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Defending Your Freedom: New Testament Ethics of Christians in Military Activities

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Abstract

The article explores the ethical dilemma faced by Ukrainian Christians amidst military conflict, drawing from biblical perspectives to reconcile emotional support for defense with the NT vision. It examines some OT narratives of warfare and conquest, highlighting shifts from pacifism to just war attitudes among Israelites.

Analysis of key NT passages, such as John the Baptist's counsel to soldiers and Jesus' interactions with crowds and disciples, offers insights into Christian conduct in times of conflict. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, perceived by followers as triumphal, challenges conventional military expectations, emphasizing peace and spiritual renewal over violent conquest. Additionally, Jesus' arrest underscores his rejection of worldly military strategies, promoting self-sacrifice over armed resistance. Paul's metaphor of a "good soldier of Christ" in 2 Timothy suggests suffering alongside Christ as a defining aspect of Christian service.

The article concludes that allegiance to Jesus entails aligning with his nonviolent example, even amidst military conflict. Through biblical analysis, it navigates the tension between supporting homeland defense and adhering to the NT vision of peace. Drawing insights from both the Old and New Testaments offers a nuanced understanding of how Christians can approach military service in light of NT's ethical vision.

Keywords: Military, New Testament, Jesus, Army, Land, Defense, Triumphal Entry, Feeding of the Five Thousand, Soldier

1. Introduction

Ukrainians are generally considered a peaceful nation. In 2014–2015, however, a conflict between Russia and Ukraine following Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories presented an acute dilemma: to defend the country's borders or to let the land be taken away. The Christian community became divided between "the hawks and the doves."[1] Some Christians were strongly advocating for standing up, picking up arms, and defending the land, while others were standing on the side of peaceful resolution, even at the cost of losing their land and maybe even losing their freedom.

In 2015, the Ukrainian nation was able to experience the reality of surrender and defense. When the Crimean Peninsula was annexed, the government was not prepared for the invasion, so the invader did not meet resistance. In the case of the invasion of Eastern Ukraine, however, the nation took the stand and tried to defend the land. That operation had a toll on thousands of lives.[2]

Then, on February 24, 2022, another attack on Ukrainian territories by the Russian government led to an obvious action of military defense. This time, the majority of Christian communities were united in their support of the Ukrainian army. When the Russian army entered the cities of Bucha, Irpin, and the cities of southeastern Ukraine, Ukrainian Christians who lived in Ukraine and around the world were united in their vision: Ukrainians need to stand against evil aggression.[3]

[1] The translator of Adolf Harnack's *Militia Christi* makes a remark about doves and hawks in relationship to the scholars who defend pacifism or militarism of the early Christian church. The "hawks" are advocating for the necessity of defending the country and its freedom. The "doves," in their turn, take the stand of peaceful surrender. See Adolf von Harnack, *Militia Christi: The Christian Religion and the Military in the First Three Centuries*, trans. David Mclnnes Gracie (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 17.

[2] According to OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) as of June 3, 2015, 6,454 people (both military and civilians) have been documented as killed in the conflict zone and 16,146 as wounded (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Ukraine: Situation Update No. 3 as of 5 June 2015" [June 5, 2015]).

[3] According to OCHA: "From 24 February 2022, which marked the start of the large-scale armed attack by the Russian Federation, to 14 May 2023, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded 23,821 civilian casualties in the country: 8,836 killed and 14,985 injured" (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Ukraine: Civilian Casualty Update 15 May 2023" [May 15, 2023]).

Amid these military developments, Ukrainian Christians were becoming more explicit in using military language in their sermons, presentations, and written documents. This military language sounds harsh and, at times, uncomfortable to the ear of those who have not experienced the war firsthand. Yet, this language is not harsh enough for those whose homes are destroyed and who are displaced due to military aggression. The dilemma is more acute than ever before: what should Christians do when their homeland is being attacked?

This article is in an attempt to turn towards the NT to allow it to reveal its ethical vision towards the question of defending the "homeland." I, the author of this article, am a Ukrainian who does not live in Ukraine and who was not in Ukraine when the war began. But I experienced this war when I traveled to Ukraine after the war started, and we are actively involved in helping civilians to evacuate affected territories. I am also a NT scholar, which is why this article will try to reconcile my emotional support of the Ukrainian army and the NT vision for the defense of the homeland.

This study will consist of two steps. First, I will briefly survey some cases of military activities and defending the land and freedom in the OT. Second, I will analyze critical passages in the NT that relate to the issue of military service.

2. Military in the Old Testament

Nowadays, it is a consensus to sympathize and be on the side of a person or a nation that is under attack and in the position of defending themselves. While reading the OT: we sympathize with the Israelites who left Egypt because they were oppressed (enslaved people) and we continue to sympathize with them even when they attack and wipe out people, such as Amorites (Deut 2:33–34) and seven more nations "mightier and more numerous than Israel" (Deut 7:1–2; 13:15–16).[4] The argument in defense of Israelites is often derived from Deut 9:5, "because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfill the promise that the LORD made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." According to the text, here are two elements that justify

[4] This pattern is commonly observed in today's world as well. The powers often hide their military and political agendas under the cover of defending people, defending democracy, and defending freedom. However, instead of defending, they send troops that destroy other nations, with thousands of lives lost.

this "just war." First, the opponents of the Israelites are labeled as wicked. Second, this is how the "promised land" is repossessed.

In the short span of 40 years, the nation of Israel turned from the "doves" to the "hawks." Bainton argues that there are three attitudes toward war and peace in Christian ethics: pacifism, the just war, and the crusade.[5] His description of the attitudes toward war best describes the situation that becomes evident in the OT. The two last attitudes, the just war and the crusade, presuppose some active military units. The just war is often treated as means of defending yourself or a valuable land, and it requires an army, but not necessarily a regular one.[6] The crusade is an attack that assumes a professional army.[7] The Israelites went from pacifists (Exod 14:14) to the just war (Deut 20:1–4; Josh 6) and, finally, to the crusade (1 Sam 15:3; Josh 10:40). The three attitudes are also present in the historical development of Christianity.[8]

During the monarchy, the reality of a professional army had become more acute. Solomon had a regular standing army with 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen (1 Kgs 10:26). After the division between Israel and Judah, the regular army became a norm. Judah and Israel became aggressors and defenders of the land and their freedom.[9] There is, however, an impression that God did not want Israel to be in the attitude of the "crusaders." In 2 Sam 24, when David sought to increase the tribal militia by conducting a census, God was greatly displeased.

5 Roland Herbert Bainton also goes on to say that this is also a historical development. The church up to Constantine was pacifist. Then due to the invasions of the Barbarians the church adhered to the idea of the just war and in the Middle Ages Christians embraced crusades. See Roland Herbert Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-Evaluation* (New York: Abingdon, 1960), 14.

6 See Robert M. Good, "The Just War in Ancient Israel," *JBL* 104.3 (1985).

7 See Jonathan Simon Christopher Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A Short History* (London: Athlone Press, 1987); Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome A.D. 66–70* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Doron Mendels, *The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

8 See also perhaps one of the best edited books of current Christian thinking on issues of war and peace where the questions of just war, nonviolence, Christian realist, and church historical views are presented: Paul Copan, ed., *War, Peace, and Violence: Four Christian Views*, *Spectrum Multiview Books* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022).

9 For more on the development of the military and the war and peace in the ancient Israel see Carly L. Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History*, BZAW 407 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 84–96.

In the middle of all these conflicts, one promise of Isaiah the prophet to Judah was serving as a hope of the future, "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" (Isa 2:4, cf. Mic 4:3). The hopes expressed in Isa 2:2–4 and Mic 4:1–4 is clear; there will be no need for the regular army and any type of army. The soldiers will become farmers again, just as it was in the very beginning before the tower of Babel.[10] Universal peace will be established and instead of learning the craft of war, people will be learning the ways of YHWH.

3. Military in the New Testament

Military personnel is frequently mentioned in the NT.[11] The main terms that describe military personnel are soldier (στρατιώτης), a centurion (ἑκατοντάρχης), and military tribune or commander (χιλίαρχος). It is clear that the NT does not support violence. On the contrary, it speaks against it.[12] Whenever violence is presented in the NT, Jesus and his followers are its victims. Early Christians resorted to pacifism, continuing the legacy of Jesus and His followers.[13] The sectarian character of the NT community adds to the pacifist

10 Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, WBC 32 (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 37.

11 References to soldiers (στρατιώτης) can be found in Matt 8:9; 27:27; 28:12; Mark 15:16; Luke 3:14; 7:8; 23:36; John 19:2, 23–25, 32, 34; Acts 10:7; 12:4, 6, 18; 21:32, 35; 23:23, 31–32, 42; 28:16; 2 Tim 2:3. References to fellow soldiers (συστρατιώτης) can be found in Phil 2:25 and Phlm 2. Reference to centurions (ἑκατοντάρχης) can be found in Matt 8:5, 8, 13; 27:54; Mark 15:39, 44–45; Luke 7:2, 6; 23:47; Acts 10:1, 22; 21:32; 22:25, 26; 23:17, 23; 27:1, 6, 11, 31, 43. Reference to tribunes (χιλίαρχος) can be found in Mark 6:21; Acts 21:31–33, 37; 22:24, 26–29; 23:10, 15, 17–19, 22; 25:23; Rev 6:15; 19:18.

12 Matt 5:9, 38–39; 26:52; John 14:27; Rom 12:18; 14:19; 15:33; 1 Cor 14:33; 2 Cor 10:3–4; Jas 4:1–2; 1 Peter 3:9.

13 David Hunter, analyzing recent trends in the research on early Christians and military service, states that up until 1990 it has been a general consensus in regards to the conclusion on violence and military service: "1) that the early Christians who addressed the matter directly during the first three centuries, most notably Tertullian and Origen, condemned warfare and military service on grounds that were essentially 'pacifist,' that is, out of an aversion to bloodshed; 2) that, at least from the end of the second century, some Christians participated in the military and that the number continued to grow throughout the third century; 3) that, by the end of the fourth century, a "just war ethic" had developed (largely the work of Ambrose and Augustine), which met the need for a Christian accommodation to a changed political and social situation" (David G. Hunter, "A Decade of Research on Early Christians and Military Service," *RelSRev* 18.2 [1992]: 87).

tendencies.[14] When there is not much power, it is easier to resort to pacifism. In addition to that, the early church, filled with eschatological expectations, was awaiting the soon-coming redemption of Israel (Acts 1:6). The NT authors express their attitude against violence.[15]

Yet, the agents of violence, soldiers, were not asked to abandon their vocation.[16] The preliminary conclusion that we can come to is that the NT does not condemn military service. Yet it will be just an argument from silence. Therefore, a thorough survey is necessary in order to establish this assumption. I will analyze five passages, and after their analysis, we might be able to come closer to the NT vision of military defense of the land.

3.1 John the Baptist and the Soldiers: Luke 3:14

In Luke 3:14, John the Baptist encourages a group of soldiers to be fair, do not "violently shake money" (διασείσητε) from anyone, do not harass (συκοφαντέω) anyone, but start being content (ἀρκεῖσθε) with your ration-money (ὀψωνίοις)[17] which was not much at all.[18] Bovon argues, standing on the shoulders of Scheider, that in Luke's theological thinking, these soldiers were likely the Gentiles.[19] It is hard to agree with Bovon since it is unlikely that the Roman soldiers would go to listen to a desert prophet. I agree with

[14] I agree with Lawson who, quoting Johnson, suggests, "[a] sect is a religious group that rejects the social environment in which it exists" (Ronald Lawson, "Onward Christian Soldiers? Seventh-day Adventists and the Issue of Military Service," *RRelRes* 37.3 [1996]: 194).

[15] It is impossible to find a passage in the NT in support of violence in the Gospels or Pauline letters. Richard Hays also states that "[t]here is not a syllable in the Pauline letters that can be cited in support of Christians employing violence" (Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996], 331).

[16] The argument can go as follows: if Jesus's followers are called to avoid violence, why didn't John the Baptist instruct the soldiers to leave the military when they came to him repentantly seeking guidance (Luke 3:10–14)? This would have been the perfect opportunity for John to express such a belief if he held it.

[17] The term ὀψώνιον refers to a military ration that was provisioned (BDAG, s.v. "ὀψώνιον").

[18] James Jeffers states that the salary of the regular Roman soldiers was between 225 and 300 denarii a year, while the auxiliary troops were paid only 100 denarii (James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999], 176).

[19] François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas, Hermeneia 63A (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2002), 124 n. 44.

Nolland that the soldiers here were, most likely, Jewish,[20] or at least the auxiliaries. A few elements testify to that: (1) the soldiers are coupled with tax collectors who were Jewish (Luke 3:12–13), and they were most likely employed to protect tax collectors; (2) John the Baptist talks about the money with them, so we can conclude that they were police who were, perhaps, protecting the tax collectors; (3) in Luke 3:8 John the Baptist introduces his speech referring to the children of Abraham. Therefore, these Jewish soldiers were serving Rome and, perhaps, were also tasked to control the situation if there was a revolutionary outbreak.[21]

The soldiers here are not asked to abandon their craft but should stop exercising their authority to extort money from others. The behavior of soldiers was destroying the community; they were exploiting and manipulating others to their advantage. The message of John is directed towards the community; he aims to improve the community by asking regular folk to "share their tunic" (Luke 3:8), tax collectors to stop collecting more taxes than needed (Luke 3:13), and finally, the soldiers are commanded to stop extorting others (Luke 3:14). These instructions represent different social strata, highlighting that John's message was directed at the Jewish community, which needed reform in preparation for the eschatological age heralded by Jesus.

In the Luke-Acts framework, this community plays a vital role. In Luke 3, John the Baptist is trying to form a better society, in Luke 4, Jesus, in His inaugural speech, announces the new age; and in Acts 2, we see the community led by the Holy Spirit. In a world where war is an everyday reality, Luke-Acts present a counter-cultural message, advocating for non-violent methods and emphasizing the necessity of a world free from coercion and oppression.

However, the interaction between community and soldiers in this context, especially regarding warfare and the defense of one's homeland, requires further nuance. These Jewish soldiers were not defending their homeland in the traditional sense but were serving the Roman authority, maintaining order rather than engaging in battlefield combat, similar to modern police forces. This distinction complicates discussions on "just war" or homeland defense. If these soldiers were serving Rome, their role would contrast sharply with groups like the Sicarii, who actively resisted Roman rule. Therefore, Israel was not a typical war zone; instead, these soldiers

[20] John Nolland, *Luke*, WBC 35 (Waco, TX: Word, 1989), 150.

[21] Andrew J. Schoenfeld, "Sons of Israel in Caesar's Service: Jewish Soldiers in the Roman Military," *Shofar* 24.3 (2006).

were maintaining internal order under Roman occupation, highlighting the complexity of their role and the broader implications for understanding justice and violence in this context.

3.2 Feeding of the Five Thousand: Mark 6:35–44 and Parallels

The feeding of the five thousand is a story recorded in all four Gospels. Scholars view the miracle in Mark in juxtaposition to the preceding passage that describes the feast that took place in Herod's palace (Mark 6:14–29).[22] Some see a contest between Herod and Jesus for a royal title in this.[23] The story is also often considered in connection with the OT stories of feeding in the wilderness (Exod 16; Pss 78:18–30; 105:40) and the feeding miracles of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 17:8–16; 2 Kgs 4:1–7, 42–44) and is pointing to the messianic meal.[24] While these observations are valid and deserve close attention, I propose that the story also has numerous military allusions and sheds additional light on our understanding of the followers of Jesus in the military service.

There are a few indicators that point out the elements pertaining to the military in the story: (1) five thousand men (Mark 6:44); (2) Jesus "commands" (ἐπιτάσσω) the disciples and the crowd (Mark 6:39); and (3) the five thousand are divided into hundreds and fifties (Mark 6:40).

3.2.1 5,000 Men

The Gospel authors emphasize the exact number of the people who were fed, πεντακισχίλιοι ἄνδρες. The text does not refer to 5,000 persons but actual men; Matt 14:21 states that the number is "without women and children."[25]

[22] See William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 227; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia 62 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2007), 324.

[23] Gabriella Gelardini, "The Contest for a Royal Title: Herod Versus Jesus in the Gospel According to Mark (6,14–29; 15,6–15)," *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 28.2 (2011), 93–106.

[24] Robert A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1989), 336; Lane, *Gospel According to Mark*, 232.

[25] The presence of women and children, as indicated by the child bringing the loaves and fishes, contradicts the notion of an all-male assembly akin to a legion. Instead, it suggests that the count of 5,000 refers to men in addition to women and children, which does not align with the idea of an organized army. However, despite this inclusivity, the author, Mark, still singles out 5,000 men, potentially on a literary level, arguing for the symbolism of a legion, emphasizing the scale of the miracle and Jesus's role as a

Thiering tries to solve the riddle of numerology and proposes that the 5,000 reflects the Jewish multitude in opposition to the Gentile multitude in the case of feeding 4,000 (Mark 8), while the remaining baskets refer to 12 apostles in Mark 6 and 7 deacons in Mark 8.[26] These conclusions are too speculative and are perhaps influenced by ecclesiological thinking.

I, however, propose to look at this number as the number of soldiers in one legion. Between the first century BC and the first century AD the number of soldiers in the legion was changing from 4,800 to 5,280,[27] Jeffers estimates a legion consisting of 6,000 soldiers.[28] Historians and scholars disagree on the number of soldiers in the legion. This variability reflects the historical uncertainty about the sizes of legions, which likely persisted when the Gospels were written. Thus, 5,000 could have been a conventional figure used to describe a legion.

After establishing that 5,000 could refer to the legion, we need to point out that it was the general's responsibility to feed and provide for the army.[29] In Mark 6:41–42 Jesus provides for all 5,000 men. Therefore, Jesus acts as a general who feeds His "legion." This miracle provoked strong aspirations among the 5,000, but Jesus dismisses this "legion."

3.2.2 Jesus Commands (ἐπιτάσσω)

In Mark 6:39 Jesus commands (ἐπιτάσσω) the multitudes to sit down. The word ἐπιτάσσω is used ten times in the NT. In all cases, it has a very strong connotation. Jesus "commands" the unclean spirits (Mark 1:27; 9:25; Luke 4:36; 8:31). Jesus commands the wind and the waves, and they obey him (Luke 8:25). The king "commands" the executioner to bring John's head (Mark 6:27). Ananias commands "those who stood by him" to strike Paul on the mouth (Acts 23:2). Paul in Phlm 8 states that he is "bold enough in Christ to command." Therefore, in the NT the word ἐπιτάσσω is used to express a command with authority as that of a general to his soldiers. Jesus commands the demons and nature, but He also commands the multitudes here.

provider akin to a general.

26 Barbara E. Thiering, "Breaking of Bread and Harvest in Mark's Gospel," *NovT* 12.1 (1970): 4–5.

27 *DNTB*, s.v. "Roman Military".

28 Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World of the New Testament*, 174.

29 Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World of the New Testament*, 176–77.

Josephus also uses the word ἐπιτάσσω when he talks about the army and specifies that the Assyrians demanded (ἐπιτάσσω) tribute from the Sodomite kings in *Ant.* 1:172–73. King Eglon demanded (ἐπιτάσσω) the Israelites to pay tribute to him (*Ant.* 5:186, 199). There are many other passages in Josephus where he utilizes the term in describing the commands of the authority of the kings to the soldiers, to the captives, or to the ones who were subordinate to him.[30]

Philo, the master of allegory, uses the term when describing how the mind "imposes violent and mischievous commands on both soul and body" (*Alleg. Interp.* 3:80). Elsewhere, he talks about how the soul gives the commands that need to be obeyed (*Cher.* 115). In other passages, Philo also talks about allegories of mind, reason, or soul commanding (*Names* 1:226, 254; *Dreams* 1:56; *Abr.* 1:74).[31] Therefore, Philo takes the term and applies it to personal and philosophical matters.

First Clement 20:3 ascribes the commands over the sun, the moon, and the choir of stars to God. Clement also writes about the "prefects or tribunes or centurions or captains of fifty and so forth," stating that they "execute the commands given by the emperor and the commanders" (1 Clem. 37:3). Other Apostolic Fathers also present the idea of authoritative commanding in reference to the subordinate relationship.[32]

After a short survey of the term ἐπιτάσσω, it is evident that the term is most of the time used in reference to the subordinate relationship of the king and those who are under their authority. In the Gospels, the term is frequently ascribed to Jesus since his authority is promoted and demonstrated. Therefore, the term has military nuance and presupposes Jesus' authority as general or king (Messiah).

30 The word ἐπιτάσσω is used 41 times by Josephus in his writings. A survey of the usage of the word suggests that it was primarily used in reference to the command of the superiors (*Ant.* 7:99; 8:58, 147; 9:241, 259; 10:82; 10:123, 155; 11:45, 61; *J.W.* 1:89, 154, 465; 2:195; 6:131; *Ag. Ap.* 1:120).

31 The word is used 17 times by Philo and is often used in reference to the commands directed to one's body. Therefore, Philo allegorizes the meaning of the authoritative command and applies it to describe how these authoritative commands can manipulate a person's life (*Alleg. Interp.* 3:80; *Cher.* 1:115; *Migrat* 1:8; *Names* 1:226, 254; *Dreams* 1:56; *Abr.* 1:74, 228; *Joseph* 1:135, 152; *Moses* 1:37; *Prob.* 1:22, 30, 101, 104; *Legat.* 1:259).

32 The majority of cases of the use of term ἐπιτάσσω in Apostolic Fathers presuppose subordinate relationships (Did. 4:10; Barn. 6:18; 19:7; Herm. Vis. 81:4; 82:1).

3.2.3 Ranks, in the Hundreds and the Fifties

Jesus commanded the multitudes to sit by numbers, in hundreds and the fifties (Mark 6:40). Lane observes the green grass mentioned in v. 39 as reminiscent of Ezek 34:26, 29, and Ps 23:1 as well as ranking in hundreds and fifties as reminiscent of Exod 18:21.[33] Though popular, this interpretation still needs to be completed, perhaps, due to the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls after Lane's commentary.

Collins highlights notable similarities between the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) and Mark 6:40.[34] The *Damascus Document* and the *Rule of the Community* suggest that the DSS community had to be organized in groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens (CD 13:1–2; 1QS 2:21–23). An even more striking reading is found in the *War Scroll,* where the community is described as organized with banners and their standards waiting to fight against the wicked (1QM 3:13–4:4). The organization also follows the same pattern, "the name of the chief of the *hundred* and the names of the chiefs of his tens. And on the banner of the *fifty* they shall write, 'Ended…'" (1QM 4:3, emphasis mine).

Guelich emphasizes the probability of the Qumran community borrowing the organization from Exod 18:21.[35] However, they could also have borrowed it from the military organization of their time. In addition, in Qumran writings, this organization is closely associated with the military structure. Therefore, the organization of hundreds and fifties in Mark 6:40 indeed resembles the pattern seen in the scrolls of the community and is related to military service.

As was highlighted earlier, Clement also writes about the "prefects or tribunes or centurions [captains of hundreds] or captains of fifty and so forth" (1 Clem. 37:3). The division in hundreds and fifties are here also clearly related to the military.

To sum up, three elements highlight the military tones of the feeding of the five thousand. First, 5,000 is the number of soldiers in the Roman legion, so Jesus here is a general of the legion; He provides for His legion and supports the legion. Second, the word "command" (ἐπιτάσσω) was used primarily to describe the command that carried strong authority. It was often used to describe the relationship between the king or general and their subordi-

33 Lane, *Gospel According to Mark*, 229.

34 Collins, *Mark*, 324–25.

35 Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26*, 341.

nates. Third, the division of the multitudes in the hundreds and fifties strikingly resembles the division of a military unit in the DSS writings and 1 Clement as well as the military camp in Exod 18:21.

Let us take a look at this event from the point of view of one of those 5,000 men. Jesus and His disciples just fed that man, and he felt that Jesus would be instrumental as they would establish the kingdom with a sword and with sweat. He even just pledged his allegiance to Jesus, his general. Contrary to his expectations, instead of marching to Jerusalem with this newly formed legion, he sees Jesus forcing (ἀναγκάζω) His disciples into the boat and sending him away, along with the multitudes (ἀπολύω) (v. 45). Then he sees Jesus going into the mountain by Himself to pray (v. 46).

3.3 The Triumphal Entry: Matthew 21:1–11

The pericope on the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem is often titled "triumphant" in our Bibles. It is impossible not to recognize the royal motive in this passage. Many interpreters highlight the significance and the peculiarities of the Matthean recollection as (1) the fulfillment of the OT quotations and (2) the introduction of the new elements, such as the healing of the "blind and the lame" in v. 14.[36]

Jesus is identified as the Son of David (υἱὸς Δαυίδ) in Matt 21:9.[37] In the story preceding the triumphal entry, the two blind men in Jericho cry out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" (Matt 20:30). After the blind men experienced the "compassion" of Jesus and "their eyes received sight, they followed him" (Matt 20:34), they became a part of the great Galilean entourage of Jesus, the Son of David. They joined the restoration movement of Israel as "soldiers" join their general. Even this announcement of Jesus as the Son of David brings to memory a description of David as "a mighty man of valor, a man of war" (1 Sam 16:18).

When Jesus was on a donkey moving to Jerusalem, all the people who went ahead of Him and who were following Him also cried out "Hosanna

[36] Hagner and Luz give more differences between the parallel stories in the Gospels. For more, see Donald Alfred Hagner, *Matthew*, WBC 33A (Waco, TX: Word, 1993), 591–93; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21-28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia 61C (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2005), 4–6.

[37] Matthew is especially eager to let the reader know that Jesus is connected with David. He begins his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus where he clearly states and presents allusions to Jesus as the Son of David. Such as the number of Generations, fourteen, that can also be the numeric value of the name דוד = 4+6+4.

[save us] to the Son of David!" (Matt 21:9). The military expectations of Jesus's entourage are evident.

Jesus entered Jerusalem right before the Passover. It was the time when the Roman government was especially concerned with Jewish freedom aspirations.[38] The Roman soldiers were present in Jerusalem to ensure the *Pax Romana*. Therefore, it is probable that the great multitude that followed Jesus into Jerusalem perceived themselves as "soldiers" following a powerful military man. The association of Jesus with David further bolsters this point. David, renowned as the man after God's heart (1 Sam 13:14), was also known as a warrior. Consequently, David was ineligible to construct the Temple (1 Chr 28:3). Thus, the crowd may have assumed Jesus to be a warrior figure. However, Jesus, contrary to this expectation, immediately undertook the "reformation" of the Temple upon entering Jerusalem.

In vv. 4–5 Jesus fulfills the OT (Zech 9:9) by entering Jerusalem on a meek animal, a donkey. R. T. France beautifully describes Jesus as "victorious and yet meek, and his triumph is received rather than won ('vindicated and saved'). He rides a donkey rather than a war horse, and his kingdom will be one of peace rather than of coercion."[39]

Even though Jesus entered Jerusalem on a meek animal, the people of Jerusalem were "shaken" (σείω) (v. 10). They did not know much about Jesus since, according to the narrative of the Synoptic Gospels, this was the first time Jesus entered Jerusalem as an adult. The Jerusalemites did not readily receive Jesus.[40] In his interpretation of v. 10, Hagner did not acknowledge the threat that the people of Jerusalem had probably felt from observing the entrance of Jesus.[41] France, however, rightfully comments that the commo-

[38] Josephus testifies that Archelaus, Herod the Great's son and vassal of Rome, slaughtered a number of Jews who were protesting in the Temple (*J.W.* 2:10–13; *Ant.* 17:204–205). Sometime later the Roman procurator Ventidius Cumanus slaughtered a great number of the Jews who were gathered in Jerusalem for the festival. According to *Jewish Antiquities* 20,000 people died (*Ant.* 20:106–12).

[39] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 777.

[40] Kinman compares the "triumphal entry" with *parousia* in the Roman empire and states that the city that did not receive the triumphant with readiness would be punished (Brent Kinman, "Parousia, Jesus' 'a-Triumphal' Entry, and the Fate of Jerusalem (Luke 19:28–44)," *JBL* 118.2 [1999]: 280–84, esp. 283).

[41] Hagner presupposes that people probably had heard the reports about Jesus from Galilee, but he does not emphasize the seriousness of Jesus's entrance with His Galilean entourage and the effect that it had on the people of Jerusalem (See Hagner, *Matthew*, 596).

tion filled those in Jerusalem with fear.[42] After all, the Galilean crowd, people from the northern province, with Jesus as their leader, posed a real threat to the Judeans and their peace. The entourage of Jesus could have also been perceived as a military unit ready to strike against the Romans and the Jerusalemites.

Jesus's "triumphal entry" also follows a spatial development. He approaches Jerusalem (vv. 1–9), He enters Jerusalem (vv. 10–11), then the Temple (12–16), and He leaves the city. These elements resemble the element of the conquest, but a different type of conquest. Jesus aims not to free people from their oppressors, the Romans. His purpose is to heal the very heart of the Jewish community, the Temple.

After cleansing the Temple, Jesus invites the blind and the lame, those who were mercilessly excluded, into the Temple and heals them.[43] After this, Jesus simply leaves the city. The Galilean entourage of Jesus is also dismissed. Like in the story of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus highlights the nature of His "military campaign." Those who followed Jesus were concerned with issues of this world; they were willing to die for the purpose of defending their land and their freedom. Jesus, however, touched on the very issue of the community and aimed to edify it. In Matthew Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and here again we see how Jesus is fulfilling the law as the Hebrew Bible by humbly entering Jerusalem on a donkey and cleansing the heart of the religious life, the Temple. Those who regarded Jesus as their messiah and leader were taken aback when their expectations of conquest were shattered once again. Jesus rejects and renounces military strategies and pursuits, leaving pacifism as the only viable option.

3.4 The Arrest of Jesus: John 18:1–11

The arrest of Jesus is a pericope that presents a collision of two "military" powers. Judas previously pledged his allegiance to Jesus, he was one of the disciples. In John 18, however, Judas joins the military power of the world that seeks violence. John 18:3 states, "Judas, having received (λαβὼν) a cohort of soldiers (σπεῖραν) and some assistants (ὑπηρέτας) from the chief priests

42 France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 781.

43 This text is perhaps an echo of 2 Sam 5:6–8. Jebusites were so confident that David and his people would not be able to conquer the city that they had the blind and the lame defend their city. The city was conquered. But perhaps because of the humiliating action of Jebusites the text of 2 Sam 5:8 says, "The blind and the lame shall not come into the house." In fact, the word "house," *bait*, that is used here can also mean "the temple" which is often called *habait*.

and the Pharisees, went there with torches, lamps, and weapons (ὅπλων)." Judas previously, during the Last Supper, went into the night (John 13:30). A rejection and abandonment of the light, Jesus (John 8:12), leads into the world and darkness that cannot comprehend Jesus (John 1:5). George Beasley-Murray, basing his argument on Bultmann, argues that it is very unlikely that the military cohort would be entrusted to a Jewish civilian.[44] I, however, suggest that Judas was put in charge of the soldiers, and the term λαβών, in this case, presents an idea of "taking in hand."[45] The theological implication of this is apparent. Once you leave the light and walk into the darkness, you start living the evil model of conquest.

Ernst Haenchen opines that this Roman-Jewish company consisted of around 800 men, and that the high priest and Pilate arranged the arrest.[46] Due to the friendly relationship between the high priest and Pilate, it is likely that the cohort would be dispatched to deal with Jesus.

Jesus's activities were interpreted as rebellious and were perceived as a threat by the ruling powers. The disciples also perceived Jesus as the one who would lead them in the rebellion as a king leads their soldiers. Instead of resistance, however, Jesus meets his destiny with dignity. Along with Beasley-Murray and Haenchen,[47] I also see how Jesus's statement "I am" (ἐγώ εἰμι) in John 18:5 points the reader back to Jesus's ἐγώ εἰμι statements (cf. 6:20; 8:28, 54), where He associates Himself with YHWH. After all, Jesus is the revelation of the Father in John. Thence, the dramatic reaction of the soldiers: when they heard Him say these words, "they drew back and fell to the ground" (ἀπῆλθον εἰς τὰ ὀπίσω καὶ ἔπεσαν χαμαί) (John 18:6).[48]

The expression of Jesus's power is evident in John 18:6. However, Jesus does not exercise His power in order to stop His oppressors. He even dismisses His potential army, His disciples (John 18:8). Jesus is the king and the general who does not want to lose the lives of His "soldiers" but tries to save their lives (John 18:9). This model is contrary to the model of the rulers of this world. The rulers count for nothing the lives of their soldiers. The governors send them anywhere, hiding their evil agendas under the cover

44 George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed., WBC 36 (Waco, TX: Word, 1999), 322.

45 BDAG, s.v. "λαμβάνω."

46 Ernst Haenchen, *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 7–21*, trans. Robert W. Funk, Hermeneia 64B (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 164–65.

47 Beasley-Murray, *John*, 322, Haenchen, *John*, 165.

48 Even though some argue that this cannot be true since Roman soldiers could not even understand the significance of the statement. However, it is important to bear in mind that the Gospels is a combination of history and theology. Here, therefore, this is seen very clearly.

of the "greater good." Jesus's example, on the contrary, is the example of a "ruler" who willingly and with dignity goes to death in place of others; He saves the lives of others.

Peter's eyes and ears seemed to be closed when Jesus faced the soldiers who were arresting Him. Instead of recognizing the power of Jesus, instead of hearing Jesus's command to be dismissed, Peter, a faithful soldier, uses his short sword (μάχαιρα) to protect Jesus (John 18:10). The final words of Jesus during the arrest should ring in the ears of Christian community throughout centuries, "Put your sword into its sheath" (John 18:11). Jesus does not need a military to defend Him. Jesus does not want His "soldiers" to cut the "ears" of others in their attempt to protect Him.

In John 18:1–11 we are confronted with the disciples' misunderstanding of Jesus's mission and His campaign. Jesus's disciples did not fully embrace the "military" rules of Jesus.

3.5 Good Soldier of Christ: 2 Tim 2:3[49]

Paul knew the power of metaphors, and he masterfully used them throughout his epistles.[50] In 2 Tim 2:3 Paul encourages Timothy to "share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." Philip Towner argues that the theme of sharing in suffering (συγκακοπαθέω) is the main theme of the letter.[51] It is true, since the theme occurs in other verses (1:8; 2:9; 4:5). But it is the metaphor that Paul employs to explain this suffering that is striking. Paul encourages Timothy to suffer as a soldier of Christ Jesus (στρατιώτης Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ). Even though it is not explicitly stated how this metaphor is applied, coming back to the analysis of our previous passages, we see that the life of

[49] Along with Johnson I argue that Paul was the author of the so-called *Pastoral Epistles* (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). Luke Timothy Johnson presents a number of criteria that support Pauline authorship in Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 55–90. Johnson's position is acknowledged by prominent Pauline scholars such as N. T. Wright, who also argues for Pauline authorship of 2 Timothy (see N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 2013], 80).

[50] Only in his *Pastoral Epistles* can we identify at least eight categories of metaphors. These categories are medicinal (1 Tim 1:10; 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:1–2, 8; 2 Tim 2:17); architectural (1 Tim 3:13, 15; 6:19; 2 Tim 2:19); agricultural (1 Tim 5:17–18; 6:10; 2 Tim 2:6; Tit 3:14); commercial (1 Tim 6:5; 2 Tim 1:12, 14); marine (1 Tim 1:19; 6:9); war (1 Tim 1:18; 6:12; 2 Tim 2:3–4); athletic (1 Tim 4:7–8; 6:12; 2 Tim 2:5; 4:7); cultic (1 Tim 2:3–4, 8; 5:9–10; 2 Tim 1:3; 4:6).

[51] Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 491.

a soldier of Christ is a life of suffering together with Christ, the commander, and the general.

While in some respect my conclusions resonate with those of Helgeland, Daly, and Burns, who opine that Christians opposed the military not on the basis of ethics, but of religion. He states that the Roman army was some sort of religion.[52] The same feeling of community is present in both Christianity and the army. Therefore, the matter of allegiance is even further emphasized. If you are in the "army" of Jesus, you can live up to His standards. You will follow His example of life that seeks to redeem others even at the expense of your own suffering. If you are in the army of this world, you will live in accordance with the satanic model, where you will always pull the object of desire to yourself.

Therefore, if Jesus, the Son of God, does not exercise His power and does not play according to the military rules of this world, then those who pledge their allegiance to Jesus Christ should follow the example of Jesus and suffer together with Him. Mounce thoughtfully explains the meaning of the metaphor of soldier that follows the encouragement of sharing in suffering in 2 Tim 2:3 and argues that it has the idea of "single-mindedness to please one who enlists him."[53] This is exactly what we have observed in our analysis of the previous passages. The question of Christians in military service is a matter of who you pledge your allegiance to. Do you follow the generals, rulers, kings, and governments of this world and, by extension, live according to their model of imploring force onto others? Or do you follow Jesus Christ, the general who leads you by His own example?

4. Conclusion

This article has examined the complex issue of Christians in military service and their adherence to NT ethics, particularly in light of the Ukrainian conflict. The analysis of biblical texts has revealed the diverse perspectives within the Christian community on the topic of armed defense versus peaceful resolution.

[52] John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly, and J. Patout Burns, *Christians and the Military: The Early Experience* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 48. They also support this point listing a number of practices that resembled "Roman religious world, a microcosm of Rome itself." Some of the elements that they list are the cult of the standards, the calendar of frequent military festivals and sacrifices timed to coincide with similar services at Rome (Helgeland, Daly, and Burns, *Christians and the Military*, 54).

[53] William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Nashville: Nelson, 2000), 507.

In light of these findings, Christians in military service face a delicate balancing act between fulfilling their duty to defend their homeland and upholding the teachings of Jesus. Navigating this tension requires a nuanced understanding that integrates the principles of both the OT and NT.

The OT reflects a transition from pacifism to the participation in just wars, while maintaining the hope for a future without the need for armies. In the NT, there is no explicit condemnation of military service but there is an emphasis on ethical conduct within the military.

By considering passages such as Luke 3:14, the feeding of the five thousand, the triumphal entry, and the arrest of Jesus, we have gained insights into the NT's perspective on military defense. These passages highlight the importance of fair treatment, ethical behavior, and Jesus' rejection of violence.

Those who follow Jesus are His "soldiers," and they cannot be the soldiers of some rulers of this world. As we have observed, multiple passages highlight the idea of choosing the right side and the right allegiance. In other words, you cannot serve both Jesus and Caesar at the same time. Therefore, the question of military service falls into the realm of allegiance.

In the NT, the issue of military service comes down to what or whom one serves. The call of the NT is to choose Jesus, pledge allegiance to Him, to become His "soldier," and follow His model. On the other hand, one can choose the government of this world, which will inevitably command to follow their, in most cases, evil agenda.