

**HOW WOULD YOU EXPLAIN THE PRINCIPLES OF A “JUST WAR” AS APPLIED  
TO THE RECENT CONFLICT IN IRAQ?**

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## Introduction

The Bible emphasises that peace is God's will, as exemplified by the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 2:4 "They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more." Jesus taught in Matthew 5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." In Matthew 5:39 he urges his followers "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" and in 5:43-44. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'". These passages naturally lead to the question whether Christians should oppose all wars, or if not, which wars would meet with their approval. I am going to expound the so-called "just war" doctrine to try to clarify this point, and apply it to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

### 1 Does the Bible condone war?

The Old Testament is replete with references to war, notably the invasion of Canaan, with the Lord's approval. See Joshua 11:20 "Joshua waged war against all these kings for a long time..... it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the Lord had commanded Moses" While these appear to justify war, the condition is a very specific one. Israel was God's Holy Nation and was waging war under God's explicit command, to fulfil his purpose of punishing the sin of the Canaanites. No nation has this status nowadays. Equally, the war that Christ leads in Revelation 19 is a very specific conflict of good and evil which is not comparable with earthly conflicts.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 3:8 implies some acceptance of war, "There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven . . . A time for war and a time for peace." But again this does not necessarily condone war. In the New Testament there are references to soldiers which do not condemn their occupation, such as the centurions in Matthew 5:8 and Acts 10:22. But it can be argued that the focus here is on their faith and not their occupation. The Bible also comments on slavery without commending it.

A stronger case can be based on the argument that God is a God of justice at an international as well as a personal level as Isaiah 51:5 "My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations." Justice is also the task of the Messiah as suffering servant whom Isaiah 42:1 (as quoted about Jesus in Matthew 12:18) proclaims ""Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations." In some cases God's justice is administered through human agents, even pagan kings such as Cyrus in Isaiah 45:13 "This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armour."

We can interpret Romans 13:4-5, which comments on the authority of state officials in this context. It states "he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." As well as justifying a police power of the state against criminals, it can be argued in the light of the above that the passage justifies action against wrongdoing at an international level by means of war, the state thereby protecting the lives of its people and seeking justice internationally. But elsewhere we are warned to be cautious as in Hebrews 10:30 "For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay,""

## **2 What is a just war?**

The above passage from Romans, viewed in the light of God's desire for justice, was a key background to the concept of the "just war" developed by Augustine and later by Aquinas. This begins with a strong presumption against use of force and clarification of when it could be justified. As Augustine wrote to General Boniface "Peace should be your aim; war should be a matter of necessity so that God might free you from necessity and preserve you in peace. One does not pursue peace in order to wage war; he wages war to achieve peace."

The key components of the just war are as follows: a just war requires a just cause, a just intention, limited means, a last resort, reasonable expectations of success, a formal declaration by a legitimate authority and protection for non combatants. We shall now go on to clarify these points and apply them to the invasion of Iraq that took place in 2003. We shall see that the war is hard to justify *ex post* by almost all the criteria of a just war. But *ex ante* there may be some justification.

## **3 Can the concept be applied to the invasion of Iraq?**

The "just cause" means that the reason for the war is one that is acceptable in terms of God's justice, such as aiding the vulnerable. The Iraq war was ostensibly to pre-empt use of weapons of mass destruction, which at the time were thought to threaten neighbouring countries but it was feared could later threaten the aggressors, the UK and US. An additional reason was added later, to save the people from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein whose rule had entailed massive loss of life comparable to that of the Ninevites in Nahum 3:1 "the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!" The Iraqis would then be free to govern themselves democratically. A third "just cause" was a perceived actual or potential link from Iraq to Al Qaeda terrorists that an invasion would pre-empt.

Even if all of these had been proven, there is a problem with the fact the war was pre-emptive. Powers (2003) argues that the US had illegitimately taken the concept of pre-emption which was supposed to be an option in exceptional cases (such as with troops massed on the border) and turned it into a new doctrine about the legitimacy of the unilateral use of preventive war to deal not just with imminent threats, but with merely potential or gathering dangers. Hunsinger (2003) notes that pre-emptive strikes must meet a high standard of justification. Otherwise, they are acts of aggression that violate international law. The just war should be a defensive one – and this was clearly not one.

The case for just cause is even weaker *ex post*, as it would appear from the evidence since the war that the first and third causes were in fact false ones. There were no weapons of mass destruction nor was there a link to Al Qaeda. The imponderable issue is whether the governments seeking war knew these facts and deceived their populations, acting contrary to Leviticus 19:11 "Do not lie. `Do not deceive one another." At least in their favour was evidence that Saddam had used such weapons in the past, such as poison gas against the Kurds and against Iran. On the other hand it can be argued that there was no *new* reason to go to war that did not exist one, two, four, or even six years earlier. Governments were responding at best to a threat that was not clear, that was not direct, and that was not imminent (Hunsinger, *ibid*).

Complementing the just cause, the "just intention" implies that the war aim is not any selfish gain by the country declaring war, but rather seeks to ensure the benefit of the victims of the conflict. Here one may argue that the allied intentions may not have been entirely pure. There is a question whether Bush was seeking to "complete the job" that his father had begun in

combating Saddam, an issue of revenge when Leviticus 19:18 says “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge”. There is the accusation that seeking to safeguard oil supplies was at the root of the conflict – whereas the much worse loss of life in Rwanda was not counteracted.

“Proportionate means” imply that only the minimum amount of force must be used to obtain the objective of a just peace. Here it is true that the military force was not aimed to destroy the country or its people but only to neutralise the army, which was itself dissolved rather than being put in prison camps.

The “last resort” means that all other means of resolving the conflict have been tried, and in particular diplomacy, as noted in Matthew 5:9 cited above. Also Jesus urges us in Matthew 18:22 to forgive “not seven times, but seventy-seven times” before beginning an (interpersonal) conflict. The UN had long been seeking to probe Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction, whereas he had been obstructing the weapons inspectors. This had led to the ultimatum that he give up his weapons or the country would be invaded. A controversial point is that Saddam at the last minute did promise to give the inspectors free rein, which was ignored and the country invaded. Following the point made above, the “pre-emptive” war proposed against Iraq was clearly not a last resort

A “formal declaration by a legitimate authority” implies that war should be open and not covert. This was carried out, and the principal is a legitimate democratically elected state (i.e. the US). Here we can contrast war among the nations in Iraq with terrorism, which is a war with groups of people, which is never declared, nor often is warning given about attacks. On the other hand there is a question whether a multilateral attack authorised by the UN would have had more legitimacy than a small group of states led by one major one. Some go further and say that the UN, as the highest world authority, is the only “lawful authority” with the right to sanction such a war (Tauran 2002).

“Protection of non-combatants” would imply that only soldiers should be victims of the war. There should not be the horrors of war all too familiar in biblical times as Jesus rightly foresaw for Jerusalem in Luke 19:44 “They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls.” Non-combatants should count as “our neighbours” in terms of the second commandment. Such horrors have indeed been avoided in the current conflict, although civilian casualties have still occurred. We should still be concerned about miscarriages of justice in the war such as the humiliation of prisoners – not least as God cares for prisoners “He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners” said Jesus in Luke 4:18.

“Reasonable expectations of success” mean that the war is not to be a foolhardy gamble, but one where the aims are likely to be achieved. One could cite here Jesus’ parable about the king going to war in Luke 14:31 “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.” Here again the overwhelming power of the US and UK gave a reasonable assurance that militarily they could overwhelm Saddam’s army.

What was less clear was whether they could overcome the will of the people of Iraq if it turned against them, or indeed whether their action would increase rather than reducing the terrorist threat. As pointed out by Skillen (2003) “If all we do is blast out a regime and conditions of long-term civil war are all that's left, then the operation can hardly be justified,”

## Conclusion

Just war does not seem to have been achieved for the conflict in Iraq. It lacked a just cause, there are doubts about the just intention, it was not the last resort and the way it was carried out, without a plan to win the peace, suggests that objectively, reasonable expectations of success were not achieved. Although declared by a legitimate authority, the legitimacy of the US pales alongside the UN, which did not sanction the war. Even though there was proportionality and protection of non-combatants, this is not sufficient to justify the war. Even at the time, when there was still believed to be a threat from weapons of mass destruction, the case was not strong. These points emphasise that the criteria for a just war are, rightly, hard to fulfil. Perhaps a better example was the intervention in Kosovo to make peace between the Serbs and Muslims – or if there had been intervention to prevent genocide in Rwanda – but they would require separate analysis. Before concluding, one should add that even if the Iraq war had fully met all the criteria of a just war, one may wish to question the concept itself. In particular, wars that begin as just may become “unjust” in the sense of violating some of the conditions. What begins as a limited and discriminate war may become indiscriminate, as witness escalation to aerial bombing in Vietnam. This suggests the need for an extra layer of caution before declaring war.

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