



ETB: Ephesians 6:10-20

ARMOR

AS BIBLICAL IMAGERY

ISTOCK PHOTO

By **Randall L. Adkisson**

PAUL'S LETTERS ARE not legal briefs; nor was he writing as a college professor setting forth content in preparation for a final exam. A high view of Scripture is admirable and necessary, but an unexamined understanding of inspiration can lead one to read the New Testament epistles as either a stilted college text or a legal brief instead of a letter, imbued with the background and personality of the writer.

Experiencing the brilliance of Paul's description of the believer's armor requires catching the light refracted through the facets of his life. Paul's every experience of persecution and triumph, opportunity and relationship, education and revelation sparkle under expert crafting of his Lord.

How would one characterize Paul—as a Roman or a Hebrew citizen? As one who spoke Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, or Latin? As a scholar or a tradesman? As a desert ascetic or a man of deep relationships? He was not one of these; he was all of them. By the time he found himself under house arrest and penning the deeply personal letter to the Ephesians, he drew upon all these facets to express the depth and beauty of God's provision. After all, he desired that the readers would "comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love."¹

Below: Bedouin tents in the region of ancient Zoar. Judah's King Joram (ruled 853-

841 BC) fought Edom at Zair (2 Kings 8:20-21), a location that many equate with Zoar.

Right: From the region of ancient Cilicia, an inscribed bronze shield with incised decoration; Urartian; dated to about 650 BC.

Below: Slingstones gathered in a stone basin; the individual stones are roughly the size of a large orange.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM (LONDON 31/9/81)



its enemies, from the Philistines to the Romans.

Paul, then, was likely not modeling the armor after one particular soldier, however near he might have been situated, but upon every soldier. More particularly, he was describing the Christian soldier equipped and empowered by the Lord of hosts, who Himself is arrayed in splendid panoply.² An original recipient might profitably apply Paul's message by relating it only to the soldiers seen locally, but Paul alluded to much more.

Old Testament Imagery

God is Arrayed in Armor—In Isaiah's prophetic picture of the victorious Messiah, He is described as one belted about His waist with righteousness and faithfulness (Isa. 11:5). Explained one Old Testament scholar, "At the outset we have learned of the full accoutrement of the





Right: Ivory plaque showing spoils taken in battle; Roman; dated 100 BC–AD 100. Items depicted include: chariots, bows, quivers, oblong shields, cuirasses, sword, and helmet. In the center is a wreath of victory.

Below: Scene engraved in silver depicts David's covenant with his friend Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:1-4).

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Above: In the hill country between Jericho and Bethel, the location of ancient Michmash; the Philistines gathered 3,000 chariots and 6,000 horseman at Michmash, preparing to fight Saul and his army. Jonathan and

his armor bearer sneaked into the Philistine camp and killed 20 of their soldiers. Confusion ensued and the Philistines fought and killed each other. God gave the Israelites great victory at the pass of Michmash (1 Kings 13–14).

Messiah and of the sure outcome of His work, the destruction of the wicked and the deliverance of the poor and afflicted.”³

A belted warrior was one about to enter into a close and intense struggle. The victor would keep his belt and he would have wrested the opponent's belt to keep as a victor's spoil.⁴ In Isaiah, the Messiah holds both belts and they are in turn descriptive of His victory and character.

Although Isaiah 11 does not mention a sword, the Messiah's Word executes judgment against the wicked, slaying him.⁵ Messiah is true and righteous, able to execute justice and secure victory through His Word.⁶ To the point, Isaiah 49:2 describes the Messiah's Word as a sharp sword and a select arrow.⁷ The Lord Himself is described as putting on a helmet of salvation and righteousness as armor in Isaiah 59:17

as He deals with the sinfulness of mankind.

God is a Shield—His Word is a sword; additionally God presents Himself as a shield. He is Abraham's promised shield in Genesis 15:1. In Deuteronomy He is revealed as the shield of Abraham's promised progeny. “How happy you are, Israel!...He is the shield that protects you, the sword you boast in” (Deut. 33:29).

David, who eschewed Saul's armor in the battle with Goliath, gladly embraced the Lord as his shield: “My God....My shield, the horn of my salvation” (2 Sam. 22:3). David's trust in this shield is celebrated in 2 Samuel 22 and throughout the Psalms.⁸ Proverbs reminds the reader, “He stores up success for the upright; He is a shield for those who live with integrity” (Prov. 2:7).

The Armies of Israel—The Old Testament speaks of armor in literal as well as figurative terms. Although David refused Saul's armor for his initial battle, he captured Goliath's armor as a bounty. Afterwards David used it, as well as his own, throughout his life (1 Sam. 17; 21:8-9). As a gift of solidarity, Jonathan presented David with his armor, including his sword and belt (1 Sam. 18:4).



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Later kings, as well, both wore and equipped their armies with armor. “Uzziah provided the entire army with shields, spears, helmets, armor, bows, and slingstones” (2 Chron. 26:14). Paul would have been well versed in the motif of armor from his studies, worship, relationships, and imprisonments.

New Testament Consistency

Key to understanding Paul's use of this metaphor in Ephesians 6 lies in the descriptive phrase “armor of God.” Paul was not focused on Roman armor or the armor of Israel. A scholar familiar with the Prophets—Paul would have easily visualized Isaiah's description and David's insight.⁹ The armor envisioned was God's armor, no matter its similarities to the nearby Roman guards.



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Left: Iron Age Judean spearhead.

Far left: Armor scales from Hazor dated to the 13th cent. BC; bronze.

righteousness, and preparedness that are in view. The Christian Standard Bible translation catches this emphasis well: “Stand...with truth like a belt...righteousness like armor on your chest” (Eph. 6:14).

These character traits are not natural to the believer and should not be misunderstood as ordinary personal characteristics. They are the character traits of Messiah Himself, now available by the indwelling Spirit to each believer (2 Cor. 10:3-4). The idea builds upon Paul’s earlier revelation where believers are to lay aside falsehood and put on the “new self,” to be imitators of God, and to grow to the full measure of our Messiah (Eph. 4:13,24-25; 5:1). Believers are to be “in Him” as He has lavished them with His grace. These gifts are part of the “immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe” (1:19).

Even faith, the confident reliance upon God’s grace and love, is part of God’s gift of salvation (2:4-8). This confidence in God’s provision becomes a sure defense imparting courage, endurance, and ultimate victory to the believer—even in the most difficult trial.

The helmet of salvation, described to the Thessalonian church as “a helmet of the hope of salvation,” is the assurance of God’s intervening salvific acts no matter the intensity of the battle

(1 Thess. 5:8). The Lord Himself wears the helmet in Isaiah’s prophecy (Isa. 59:17).

With the confidence of impenetrable faith derived from a sanctified character and sure salvation, the believer may wield successfully the promises of God’s Word. Assured of standing victorious at the end of the battle, Christ’s follower will be fit and ready for the next onslaught. Though the gates of hell be opened, they will not prevail.¹⁰ 📖

1. Ephesians 3:18; all Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

2. The English “panoply” is a transliteration of the Greek word used in Eph. 6:11, often translated “full armor.”

3. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1965), 1:385.

4. A Hebrew synonym is in 2 Sam. 2:21 and Judg. 14:19. In these depictions of battle, the prize or spoil is the foe’s belt.

5. “Wicked” is singular in the Hebrew text.

6. The concept of God’s Word as a sword is present in both Old and New Testaments. “This is why I have used the prophets to cut them down; I have killed them with the words from my mouth” (Hos. 6:5). “For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12).

7. Some scholars understand the passage to refer to Israel, but others highlight the individual and transcendent description as surpassing the nation and revealing the Messianic messenger. “He made my words like a sharp sword; he hid me in the shadow of his hand. He made me like a sharpened arrow; he hid me in his quiver” (Isa. 49:2).

8. Pss. 3:3; 5:12; 7:10; 18:2,35; 28:7; 33:20; 35:2; 59:11; 84:11; 91:4; 115:9,10,11; 119:114; 140:7; 144:2.

9. The Hebrew division of the “Prophets” includes both Isaiah and 1 & 2 Samuel.

10. See Matt. 16:18; 1 Thess. 5:8. Daniel is an example of one whose Spirit imparted character combined with his trust in the Lord allowed him to persevere, standing strong through persecution again and again. See Dan. 6; Eph. 4:1; Col. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:12.

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