



Shalom—Eirene—Peace

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In the Greek culture and thought of the world of the New Testament times the word “peace” (*eirene* in Greek) denoted the antithesis of war, the condition resulting from a cessation of war, and the state of law and order that yields blessings and prosperity.¹ Hence, “peace” belonged basically to the political realm, and was lived and enjoyed as a political reality (government was then the agent of peace, through the exercise of law and government political and military powers). Although written in the Greek language, the New Testament does not use the word “peace” (*eirene*) only in its common meaning in the Greek world. New Testament “peace” (*eirene*) reflects rather a much more comprehensive concept, a concept that is not Greek in its nature but Hebrew, translating the all-important and encompassive Jewish idea of *shalom*.

The word “peace” (*eirene*) in the New Testament occurs 91 times. For sure, peace as the opposite of war is one of the meanings in these occurrences (as in Luke 14:32 and Acts 12:20). However, faithful to the concept of *shalom*, the basic concept of “peace” in the New Testament is that of “wholeness”—a “wholeness” in all dimensions of life, implying in tranquility, safety, well-being, welfare, health, con-

tentment, success, comfort, integrity, harmony with God and His laws, etc. Such a kind of peace is in direct relationship with the work of God in a man’s life and in his world.²

The wish for peace was a common and constant element in the New Testament, as it was and still is in the Jewish context. This is most patently indicated by the usage of the common Jewish greeting *Shalom aleichem*. Matthew 10:12-13 clearly indicates that *Shalom aleichem* was the greeting that the disciples of Jesus evoked upon a house to which they would have been invited. Luke 24:36 describes that Jesus himself greeted his disciples with these words. The wish-

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ing for peace (*eirene* or *shalom*) was a common element in the opening and closing greetings of the apostolic letters of the New Testament. By reading these greetings, one can perceive that the most basic formula became “grace and

peace from God, our Father, and from Jesus, the Messiah, be upon you.”³ Many New Testament interpreters judge that the apostles, or more specifically Paul, developed a new kind of greeting that was a benediction-like prayer that emphasized “grace and peace.” Some of these scholars believe that the common Greek-Roman wish formula *chairein* (“joy, gladness”), found in letters of the time, was transformed and adapted into *charis* (“grace”), a Christian key element, and to it was added the common Jewish greeting for “peace.” This benediction-like prayer, “grace and peace,” would have become therefore a typically and fundamentally Christian novelty.⁴ One should notice, however, that “grace and peace” were two keywords of the most important benediction-prayer of the Jewish liturgy from the times of Moses up to now, the *Birkat Kohanim*, the “Priestly Benediction” (Numbers 6:24-26). As a priest lifted his hands to bless a congregation, a group of people, or an individual, he wished that God would bless them and would keep them, that He would shine His face upon them and be “graceful” (from the Hebrew root *chanan*, “grace”) to them, that He would lift His countenance upon them and give them “peace” (*shalom*). So “grace and peace” from God was a common

wish prayer-like benediction in Jewish context in a way very similar to what is written in the apostolic letters.

Since “peace” (*eirene*) in the New Testament reflects the all comprehensive Jewish concept of *shalom*, the responsibility for the implementation of peace does not repose upon government and the political powers only. The individual is directly concerned with it and it is his responsibility to work for it. The Hebrew Bible directly admonished: “Seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14). The biblical injunction to “seek peace” had a profound impact on the Jewish concept of a man’s position toward peace. This can be exemplified by the words of the famous Jewish sage Hillel (beginning of C.E.) in the Talmudic collection of wisdom sayings *Pirkei Avot*, chapter 1, verse 12: “Hillel used to say: Be thou of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it, loving people and bringing them to the Torah.”⁵ So, “peace” and “love” are directly related. One is supposed to “love peace” and that means “to love people” and bring them into harmony with God’s law. Peace in the New Testament follows a similar line of thought. To live in peace is to live a relationship of love in harmony with God’s law that commands “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27—in Luke the reference to this commandment is followed by a parable that illustrates how a man, a Samaritan, treated a supposed enemy as a brother, loving him as such). “Peace” and “love” are part of the fruit of the Spirit of God that appears in the life of a man who lives in harmony with the divine law (Galatians 5:22). One must be active in the implementation of peace in his life and around him. The New Testament exhorts each one to be at peace with one another (Mark 9:50 and 2 Corinthians 13:11) and ideally with all men (“if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with every-

one”—Romans 12:18). One needs to strive for such peace (Hebrews 12:14), actively searching to establish it and bring man into harmony with God and with his fellow (Romans 10:14-15). Those who so actively involve themselves in establishing such peace will be called “children of God,” as Jesus said: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:9). The “peacemakers,” in Hebrew *Ossei Shalom*, will be called *Benei Elohim* (“sons of God”), for one of the main characteristics of God is to be an *Osseh Shalom* (One Who Establishes Peace). This title for God is one of the most common in Jewish Literature and Liturgy.⁶ By using it in a parallel expression to men, Jesus emphasized that one of the main characteristics of the image of God to be restored in us is “peace” and the active involvement in establishing it, so that we can be again like our Heavenly Father (a *Ben Elohim*, a “son/child of God”).

In Hebrew thought, God is the source of peace.⁷ He, the *Osseh Shalom*, is the One Who establishes peace in Heaven, as well as on Earth.⁸ It is from Him that we expect peace to come, as well expressed at the climax of the Sacerdotal Blessing in Numbers 6:24-26. Indeed, in the Bible, He is the God of Peace (Judges 6:24), a title for God that occurs many times in the New Testament (Romans 15:33; 16:20; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 13:20). Jesus, as the Messiah, is presented as the mediator of the peace from God (Romans 5:1), he himself is peace (Ephesians 2:14-18). Since his birth a strong emphasis is put on peace toward men (Luke 1:79; 2:14). In this way, the New Testament reflects the Jewish expectation of a Messiah that was called by the prophet Isaiah the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6; see also Isaiah 52:7; 57:19; Ezekiel 37:26; Haggai 2:9). The peace mediated by the Messiah is different from the peace that comes from the world (John 14:27; 16:33), for,

by bring men into harmony with God, its results affect not only one’s life here and now but bear fruits that spring forth to eternity (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

¹H. Beck and C. Brown, “Peace,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 2:776.

²Ibid., 780; David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1996), 39.

³See Romans 1:7; 15:33; 16:20; 1 Corinthians 1:3; 16:11; 2 Corinthians 1:2; 13:11; Galatians 1:3; 6:16; Ephesians 1:2; 6:23; Philippians 1:2; 4:7, 9; Colossians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 3:16; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 3; Hebrew 13:20; 1 Peter 1:2; 5:14; 2 Peter 1:2; 3:14; 2 John 3; 3 John 15; Jude 2; Revelation 1:4.

⁴See the discussion in Ralph Martin, 2 *Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 4; and Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 49-50.

⁵The Talmudic tractate *Pirkei Avot* can be found in most Jewish prayer books, or *Sidur*, that is commonly used for the liturgical services of the synagogue. The present quotation was extracted and translated into English from the Hebrew and Portuguese edition of Jairo Fridlin, ed., *Sidur Completo com Tradução e Transliteração* (1979).

⁶It appears for example at the conclusion of the Great Prayer (the *Amidah*) and of the *Kaddish*, prayers that are at the very backbone of the Synagogue regular liturgy. The concluding words of these prayers became the well-known and popular Jewish religious hymn *Osseh Shalom*, which says: *Osseh shalom bimromau, Hu yáasser shalom aleinu ve’al kol Yisrael, ve’imru Amen* (“The One Who establishes peace in the Heights, may He establishes peace upon us and upon all Israel, and all may say: Amen!”).

⁷Genesis 28:21; 41:16; Leviticus 26:6; Judges 18:6; Job 5:24; 15:21; 25:2; Psalms 4:8; 29:10-11; 34:15; 35:27; 37:11; 55:18; 73:3; etc.

⁸See the hymn *Osseh Shalom* above in note 6.