221687 - Do the teachings of the Prophets differ with regard to the prescription of fighting?

the question

I am interested in Islam, yet one thing is confusing me greatly. According to Islam, all of the prophets carried the same message to different times and places. However, as evidenced by many of your answers, fighting and using the sword is a key part of Islam. Why is it, then, that Jesus who was considered to be a prophet, had a starkly different view of the sword? In one of the verses (26:52) he told his disciple to put away his sword, and that the one who uses it will perish with it.
I am confused as to why these two prophets had such different views on use of the sword, when they are supposed to be carrying the same message

Detailed answer

Firstly:

It should be quite clear to you – as you are interested in studying Islam – that the message of the Prophets is the same with regard to basic beliefs and aims.

But with regard to the rulings on minor issues, each Prophet had his law [with the details of rulings that he brought from his Lord], and each message had its own juristic rulings that differed between the Messengers and Prophets, as Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, tells us (interpretation of the meaning): “To each among you, We have prescribed a law and a clear way” [al-Maa’idah 5:48].

It was narrated that Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “I am the closest of people to ‘Eesa ibn Maryam (Jesus son of Mary – peace be upon him) in this world and the Hereafter. The Prophets are like half-brothers; their mothers are different but their religion is one.”

Narrated by Muslim in his Saheeh (no. 3443).

Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

What this hadith means is that the basis of their religion is one, namely Tawheed or affirmation of the Oneness of Allah, even though the minor details of their laws differed.

End quote from Fath al-Baari (6/489)

Hence it will also be quite clear to you that very many of the details of acts of worship and practical matters in Islam are not to be found in other religions. There were some acts of worship that were prescribed for the followers of earlier Prophets but were abrogated in the case of Islam, and Allah prescribed a law and a clear way for each nation. Although there is common ground between these laws, the differences between them are also great.

Indeed, practical rulings varied through the stages of Islamic sharia (law) itself. Fighting the enemy, for example, was not prescribed in the Makkan stage of the mission of the Prophet Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). Rather it was prescribed after the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) migrated to Madinah, as we see in the verse in which Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Permission to fight is given to those (i.e. believers against disbelievers), who are fighting them, (and) because they (believers) have been wronged, and surely, Allah is Able to give them (believers) victory.

Those who have been expelled from their homes unjustly only because they said: "Our Lord is Allah." - For had it not been that Allah checks one set of people by means of another, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, wherein the Name of Allah is mentioned much would surely have been pulled down. Verily, Allah will help those who help His (Cause). Truly, Allah is All-Strong, All-Mighty”

[al-Hajj 22:39-40].

It is more appropriate that the rulings on fighting should vary between the laws of the Messengers and Prophets; that is nothing odd or strange.

Differences between their laws do not indicate that there are differences between the Messengers and Prophets; rather all of them came from the same source, which is the revelation from Allah, may He be glorified and exalted; their beliefs are the same and do not change. As for the laws which regulate their lives, acts of worship and interactions with others, they have changed a great deal.

Fighting the enemy is one of these legal matters, and has nothing to do with beliefs or Islamic concepts of the unseen, the Hereafter, the reckoning, or Paradise and Hell. Fighting is an action and is something that is done by nations and states for purposes that may be noble, such as fighting to defend one's land and honour; nobler than that is fighting to protect the faith and make the word of the Lord of the worlds supreme. Or it may be for ignoble purposes, such as fighting to usurp wealth or power in the land.

If we assume, for argument's sake, that there is a difference in how fighting is regarded between Islamic sharia and the law of the Messiah (peace be upon him) or the law of Moosaa (Moses – peace be upon him), that is nothing to be surprised by or to wonder at.

We accept that in the sharia of Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) the view of fighting varied. In some circumstances it was permitted and in other circumstances it was not allowed. None of the scholars or wise men thought there was any contradiction or confusion with regard to the source of the revelation that was sent to the Prophet Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). Why would you think that differences in the laws of the Prophets concerning the matter of fighting is a sign of contradiction between them or indicates that their message was not one and the same?

Secondly:

Moreover, the Torah clearly states that Moses enjoined fighting, and that came about in fulfilment of a promise that was mentioned in the Torah. The Torah speaks a great deal about the Israelites fighting the Midianites in vengeance. The battle plan was drawn up via divine revelations and the matter ended as described:

“The Israelites captured the Midianite women and children and took all the Midianite herds, flocks and goods as plunder. [10] They burned all the towns where the Midianites had settled, as well as all their camps. [11] They took all the plunder and spoils, including the people and animals, [12] and brought the captives, spoils and plunder to Moses and Eleazar the priest”

Numbers 31:9-12, 17:25 [NIV –New International Version]

The Jews claim that God is with them in their battles, and that He will fulfil His promise to them (Deuteronomy 6:10-12, 20:4)

Hence they used to consult God (“inquire of the LORD”) before every battle, through the priests (Judges 20:26-28, I Samuel 23:2)

All the battles that are attributed to Moses were primarily aimed at enslaving others (Deuteronomy 20:14, 21:10-14)

The Jews knew religious warfare from ancient times, and they were accustomed to killing idolaters, both individuals and nations. That was clear in the war against the Amalekites at the time of Moses (Exodus 17:14-16), and was repeated at the time of Saul and David (I Samuel 14:48, 15:17-18, 30:17; 2 Samuel 8:12)

This was mentioned by Dr. Bakr Zaki in his book al-Qitaal Mashroo‘iyyatan wa Adaaban fi’l-Islam wa’l-Yahoodiyyah wa’n-Nasraaniyyah (Fighting: Prescription and Code of Conduct in Islam, Judaism and Christianity), p. 269-270

Under the heading: “Is fighting prescribed in Christianity or not?” the author says:

In answer to this we say: self-defence by all possible means is something natural except in those who have no self-respect, just as defence of one’s faith, honour, family and property are all natural instincts if the means are available. Defence may go so far as uniting for that purpose, if the threat is to a community, or to an individual who has some standing in that community, if means of such defence are available. These means include the following:

· Moral strength in the defenders; this is the strongest factor in fighting

· Physical strength that enables use of different weaponry and equipment for fighting

· Availability of a location to form a base for military operations

· Ability to plan tactics and strategy, which is no less important that the other means mentioned above.

If we look for these elements in the Gospels, we find the following:

[here the author explains at length that none of these elements which facilitate fighting were available at the time of the Messiah (peace be upon him)]

Then he says:

The factors mentioned above did not allow for the prescription of fighting, and indeed such a prescription would have been beyond the people's means, and the (divine) laws are aimed at making things easy and removing hardship. However, there are two views among the Christian scholars with regard to fighting, as follows:

-1-

The first view is that fighting is not prescribed. These scholars quoted the following text as evidence:

38 You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

Matthew 5:38-41 [NIV –New International Version]

(You can see a discussion of this passage in the book al-Maseehiyyah wa'l-Mujtama' fi Daw' Ta'aaleem al-'Ahd al-Jadeed (Christianity and Society in the Light of New Testament teachings), pp. 23-26; al-Kanz al-Jaleel fi Tafseer al-Injeel (A Treasury of Gospel Commentary), 1/74-76

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth….

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me

Matthew 5:5-12 [NIV –New International Version]

The Messiah rebuked one of his disciples for using the sword when he was taken to be crucified [according to the Gospel narrative], and he instructed him to sheath it:

51 With that, one of Jesus’ companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

52 “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?

Matthew 26:51-54 [NIV –New International Version]

-2-

The other view is that fighting is prescribed. These scholars quoted the following texts as evidence for it being prescribed in Christianity:

34 Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.35 For I have come to turn

a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

36 a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’

37 Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

Matthew 10:34-38 [NIV –New International Version]

In Luke it says:

But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and kill them in front of me

Luke19:27 [NIV –New International Version]

49 I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.

Luke 12:49-50 [NIV –New International Version]

In the Bible, fire refers to war and resistance (Isaiah 43:2; I Peter 1:7)

There are a number of references to destructive wars (Matthew 24:19), and war is also mentioned in general terms (Matthew 24:6; Mark 13:7)

As the Messiah did not fight, we cannot know what his code of conduct would have been or what the outcome of fighting would have been.

Those who hold the first opinion interpreted the texts above by saying that the sword in the texts is the sword of truth, in standing up to falsehood (al-Kanz al-Jaleel, 2/265).

End quote from al-Qitaal Mashroo‘iyyah wa Adaabuhu fi’l-Islam, al-Yahoodiyyah wa’n-Nasraaniyyah, p. 283-292

To sum up: it is correct to say “all the messages are the same”, because they brought the same beliefs and aims. But with regard to juristic rulings and minor details, they are not the same; rather they vary. This is if we assume that fighting was not prescribed in the law of the Messiah (peace be upon him). However there are texts in the Gospels available in printed editions today which clearly mention fighting and the sword.

And Allah knows best.