

THE CURSE OF DEATH IN WAR

SHAUL BAR

Of the various forms of death that appear in the Bible, a natural death is the most common. There are also various kinds of unnatural death: premature death in war, by judicial execution, excision, plague, or illness. In this paper we will limit our study to one category, death in war, which was considered an unnatural death. Was it a good omen to die on the battlefield or was it a bad omen? Does this kind of death have a special meaning and in what way does it differ from natural death? This paper will show that death in war was among the curses and threats against the Israelites which also included the curse of non-burial.

THOSE WHO FELL, THE SLAIN

Over the generations, the nature of the Israelite wars changed. At first they were wars of conquest and settlement; later, under the judges, they were defensive wars against foreign invaders. Under the monarchy there were wars to expand and stabilize the borders of the kingdom; and, finally, wars fought by the kings of Israel and Judah to fend off the imperial designs of the great empires.

When the Bible refers to violent death or death on the battlefield it generally employs the root *n-f-l* ("fall"), which occurs 115 times in this sense.¹ We read, for example, that Eglon was *fallen down dead on the ground* [*nofel artzah met*] (Judg. 3:25; cf. 4:22; II Sam. 2:23). The root *n-f-l* may also occur alone, without any form of *m-v-t*, to indicate death: *thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell there* (I Sam. 4:10; cf. 31:8).² Sometimes the Bible notes how a person "fell," as in the expression *fell by the sword*,³ which occurs some 35 times.⁴

Those who die on the field of battle are referred to as *those who fell*: *The total of those who fell that day . . . came to twelve thousand* (Josh. 8:25).⁵ In other passages, those who die on the battlefield are referred to as *halalim*, "the slain" – *Assyria is there with all her company, their graves round about, all of them slain, fallen by the sword* (Ezek. 32:22)⁶ – or as *halelei herev*:

those slain by the sword (Jer. 14:18; Lam. 4:9; etc.). The root *h-l-l* in this sense occurs 91 times in the Bible.⁷ Still another idiom is *metei milhamah: the dead of war* (Isa. 22:2).

The death of a king in battle is described in I Kings 22:35. Ahab the king of Israel is mortally wounded and dies after losing much blood: *The king remained propped up in the chariot facing Aram; the blood from the wound ran down into the hollow of the chariot, and at dusk he died.* It is noteworthy that Ahab is said to have *slept with his fathers* (I Kgs. 22:40), even though this formula is generally⁸ applied to kings who died peacefully, not to those who met a violent death.

During the war against the Philistines which the Israelites lost, they left the corpses of King Saul and his sons on the battlefield. According to the biblical narrative, the Philistines cut off Saul's head and nailed his corpse to the wall of Beth-shan. When the men of Jabesh-Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, they went and took Saul's corpse and his sons' corpses from the wall of Beth-shan. According to I Samuel 31:12-13, the people of Jabesh Gilead burned the corpses of Saul and his sons, then they buried the bones.⁹ Both traditional commentators and modern scholars, puzzled by this unusual act of cremation, have offered various explanations. The Sages, for example, explained that they burned only the personal effects of the deceased.¹⁰ It may be more plausible that in this case the bodies were cremated to prevent the Philistines from abusing them. The bones were first buried under a tree, but later we read that King David took the bones of Saul and his son Jonathan and gave them a respectful burial in their family sepulcher (II Sam. 21:14). David probably did so out of political motives. There were, it appears, growing suspicions that he was involved in the killing of Saul, and later of Abner, as modern scholars have pointed out.¹¹ In order to remove any doubts, therefore, David eulogized Saul and Jonathan, and had their remains honorably interred. This he did to improve his image and gain the support of all Israel.

CURSE OF DYING IN WAR

The Book of Deuteronomy contains curses and threats against the Israelites. Among them we find the curse of being routed by the enemy in war. This curse is a punishment for the Israelites' sins. The Bible provides a horrifying description of Israel vanquished by its enemies: *Your carcasses shall become*

food for all the birds of the air and all the beasts of the earth, with none to frighten them away (Deut. 28:26). The same description is found in Jeremiah 16:4 and 6 and 19:7. In Ezekiel's prophecy about Gog and his host, the dead will be left to be eaten by scavenger birds and wild beasts (Ezek. 39:4).

In the prophetic literature, defeat in war is divine retribution for Israel's transgressions, the consequence of insufficient fear of the Lord. That is, death in war is the price of sin. Many of the references to war place it among the three canonical forms of unnatural death: sword, pestilence, and famine.¹²

The imprecations in Leviticus 26:25-26 establish a three-fold scheme of sword, pestilence, and famine.¹³ This sword, which avenges violation of the Covenant, is wielded by the enemies of Israel. Pestilence follows in the wake of the sword: those who take refuge in the cities in order to escape the sword will die of the plague there. (The same idea occurs in Deuteronomy 28:21.) In addition to the plague raging in the cities, the siege will give rise to severe famine, and parents will become cannibals and eat their own children (Lev. 26:29). This curse is recounted in much greater detail in Deuteronomy 28:53-57. The curse was fulfilled during the Aramean siege of Samaria, where we read of the woman who agreed with her friend to eat their children, only to be tricked by her (II Kgs. 6:24-33). The prophets who announced the downfall of Judah also proclaimed this awful fate: *I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and every one shall eat the flesh of his neighbor in the siege and in the distress* (Jer. 19:9, with an echo of Deuteronomy 28:53 and 55); *parents shall eat their children in your midst, and children shall eat their parents* (Ezek. 5:10).¹⁴

Some believe that the passage in Deuteronomy, with its reference to siege and cannibalism, was added at a later period, thus reflecting conditions during the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the kingdom of Judah. This is a needless assumption, because similar curses can be found in the Assyrian covenant texts, where they are typological. The treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati'lu of Arpad includes the following: "May Adad, the canal inspector of heaven and earth, put an end to Mati'lu, his land and the people of his land through hunger, want, and famine, so that they eat the flesh of their sons and daughters and it tastes as good to them as the flesh of spring lambs."¹⁵ A treaty of Esarhaddon contains a number of variations on this theme. "A mother [will close her door] against her own daughter. In your

hunger eat the flesh of your sons. Let one eat the flesh of another, let one clothe himself with another's skin" (448–450). "Just as this sheep is cut up and the flesh of her young is put in her mouth, so may he give you to eat in your hunger [the flesh of your wives(?)], the flesh of your brothers, of your sons, and of your daughters" (547–550).¹⁶

In the ancient world, as in the biblical tradition, the punishment for breaking God's covenant and disobeying Him was the curse of defeat in war. The curse of dying in war is found in the Code of Hammurabi: "May she shatter his weapons on the field of battle and conflict; may she create confusion (and) revolt for him! May she strike down his warriors (and) water the earth with blood! May she throw up a heap of his warriors' bodies on the plain; may she show his warriors no mercy! As for himself, may she deliver him into the hands of his enemies, and may they carry him away in bonds to the land hostile to him."¹⁷ In another instance in Hammurabi's law we read: "May Zababa, the mighty warrior, the firstborn son of Ekur, who marches at the right hand, shatter his weapons on the field of battle! May he turn day into night for him, and let his enemy trample upon him!"¹⁸

NON-BURIAL

In addition to the curse of dying in war, we also find the curse of non-burial that was associated with defeat in war. When the Bible recorded the burial of Sarah, the first interment mentioned in the Bible, we find many details which describe the event. One reason for its inclusion was to show the great respect that the Torah has for burying the dead. Furthermore, in the ancient world, to remain unburied was a curse and non-burial was worse than death, because the spirit of the dead could not find rest and would never reach the underworld. More so, not burying the dead promptly was a sign of disrespect for the deceased. Rashi, in his commentary on Deuteronomy 21:23, explains that leaving the corpse hanging would be an affront to the Lord, because the human body is made in the image of God. That is why the dead must be buried without delay. In the ancient world, the practice of immediate burial arose from the popular belief that the spirits of the dead roam the land at night; if they find their own remains unburied, they are apt to harm the living.

In the war of words between David and Goliath, the Philistine curses David and promises that he *will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts*

of the field (I Sam. 17:44). Not to be outdone, David retorts: *I will strike you down, and cut off your head; and I will give the carcasses of the Philistine camp to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth* (v. 46). Here again, the curse is to not be buried, so that the spirit will wander aimlessly.

The curse of non-burial is also found in the prophetic literature: *The carcasses of this people shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, with none to frighten them away* (Jer. 7:33), an echo of Deuteronomy 28:26. That there is no one to frighten the scavengers away implies that there are no survivors to take pity on them. A similar curse is uttered by the prophet: *They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their corpses shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth* (Jer. 16:4). Here, "deadly diseases" refers to the plagues that break out in the aftermath of war. Again, no one survives to eulogize the dead and, as Jeremiah threatened earlier, there will be *none to bury them* (14:16). The dead will be scattered on the ground like dung, food for the birds and beasts (19:7). This is a description of war and its consequences. The image of the scavengers feasting on human corpses frequently appears in Jeremiah, but rarely elsewhere in biblical prophecy.¹⁹

The curse of non-burial is also found in extra-biblical sources. For example, in the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon: "May Ninurta, leader of the gods, fell you with his fierce arrow, and fill the plain with your corpses, give your flesh to eagles and vultures to feed upon."²⁰ "Let dogs and pigs eat your flesh, and may your spirit have no one to take care of and pour libation to him."²¹ "May the earth not receive your body for burial, may the bellies of dogs and pigs be your burial place."²² Clearly, victorious kings treated their vanquished foes savagely. The annals of Ashurbanipal report what he did to his enemies: "I fed their corpses, cut into small pieces, to dogs, pigs, zibu-birds, vultures, the birds of the sky and (also) to the fish of the ocean."²³ In the Epic of Gilgamesh, after Enkidu returns from the underworld, he is asked: "Him whose corpse was cast out upon the steppe hast thou seen?" and he replies: "I have seen: His spirit finds no rest in the netherworld."²⁴

CONCLUSION

Death in war was unnatural, hence it was considered a punishment. In the prophetic literature, as well as extra-biblical sources, death in war resulted from the sin of disobeying God and not obeying His commandments. Another curse associated with war was leaving corpses unburied for scavenging beasts to prey upon. In the Hebrew Bible, denial of burial and exposure of the body to predators was considered a severe curse. This mirrors the belief in ancient times that not to be buried was worse than death, because the spirit of the dead could not find rest and would never reach the underworld.

NOTES

1. For more on this root, see: M. Declor, "Quelques cas de survivances du vocabulaire nomade en hébreu biblique," *VT* 25 (1975) pp. 307–322, esp. 313ff; Jonas C. Greenfield, "Lexicographical Notes I," *HUCA* 29 (1958) pp. 215–7.
2. Cf. Exodus 32:28; Judges 12:6, 20:44; I Samuel 17:52; II Samuel 21:22; I Chronicles 21:14; and *passim*.
3. The root *n-f-l* in the *hif'il* conjugation has the sense of *cause to fall by the sword*; for example, *I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land* (II Kgs. 19:7); cf. Isaiah 37:7, Jeremiah 19:7, Ezekiel 6:4, 32:12; II Chronicles 32:21. This means that in such cases the Lord is the cause of death. The *hif'il* occurs frequently in 1 QM; for example, in the Isaiah scroll, "they fall by the sword of El" (1 QM 19:11).
4. See, for example, Isaiah 31:8; Numbers 14:43; II Samuel 1:12; Lamentations 2:21; II Chronicles 29:9; Psalm 78:64; Jeremiah 20:4; Ezekiel 32:23; and *passim*.
5. See Judges 20:46; II Kings 25:11; Jeremiah 39:9; 52:15.
6. Ezekiel 32:24; II Samuel 1:19, 25, 27; I Chronicles 10:8.
7. Abraham Even-Shoshan, ed., *A New Concordance of The Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1980), 2:696.
8. On the idiom "slept with one's fathers," see B. Alfrink, "L'expression slept with his fathers," *OTS* 2 (1943) pp. 106–118; Helmer Ringgren, "'ābh," *TDOT* 1:10.
9. The parallel text in I Chronicles 10:12 does not mention the cremation of the corpses, but only the place where Saul and his sons were buried. According to Kalimi, the reasons for the omission are the alien nature of cremation in Israel, the fact that Amos regarded cremation as a sin, and the tendency of ancient texts to present it as a punishment for severe transgressions. See Isaac Kalimi, *The Book of Chronicles: Historical Writing and Literary Devices* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2000) p. 53 (Hebrew).
10. See Tosefta *Shabbat* 7 (8):18; Tosefta *Sanhedrin* 4:2–3; TB *Avodah Zarah* 11a.
11. See Meir Malul, "Was David involved in the Death of Saul on the Gilboa Mountain?" *RB* (1996) pp. 517–545; Simcha Shalom Brooks, *Saul and the Monarchy: A New Look* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005) p.77.
12. In the prophetic literature, the threefold scheme of "sword, plague, and famine" is sometimes artificial. In Ezekiel 14:21 there are four "judgments": sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence. See the discussion by H. G. Reventlow, *Wächter über Israel: Ezekiel und seine Tradition*

(BZAW 82; Berlin: Topelmann, 1962) pp. 38–42. Sometimes we also find a single element of the three, as in dying of hunger (Ex. 16:3; Isa. 14:30; Jer. 38:9). Closely related to death by famine is death by thirst, which appears both alone and in association with famine (Ex. 17:3; Judg. 15:18; II Chron. 32:11). Pestilence, too, sometimes appears alone (Ps. 78:50).

13. On the threefold scheme, see the comprehensive survey in Helga Weippert, *Die Prosareden des Jeremiabuches* (BZAW 132; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973) pp. 148–191.

14. Cf. also Lamentations 4:10; Zechariah 11:9; Isaiah 9:19–20, 49:26.

15. "Treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati'lu of Arpad," trans. Erica Reiner, *ANET*, p. 533. See also "The Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon," trans. Erica Reiner, *ANET*, nos. 440, 547, 570, pp. 538–41. For a discussion of these texts, see D. Hillers, *Treaty Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (BibOr 16; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964) pp. 62–63.

16. D. Hillers, *Treaty Curses and the Old Testament Prophets*, p. 62. For cannibalism in Near Eastern documents, see: A. L. Oppenheim, "'Siege-Documents' from Nippur," *Iraq* XVII (1955):79, no. 34.

17. "The Code of Hammurabi," trans. Theophile J. Meek, *ANET*, xxviii, p.179.

18. *Ibid*, pp. xxvii, 179.

19. Jeremiah 8:2, 9:21, 14:16, 16:6, 25:33, 34:20, 36:30; cf. Ezekiel 39:17-20; Psalm 79:2-3; 83:11.

20. "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," trans. Erica Reiner, *ANET*, p. 538, no. 41.

21. *Ibid*, no. 47.

22. *Ibid*, p. 539, no. 56.

23. "The Death of Sennacherib," trans. A. Leo Oppenheim, *ANET*, iv, 65–82, p.288.

24. "The Epic of Gilgamesh," *ANET*, xii, 152-154, p.99.



INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

Detailed *Instructions for Authors* and journal style

can be found on our Internet website:

<http://www.jewishbible.org>

