

FRATERNAL STRIFE IN THE BIBLE

AITON BIRNBAUM

Jewish traditions, from ancient times onward, stress fraternal affinity, cooperation, and mutual responsibility, as in "*haverim kol Yisrael* [all Israelites are comrades]"¹ and "*kol Yisrael arevin zeh la'zeh* [all Israelites are responsible/ guarantors for one another]."² Yet the Israelites of the biblical period had, like other peoples and nations throughout history, fraternal strife and civil wars. This article investigates the topic of fraternal strife and internal war as recorded in the Bible. Did the ancient Israelites ever engage in major interne-cine conflict resulting in thousands of casualties? Was their behavior similar or different in this respect from that of other ancient or modern nations?

As reported in the psychological literature, when Israeli college students were recently asked about their perception of the matter, the most common response was that no such episodes of fraternal or civil strife appear in the Bible, while the average estimate was just over one such event.³ Informal contacts with rabbis and interviews with teachers of Bible and Jewish history tend to support similarly low estimates.

The issue has been touched upon in various works dealing with war in the Bible, but usually only in passing, and not as a separate and distinct topic unto itself. This seems to hold among Jewish and biblical encyclopedias as well as popular and scholarly books and articles in the field.⁴ This paper attempts to focus explicitly on the issue by reviewing the Tanakh for major instances of armed conflict between groups of Israelites and Judeans causing thousands of casualties.

ISRAELITE FRATERNAL STRIFE IN THE TORAH

It may be surprising to realize that the first instance of self-inflicted mass casualties among the Israelite people occurs at the very time and place of its spiritual birth, at Mount Sinai. While Moses receives the Ten Commandments, the children of Israel commit the Sin of the Golden Calf, leading to Moses breaking the original tablets. Moses' rallying cry then is: '*Whoever is for the Lord, come here!*' and he charges the men of the tribe of Levi who answer his call to '*go . . . and slay brother, neighbor, and kin*' (Ex. 32:26-

29). There were 3,000 slain, more than Israel's losses in the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

The people's idolatrous cavorting with the women of Midian at Peor (or Baal Peor) toward the end of their wanderings in the desert results in much higher casualties. God orders Moses publicly to hang the leaders of the sedition and Moses orders the judges to execute those closest to them. The ensuing "plague" is halted when Phinehas slays a tribal leader and his Midianite woman (Num. 25). The text reports 24,000 dead (v. 9).

The calamity at Peor may lead us to turn back to another much earlier incident: namely, the rebellion of Korah. That affair ends with the deaths of Korah and his followers, and a "plague" from God, together claiming approximately 15,000 lives (Num. 16:1-4, 32-35; 17:6-15). While the traditional view of this incident lays all responsibility for these deaths upon the rebels, and attributes their actual demise to God, there may be grounds to question such a view. The text tells us that after the initial deaths of the leaders of the sedition, . . . *the whole Israelite community railed against Moses and Aaron, saying, 'You two have brought death upon the Lord's people!'* (17:6). Thus it would seem that a clear majority, if not all, the people who actually witnessed the events do not attribute the deaths in the episode to Divine intervention alone. The text links the majority of the incident's casualties to the subsequent Divine plague, but comparison of this train of events with that at Peor raises further questions. At Peor, the Divine plague follows on the heels of zealous and lethal human intervention. The close parallel with the Korah episode is exemplified both in the shared central concept of Divine "plague" and in the successful priestly intervention which dramatically halts the plague in progress (Aaron in the Korah episode, and Phinehas at Peor). This may further support the possibility of active human initiation in the Korah episode as was clearly the case at Peor. Significantly, even in the episode of the Golden Calf, where the 3,000 casualties are explicitly killed at the hands of their Levite brethren, a plague from God is also implicated as part of the outcome (Ex. 32:35). Thus, the Torah presents as many as three instances of internal conflict among the Israelites resulting in thousands of casualties during their 40 years of wandering in the desert.

JOSHUA THROUGH THE JUDGES

The 40 years in the desert may have been needed to unify the people and ease their initial penchant for fraternal strife, allowing the inter-tribal cooperation apparent in the Book of Joshua. Nevertheless, the tribes arrive at the brink of internal war precisely when their mission of conquest is largely accomplished (Josh. 22), only at the last moment successfully averting a major war. The decision and logistical readiness of 10 tribes to make war against the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh is clear from the text (22:12,33), despite the latter just having faithfully and completely discharged their duty actively to aid their brethren in battle for the Land (22:1-6).

This drama at the close of the era of Joshua presages deteriorating local and inter-tribal relations as reflected in the Book of Judges. After his great victory over Midian, Gideon wreaks vengeance upon two Israelite cities that refused him aid in battle (Jud. 8:14-17). On the other hand, the same Judge successfully defuses a potential internal war when the tribe of Ephraim belligerently seeks redress for not being called to participate in the battle from the start (8:1-3).

The Judge Jephthah is not able to control a very similar situation after his victory over Ammon. Josephus (*Antiquities*, V:VII:11) attributes the angst of Ephraim to jealousy over the glorious victory and spoils of war. In the ensuing conflict, Jephthah's men slaughter 42,000 Ephraimites, showing no mercy even to those attempting to flee (12:1-6). The text provides an unusually detailed account of how the men of Gilead identify the fleeing Ephraimites based upon linguistic differences between the two groups.

The infamous tale of the concubine at Gibeah, a town of the tribe of Benjamin, deteriorates quickly into full-scale fraternal war with still graver consequences (19-21). When Gibeah refuses to surrender the perpetrators of a gang rape-murder for punishment in an apparent clash over legal jurisdiction, the united tribes assemble a unified army of 400,000 who make war on Benjamin's 25,600 men. In the first two encounters, the 12 tribes lose 40,000 men. Then, in the third and final battle, the tribe of Benjamin is virtually annihilated. After all but 600 of the tribe's fighters are killed in battle, the Israelite army methodically wipes out all the cities of Benjamin, killing men, women, children, and even animals (20:48) – reminiscent of the biblical *herem* usually reserved only for the most hated or dangerous of enemies.

The approach of *herem* is again evident, as the men, women, and children of Jabesh-Gilead are all put to the sword (21:10-11), except for 400 virgins spared to be delivered as wives to the Benjaminite remnant. As portrayed in the text, this punishment of those who abstained is perpetrated despite strong feelings of remorse among the tribes over the war's horrific consequences (21:1-15). In any case, a solution is eventually found to provide another 200 women allowing the 600 surviving Benjaminites to marry and bring the tribe back from the very brink of extinction.

THE MONARCHY

The tale of fraternal strife continues even under the rule of kings, potential supreme symbols of national unity. The Bible tells of the protracted struggle for the throne that ensues after the death of Saul, between his son Ish-bosheth and David (II Sam. 3:1). The battle at Gibeon includes stark images of fraternal bloodshed at close quarters (2:12-32). The generals' dialogue illuminates how such conflicts can easily get out of control, with tragic results, though also the possibility of their quick cessation. This battle leaves 380 dead, so we may assume that thousands died during the years of warfare, though no other battles or total figures are explicitly reported in the text. The duration of this war is probably at least two years, the time Ish-bosheth is reported to have ruled over Israel, while the House of Judah supported David (2:10).

Much later, after David unites the people under him and defeats all surrounding external enemies, his son Absalom rebels against him. In the decisive battle, Absalom's larger army, gathered from all the tribes of Israel, is defeated, suffering 20,000 dead (18:6-8).

After the death of Solomon, rebellion leads to the permanent split of the Hebrew state into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah (I Kg. 12:18-20). A careful review of I and II Kings and I and II Chronicles reveals that there were bloody insurrections and civil wars within the separate kingdoms (e.g., I Kg. 16:8-22; II Kg. 11), but only major conflicts between the two kingdoms will be summarized briefly here.

A state of hostility exists between the two fraternal states throughout much of the First Temple period (I Kg. 14:30, 15:6-7,16,32; II Kg. 13:12; II Chr. 12:15, 13:2). After initial local violence at the outbreak of the rebellion, a large-scale attack by Rehoboam of Judah upon Jeroboam of Israel is averted

by prophetic intervention (I Kg. 12:21-24), and probably for fear of Jeroboam's former protector Shishak of Egypt (11:40; 14:25). Large-scale warfare erupts between Jeroboam and Abijah, son of Rehoboam. Jeroboam engineers a surprise attack with 800,000 men against Judah's 400,000, but Israel is defeated (II Chr. 13).⁵

Some decades later, under attack by King Baasha of Israel, King Asa of Judah bribes Aram to attack Israel. This first intervention of outside powers stemming directly from wars between Judah and Israel leads to the destruction of Israelite cities (I Kg. 15:16-22).

Much later, King Amaziah of Judah wages war against Jehoash of Israel (II Kg. 14:7-16; II Chr. 25:17-24), ending in the rout of Judah. The prologue of that war was Amaziah's decision to let go of 100,000 fighters hired from Israel for his campaign against Edom. Whether the aggression of this contingent against Judah was out of disappointed expectations for glorious battle and spoils of war, out of hurt pride, and/or opportunistic exploitation of Judah's preoccupation in the south to recoup Israel's prior losses in the ongoing border disputes is difficult to ascertain. In any case, the text specifies that the Israelite force invades a significant area under Judahite control, killing 3,000 people (II Chr. 25:5-14).

Finally, II Kings 16:5-10 depicts King Pekah of Israel allied with Aram, besieging Jerusalem to coerce Judah to join their front against Assyria (the so-called Syro-Ephraimite War). From II Chronicles 28 we learn that Israel defeats Judah, taking 200,000 women and children captive. Though the captives are eventually returned, King Ahaz of Judah successfully bribes Assyria to attack Aram and Israel in order to relieve their siege. This war between the two Hebrew kingdoms thus involves foreign intervention on both sides, and leads directly to Assyria's conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the first exile of northern and eastern tribes (II Kg. 15:29; I Chr. 5:26). For its part, Assyria apparently allows the war first to weaken both kingdoms, then sweeps in for the kill. While under attack from Israel, Judah is also assaulted by the Edomites and Philistines who capture cities and take captives (II Chr. 28:17-18).

Thus, there are at least four major wars between the two Hebrew kingdoms explicitly described in the Tanakh, with reported casualties as high as half a million killed and hundreds of thousands captured. More than once, such

conflict leads to invitation of outside intervention by one or both sides, the siege of Jerusalem and depletion of the Temple, the loss of Israelite and Judean cities and territories, and even contributes to the ultimate destruction of Israel and loss of the exiled Ten Tribes. Of course, one may speculate that the initial conflict leading to the split of the kingdom already spelled doom for both.

Though outside the purview of this paper on fraternal conflict in the Hebrew Bible, we note in passing the significant post-biblical internecine fighting of the Hasmonean and Herodian periods, as described in the Book of Maccabees and by Josephus. Best known is the infighting during the Great Revolt against Rome (66-70 CE), in which competing Jewish factions attack each other and burn precious supplies even in the face of impending siege and starvation, hastening the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Second Temple.

SUMMARY

Thus we see that biblical history is replete with fraternal strife. Our current count of major internal conflicts of the Bible excludes relatively more minor or local affairs, such as Gideon versus Succoth and Penuel (Jud. 8:4-9,15-17), Abimelech versus Shechem and Thebez (Ch. 9), David versus Sheba son of Bichri (II Sam. 20), Omri versus Tibni (I Kg. 16:21-22), Menahem versus Tiphshah (II Kg. 15:16), and others. The major instances of fraternal violence identified here, with presumed primary cause are: (1) the Golden Calf [religious zealotry], (2) Korah [individual rivalry], (3) Peor [religious zealotry], (4) Jephthah [economic inter-tribal rivalry], (5) Gibeah [inter-tribal juridical jurisdiction], (6) David versus Ish-bosheth [individual and tribal rivalry], (7) David versus Absalom [individual rivalry], (8) Abijah versus Jeroboam [inter-kingdom warfare], (9) Baasha versus Asa [inter-kingdom warfare], (10) Jehoash versus Amaziah [inter-kingdom warfare], (11) Pekah versus Ahaz [inter-kingdom warfare/regional power struggle].

Evidently, the various conflicts were caused and influenced by religious, economic, political, and social factors. Major events involved individual leaders and families, specific cities, single tribes, groups of tribes, or all the tribes, as well as the two sister kingdoms. The conflicts include single battles, relatively time-limited campaigns, or prolonged states of war over a period of

years or even decades. Three of them take place during the 40 years of wandering in the desert described in the Torah, two in the period of the Judges, two in the early monarchy (involving David, and described in II Samuel), and four during the period of the divided kingdom (described in Kings and Chronicles). This Israelite fraternal violence occurs sporadically over a long period, from Sinai (circa 1280 BCE) through the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel (722 BCE), a total of approximately 560 years.⁶ Thus, on average, there took place one major intra-Israelite conflict every 50 years during this period. Overall, the biblical fraternal strife exhibits tendencies for high levels of aggression, and climbing death tolls over time. Several leave hundreds of thousands dead, a staggering figure for a population that according to expert estimates was no more than a few million.⁷

In addition, it is impossible to rule out that other battles or internal wars took place during biblical times. The above account describes only those events on which we are informed. Certain books of the Bible completely ignore or gloss over the darker sides of central events in ancient Israelite/Judean history. For example, the Deuteronomic recounting of events of the wanderings in the desert does not depict the aspects of the events of the Golden Calf, of Korah, or of Peor that lead us to conclude that they are likely to have involved major internal conflict. The text of I Kings does not go into Abijah's war against Jeroboam, which is described in detail in II Chronicles. This raises the possibility that there were yet other conflicts of which we remain ignorant. We recall that various ancient texts mentioned in the Bible have apparently and tragically been lost, such as the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah, the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel, and others.⁸ It is a matter of speculation what other conflicts may have been described in these texts.

For anyone seeing the Bible as a template of human behavior, this biblical evidence of fraternal violence is bound to be quite upsetting. We may now recall the empirical data presented above showing that most Israeli college students assume there were no instances of large scale fraternal conflict in the Bible (with an average response of just one), conflicting dramatically with the 11 major incidents identified here. This is all the more noteworthy since such events would be expected to stand out and attract attention, if only by virtue of their shocking nature and outcomes. Also, the events appear in biblical books of the narrative genre, usually considered relatively more accessi-

ble to readers (Torah and First Prophets). Given all this, it appears highly likely that the trend toward minimizing or forgetting these facts reflects the action of psychological defense mechanisms against anxiety, similar to those described elsewhere regarding awareness of biblical assassinations.⁹

The action of such psychological defenses can indeed allow the disturbing narratives to be forgotten, ignored, or marginalized. Such repression may help us to avoid not only our anxiety about possible future fraternal conflict, but also any collective guilt over the horrors of past events. Some may employ defenses based on intellectualization, arguing, for instance, that ancient history is irrelevant to modern times. But since people seem to have basically remained the same¹⁰ while the number and lethality of armed conflicts over the last 3,300 years has only increased, this argument is tenuous at best, and would need to be supported.

Another form of rational defense might be to dispute the veracity of the biblical accounts. Biblical criticism may cast doubt on the occurrence or the details of this or that conflict as presented in Scripture. Without going into exhaustive analysis of biblical critical approaches to the various texts cited here, there is archeological evidence in support of at least some of the relevant biblical narrative. Aharoni, for instance, cites evidence supporting the destruction of Gibeah and surrounding sites around the beginning of the period of the Judges, which would concur with the story of the devastating internal war and resulting annihilation of Benjamin's cities.¹¹ In addition, it is hard to imagine a reason for the biblical narrator to fabricate such terrifying and depressing events, disparaging to the reputation of a moral and united Israel, and raising serious religious and existential questions about Israel's relation to God. For example: How could He have allowed such events among his Holy People, especially when He was consulted? (Jud. 20:18,23,27-28). Also, some of the narratives are detailed enough and horrible enough to beg the question: Who could have made up such stories? – the events at Gibeah again providing a dramatic case in point. Finally, we find in other books of the Bible references in passing to internal wars of the past, which supports the likelihood of their actual occurrence while demonstrating their long-lasting effect upon the collective memory of Israel even centuries later. For example, the incident at Peor is mentioned in Joshua 22:17, Psalms 106:28-31, and Hosea 9:10, while the bloodshed at Gibeah is echoed in Ho-

sea 9:9 and 10:9. Given that traumatic memories were present in the oral and written history transmitted from generation to generation, it is hard to imagine that anyone could have made up fictional events and inserted them into this history, let alone into the sacred scriptures. The rabbis who canonized the Bible, and lived much closer to the events than we do, apparently had no hesitation about ratifying their reality, despite their disturbing and problematic nature.¹²

Thus, unpleasant as it may be, we are forced to recognize that our ancestors did indeed engage repeatedly in violent conflict among themselves. If we can face up to these facts, we may be able to hear the Bible's warning: Fraternal conflict is ubiquitous among human beings, the People of Israel are by no means exempt, and all societies must take utmost care to prevent it. We need to be working hard to teach our young people the lessons of our past mistakes, while we make biblical studies more relevant for their personal lives. We need to act at the community level to promote unity and allow the kind of dialogue that will enhance the chances of peaceful conflict-resolution. We need to elect leaders who will be wise enough to avoid unnecessary conflict through their decisions and the process through which their decisions are made and implemented. Mechanisms for nipping conflict in the bud and allowing for a return to calm dialogue need to be put into place. By following a path sensitive to all major factions, and pursuing due process in an open, ethical, and truly democratic manner, it is to be hoped that internal conflict can be prevented, an objective of the highest priority from both a biblical and a modern point of view.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: *The author wishes to thank Rabbi Professor. Ervin Birnbaum, Hadassah Birnbaum, MSW, and Liora Birnbaum, Ph.D., for their comments on a previous draft of the manuscript.*

NOTES

1. Joshua b. Levi, Talmud J., *Hagiga*, 3.6. as cited in J. L. Baron (Ed.), *A Treasury of Jewish Quotations* (New York: Crown, 1956) p. 246. The same source quotes a relevant midrash on *el ginat egoz yaradeti* [I went down to the nut grove]: "As with nuts, if you take one from a heap, all the rest topple over, so with Jews, if one is smitten, all feel it" (Song of Songs Raba, 6.11.1).
2. B.T., Shevu'ot, 39a.
3. A. Birnbaum, "Israelis' Attitudes toward the Disengagement Plan, Perceived Risk, and Knowledge of Biblical Events," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 101 (2005) p. 42.

4. E.g., *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971) has no separate entry on the topic, nor a subsection under "War and Warfare." The same holds for the *Encyclopaedia Hebraica* (Jerusalem, 1969), *Encyclopedia of the Scriptures* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1962), *Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 1987), and the *Israeli Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1988). C. Herzog and M. Gichon, *Battles of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Steimatzky, 1978) virtually ignores intra-Jewish battles. See as well: J. Liver (ed.), *The Military History of the Land of Israel in Biblical Times* (Israel, Maarachoth-Israel Defense Forces Publishing House, 1964) [Hebrew]. The only Jewish conflict described there in detail is that between David and Eshba'al (Ish-bosheth), in Y. Yadin, "Let the Young Men Come Forward and Sport Before Us" (pp. 166-169). Even then, almost all attention is given to the champions' battle at Gibeon, while the ensuing large-scale battle within the context of prolonged war is ignored. See also T. R. Hobbs, *A Time for War: A Study of Warfare in the Old Testament*, (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989). Specific battles are analyzed by biblical commentaries, and by scholars writing on the relevant period, kings, or archeological excavation reports, and in passing, in history texts, but even there, wars among the Israelites seem to get short shrift.

5. See D. Elgavish, "War and Peace in Israel-Judah Relations," MA thesis, Bar-Ilan University (1978) [Hebrew]. Elgavish concludes that it was actually Abijah who began the attack. He also sees the civil wars in this period as minor border disputes, emphasizing the restraint exercised by the two kingdoms in their mutual hostilities. See D. Elgavish, "Restraint in the Wars Between Israel and Judah" *Judea and Samaria Research Studies* 4 (1994) pp. 59-68 [Hebrew]. Paradoxically, his well-argued point emphasizing the continued feelings of fraternity between Israel and Judah despite their political separation would support conceiving of the battles waged periodically between them as civil wars rather than wars between fully independent states.

6. All dates based on *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 8, (1971) pp. 766 ff.

7. This according to plain text. For discussion, see J.W. Wenham, "The large numbers in the Bible," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 21 (1993) pp. 116-120.

8. As cited by Elgavish, War, pp. 13-14, the Books of Kings refers to these volumes no less than 16 times each (e.g., I Kg. 14:19, 29, etc.). The assumption of the authors of Kings and Chronicles that these and other texts were available and that readers were familiar with their content may help explain their own extreme lack of detail on most conflicts mentioned. This often leaves us in the dark as to whether there were only isolated battles in specific periods of strife or ongoing, prolonged struggles with numerous undocumented battles. For instance, compare II Chronicles 15:19 for the former picture, with I Kings 15:16 for the latter, both referring to the time of Asa and Baasha. The same question applies to the entire period of the first three generations of kings following Solomon. Elgavish also notes the problem of limited relevant biblical vocabulary, the single term "*milhama* [war]" apparently applying to a single battle, short-term warfare, long military campaigns, and decades-long states of war. Additional difficulties are posed by the text attributing conflicts and their consequences to God and matters religious, curtailing elucidation of the human and political factors involved. Other factors, including the agenda of the authors of our texts, may well have influenced what events were included and the spin put on them, according to Elgavish.

9. A. Birnbaum, "Political Assassination in Biblical and Modern Israel: Psycho-historical Perspectives" *Judaism* (in process). Unconscious psychological defense mechanisms against anxiety

were initially identified and described by Sigmund Freud, and then Anna Freud. See, e.g., Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (rev. ed.; London: Hogarth, 1976).

10. A. Birnbaum, "Jacob's Trauma: A Study in Biblical Clinical Psychology," *Conservative Judaism* 57(3), (2005) pp. 49-76.

11. Y. Aharoni, *Carta's Atlas of the Bible* (2nd ed.) 1974, p. 56. See also various findings presented in I. Efal (Ed.), *The History of Eretz Israel: Israel and Judah in the Biblical Period*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1984). Compare with the evidence and questions raised by A. Zartal, *The Alter of Mount Ebal and the Origin of Israel* (Tel Aviv: Hemed, 2000), and I. Finkelstein & N. A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

12. A. Birnbaum, Political Assassination.