

Ephesians 6:11-17

I heard a Messianic teacher say that the armor of God is not the armor of a Roman soldier, but really the garments of a Levitical priest serving in the Temple. Do you have an opinion about this? Is this a valid understanding?

This entry has been adapted from the commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*.

As significant as the armor of God is for us being effective in our service to Him, a few teachers out in the Messianic community today have doubted that the armor represented by Paul in Ephesians is that of a soldier fighting in battle (cf. Romans 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:8). They have instead advocated that Paul was making reference to “priestly elements” or “priestly garments” of service, but sadly for them there is no sound basis for these conclusions. The first and most obvious problem with this view is that it fails to engage with the Tanach passages quoted by the Apostle Paul, which make direct reference to God’s wearing armor as a warrior (Isaiah 11:1-5; 59:14-18; cf. Wisdom 5:17-20).¹ Is the armor of God really speaking of the garments of a Levitical priest, and not the elements of warfare? While we are surely to serve as though we are priests in God’s service (Exodus 19:6; Revelation 1:6, etc.), **that is not what is in view here in vs. 11-17.**

Advocates of this view, clouded by negative ideas against the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome, make the unfortunate conclusion that the armor elements of a breastplate, shield, helmet, and sword were things that were only Greco-Roman. Historical observations of ancient weapons of warfare are undoubtedly lacking as these basic elements of warfare were common *not only* among the classical civilizations, but also Ancient Near Eastern civilizations contemporary to and pre-existent of Ancient Israel. “ANE civilizations developed [these] weapons long before the nation of Israel was formed; these were utilized in battles with enemies, never in isolation from other people” (*ABD*).² While there was variance between the warfare elements of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians—and likewise the Ancient Israelites—there was also a great degree of commonality:

“Little is known of Hebrew armor. Saul and Jonathan both had armor, which must at least have consisted of a HELMET; a breastplate or coat of mail; GREAVES; and a shield. Probably a girdle belt...was used for tying down the breastplate” (*IDB*).³

The commonality among both ANE and classical weapons of war would have remained true up until the First Century C.E. Paul’s references to a breastplate, shield, helmet, and sword could just as well have referred to a soldier in the army of King David than a soldier in Caesar’s legions. While it might tickle some ears that Paul is really talking about the garments of a priest in Ephesians 6:11-17, neither the vocabulary of the passage nor an examination of history confirms this view. It trivializes the reality that we are presently engaged in a war against Satan for human beings and their redemption.

Messianic interpreters who claim that the armor of God is really the garments of a Levitical priest have handled the text in a very irresponsible way, especially when there are specific quotations offered from the Tanach used by Paul to substantiate his view. The view that the armor of God is really priestly garments, and not the armor of a soldier, has only come about because of an inappropriate prejudice against ancient classicism that has

¹ Cf. Kurt Aland, et. al., *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1998), 670; Erwin Nestle and Kurt Aland, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece, Nestle-Aland 27th Edition* (New York: American Bible Society, 1993), 514.

² Mark J. Fretz, “Weapons and Implements of Warfare,” in *ABD*, 6:893.

³ J.W. Wevers, “Weapons,” in *IDB*, 4:825.

been allowed to pass in the Messianic community, with few challenging it. It is not based in an objective examination of the Biblical text.⁴

⁴ It may also be observed that one of the major reasons why a theologically significant epistle such as Paul's letter to the Philippians is seldom examined in today's Messianic movement is because it specifically forces an interpreter to engage with Ancient Greco-Roman classicism. It addresses those in a colony of Rome who have recognized Yeshua the Messiah as LORD (Philippians 2:5-11), and *not* Caesar.

Consult the editor's commentary *Philippians for the Practical Messianic*.