Justifying War Crimes in the Bible and the Ancient Near East

In the ancient world, as now, indiscriminate violence and mass killing in war is explained as a struggle to defend “our” way of life against those who threaten to destroy it.

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Gypsum wall panel depicting, in relief, an attack by Tiglath-pileser III on an enemy town, 730-727 B.C.E. British Museum

Decapitation. Impalement. Flaying. Tying prisoners up in cages like dogs. Military violence in the ancient Near East is not for the faint of heart.[1] We know of these exploits from the written accounts of ancient scribes as well as from artistic depictions commissioned by rulers to decorate their palaces. Modern readers rightly recoil at such violence, and the creators of the accounts and images seem also to have been aware of the moral questions raised by these actions. Thus, ancient Near Eastern rulers and their scribes needed to explain this violence within a wider ethical framework.

Indeed, the rationalization of military violence in the ancient Near East often sounds uncannily similar to modern rhetoric supporting wars of aggression or conquest: the enemy people are a threat to the civilized order of society, and thus killing them protects one’s own society from the forces that threaten to undermine it.

Articulations of the specific threat posed by the “enemy” take many different forms in ancient Near Eastern texts.

Wipe out the Canaanites to Avoid YHWH’s Wrath

Consider Deuteronomy’s instruction to eradicate the peoples currently in the land—every man, woman, and child:

‏דברים כ:טז רַק מֵעָרֵי הָעַמִּים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לְךָ נַחֲלָה לֹא תְחַיֶּה כָּל נְשָׁמָה. כ:יז כִּי הַחֲרֵם תַּחֲרִימֵם הַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי הַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוְּךָ יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

Deut 20:16 But in the towns of these peoples, which YHWH your God is giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive. 20:17 No, you must proscribe them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—as YHWH your God has commanded you.[2]

Earlier in that passage, when dealing with distant peoples, Deuteronomy allows for the city to surrender and take on vassalage to avoid destruction (vv. 10–15). The local peoples are given no such option. Deuteronomy justifies this requirement by claiming that they will lead the Israelites into apostasy:

‏דברים כ:יח לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹאיְלַמְּדוּ אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכֹל תּוֹעֲבֹתָם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם וַחֲטָאתֶם לַי־הוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

Deut 20:18 So that they will not lead you into doing all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods and you stand guilty before YHWH your God.

Indeed, elsewhere Deuteronomy warns that if the Israelites do not remove the people living in the land, and they do end up worshipping other gods, then YHWH “will quickly wipe you out” (וְהִשְׁמִידְךָ מַהֵר; Deut 7:4), thus presenting the destruction of the Canaanites as a defensive measure of sorts.

Defeating the Forces of Chaos: *Enuma elish*

Another approach found in the ancient Near East is to express defeat of one’s enemies as reflecting the primeval struggle of the gods against chaos.[3] The clearest example of this type of rhetoric draws on the Mesopotamian myth known as *Enuma elish*. In the story, Tiamat, the watery mother of the gods, threatens to destroy the gods in anger over the killing of her husband, Apsu. The gods then declare Marduk, the most powerful deity, to be king, and they commission him to fight against Tiamat.[4] Marduk defeats her and uses her body parts to create the orderly and habitable universe where we now live.

In Mesopotamian royal propaganda, the human king demonstrates his fitness for kingship by assuming the role of Marduk and proving his prowess as a warrior.[5] Indeed, following the model of kingship established by Marduk’s combat with Tiamat, the first task a new king must undertake is to go out on a military campaign.

Girded with Marduk’s Weapons

The invocation of creation mythology in service of royal military campaigns is explicit in the titulary of the great imperial Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser III’s (r. 745–727 B.C.E.), which served as a summary of his self-perception. Of his effects on his enemies, he claims:

Valiant man who, with the help of Aššur, his lord, smashed like pots all the unsubmissive, **swept over them like the flood**, made them as powerless ghosts.[6]

The flood is one of the weapons that Marduk uses in his battle against Tiamat:

*EE*IV 48–49 The lord raised the **flood-weapon**, his great weapon,  
And mounted the frightful, unfaceable **storm-chariot**....

Sargon II (r. 724–705) also uses imagery drawn from Marduk’s weapons:

**Storm**—“Like the onslaught of a storm, I overwhelmed the cities of Samʾūna and Bāb-dūri.”[7]

**Net**—“I mustered the troops of the god Aššur and overwhelmed the land Tabal to its full extent as if with a net.”[8]

This image mirrors Marduk, who immobilizes Tiamat with his net:

*EE*IV 41–42 He made a **net** to encircle Tiamat within it,  
Guarded the four winds so that none of her could escape.

Sargon also repeatedly emphasizes that he was “without rival” in battle and combat,[9] which may allude to the climax of *Enuma elish*, in which Marduk is also declared to be without rival.[10]

Demonizing the Enemy, *Enuma elish*-Style

Notably, the inscriptions’ allusions to *Enuma elish*become more frequent and more complex when they are describing more extreme acts of violence. When Sargon describes having bespattered the Babylonians “with deadly venom,”[11] for example, he claims that this is because the Babylonians are allies of Tiamat, the sea goddess—describing their king, Marduk apla-iddina (biblical Merodach Baladan [see 2 Kgs 20:12; Isa 39:1]), as trusting the sea and comparing him to a *gallû*-demon (one of the minions of Tiamat in *Enuma elish*):

Marduk-apla-iddina, descendant of Yakīn, king of Chaldea, a murderer (and) **the (very) image of a *gallû*-demon**, who does not fear the word of the lord of lords (Marduk), **put his trust in the sea (and its) surging waves**, broke the treaty (sworn) by the great gods, and withheld his audience gift.[12]

Sennacherib’s (r. 705–681 B.C.E.) descriptions of his campaigns against the Babylonians include some of the most extreme violence of his reign. For example, a hexagonal prism found at Nineveh describes the enemies’ blood flowing like a river in flood:

I slit their throats like sheep (and thus) cut off their precious lives like thread. Like a flood in full spate after a seasonal rainstorm, I made their blood flow over the broad earth. The swift thoroughbreds harnessed to my chariot plunged into floods of their blood (just) like the river ordeal. The wheels of my war chariot, which lays criminals and villains low, were bathed in blood and gore. I filled the plain with the corpses of their warriors like grass. I cut off (their) lips and (thus) destroyed their pride. I cut off their hands like the stems of cucumbers in season.[13]

In the same text, allusions to *Enuma elish* work hard to justify the violence as proportional to the perceived danger by associating his enemies with personified chaos. Thus, the citizens of the entire city are called *gallû*-demons,[14] and their king is said to be enthroned “inappropriately for him.”[15] This invokes a rare phrase used to describe Tiamat’s enthronement of her second husband, Qingu, who helped lead Tiamat’s attack against Marduk (*EE* IV 82). Sennacherib also imagines himself attacking the enemy like Marduk’s weaponry against Tiamat:

I blew like the onset of a severe storm against the enemy on (their) flanks and front lines.[16]

The Righteous King Preserving Justice

Both Sargon and Sennacherib reinforce their status as bulwarks against incipient chaos with assertions of their own justice and righteousness. Sennacherib’s titulary, for example, explicitly conflates his moral standing with his role in preserving order, describing him as:

Guardian of the right, lover of justice…perfect hero, mighty man, first among all princes, the powerful one who consumes the insubmissive, who strikes the wicked with lightning.[17]

Both kings’ inscriptions also emphasize the rebelliousness of their enemies, using language that conflates rebellion with sin. For example, Sargon describes an attempted rebellion as a “wicked plan” and declares that he deported the rebels as punishment for their “sin”:

The people of the cities of Sukka, Bala, and Abitikna conceived a**wicked plan** (*milik lemuttim*) of tearing up the roots of (their) land and with Ursâ, or Urartu (Armenia), they came to terms. Because of **the sin which they had committed** (*ina ḫiṭṭi iḫṭû*), I tore them away from their homes and settled them in Hatti of Amurru.[18]

The particular emphasis on enemy rebelliousness suggests that increased levels of violence required a concomitant increase in moral rationalization.

Cosmic Battle in the Bible

Though the Bible does not include a complete Israelite creation myth in which creation is preceded by YHWH’s battle against watery chaos, several passages, particularly in the Psalms, preserve vestiges of such a tradition. As in Assyria, the human king is YHWH’s counterpart, defending order and justice on earth in a perpetual re-enactment of YHWH’s own battle against chaos.[19]

YHWH Equips the King to Battle Chaos

Psalm 18 describes YHWH’s military power using terms that evoke YHWH’s struggle against chaos:

תהלים יח:יד וַיַּרְעֵם בַּשָּׁמַיִם יְ־הוָה וְעֶלְיוֹן יִתֵּן קֹלוֹ בָּרָד וְגַחֲלֵי אֵשׁ. יח:טו וַיִּשְׁלַח חִצָּיו וַיְפִיצֵם וּבְרָקִים רָב וַיְהֻמֵּם. יח:טז וַיֵּרָאוּ אֲפִיקֵי מַיִם וַיִּגָּלוּ מוֹסְדוֹת תֵּבֵל מִגַּעֲרָתְךָ יְ־הוָה מִנִּשְׁמַת רוּחַ אַפֶּךָ. יח:יז יִשְׁלַח מִמָּרוֹם יִקָּחֵנִי יַמְשֵׁנִי מִמַּיִם רַבִּים.

Ps 18:14 Then YHWH thundered from heaven, the Most High gave forth His voice—hail and fiery coals. 18:15 He let fly His shafts and scattered them; He discharged lightning and routed them. 18:16 The ocean bed was exposed; the foundations of the world were laid bare by Your mighty roaring, O YHWH, at the blast of the breath of Your nostrils. 18:17 He reached down from on high, He took me; He drew me out of the mighty waters.[20]

The text initially presents YHWH rescuing the king, but then later credits YHWH with preparing the king himself for battle:

‏תהלים יח:לג הָאֵל הַמְאַזְּרֵנִי חָיִל וַיִּתֵּן תָּמִים דַּרְכִּי. יח:לד מְשַׁוֶּה רַגְלַי כָּאַיָּלוֹת וְעַל בָּמֹתַי ‎יַעֲמִידֵנִי. יח:לה מְלַמֵּד יָדַי לַמִּלְחָמָה וְנִחֲתָה קֶשֶׁת נְחוּשָׁה זְרוֹעֹתָי.

Ps 18:33 The God who girded me with might, who made my way perfect; 18:34 who made my legs like a deer’s, and let me stand firm on the heights; 18:35 who trained my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze.

The psalm also associates certain military images—bow (קֶשֶׁת), arrow (חֵץ), shield (מָגֵן)—with both parties (vv. 3, 15, 31, 35, 36). The text thus creates an image of YHWH, amid a threat from chaotic waters, seizing the king and equipping him to combat those forces by bestowing upon him his divine military skill.

Equating Warfare with the Struggle against Chaos

Psalm 89 reiterates the close connection between YHWH and the human king and underlines the extent to which the human king’s military activity is seen as part of a cosmic struggle. The psalm depicts YHWH as the triumphant victor over the chaotic sea, personified as the monster, Rahab:[21]

תהלים פט:יא אַתָּה דִכִּאתָ כֶחָלָל רָהַב בִּזְרוֹעַ עֻזְּךָ פִּזַּרְתָּ אוֹיְבֶיךָ.

Ps 89:11 You crushed Rahab; he was like a corpse; with Your powerful arm You scattered Your enemies.

After verses celebrating YHWH’s just and righteous dominion over the whole of creation, the psalm rejoices that YHWH has also chosen a human king, whose battles against earthly enemies will be supported by YHWH:

‏תהלים פט:כ אָז דִּבַּרְתָּ בְחָזוֹן לַחֲסִידֶיךָ וַתֹּאמֶר שִׁוִּיתִי עֵזֶר עַל גִּבּוֹר הֲרִימוֹתִי בָחוּר מֵעָם.

Ps 89:20 Then You spoke to Your faithful ones in a vision and said, “I have conferred power upon a warrior; I have exalted one chosen out of the people.

Like in the Assyrian inscriptions, YHWH’s support for the human king is communicated with water imagery—the king’s enemies are like the chaotic, watery forces that YHWH also fights:

תהלים פט:כו וְשַׂמְתִּי בַיָּם יָדוֹ וּבַנְּהָרוֹת יְמִינוֹ.

Ps 89:26 I will set his hand upon the sea, his right hand upon the rivers.

As in Assyria, the intimacy between god and king makes aggression against Israel tantamount to aggression against YHWH, and the threat posed by these mutual enemies is conceived in cosmic terms.

Demonizing the Enemy

The psalms also identify Israel’s enemies as wicked, and thus cast Israel as the suppressor of the nations’ unnatural, antisocial, and immoral activities:

תהלים ט:ה כִּי־עָשִׂיתָ מִשְׁפָּטִי וְדִינִי יָשַׁבְתָּ לְכִסֵּא שׁוֹפֵט צֶדֶק. ט:ו גָּעַרְתָּ גוֹיִם אִבַּדְתָּ רָשָׁע שְׁמָם מָחִיתָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.

Ps 9:5 For You uphold my right and claim, enthroned as righteous judge. 9:6 You blast the nations; You destroy the wicked; You blot out their name forever.

YHWH and the psalmist are aligned with justice, but the nations are rife with wickedness (Ps 9:15–16; 68:22; 144:11).

Conquest as the Establishment of Justice and Order

As in the Assyrian inscriptions, the execution of war is sometimes presented in the psalms as a matter of the establishment of justice. Psalm 110 explicitly connects the two themes, as the king’s judgment of the nations means filling them with corpses and shattered heads:

‏תהלים קי:ה אֲדֹנָי עַל יְמִינְךָ מָחַץ בְּיוֹם אַפּוֹ מְלָכִים. קי:ו יָדִין בַּגּוֹיִם מָלֵא גְוִיּוֹת מָחַץ רֹאשׁ עַל אֶרֶץ רַבָּה.

Ps 110:5 The Lord is at your right hand. He crushes kings in the day of His anger. 110:6 He works judgment upon the nations, heaping up bodies, crushing heads far and wide.

The ancient Israelites never exerted the kind of political power that Assyria had, but this seems not to have precluded the theoretical justification of imperial pursuits. In Psalm 72, for example, the king’s power is ideally conceived as universal, with foreign kings expressing their subordinate status through tribute or prostration:

תהלים עב:ח וְיֵרְדְּ מִיָּם עַד יָם וּמִנָּהָר עַד אַפְסֵי אָרֶץ. עב:ט לְפָנָיו יִכְרְעוּ צִיִּים וְאֹיְבָיו עָפָר יְלַחֵכוּ. עב:י מַלְכֵי תַרְשִׁישׁ וְאִיִּים מִנְחָה יָשִׁיבוּ מַלְכֵי שְׁבָא וּסְבָא אֶשְׁכָּר יַקְרִיבוּ. עב:יא וְיִשְׁתַּחֲווּ לוֹ כָל מְלָכִים כָּל גּוֹיִם יַעַבְדוּהוּ.

Ps 72:8 Let him rule from sea to sea, from the river to the ends of the earth. 72:9 Let desert-dwellers kneel before him, and his enemies lick the dust. 72:10 Let kings of Tarshish and the islands pay tribute, kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. 72:11 Let all kings bow to him, and all nations serve him.

Collectively, these psalms, like the Assyrian annals, reflect a moral framework in which king and god converge in war to defeat the chaotic threat posed by their mutual enemies, presented as an ongoing manifestation of the struggle between YHWH and the sea at creation.

Military threats against Israel are interpreted as theological threats to the sovereignty of YHWH, while language of wickedness and innocence underscore the moral rectitude of punitive violence. The object of military action is the incorporation of an ever-increasing territory into the ordered dominion of god and king.

War as a Moral Imperative

Both the Assyrian and the Israelite texts express the idea that an orderly universe was created in the aftermath of an almighty battle between personified chaos and a god who was subsequently acclaimed king. In both civilizations, this produced an ethical framework where military violence could be morally justified as a struggle against a fantastically dangerous alternative. The efforts of human kings to expand their territory by conquest were portrayed as part of an ultimate and ongoing struggle.

By this reckoning, to violently destroy the enemy was not only a matter of preserving one’s own way of life, in the immediate sense, but part of a much wider existential struggle for the preservation of the universe itself. Achieving the submission of the enemy, even by violent means, was not merely a matter of moral tolerability but a matter of moral imperative.

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1. An earlier version of this article appeared as [“The Ethics of War in Ancient Israel and Assyria,”](https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/2017/08/cro418001) *The Bible and Interpretation*(2017).
2. Cf. Deuteronomy 7:1–2. Biblical translations follow NJPS, with modifications.
3. We see in many ancient Near Eastern cultures the idea that the world is a bubble of order situated in the midst of a watery chaos. For example, Mesopotamian mythology pictured a primordial battle between the gods and chaotic monsters, leading to the creation of the ordered world. The Egyptians envisioned a nightly battle of the sun-god against chaos to maintain *ma’at* “order,” with the Pharaoh doing the same by quashing the enemies of Egypt. See discussion in Jan Assman, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, trans. by David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 69–70; Erik Hornung, *Idea into Image: Essays on Ancient Egyptian Thought*, trans. Elizabeth Bredeck (Princeton, NJ: Timken Pub. 1992), 131–146.

They rejoiced, they proclaimed: “Marduk is King!”  
They invested him with sceptre, throne, and staff-of-office.  
They gave him an unfaceable weapon to crush the foe.  
“Go, and cut off the life of Tiamat!  
Let the winds bear her blood to us as good news!” (*EE* IV 28–32)

Translations of *Enuma elish*follow Philippe Talon, *Enūma Eliš: The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth*, SAACT 4 (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2005); and Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

1. The centrality of Marduk, a Babylonian god, in these inscriptions requires explanation, since the Assyrians had their own national deity, Ashur, whom they viewed as the head of the pantheon. *Sargon’s Letter to Aššur* claims that Marduk has, from the beginning, given authority over the territories of the world to Ashur to honor him (D. D. Luckenbill, *Historical Records of Assyria from Sargon to the End*, vol. 2 of *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1927), §170). One way that the Assyrians used the Marduk-centered *Enuma elish* in their rhetoric was to place the Assyrian king in the role of Marduk. Acting as Marduk’s earthly counterpart, the Assyrian king conquered territory and placed it under Ashur’s authority. Sennacherib’s scribes apparently attempted to solve the problem of Marduk’s central role in the story in another way, by rewriting *Enuma elish* with Ashur replacing Marduk. This revised version of the myth does not appear to have become dominant, however. Note also that invocations of *Enuma elish* are rare in the inscriptions of the last two major kings of Assyria, Esarhaddon (r. 680–669) and Assurbanipal (r. 668–626). Both kings elected instead to establish their synergy with the gods, and justify their military actions, through appeals to divination, especially prophecy.
2. Translation based on Tiglath-pileser 53, line 2 (Hayim Tadmor and Shigeo Yamada, *The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III [744–727 BC] and Shalmaneser V [726–722 BC], Kings of Assyria*, RINAP 1 [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011], 138); and Summ. 11:2 (Hayim Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III King of Assyria: Critical Edition, with Introductions, Translations and Commentary* [Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994]).
3. Sargon II 4, line 60 (Grant Frame, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II, King of Assyria (721–705 BC)*RINAP 2 [University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021], 121).
4. Sargon II 2, line 338 (Frame, *Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II*, 69). Sargon also employs fog imagery—“Angrily, I mustered the numerous troops of Assyria and, like a fog, overwhelmed extensive districts within the lands of Kammanu and Gurgum, together with settlements in their environs” (Sargon II 74, lines 53–58 [Frame, *Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II*, 331]). Fog is not one of Marduk’s initial weapons in his battle, but he subsequently makes it out of Tiamat’s spittle (*EE* V 51).
5. For more on this term in Assyrian rhetoric, see the chapter, “Without Rival: The Royal Performance of Masculinity in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions and Palace Reliefs,” in Cynthia Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 62 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 20–59.
6. Luckenbill, *Historical Records of Assyria from Sargon to the End*, §§54, 104, 107; cf. *Enuma elish* VI 106.
7. Sargon II 7, lines 131 (Frame, *Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II*, 149)
8. Sargon II 7, lines 121b–122 (Frame, *Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II*, 148).
9. Sennacherib 22, col. vi, lines 2–12 (A. Kirk Grayson and Jamie Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria [704–681 BC]*, Part 1, RINAP 3/1, [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012], 183).
10. Sennacherib 22, col. v, lines 17–19 (Grayson and Novotny, *Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria [704–681 BC]*, Part 1, 181).
11. Sennacherib 22, col. v, line 29 and Sennacherib 23, col. v, line 21 (Grayson and Novotny, *Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria [704–681 BC]*, Part 1, 181 and 198).
12. Sennacherib 22, col. v, lines 76–77 (Grayson and Novotny, *Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria [704–681 BC]*, Part 1, 183).
13. D. D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib*, OIP 2 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1924), 23:4–5, 7–9; 48:2–3; 55:2–3; 66:1–2.
14. Luckenbill, *Historical Records of Assyria from Sargon to the End*, §6. For the Akkadian text, see Sargon II 1, lines 66–68a (Frame, *Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II*, 58). Akkadian *ḫiṭṭi iḫṭû*, from the root *ḫ.ṭ.ʾ*, can refer to making a mistake or committing a sin (*CAD Ḫ*, s.v.*ḫaṭû*, 6:156). The root is cognate with Hebrew ח.ט.א, which carries a similar range of senses.
15. The similarity in themes to the Assyrian tradition does not indicate that a direct relationship exists between the written texts. Rather, it reflects a similar conception of the universe and a similar social provenance: like the Assyrian inscriptions, the psalms mostly derive from the royal temple and court.
16. A nearly identical psalm appears in 2 Samuel 22.
17. Though the English spelling is the same, this name should not be confused with that of the prostitute in Joshua 2, which is spelled with a *chet:* רחב.

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