

Stephen Germany

Self-Defense as a *casus belli* in Ancient Mesopotamian and Hittite Literature and in the Hebrew Bible¹

In ancient Near Eastern literature, the concept of self-defense serves more than simply as a justification for mobilizing an in-group to commit collective violence against one or more out-groups; it also reveals important features of the religious worldviews of the societies that produced such literature. This study will compare the religious worldviews underlying the motif of self-defense in Mesopotamian literature, Hittite literature, and the Hebrew Bible, revealing both lines of continuity and important differences in the conception of the collective “self” in these literatures.

Keywords: Self-defense, *casus belli*, Assyrian royal inscriptions, Hittite annals, conquest narratives, David, Esther

The invocation of self-defense as a *casus belli*² or justification for waging war has a long history in human societies,³ and it is attested relatively early in the literary record from antiquity. In ancient Near Eastern literature, the concept of self-defense serves more than simply as a justification for mobilizing an in-group to commit collective violence against one or more out-groups;

- 1 The present article was written as part of the Swiss National Science Foundation project “Transforming Memories of Collective Violence in the Hebrew Bible” (project number 181219). It was first presented at the University of Göttingen on June 21, 2019 and again in a workshop at the University of Basel on February 14–15, 2020. I am grateful for the helpful suggestions from colleagues for improving the argument that I received on both occasions.
- 2 Strictly speaking, the term *casus belli* refers to “the grievance section of an ultimatum or a declaration of war” in Medieval Latin texts, although in modern scholarship it is used more broadly to refer to the events that lead to or are invoked as justification for war. See J. Sasson, “Casus belli in the Mari Archives,” in *Krieg und Frieden im Alten Vorderasien: 52^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale / International Congress of Assyriology and Near Eastern Archaeology, Münster, 17.–21. Juli 2006* (ed. H. Neumann et al.; AOAT 401; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014), 673–690, here 673.
- 3 J. Lider, *On the Nature of War* (Westmead: Saxon House, 1977), 138 goes as far as asserting that “[t]he justification [for war] most widely accepted throughout history and in all belief systems has been defence against aggression.”

it also reveals important features of the religious worldviews of the societies that produced such literature (or, more precisely, of their political and intellectual elites). This study will compare the religious worldviews underlying the motif of self-defense in Mesopotamian literature, Hittite literature, and the Hebrew Bible, revealing both lines of continuity and important differences in the conception of the collective “self” in these literatures. Among other aspects, it is particularly notable that in all three cases the depiction of the collective “self” as exercising violence is linked in one way or another to the prior experience of being the recipient of collective violence, whether real or fictive, by outside groups.

1. Mesopotamian Literature

Among the most important sources for depictions (and justifications) of warfare in ancient Mesopotamia are royal inscriptions and chronicles. Already in the third millennium B.C.E., an inscription of king E-anatum I of Lagash (ca. 2425–2405)⁴ describes how Urlumma, the ruler of Umma, “transgressed the boundary channel of [the god] Ningirsu,” which prompted an oracle from the god stating that “Urlumma ... has marched on my very own field” and committed “violence against E-anatum,” which is followed by a concise statement that E-anatum defeated Urlumma.⁵ Here, the territory of Lagash is described as belonging to the deity Ningirsu, which makes Urlumma’s action not only an act of aggression against E-anatum but also a violation of Ningirsu’s property and, by extension, the deity’s sovereignty. At the same time, the text emphasizes king E-anatum’s special relationship to Ningirsu, thus reinforcing E-anatum’s authority to the text’s audience.⁶

⁴ All dates in what follows are B.C.E.

⁵ J.S. Cooper, *Presargonic Inscriptions* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1986), 47–48, quoted in W.J. Hamblin, *Warfare in the Ancient Near East to 1600 BC: Holy Warriors at the Dawn of History* (London: Routledge, 2006), 60. See also D.R. Frayne, *Presargonic Period (2700–2350 BC)* (RIME 1; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 129 [E1.9.3.1, iii 16–22]. For further discussion of self-defense as a cause for war in early Mesopotamia, see A. Altman, *Tracing the Earliest Recorded Concepts of International Law: The Ancient Near East (2500–330 BCE)* (Legal History Library 8.4; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 7–11.

⁶ On this aspect of the inscriptions of E-anatum, see V. Sazonov, “Some Remarks Concerning the Development of the Theology of War in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *The Religious Aspects of War in the Ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome* (ed. K. Ulanowski; CHANE 84; Leiden: Brill, 2016), 23–50, here 26–27.

Similar descriptions of attacks against the king's territory become more prominent in Mesopotamian literature from the Middle Assyrian Empire (14th–10th centuries). For example, Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207) justified his campaign against the land of Katmuḫu by claiming that “five fortified cities of the land Katmuḫu ... dragged off my people (and) plundered my land.”⁷ Although in the case of Tukulti-Ninurta I the veracity of such a claim cannot be verified, at later points in the Middle Assyrian period there were indeed incursions by outside groups (such as the Arameans) into Assyrian territory, as is indicated by an Assyrian chronicle fragment of Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076)⁸ as well as by the so-called Broken Obelisk of Aššur-bêl-kala (1074–1056).⁹ According to M. Liverani, this experience contributed to the development of a “siege mentality” and the notion of “one against many”¹⁰ in Middle Assyrian royal ideology, as is reflected, for example, in a passage from the chronicles of Tiglath-Pileser I describing how twenty-three kings of the land of Nairi gathered their chariots and soldiers and advanced in battle against him.¹¹

This Assyrian “siege mentality,” however, was not only connected to the experience of being attacked; it also drew on older Mesopotamian cosmological traditions that conceived of Mesopotamia as an orderly center (characterized geographically by alluvial plains) surrounded by a chaotic periphery (constituted by mountains to the north and desert to the south) that must be brought under order.¹² As B. Pongratz-Leisten has shown, this worldview can be traced back to southern Mesopotamian myths, which locate the forces of chaos that the gods must ward off in the mountain regions, as well as to Sumerian city laments, which consistently depict

7 A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC (to 1115 BC)* (RIMA 1; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) (henceforth RIMA 1), 235 [A.0.78.1, iii 21–29].

8 A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Locust Valley: Augustin, 1975), 189.

9 See A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC, I (1114–859 BC)* (RIMA 2; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) (henceforth RIMA 2), 101–103 [A.0.89.7, iii 1–32].

10 M. Liverani, *Assyria: The Imperial Mission* (trans. A. Trameri and J. Valk; Mesopotamian Civilizations; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2017), 117–120.

11 RIMA 2, 14 [A.0.87.1, iv 49–90]. See also RIMA 1, 272 [A.0.78.23, 46–47], which refers to the forty kings of the land of Nairi defeated by Tukulti-Ninurta I.

12 Liverani, *Assyria*, 13, 116. For a depiction of the enemies to the north during the Middle Assyrian Period, see, e. g., a hymn from Tiglath-Pileser I's campaign in the Zagros: “The sons of the mountains devised warfare in their hearts. They prepared for battle, they sharpened their weapons. The enemies initiated the war.” Quoted from V. Hurowitz and J. G. Westenholz, “LKA 63: A Heroic Poem in Celebration of Tiglath-pileser I's Mušru-Qumanu Campaign,” *JCS* 42 (1990): 1–49, here 5.

military confrontations as taking place beyond the realm of cosmic order.¹³ Thus, while the idea of the deity (namely, Ningirsu / Ninurta) going to battle against the hostile land at the periphery was already present in earlier Mesopotamian mythology, it began to be used in the service of an expansionist imperial ideology beginning with the reigns of Adad-nerari I (1295–1264) and Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207).¹⁴

This Middle Assyrian idea of the king as an embodiment of the deity who wards off the forces of chaos was later adopted in the expansionist ideology of the Neo-Assyrian Empire as well, with several Neo-Assyrian texts likening the king to the gods Ninurta or Erra.¹⁵ The “siege mentality” depicting the aggression of coalitions of enemy forces¹⁶ can also be found in the inscriptions of numerous Neo-Assyrian kings, including Ashurnasirpal II (883–859),¹⁷ Shalmaneser III (859–824),¹⁸ Šamši-Adad V (824–811),¹⁹ Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727),²⁰ Sargon II (722–705),²¹ Sennacherib (704–681),²² Esarhaddon

13 B. Pongratz-Leisten, “The Other and the Enemy in Mesopotamian Conception of the World,” in *Mythology and Mythologies: Methodological Approaches to Intercultural Influences. Proceedings of the Second Annual Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project Held in Paris, France, October 4–7, 1999* (ed. R. M. Whiting; Melammu Symposia II; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001), 195–231, here 209.

14 *Ibid.*, 224–225, 229.

15 On the connection to Ninurta, see S. M. Maul, “Der assyrische König – Hüter der Weltordnung,” in *Gerechtigkeit: Richten und Retten in der abendländischen Tradition und ihren altorientalischen Ursprüngen* (ed. J. Assmann et al.; Munich: Fink, 1998), 65–77, here 72–75. On the connection to Erra in the inscriptions of Shalmaneser, see A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC, II (858–745 BC)* (RIMA 3; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) (henceforth RIMA 3), 29 [A.0.102.5 iii 2].

16 For further examples of the Assyrian kings fighting against alliances of enemies, see B. Oded, *War, Peace and Empire: Justifications for War in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1992), 46–50.

17 RIMA 2, 203 [A.0.101.1, ii 24–25].

18 W. Schramm, *Einleitung in die assyrischen Königsinschriften, Teil 2: 934–722 v. Chr.* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 71.

19 RIMA 3, 188 [A.0.103.1, iv 37–42].

20 H. Tadmor and S. Yamada, *The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC), and Shalmaneser V (726–722 BC), Kings of Assyria* (RINAP 1; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 84–85 [Tiglath-pileser III, 35 i 21’–27’a].

21 In the inscriptions of Sargon II, Samaria is mentioned as one of the coalition partners rallied by the king of Hamath against Assyria. For the text, see A. G. Lie, *The Inscriptions of Sargon II, King of Assyria, Part I: The Annals* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1929), 6–7.

22 A. K. Grayson and J. Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704–681 BC)* (RINAP 3/1–2; 2 vols.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012–2014), 1:32–34 [Sennacherib 1, 4–15], 1:96 [Sennacherib 15, iii 8’–17’], 2:197–200 [Sennacherib 146, 147].

(680–669),²³ and Ashurbanibal (669–631).²⁴ Underlying these repeated depictions of foreign groups is the idea that areas beyond Assyria's direct control are chaotic and thus inherently threatening.²⁵

2. Hittite Literature

Like the Assyrian royal inscriptions, Hittite annals embed the claim of aggression by foreign groups within accounts of military campaigns at the periphery of the empire. Several episodes from the so-called Ten Year Annals of Muršili II (ca. 1321–1295) provide interesting insights into the perceived threats to the Hittite Empire that justified going to war. Following a long-running conflict with a certain “Pihhuniya, man of Tipiya” in the region of Kaška to the north of the Hittite Empire, Muršili purportedly sent a letter to Pihhuniya explaining his grievance.

I, My Majesty, went toward him and sent him a messenger saying “Send out to me my subjects whom you took and led down to Kaška.” Pihhuniya wrote back to me as follows: “I will not give anything back to you. And if you come to fight me, I will not take a stand to fight you in my own field and meadow, I will come to your land and I will take a stand to fight you in the midst of your land.” When Pihhuniya had written this back to me and did not give my subjects back to me, I went to fight him.²⁶

Here, it is noteworthy that the initial source of conflict is Pihhuniya's refusal to return Hittite imperial subjects to the Hittite king. Although this text also depicts Pihhuniya as threatening to invade Muršili's land, this is not Muršili's main justification for going to war, as the last line makes clear (“When Pihhuniya had written this back to me *and did not give my subjects back to me*, I went to fight him”). Rather, Pihhuniya's primary offense is a violation of the Hittite king's access to human labor and the economic benefits derived from this labor.

23 R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons, Königs von Assyrien* (Graz: E. Weidner, 1956), 104.

24 J. Novotny and J. Jeffers, *The Royal Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal (668–631 BC), Aššur-etel-ilāni (630–627 BC), and Šin-šarra-iškun (626–612 BC), Kings of Assyria* (RINAP 5/1; University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 232–233 [Ashurbanipal II, i 52–82].

25 See E. Cancik-Kirschbaum, “Rechtfertigung von politischem Handeln in Assyrien im 13./12. Jh. V.Chr.,” in *Ana šadī Labanāni lū allik* (ed. B. Pongratz-Leisten et al.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997), 69–77, here 74: “Die Vorstellung, daß alles, was nicht dem eigenen Einfluß unterliegt, fremd und damit zunächst feindlich sei, ist ein wichtiges Element der assyrischen Staatsidee.”

26 Quoted from R. H. Beal, “Making, Preserving, and Breaking the Peace with the Hittite State,” in *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (ed. K. A. Raaflaub; Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 81–97, here 90.

A similar connection between the Hittites' claim to the control of human labor and the justification for going to war is found in another section of Muršili's Ten Year Annals describing the demand for the extradition of soldiers of conquered lands who had sought refuge outside of the sphere of Hattuša's direct control.

When my brother [Arnuwanda conquered ...], the troops [of Attārimma, Huwaršanašša and Šuruda fled before him and went] to [Arzawa. I sent a messenger] to Uhha-ziti. [I] wrote to him [as follows:] "People [who belong to me – the troops of Attārimma,] Huwaršanašša [and Šuruda] – came [to you. Give them back to me.]" But Uhha-ziti [wrote back] to me [as follows]: "I will not [give anyone back] to you." ... He mustered his troops ... I set my infantry and horse-troops in motion and in that same year I went against Arzawa. I sent a message to Uhha-ziti (as follows): "Because I asked you to return my subjects who came to you and you did not give them back – you kept calling me a child and you kept belittling me – now, come, we will fight."²⁷

Although several additional Hittite texts claiming to be responding to enemy aggression could be cited here,²⁸ one further example must suffice, namely, an accusation against the gods of the Kaškaean uttered in a ritual prior to battle.

The gods of the Hatti land have done nothing against you, the gods of the Kaškaean country. [...] But you, the gods of the Kaškaean country, began war. You drove the gods of the Hatti land out of their realm and took over their realm for yourselves. The Kaškaean people also began war. From the Hittites you took away their cities and you drove them out of their field (and) fallow and out of their vineyards.²⁹

Here, the economic dimension of the Hittite imperial "self" once again comes to the fore: Following the general claim that the Kaškaeans "drove the gods of the Hatti land out of their realm," a more concrete grievance is specified: the taking of cities, fields, and vineyards from the Hittites. Taken together, these examples illustrate how the perceived threat against the Hittite Empire that justifies going to war is not so much a territorial threat but rather a violation of the Empire's claim to economic and military manpower.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See, e.g., K. L. Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (JSOTSup 98; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 146 [KBo III.4 Vs I.30–35]; Beal, "Peace with the Hittite State," 92–93 (a letter from Muršili II to Anniya, king of Azzi-Hašaya).

²⁹ Beal, "Peace with the Hittite State," 91–92 (with references to further literature on this text).

3. The Hebrew Bible

Like in Mesopotamian and Hittite literature, the concept of self-defense as a justification for war in the Hebrew Bible sheds important light on the religious worldview underlying the depiction of war.³⁰ The following discussion will focus on three groups of biblical texts: (1) the conquest narratives in the books of Numbers and Joshua, (2) narratives relating to David's wars in 2 Samuel, and (3) the book of Esther.³¹ Among these texts, the conquest narratives in Numbers and Joshua and the Esther narrative reflect the idea of defending the collective "self" against outside religious and cultural influences, while the narratives of David's wars employ the concept of self-defense more along the lines of the Mesopotamian and Hittite texts discussed above.

3.1. The Conquest Narratives

Within the conquest narratives in the books of Numbers and Joshua, stories of military encounters between the Israelites and non-Israelite groups frequently depict the Israelites as the victims of aggression. Albeit somewhat distinct from the conquest narratives in Num 21:21–35 and Joshua 6–11, the first act of "conquest" following the Israelites' exodus from Egypt in fact appears already in Num 21:1–3,³² which describes how the Canaanite king of Arad attacked the Israelites on their journey through the Negev, causing Israel to fight back with divine approval and assistance. The king of Arad is clearly depicted as the aggressor (יִלְחָם בִּישְׂרָאֵל), and the text further implies that the Israelites were forced to respond in order to rescue those

³⁰ Surprisingly, relatively little attention has been paid to the idea of collective self-defense in the Hebrew Bible. An exception is the recent overview found in C. Trimm, *Fighting for the King and the Gods: A Survey of Warfare in the Ancient Near East* (RBS 88; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 35–43, who includes a brief discussion of texts in the books of Kings. P. J. Kissling, "Self-Defense and Identity Formation in the Depiction of Battles in Joshua and Esther," in *Interested Readers: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J. A. Clines* (ed. J. K. Aitken, J. M. S. Clines, and C. M. Maier; Atlanta: SBL, 2013), 105–119 has surprisingly little to say about this topic beyond the observation that "the self-defensive nature of the battles" is a motif shared by Esther and Joshua (105).

³¹ Another important text dealing with the notion of self-defense is the book of 1 Maccabees, although addressing the many relevant passages in this book is beyond the scope of this article, so I have limited the present discussion to the Hebrew Bible.

³² The conflict with the Amalekites in Exod 17:8–16 could also be mentioned here insofar as the Amalekites are depicted as the aggressors, although this episode is not a "conquest narrative" in the strict sense of the term, since the defeat of Amalek is disconnected from specific territorial claims.

whom the king of Arad had taken captive (v. 1). Here, the rescue of captives as a justification for going to war resembles some of the Hittite texts cited above, reflecting the idea that the integrity of the collective “self” has been compromised and must be restored. The Israelites’ response in Num 21:1–3, however, goes beyond simply warding off the Canaanite attack and rescuing the captives and instead results in the complete destruction (חרם) of the Canaanites in Arad and in the surrounding area. In this respect, the motivation for defending the collective “self” in Num 21:1–3 (the threat of illicit religious practices³³) differs significantly from that in the Hittite annals (the control of human labor and economic resources).

The Israelite response to military aggression in Num 21:1–3 – an initial act of self-defense followed by the conquest of an entire region or population – proves to be a recurring pattern in the conquest accounts in Numbers and Joshua. This can be seen in the Israelites’ next military encounter later in Num 21:21–24, this time with Sihon, king of the Amorites.

Then Israel sent messengers to King Sihon of the Amorites, saying, “Let me pass through your land; we will not turn aside into field or vineyard; we will not drink the water of any well; we will go by the King’s Highway until we have passed through your territory.” But Sihon would not allow Israel to pass through his territory. Sihon gathered all his people together, and went out against Israel to the wilderness; he came to Jahaz, and fought against Israel. Israel put him to the sword, and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok [...].

After taking possession of Sihon’s land, the Israelites turn northward, and a similar sequence of events occurs in 21:33–35.

Then they turned and went up the road to Bashan; and King Og of Bashan came out against them, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei. But Yhwh said to Moses, “Do not be afraid of him; for I have given him into your hand, with all his people, and all his land. You shall do to him as you did to King Sihon of the Amorites, who ruled in Heshbon.” So they killed him, his sons, and all his people, until there was no survivor left; and they took possession of his land.

Here, although Og is depicted as initiating the aggression against the Israelites, a reader of the biblical text who knows that the Israelites will eventually cross the Jordan near Jericho (just north of the Dead Sea) could rightly ask why the Israelites went to Bashan if not to conquer the territory there, which is of course the *raison d’être* of the episode. In this respect, the defeat of Og can be compared to the Assyrian royal inscriptions, which justify the conquest of new territories by depicting the inhabitants of those territories as initiating the hostilities.

³³ This motivation is not stated explicitly in Num 21:1–3 but can be deduced from other texts referring to *hērem* such as Deuteronomy 7.

Following the defeat of Sihon and Og in Numbers 21 (retold by Moses in Deuteronomy 2–3), the next act of conquest occurs in Joshua 6 and 8, the capture of Jericho and Ai. Here, in contrast to Numbers 21, it is notable that the Israelites' defeat of these two cities is *not* depicted as a response to an act of aggression; rather, Josh 6:1 implies that *Jericho* has taken measures to defend itself against the Israelites (ויריחו סגרת ומסגרת מפני בני ישראל), who ultimately capture the city with the help of divine intervention and submit its population to the ban. The narrative of the conquest of Ai in Joshua 8 also lacks the motif of self-defense; instead, Yhwh commands Joshua to initiate the military confrontation (v. 1).

In the received text of the book of Joshua, the narrative of the conquest of Ai in Joshua 8 is followed immediately by the reaction of a group of Cisjordanian kings in Josh 9:1–2.

Now when all the kings who were beyond the Jordan in the hill country and in the lowland all along the coast of the Great Sea toward Lebanon [...] heard of this, they gathered together with one accord to fight Joshua and Israel.

These verses are likely a later addition to Joshua 9, as they resemble the similar statement that the *inhabitants of Gibeon* heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai in v. 3, and the Cisjordanian kings play no further role in the chapter.³⁴ Rather, the original continuation of the conquest of Jericho and Ai was probably a relatively brief report of the Gibeonites' peace agreement with Joshua (Josh 9:3, 6a, 8a, 15aα),³⁵ followed by the reaction of King Adoni-Zedek of Jerusalem in Josh 10:1–5.

When King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem heard how Joshua had taken Ai, and had utterly destroyed it, doing to Ai and its king as he had done to Jericho and its king, and how the inhabitants of Gibeon had made peace with Israel and were among them, he became greatly frightened [...]. So King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem sent a message to King Hoham of Hebron, to King Piram of Jarmuth, to King Japhia of Lachish, and to King Debir of Eglon, saying, "Come up and help me, and let us attack Gibeon; for it has made peace with Joshua and with the Israelites." Then the five kings of the Amorites [...] gathered their forces, and went up with all their armies and camped against Gibeon, and made war against it.³⁶

34 On the secondary nature of Josh 9:1–2, see S. Germany, *The Exodus-Conquest Narrative: The Composition of the Non-Priestly Narratives in Exodus-Joshua* (FAT 115; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 412.

35 For the delimitation of the earliest narrative in Joshua 9 in these verses, cf. E. A. Knauf, *Josua* (ZBKAT 6; Zurich: TVZ, 2008), 90; C. Berner, "The Gibeonite Deception: Reflections on the Interplay between Law and Narrative in Josh 9," *SJOT* 31 (2017): 254–274, here 255–256; and Germany, *Exodus-Conquest Narrative*, 412–419.

36 On the likely secondary nature of the reference to Joshua destroying Ai and Jericho in v. 1, see Knauf, *Josua*, 96, 98 and Germany, *Exodus-Conquest Narrative*, 421.

In the narrative that follows Josh 10:6–10, Joshua's attack against the Canaanite coalition is thus cast as legitimate insofar as it is in defense of the Gibeonites, who are at this point formal allies of the Israelites (see esp. the Gibeonites' request for help in v. 6).³⁷ However, the Israelites do not stop at simply repelling the attack of the Canaanite coalition but instead press on in a more offensive mode, ultimately conquering an area corresponding roughly to the future kingdom of Judah (vv. 28–42).

This process repeats itself in Joshua 11, in which King Jabin of Hazor hears of Israel's conquests in the south and summons a group of northern kings, who assemble at the waters of Merom in order to fight with Israel (להלחם עם ישראל). While it seems clear that the northern coalition has the intent to attack, it is Joshua who strikes first (v. 7), spurred on by a divine word of reassurance (v. 6). Following the battle at the waters of Merom, Joshua turns back and attacks Hazor and the cities of the other northern coalition partners, thus conquering all of northern Palestine as well (vv. 10–17). In order to reiterate that the conquest of the land was a response to aggression, v. 20 states that "It was Yhwh's doing to harden their hearts so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed".

As has been shown here, the conquest narratives in Numbers and Joshua frequently depict the Israelites' defeat of enemy kings and the conquest of their territory as a response to aggression by these kings. Two important exceptions to this pattern are found in the narratives of the conquest of Jericho and Ai in Joshua 6–8, which are the first cities to be conquered after the Israelites symbolically cross the Jordan in Joshua 3–4. Upon first glance, this might suggest that there is something different about the way cities in Cisjordan are to be conquered. Such a possibility, however, is challenged by the fact that the defeat of the remaining Cisjordanian kings in Joshua 10–11, like the defeat of the Transjordanian kings Sihon and Og in Numbers 21:21–35 as well as the defeat of the (Cisjordanian) king of Arad in Num 21:1–3, is depicted as the response to an initial act of aggression. However, what is common to all of these narratives, including Joshua 6–8, is the notion of the Israelite corporate "self" as threatened by foreign religious practices, which

37 On the motif of going to war in defense of an ally (*casus foederis*) in ancient Near Eastern literature, see Oded, *War, Peace and Empire*, 62 and Trimm, *Fighting for the King and the Gods*, 35. For a Neo-Assyrian example of this motif, see E. Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC)* (RINAP 4; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 15–16 [Esarhaddon I, ii 40–64]; for a Hittite example, see G. Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* (WAW 7; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 34–35 [CTH 46].

is dealt with in these texts through the complete destruction of the human population (i. e., *ḥērem*) in the conquered territory. In this respect, the idea of the Israelite corporate “self” differs sharply from that found in many of the Assyrian and Hittite texts discussed above, in which the imperial “self” is defined by *incorporating* and *controlling* foreign populations rather than *separating from* them.

3.2. David’s Wars

In contrast to the conquest narratives in the books of Numbers and Joshua, Israel’s military encounters take on a more offensive character following the anointing of David as king over Judah and Israel (2 Samuel 2 and 5, respectively). Notably, David’s first action as king over all Israel is to attack the Jebusites in Jerusalem, establishing his new capital there (2 Sam 5:6–10). The depiction of the military encounters between Israel and the Philistines also shifts somewhat from this point forward. Whereas in the books of Judges and 1 Samuel the Philistines are depicted as aggressors and oppressors, beginning in 2 Samuel 5 the narrative portrays David as taking the initiative in attacking the Philistines.³⁸ Likewise, 2 Samuel 8 reports that David defeated the Philistines, Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, Amalekites, and Arameans, taking tribute and booty from them and setting up military garrisons in the process (vv. 1–14). Unlike the conquest narratives in Numbers and Joshua, David’s wars are not portrayed as defensive measures against illicit (“Canaanite”) religious practices through the use of *ḥērem*. Instead, like the Assyrian and Hittite kings, David has taken on the role of empire-builder, actively expanding his sphere of influence and profiting economically from the subjugation of neighboring polities.

This “imperial” portrayal of David is expressed particularly clearly in 2 Sam 11:1, which at one time likely connected directly to the report of the defeat of Rabbath-Ammon in 2 Sam 12:26–31 without the intervening story of David and Bathsheba.³⁹

38 Even in 2 Sam 5:17–18, which depict the Philistines as having encamped in the valley of Rephaim, it is David who initiates the battle at Baal-perazim, defeating the Philistines there (v. 20; see also the similar scene in vv. 22–25).

39 The story of David and Bathsheba has long been regarded as a later insertion into the narrative; see, e. g., L. Rost, *Die Überlieferung der Thronnachfolge Davids* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1926), 74–80; P. K. McCarter, *II Samuel* (AB 9; New York: Doubleday, 1984), 285; T. A. Rudnig, *Davids Thron. Redaktionskritische Studien zur Geschichte von der Thronnachfolge Davids* (BZAW 358; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), 27; and S. L. McKenzie, “Why Did David Stay Home? An Exegetical Study of 2 Samuel 11:1,” in

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. (2 Sam 11:1)

In the received form of the books of Samuel, the depiction of David's attack on Rabbah in 2 Sam 11:1 + 12:26–31 is contrasted sharply by 2 Samuel 10, which depicts David as acting in self-defense against the Ammonites' hiring of the Arameans as mercenaries (vv. 6–14) and then against the Arameans' gathering of reinforcements at Helam (vv. 15–19), both of which imply an intention to attack Israel.⁴⁰ Together with other commentators, I regard 2 Samuel 10 as comprised of three later introductions (first vv. 1–5, then vv. 6–14, and finally vv. 15–19) to the narrative of David's attack on Rabbah in 2 Sam 11:1 + 12:26–31.⁴¹ Thus, the literary development of the narrative of David's military confrontations with the Ammonites in 2 Samuel 10–12 reflects a shift from portraying David as not needing any justification for military action (11:1 + 12:26–31) to depicting David's actions as a response either to an insult (Nahash's shaming of David's emissaries in 10:1–5) or to an imminent threat (10:6–14, 15–19). It seems, then, that later biblical authors were uneasy with the depiction of David as going to war against neighboring polities for the sake of expanding his own power and therefore reframed David's attack against the Ammonites as a response to aggression in defense of the collective "self," as is aptly expressed in Joab's statement to Abishai prior to the battle with the Ammonites and Arameans in 2 Sam 10:12: "Be strong, and let us be courageous for the sake of our people, and for the cities of our God" (חזק ונתחזק בעד עמנו ובעד ערי אלהינו).

3.3. Esther

Like in the conquest narratives in the books of Numbers and Joshua and the later reworking of the narratives of David's wars in 2 Samuel, the concept of engaging in battle in defense of the collective "self" and its cultural (and especially religious) identity also features prominently in the book of Esther. Following Esther's revelation to King Ahasuerus of Haman's edict

Raising Up a Faithful Exegete: Essays in Honor of Richard D. Nelson (ed. K. L. Noll and B. Schramm; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 149–158, here 157.

40 Cf. R. C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10–12* (JSOTSup 75; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 63–64, 68–69; G. Hentschel, "Die Kriege des friedfertigen Königs David (2 Sam 10,1–11,1; 12,26–31)," in *Überlieferung und Geschichte. Gerhard Wallis zum 65. Geburtstag am 15. Januar 1990* (ed. H. Obst; Halle: Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 1990), 49–58, here 56–57; and Rudnig, *David's Thron*, 19.

41 See, e.g., Hentschel, "Kriege," 55 and Rudnig, *David's Thron*, 23.

to annihilate the Judeans on the 13th of Adar (Esth 3:12–15) and the king's subsequent command to execute Haman (Esther 7), Mordecai is elevated to Haman's previous position (Esth 8:1–2) and writes a counter-edict to Haman's decree in 8:11–13.

By these letters the king allowed the Judeans who were in every city to assemble and defend their lives (לעמד על נפשם), to destroy, kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, with their children and women, and to plunder their goods on a single day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the 13th day of the 12th month, which is the month of Adar. A copy of the writ was to be issued as a decree in every province and published to all peoples, and the Judeans were to be ready on that day to take revenge on their enemies.

What is particularly significant in this passage for the present study is the juxtaposition of the concept of self-defense with the concepts of plundering (v. 11) and taking revenge (v. 13), which suggests that the author of these verses did not regard the use of violence as limited to the preservation of one's own life or people.⁴² Rather, like in the conquest narratives in the book of Joshua, self-defense serves as an initial justification for fighting that ultimately takes on a more offensive character and contributes to reinforcing the identity of the collective "self" over against the "other." If Esth 8:11–13 are to be understood in the context of the Hasmonean period, as H. Bezold argues,⁴³ then the call for the collective use of violence in Esth 8:11–13 would be more than a counterfactual response to the cultural memory of experienced violence at some point in the past (as seems likely in the conquest

42 These three verses are followed by a second report of the dispatch of the decree in v. 14 that closely follows the wording of v. 10, which may be a diachronically relevant *Wiederaufnahme*, indicating that vv. 11–13 are not part of the earliest Esther story. Such a solution has, to my knowledge, not been proposed in prior scholarship on the book of Esther, although it in fact fits quite well with the widely held view that Esther 9–10, which narrate the Judeans' vengeance on their enemies throughout the Persian Empire, form a later conclusion to the book. For this view, see, e.g., D. J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (JSOT Sup 30; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 37–40; C. V. Dorothy, *The Books of Esther: Structure, Genre and Textual Integrity* (JSOTSup 187; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); R. Kossmann, *Die Esthervelle: Vom Erzählten zur Erzählung. Studien zur Traditions- und Redaktionsgeschichte des Estherbuchs* (VTSup 79; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 344; H. M. Wahl, *Das Buch Esther: Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 6; B. Ego, *Ester* (BKAT 21; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 42–49; and J.-D. Macchi, *Le livre d'Esther* (Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament 14; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2016), 28–50, 491–493.

43 For further discussion of a Hasmonean contextualization of the book of Esther, see H. Bezold, "Violence and Empire: Hasmonean Perspectives on Imperial Power and Collective Violence in the Book of Esther" in this issue.

narratives as well as in the narratives of David's wars); instead, it would be a real call to action in the author's present.

4. Conclusions

As the Mesopotamian, Hittite, and biblical texts discussed above have shown, self-defense appears frequently as a justification of war in ancient Near Eastern literature. The idea *per se* can be regarded as rather universal and thus does not necessarily imply direct literary dependence among the three textual corpora discussed here. Rather, what is more interesting and significant is the way in which the motif of self-defense reflects underlying ideas of collective identity and the relationship of the in-group to the out-group in these texts.⁴⁴ Whereas in the Mesopotamian and Hittite texts the collective "self" is perceived as threatened by the loss of access to economic resources (such as taxable land and human labor), in the biblical texts considered here the collective "self" is threatened by the prospect of its identity being undermined by illicit religious practices ascribed to the cultural "other."

Although the conquest narratives in the books of Numbers and Joshua reflect to a certain extent the same use of self-defense as a justification for conquering new territory that is found in the Assyrian royal inscriptions and Hittite annals,⁴⁵ a key difference is that the biblical narratives were possibly written at a time when Israel and/or Judah was not in a position to carry out the expansionist rhetoric of the text, whereas the Assyrians and Hittites generally were in such a position. Yet this did not prevent Israelite or (more likely) Judahite scribes from using the same imperial rhetoric as their more powerful neighbors, thereby also providing a literary alternative to the historical reality in which Judah was a vassal of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. In stark contrast to 2 Kgs 16:5–9, where Ahaz calls upon Tiglath-pileser III for help in defending Judah against an attack by Aram and Israel, in Joshua 10 the Israelites are the dominant power that comes to the aid of its vassal, the Gibeonites. An earlier form of the narrative of David's war against the Ammonites in 2 Samuel 10–12 also employs imperial rhetoric, although here it was only later that the motif of self-defense was added, apparently in order to soften the earlier depiction of David's unabashed pursuit of power. Even the book of Esther, which uses the motif of self-defense in a very different

⁴⁴ For a similar approach with regard to the Neo-Assyrian annals, see Oded, *War, Peace, and Empire*, 5.

⁴⁵ For this observation, see also Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 234.

44 Stephen Germany

narrative context and has a different underlying historical reality, reflects a striking degree of continuity with the Mesopotamian, Hittite, and other biblical texts discussed here in its use of self-defense as a justification for offensive actions that go beyond the preservation of life and/or territorial integrity. Assuming that the passages relating to self-defense and revenge in Esth 8:11–13 and Esther 9–10 stem from the Hasmonean period, this use of an imperialistic rhetorical trope is consistent with the Hasmoneans' own political aspirations.⁴⁶

46 For further discussion, see Bezold, “Violence and Empire” in this issue.

