; the Deborah story, including Jael [Judg 4-5]).
- Carrying out a coup d'etat when sanctioned by a true prophet, including the assassination of a corrupt king (Jehu [1 Kgs 19:15-17; 2 Kgs 9-10]).
- Helping allies who have been attacked (the Gibeonites [Josh 10:6f]).
- Punishing a tribe when they defend people who have committed vile acts (Benjamin).
- Carrying out חרם, holy war.

5. Accidentally killing someone (as noted above).

Thus the commandment, *Thou shalt not kill*, has often been misunderstood. This commandment refers specifically to murder, rather than covering all killing of humans. (It also is not a reference to animals or trees.) The fact that Deuteronomy prohibits murder, has rules for war, calls for capital punishment for particular crimes, and speaks of protection of one who accidentally commits homicide means that either (a) the Bible is self-contradictory; or (b) not all killing is viewed as murder.

II. How does the Bible view war and the role of the people of God in war?

- The Bible assumes God's people will encounter military conflict from time to time.
 - The Bible assumes war will occur, rather than trying to provide a philosophical justification for it.
 - God provided Israel with rules for warfare, including who could be excused from service (Deut 20; but cf. Eccl 8:8 [an observation]).
 - A distinction is made in Deut 20 between war with those outside of the Promised Land and the conquest.
- Sometimes God did tremendous miraculous actions to help Israel in war. (These were often connected with Israel also taking military action):
 - Psy-ops, providing the sound of marching in the treetops (2 Sam 5:24).
 - Blinding the enemy (2 Kgs 6:18f).
 - Having the sun stand still to make the day longer (Josh 10:9-14).
 - Sending an angel to kill 180,000 Assyrians (2 Kgs 19:35; 2 Chr 32:21).
 - Knocking down the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6).
 - Sending hornets (Exod 23:28; Deut 7:20; Josh 24:12) and hailstones (Josh 10:11).
 - God told king Jehoshaphat to put the singers out in front of others, and the enemy killed themselves (2 Chr 20:14f).
 - God sometimes gave Israel the intel they needed to defeat their enemies:
 - God gave Elisha inside information (2 Kgs 6:11-12).
 - God used Jonah to give Jeroboam II advice which helped the king retake a lot of lost territory [2 Kgs 14:25]).
 - God was willing to help them conquer the land, even when they had not been completely obedient (Deut 9:1f; but see Deut 28 for what would happen if the nation was consistently disobedient to God).

- Other times God expected Israel to fight, although He would still bless them.
 - Jehoshaphat also went to war using conventional means, not putting the singers first (1 Kgs 22; 2 Kgs 3:7f).
 - One would put a thousand to flight (Deut 32:30;).
 - They are commanded to conquer the land (Deut 1:21; Num 33:51f; Deut 20:16-17).
 - Israelites in Judges were expected to learn how to fight in war (Judg 3:1-2).
 - Jephthah defeated the Ammonites (Judg 11:30-33).
 - David fought many battles, not just vs. Goliath (1 Sam 18:5; 1 Chr 19:17f; Ps 144:1).
 - Saul was stripped of his kingdom because he did not carry out God's order to destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam 15).

- The Spirit of the LORD came upon people and empowered them as warriors or as military leaders:
 - Othniel (Judg 3:9-10).
 - Gideon (Judg 6:34; 7:9,14,20).
 - Jephthah (Judg 11:29-33).
 - Samson (Judg 13:24-25; 14:5-6, 19; 15:14-16).
 - Saul (1 Sam 10:9-10; 11:5-8).

- Foreigners joined Israel and served honorably. These were treated as Israelites.
 - Caleb the Kenizzite (many references).
 - Uriah the Hittite (1 Chr 11:41).
 - Ebed-Melek the Ethiopian (Jer 38:7f; 39:15-18).

- Some situations call for action to deliver others (Prov 24:11-12).

“Deliver those who are being taken away to death, And those who are staggering to slaughter, O hold {them} back. If you say, "See, we did not know this," Does He not consider {it} who weighs the hearts? And does He not know {it} who keeps your soul? And will He not render to man according to his work?”

- What about military service for corrupt leaders?
 - Obadiah (not the prophet) was a military officer for Ahab, and yet the LORD blessed him (1 Kgs 18:3f).
- If war is not inherently evil, can particular actions be wrong? Yes. The Bible does not justify all military actions, including some by Israel. It records a number of atrocities and describes them as such:
 - Saul killing a town full of priests and their families (1 Sam 22:6-23).
 - Incidents of foreign nations engaging in:
 - “ethnic cleansing” (Syria, the Philistines, the Phoenicians, Edom, Ammon, Moab [Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13]). Much of this was one pagan nation doing it to another pagan nation. Actions described include mass slaughter and the delivery of large populations into slavery.
 - attacking war refugees (Edom [Obad 10-14; Ps 137:7])
 - When David used military conflict to arrange for the death of Uriah the Hittite, that was murder (2 Sam 11:1-12:15).
 - The assassination of Saul’s son Ish-Bosheth, David’s rival, was viewed by David as murder (2 Sam 4:5-12).

3. Does the New Testament speak positively or negatively of military service?

John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Apostles all dealt with those in the military.

- John the Baptist was encountered by soldiers, and he told them not to abuse their positions of power, but to be content with their wages (Luke 3:14).
- Jesus, who healed a centurion’s servant/son, described him as a man of great faith who would be in the Kingdom of God (Mat 8:5-13; Luke 7:2-9).
- When Peter was told to go preach the Gospel to Cornelius, no objections were given to the notion that Cornelius was a Roman military officer (Acts 10:1-48).
- Paul asserted his Roman citizenship when he was dealing with the Roman commander (Acts 22:24-29).

- Paul hears of a conspiracy to kill him, and directs that the Roman commander be informed. The result was that Paul was given Roman military protection when he was transported. (Acts 23:10-24).
- When Paul appealed to Caesar, he did so in order to obtain physical protection by the Romans (Acts 25:11-12).
- Paul hints of possible believers among the praetorian guard (Phil 1:13).
- Governmental officials have been given the right to execute (Rom 13:4)
- Some of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11--a passage written to Christians--involved those who carried out military feats.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace. And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. (Hebr 11:30-34)

In sum, the New Testament never condemns people for being in the Roman military. Rather, some are described as people of great faith. In addition--and this is written to Christians (Hebrews)--some examples of people of great faith were warriors.

Conclusions:

- Killing in war is distinguished from murder. It can be murder, but frequently is not viewed that way in the Bible.
- The Bible assumes that God's people will be involved in military conflict. There is no hint that war in and of itself is morally wrong, although particular wars could be.
- God often helped His people in war.
- Contrary to popular belief, the New Testament has some positive statements about those in military.