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Use of the Bible in Theology: A Case Study

Hans Walter Wolff

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Though coming out of a local theological debate, the following discussion on the use of the prophetic word of converting swords into plowshares has a profound as well as universal significance. Basing his arguments on scholarly and sound exegesis, the author convincingly demonstrates the need for the Church's unity to speak for disarmament as well as for a Christian life-style which is worthy of the one who went to the cross for the sake of reconciliation of man to God. The article takes up not only a burning issue of our time, namely, the question of war in an age of imminent nuclear holocaust, but also another burning issue in theology, namely a wholistic use of the Bible in developing a particular doctrine.

Editor

'Swords into plowshares'.—Several years ago young people of the church in the German Democratic Republic chose as their motto this phrase from the Old Testament prophets. They wore it, sewn upon their jackets and shirts, but this was immediately forbidden by the authorities. Yet this watchword quickly moved across the border into 'West Germany', where Christians who were members of the Peace Movement picked it up everywhere.

This prophetic word is not only made use of—even loved—by peace advocates, but it is also a matter of resolute controversy among theologians. In the face of the extreme threats to the future of the world, the lack of agreement on the meaning of this prophecy forbids us to remain silent on the matter. Rather, we ought to attempt to overcome the impasse, or lack of unity, in its interpretation. I shall attempt to make several exegetical observations which I hope will promote some unanimity in our understanding of the Christian's witness to the world.

For the sake of some methodological clarity, I begin with questions addressed to Prof. Trutz Rendtorff. In an interview with Professors Rendtorff and Dorothee Soelle, reported by the magazine *Der Spiegel* (Oct. 10, 1983, vol. 37, no. 41), Prof. Soelle made passing reference to the passage in Isaiah about 'beating swords into plowshares'. To this Prof. Rendtorff responded, 'Which prophet should we listen to, Prof. Soelle? Surely you know the word of the prophet Joel: "Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears" (Joel [p. 38](#) [3:10](#))? How do we resolve the dilemma of which biblical passage we should follow? We are not relieved of making our own individual decisions by reference to such texts.' The editor of *Der Spiegel* then asked: 'Who interprets the Christian teaching correctly, Prof. Soelle or Prof. Rendtorff?' Later, Rendtorff commented:

‘You can surely see that also in theology different positions can be represented. But each individual must decide for himself. For my generation, this has been a theme of life.’

If I understand Trutz Rendtorff correctly in this interview, he intends to suggest in a preliminary way two things for consideration: (1) The Bible contradicts itself. Individual Bible passages do not help us to decide whether, according to Isaiah, peace will be secured through disarmament; or whether, according to Joel, arming for war, at least at certain times, protects against its dangers. The Bible provides evidence for both views. (2) The criteria for our decisions in such matters are to be found outside the Scripture. Therefore, Christians are unable to reach unanimity on such matters. Each person must arrive at his or her own decision, and also allow the decision of others to stand as valid.

JOEL 3 VERSUS ISAIAH 2?

Now, allow me to pose two methodological counter-questions. First, is not his opposing of [Isaiah 2](#) (‘swords into plowshares’) and [Joel 3](#) (‘plowshares into swords’) to be understood as a dramatic gesture in the discussion? Do we not agree that, for the genuine understanding of these texts, their context deserves attention?

How are we to interpret the reference in [Joel 3](#)? The context of [Joel 3:9–12](#) ([Heb. 4:9–12](#)) clearly indicates that the prophet proclaims Yahweh’s judgment on the nations. Because nations of the world have severely mistreated Israel, the people of God (cf. [3:1–3](#)), they are all to bestir themselves and be gathered together before their judge (v. [12](#)). With biting sarcasm this gathering for punishment is characterized as an all-inclusive mobilization for war:

Proclaim this among the nations.
Prepare for a holy war!
arouse the warriors!
Let all the men of war draw near,
let them come up! (v. [9](#))

And then the entire war is turned into irony by the reversal of the passage in Isaiah:

Beat your plowshares into swords [p. 39](#)
and your pruning hooks into lances!
Let the weak say: ‘I am a warrior’. (v. [10](#))
Come all you nations round about.

(But for what purpose? For a great war and victory? No!):

So that Yahweh may shatter your heroes ... (v. [11](#))
For there I (God, the Lord) will sit to judge
all the nations round about (v. [12](#)).

Here we find it blatantly stated that all military preparation—even when peaceful farming and vinedressing implements are turned into weapons, even when all the men are summoned, including the weaklings, untutored in war—is completely in vain. Thus, in principle, Joel chapter [3](#) by no means stands in contradiction to Isaiah chapter [2](#). Joel emphasizes with sarcasm that all military preparation must come before the judgment seat of God and be annihilated. The phrase ‘plowshares into swords’ makes a blunt mockery of the world powers, who think that by completely arming themselves with much effort they will have power and superiority over the people of God. Verse [16b](#) then adds:

But for his (weaponless) people Yahweh is a refuge,
and a stronghold for the people of Israel.

Once the context of the passage is correctly understood, we find not an opposition between [Joel 3](#) and [Isaiah 2](#), but instead in both texts the declaration of an end to the wars of the nations. It seems to me that, on the basis of these observations about the context, there can be agreement among us.

Second, how are we to evaluate Trutz Rendtorff's statement which emphasizes that each individual must make his or her own decisions? Is a person—including each Christian—really free to make up his or her own mind regarding military armaments, since our modern weaponry brings mankind closer to total self-destruction as never before? The slogan from Joel, 'plowshares into swords', by no means has the sense of a divine command to make military preparation, but rather is a divine judgment upon massive armaments. Surely, as always, we may not arbitrarily isolate a given passage from its context. But, as Christians, where else should we seek help for making decisions in these matters, if not in the entire kerygmatic intention of the Old and New Testaments? In view of military threats capable of annihilating the human race, where else should we Christians find an orientation for our 'yes' or 'no' than in the foundational concepts of the canon of our faith? So we want the endeavours of our biblical exegesis [p. 40](#) to arrive at a common understanding and decision about peace in our world. Of this I am certain: if we will listen to the biblical witness, there need not be a permanent split on matters of war and peace also in the church.

WAR AND PEACE

Before we investigate more closely the disputed meaning of the prophetic words 'swords into plowshares', and before we make at least a preliminary comparison of related themes in the New Testament, let us discuss the main themes connected with war in the Old Testament.

Ancient Israel was well-acquainted with the 'war-cry'. In 1916 Hermann Gunkel described Israel's 'war-like spirit' under the title 'Israelitisches Heldentum und Kriegsfroemigkeit im Alten Testament' (Israelite Heroism and Martial Piety in the Old Testament). The nature and disposition of the ancient Israelites can hardly be distinguished from that of the neighbouring peoples, and, unfortunately, an even smaller distinction exists between the broadest streams of Christianity and the world, even in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, we have been made more and more aware of a series of voices which indicate that in the 'flesh' of the Old Testament we encounter the 'spirit' of Israel's God. In several highly significant streams of tradition, even in the midst of the old words, we hear a new word, pointing toward the future, giving us hope and directing our path.

To begin with, I call attention to the narratives which attest to the so-called 'holy war', in which Israel, without any weapons, stands before its heavily-armed enemies, and then in a wondrous manner experiences the truth which Moses calls out to them in [Exodus 14:14](#):

Yahweh will fight for you, and you have only to be still and astonished.

This is the way Israel experienced the Exodus, and so Israel's faith was founded and ever and again renewed. Later narratives attest to the same faith, as we find, for example, in the taking of Jericho ([Joshua 6](#): Jericho's walls collapsed without the use of any weapons, as the priests marched around the city with the ark, trumpets and shouting); or when,

according to [Judges 7](#), Midian was defeated (Israel's army, having been repeatedly reduced, used no weapons, but smashed jars, torches, and trumpets to put holy terror into the enemy, a terror which caused them to destroy themselves); or, when David fought Goliath ([1 Samuel 17](#): the giant Goliath, his sword, lance and spear notwithstanding, was defeated by the shepherd boy, who marched forth in the name of Yahweh of Hosts). Seen from an historical point of view these [p. 41](#) may have been quite insignificant experiences of deliverance from some difficulty, but Israel's faith had shaped them into a grand narrative in order to awaken new faith. In this way prophetic expectation about the future could look backwards into Israel's history.

Isaiah condemned the attempts of his contemporaries to find security through military power:

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help
who rely on horses.
They trust in chariots because they are many,
but they do not look to the Holy One of Israel
or consult Yahweh ([31:1-3](#)).
In returning and rest you shall be saved ([30:15](#)).

Israel's continued existence is never guaranteed by the usual deterrence of the enemy through fearsome armaments. Thus we find the prophet Hosea making an absolute contrast between military security and trust in Yahweh:

Assyria shall not save us,
we will not ride upon horses.
Nor will we any longer say 'our God'
to the work of our hands ([14:3](#)).

The notion that 'Yahweh destroys weapons' becomes one of the great themes of the Old Testament. [Psalm 46](#), a Song of Zion, puts it this way

The nations rage, the kingdoms totter,
... Yahweh of Hosts is with us.
Come, behold the works of Yahweh,
... He makes wars cease to the end of the earth:
He breaks the bow, shatters the spear,
and burns the chariots with fire (vv. [6-9](#)).

One cannot miss hearing in the Old Testament a decisive 'No' to every trust in any kind of weapons. Biblical faith decisively rejects all that has to do with war, not only in the outside world, but also in Israel! Entirely unambiguous is the new tone sounded in the midst of the Old Testament: faith in the God of Israel and security through military power are not compatible.

Alongside this 'No' to military weapons stands an equally clear 'Yes' to peace. Here I shall refer to a series of prophetic texts which we think of as messianic prophecies. Too little attention has been paid to the fact that all of these texts proclaim peace as well as a coming Messiah. [p. 42](#) We shall examine the most important prophecies, which strengthen the expectation that something new is coming into the world, which will nullify the old rules of war, whereby one group or nation was pitted against another.

In [Isaiah 9](#), God is given praise first of all because he—once again—has overcome military oppression (v. [4](#)) and destroyed the last traces of the soldiers' equipment (v. [5](#)) in preparation for handing over sovereign authority to the Messiah. The Messiah himself,

however, is given the lordly titles of 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (v. [6](#)). The primary accent apparently rests on the last title, for the coming ruler is enthroned only so that 'peace without end' can be established. The pedestal upon which his throne rests is called 'justice and righteousness'.

The promise in [Isaiah 11](#) goes into more detail about the instruments the Messiah will use to bring about and maintain peace:

He will smite the violent with the rod of his mouth
and with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked (v. [4](#)).

Thus it is exclusively 'word' and 'spirit' which are used by the Messiah to stop those who commit deeds of violence. The power of his words and the authority of his spirit do away with injustice, the source of discord. The Messiah offers care and concern especially for those who are weak and have few legal rights.

In addition to this peace which society will enjoy, vv. [6-8](#) speak of an unprecedented ecological peace:

The infant shall play over the hole of the cobra, ...
The wolf shall live with the sheep,
and the leopard shall live with the kid.

This messianic ecology amazes us. The narrow confines within which we usually envision the development of a future peace are widened through fables and leave quickly behind the sphere of what is humanly possible. In [Isaiah 11:10](#) the messianic age is also described in terms of world peace:

The root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign for the peoples.
Him shall the nations seek.

The Messiah is the last refuge to whom the peoples can turn with their problems. In [Micah 5:5a](#) it can even be said of the Messiah: 'He shall be the peace' (or: 'he will bring about peace' [?]) and, indeed, even 'unto the ends of the earth' (v. [4b](#)). He will be the son of the small town of Bethlehem, which never mustered a significant number of [p. 43](#) troops for the Israelite army ('little among the thousands of Judah', v. [2](#)). He will conduct his office as a shepherd (v. [4](#): 'he will feed his flock in the strength of Yahweh'). There is no mention of any kind of military weaponry.

[Zechariah 9:9-10](#) is very clear on this point, and goes further by adding three additional ideas. (1) Although the Messiah himself is proclaimed also as a king ('Behold, your king comes to you!'), the traditional picture of a king is completely changed. Lacking power of any kind, he is even described as 'poor and needy'. He does not ride upon a charger (an animal of war), but upon an ass, indeed, the weak foal of an ass (the animal of the common people). (2) This king, himself weaponless, will disarm his own people:

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem,
and he will break the battle bow (v. [10](#)).

Those who are most closely connected with this king (Ephraim, Jerusalem), his own people, are the first to be disarmed. (3) Finally, he will 'command peace to the nations'; indeed, this peace will encompass the world ('from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth').

Now let us summarize: The expectation of a Messiah belongs inseparably with the hope for an end to war, the destruction of weapons, and the establishment of peace

between nations, including social justice. When the disciples of Jesus called their master the Christ, i.e., the Messiah, they hardly could have been unaware of these motifs from messianic prophecy. Does not the passage in [Ephesians 2:14](#), 'He is our peace', recall [Micah 5:5a](#) and [Isaiah 9:6-7](#)? Is it not true that the hymnic praise of the inaugurator of peace is at the heart and centre of messianic thinking?

But what is the relationship of the one whom Jesus' disciples saw as 'their peace' and peace for the nations? At this point we must turn our attention, unhurriedly and with exegetical precision, to the prophetic text from which the catchphrase 'swords and plowshares' is taken.

AN INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH 2 AND MICAH 4

Our passage is the most significant promise for Jerusalem on the theme of world peace that is known in the Old Testament. In this particular text are combined the most important elements of tradition concerning the theme 'war and peace'. This prophecy comes down to us in two similar, almost verbally identical literary traditions, in [Isaiah 2:2-4](#) [P. 44](#) and [Micah 4:1-3](#). In their present literary compositions, both passages are attached immediately to older prophecies which threaten Zion with devastating blows of destruction, a destruction which surely had already taken place by the time of this prophetic word of promise. This promise is to be regarded as 'eschatological' in the strict sense of the term. It reckons with a great change in the world. Mount Zion and the temple of Yahweh, which had become an expanse of ruins, will in the end range above all mountaintops of the world. The nations of the world, until then in conflict, will stream to Zion for universal instruction through the word of Yahweh. And thus the prevailing world politics will be put to an unequivocal and final end.

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation
neither shall they learn war any more

([Isaiah 2:4](#)).

The introductory formula 'And it shall come to pass in the latter days' (RSV) is meant to be understood in an eschatological sense. The Septuagint correctly rendered the eschatological expression, as did the Vulgate (*in novissimo dierum*). I translate 'But in days to come, at the passing of this age', because the text refers less to the 'last days' (Luther) or the 'end' (thus the German *Einheitsuebersetzung*) of the present age than it does to the age which is presently still hidden, a time which is entirely new. In the post-exilic literature we find the expression 'in the latter days' more frequently used to characterize a change of fortune, especially for hostile nations ([Jeremiah 48:47](#); [49:39](#)) and, indeed, for all peoples ([Ezekiel 38:16](#)). Evidence for an early post-exilic date of the prophetic promise in [Isaiah 2](#)/[Micah 4](#) is also found in the word-statistics and the new thematic connection of older traditions.

We turn now to the structure of the basic text as it has been handed down similarly in the books of Isaiah and Micah. We may distinguish between three strophes.

The first strophe consists of [Isaiah 2:2](#) and [Micah 4:1](#), including in each instance the first three words of the following verse. In three double-triplets (3+3), the first strophe announces the vision of the surpassing height of the temple-mount in Jerusalem and streaming of the nations to it:

But in the days to come, at the passing of this age,
the mountain of Yahweh's house shall be established as the highest of mountains.
It shall be raised up above the hills.

To it will flow (all) peoples (nations) and the multitudes of the nations (peoples) will come. p. 45

The second strophe consists of the continuation of the third verse of Isaiah and the second of Micah. It offers a report of un-named nations summoning one another to make the pilgrimage to Zion.

They say:
'Come, let us go to the mountain of Yahweh,
to the house of the God of Jacob.'

They expect that Yahweh's voice will provide them with instruction; this is made emphatic by a brief verse formulated as a double-douplet (2+2).

That he may teach us his ways,
and that we may walk in his paths.

Then another double-triplet (3+3) speaks of the fulfilment of this expectation that the word of Yahweh will come forth out of Zion:

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem.

The third strophe (v. 4 in Isaiah; v. 3 in Micah) contains the specific promise of the word of Yahweh, which is the particular scopus of this great prophetic text. Indeed, we read for the first time a conciliatory statement about justice from Yahweh:

He will make conciliation between (Micah: many) peoples (nations),
give justice for numerous nations (peoples) (Micah: afar off).

Two further double-triplets express the effects of peace among the peoples, namely, the transforming of weapons into peaceful implements, and the end both of war and the study of war:

Then they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.
No longer shall nation lift up sword against nation
nor shall they learn war anymore.

The Hebrew texts in Isaiah and Micah exhibit small variants when compared with one another. Such variations suggest that there was a lively oral tradition which handed on this great prophetic promise. (An early example of the modern popularity of this pericope!) A most significant addition occurs in [Micah 4:4](#). Whereas the basic text in Micah—almost identical with that in Isaiah—speaks of overcoming the conflict among nations, this later addition in v. 4 draws the consequences for the peaceful individual life which is to be hoped for. The idyllic sketch presented in this verse departs from the context, and with its lines of four stresses each, is also rhythmically different: p. 46

They shall sit everyman under his vine and under his fig tree—
and no one shall be afraid.
For the mouth of Yahweh of Hosts has spoken.

In post-exilic times such words were also used to portray the golden age of peace during Solomon's reign ([1 Kings 5:5](#); cf. [2 Kings 18:31](#)) as a time of security, free from the dangers of war; as a life of joy (cf. [1 Kings 4:20](#) with [5:5](#)) and neighbourly friendship

([Zechariah 3:10](#): ‘In that day everyone of you will invite his neighbour under his vine and under his fig tree’). No terror disturbs a sociable, serene community life. By the addition of v. [4](#) the universal promise of this prophetic text is reinterpreted in terms derived from the sphere of intimate peasant life.

A different sort of addition to the unconditional promise of peace just noted in [Micah 4:4](#) are those expansions which are not a part of the promise, but instead draw conclusions which are for the purpose of offering helpful orientation for a present crisis. The additions occur in Isaiah ([2:5](#)) as well as in Micah ([4:5](#)), but each differs considerably from the other. This, once again, may indicate a lively oral tradition through the recitation of these words in the worship service.

Let us begin with the shorter, more prosaic text in Isaiah. To the grand, three-strophied promise an admonition has been attached which is meant to address the then present audience:

O house of Jacob!
Come and let us walk
in the light of Yahweh (v. [5](#)).

One cannot fail to recognize the connection of the wording with the previous verses. The address ‘house of Jacob’ recalls v. [3](#), according to which the peoples are to go up to the ‘house of the God of Jacob’. Similarly, the exhortation ‘Come and let us walk in the light of Yahweh’ picks up the language of the summons with which the peoples call to one another: ‘Come and let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh’. It also takes up the wording of the expectation that is expressed in v. [3a](#): ‘that we may walk in his paths’. Other early post-exilic texts about Jerusalem also speak about walking ‘in the light of Yahweh’; indeed, these texts speak not only of the ‘peoples’ ([Isaiah 60:3](#)), but also of Israel ([Isaiah 60:1–3, 19](#); cf. [Micah 7:8](#); [Psalms 56:14](#); [89:16](#); [27:1](#)).

Now it is to be noted that the grand promise (vv. [2–4](#); also [Micah 4:1–3](#)) spoke not of Israel, but of the peoples inclusively and of their relationship to the house and the word of Yahweh. On the other hand, now the leader in liturgical worship summons in v. [5](#) only the [p. 47](#) worshippers in Jerusalem, as ‘House of Jacob’, to walk in Yahweh’s light. What else can this mean than that the Israelite hearers already now should follow the instructions of Yahweh, which at a future time will lead all peoples to peace with one another (vv. [3–4](#))? Thus the eschatological promise for the peoples has become a word to help give direction for Israel for the present.

That such a summons belongs to a crisis in the orientation of the life of the people of God is made even more clear when we examine the corresponding passage in [Micah 4:5](#). For in this verse the difference at that time between the world of the nations, on the one hand, and Israel, on the other, is made explicit. At the same time, the non-fulfilment of the promise of peace among nations stands in contrast with Israel’s accomplishment of obedience to God.

All the peoples walk
each in the name of its god.
But we will walk
in the name of Yahweh,
our God for ever and ever.

The connection between v. [5](#) and vv. [1–4](#) in Micah has until now been given too little attention. The difficulty is related to the meaning of the conjunction which connects v. [5](#) with vv. [1–4](#). Usually the particle is translated in the casual sense as ‘for’. It is thus translated in the Septuagint and the Vulgate as well as in the older Luther translation, the

Zuercher Bibel (1954), the Jerusalem Bible (1968), and unfortunately also now in the Unified Translation (*Einheitsuebersetzung*, 1980). Such a translation of the particle makes the significance of the connection of v. [5](#) with vv. [1-4](#) completely unclear, for the declaration in v. [5](#) can just as little serve as a motivation for vv. [1-4](#) as does the exhortation in [Isaiah 2:5](#) for vv. [2-4](#). It is probably for this reason that the revised Luther translation of 1964 leaves the conjunction untranslated—an unsatisfactory solution offered out of embarrassment.

But the connection between v. [5](#) and the preceding context becomes quite clear if we understand the conjunction to have a concessive meaning ('although', 'even if', 'notwithstanding'), as Th. C. Vriezen has convincingly demonstrated (cf. for example [Isaiah 54:10](#), 'Although the mountains depart and the hills be removed, my steadfast love shall never depart from you ...'; cf. also [Isaiah 51:6](#); [Proverbs 6:35](#)). Thus the connection of v. [5](#) with the preceding word of promise becomes clear. It may be paraphrased:

Even though all peoples go
 (their own way) p. 48
 each in the name of its god,
we ourselves go
 (even now our own way)
 in the name of Yahweh, our God,
 for ever and ever.

Thus we have here a confessional statement, which the worshipping community speaks in the first person plural, and which is solemnly concluded with a liturgical expression ('for ever and ever', as in [Psalm 45:18](#); [145:21](#), etc.). This confession, in relation to the preceding words of promise, precisely corresponds in substance to the exhortation in [Isaiah 2:5](#). But it points more clearly to the spiritual crisis for Israel in order to lead it away from this to an unequivocal action of the worshipping community. The universal promise, according to which all nations will be at peace by walking in the ways of Yahweh, is at that time completely unfulfilled. The nations of the world do not yet think about directing their lives in accordance with the word of Yahweh. But the community of Yahweh even now should ([Isaiah 2:5](#)) and will ([Micah 4:5](#)) obey his instructions and his word; even now it is to make its swords into plowshares and not learn war anymore. So the worshippers of Yahweh even now are to walk on the path which is promised for all peoples for the days that are to come. Even now!—although Mount Zion does not by any means tower over all the mountain peaks of the world. Even now!—although the nations still follow their gods of war. The way of Yahweh is the only lasting way, the path that leads to what is ultimate and final, the path which also all people must tread in the future.

In the light of these considerations, several questions arise which I would like to put to Wolfhart Pannenberg and his article 'Swords into Plowshares—the Meaning and Misuse of a Prophetic Word'.

1. Pannenberg correctly states that the prophecy about 'Beating your swords into plowshares' is not found in the context of a direct political challenge; rather, it belongs to an eschatological vision. Nevertheless, did not our exegetical observations convince us that this form critical analysis of the context is yet incomplete? The present literary context of the promise makes it apply to the contemporary times of a new audience, with the exhortation to the House of Jacob that it should even now walk and act in the light of Yahweh ([Isaiah 2:5](#)). Our analysis further showed that in [Micah 4:5](#) there is a corresponding clarification of the divine will that, unlike the nations, the House of Jacob is to act even now according to Yahweh's will for peace. Does this not fully justify the use

of this passage by the Protestant youth in [p. 49](#) the German church? Indeed, does it not unambiguously require it for the worshipping community which hears these words?

2. Pannenberg refers in his article to [Isaiah 2:5](#) and suggests that the prophetic vision, with its reference to law ([Isaiah 2:3](#)), could become a certain signpost in our own historical situation. However, does not this restriction of focus on the concept of law in the passage arbitrarily diminish the contemporary significance of the text's content and meaning? Pannenberg's admonition to work on international law is of course useful. But does it in fact correspond to the content of the text? The expectation voiced in the text points ahead not to the law as such, but to the fact that Yahweh judges the nations; that Yahweh's word and instruction will lead to peace. In this passage those who hear the word of God have a question put to them for the present as well as for the future. And what about the consequences which the text draws? Those who hear these words are to transform their weapons into implements of peace; they are to stop learning about and declaring war. As a consequence of Yahweh's mediating and judging of nations, it is apparent that the decision to beat swords into plowshares cannot be evaded. The direction things are to take is unambiguous. Any alternative to this, especially in the direction of building modern weapons capable of annihilating humankind, is surely not to be found here or among the many related Old or New Testament texts. Surely it is most urgent that we work toward an international legal agreement on disarmament, but such acts of conciliation ought not to take the place of what is proclaimed here as the consequences that Yahweh's word wants to call forth. As people who listen to the God of the biblical witnesses, must we not take upon ourselves the rigorous requirements of a special and proleptic, one-sided life of peace, as this text and many of the words of Jesus and the apostles teach us in the New Testament?

3. I hope that I have been able to convince Professor Pannenberg that the confession in [Micah 4:5](#) has great significance for the broader understanding of this prophetic text and for the problem of its misuse. In this passage the conduct of the nations in those days and the community of Yahweh is clearly distinguished. This clarity of distinction is completely absent in Pannenberg's article. In [Micah 4:5](#) the people of God clearly perceive that the nations for the time being are a long way from hearing God's word, which can help them achieve peace. But this cannot and should not hinder the worshippers in Zion from following already the ways of their God, in the certainty that the ways of God are the ultimate and final path which, sooner or later, the nations must also tread. But how does this expected action of [p. 50](#) God's people relate to Pannenberg's ideas that 'we must hold fast to the principle of mutuality, to the conception of mutual obligations, even when it has to do with questions of disarmament'? The community spoken about in [Micah 4:5](#), in the midst of a world crisis, confesses its faith that it must already work unilaterally for that peace which the nations in general did not yet practice. Pannenberg thinks that even during a time of nuclear armament 'peace can be attained and guaranteed only on the basis of mutual give and take, and thus on the basis of political agreement'. Is this conception of mutuality representative of biblical thought if, as we read elsewhere, 'to give is more blessed than to receive'? In any case, it is not compatible with [Micah 4:5](#).

In my opinion, the fear of a misunderstanding and a misapplication of this prophecy is justified only when the watchword 'Swords into plowshares' is banned from the historical present of the worshipping community and its members and their public actions, and is relegated to an indefinite, far-off future for the nations (or else applied to a spiritual inwardness). One can ask, in the light of present-day Christianity, whether the negotiations of the major powers would not be more successful for achieving world peace, if the politicians who want to be Christians would allow a more unequivocal impact of this

prophetic word upon their work. In any case, there remains the question about what it is that specifically distinguishes Christian actions in this matter.

4. We have examined a prophetic text which occurs twice in Israel's literary tradition and which exhibits several variations and interpretations in its oral transmission. This prophecy not only takes up those strands of tradition which allowed a new theme to break forth in the midst of the war-cry in ancient Israel (we noted above the experience of faith in narratives about the wars of Yahweh; the theme 'Yahweh destroys weapons' in Zion Psalms; the prophetic condemnation of self-security through the politics of military power; and the connection of messianic expectation with a hope for peace); it also stands in a relationship to New Testament texts, which we must now seek to determine. In conclusion, let us ask whether the New Testament, in the light of the life and activity of the followers of Jesus, at some point reflects the meaning and the spirit of our prophetic text; and whether the New Testament does not disclose even more the ultimate basis for the text.

SOME NEW TESTAMENT PARALLELS

According to [Romans 12](#), with the appearance of Jesus Christ the [P. 51](#) eschaton of the mercy of God has entered into our history. Accordingly, the community of Jesus' followers is not to be conformed to this world; rather, in its reasonable worship, the community should repay no one evil for evil (cf. vv. 17:21!). This means: 'If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all' (v. [18](#)). 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (v. [21](#)). The First Letter of Peter reckons with the fact that the Christian community, like its Lord, will experience suffering. The letter reminds the community that its conduct should conform to the example of Christ, who 'when he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly' ([2:21-24](#)). Jesus' disciples, according to [Luke 9:51-54](#) were inclined to let 'fire from heaven' fall upon their enemies (v. [54](#)). 'But Jesus rebuked them and said: "Do you not know what manner of spirit you are of?"' Do not all of these passages from different areas within the New Testament point in the direction of our prophetic text? Do they not make clear the meaning, the spirit, and the essential foundation of our deeds and actions?

Now, it can be said that, considered sociologically and also in the light of their political problems, the New Testament followers of Jesus are comparable neither to ancient Israel, nor to our national churches, large denominations, nor to the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century. But concerning this, let me ask two questions.

1. In the midst of our human and political problems, must not the church today—if it is to be, remain, or become the church of Jesus Christ—hold fast to the apostolic exhortation, as did early Christianity: 'Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ' ([Philippians 1:27](#); cf. [Colossians 1:10](#))?

2. Does not the church of today in many respects stand closer socio-politically to the problems of Old Testament Israel than it does to the New Testament community?

Thus we may draw the conclusion that a prophetic text such as [Isaiah 2](#)/[Micah 4](#) elucidates and makes concrete for us our responsibilities, though the final basis for our actions is laid in the New Testament.

It is said that everyone wants peace. What is disputed among us is the way to achieve peace: occasional threats with weapons that annihilate humanity, or immediate disarmament. Is there a clearer help for Christians in their decision-making than the prophetic passage about 'turning swords into plowshares', supported by other theological traditions proclaimed in the Old Testament, and by further motivations found in the New Testament? It would be an immeasurable gain if the [p. 52](#) churches of the world would

become more and more unified on this point. There are certainly no significant words of the prophets, of the Apostles, or of Jesus, which point in any other direction than the prophetic text, 'beat your swords into plowshares'. I ask you: if we listen to God's word of reconciliation and if we look to the way of Jesus' cross, must there still be a parting of our ways? No! Nor should this be the case when our encounter with this prophetic word is similar to what Mark Twain once wrote: 'It is the Bible passages which I understand that give me a stomach ache, not those that I don't understand.' 'Beat your swords into plowshares'—that is easy to understand.

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The Evolution of Evangelical Mission Theology since World War II

Arthur F. Glasser

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With his vast experience and expertise in missions and missionary theology, Arthur Glasser traces the major phases in the development of Evangelical Missiology in the last half century in a convincing manner. His concluding challenge—'If evangelicals are to develop an adequate Trinitarian Mission theology based on the Kingdom of God, they must face up to the implication of the Ecumenical problem: What must we do with those whose confession of Jesus Christ we must take seriously yet, whose perspectives on the Christian mission differ markedly from our own?'—will shake up any conscientious reader. The article is particularly beneficial as it gives insights concerning the historical development of a particular area of theology.

Editor

Howard Snyder stands taller and sees further than many evangelical writers today. Having been a missionary in the third world (Brazil) gives him considerable insight into the contemporary scene. Not only is he biblical through and through. His theologizing is disciplined reflection on the total witness of the Bible on the basic issues facing the church in our day. As a result, what he writes I read, and when he speaks I listen.

In 1983, at a Conference at Colorado Springs, Colorado, I heard him discuss the significance of Jesus Christ's preoccupation with the kingdom of God. Snyder then went on to relate this to the present need of the church. I was fascinated. But it was his initial statement that particularly grasped my attention. Without qualification he introduced his presentation with the following judgment: 'The recent partial recovery among evangelicals of the kingdom of God theme is surely one of the most significant theological developments of this decade—perhaps of this century.' This brought me to a full stop. But I heartily agreed!