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CHRISTIANS AS SOLDIERS OF CHRIST. MILITARY METAPHORS IN BASIL OF CAESAREA

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Abstract. Basil's position regarding military service is commonly discussed from the perspective of Canon 13 (*Ep.* 188.13). The use of military topics and metaphors has received little attention. This paper explores the use of military virtues, metaphors, and scenarios in the Basilian corpus. While these do not refer to war and military duty as such, identifying Christians with soldiers, setting the military as an example of virtuous, committed service can work only when military virtues have a positive significance and combat experiences have a lesson to teach. Nonetheless such texts should not be weaponized to justify wars of aggression.

Keywords: Basil of Caesarea, Canon 13, military metaphors, asceticism, spiritual warfare.

To Stelian Tofană, without whom the Centre for Biblical Studies would not exist.

As of 24 February 2022, war returned to Europe. This tragic development confronts scholars of religion with two significant questions that require theological and ethical assessment: the right of a country to defend itself in a genocidal war from the perspective of an arguably pacifist religion, and the way religion can be instrumentalised to justify wars of aggression.

Returning to the sources of theological reflection, I have chosen to explore the reception of New Testament military metaphors in Basil of Caesarea. Basil's stance on war and the military is commonly addressed from the perspective of Canon 13, which expresses unease with military service. Referring to the authority of the (unnamed) fathers, he does not reject military service as such.[1] But given the

[1] On fourth century Christian attitudes toward the army and military service in the context of political, social, and religious changes: John F. SHEAN, *Soldiering for God. Christianity and the Roman Army*, Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2010, 279–326, on Basil's Canon XIII: 293–294, 304–305; on the latter also Valerie A. KARRAS, "'Their Hands Are Not Clean': Origen and the Cappadocians on War and Military Service", in Perry T. HAMALIS – Valerie A. KARRAS (eds.), *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017, 125–158 (rather apologetical); John MCGUCKIN, "St. Basil's Guidance on War and Repentance", *In Communion. Website of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship* (19.02.2006): https://incommunion.org/2006/02/19/st-basil-on-war-and-repentance/ (a theological approach, critical of just war theory).

fact that soldiers are involved in killing, Basil advises a temporary ban on their admittance to the Eucharist.[2] Basil's extensive use of military metaphors to describe Christian existence, in particular ascetic life has received little attention. In what follows I survey Basil's use of military topics and metaphors. In the first part I look at the allegorical interpretation of the Lukan parable of the king going to war, read in conjunction with that of the tower builder. I subsequently discuss some writings that envisage being a Christian and ascetic lifestyle as a spiritual war against the devil, sins, and worldly concerns. Finally, I briefly address the image of God as a general in Homily 18 on Psalm 45 (LXX).

While Basil does not refer to war and military duty as such, I argue that identifying Christians with soldiers, setting the military as an example of virtuous, committed service can work only when military virtues have a positive significance and combat experiences have a lesson to teach. This questions a radical rejection of soldiering. At the same time, the way he addresses the topic disallows any attempt to use these or similar texts to justify wars of aggression.

1. Fighting distraction and defending the mind from evil: Luke 14,28-32

The parable of the tower builder and of the king pondering to engage an aggressor[3] advise prudence. The builder may encounter mockery if he fails to complete the project due to insufficient resources. The king could face defeat from an overpowering enemy. The costs of a failed military campaign (or of surrender) are not detailed. The parable implies that if unable to stand up against the enemy, the king should ask for peace.[4] The two similes are meant to illustrate discipleship

[2] *Ep*. 188.13, PG 32.681; Basil, *Letters III: Letters 186–248*, tr. Roy J. DEFERRARI (LCL 243), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press / London: Heinemann, 1930, repr. 1986, slightly modified ("Homicide in war our fathers did not consider as homicide – making a concession, in my opinion, to those who fight in defence of temperance and piety (ὑπὲρ σωφροσύνης καὶ εὐσεβείας). But perhaps it is well to advise that men with unclean hands abstain from communion alone for three years"); see also 188.8 ("entirely voluntary and admitting of no doubt are, for instance, […] the attacks of soldiers. For […] men in warfare proceed to slaughter openly, proposing neither to terrify nor to chastise but to kill their opponents.").

[3] He does not start an offensive: the other king is coming against him. Adolf JÜLICHER, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* II. *Auslegung der Gleichnisreden der drei ersten Evangelien*, Freiburg / Leipzig / Tübingen: Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1899, 205; J. Duncan M. DERRETT, 'Nisi Dominus Aedificaverit Domum: Towers and Wars (Lk XIV 28-32)', *NovT* 19 (1977) 241–261 (254); Hans KLEIN, *Das Lukasevangelium* (KEK), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006, 516, with n. 36; Michael WOLTER, *The Gospel According to Luke* II *(Luke 9:51–24)* (tr. W. COPPINS and C. HEILIG); Waco, TX: Baylor University Press / Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017, 231 (ἔρχεσθαι ἐπί as attacking).

[4] NA[28] has ἐρωτᾷ τὰ πρὸς εἰρήνην, asking about the terms of peace (i.e. about a peace deal), cf. ℵ[2] A D. 𝔐 has the same reading. However, earlier manuscripts referred simply to asking for peace (𝔓[75]: ἐρωτᾷ εἰρήνην; B: ἐρωτᾷ εἰς εἰρήνην; ℵ* πρός εἰρήνην).

as renunciation, but their emphasis on calculating the odds of success and on prudence is at variance with the fervour of giving up everything to follow of Jesus.[5]

Early Christian authors will read the parables allegorically. The parable of the king at war will mostly be understood as referring to spiritual warfare.

The *Great Asketikon*

In the *Great Asketikon* (question 263 of the Shorter Responses), Basil summarises the two parables, understood as illustrations of Luke 14,33 on discipleship as renunciation.[6] The question itself underscores the inability of the main characters to complete the task. Should they realise their incapacity, they should abandon their plan. The king would need to ask for the terms of peace.[7]

The response explains the two similes by shifting the discussion to a different topic. As opposed to what a reader may think, the parables are not about the liberty or right (ἐξουσία) to become a disciple or not, Basil argues. They are meant to emphasise that one cannot please God unless the soul (ψυχή) becomes free from distraction. A person torn by distraction is in danger of falling prey to the ruses of the devil. Such a soul deserves mockery and laughter. The tower builder and the king stand thus for the soul, and the enemy is the devil, who assaults the soul with thoughts and desires that distract it from a single-minded commitment to God. The war envisaged in Luke 14,31-32 is not detailed in the answer, but implied in the portrayal of the devil as an enemy whose ruse believers should be able to withstand, and who, in light of the quote from Ps 37,17, could capture the soul. In this context, the reference to Luke 14,29 expands the scope of the mockery incurred as a result of the failed building project to the potentially failed military campaign (implied in Luke 14,31-32). Given this allegorical interpretation of the two parables, Basil, understandably, does not contemplate the option suggested in Luke 14,32 that the king should ask the enemy for (a) peace (deal). One cannot surrender to the devil.

Averting distraction is a major topic in Basil. It is also addressed in the Longer Responses (question 5), where Basil evokes Luke 14,33, without referring to the two parables.[8] Becoming free from distraction is fundamental to keeping the

[5] François BOVON, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas (Lk 9,51-14,35)* (EKK III/2), Zürich: Benziger / Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1996, 543; KLEIN, *Lukas*, 516.

[6] *Regulae brevius tractatae*, Q 263, PG 31, 1261; Anna M. SILVAS, *The Asketikon of Saint Basil the Great*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 416. On the textual history of the *Asketikon*: SILVAS, 1–14, on the division of the Great Asketikon in longer and shorter responses by Basil, during the recension in Annesi in the mid-370s: EAD., 130). The detailed quotation of the two parables appears only in the Shorter Responses.

[7] Basil seems to have known the same reading found now in NA[28] (ἐρωτᾷ τὰ πρὸς εἰρήνην), cf. ℵ[2] A D and the 𝔐.

[8] *Regulae fusius tractatae* Q 5; PG 31,920–924; SILVAS, *Asketikon*, 175 (Q 5.2); also *The long rules*, in St. Basil, *Ascetical Works* (Fathers of the Church 9), tr. Monica WAGNER, Washington,

great commandments to love God and one's neighbour. It requires training, just as any specialised professional formation. Distractions include marriage and all other bonds of attachment to worldly life. Believers should detach themselves from all worldly ties and habits, as the only way to be pleasing to God (cf. Luke 14,33).

De baptismo

Basil cites Luke 14,28-35 extensively in *Concerning Baptism*,[9] in an instruction on the core tenets of Christian faith and practice. The guidance on discipleship evokes the promise that assisted by divine grace believers will be able to free themselves "from the tyranny of the Devil by refraining from every action that is pleasing to the Devil". They will be pleasing to God by renouncing all worldly values and even justified claims that would distract them from a whole-hearted dedication to God (a recurring motif in Basil). The parables are not analysed in detail, and the link between these and the exhortation proper is rather loose. It is the notion of earning freedom from the tyranny of the devil that suggests a closer connection to the parable of the king going to war against his enemy.

In Isaiam

In the commentary on Isaiah, Basil evokes the parable of the tower builder commenting on the margin of ch. 2. The chapter itself starts with the vision of the all-embracing eschatological peace (Isa 2,2-4), followed by a series of doom oracles envisioning the fearful day of judgement: the Lord will tear down all heights and towers, the haughty who stand up to him. Discussing this latter passage, Basil refers to Luke 14,28-29 (the Lord bids us to sit down and reckon whether we have sufficient means to complete the building).[10] The reference to the

DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1962, 241–243. On renunciation also Q 8, (based on Matt 16,24 and Luke 14,44): PG 31,933–941; SILVAS, 186–190; WAGNER, 252–257.

9 *De baptismo* 1.1.5, PG 31, 1524; Basile de Césarée, *Sur le baptême* (SC 357), ed. Jeanne DUCATILLON, Paris: Cerf, 1989, 98 (on the authenticity of the writing: 7–12); Engl. WAGNER, *Ascetical Works*, 347. Here, too, quoting Luke 14,32, the edition has ἐρωτᾷ τὰ πρὸς εἰρήνην.

10 *In Isaiam* 2.92; PG 30, 269. Engl. St. Basil the Great, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, tr. Nikolai A. LIPATOV (Texts and Studies in the History of Theology 7), Mandelbachtal / Cambridge: Cicero, 2001, 105. The authenticity of the writing is doubted: Johannes QUASTEN, *Patrology* 3. *The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature*, Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, ^{3}1986, 218–219; Steven A. MCKINION (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Old Testament X): Isaiah 1-39*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004, xviii. For a defence of its authenticity: Nikolai A. LIPATOV, "The Problem of the Authorship of the Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah attributed to St. Basil the Great", in *Studia Patristica* 27: *Papers Presented at the Eleventh International Conference on Patristic Studies Held in Oxford 1991*, Leuven: Peeters, 1993, 42–48, arguing that the *Hexaemeron* presupposes the discussion of Isa 5 in the Commentary. This implies that *In Isaiam* would precede the *Hexaemeron*. The parallel with Luke 14,28 was already

parable of the two kings is implicit, evidenced by the interpretation of the two parables in tandem. Basil understands the tower of Isa 2,15 (LXX) in the light of Luke 14,28 as a watchtower meant to guard the city against the approaching enemy (πρὸς φυλακὴν πόλεως, καὶ γνῶσιν ἐφόδων πολεμικῶν ἐπιτήδειον). This interpretation of the tower (Luke 14,28/Isa 2,15) as a watchtower with a defensive purpose is not inspired by Isa 2; it reflects the transferal of the military significance from the parable of the king going to war unto the one that precedes it.

Allegorically, the watchtower is the mind (νοῦς), given us to preserve the good(s) and foresee the plots [of the evil one] (φυλακτικὸς τῶν ἀγαθῶν, προορατικὸς τῶν ἐπιβούλων).[11] Although Basil does not elaborate on the parable of the king, in this military scenario the army of the Evil one assaults the mind with wicked ploys.

This allegorical exegesis of Isaiah 2 is not without difficulties, due to the ambivalence of the tower imagery, resulting from the combination of the Isaian and the Lukan text. While in Isaiah 2 the Lord destroys the tower(s) charged with negative symbolism, in Luke Jesus endorses a careful consideration of a useful building project. Basil's own interpretation of the tower in both passages as a watchtower also conveys the tower a positive meaning. Basil solves the tension between the Isaian and the Lukan passage by adding a further allusion to a biblical tower, that of Babel, symbolising "the haughty and inflated mind" (this tower ought not attempt to ascend to heaven).[12] These complex and contradictory biblical associations are bound together by the topic of violence, carried out either by God or by the enemy (the devil). What emerges from all these images is the mind, which should be ready to stand against the attacks of the devil but should not be haughty before God.

2. Christian life as soldiering

The Basilian corpus has multiple texts likening Christian existence, in particular ascetic life to military service and spiritual warfare.

noted by Thomas Aquinas (*Catena Aurea* III/2, tr. J. H. NEWMAN; Oxford, 1844, 518). Also Jean-Paul MIGNE (PG, 269) and LIPATOV, *Commentary*, 105, n. 3.

[11] While Newmann translated "to preserve the good, to guard against the evil", emphasising the spiritual sense of the fight, Lipatov has a more literal translation ("guarding our goods and foreseeing the plots of the adversaries"), which suggests material goods to be preserved and defence from the ploys of earthly enemies. However, this is not the point in the context.

[12] LIPATOV, *Commentary*, 105.

Ascetics as soldiers of Christ: the *Praevia Institutio Ascetica*

The *Introduction to ascetical life* proposes an extensive allegory envisioning Christians as soldiers of Christ, the King, and citizens of the heavenly polis.[13] The passage implicitly portrays the military as an esteemed stand, an example of dedication, resilience, endurance of hardships and courage. This matches the ancient construal of the Roman army as a distinct, respected body.[14]

Since the royal ordinances addressed to soldiers are nobler compared to those to common subjects, the author implies that the status of the military, who stand for the ascetics, is superior: they aspire to greater dignity from above (ἄνω καὶ μεγάλη ἄξια).

The exhortation focuses on renunciation of worldly pursuits. Believer-soldiers should follow their heavenly king, acquiring freedom from possessions (house, lands) and secular business (engaging in trade), knowing that he will provide for their sustenance. The references to soldiers' freedom from worry regarding their subsistence evoke the ways the state provided for the military.[15]

[13] *Praevia Institutio Ascetica*, PG 31, 620–626, WAGNER, *Ascetical Works*, 9–13; briefly mentioned by SILVAS, *Asketikon*, 342, n. 361. She also notes the intertwining of athletic and military metaphors in Basil's Second Homily on Fasting (PG 31.185–197) and other early Christian writings: SILVAS, 211, n. 289. The authenticity of the writing is doubted: M. GEERARD, CPG II, 2888 (following Jean GRIBOMONT, *Histoire du texte des Ascétiques de S. Basile* (Bibliothèque du Muséon 32), Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1953, 310–311; Paul J. FEDWICK (ed.), *Basil of Caesarea: Christian, Humanist, Ascetic. A Sixteen-Hundredth Anniversary Symposium*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1981, XXIX [*SInst]; Philip ROUSSEAU, *Basil of Caesarea* (Transformation of the Classical Heritage 20), Berkeley – Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994, 355. Pierre HUMBERTCLAUDE considered it probably genuine (*La doctrine ascétique de Saint Basile de Césarée*, Paris: Beauchesne, 1932, 3 (further on the work 27–30). Ioannes KARAYANNOPOULOS quotes it as genuine ("St. Basil's Social Activity: Principles and Praxis", in FEDWICK, *Basil of Caesarea*, 375–392 (388).

[14] Such perception had to do with physical circumstances (the deployment to *castra* and the process of castrametation, the wearing of military gear), with legal privileges and restrictions (including the marriage ban), the praise of military discipline, and symbolic practices (swearing the oath, honouring the standards and other insignia). Ramsay MACMULLEN, "The Legion as a Society", *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 33 (1984) 440–456; Jon E. LENDON, *Empire of Honour. The Art of Government in the Roman World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 238–240, 253; A. D. LEE, *Warfare in the Roman World* (Key Themes in Ancient History), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, 113–117; Sara E. PHANG, *Roman Military Service: Ideologies of Discipline in the Late Republic and Early Principate*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 4, 8, 67–70, 73–74, 81–86, 92–93, 105–108; EAD., *The Marriage of Roman Soldiers (13 B.C.-A.D. 235). Law and Family in the Imperial Army*, Leiden, Brill, 2001.

[15] Providing for the military consisted in annual wages (*stipendia*), imperial donatives, rations (*annonae*), securing feeding, clothing, and most likely equipment, and discharge bounties upon retirement including land and allotments in cash and kind. For the fourth century: Hugh ELTON, *Warfare in Roman Europe, AD 350-425* (Oxford Classical Monographs), Oxford: Clarendon, 2004, 120–125; for the first three centuries: PHANG, *Roman Military Service*, 153–200. More

Believers' lack of concern for owning land matches restrictions imposed on soldiers' purchasing property in the region where they were deployed.[16] The argument is underscored with a reference to 2 Tim 2,3-4. (As a good soldier of Christ, Timothy should be aware that no one in military service (στρατευόμενος) should be entangled in earthly matters but should strive to please his enlisting officer (τῷ στρατολογήσαντι ἀρέσῃ).[17] The reference to 2 Timothy evokes the single-minded commitment required from the soldier of Christ.

The second part of the exhortation sets soldiers as an example of self-sufficiency, fortitude, and ability to endure hardships, deprivation, and dangers. They are content with basic food and water, they engage in marches and vigils, endure the vicissitudes of weather, and are ready to engage the foe in perilous ventures, even at the cost of their life. Enduring adversity was an essential trait of the military in antiquity.[18] Highlighting such qualities matches ancient perception of the soldier as an example of virtues pertaining to military masculinity.[19] These values and virtues were also common in moral-philosophical writings.[20] The soldiers of Christ are expected to exhibit similar virtues.

broadly on the costs of sustaining the army: A. D. LEE, "Warfare", in Philip SABIN, Hans VAN WEES, Michael WHITBY (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, 2: *Rome From the Late Republic to the Late Empire*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 379–423 (401–412). On material reward for ministry described as military wages or allotments (ὀψώνια), already 1 Cor 9,7; Ign., *Pol*. 6.2; see the discussion of the term by Chrys C. CARAGOUNIS, "ΟΨΩΝΙΟΝ: A Reconsideration of Its Meaning", *NovT* 16.1 (1974) 35–57.

16 LEE, *Warfare*, 59 (*Dig*. 49.16.13). (They could inherit or rent land, to be cultivated by relatives, slaves, paid workers, or tenants). For a critique of soldiers' extrainstitutional work, with little practical effect, and without encompassing prohibition of trade: PHANG, *Roman Military Service*, 176–177.

17 Ceslas SPICQ, *Les Épîtres pastorales* II, Paris: Gabalda, 1969, 740–742; I. Howard MARSHALL, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ICC), London – New York: T&T Clark, 1999, 722–723, 728–729.

18 Hdt. 6.11; Pl., *Symp*. 219e-220d; Xen., *Cyr*. 1.6.25; Isocr., *Or*. 15.120; Sall., *Iug*. 85.33; Max. Tyr., *Or*. 23.2. Nathan LEACH, "Epaphroditus and Archippus, Paul's Fellow Soldiers: Reexamining Paul's Rhetorical Use of συστρατιώτης", *JBL* 140 (2021) 187–206 (199).

19 Christopher B. ZEICHMANN, *The Roman Army and the New Testament*, Lanham, MD: Lexington / Fortress, 2018, 7–8.

20 Niko HUTTUNEN, *Early Christians Adapting to the Roman Empire. Mutual Recognition* (NovTSup 179), Leiden: Brill, 2020, 189–194; Edgar KRENTZ, "Paul, Games, and the Military," in J. Paul SAMPLEY (ed.), *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003, 344–383 (351); ID., "Military Language and Metaphors in Philippians", in Bradley H. MCLEAN (ed.), *Origins and Method: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity. Essays in Honour of John. C. Hurd* (JSNTSup 86), Sheffield, Sheffield Academic, 1993, 105–127 (107); Abraham J. MALHERBE, "Antisthenes and Odysseus, and Paul at War", in Abraham J. MALHERBE, *Light from the Gentiles: Hellenistic Philosophy and Early Christianity: Collected Essays, 1959–2012* (NovTSup, 150), vol. 1, edited by Carl R. HOLLADAY, John T. FITZGERALD, Gregory E. STERLING and James W. THOMPSON, Leiden: Brill, 2014, 135–166 (137–143, 146–148); LEACH, "Epaphroditus", 197–198; Christine GERBER, "Krieg und

The warrior of Christ engages in combat on multiple levels: he fights the divine fight (θεῖα στρατεία) to contain bodily nature, abandoning the desire for fleshly union, for wife and children, but also against invisible, cosmic foes (principalities and powers, cf. Eph 6,12), who should be driven out from firstly from one's own soul and from that of fellow believers. War is waged against disputes and thoughts contrary to the faith of Christ and the knowledge of God, against impious and wicked counsels (2 Cor 10,4-5).[21] It should be noted that the author does not advise fighting against fellow humans who hold such beliefs, but against thoughts and demonic powers. Fellow believers should be helped when they seek protection and counsel. Since the addressees are foremost the ascetics, the exhortation shows on the one hand that they have to fight evil first and foremost in themselves, before offering advice to others. Further, the admonition they offer is not a violent exercise of power over others but involves offering refuge. The weapon of their fight against impiety is the word of piety.

The soldiers of Christ have to be ready to stand their ground in the face of persecutions (both juridical and physical) and fight even unto death.[22] Doing so they display courage (θάρσος, ἀνδρεία). The faithful willing to struggle until the supreme sacrifice is repeatedly praised as a noble soldier (στρατιώτης γενναῖος /ἀγαθός).

Dying for Christ is not a defeat. It means sharing in the fate of Christ, the victorious king. It is the perfect victory, because it involves faithfulness to oneself and boldness in speaking out on behalf of the eternal truth (an expression of

Hochzeit in Korinth. Das metaphorische Werben des Paulus um die Gemeinde in 2 Kor 10,1-6 und 11,1-4", *ZNW* 96 (2005) 99–125 (109).

[21] „Follow the Heavenly Bridegroom; withstand the onset of invisible foes; wage war against principalities and powers, driving them out first from your own soul that they may have no part with you and, thereafter, out of those who fly to you and, seeking the protection of your counsel, cast themselves at your feet as their leader and champion. Repudiate those disputes which are opposed to the faith of Christ. Fight with the word of piety against the impious and wicked counsel; 'destroying counsels', as the Apostle says, 'and every height that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God'." WAGNER, *Ascetical Works*, 10.

[22] It is unclear which persecutions are envisaged here, against Christians for their faith (an experience which belonged to the past) or against orthodox believers within the Church (that did not involve to martyrdom). During Julianus' soft persecution Basil was just becoming a deacon, but he might have preserved the memory of earlier tribulations at the time of writing. (Gregory of Nazianzus' *In Praise of the Maccabees* was probably written in response to Julianus' policies, cf. Martha VINSON, Gregory of Nazianzus, *Select Orations* (The Fathers of the Church 107), Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003, xv, 72–84; Raphaëlle ZIADÉ, *Les martyrs Maccabées: de l'histoire juive au culte chrétien: Les homélies de Grégoire de Nazianze et de Jean Chrysostome* (SupVigChr 80), Leiden: Brill, 2006, 140–153.) If the work is by a later author, it is even more difficult to link the reference to datable persecutions.

παρρησία). Christ will reward this ultimate victory with heavenly citizenship, peace, divine friendship, the company of angels, and an everlasting crown.

Basil extends this military allegory to women, in particular to virgins and martyrs. Women too are examples of military bravery (ἀνδρεία), on equal par with men. They too are chosen to fight in the army of Christ in virtue of their manly spirit.

Soldiers as an example for believers: *Attende tibi ipsi*

Basil also sets soldiers as an example in "Give heed to thyself". The homily on Deut 15,9 which exhorts believers to introspection and detachment from worldly desires, assimilates the members of the Church with various professional groups (in a combined reference to 1 Tim 3,15 and 2 Tim 2,20).[23] Basil exhorts believers to pursue their vocation in the best possible way, according to their particular role. The two last groups with which some believers might identify are the athletes and soldiers. The soldier-believer has to be ready to suffer for the gospel (2 Tim 1,8), to fight the good battle (1 Tim 1,18) against the spirits of wickedness and the passions of the flesh, putting on the full armour of God (Eph 6,11-13), being concerned solely with pleasing the one who enlisted him (2 Tim 2,4). The subsequent exhortation to athlete-believers combines athletic and military imagery, evoking fighting and battling the (invisible) adversary, keeping vigilant and restless in fight.

The exhortation continues with a cautioning against dreaming about fame, earthly happiness (marriage and offspring), wealth, political and military carrier, and the glory associated with it. This reference cannot be regarded a critique of military carrier as intrinsically wrong, since it pertains to a list of positive avocations; it is challenged as an expression of worldly preoccupations and an aspiration to glory.

Waging war against sins and worldly preoccupations: *De iudicio Dei* and *De baptismo*

The *De iudicio Dei* applies the extensive military scenario imagined by Paul in 2 Cor 10,4-6 to depict the gravity of divine judgment and to argue that all sins (even erroneous beliefs, sins by omission or committed by ignorance) will face punishment.[24] Paul threatens to tear down fortifications and elevated ramparts (the

[23] *In illud: Attende tibi ipsi* 4, PG 31, 205, 208; WAGNER, *Ascetical Works*, 437–438. The passage lists eight categories: hunters, travellers, architects, builders, farmers, shepherds, athletes, and soldiers. The discussion of the soldiers precedes that of athletes; the latter combines athletic and military metaphors.

[24] *De iudicio Dei* 6–7 ; PG 31, 653–676 (668–669); WAGNER, *Ascetical Works*, 47–48. On Basil's eschatological views and rejection of the idea of universal salvation: Brian E. DALEY, *The Hope*

thoughts raised against the knowledge of God) in a kind of holy war, using weapons endowed with divine power.[25] He takes the enemies (the thoughts) captive and brings them to full obedience.[26] He fights not only against arguments and thoughts opposed to the knowledge of God, but also against those who hold such views. Both will be brought to submission. Basil quotes this Pauline passage extensively, to argue that no sin will be left unpunished. Sins express contempt against the law of God. They are the heights exalted against the knowledge of God the apostle wants to destroy.

De baptismo also quotes 2 Cor 10,4–5, contrasting human traditions and observances, counsels of human wisdom to the justice of God.[27] These are the fortifications and heights elevated against the knowledge of God, the counsels the Apostle forcefully fights to tear down. Those who object against the judgement of God face condemnation. Believers should be pure from the desires of the Devil, from worldly preoccupations, human traditions, and their own wishes (even those that appear to be fair), in order to accomplish the will of God.

Fighting the devil

The motif of the devil waging war against believers through their desires is more explicitly addressed in Basil's *Homily 21* on detachment.[28] The topic of war is developed in some detail. The homily was most probably delivered in Satala on the occasion of Basil's mission to appoint bishops for Armenia.[29] The mission was

of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 81–83.

25 GERBER, "Krieg", 112–113, n. 62; HUTTUNEN, *Early Christians*, 187. On the detailed description of a military campaign and the knowledge of military techniques: MALHERBE, "Antisthenes", 136–137; GERBER, "Krieg", 107–109.

26 The war ending in the full submission of the opponents reminds of the pacification carried out by the Roman army after the surrender of the defeated into the *fides* of the conqueror. David J. WILLIAMS, *Paul's Metaphors: Their Context and Character*, Peabody, MA, Hendrickson, 1999, 217; HUTTUNEN, *Early Christians*, 187. On the *deditio* into the *fides* of the Roman commander: Polyb. 20.9.10–10.9; 36.4.1-4; Tac., *Agr.* 30–31; Livy 28.19.4; Carlin A. BARTON, "The Price of Peace in Ancient Rome", in Kurt A. RAAFLAUB (ed.), *War and Peace in the Ancient World*, Malden, MA – Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, 245–255; also Nathan ROSENSTEIN, "War and Peace, Fear and Reconciliation at Rome", in the same volume, 226–244 (227–228, 234–236).

27 *De baptismo* I.2.19; PG 31, 1557, 1560; DUCATILLON, *Sur le baptême*, 164, 166 ; WAGNER, *Ascetical Works*, 375–376.

28 *Quod rebus mundanis adhaerendum non sit*, PG 31, 539–564; *Hom. 21. Engl. On detachment from worldly goods, and concerning the conflagration which occurred in the environs of the church*, WAGNER, *Ascetical Works*, 487–505 (487–488, 499).

29 Susan R. HOLMAN, "Rich City Burning: Social Welfare and Ecclesial Insecurity in Basil's Mission to Armenia', *JECS* 12.2 (2004) 195–215 (in 372 or 373). Holman shows that beyond Basil's social sensitivity, the homily and notably the reference to the arson of the church in Satala

not uneventful. Basil refers to the arson of the local church and interprets the incident as a war waged by the Enemy, who uses war engines to destroy the church of God. But divine protection ensures that the church ("our mother") remains unharmed.[30] The passage is interesting because it interprets an incident perhaps related to a local, intra-ecclesial conflict as a cosmic war waged by the devil against the church.[31] The church obviously needs to resist and fight the ruses of the devil, just as individual Christians have to.

3. God as general and defender: *Hom.* 18 on Psalm 45 [46]

Basil's exegesis of LXX Psalm 45[32] focuses on the theme of God as helper, as strength and refuge for those who believe in him. Whatever the circumstances of their life and the difficulties they face, believers should seek God's help, without trusting in transient worldly values and fickle human assistance. The military scenario is obviously a salient feature of the psalm. The Lord of Hosts (κύριος τῶν δυνάμεων, vv. 7, 11 LXX) stands in the midst of his city and defends it against the uproar of hostile nations, breaks down the enemy and drives them away. Basil takes the military imagery further. God is compared to a general followed by a noble army, "ready to give help to an oppressed district" (στρατηγὸς ὁπλιτικὸν γενναῖον ἐξηρτημένος, ἕτοιμος ἀεὶ βοηθεῖν τῷ καταπονουμένῳ μέρει). In a similar manner, God is the helper of believers (βοηθὸς ἡμῶν ἐστιν), a fellow combatant / an ally (σύμμαχος) to anyone waging war against the wiles of the devil (μεθοδείας τοῦ διαβόλου), sending ministering spirits to save those in need. God is thus a saviour rescuing his people with the assistance of his military corps. The besieged, desperate city is saved by "a general, unconquerable in might" (στρατηγός, ἄμαχον τὴν ῥώμην), who breaks the siege by enemy nations and kings with his terrifying appearance and voice (6). While the psalm refers to God as "Lord of the hosts", the

may reflect local opposition and tensions related to theological dissension (in particular the Eusthatian controversy).

30 *Quod rebus* 9, PG 31, 556–557; WAGNER, *Ascetical works*, 499–500 ("the Devil has again manifested his savage hostility toward us. With flames of fire for weapons, he laid siege to the sacred enclosure of the church. Once more, however, our common mother won the victory and turned back upon the Foe his engines of war. He accomplished nothing except to make a public avowal of his hatred. Grace, like an opposing gust of wind, checked the hostile fall of the scales. The church remained unharmed.").

31 On outbreaks of fire at holy sites, interpreted symbolically as expressions of heresy or persecution: Jennifer BARRY, "'We Didn't Start the Fire': The Alexandrian Legacy Within Orthodox Memory", *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 3.1 (2020) 13–30.

32 *Hom. in Ps. XLV* 2-3, 6; PG 29, 416–432 (417–420, 425); Engl. *Exegetic Homilies* (The Fathers of the Church 46), tr. Agnes Clare WAY, Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963, 297–310 (299–300, 305). Giovanni RICCIARDI, *Le omelie sui salmi 45 e 59 di Basilio di Cesarea: introduzione, edizione critica, traduzione, commento storico-esegetico*, doctoral dissertation, Università degli Studi di Roma Tre, 2013, 82, 95–96, 141, 156–157.

description of God as a general is Basil's own. God is portrayed not simply as a warrior, as a military leader, but as a saviour of the afflicted city. The emphasis on the terrifying appearance and voice of the Lord (an image taken from the psalm) seems to suggest that the Lord drives away the besieging nations and kings without a fight.

Final considerations

Canon 13 voices Basil's view that killing, even when carried out against threatening enemies in an institutional context, fighting in defence of σωφροσύνη and εὐσέβεια, is morally problematic. Yet, Basil does not question military service as such.

This survey reveals numerous passages in the Basilian corpus, which discuss Christian life as soldiering and warfare. Obviously, military metaphors do not express direct approval of military service. But setting soldiers as an example for Christians, lengthily comparing ascetic life with military service, exhorting believers to embrace military virtues – standing, single-minded commitment, courage –, and demanding them to fight (against evil spirits, passions, earthly desires, human traditions) can work only if these values and virtues associated with the military are indeed appreciated. The inclusion of the soldiers among other professional categories which stand for various roles in the Church shows that the author sees soldiering as a necessary vocation.

This ambivalent stance towards military service had to do with the much discussed Constantinian turn, with the political and religious changes that occurred in the fourth century, in particular the Christianization of the Empire, the need to defend it from barbarian invasions, and the disappearance of an earlier objection against soldiers' participation in pagan rites.

The least this overview shows is that Basil does not regard military service as incompatible with the Christian existence, but treats it pragmatically, as a necessary, albeit morally fraught occupation. In continuity with the Pauline corpus, he rehearses the topos of Christian existence as spiritual war. He identifies a number of virtues and attitudes displayed by the military, which believers, in particular ascetics should follow. Furthermore, God is envisioned as a mighty general and a saviour of his people.

The argument may be nuanced if we consider that some of the writings discussed here are disputed. Thus one could claim that some of the passages reflect the position of (a) later author(s) writing under the authority of Basil. Even if this would be the case, military metaphors used as examples for Christians are also found in the genuine writings of Basil. This does not come as a surprise, given the widespread presence of military images, scenarios, and virtues in the New Testament, in particular in the Pauline Corpus.

It should be noted at the same time that in virtually all circumstances, whether in Canon 13 or in allegorical readings of the New Testament, Basil refers to defensive wars against evil spiritual powers / the devil, or to divine judgement. Even a passage like 2 Corinthians 10,4–6, where Paul threatens to wage himself a (spiritual) war against those who hold opinions contrary to the knowledge of God is reinterpreted and applied to God. The only instance which envisages turning to fellow humans (in the *Praevia institutio ascetica*) carefully avoids the impression that offering advice and driving out evil powers or thoughts contrary to faith from someone is an exercise of power and violence.

The evidence discussed here cannot be used as ideological legitimation for wars of aggression. Recent attempts by the Russian Orthodox Church to depict the invasion of Ukraine as a metaphysical war between good and evil show the degree to which religion can be instrumentalised to justify horrific military campaigns. Such tendencies demand theologians to speak up against the weaponization of religion and religious texts.[33] At the same time, while Orthodox theology has not formally embraced a just war theory and, relying on the teaching of the Greek fathers, has underscored the evil of wars, this overview of the Basilian writings indicates that a radical rejection of all things military is hardly conceivable. This is particularly true for defensive wars.

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[33] Viorel COMAN, „Critical Analysis of the Moscow Patriarchate Vision on the Russian–Ukrainian Military Conflict: Russkiy Mir and Just War", *Scottish Journal of Theology* (2023) 1–13 (emphasising the contrast between the position of the ROC and the Ecumenical Patriarchate).

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