

Preferring the life of the innocent

Next, we address the issue of defensive action. Where does Scripture say we can use physical force, even to the point of taking a life, in order to defend ourselves or another?

The concept of defensive action is seen in Scripture in a number of areas; Abram used force to rescue his relatives (Gen. 14:14-16), and Moses actually used lethal force against an Egyptian who was in the process of abusing a Hebrew slave (Exod. 2:11-12). Centuries later God divinely inspired an unknown writer to mention the period in Moses' life surrounding this event. He is listed in the "Hebrews hall of fame" without a word of reproach for this deed (Heb. 11:24-27). And Stephen, before being stoned, also testified to the nature of Moses' actions in defense of the slave (Acts 7:23-25).

There are clear consequences to murder in other passages of Scripture, and the moral censure is also clear. If condemnation for this act by Moses was warranted, it would seem likely that evidence would abound.⁵

And there are examples that date themselves after the giving of the Law to Moses. Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, drove a stake through the temple of Sisera's head (Judges 4:17-21). Only one chapter later, Deborah, who is Judge over Israel, sings "Most blessed of women be Jael...Her hand reached for the tent peg...She struck Sisera, she crushed his head...At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell—dead."⁶

Those who would argue that this was an act of warfare neglect to consider two important facts. Women, in general, were not allowed to go to war (Deborah was an exception, not the rule), and the law of hospitality as practiced in the time of the judges made it unthinkable for Sisera to consider himself to be in danger from his friend's wife. Greeting him outside of her tent, she was the epitome of hospitality. And nowhere in Scripture do we find moral disapprobation for Jael's act (committed despite the fact that she had no civil authority) to bring a wicked man down in the protection of a community.

5. As a contrast, it might be appropriate to read through the story of David the king who orchestrated the death of a faithful soldier, Uriah the Hittite. God's Word makes clear pronouncement against his act of deception and murder (2 Sam. 11-12).

6. Judges 5:24-31 describes in song the sequence of events surrounding the death of Sisera, and ends with an imprecatory plea that all of the Lord's enemies should thus perish. Such jubilation seems out of place in our modern age, yet there is something in each of us that appreciates a justice done.

On a larger scale, Elijah the prophet of God slew 450 prophets of Baal in defense of a nation (1 Kings 40:40). He was certainly not acting under the authority of God's divinely appointed governors, Ahab and Jezebel. In fact, there is no indication of a special Divine revelation. Rather, it appears that his action was prompted by the singular and divine authority of God's Law (Exod. 22:20).

It is also important to pick up the theme of self-defense which is so easily overlooked in a later chapter of the Exodus account. In the OT capital punishment is not prescribed for property crimes. Yet the thief opens himself up to the risk of death if he is caught breaking into a home in the middle of the night (Exod. 22:2). It is because of the potential risk to innocent life, implied by breaking in under cover of darkness, that the homeowner is free of "blood guilt" should he kill the thief in the ensuing effort to protect himself or his family.

William Blackstone states, the law "which punished no theft with death, makes homicide only justifiable, in cases of nocturnal house breaking . . . or even by day, if he armed himself with any dangerous weapon."⁷

Out of context

In condemning Christians who have used force, those who consider themselves to be authorities on the subject may sometimes bring shame upon their office of pastor or pro-life leader. It is not uncommon to see Scriptures pulled out of context in order to make a point which was never intended in the Word. When investigating the claims of any position on the debate over the use of force, it is important that we examine both specific commands and any underlying principles.

We address with concern the manner in which an investigation is made of the issue because too often it is the case that we first deduce a position, then make every effort to justify that view. It is the worldly "scientific method" of stating a theory and then attempting to force all of the information to conform to our idea of reality. But when looking into Scripture, there are rules which must apply.

The Scripture which tells of the thief who breaks into a home in the middle of the night gives us opportunity to stop for one moment and examine how a simple distortion can both wrongly convince others of our position, and erode the integrity with which we handle the Word of God.

⁷ Wm Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, vol. 4, pg. 180-181.