

God(s) in Control: Rituals of War in Ancient Greece and Israel

Joseph Abeles
University of California, Los Angeles

ABSTRACT

Ancient Greek and Israelite societies each placed heavy emphasis on the divine, notably during wartime. Analyzing their practices around war shines light on the ways in which the divine are honored. The Greek structure of *isonomia*, equality in social standing, is visible through their wartime practices, as are the Israelite emphases on God's oneness and observing God's commandments. Specific rituals explored in this paper include sacrifice, divination, and war tactics. Social structures are further examined in the context of how warfare tactics and rituals demonstrate the priorities of each society.

Keywords: Ancient Greece, Ancient Israel, Warfare, War Rituals, Isonomia, Mitzvot, Sacrifice, Divination

UCLA Journal of Religion

Volume 4
2020

God(s) in Control: Rituals of War in Ancient Greece and Israel

Joseph Abeles¹
University of California, Los Angeles

When the mythical soldier Achilles prepared to face the enemy Trojans, he dared not enter the battlefield without first addressing his gods.² Across the Mediterranean, Israelite priests sought council with their god Yahweh to sanction battle strategies. Within ancient Greek and Israelite societies, there existed an inextricable link between battle and the divine. Examining their rituals and practices surrounding battle provides much insight into each society's respective priorities. For the Greeks, battle strategies reflected their emphasis on pleasing the divine and having a social structure based on equality; for the Israelites, the focus was on the oneness of God and following God's will. Through an analysis of established war practices and principles, including divination, sacrifice, and various battle strategies, this paper will illustrate a number of means through which military rituals in ancient Greece and Israel modeled social and political structures and priorities.

In the ancient Greek world, humans were subservient to the gods, and offered pleasing sacrifices in order to gain favor in their eyes. As Euthyphro explained to Socrates, "if a man

¹Joseph Abeles, UCLA Honors College Class of 2021, is double-majoring in Psychology and Religion. In addition to the historical precedents to modern religious expressions, he is interested in the vast intersection between religion and psychology. This paper was inspired by a Classics course with department chair Dr. Kathryn Morgan.

² Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

knows how to say and do what is pleasing to the gods at prayer and sacrifice, those are pious actions such as preserve both private houses and public affairs of state.”³ The preservation of public affairs required pious actions even in times of war, as historian and soldier Xenophon noted when his failure to offer a *sphagia* offering to Zeus Meilichios before battle ultimately resulted in Xenophon’s financial misfortune.⁴ *Ta sphagia*, sacrifices intended to invoke or continue the gods’ favor surrounding battle, were only one type of sacrifice performed before war; the other type was *ta hiera*, sacrifices used for divination purposes to determine the outcome of a particular battle.⁵ Diviners examined the entrails of the sacrificial animal, specifically the liver, and decided whether the fighting would result in a victory for them. Famously, Pausanias refused to advance into battle with the Persians in 479 until the *sphagia* were promising.⁶ Xenophon describes another instance in *Hellenica* in which adverse *hiera* stalled a Spartan advance for four days.⁷ These instances of delayed battle, during which troops may have been attacked without being able to retaliate, demonstrate the commitment of ancient Greek warriors to their religious structure. Soldiers would not dare disrupt the social order and partake in warfare without the affirmative message of their gods, for they knew that the gods were more powerful contenders than the Persians or any other state with whom they would engage in battle. The message was quite clear: the gods reign supreme.

With sacrifice came the need to divide meat, another pre-battle ritual that reflected the political structure of the Greek polis. After an animal sacrifice, the flesh not allotted to the gods

³ Plato, *Euthyphro*, 14b.

⁴ Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 7.8.1-6.

⁵ William Kendrick Pritchett, *The Greek State at War: Part I* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 111.

⁶ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 9.61.

⁷ Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 3.1.17.

or those directly involved in the sacrifice was cut into strips of equal weight for consumption. The meat was distributed politically, corresponding to “the ideological model of *isonomia*, meaning both 'equality of distribution' and 'equality of political status.’”⁸ The distribution of meat allowed many participants to be involved, and the equality of portions suggests a mirroring of the Greek social order: an expression of the will of the community to have equivalent shares. The religious nature of this social practice carries the implication that the manner in which this ritual was enacted might have been divinely sanctioned, and that having equal shares in meat and in politics was the proper way for the polis to function. All Greeks could consume equal shares of meat and serve the gods in equal respects.

In the Hebrew world, in contrast to the Greek, Leviticus 22:10 explains that non-priestly “lay-person” may not eat the food offered in a sacrifice to the Israelite god.⁹ The Israelite god Yahweh set out a clear hierarchical system for his nation, with priests holding one of the highest statuses because of their roles as intermediaries between the people and God. Unlike the Greek socio-religious structure, in ancient Israel there was a clear correlation between someone’s relationship with God and his/her social standing—a relationship which was well calculated to place an emphasis on the power drawn from God in society. The highest-ranked officials of the Hebrew Bible, above even kings because of their direct channel with God, were the prophets. To determine the will of God before battle, prophets divined by means of cleromancy—casting lots. The Deuteronomistic History places great emphasis on the importance of following God’s will, specifically including the method by which it was appropriate to engage in divination. Bill Arnold explores this topic by observing the presentation of the first kings of the United

⁸ Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, trans. Paul Cartledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 36.

⁹ New Revised Standard Version is used for all Hebrew Bible references.

Monarchy, Saul and David, and their modes of divination before war. Arnold argues that the text legitimizes and idealizes the rule of David (whose prophets used cleromancy) by contrasting it with a portrait of Saul as a rejected king who used a forbidden form of divination.¹⁰ The Book of Samuel depicts Saul as using the impermissible means of necromancy in a dramatic scene before battle, in which he consults a “spiritus” in order to converse with his favored prophet from beyond the grave.¹¹ However, the accepted modes described in the text by which the Israelite god can communicate with the king are “by dreams, or by Urim [lots], or by prophets,” and for failing to follow the conventions of divination, Saul was cursed.¹²

Why is necromancy portrayed negatively in the Hebrew Bible, as opposed to other means of divination? Arnold points to the Book of Isaiah to show that the Israelites were often tempted to use necromancy, but God forbade it because drawing upon ancestral *elohim* (god, gods, or divinities) through necromancy impinged upon the oneness of Yahweh.¹³ Disobeying the word of God therefore risks violating a harshly punishable commandment of Deuteronomy 6:14-15: “Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, because the Lord your God. . . is a jealous God.” In the example of Saul’s disobedience, as in Greece, even the desperation of being on the battlefield does not excuse violations of the divine law; God reigns supreme and controls the outcome of war and bypassing the sacred standard will prove more harmful than beneficial.

¹⁰ Bill Arnold, “Necromancy and Cleromancy in 1 and 2 Samuel,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, April 2004), 198-214, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43725201>.

¹¹ 1 Sam. 28:3-19

¹² 1 Sam. 28:6

¹³ Arnold, “Cleromancy and Necromancy” 204. Referencing Isa. 8 and 28.

Following the instructions of the Israelite god came with many restrictions on acceptable actions. God established hundreds of *mitzvot*—commandments—for his people to observe; the Israelites were obligated to perform these commandments in order to maintain the covenant God made with their ancestors. Several *mitzvot* regard actions which may not be taken during war, such as gratuitously destroying fruit-bearing trees when besieging a city.¹⁴ Scholars have proposed that this particular boundary was established in response to the ecological destruction Israel itself had suffered under siege, based on an account of the siege of Megiddo by Thutmose III, in which fruit trees were used to build siege works.¹⁵ The Deuteronomistic account aligns the will of God with a priority of the people, separating the Israelites in practice from the surrounding nations while allowing them to become closer to Yahweh through observance of wartime laws. Here we have a convergence of political and religious obligations, as a practice which previously devastated the agriculture of Israel becomes religiously restricted to more effectively prevent the Israelites from doing the displeasing action. Serving God has become the outcome of separation from other nations, which also helps lessen the proximity behaviorally between Israel and its polytheistic neighbors.

In addition to performing *mitzvot* to honor Yahweh, Israelites followed commandments to recognize his oneness. One such *mitzvah* consisted of destroying idols upon entering new parts

¹⁴ Deut. 20:19-20

¹⁵ Michael G. Hasel, *Military Practice and Polemic: Israel's Laws of Warfare in Near Eastern Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2005), in Jacob L. Wright, "Warfare and Wanton Destruction: A Reexamination of Deuteronomy 20: 19-20 in Relation to Ancient Siegecraft" in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 127, No. 3 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, Fall 2008): 427, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25610132>.

of Israel, a major motif of the Deuteronomistic History,¹⁶ the precedent of which is set with the laws of *herem*, utter destruction, in Deuteronomy 7:

When the Lord your God gives [idolatrous nations] over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy [*herem*] them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. . . for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then. . . [the Lord] would destroy you quickly. . . . [B]urn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people.¹⁷

Several important messages arise from the *mitzvah* of *herem*. God explicitly instructs this utter destruction ostensibly because any interaction with other gods may tempt Israelites to “serve” them, which would kindle Yahweh’s anger because he selected Israelites specifically as his devotees. This gives reason for the observance of divine law and the exclusivity of worship: Yahweh is a jealous God¹⁸ and therefore requires complete recognition and compliance. Through following commandments and recognizing the singularity of Yahweh, the Israelites could remain in God’s good graces and continue to prosper in the land.

The Greeks, too, secured the favor of their gods by following specific, religiously based laws. For instance, military operations could not take place during festivals because of the festivals’ special significance as times to honor the gods, as seen in Sparta’s practices.¹⁹ As Pritchett notes, “Part of the etiquette of ancient warfare [was] that religious obligations of the times often prevailed over purely military considerations.”²⁰ However, perhaps due to the large

¹⁶ Robert H. Pfeiffer, “The Polemic against Idolatry in the Old Testament,” In *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 3/4 (Atlanta, GA: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1924): 235, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3259257>.

¹⁷ Deut. 7:2-6

¹⁸ As noted above in Deut. 6:15.

¹⁹ Daniel P. Tompkins, “Greek Rituals of War” in *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World*, ed. Brian Campbell and Lawrence A. Tritle (Jan 2013): 529, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195304657.013.0027.

²⁰ Pritchett, *Greek State at War*, 1:126.

number of festivals celebrated in Athens each year—between 120 and 144 festival days a year²¹—festivals never prevented Athens from partaking in aggressive military operations.²² This raises questions of Athen's priorities in contrast with Sparta's: Sparta's emphasis on withholding from battle during festivals suggests higher regard for the religious in Sparta than in Athens. In both cases, that festivals ever played a role in the decision of whether or not to go to battle showcases the importance of divine favor in the military operations of ancient Greece. A Greek soldier would never want to offend any god by participating in an unsanctioned battle; honoring the gods is the preeminent priority in his eyes.

Methods of warfare can also shed light on Greek priorities. For example, Greek soldiers sang the marching *paian* when proceeding into war, the purpose of which is somewhat unclear. Daniel Tompkins provides two possible explanations based on ancient texts: “to avert evils” or “to enable marching in step.”²³ Either explanation corresponds with the already-discussed priorities seen in the Greek world. If the *paian*'s function was apotropaic, serving to avert evils, this would relate to the theme of divine control of fate. There would be no reason to avert evils if evil were a purely human function, for then only the fighting itself would be relevant in determining the victor of the battle. Calling upon a higher method of apotropaism implies that the deities control the Greeks' fates, with success on the battlefield hinging on pleasing the gods and warding off evil. If, however, the true purpose of the *paian* was to enable marching in step, this relates to the general principle of equality seen in Greek rituals, such that all soldiers are unified within the social structure of the polis. The equality of citizenry is not without religious

²¹ Kathryn Morgan, “Festivals and Civic Religion” (lecture, Greek Religion, University of California, Los Angeles, November 4, 2019).

²² Tompkins, “Greek Rituals of War.”

²³ Tompkins, “Greek Rituals of War” 530. Tompkins respectively references Authenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* 14.701; and Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 5.69-70.

implications: as in Attica, where citizens' roots were drawn to the soil itself, it is possible that the equal nature of citizens during the war march might have related to the equal level of (certain, war-eligible) people based on their standings as humans, lower than the gods.

In Israelite warfare, trickery and deceit were often portrayed more positively than Greek united-front battle strategies. Simple sociological explanations include a narrow focus on how to gain advantages over fortifications, since, as a small people, the Israelites were unable to win head-on battles with most other nations. A more religiously-driven argument, however, suggests that because the land of Canaan was promised to the descendents of Abraham in Genesis 12:7, the Israelites had a divine right to fight using whatever means necessary to fulfill this promise.²⁴ The story of Ehud and King Eglon is a fascinating case study in which the Hebrew Bible positively presents an example of trickery, prompting many interpretations. Ehud, one of the few Israelites described in the Bible as left-handed, is sent to kill the Moabite king. Ehud tells King Eglon that he has a message from God, draws him in close, and stabs him in the belly with his left hand.²⁵

Sociological interpretations suggest two practical benefits to Ehud's left-handedness: The right side of the body would less likely be searched for a weapon when entering the court than the more commonly used left side, and it is harder for righties to defend against left-handed attacks.²⁶ In a religious frame, however, we see two other possible reasons for the left-handed attack. Ehud gets close to Eglon in private by telling him that he has a "secret message from

²⁴ This includes lulling a foreign king to sleep in order to kill him, as Jael does to protect the land (Judg. 4-5), and, similarly, the eponymous character in the deuterocanonical book of Judith beheading an enemy king while he is drunk and defenseless.

²⁵ Judg. 3:12-30

²⁶ Suzie Park, "Left-Handed Benjaminites and the Shadow of Saul" in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 134, No. 4 (Atlanta, GA: The Society of Biblical Literature, Winter 2015): 708, Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15699/jbl.1344.2015.2877>.

God,” a *davar seter*.²⁷ The text puns the Hebrew word *davar*, which means both ‘message’ and ‘thing.’ The ‘thing’ in question is a sword, delivered by God via Ehud, as promised. Another interpretation of the use of Ehud’s left hand is based on the symbolic interpretations of the left hand in the contemporary Near East as the hand of cursing.²⁸ With that hand, Ehud “conveys to Eglon the curse of God,” poetically bringing divine justice down on the cursed with his cursed side.²⁹

Divine justice plays a further role in the story, as God’s control permeates the entire tale of Ehud: it was because “the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” that “the Lord strengthened King Eglon of Moab against Israel.”³⁰ Ehud was only able to complete his mission after God, hearing the Israelites’ cries, “raised up for them a deliverer.”³¹ This is a classic plot device of the Hebrew Bible which exhibits the control of Yahweh and the importance of doing his *mitzvot*. From the perspective of the text, God’s power and control are more crucial to Israel’s deliverance than the subtle advantages of Ehud’s left-handedness. Without God’s permission, Ehud would not have been able to save the Israelites from the rule of the oppressive monarch, and, without God’s covenant with the Israelites, they would have no right to the land of Israel in the first place. Hence, God’s will is the dominant force controlling their lives, and it is through obedience that they receive reward.

Deities dominated and controlled Greek warfare as well; as such, they were given generous offerings by the Greek state after a victory. At the point of *tropai*, the physical location where the enemy had turned away, the victors erected a *tropaion* in honor of the gods, most often

²⁷ Judg. 3:19

²⁸ Park, “Left-Handed Benjaminites” 709.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Judg. 3:12

³¹ Judg. 3:15

to Zeus Tropaios and Nike. On it, spoils from the enemy, such as armor, were dedicated to thank the helpful gods who were clearly on the victors' side. Spoils could be promised to the gods before the battle in the form of vows, which could influence the outcome of the battle. Justinus tells us that at the Battle of the Sagra River, the Crotonians vowed to dedicate one-tenth of their spoils to Apollo should they win, which would have bode well for them, had not the Locrians vowed *one-ninth* of their potential spoils. The outbidding tactic worked, and the vastly outnumbered Locrian army defeated the Crotonians, with the aid of "two young men fighting in armour different from that of the rest, of an extraordinary stature" on the wings of a great eagle, certainly delivered by the gods.³² This story demonstrates not only how beneficial vows could be in battle, but also how the deities indisputably influenced battle in the Greek imagination. This explains why vows and votives were taken so seriously in ancient Greece; to offer too little to the gods could mean the difference between life and death.

By examining ancient Greek and Israelite warfare, we have determined certain underlying themes which connect to models of political and social structures while demonstrating the respective priorities of the people. The Greeks performed sacrifices and read oracles to influence and determine the will of the gods. Good Israelite fortune came from following God's *mitzvot*, and tactics of warfare for both the Greeks and the Israelites emphasized the dominant nature of the divine. The consistent presence of religious belief interwoven with structural practice elucidates that within each culture, the sociopolitical system functioned according to its unique goals, reverent to its conception of the divine.

³² Justinus, "Epitome of Pompeius Trogus' *Philippic Histories*," Book 20, trans. Rev. J.S. Watson (1853. <http://www.attalus.org/translate/justin2.html>).

REFERENCES

- Arnold, Bill. "Necromancy and Cleromancy in 1 and 2 Samuel." in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 2. Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, April 2004.
- Authenaues, *The Deipnosophists*. In Daniel P. Tompkins. "Greek Rituals of War" in *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World*. Ed. Brian Campbell and Lawrence A. Tritle. Jan 2013.
- Hasel, Michael G. *Military Practice and Polemic: Israel's Laws of Warfare in Near Eastern Perspective*. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2005. In Jacob L. Wright, "Warfare and Wanton Destruction: A Reexamination of Deuteronomy 20: 19-20 in Relation to Ancient Siegecraft" in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 127, No. 3. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, Fall 2008.
- Herodotus. *Herodotus: The Histories*. London, Eng.; New York: Penguin Books, 1996.
- Justinus. Epitome of Pompeius Trogus' *Philippic Histories*. Book 20. Translated by Rev. J.S.Watson, 1853. <http://www.attalus.org/translate/justin2.html>
- Lattimore, Richmond, trans. *The Iliad of Homer*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.
- Morgan, Kathryn. "Festivals and Civic Religion." Classics 166A: Greek Religion. Class lecture at University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, November 4, 2019.
- Park, Suzie. "Left-Handed Benjaminites and the Shadow of Saul." In *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 134, No. 4. Atlanta, GA: The Society of Biblical Literature, Winter 2015.
- Pfeiffer, Robert H. "The Polemic against Idolatry in the Old Testament." In *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 3/4. Atlanta, GA: The Society of Biblical Literature, 1924.
- Plato. *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2002.
- Pritchett, William Kendrick. *The Greek State at War: Part 1*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1974.
- Thucydides. *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In Daniel P. Tompkins. "Greek Rituals of War" in *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World*. Ed. Brian Campbell and Lawrence A. Tritle. Jan 2013.
- Tompkins, Daniel P. "Greek Rituals of War" in *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World*. Ed. Brian Campbell and Lawrence A. Tritle. Jan 2013. Chapter 24. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195304657.013.0027.

Xenophon. *Anabasis*. Ed. Carleton L. Brownson.

<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0032.tlg006.perseus-eng1:7>.

Xenophon. *Hellenica*. Translated by H. G. Dakyns. Project Gutenberg, 2008. E-book.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1174/1174-h/1174-h.htm>.

Zaidman, Louise Bruit and Pauline Schmitt Pantel. *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*.

Translated by Paul Cartledge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.