ON THE PATH OF THE MACCABEES?
THE RHETORIC OF ‘HOLY WAR’ IN THE SERMONS
AND PAMPHLETS OF ‘PURITANS’ IN THE RUN-UP TO
THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR (1620–1642)

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In 1629, the English theologian Richard Bernard published a book with the remarkable title *The Bible-Battells, or the Sacred Art Military for the Rightly Wageing of Warre according to Holy Writ*.¹ In this tractate, Bernard consistently used the Bible as an exemplary text for the just waging of war. He emphasized, on the one hand, which wars were pleasing to God and thus necessary, and, on the other hand, the manner in which war was meant to be waged. The ancient nation of Israel here served as a model worthy of imitation.²

Bernard’s decision to confront his readers with the model of ancient Israel was not without reason. In 1629 England was still at war with France and Spain; but following a worsening of the military situation and conflicts with Parliament in 1628, Charles I had decided to do everything he could to arrange a peace. His hopes were realized with France in 1629 and with Spain in 1630.³ With his text, Bernard was

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¹ Richard Bernard, *The Bible-Battells, Or the Sacred Art Military for the Rightly Wageing of Warre according to Holy Writ* (London: 1629). The bellicose nature of this text becomes all the more clear when it is compared to John Downname, *The Christian Warfare* (London: 1604). Downname understands Christian warfare in an entirely spiritual sense as a struggle of every Christian with the attacks of Satan. Another purely spiritual concept of war is presented in William Gouge, *The Whole Armour of God, or the spiritual Furniture, which God hath provided every Christian Soldier* (London: 1616). The difference between these two viewpoints represents a difference between two types of clergy within the English Church, the “political” and “moral” Puritan; see Michael McGiffert, “God’s Controversy with Jacobean England,” *American Historical Review* 88 (1983): 1151–1174, esp. 1159.
delegitimizing these peace policies without explicitly mentioning them. War against idolaters, his message went, was a duty for God; rejecting it an act of disobedience toward Him. And England’s salvation could only be achieved on God’s side. Within this argumentation, war and peace were not negotiable quantities, to be opted for according to considerations of political opportunity. Rather, the course of things was fixed by God’s law.

At first glance it is astonishing that the Maccabees and their successful campaigns hardly have a place in Bernard’s *Bible Battells*. At the tractate’s start, Judas Maccabeus is mentioned once as a military hero at the end of an enumeration of other heroic biblical figures: Joshua, Shamgar, Samson, and David. Bernard does not devote any more attention to either Judas or his family despite his declared goal of writing a “History of Holy Warres” that takes Israel as its standard. When Bernard needed to demonstrate the necessity of certain wars being waged against idolatry, he cited the Deuteronomic texts (Num 25:1, 17–18; 31:1–3) together with Joshua (22:12, 33) and Judges (20). This was the case as well with a number of other publications stemming from the Protestant side in the 1620s and then again in the 1640s that propagated holy war, in other words, a campaign in defense of the true faith against the phalanx of idolaters. Despite the Old Testament’s nearly undisputed role as an exemplary political work in the period’s political discourse and its omnipresence in the ongoing political controversies, the deeds of the Maccabees do not figure prominently in any of these texts.

This fact calls for an explanation, particularly in light of the presence in Bernard’s *Bible-Battels*, as well as in many sermons and texts dealing more directly with the period’s political situation, of a range of elements also comprising the political theology of the Maccabean

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4 Bernard, *The Bible-Battells* Preface ¶7r: “Our course is just, though God please a while to afflict us, Set be worth of our Religion before your eyes: Its the truth of the eternal God. The Scriptures command it; and thereby our consciences bound, doe tie us unto it.”
