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### The Military Tradition in Ancient Israel

In May of 1967, Egypt gathered over 1,000 tanks and 100,000 infantrymen while calling for a unified Arab attack against the newly formed Israeli nation. Israel, fearing such an engagement, launched a pre-emptive strike against Egypt, and later muscled back the invading state of Jordan. In the end the Israeli nation gained control of the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and Eastern Jerusalem in what was considered a tremendous military victory. Although many historians and military strategists marvel at the Israeli display of supremacy and strength during the Six Day War, it is not something new to the Jewish people. A simple journey back into the Israelite's past, and a dive into the Old Testament, can testify to this military voyage. This paper will explore the rich military tradition of the ancient Israelites, and follow their biblical leaders and their military excursions as they try to carve a kingdom out of 'God-given' land against the native Canaanites and the foreign Philistines.

To first understand the affluent military tradition of the Israelites, one must pay keen attention to the importance of the land. Pushing the religious aspect of the land as being given by God to the Israelites aside, one can view the land in terms of its strategic and tactical value, which warrants the various military excursions. One of these values relates to "Palestine [as] the only land-bridge that connects Eurasia with Africa."<sup>1</sup> Another "factor contributing to the geopolitical strategic equation in antiquity was the relative poverty of the country" which made it

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<sup>1</sup> Richard A. Gabriel. *The Military History of Ancient Israel*, p. 2

easy and tempting to those seeking conquest.<sup>2</sup> The third tactical seduction of a military invasion of the land is found in “Israel’s long coastlines [which] made it relatively easy to invade the country from the sea.”<sup>3</sup> The vital role the land plays in the transfer and trade of goods, as well as the relative ease of conquest of its poor accessible natives leads to the overall value in the land, and the added incentive on an aggressive Israelite invasion and defense.

As the Israelites were led out of Egypt by Moses, and leadership later fell upon the mercenary-trained Joshua, God lead the Israelites into a land inhabited by the ancient Canaanites. It is upon the crossing and Joshua’s initial military campaign that Israel’s first rival is introduced. Using Richard A. Gabriel’s dating as the standard, the Canaanites were around from approximately 1500-900 BCE, and seeing their surge in power around the mid 1400’s. The “Canaanite infantry, called the *hupshu*, had both military and regular units.”<sup>4</sup> The irregulars of the Canaanite army, known as the *khepeti*, “were lightly armed with bows and spears.”<sup>5</sup> In addition to these irregulars, the meat of the Canaanite forces were the *hupshu*, who were “probably well-trained professionals who were heavily armed... [with] armored corsets, helmets, and [who] carried a sickle sword and shield and the socket axe.” (See fig. 3.1 & 3.2)<sup>6</sup> The infantry was finally made up of the Canaanite version of the storm trooper, or the *na’arun* heavy infantry whom “served as the palace guard of the Canaanite kings.”<sup>7</sup> In addition to the bulk of the infantry, the Canaanites rival princes of the city-states had adopted such military technologies as the chariot from the traveling Hyksos.<sup>8</sup> These chariots of the Canaanite princes served as the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid p. 3

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p. 3

<sup>4</sup> Richard A. Gabriel, *The Ancient World, Soldiers’ Lives Through History*, p. 190

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p. 190

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p. 190

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p. 190

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p. 190

main striking arm of the Canaanite armies, and were “manned by the social elite of feudal nobles serving as chariot warriors, called *maryannu*.”<sup>9</sup> These *maryannu* were usually protected by heavy coats of scale armor, and armed with the powerful composite bow, the heavy spear, and an emergency club in case the first two weapons failed.<sup>10</sup> As for the nature of Canaanite fortifications that Joshua and the Israelites faced, the Canaanite princes usually “constructed their cities atop a new kind of massive rampart, a slanted bank of packed earth called a glacis. The glacis joined an exterior ditch, a fosse, obstructing the most likely avenues of the approach.”<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the threat of the native Canaanites, Joshua and the other Israeli military leaders had foreign threats found in the Philistines. Using Richard A. Gabriel’s dating as the standard, the Philistines were roughly at their height from 1200-900 B.C.E. They were people of “Aegean stock and related to both the Minoan and Mycaean peoples of the Mediterranean islands and main land Greeks [Classical Greeks],” who “settled along the southern coastal plain of Canaan.”<sup>12</sup> As with the Canaanites, the Philistines had no central king, and when foreign threats arose they gathered together in a council of princes called a *sarney*.<sup>13</sup> While the Canaanites placed their military focus on the chariot arm of their army, the Philistines “appear to have maintained a large number of heavy infantry of professional quality,” which also stood in contrast to the light-armed infantry of the Israelites.<sup>14</sup> Their heavy troops were usually armed with their infamous long straightened iron swords, while others wielded weapons reminiscent of the Greek dory and short-spear of later-year.<sup>15</sup> In addition to their armament, these heavy troops

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid p. 189

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p. 189

<sup>11</sup> Ibid p. 188

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p. 193

<sup>13</sup> Ibid p. 194

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p. 195

<sup>15</sup> Ibid p. 194

were armed in armor made up of a coslet of bronze or leather, shaped in an inverted V, which thus contained other layers of additional protective material.<sup>16</sup> Although the heavy infantry remained the military standard of the Philistines, their entrance into the land of Canaan led to the arrival of the Canaanite's chariot technology, and they merely outfitted and trained a sector of their heavy infantry for chariot proficiency. As the Philistine sought to procure trading stations and routes deeper east, and as the Israelites patrolled into the coastal lowlands of the Philistines, "circa 1050 B.C.E. the Philistines forced the Israelites into a context of arms, with the result that the Israelites suffered a defeat at the battle of Aphek."<sup>17</sup>

This now leads to the military profile of the ancient Israelites. Having set the stage with bios of the enemy states of the period, this paper will now analyze three important military leaders from ancient Israel: Joshua, David, and Solomon. Although all three have separate focused objectives, they all shared six tactics that Abraham Malamat describes in an article within the BAR:

(1) The Israelites exploited the disunity among the city states (e.g. Josh. 9); (2) They employed many forms of guile to surprise the enemy; (3) Covert infiltration (Jericho); (4) Enticement (Ai); (5) Night movements (Ai, Gibeon) and night attacks (1 Sam. 14:39); and (6) The battle cry (Judg. 7:21; 1 Sam. 3:5), which could either frighten or dishearten the enemy."<sup>18</sup>

With this tactical character being a military trait shared by Israel's leaders (including the above mentioned strikes of the 1963 Israeli Defense Force), one can thus understand the military specialization sought out by the Israel's various leaders. As Joshua crossed into the land of Canaan, his ragtag band of ex-mercenaries were organized into a system of tribal units, each led by their tribal leaders with Joshua as the general commander-in-chief. The tribal organized army

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid p. 194

<sup>17</sup> Ibid p. 195

<sup>18</sup> John A. Wood, *Perspectives On War In the Bible*, p. 181

was made into guerilla-like infantry, and “armed with sickle swords, spears, bows, slings, and daggers.” (see fig. 3.1, 3.2)<sup>19</sup> John A. Woods points out T.R. Hobb’s conclusion “that the Israelites preferred [the] slashing sword (for cutting muscles and blood vessels) over thrusting swords (for penetrating vital organs).”<sup>20</sup> Joshua’s military focus was that of light infantry arranged in a way to emulate the quick style combat of guerilla warfare that replicated the mountainous and uneven terrain. Joshua’s excursions into the Hill Country of the land of Canaan left little need for the use of the expensive chariot, and gave his forces a slight advantage over the phalanx fighting heavy infantry of the Philistines and chariot focused Canaanites.<sup>21</sup>

David later took Joshua, the Judges, and Saul’s military expeditions and both expanded and reformed them. He first began his reforms by greatly increasing his military numbers by requiring a national tribal levy over all able-bodied males. One military factor that didn’t change between David, Saul, and Joshua was that of the army’s focus on its light infantry force. *I Chronicle* best describes the tribal weapon specialization that occurred in David’s army:

The Benjaminites: “were armed with bows and ‘could use both right hand and left hand in hurling stones and shooting arrows out of a bow.” The Gadites: “were proficient at ‘shield and buckler...and were a swift as the roes upon the mountains.” The sons of Judah & Naphtali: “bore shield and spear.” The Zebulunites: “may well have been the Israelite equivalent of rangers for “they were expert in war, with all instruments of war...and could keep rank’ ”<sup>22</sup>

David took advantage of this naturally occurring tribal weapon specialization, and outfitted them as slingers, archers, and even special infantry as it benefited his light-infantry set-up (see fig. 4.1).

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid p. 198

<sup>20</sup> John A. Wood, p. 179

<sup>21</sup> Richard A. Gabriel, *The Ancient World, Soldiers’ Lives Through History*, p. 198

<sup>22</sup> *1 Chronicles 12*; Cross references to be found in *Judges 3:15*, and *Judges 20:16*

As Solomon came along, David's military conquest had ushered in an age of successful Israeli Empire, leaving the role for Solomon to fortify and modernize the nation. "Solomon equipped Israel with a system of fortifications from which the nation could be defended with a mobile strategic defense in depth, the same strategic design employed by the Canaanites two centuries earlier."<sup>23</sup> Such fortifications are found at Hazor, Megiddo, Tamar, Gezer, Baalath, Lower Beth-Horon, and Tadmor. In addition to modernizing the nation's defenses, Solomon took the role as Israel's greatest military reformer (although he lacked the military experience of Joshua and David). Under Solomon, the military was given a powerful chariot arm which it implemented in its defensive strategy, and focused on using the arm to combat invading forces in an effort to prevent the handicap of military siege. It is in this open field of war that the earlier mentioned Israelite strategies could be exploited by Solomon's newfound chariot sector (see fig. 4.2).

Having glanced over three of Ancient Israel's greatest leaders, and having analyzed both the make-up of their armies and those of their enemies, this paper will now focus in depth on their military actions and campaigns. The first campaign worthy of mention is that of Joshua (1225-1200 B.C.E.) as he crossed into Canaan and came in contact with Jericho. Here we find Joshua seeking a psychological tactic (psych-ops), as explained in the classic story of his soldiers and priests marching around Jericho. According to Richard A. Gabriel "Joshua was attempting to weaken the will of the enemy by increasing the fear and uncertainty that Rahab the prostitute and the Israelite scouts had detected earlier."<sup>24</sup> When looking at Jericho, it is important to understand that (using Yadin's calculations), Jericho had roughly 1,400 meters of perimeter wall, which the

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<sup>23</sup> Richard A. Gabriel, *The Ancient World, Soldiers' Lives Through History*, p. 201

<sup>24</sup> Richard A. Gabriel. *The Military History of Ancient Israel*, p.131

Israelites could easily cover 1 meter of ground six men deep with it's 8,000 men encirclement.<sup>25</sup> Another important factor is the usage of the Hebrew term “*sabbotem* to describe the movement of the column at Jericho,” which could be accurately translated to not mean the Israelite’s march around in procession, but rather ‘encircled’.<sup>26</sup> Taking both above-mentioned points, it is not a stretch to image the message of the text to mean the Israelites used the traditional tactic of numbers in a siege and simply overwhelmed the defenders at Jericho. Herzog and Gichon both agree with the ruse disguised as a religious progression, where:

“on the seventh day, after the Israelites had begun their now customary maneuver, at a sign from their leader, the silent, tranquil procession suddenly changed into a column of frantic assault...[where] the Israelites scaled the walls and passed through any portion of them damaged by recent tremors...and ‘utterly destroyed all that was in the city...by the edge of the sword’.”<sup>27</sup>

A later example of this type of ruse can be found in Julius Sextus Frontinus *Strategemata*.

Suggesting the existence of this tactic in ancient antiquity.<sup>28</sup>

Another important victory of Joshua’s was that of Ai/Bethel, which allowed them the strategic advantage of a foothold in the Judean highlands. Herzog and Gichon summarize Joshua’s plans as follows:

“(1) Employment of the complete tribal host; (2) dislodgement of the garrison at Ai from its stronghold by a simulated flight of the main force... (3) Detachment of a body of ‘picked troops’ to the rear of Ai...to capture the objective deserted by its defenders in pursuit of the supposedly fleeing Israelites; (4) trapping pursuing enemy between the main force and the capturers of Ai; (5) detachment of a strong block force

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid p. 131

<sup>26</sup> Ibid p. 131

<sup>27</sup> Chaim Herzog & Mordechai Gichon, *Battles of the Bible*, p. 48

<sup>28</sup> Julius Sextus Fontinus, *Strategemata*, I.IV.8; “When Gnaeus Pompey on one occasion was prevented from crossing a river because the enemy's troops were stationed on the opposite bank, he adopted the device of repeatedly leading his troops out of camp and back again. Then, when the enemy were at last tricked into relaxing their watch on the roads in front of the Roman advance, he made a sudden dash and effected a crossing.”

prior to the battle to occupy a position straddling the approaches from Bethel,” (see fig. 1.1,1.2, 4.4 & 4.5 for clarification)<sup>29</sup>

Joshua skillful turned an initial upset into a strategic weapon, and as explained in the Book of Joshua, he successfully routed the defenders out of Ai into an awaiting trap, thus allowing him that formerly mentioned foothold.<sup>30</sup>

The next campaigns on which this paper will examine are those of the Philistine Wars and the Capture of Jerusalem as waged by David (1005-961 B.C.E.). Upon the anointing of David as king over a unified Israel, the Philistine’s strategic goal was to break up this newfound unity and dismantle the monarchy.<sup>31</sup> As the Philistines treaded upon David’s territory, two conflicts are worth mentioning. The first of these battles occurred against the Philistines in open terrain as recalled in II Samuel 5:19-20. However more importantly, as it highlights David’s military genius, is the second Philistine conflict, where David used a small force of men as a trap to lure in the Philistines near a tree-line, while using the cover of the “the sound of [Yahweh’s] steps in the tops of the Baka-bushes,”<sup>32</sup> to mask his army’s entrance into the forest (see fig. 1.6).<sup>33</sup>

“Whereas the first encounter had resulted in a tactical victory for the Israelites, the second battle seems to have produced a defeat of strategic proportions for the Philistines, driving them completely from the hill country once and for all. Never again do we hear of Philistine troops or garrisons in the hill country.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Herzog & Gichon, p. 53

<sup>30</sup> For the biblical account of the campaign, see *Joshua 8:4* (Phase 1), *Joshua 8:15, 17, 22, & 24* (Phase 2). “They were unable to flee either backward or forward...so that they were in the very midst of Israel, scattered hither and thither.” (*Joshua 8:22*)

<sup>31</sup> “[W]hen the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over Israel, they came up in search of him, but when David heard of this, he went down to the stronghold,” (*II Samuel 5:17*).

<sup>32</sup> *II Samuel 5:23-25*

<sup>33</sup> Richard A. Gabriel. *The Military History of Ancient Israel*, p. 245

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* p. 246

The second campaign worth mentioning is David's capture of Jerusalem (see fig. 1.4). David's focus here was to offer Israel a new fortress to buffer future Philistine attacks. Using Yadin's population/defense calculations<sup>35</sup>, "the Jebusites could have deployed one defender for every 1.5 yards of wall, a formidable defensive force against an army with no siege train."<sup>36</sup> According to biblical tradition, David received victory with the aid of the *tsinor/tzinor/tsinnor* (see fig. 2.1). This has led to various interpretations as to David's victory. Herzog and Gichon argue in favor of the *tsinor* as being the Gihon Spring/Warren's Shaft. They make the case that "having discovered the *tzinor* [waterway/Warren's shaft], David decided to launch a surprise attack through it while attention was centered upon the northern sector of the city."<sup>37</sup> While they admit that the feat was an extremely difficult one, they underscore Kathleen Kenyon and Y. Shiloh's excavations as pointing to "the diversionary efforts launched by David from the captured citadel."<sup>38</sup> Alfred Hoerth also argues in favor of this first interpretation, stating that the difficulty of having to climb 'Warren's Shaft' and the cover of night, allowed the Israelites to sneak into the city and overpower any surrounding guards.<sup>39</sup> However, this explanation is not universally accepted. Richard A. Gabriel argues in favor of victory in numbers, stating that "if David used only half of the 20,000 or so men mentioned in the I Chronicles text as joining him at Hebron...then David could have deployed almost seven men per yard of wall in the attack, or about the same ratio that favored Joshua in his attack on Jericho."<sup>40</sup> He does away with the word

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid p. 251; "Using Yadin's method of calculating the populations of ancient cities employed earlier, the population of Jebusite Jerusalem during David's time can be estimated to have been approximately 3,840 people, or 240 persons per square urban acre multiplied by 16 acres. Approximately 25 percent of the population, 1,000 men, would have been available for defense."

<sup>36</sup> Ibid p. 251

<sup>37</sup> Herzog & Gichon, p. 101

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 102

<sup>39</sup> Alfred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology & the Old Testament*, p. 266

<sup>40</sup> Richard A. Gabriel. *The Military History of Ancient Israel*, p. 251

*tsinor* by translating it as it's usual reference to the throat and windpipe, and states it was simple military advice given from a battle hardened general.<sup>4142</sup> The more modern *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* concludes that after the recent discoveries in 1995, the shaft or watercourse that the *tsinnor*<sup>43</sup> refers to is not known to be 'Warrens Shaft', but rather some other waterway lost in history.<sup>44</sup>

With the expansion and success of David's kingdom and military excursions, Solomon (961-921 B.C.E.) inherits the first true empire of the Israeli state. Although the order is sometimes debated over, Solomon initiates massive military reform and fortification. Besides building the Temple, his own palace, and extensions to Jerusalem's walls, he further fortified Hazor, Megiddo, Dezer, Gezer, lower Beth-horan, Baalith, and Tamar, with further garrisoned and chariot towns.<sup>45</sup> The set-up was as follows:

“...*Hazor* guarded the main highway from Israel to Syria...*Megiddo* controlled the major west-east axis of northern Palestine...*Gezer* was the key border fortress that guarded the entry into Judean ridge...*Lower*

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid p. 252; See *II Samuel: Anchor Bible* 137 for added clarification.

<sup>42</sup> Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in Light of Archaeology*, p. 97; The promotion of Joab for being the first to siege Jerusalem is worth notice, and is supported in “Thutmose III's chronicle of his attack on Kadesh as spoken by a brave Egyptian soldier. ‘His majesty sent forth every valiant man of his army, to breach the new wall which Kadesh had made. I was the one who breached it, being the first of every valiant man.’ ”

<sup>43</sup> *NIV*, p. 450 “While some suggest meanings such as ‘dagger,’ ‘hook’ or ‘grappling-hook,’ the context of *Psalms* 42:7 (where the *NIV* translates *tsinnor* as ‘waterfalls’) implies the word in *2 Samuel* 5:8 has to do with a water system. Cognates (words related by descent from the same ancestral language) from Aramic and Ugaritic also indicate that *tsinnor* refers to a watercourse, shaft or tunnel.”

<sup>44</sup> Ibid p. 450

<sup>45</sup> Richard A. Gabriel. *The Military History of Ancient Israel*, p. 195; “This was the purpose of the forced labor which Solomon imposed: It was to build the House of the Lord, his own palace, the Millo, and the wall of Jerusalem, and to fortify Hazor, Megiddo, and Dezer... Solomon fortified Gezer, lower Beth-horan, Baalith, and Tamar in the wilderness... and all of Solomon's garrison towns, chariot towns, and calvary towns... throughout the territory he ruled.” (*I Kings* 9:15-19)

*Beth-horan* protected the main western approach to Jerusalem...*Upper Beth-Horan* were also improved...”<sup>46</sup>

In addition to the defensive fortifications that emulated those of the earlier Canaan system, “it is to Solomon that credit is due for the establishment of an Israelite chariot corps.”<sup>47</sup> As for how Solomon managed to obtain them, it is often thought that “as the Israelites gradually integrated the Canaanite enclaves into the state...control of their chariot units gradually passed to the Israelites. The same was likely true for the Philistines.” (298). This suggests that the process of building the Chariot Corps<sup>48</sup> wasn’t merely one of grand purchases, but a slow accumulation that peaked under Solomon. Taken together, Solomon created a “schematic of strong points serving at one and the same time as pivots for defense and as bases for mobile force (chariots) reaction and pro-action.”<sup>49</sup> (see fig. 1.5). In conclusion, this paper has explored the domestic chariot-specialized Canaanites, as well as the foreign heavy infantry-focused threat of the Philistines. It has also examined the clandestine guerilla nature of ancient Israeli armies, as well as their armament and organization. Having this backdrop settled, further examination was placed on three of Israel’s finest military leaders; Joshua, David, and Solomon. Keen focus was then placed on individual military cases that explored the Israeli military tradition, such as the capture of Jericho, Ai/Bethel, and Jerusalem, as well as the two unique military campaigns waged against the Philistines, and Solomon’s modernization of both Israel’s defense and military. Having also explored avenues of scholarly argumentation, recent archaeological conclusions, and traditional scriptural evidence, one is left with no surprise when witnessing the potent military force of the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid p. 295

<sup>47</sup> Ibid p. 298

<sup>48</sup> *I Kings 9:26*; “1,400 chariots and 12,000 horses which he stationed in the chariot towns and with the king in Jerusalem [the strategic reserve]” This is usually regarded as a reasonable #.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid p. 294

modern Israeli Defense League, knowing that in light of Israel's past it has been a rich military nation since its birth.

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