

A frequent struggle with the peace testimony is the amount of violence in the Old Testament
The frequency of wars and conquest which God seemingly demands
Some cite the Old Testament as the Biblical basis for violence and just war
One answer is to ignore the Old Testament and simply focus on the New Testament
Because it is easier to see the call to peacemaking in the New Testament

Yet, I want to take a hop, skip, and a jump through the Old Testament...

Exodus 14—the Israelites were sent out of Egypt, only to find the Egyptian army in hot pursuit
In fact, they were trapped between the sea and the army
Moses said, *“The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” Exodus 14:14*
The Red Sea divided and they crossed on dry land—with the sea closing over the army

Exodus 17—The Amalekites came against Israel and Joshua led the troops against them
As long as Moses held his hands up, the Israelites won, when they dropped, they lost
As Moses grew weary, Aaron and Hur help up his hands and the Israelites won the battle

Joshua 6—The Israelites are to enter the Promised Land, they cross the Jordan River at Jericho
Taking the Ark of the Covenant, circled Jericho once a day for 6 days, blowing trumpets
On the 7th day, the Israelites circled 6 times, blowing trumpets—and on the 7th shouted
The wall around Jericho fell down and the Israelites took the city
Only Rahab the prostitute and those with her were saved

Joshua 10—The Amorites attack the Israelites, but God told Joshua, *“Do not fear them...”*
In answer to Joshua’s prayer, the sun stood still, allowing the Israelites to win

Judges 7—God told Gideon that he had too many troops to go to battle against the Midianites
Gideon reduced the army from 32,000 to 10,000 but it was still too many
Finally, with only 300 people left, God delivered the Midianites to the Israelites

2 Kings 6—King of Aram was frustrated that his plans were thwarted as if he had a traitor
But they said it was Elisha and that God told him the King’s secrets
The king’s army surrounded the city intending to seize Elisha
Elisha’s servant panicked, but Elisha prayed that he be able to see the heavenly army
Elisha prayed and the king’s army was struck blind, then led to Samaria
Inside Samaria, their sight returned and the King of Israel wanted to kill them all
But Elisha said no, give them a great feast and release them—and the war ended

2 Chronicles 20—A great army came against the southern kingdom of Judah
Jehoshaphat prayed and called all of Judah to pray
“We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” 2 Chronicles 20:12
God said, *“This battle is not for you to fight; take your position, stand still, and see the victory of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, and the LORD will be with you.” 2 Chronicles 20:17 NRSV*
Then Jehoshaphat set the choir out front, singing praises to the Lord
The enemy ambushed and destroyed each other—when Judah got there it was all over

Throughout these stories, God calls Israel to trust in Yahweh rather than military might
God is breaking the pattern of the day when the norm was to fight and conquer enemies

In contrast to conventional warfare at the time, Israel was not to take prisoners
They were not to take loot or rape the women of the enemy
God was to receive the glory, rather than those wielding military skill

1 Samuel 8—Israel lusted for a king like everyone else in the countries surrounding them
God gives them a king—but it is seen as an abandonment of God as their king

Instead God is calling this people to follow after God and to let God lead them
As they left Egypt, it was a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night
God led through the prophets
God led through various spokespersons and leaders
Always it was an invitation to be the people of God, Listening and following after God

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Genesis 12:1-3

But the temptation was great to follow the traditional ways of the people around them
And those stories are in scripture as well—many times the people did as they pleased

What God desires for Israel and the world is shalom
It is often translated peace, but it means so much more than that
God's shalom is more than the absence of conflict
Shalom includes reconciliation, wellbeing, wholeness, prosperity, flourishing of God's world
But God's shalom is more than wellbeing for the insiders—it was to show mercy to all people
They were to be kind to the alien and outsiders—extending them mercy and grace
When those around us are whole and prosper, we can all live in peace and shalom

God's promise to bless the world through Abraham is not primarily about land or people groups
It is a matter of covenant partnership and witness
In keeping the Lord's commandments and furthering the ways of the Lord
Israel becomes a light to the nations—a city on a hill
It's a grand experiment—showing the nations around them the results of following God
I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."
Isaiah 49:6 NRSV

On this holy mountain of the Lord the way of peace will be demonstrated...

4 *In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,*
2 *and many nations shall come and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
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 instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
3 He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
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;
4 but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. Micah 4:1-4*

Even the word Jerusalem means “city of peace,” and on the Lord’s holy mountain...
The wolf and lamb will eat together and the lion will eat straw like an ox (Isaiah 65:25)

Despite the conquest narratives in the Old Testament, Israel is the Servant of Yahweh
The Israelites are called into a covenant relationship in which they are to show mercy to others
The people of God are to show mercy to the downtrodden
hospitality to the alien
and justice to the oppressed
It is God’s intent that the victories of Israel are the result of God’s work and for God’s glory
That all people everywhere might see and follow this same God

Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts. Zechariah 4:6

But the whole thing centers around trust—the Israelites had to trust God to lead them
Trust enough to do some pretty radical things—send away 99% of your army
Walk around the city 13 times, playing trumpets, while everyone laughs at you
Enter battle with the choir out front, planning to stand still and do nothing
Feed the enemy a grand feast and let them go
In trusting the Leadings, God was faithful
It wasn’t a blind trust—it was Listening for way forward and following
Choosing to be faithful, willing to follow, trusting that we will be ok no matter the outcome

All Scripture references from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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