

Peace in Its Fullness: Biblical Perspectives on Aspects of Peace

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Abstract:

This article explores biblical conceptions of peace, particularly the connection between peace and social justice, focusing mainly on the Old Testament. The biblical roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s quote, "Without justice there can be no peace" are examined. Governments are responsible for justice through legal and judicial systems. Justice also has an ideal or cosmic sense. Martin Luther King Jr., worked for this kind of justice as he sought to overturn laws that oppressed African Americans. God's justice is defined broadly to include defense of the poor and oppressed, as well as ecological harmony.

Key Words: Peace, social justice, Martin Luther King, Jr., ecological harmony

From the biblical perspective, peace is a much larger concept than just the absence of war between nations—although that is certainly one major aspect of peace. One of my favorite expressions of the Bible's larger view of peace is graphically shown in a series of paintings by an 18th century American artist named Edward Hicks, called "The Peaceable Kingdom." Hicks was a Quaker and thus a pacifist, who was very much influenced by the Bible in general, particularly by a certain prophecy from Isaiah—a prophecy to which we will return in greater detail further below—which foretells the peaceful co-existence of the lion and the lamb, as well as other animals that are usually thought of as natural enemies. The dozens of paintings that Hicks produced on this theme were his meditation on the significance of this biblical text.

In the foreground there is always the image of a lion together with a lamb, depicting peace within the natural order. In the background there is usually another motif that broadens and complements Hicks's representation of this

aspect of peace. As a Quaker, he was interested in the founding of the colony of Pennsylvania by William Penn, as a place where Quakers might live and practice their faith without persecution. The scene thus includes a portrayal of William Penn making a peace treaty with the Indians. From the perspective that Hicks put forward in his “Peaceable Kingdom” paintings, the biblical concept of peace has two closely interrelated aspects. There is not only a political aspect which entails the end of conflicts between native Americans and English colonists, but also an ecological aspect which entails the end of conflicts among the other creatures of the animal world.

Justice as the prologue to peace

In what follows I would like to follow the lead of Edward Hicks and explore what the Bible regards as various aspects of peace, to see how they are interrelated and take us beyond the narrow idea of peace as the absence of war between nations. And to begin with I would like to explore a saying of Martin Luther King, in which he puts his finger on what the Bible considers the most fundamental prerequisite for peace of any sort. King summed up what the Bible would consider the prologue to peace by saying: “Without justice there can be no peace.” In making this remark King was restating a profoundly biblical notion, as he often did in his speeches.

I think that King’s dramatic eloquence sometimes obscures the extent of his dependence on the Bible. I have never had an opportunity to visit the King Center in Atlanta—I hope to someday—but I have seen a picture of a monument there which bears the inscription: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Underneath this quotation it is ascribed to Martin Luther King, Jr. Of course King did say this, but what’s missing here is a reference to the fact that he was quoting the prophet Amos. In this case, as in many others, King was simply restating a plainly biblical theme.

King was doing the same when he said, “Without justice there can be no peace.” There are many texts that we could cite to show just how closely this saying agrees with

the overall biblical perspective on peace. Here I will limit myself to only two, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, both of which use striking metaphors.

The first text is Psalm 85:10. It says, “Justice and peace have kissed each other.” Some translations read “righteousness and peace” instead of “justice and peace,” but this should not obscure the fact that this verse describes the intimate relationship between justice and peace. Whenever the word “righteousness” is found in an English translation of the Bible, we can often substitute the word “justice” in order to get a more specific indication of the true meaning, regardless of whether the original text is in Hebrew or in Greek. In both languages the overall concept of justice is expressed by a pair words, which are traditionally translated “justice and righteousness.” One of these terms refers to justice as a social phenomenon, as it is implemented in law and legal institutions. The other refers to justice as a higher, universal, and even cosmic ideal. These two dimensions of justice are always in a dialectical relationship with one another. We know from experience that laws can become unjust, in tension with the higher ideal of what is right. We also know—as Martin Luther King showed—that in such cases civil disobedience can bring about a reform of unjust laws, to bring them into agreement with universally recognized human rights.

The English word “righteousness” once had rather robust meaning which made it a good term for justice in its higher, universal, and even cosmic manifestation. But for complex cultural-historical reasons “righteousness” has come to mean something less. To be “righteous” now means merely to be virtuous in some general and indefinite way. From a biblical perspective, however, “righteousness” means a whole lot more. It means “justice” in the highest and fullest sense of the word.

Thus we can read Psalm 85:10 as a metaphorical description of the way in which justice and peace are intimately related. They have kissed each other! And this is not some peck on the cheek. This is a passionate, deep kiss. The image suggests the virtually total extent to which peace

is dependent on justice. Just as you can't have a deep kiss without a passionate lover, you can't have peace without justice.

The New Testament is no less insistent on this point, but in James 3:18 it uses a different metaphor. Here we have the agricultural imagery of sowing and reaping. If you compare English translations of this verse, you will find considerable differences in the way it is rendered. It is tricky to translate because it reverses the more familiar biblical use of this imagery. You may well have heard the biblical adage, "As you sow, so shall you reap." In James 3:18, however, this adage is turned inside out. The point is, rather, that as you reap, so shall you sow. This verse might be translated as follows: "Peace-makers sow peace by harvesting justice." In other words, there's no possibility of peace even beginning to emerge unless justice has already been fully realized.

Thus the New Testament as well as the Old affirm that justice is an absolute prerequisite for peace. Those who fail to realize this are simply deluding themselves. The prophet Jeremiah forcefully describes this kind of self-delusion:

From the least to the greatest of [the people],
everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet
to priest, everyone deals falsely.
They have treated the wound of my people
carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no
peace.

They acted shamefully, they committed abomination;
yet they were not ashamed, they did not know
how to blush. (Jeremiah 6:13-15)

You can't aspire to peace while promoting injustice. Those who do so show that they have no awareness of the discrepancy between what they do and what they say, and thus have no sense of shame. And what's even worse, Jeremiah often says elsewhere, is that they use their religiosity to cover over their hypocrisy and hide it from themselves.

Given the Bible's explicit insistence on the necessity of establishing justice in order to have peace, we should not be surprised to find that this idea pops up whenever any aspect of peace is described. Here we will deal with the biblical concept of peace in three of its major aspects: international, socio-economic, and ecological.

The international aspect of peace

As I have already stated, our intention here is to go beyond the too narrow idea of peace as the absence of war between nations, but that is nevertheless an important and very basic aspect of the biblical concept of peace. Perhaps the most powerful expression of this ideal is found in a prophecy from Isaiah that is inscribed at the entrance to the United Nations building in New York City.

It shall come to pass...
 that many peoples shall come and say:
 "Come, let us go up... to the house of the God of Jacob;
 that he may teach us his ways and that we may
 walk in his paths."
 For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
 and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
 He shall judge between the nations,
 and shall decide for many peoples;
 and they shall 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. (Isaiah
 2:2-4)

"Beating swords into ploughshares" is a familiar biblical image, but it is often taken out of context in such a way that we lose sight of what is described here as a necessary prerequisite to international peace: the implementation of God's universal law. With respect to this particular aspect of peace, as with respect to peace in general, it can't happen without justice.

The socio-economic aspect of peace

In the Bible one of the main responsibilities of any government is the establishment of socio-economic peace, and in the context of ancient society this means that it is the responsibility of the king. The ideal of socio-economic peace is often associated with the figure of King Solomon, to whom God gave the gift of wisdom so that he could judge his people justly. The proverbial “wisdom of Solomon” is demonstrated in the legendary account of a case brought to him by two women who lived together, both of whom had recently given birth to children (1 Kings 3:16-28). One of those children had died during the night, and the woman who awoke to find the child beside her dead accused the other of having switched the children, so that the one who was still living would be hers. Solomon saw no way of adjudicating their counter-claims, so he decreed that the only fair resolution was to cut the living child in two and give half to each woman. This elicited a protest from only one of the woman, who agreed to relinquish her claim and give the child to the other woman, rather than have any harm come to it. Solomon, shrewdly surmising that she must be the real mother, then awarded the child to her.

The king’s responsibility for establishing socio-economic peace is described in a portion of Psalm 72, one of the royal psalms:

Give the king your justice, O God,
 and your righteousness to the king’s son.
 May he judge your people with righteousness,
 and your poor with justice.
 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
 and the little hills bring righteousness.
 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
 give deliverance to the needy,
 and crush the oppressor....
 In his days may justice flourish
 and peace abound, until the moon is no more.
 (Psalm 72:1-4, 7)

Notice that with regard to the socio-economic aspect of peace, no less than with any other aspect of peace, justice

comes first. It's necessary for the king to end socio-economic oppression of the poor and needy if he is to reign over a kingdom where peace abounds.

The Ecological Aspect of Peace

Psalm 72, from which we just quoted in connection with socio-economic peace, also lays responsibility for ecological peace at the feet of the king—which in terms of our society would be the government. In that text ecological peace is described in terms of the agricultural fruitfulness that results from the government's establishment of justice: "There will be abundance of grain on the earth, growing thick even on the hilltops. Its fruit will flourish like Lebanon, and its grain like grass upon the earth."

Perhaps the most famous biblical description of ecological peace is found in the prophecy from Isaiah, to which I alluded at the outset in connection with the "Peaceable Kingdom" paintings of Edward Hicks. In that text the violence that occurs between natural enemies, which seem built into the order of creation will one day be eliminated. Even the primeval curse that made enemies of human beings and serpents (Genesis 3:15) will be removed.

With justice shall [the king] judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the
earth...
[Then] the wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall grace,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play of the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the
adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain.
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the
LORD as the waters cover the sea.
Isaiah 11:4a, 6-9)

Here once again, the necessary prerequisite of justice is often lost sight of. This ecological aspect of peace will be eventually realized, but only if the government—in the meantime—fulfills its responsibility of establishing justice.

Jesus' teaching on peace

The teaching of Jesus was firmly rooted in the scriptural tradition of peace in its fullness, and thus he continued to stress not only the high priority of peace, but also the impossibility of peace without justice. This is particularly evident in two of his sayings from the Sermon on the Mount, which provide a good summary and conclusion for the main point we have been emphasizing here:

Blessed are the peace-makers, for they will be called children of God. (Matthew 5:9)

And

Seek first God's kingdom and his justice,
and all else that you need will be yours. (Matthew 6:33)

Biographical Sketch

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