

HOLY WAR IDEA IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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"Holy War" is a Western concept referring to war that is fought for religion, against adherents of other religions, often in order to promote religion through conversion, and with no specific geographic limitation. This concept does not occur in the Hebrew Bible, whose wars are not fought for religion or in order to promote it but, rather, in order to preserve religion and a religiously unique people in relation to a specific and limited geography. The Western concept also presumes from the outset that there is such a thing as "holy war" in opposition to "profane war," but such a dichotomy is not always possible since wars that may be fought for material (economic) reasons may be couched in sacred terms. In some traditional societies where every dimension of life is experienced within the sphere of the sacred, wars to gain territory or appropriate material wealth may be considered "holy." This is certainly the case in many depictions of war in the Hebrew Bible, while in others, wars are depicted as occurring outside the broadest definition of "holy war" (Numbers 14:39-45/Deut.1:41-44). All wars depicted in the Hebrew Bible as national wars, whether by Israelites, Moabites, Phoenicians or Egyptians might be considered "holy wars" because they are fought by, for, and with the national gods of these nations. For the purposes of this article, biblical holy war is defined as war fought on behalf of the People of Israel either by or on the authority of the God of Israel. An example of wars fought by the deity itself is the destruction of the Egyptian armies at the Reed Sea (Ex. 14). Most wars depicted for the conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel and for its defense are fought on the command or authority of the Israelite God.

THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

Nations and peoples in the ancient Near East had their own national deities which they worshipped and which, in return, sustained them and protected them. It is likely that when independent communities or city-states came into political relationship or unification, they brought their gods into a corresponding relationship that resulted in a pantheon. Within that pantheon, the gods took on a differentiation that we recognize in the well-known Greek and Egyptian systems, but differentiation also occurred in Mesopotamia, the Levant and most other areas of the ancient Near East.

In ancient Canaan, the land out of which emerged the Land of Israel and the People of Israel, there were warrior gods with characteristics that parallel some of the martial characteristics of the biblical God of Israel. It must be noted, however, that the God of Israel is not merely a warrior deity, but in fact combines all traits and associations of the major deities, including sustenance, fertility and compassion. We concentrate on the martial aspects of the Israelite deity for the purposes of this article only. The god Yamm of Ugarit (broadly, in Canaan) had messengers who appear as flaming warriors with flaming swords, parallel to the cherubs and flaming turning sword put in place by the God of the Hebrew Bible in Gen.3:24 (see also Num.22:31, Josh.5:13, 2Sam. 24:16-17, 1Chron. 21:27-40), and the image of the God of Israel as warrior (Ex.15:3), storm god (Gen.7, Ex.14:21) and king (1Sam. 8) parallels that of the martial god of Canaan known as Ba`al. In most cases in the ancient Near East, the gods fought one another in the heavens just as their human followers fought one another below. In only one case known from the literature of Ugarit does a god fight human warriors as does the God of Israel, and this is the goddess Anat. It is theorized that Israel's rejection of the existence of gods aside from the God of Israel mitigated against the old presumption of gods fighting one another as their subject peoples

fought one another, and necessitated the deity engaging directly in battles with the human enemies of Israel (Miller, 1973).

IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Scholars of biblical holy war often refer to the phenomenon as "Yahweh war," meaning the war of the God of Israel, because the deity appears so prominently. In the Hebrew Bible, God may be referred to as the "man of war" (*ish milhamah*, Exodus 15:3). The common term "the Lord of Hosts" (*adonay zeva<ot*) may refer to heavenly warriors, though in some contexts the "hosts" may refer to a heavenly court for the divine king. God is consulted before engaging in war (Jud. 1:1, 20:18, 23), and certain burnt offerings are made before engaging in battle to engage the assistance of God (Jer. 6:4, Micah 3:5, Joel 2:9). God himself fights for Israel (Ex.14:14). The Bible even records a battle cry: "[The sword] of God and Gideon!" (who was a tribal leader and warrior Jud.7:18).

The Ark of the Covenant is the symbol and banner of God's presence in battle (1 Sam. 4:4, 2 Sam. 11:11), and this connection between the Ark and the presence of God in war is made already in the desert in Num.10:35: "When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered and may Your foes flee before You!" The Ark is like a battle station from which God fights for Israel and, although not mentioned in every battle, probably went forth often and is referred to in passing as a regular part of the battle array

(Jud.4:14). The Philistine enemy was terrified of the Ark itself and related to the Ark as if it were the very appearance of God (1Sam.4:5-8).

The Hebrew Bible is a collection of literature spanning many centuries and reflecting a period considerably longer. The meanings of the ideas and institutions contained within it are therefore complex, sometimes even contradictory, and clearly reflect historical and conceptual development. This is certainly the case and with the role of God in war. There is still no scholarly consensus regarding the process and details of the evolution of the ideas of holy war in ancient Israel, and part of the disagreement rests on the dating of early texts. All scholars, however, maintain that the biblical war narratives do not depict the actual history of the events they portray, but rather a literary interpretation. There is also general scholarly consensus that God's role in Israelite warfare evolved from one in which God assists alongside Israel in the actual fighting to one in which God is credited entirely and without human assistance with the protection of Israel.

The classic work of Gerhard von Rad (1952) is cited here as an example of scholarly thinking about this evolution. According to von Rad, Israel originally believed that they fought alongside God in their wars, but as they became influenced by the wisdom literatures of neighboring peoples, the human role was downgraded and God was seen as the sole warrior. Eventually, the idea of holy war became associated with the absolute miracle of God's deliverance, such as with the miracle at the Reed Sea (Ex. 14), Joshua at Jericho (Joshua 6), and David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17). The prophets then spiritualized the idea and considered prophecy itself as the legal successor to holy war on behalf of Israel. Holy war was later reclaimed and institutionalized in the 7th century BCE under Josiah, when the nation needed a

powerful incentive to fight wars of defense, but was again and finally spiritualized with the Deuteronomic rewriting of history and the Book of Chronicles.

Another study (Conrad 1985) observes the different roles of God in war as two paradigms that are exemplified in two types of warriors. In the "Joshua paradigm," God engages actively in fighting battles which eventuate in winning the Land of Israel for the people (Deut.3:2/Num.21:34, Josh. 8:1-2, 10:8, 2Sam. 13:28, 2 Kings 25:24, etc.), while the "Abraham paradigm" represents Israel for whom God wages peace among the nations and promises great posterity (Gen.15:1, 21:17-18, 46:3-4, Ex. 14:13-14, Isaiah 7:4-9, 41:8-16, Jer. 30:10, Neh.4:8, Hag. 2:4-9, etc.). The Joshua warrior paradigm reflects memories of a heroic past when God delivered His people and granted victory in the struggle over the Land, while the Abraham paradigm in the exilic and post-exilic periods reflects Israel's imagining about the future restoration of offspring and a return to the Land.

WAR POETRY

A great deal of poetry is embedded in Hebrew Scripture and much of it consists of hymns of praise and thanks for God's protection of Israel and victory over Israel's enemies. Perhaps the most famous is the "Song of the Sea" of Exodus 15, which recounts God's deliverance of his people as he marches them out from Egyptian bondage to take the land for Israel. God throws Pharaoh and his chariots into the sea, drowning the enemy and blasting the waters with the breath of his nostrils. He foils the attempt of the enemy to despoil Israel and strikes fear in the hearts of the Canaanites who will melt away at the coming of Israel into the Land.

The "Song of Deborah" in Judges 5 is a victory poem recounting the destruction of "the kings of Canaan" in a battle fought by the tribal chieftain Barak and the prophetess Deborah. It extols the acts of human heroes, excoriates the tribes

who failed to fight, and attributes the victory to God for his people: "So may all Your enemies perish, O Lord! But may His friends be as the sun rising in might!" (5:31).

Various other poems in the Psalms and embedded within narrative contain victory songs and hymns of praise for divine acts in saving Israel. The images include the God of Israel and his heavenly host fighting with human armies to take the Land or to conquer enemies after the original settlement, God establishing his kingship through his might and victory, requests for God to rise up against Israel's enemies, and even the celestial bodies responding to God's fighting for Israel (Deut. 33, Habakkuk 3:3-15, 2 Sam 18/Psalm 18, Joshua 10:12-13, Psalms 7:7, 59:5, 59:5-6, Isa.10:26).

Psalm 68 contains fragments of a series of war songs or pieces of war poetry. "God will arise, his enemies shall be scattered, His foes shall flee before him....O God, when You went at the head of Your army, when You marched through the desert, the earth trembled, the sky rained because of God....The kings and their armies are in headlong flight; housewives are sharing in the spoils....When Shaddai scattered the kings, it seemed like a snowstorm in Zalmon...God's chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands....You are awesome, O God, in Your holy places; it is the God of Israel who gives might and power to the people. Blessed is God."

LAW

The Bible includes only a few formal laws associated with war [these laws are developed considerably in later Rabbinic interpretation]. Because God was understood to have some kind of presence within the war camp to protect the people and deliver the enemy, the camp must remain "holy" (*qadosh*), meaning in this context that it must not be sullied by anyone in a state of ritual impurity. Those,

therefore, who experience a nocturnal emission must leave the war camp until they can be rendered ritually pure, and an area must be designated outside of the camp for people to relieve themselves and bury their excrement (Deut. 23:10-15). It is forbidden to rape captive women. If a captive woman is desired, she must be brought into the home of her captor, her captive clothing replaced, her hair trimmed and nails paired, and she must be allowed to mourn her parents for one full month before she may be taken to wife legally and sexually. If, once the heat of war has cooled during those thirty days, she is no longer desired, she must be released; she may not be enslaved (Deut. 21: 10-14).

Deuteronomy 20 provides encouragement for battle by ensuring that God will be with the troops to bring them victory (vs.1-4). At the same time, it provides for a series of military deferments. These apply to those who have built a new house but have not yet dedicated it, planted a vineyard but have never harvested it, and have become engaged but have not consummated the marriage. All may return home lest they not enjoy the fruit of their love and labors. Likewise, those who are too fearful to engage in battle are relieved of duty lest their fear infect their comrades and hinder their fighting ability (vs.5-9).

Deuteronomy 20:10-18 provides rudimentary rules of engagement in war, presumably one of conquest, and these differ depending on whether the enemy lives in "towns that lie very far" or "the towns...belonging to the nearby nations." With regard to the former category, they are offered terms of surrender. If they agree they are subjected to forced labor [but they retain ownership of their material possessions, not slavery as known in Western history]. If they choose to fight and are defeated, the males are put to the sword and the women, children, livestock and all material goods may be taken as spoil. With regard to the latter category, which is specified as certain

Canaanite groups living within what is designated as the Land of Israel, they must be proscribed through the *herem* (see below). Verses 19-20 then forbid the destruction of trees that are depended upon for sustenance. Only trees that are known do not yield fruit may be cut down for constructing siege works.

THE *HEREM*

The *herem* refers to something separated from the normal either because of being dedicated to God or proscribed as an abomination to him. In the first case, whatever one privately devotes to God as *herem* is sacred in the highest degree and is irrevocable, never to be redeemed by the devoter (Lev.27:28). It belongs, rather, to the priests who maintain the sacrificial system (Num.18:14, Ezek.44:29).

The second sense of the term refers to the absolute destruction of that which is abominable to the God of Israel. This may include Israelites themselves who worship other gods, whether individuals or an entire community (Ex.22:19, Deut. 13). In the case of *herem*, no benefit may be derived from such destruction. All livestock must also be destroyed, material goods burned, and in the case of a community, its buildings destroyed, never to be reoccupied.

The *herem* also applies to certain of the enemies of Israel, most often the Canaanite peoples who of course worshiped multiple gods and who represented the most persistent enemies that threatened the settlement of the People of Israel on the Land of Israel (Deut.2:32-35, Josh. 11:10-20). These peoples were also to be proscribed entirely, but in a number of cases such as some of those cited here, the spoil was not all destroyed but was taken by Israel. It is theorized that the institution of *herem* may have developed as a desperate means of ensuring the deity's support in war by promising the dedication to God of all spoils. In fact, however, there is

noteworthy disagreement with the Hebrew Bible itself regarding the *herem*, suggesting significant ideational development. Exodus 23:27-33, for example, commands the exile of the Canaanites to rid the Land of idolatry, but not their destruction. The *herem* is not a purely Israelite phenomenon, as the Mesha Inscription demonstrates. According to this Moabite text, Mesha king of Moab, reports that when he won back territory from Israel, he massacred the Israelite inhabitants as he made towns *herem* to the Moabite god, Ashtar-Chemosh.

THE SEVEN CANAANITE NATIONS AND AMALEK

The "Seven Canaanite Nations" is a literary construct, since the actual groups listed in the various references to them in the Hebrew Bible total at least ten. These are the local communities living in the Land before and during the Settlement, and the *herem* refers most frequently to them. In the rules of engagement listed in Deut. 20, these are the peoples living in "the towns...belonging to the nearby nations." In fact, however, they serve as a literary trope in Deuteronomic material to represent the threat of idolatry and assimilation "For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the Lord's anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out" (Deut.7:4). The "Amalekites" hold a similar symbolic role, evident perhaps even in their designation, not as people, but as an individual, "Amalek." Amalek was the first to attack Israel after the Exodus from Egypt (Ex.17:8-13), and Deuteronomy tells "how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear" (25:18). God therefore commands that Amalek and his name be absolutely wiped out (Ex.17:14). Amalek thus becomes a symbol of absolute evil in Israel's enemies in biblical and post-biblical Jewish tradition, for "The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages" (Ex. 17:16). In an enigmatic command, God

command Israel to "blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!" (Deut.25:19b).

As in the case of "The Seven Canaanite Nations" and Amalek, the very notion of holy war in the Hebrew Bible takes on symbolic rather than practical meaning in its later layers. While clearly a functional category for various periods and occasions within the history of biblical Israel, "holy war" became a sacred category in the later periods that was rarely understood as applying in real time. That is, the wars of Israel in the exilic and post-exilic periods were fought just as other nations fought their wars for material gain or national survival, though Israel retained the memory of the great battles in which God fought along Israel. In the latest biblical layers such as the Book of Daniel, however, one begins to observe the phenomenon of apocalyptic in which God's wars take on a symbolic meaning that transcends real time. Holy war ideology nevertheless remained an important part of biblical literature and helped to inform Israel's self-concept. Although doubtfully associated with Israel's actual wars in the late biblical period, its prominent position in sacred writings allowed for it to be revived in post-biblical periods such as under the Maccabees and during the period of the Jewish Revolt against Rome and the Bar Kokhba Rebellion (see article, "Jewish Revolt of 6-73").

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