

WARS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Every aspect of life was holy in ancient Israel, including warfare. However, the conquest of Canaan has special rules set by God, making them *Holy Wars*. Israel's war traditions included some practices observed by other cultures in the ancient Near East.

- *Before Battle: spiritual preparation—making sacrifices and vows*

In Israel, all wars required spiritual preparation. Seeking God and purifying the war camp as well as the combatants was necessary so God could dwell among them to aid and advise.⁵⁵ Vows showed devotion. Only God could initiate a *Holy War* involving *herem* (a vow devoting something or someone for total destruction).⁵⁶ *Holy Wars* have specific rules and limitations (Deut. 7, 20). Israel is not free to attack other nations at will and ask God to bless her. In a *Holy War*, Yahweh gives specific instructions for the battle, either through a mediator (such as a prophet) or through direct revelation. Israel and her leaders are expected to obey.⁵⁷

- *During Battle: icons representing a nation's gods go before or with the warriors.*⁵⁸

The ark of the covenant becomes Israel's divine standard. The ark itself has no power, but it represents the spiritual reality that God is with Israel and fights for her.⁵⁹ In the Bible, heavenly armies and even creation helps those who are on God's side.⁶⁰

- *After Battle: praise for the victorious god is immortalized in poetry, often set to music.*

Epic hymn poems become part of the nation's oral tradition.⁶¹ "The Song of Moses and Miriam" in Exodus 15, "Deborah's Song" in Judges 5, and hymn psalms such as Psalm 98 are examples of victory poems.