

NEW BIBLE DICTIONARY THIRD EDITION¹

WAR. Heb. *milḥāmâ*, 313 times in the OT from *lāḥam*, 'to fight'; cf. Arab. *laḥama*, 'fit close together', denoting the army in battle array (*BDB*). NT Gk. *polemos*, used 18 times.

I. Strategic importance of Palestine

The position of Palestine in relation to Mesopotamia and Egypt was truly axial. And the existence of the great Arabian desert between these two ancient centres of civilization further ensured that contact was almost always via Palestine. This contact was frequently of an inimical sort, so that Palestine could not avoid being the theatre of war—and a prize of war—for considerable periods during the last two millennia bc. Added to this was the fact that the people of Israel secured a kingdom for themselves only by embarking on a war of conquest and that, once established, they had to engage in defensive wars to fend off the Philistines who were challenging their claim to the title-deeds of Canaan. Neither were David's territorial gains made without military engagements beyond the borders of Israel. The imperial era was short-lived, however, and the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah are soon to be seen defending themselves against their immediate neighbours, and finally against the unrelenting might of Assyria and Babylonia. It is no wonder, then, that war so stalks the pages of the OT.

II. War and religion

In the Near East generally war was a sacred undertaking in which the honour of the national god was very much at stake. The OT writers' conception of Israel's wars bears a superficial resemblance to this. The difference was that the God of Israel was transcendent and did not rise and fall with the fortunes of his people. For all that, he is 'the God of the armies of Israel' (1 Sa. 17:45) and far more involved in the struggles of his people than Marduk or Asshur were ever thought to be (cf. 2 Ch. 20:22). God himself is described as a 'man of war' (Ex. 15:3; Is. 42:13) and one of his titles is 'Lord of hosts'. This latter may refer to heavenly hosts (1 Ki. 22:19) or to Israelite armies (1 Sa. 17:45). It was God who led the armies of Israel into battle (Jdg. 4:14) so that the earliest account of Israelite triumphs was called 'the Book of the *Wars of the Lord' (Nu. 21:14). Indeed, at every stage in preparations for battle Israel's dependence upon God was acknowledged. First, enquiry was made as to whether this was the propitious moment for attack (2 Sa. 5:23–24); then sacrifice had to be offered. So vital did the latter preliminary seem that Saul

¹ D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, [New Bible Dictionary](#) (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

in desperation arrogated priestly privilege to himself, lest battle be joined before the favour of the Lord had been sought (1 Sa. 13:8–12).

The battle cry had a religious significance (Jdg. 7:18, 20) and, further, acclaimed the presence of God as symbolized in the *ark of the covenant (1 Sa. 4:5–6; *cf.* the manner in which the arrival of the ark in Jerusalem was greeted, 2 Sa. 6:15). Because of the divine presence the Israelites could join battle in confidence of victory (Jdg. 3:28; 1 Ch. 5:22), even if the forces of nature had to be invoked to secure the victory (Jos. 10:11–14).

After battle it often happened that the Israelites observed a *‘ban’ (*hērem*), which meant that a whole city or country, people and possessions, would be set apart for God. No Israelite was permitted to appropriate for personal needs anything or anyone belonging to a place which had been put under a ban; failure in this matter met with the direst consequences (Jos. 7; 1 Sa. 15). Sometimes the ban might not be so comprehensive as in the case of Jericho (Jos. 6:18–24), but always the right of God to the fruit of victory was being asserted. The ban was God’s way of dealing with ‘the iniquity of the Amorites’ (Gn. 15:16) and is central to the OT concept of ‘the holy war’. Moreover, if pagan tendencies were discovered among the Israelites themselves, the offending community was likewise to be put under a ban (Dt. 13:12–18). And if the whole nation incurred God’s displeasure, as they often did, then the agents of retribution could be the very pagans whom God had previously repudiated (Is. 10:5–6; Hab. 1:5–11). The ultimate is reached at the end of the monarchical period, when God announces his intention of himself fighting against Judah and on the side of the Babylonians (Je. 21:5–7). For a considerable time, however, the prophetic community had enjoyed the assurance of a better hope—nothing less than the eradication of war from the earth and the inauguration of a new era of peace by a Davidic ‘Prince of Peace’ (Is. 9:6; *cf.* Is. 2:4; Mi. 4:3).

III. Method of warfare

In the days before Israel had a standing army the national militia was summoned for action by means of the trumpet (Jdg. 3:27) or by messenger (1 Sa. 11:7). When on the offensive the Israelites set much store by military intelligence (Jos. 2; 2 Ki. 6:8–12); since there was no such thing as a declaration of war, the advantage for the assailant was all the greater. Usually expeditions were undertaken in spring when the roads were suitable (2 Sa. 11:1). Tactics naturally depended on the terrain and on the numbers involved, but in general the Israelite commanders were able, in defensive engagements at least, to exploit their superior knowledge of local geography. When it was a case of a head-on confrontation, as between Josiah and Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo, the Israelites do not seem to have fared so well. As well as the trumpet, signalling could be done by means of fires—to which practice one got the *Lachish ostraca bears testimony. The conventional methods of warfare are all represented in the OT; foray (1 Sa. 14), siege (1 Ki. 20:1) and ambush (Jos. 8) figure alongside the set piece. (*Armour; *Army.)

IV. War in the New Testament

Extending Christ’s kingdom by military means is clearly not part of the ideal of the NT. ‘My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight’ (Jn. 18:36) was the principle enunciated by our Lord when he stood before Pilate. And his words to Peter as recorded in Mt. 26:52 cast a certain shadow on the use of force whatever the circumstances may be. But the Christian is a citizen of two worlds and has duties to both; tension between the conflicting demands is inevitable, especially since the secular powers have been ordained by God and do not ‘bear the sword in vain’

(Rom. 13:4). Paul availed himself not only of Roman citizenship but also of the protection of Roman troops, as when his life was threatened in Jerusalem (Acts 21). Piety was not regarded as incompatible with the pursuit of a military career, moreover, and those soldiers who inquired of John the Baptist as to their higher duty were not encouraged to desert (see Acts 10:1–2; Lk. 3:14). We are to assume, on the other hand, that the cause which bound together Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot in the original Twelve required *both* to abandon their erstwhile occupations. In the early church a military career for the Christian was generally frowned upon; Tertullian is representative in his view that the two callings were incompatible, though he made allowances for those already committed to military service before conversion.

The Christian's warfare is pre-eminently a spiritual warfare and he has been equipped with all the armour necessary if he is to obtain victory (Eph. 6:10–20). It follows that he should be under military discipline, and to this end the NT abounds in injunctions couched in military terms (*cf.* 1 Tim. 1:18; 1 Pet. 5:9) and in military metaphors generally (*cf.* 2 Tim. 2:3–4; 1 Pet. 2:11). The critical battle was won at Calvary (Col. 2:15) so that the emphasis in a passage like Eph. 6:10–20 is not so much on the gaining of new ground, but on the holding of what has already been won. Victory ultimate and complete will come when Christ is revealed from heaven at the end of the age (2 Thes. 1:7–10). The final clash between Christ and the minions of darkness is depicted in chs. 16, 19 and 20 of Revelation. A decisive battle is fought at a place called *Armageddon (or Har-Magedon) according to Rev. 16:16. The most likely explanation of the name is that which links it with the hill (Heb. *har*) of Megiddo (n). Megiddo was the scene of many great battles in history (*cf.* 2 Ch. 35:22) and its appearance in an apocalyptic context is most fitting. For the enemies of Christ this encounter will mean destruction (Rev. 19:17–21). But thus will Ps. 110 and a host of OT passages find their fulfilment as the era of Messianic rule begins. The harbingers of that blessed age will indeed be 'wars and rumours of wars' (Mt. 24:6), but when Messiah reigns 'of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end' (Is. 9:7).

V. The Qumran War Scroll

Among the first *Dead Sea Scrolls to be discovered was one which has become known as 'The War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness'. It is undoubtedly a product of the community which was once installed at Qumran and it issues directions to the community in anticipation of a protracted war between the forces of good—represented by the sectaries—and the forces of evil. The war will be fought in accordance with all the laws of warfare which Moses laid down, and although victory is predetermined by God there will be serious setbacks. Prominent among the 'sons of darkness' are the 'Kittim', and these are almost certainly to be identified as the Romans. It would seem that this scroll was one of the more exotic products of the age of Rom. domination of Palestine, an age when apocalyptic was at a premium and Messianic expectation at fever pitch.

Bibliography. G. von Rad, *Der heilige Krieg im alten Israel*, 1951; Y. Yadin, *The Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness*, 1962; *idem*, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, 1963; R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*², 1965, pp. 247–267; C. Brown, J. Watts, 'War', *NIDNTT* 3, pp. 958–967; M. Langley, 'Jesus and Revolution', *NIDNTT* 3, pp. 967–981.²

² R. P. Gordon, "[War](#)," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1229–1230.

