

As for the towns of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. ¹⁷ You shall annihilate them (Dt 20:16-17a)

THE BAN (HRM) IN SCRIPTURE

Below are the key places where the 'ban' is referred to – either as noun or verb – in the Bible, grouped thematically.

Military Laws:

Lev 27:28-9? Dt 7:22-26 Dt 20:16-18

Other related laws:

Ex 22:20, Lev 27:28-9? Dt 13:12-18 Ezra 10:6-8 (exclusion from the community)

Places where the ban is enacted or recalled as having been enacted

Numbers 21:1-3 Deuteronomy 2:31-35*; (Sihon) 3:1-7* (Og)

Joshua 2:8-11 (Rahab); 6:15-21 (Jericho); 8:24-29* (Ai); 10:16-42 (Gilgal);

11:1-15* (Hazor¹), 16-21(summary)

Judges 1:17; 21:11* (internal – Jabesh Gilead)

1 Ch 4:34-43 (finishing of the Amalekites)

2 Ch 32:14 (recollection)

Jer 50:21-27; 51:1-5 (oracles against Babylon)

*explicit reference to keeping booty – usually livestock but in Judges 21 virgins (cf. Num 31!)

Places where the Ban is disobeyed

Josh 7; 22:20 (Achan illegally keeps some booty) cf. also 1 Ch 2:7

1 Sam 15 (Saul & Amalek)

1 K 20 23-43 (Ahab spares Ben Hadad)

References to the incomplete nature of the ban

1 K 9:20-21; 1 Ch 4:34-43

(there are other references but none that use the word HRM e.g. Psalm 106:34)

Places where God directly promises to enact a ban

Isaiah 11:15 (geographical) 34:2 (all nations) 43:28 (Israel)

Places where other nations enact a ban

2 K 19:11/Isa 37:10-13 (Asyria)

2 Ch 20:22-23 (Moab, Seir & Amonites mutually destroy each other)

Jer 25:9 (against Israel)

Dan 11:44 (The 'King of the North')

Places where it is said a ban will not take place

Zech 14:11 (Jerusalem shall never be destroyed)

Mal 4:6 (the coming of Elijah)

CONTEXTS

Textual

Dt:20 – rules for war: 1-4 Introduction 5-9 Exemptions from military service. 10-15 How to treat towns outside the Promised Land. 16-18 How to treat towns within the Promised Land. 19-20 The preservation of trees.

¹ This is the key text in Bruggeman's *Revelation and Violence* Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1986

Narrative

Rules which are specific to the conquest of the Promised Land. The exception is Amalek in 1 Sam 15 – though this is still in the context of establishing the land, & cf. Ex 17:8-15. Although 1 K 20:42 uses the term HRM it is applied to a single individual – Ben Hadad the king of Aram – and not to a town.

Historical

13th Century: It is much debated whether the HRM was ever a military practice that was actually exercised by Israel. The level of military organisation described in Deuteronomy and put into practice in Joshua does not seem to fit with what we know about the organisation of the people prior to the Monarchical period. Further, while Joshua describes the conquest in terms which are fairly comprehensive, as well as rather detached and brutal, The book of Judges, Ex 23:29-30, Ps 106 and the archaeological evidence suggest that the reality was rather different.

7th Century: It is generally accepted that the Deuteronomistic History – within which the majority of the ban texts are found (and all the explicitly military ones) – reached its final form during the Exile. Most scholars also believe that an earlier version – including much of Deuteronomy itself and probably much of Joshua – has a late pre-exilic origin, possibly during the reign of Josiah. The 'finding of the book of the covenant' (2 K 22) is almost certainly relevant here. Can the Ban (and the Conquest in general) Ban be related to Josiah's reform?

Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

Neo Assyrian text from the Annals of Ashurbanipal (7th Century)

And they (the officers) put to the sword the inhabitants, young and old, of the towns of Sais, Pindidi, Tanis and of all the other towns which had associated with them to plot, they did not spare anybody among (them). They hung their corpses from stakes, flayed their skins and covered (with them) the wall of the town(s) (*ANET*, p. 295).²

From the Moabite inscription at Mehsa (9th Century)

And Kemosh said to me: "Go, take Nebo from Israel!" And I went in the night, and I fought against it from the break of dawn until noon, and I took it, and I killed [its] whole population, seven thousand male citizens(?) and aliens(?), and female citizens(?) and aliens(?), and servant girls; for I had put it to the ban for Ashtar Kemosh. And from there, I took th[e ves]sels of yhwh, and I hauled them before the face of Kemosh (Lines 14-18, *The Context of Scripture* Vol 2 p. 137)

It is interesting to note that, while there are parallels to the ban in the texts of Israel's neighbours, Dtr does not draw on this imagery in reference to conflicts after the establishment of the Davidic monarchy.

TEXTUAL JUSTIFICATIONS

Sacrifice

The idea that the ban is a form of sacrifice³ is clear from a number of texts – including the not specifically military and non Deuteronomistic text of Lev 27:28-29.

Keeping the people pure

This is the main justification given in Dt 20:18

² Taken from Rowlett, *Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence*, JSOTSS 226, Sheffield, 1996 p. 116

³ 'Gods Portion' as Niditch puts it – *War in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford University Press, 1993 28-55

Punishment

This is some sense implicit in the purity motif – the nations are being punished for their evil practices (cf. Dt 9:4). But the point is explicit in 1 Sam 15, and also in the Achan incident (where it is a punishment for not fully implementing the Ban at Ai) and also in Dt 13. Note that the last two of these are 'internal' sanctions.

SOME SCHOLARLY OPINIONS

Peter Craigie, commenting on our text, notes the practice and speaks of a twofold justification (the purity and punishment motives).⁴ In commenting on 2:33-36 he also notes the Moabite parallel texts.⁵ In the introduction he speaks more generally of the 'theoretical' character of the texts, alludes to the idea (from Clausewitz) that the concept of moderation in warfare is wishful thinking, but does note that our text is "particularly harsh in legitimating indiscriminate killing". He also concludes that "Deuteronomy's laws of war may be seen to fit most naturally at the end of the mosaic period"⁶

Robert Polzin, taking a narrative approach, remarks how the Rahab incident is in contradiction to Dt 20, since some are allowed to survive, and the inconsistency of this with the Achan story. Polzin sees in narrative terms that Rahab in some sense represents Israel.⁷ He goes on to remark that "The Deuteronomistic History is a reminder to Israel that they were once under the ban, yet were saved because of God's promise to the fathers"⁸

Christopher Wright concentrates on the restraint urged in 10-16. On 17-19 he notes the motives for destruction as punishment and purity, and also notes "the nature of the text as preaching, not military briefing, is apparent here" – there seems to be something of an inconsistency between his approach to 10-16 and to 17-19.⁹ Commenting on 7:1-2 he notes the idea of HRM as a renunciation of any profit to be gained from the things or persons so devoted. In an additional theological note on chapter 20 he is dismissive of a 7th century context, and also remarks on the 'humaneness' of the of DT's rules of Law and also urges us to see the text as "Yahweh's legitimate moral judgement on human wickedness in the context of God's overall sovereignty"¹⁰

Lori L. Rowlett, in her "new historicist" look at Joshua, sees the whole drama of the conquest in terms of the reform of Josiah. That is to say, it is not really about other nations, but rather on the need to be 'insiders' rather than 'outsiders' in this process of reform, and the severe consequences of not remaining in harmony with the increasingly centralising authority of the 'new regime'. This is, of course, against the background of genuine external threats from Egypt, Assyria and Babylon¹¹

Duane L Christensen picks up some further points. "Though Deut 20 presents war as an instrument of divine policy, war itself does not have the stamp of divine approval" – noting 1

⁴ *The Book of Deuteronomy* NICOT Grand Rapids, Eerdmann's, 1976 cf. 275-276

⁵ *Deuteronomy* 275-276

⁶ *Deuteronomy* 56-58

⁷ *Moses and the Deuteronomist* Bommington, Indiana University Press, 1980 86-88

⁸ *Moses* 121, cf. 120-123

⁹ *Deuteronomy* NIBC, Peabody, Hendrickson, 1996, 229-30

¹⁰ *Deuteronomy* 231

¹¹ *Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence* JSOTSS 226, Sheffield, 1996

K 5:3¹² He goes on to observe the importance of this (and other texts) in developing a concept of spiritual warfare (449). Commenting earlier on Dt 7 he also notes that the language of utter destruction “belongs to the sphere of Holy War as celebrated event”.

Various religious traditions have frequently utilized military imagery to explore the divine mystery, and even to structure the community of faith (witness the Salvation Army and the Jesuits, both of which are organized along military lines). Unfortunately, the horrors of modern warfare, as captured in today’s news media, make it increasingly difficult for the average person to find ultimate meaning in military images. Moreover, the preoccupation with history in modern society exacerbates the problem. We take the statements of the biblical text literally and often lose sight of the profound theological mystery that Israel’s theologians clothed in military imagery.¹³

REFLECTIONS

The contrast between Achan and Rahab, and the story of the Gibeonites, could be a key to making sense of this particular tradition. It is interesting to note how an insider can become an outsider and vice versa. Given the amount of space given over in Joshua to these two stories, which stand in significant tension with each other, the narrative seems to point us beyond the military story which is at the surface, and on to a deeper reflection on who is ‘inside’ and who is ‘outside’.

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mk 2:33-35)

This, of course, does not ‘neutralise’ the text – it still stands as a very challenging text. And we should remain aware that this text and others like it have been used to justify horrendous behaviour in the past. Yet we might also have discovered that the text, in its very alien nature, has led us to some surprising places, and even away from the seemingly ultra nationalistic meaning that first strikes the reader.

ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

As well as works cited in the footnotes, two other relevant texts are:

Hobbs, T. R. *A Time for War: A Study of Warfare in the Old Testament* Wilmington, Michael Glazier, 1989

von Rad, Gerhard *Holy War in Ancient Israel* Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991 (ET of *Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel*, Göttingen, 1958)

¹² *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*, WBC, Dallas, Word, 2001, 448

¹³ *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9*, 157