

Why did Jesus resist Peter's cutting off the ear of the soldier, Malchus?

Background: On the Night of Jesus' Betrayal and Arrest

Malchus /'mælkəs/ was the servant of the Jewish High Priest Caiaphas, who participated in the arrest of Jesus; as written in the four gospels. According to the Bible, one of the disciples, Simon Peter, being armed with a sword, cut off the servant's ear – perhaps in an attempt to prevent the arrest of Jesus.

However, the person cutting off Malchus' ear is discussed in all four canonical gospels (Matthew 26:51, Mark 14:47, Luke 22:49-51, and John 18:10–11), but Simon and Malchus are named only in the Gospel of John. Additionally, Luke is the only gospel that says Jesus healed the servant. This seems to have been Jesus' last recorded miracle prior to his resurrection.

The relevant passage in the Gospel of Luke, states: *“His disciples realized what was about to happen, and they asked, “Lord, shall we strike with a sword?” And one of them struck the high priest’s servant and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said in reply, “Stop, no more of this!” Then he touched the servant’s ear and healed him.”* (RNAB, Luke 22:49-51)

And, the relevant passage in the Gospel of John, states: *“Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest’s slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave’s name was Malchus. Jesus said to Peter, “Put your sword into its scabbard. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gave me?”* (RNAB, John 18:10) The reasons Jesus said for the Disciple to put away his sword are that Jesus knew that he had to complete his Father’s Mission; to be arrested, tried and crucified, then Rise from the Dead.

Had the Apostles or disciples resisted Jesus’ arrest and words of condemnation, they may not have survived the attempt or would have been arrested and/or killed themselves.

What would have happened to Jesus’ mission, if Peter had been killed, or if some of the other apostles/disciples and perhaps Jesus would have been killed right there too? Remember: Jesus said unto Peter, *“Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows, you will deny me three times”* (Matthew 26:34). That would not have happened, if Simon Peter was dead or had been taken away after being arrested!

Do you think that Jesus did not know what was happening or would happen?

If Jesus was completely against violence of any type or resisting violence of all kinds, why had Jesus permitted at least two of His Apostles/disciples to carry swords at that most crucial point in time?

Because they were going into the midst of danger. The countryside was infested with robbers and wild beasts. It was customary to go armed. He tells them of those dangers - of the necessity of being prepared in the usual way to meet them. This, then, is not to be considered as a specific,

positive “command” to procure a sword, but an intimation that great dangers were before them; that their manner of life would be changed, and that they would need the provisions “appropriate to that kind of life”.

Therefore, modern day biblical scholars agree the passages justify:

1. That self-defense is lawful.
2. Owning and using a weapon, when needed in defense oneself and others, is lawful.
3. Men encompassed with danger may lawfully defend their lives.
4. It does not however prove that it is lawful to make “offensive” [not defensive] war on a nation, group or an individual. That would explain what Jesus meant by “Living by the Sword”.

However, biblical scholars have still encountered some unresolved mysteries or strangeness within these passages:

- One sword blow, one injury to one person? That doesn’t make sense. Actions tend to produce re-actions. Jesus’ followers may have been dedicated to nonviolent resistance, but nonviolence isn’t exactly a guiding principle adhered to by armies and occupying, police forces. Yet, the attacker (we’ll call him Peter, following John’s Gospel) faced no apparent counterattack. In fact, the Gospels report no response whatsoever to Peter’s attack from or by the priests, Sanhedrin or temple guards. It seems, Peter was not struck, arrested or even disarmed.
- Finally, there’s Jesus’ reaction. Only in the Gospel of Luke does Jesus move forward to heal the wounded slave.

Additionally, only in Matthew does Jesus clearly condemn the attack: “All those who take the sword, by the sword will perish.”

Given Jesus’ strong statements elsewhere about loving enemies and turning cheeks, why wouldn’t he have taken advantage of this situation to make a ringing statement about how violence violates the Will and Word of God, the Father?

So, in conclusion, was the healing of the slave necessary? Yes. Certainly all things are possible, including the conversion of Malchus. But, how could that be if he was unable to hear?

Better for his salvation to cut off his arm than his ear. “*Hear, O Israel the Lord our God*” (cf: Deuteronomy 6:4) that call resounding throughout the Hebrew texts—but how can they hear if they are not listening?! Malchus must have his ear [i.e., hearing] restored, and so it was. The Lord Jesus healed the slave, but whether he heard with an inner ear the truth about God at work in Christ Jesus, we do not know—the writers of the gospels do not tell us anything further in this regard. So we rest in an acceptance and understanding that God’s ways are mysterious indeed.