

## **Shalom ( שָׁלוֹם )! A Study of the Concept of Peace in the Old Testament**

**Luke Emeka Ugwueye**

### **Abstract**

The Hebrew idea of peace as encased in the word shalom is significant for peace building in the society and in this regard the paper surveyed various uses of the term in the Old Testament text of the Bible. There is no English word that can effectively convey the richness behind the root letters of shalom. Not only that the Old Testament concept of shalom helps in the development of peace theology but it also removes any basis for the support of war or non-peaceful conditions or indifference to them. As a central and active concept in the Old Testament, shalom gave life to ancient Israel and can do same to the society today.

### **Introduction**

Peace has had a profound meaning to many and has been an integral part of religious teaching since time immemorial. It has been central to individuals and groups in different localities. Governments at Local and International levels constantly seek it, or at least offer it as their focus or aim for formulating policies alongside their implementations.

The religious world echo and emphasize peace more than the secular world. Peace is central to Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and many other religions. In Christianity, peace is treasured much. It means grace and divine good will: a state of mind through which one can accept the all-important message of God. This is an active concept of peace, not a passive idea. All through, the theological concept of peace does overlap with peace as harmony in its secular meaning.

The most contemporary meaning of peace is an absence of some kind of antagonistic conflict. This is the *Oxford English Dictionary* meaning “a situation or a period of time in which there is no war or violence in a country or an area” (Hornby, 2001 P.857). According to Stephenson, Voorhees and Morris (2004), it is a state of agitation, calm or repose. Generally speaking, among the various senses of peace, primary in each case is freedom from, or cessation of war or hostilities, freedom from civil commotion and disorder, freedom from quarrels or dissention between individuals, a state of reconciliation after strife or enmity, freedom from riot or violence or freedom from mental agitation or anxiety.

Not included in the above definitions but complimentary to them are those concepts of peace that are compounds of different ideas such as that of Spinoza (1985), which says that peace is not an absence of war but virtue, a state of mind, a

disposition for benevolence, confidence and justice. For the early Christian father and Bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine (1997), peace between man and man is well-ordered concord, domestic peace is well-ordered concord between those of the family who rule and those who obey. Civil peace is similar concord among citizens.

However, Thomas Aquinas (1948) criticized the above view by saying that concord is an agreement between wills consenting to the same things while internally we may have appetites that disagree. True peace, therefore includes concord, but he added that the appetites within us must also be united. For instance, concord reached under threat is really not peace. Peace, then, combines two levels - that between people and that between a person and himself. The idea of peace as concord could mean any agreement between will, as Aquinas puts it, thus including agreements under duress or threat. Nevertheless, concord should imply an amicable agreement and friendly relations.

Theologians, philosophers, psychologists, mathematicians, economists, jurists and publicists who have considered the subject of peace carefully have perceived that if peace is to attract opinion and to fulfill its expectations, it must be a positive conception. It must mean justice and order and it cannot mean all these without organization. Experience has shown that in limited areas violence has been prevented only

when peace was identified with an organized society which made peace its first concern.

Must curiously, the much-sought, much-talked and much-needed peace has continued to elude humanity in the world. According to Spurgeon (2009) since the beginning of recorded history, the entire world has been at peace less than eight percent of the time. Of about three thousand five hundred and thirty years of recorded history, only two hundred and eighty six years saw peace. Moreover, in excess of eight thousand peace treaties were made and broken. During these periods about fourteen thousand three hundred and fifty one wars, large and small, in which about 3.64 billion people were killed, were fought.

In spite of the peace preached and taught by different Christian religious bodies across the globe, peace does not exist much in the world. Churches, Christians, religious bodies, government at all levels, homes, individuals and groups have not been able to attain substantial intra relational peaceful existence, hence the need for this study. The aim of the paper is to survey the concept of peace in the Old Testament for peace-building in the society.

### **Shalom ( שלום ) in the Old Testament**

According to the *Hebrew and English lexicon of the Old Testament* by (1975), shalom is a Hebrew noun meaning

“completeness, soundness, welfare, peace.” (P.1022). Foulkes (1982) agrees with Brown when he describes shalom as completeness, soundness and well being. The word shalom is one of the few Hebrew words which is well known and widely understood by English speaking people.

First and foremost, the word shalom means an interlude of safety from the ravages of warfare. The insecurity that comes from war over years had made enormous mark on the Hebrew people. They were involved much in warfare and many times they suffered defeat, the climax of which was the exile of 586 BC. They looked for the day when the swords would be beaten into plowshares (Micah 4:3). Here prophet Micah describes a theocracy, with the lord as the sole ruler over the world. In this reign of peace, instruments of war will be superfluous; therefore, they will be converted into agricultural implements (King, 1977). This will be followed by universal peace.

Shalom means much more than the absence of war or the cessation of violence and hostility. There is considerable difference between peace and truce. Peace is not wholly made at the council table or by treaties, but in the heart of men. There is no single English word that can truly convey the richness of the meaning behind the root letter shalom. The general meaning behind the root letters - שלם - is of completion and fulfillment and thus of entering into a state of wholeness and unity (oneness)

signified by a restored relationship especially wholeness of the relationship between a person and God. Shalom signifies a sense of well being and harmony both within and outside, health, happiness, quietness of soul preservation, prosperity, tranquility, security, safety, and it includes all that makes life worthwhile.

Shalom and its derivatives have been said to represent one of the most prominent theological concept in the Old Testament. The word group occurs about 180 times in the Old Testament. In narrative books shalom typically is used to describe an absence of hostility or strife. In the Psalms and Prophets it goes beyond this to indicate a total fulfillment that comes when an individual experiences God's presence. This sort of peace has its source in Yahweh. He is the one who will speak shalom to his people (Psalm 58:8). His promise to David in I chronicles 22: 9 – 10 puts shalom in context with calmness, rest, and to be quiet, as these are gifts from Yahweh.

Shalom is used as a greeting and also as a way of inquiring after someone's state of being and to want the very best for him in life. To be at peace is to be happy, to be whole, and to be right with Yahweh, fellow humans, and creation. Shalom is still being used as greeting in Israel today. It always means everything which makes for a man's highest good. The one saying shalom does not only wish the absence of evil things but also wishes the presence of all good things. In Jewish sense

peace is the symphony of life made meaningful through a right relationship with Yahweh. The Hebrew equivalent of the English greeting “How are you” is “do (you) have peace” (Gen 29: 6; 2 Sam 18: 29; 2 Kings 4: 26; Esther 2: 11).

Peace is a covenant word. It is the result of Yahweh’s activity in covenant, and it is the result of righteousness (Isaiah 32: 17). In nearly two-thirds of its occurrences, shalom describes the state of fulfillment which is the result of Yahweh’s presence. This is specifically indicated in those references to the “covenant of peace”, (Numbers 25: 5; Isaiah 54: 10; Ezekiel 34: 25; Malachi 2: 5) with his chosen representatives - the Aaronic priest and the Davidic monarchs. The peace that marks the conclusion of an agreement between adversaries (Isaac and Abimelech, Genesis 26: 29), and man and Yahweh (Abraham, Genesis 15: 15) is couched in terms of covenant agreement.

Shalom obviously formed part of the words used in offerings such as the Peace offering. It was one of the blood sacrifices of which the shed blood was the atonement on which reconciliation and peace were based (Leviticus 3; 7: 11). In the Peace offering this restoration of fellowship between God and man, broken by sin, but now atoned for by the shed blood, was indicated by the fact that every blessing, temporal and spiritual , is included in restoring man to that peace with God which was lost by the fall. According to Clendenen (2003) “The shalom

offering ,traditionally translated Peace offering but more often today Communion or fellowship offering was an offering which celebrated the joy of having peace with God and all it involved. The term peace can refer to the sense of confident awareness that all is well” (p.1261)

One of the great names of the Messiah was to be “prince of peace” (Isaiah 9:6). He is the messianic prince who brings wholesomeness, but he is also Yahweh’s last word, the concluding sacrifice that brings peace and redemption to mankind. This somehow denotes a strong eschatological element present in the meaning of shalom. The messiah’s city, Jerusalem, also means peace. The first part of the word (Jerus-) means foundation while the second part is a cognate of the word shalom. Thus Jerusalem is variously translated in modern evangelical references as ‘city of peace’, ‘possession of peace’, ‘foundation of peace’, ‘founded peace’, and ‘city of wholeness’ (Grimsrud, 2009).

As we can see from the above, shalom has many nuances but as Foulkes summarized in Ugwueye (2004) it could basically be used when one is in harmony or concord with one another (Joshua 9:15; 1kgs 5:12), when one seeks the good of a city or country (psalm 122:6, Jer 29:7). It may mean material wealth or prosperity (psalm 73:3) or physical safety (psalm 4:8). It may also mean spiritual well-being. Such peace that makes for

development is the associate of righteousness, justice and truth; not of wickedness.

### Shalom ( **שְׁלוֹמ** ) for Peace in the Society

It is obvious from all indications that our society sorely needs peace but greatly lacks it. There is no peace at home, in the community and clan, among individuals and between siblings. No peace in offices, government circles, academia, churches, business and the entire society. There is war in the Niger Delta-Nigeria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan etc. There is kidnapping, robbery, strikes, assassination and other deshaloming conditions. Even the individual himself lacks internal peace.

Shalom is a fitting area to continue the discussion of how to restore peace in the society. A society characterized by shalom embraces the core values of peace, justice and enjoyment of all relationships, centered in relationship with God. In pursuit of shalom, many who find themselves in relationships pockmarked by injustice actively seek restoration and reconciliation. In pursuit of shalom, those who enjoy special privilege, such as political office holders, rulers or head in different capacities and the rich, ought to freely give up selfish interests in order to serve and benefit others.

In pursuit of shalom, the humanists, prophets and the entire God's people speak truth to our leaders, institutions and

the affluent, calling them to practical justice and reconciliation. According to Leiter (2007), shalom was a central concept in the Old Testament that gave life to the people of ancient Israel and can give life to us today.

Shalom connotes the complete well-being of a society or community. Because it has a strong communal emphasis, shalom necessitates right harmonious relationships to other human beings. Part of what right relationship means can be seen in the linking of shalom with justice. That these two words are at times found in parallel lines of the Old Testament poetry indicates that shalom and justice are closely related concepts. While shalom includes more than justice, it certainly effects nothing less than a just society.

The deepest, underlying point to the whole story told in the Old Testament is God's mercy and love. Creation of all things is God's act of love. Abraham's call and the liberation of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage are God's act of mercy. When the temple fell, when the kingship fell, when the nation-state fell, God remained. In the apocalyptic book of Daniel, during the height of the suppression of Judaism and the Jews, God called the people of faith to find peace in patience. God promised a future, structured a new way, centered on little expressions of faithfulness and trust, rather than on nation states and power politics. It is important to learn from the above to live

faithfully and mercifully while accepting that no one controls history. Being patient, while finding little ways to be at peace and refusal to exploit others are part of God's continuing works of creative mercy. Aligning ourselves with godly ways such as this is the peaceable way live.

Shalom is linked with covenant in the Old Testament and this indicates that shalom comes as a result of God's covenantal commitment to his people. A look at God's intentions for his covenant people will help fleshen our concept of shalom. In creation and in things concerning the consummation of all things, humanity is made in the image of God, which means that every person has great value in God's eyes, because humanity derives from one family and thus shares the same origin. God's ideal for his covenant community is that of a society in which steadfast love and will cuddle each other. It is a society in which the chains of injustice and oppression are broken (Brown, 2007).

The story of humanity, however, shows that the shalom envisioned by God for humanity and established at creation was marred in the fall of man. As a result of sin, not only was the relationship between God and humanity broken, but there was also increasing division among peoples. The marring of the original vision of shalom is exemplified today in many similar kinds of injustice and division. The devastating effects of this division of and enmity within the human family can be seen

everywhere in our society. The existence of crime, ethnic prejudice and oppression are just few examples.

God's plan for restoring universal shalom is to be accomplished through his particular choice of Israel. But it is obvious that the choice of one by God is always for the sake of many. The prophets clearly articulate a vision of shalom meant for extension to all nations through Israel. Jesus Christ fulfilled God's intention of bringing shalom to all nations. One's neighbor is now broadened and specified to include those outside one's own circle. This unity, however, is not to be confused with uniformity. It is unity in diversity. Diversity is not erased in God's ideal of covenant community and shalom; rather, it is wonderfully woven into the fabric of communal unity. In this way, Paul can speak of the Christian community as a body, made of diverse members who function in different ways for different purposes while still being one. This diversity in unity or unity in diversity can be achieved only through shalom or peace of understanding.

Peace of understanding breaks the barriers of misunderstanding and suspicion in relationships. Peace achieved through understanding forestalls war and conflict between individuals and communities. It makes for trust and reliability in unions. It rouses the dull, inspires the witty, encourages the timid and brings all the conflicting elements of rival positions,

character and opinion into one uniform whole. It is only through this way that meaningful development can be achieved in our society. Unfortunately, like the Hebrews who kept on going away from God's given shalom, the society has been de-shaloming itself by engaging in acts that are anti-peace, ungodly, unpatriotic, undemocratic, unjust and oppressive. The mindset of an average person especially in Africa is how to make money. The desperation underlying this mindset accentuates this desire to make money to a feverish pitch where the distinction between good sources and bad sources of money making is impossible to make. As a matter of fact many make it through the quicker way by defrauding government, organizations, and individuals. Men in government do more to rob the society of its peace. Men out of government in various ways also dampen our peace. Most regrettably, the churches and the so called 'men of God' do not do much to create and sustain peace in the society.

The immediate and remote reason why we read the Bible is to have peace, create it or sustain it. But too often, what we read in the Bible and the way it is expressed in worship, such as attending Sunday mass, morning mass, vigil, crusade, adoration or having deliverance, anointing, chaining and binding of Satan etc become part of our libraries, rituals and vocabularies, instead of becoming part of our real lives. True peace is engendered

through living out what is in the Bible and what we profess in our dealing or relationship with one another.

Finally, it should be observed that at all times and in every circumstance, man is the epicenter of peace discourse. Man is the object of peace, man seeks peace, man sustains peace, man breaks peace and man makes peaces between men. According to Scott in Obeta (1994), “of all creatures, man alone is an enigma. At times he seems an angel, again, a devil; proud of himself today; tomorrow he will despise himself. His thoughts sometimes are as high as heaven, at other times as low as hell. A part of him delights in what is peaceful; another part drags him down to what he despises” (P.11). You are the man! Train yourself to have peace so as to give it to the society.

## **Conclusion**

The Old Testament writers understand their experiences in terms of faith. We too strive to understand our lives in the light of our faith. We share with the biblical writers the same earth, the same story. They have much to teach us. The actual political history of the Hebrews is one of failure, broken dreams, pain and even despair.

Our own world is not different. But even at that God is in the midst of everything irrespective of our clear understanding of it. In being patient, little ways to be at peace could be found.

Eschewing injustice, oppression and evil entirely engender peace in the society. Being merciful to men and faithful to God and men surely can bring peace. In appropriating all these, the Old Testament gives us a much stronger foundation for sharing the way of peace with the Christian who supports war. It gives us a basis to speak with confidence. Not only does the Old Testament help us to develop a theology of peace, it also removes any basis for the Christian to remain indifferent in the realization of societal peace.

Only reliance upon God's name can we know his peace which will surely bring about triumph over all our enemies. Safety consists not in the absence of danger but in the presence of God. The peace that God gives is not the absence of trouble, but is rather the confidence that he is there with us always. The essence of the gospel is "grace, therefore peace". Through the gospel we are all brought under God's grace and therefore have peace with him and peace within us. שלום!

## References

- Aquinas Thomas (1948). *Summa theological* translated by father of the English Dominican province, Vol 3. New York  
Augustine St. (1997). *The work of Augustine*. Edited by J.E. Rottelle, 20 vols. New York

- Brown F. (1975). *Hebrew and English lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon press
- Brown Jeanine (2007). The concept of shalom. Retrieved May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from [http://www.bethel.edu/about\\_reconciliation/position/brounj-shalom.html](http://www.bethel.edu/about_reconciliation/position/brounj-shalom.html)
- Clendenen E.R (2003). Peace. In J.O Douglas et al *New Bible Dictionary* (6<sup>th</sup> ed) (PP.901-902). England: Intervarsity press
- Grimrud T. (2009). Shalom. Retrieved June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009 from <http://our.homewithgod.com/411/shalom.htm>
- Hornby A.S. (2001). *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary* (6<sup>th</sup> ed). Great Clarendon Street: Oxford University Press.
- Kings J.P (1977). Micah. In R.E. brown et al (ed). *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (pp.283-289). London and Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Lieter D.A. (2007). Neglected voices: peace in the Old Testament. Retrieved May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from <http://peacetheology.net/2009/01/david-leiter-neglected-voices-peace-in-the-old-testament/>
- Obeta J.O. (1994). *If love fails what else?* Enugu: Ndubest Production
- Spinoza Benedict (1965). *The collected works of Spinoza*. Edited and translated by Edwin Cruelly, Princeton: Trident press

Spurgeon C.H.(2009). Resources on peace. Retrieved June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009 from <http://www.preceptaustin.org/jehovah-shalom-the-lord-is-peace.htm>

Stephenson S. Voorhees R. and Morris W (2004). *The New International Webster's dictionary of the English language*, (encyclopedic edition). USA: Trident Press International

Ugwueye L.E (2004). Re-interpreting Gen: 32:24-31 in the light of societal development in contemporary Nigerian. In M.I Okwueze (ed). *Religion and societal development, contemporary Nigerian perspective* (pp.94-105). Isolo. Lagos: Merit International Publications