CHAPTER 1

The Clause “The Lord is a Man of War” (ה’ איש מלחמה) and its Reflexes throughout the Generations

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Introduction

1. A unique usage of an epithet for God appears in the Hebrew Bible. This usage appears only once, in the ancient text of the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1–19). For at least fifteen hundred years after the Song, beginning within the Hebrew Bible itself and concluding with various genres of rabbinic literature, it is possible to discern the views expressed with regard to this idiom. It is possible to discern these views both from the way this unique expression was transmitted, and the way it was re-used in the Tannaitic period. In this study I will trace the various transformations of this expression and discuss them.

2. This study is, of course, primarily diachronic. The study of this divine epithet has both linguistic aspects regarding one of its components, as well as extra-linguistic aspects that are relevant to the realm of religious beliefs. It can be said that these theological considerations determined the attitudes of later generations to the epithet. This finds expression within the Hebrew Bible itself, as well as in extra-biblical sources and the earliest biblical exegetes, namely the translations of the Bible into various languages.

From “Man of War” to “Warrior”

3. It is well known that the Song of the Sea is one of the most ancient parts of the Hebrew Bible. This poetic text represents the most ancient layer of Biblical Hebrew. It is assumed that the text of the Song of the Sea was already in existence in the tenth century BCE, perhaps even a century earlier. The Song is replete with many very ancient words, expressions, and linguistic forms. Most of these are quite rare; some do not appear again in the Hebrew Bible, not even in the books composed during the First Commonwealth.
4. One of these expressions is the phrase אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה ("man of war"), which is an epithet for God in the clause הֲדַדְעָזֶר הָיָה תֹּעִי מִלְחֲמוֹת אִישׁ ("The Lord is a man of war") (Exod 15:3). This clause appears only once in ancient biblical poetry, and never again in the entire Hebrew Bible. In this study I discuss the phrase אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה ("man of war") as an epithet for God and trace its development through the Tannaitic period, when an alternate expression was used in the composition of a fixed formula for blessings.

5. God, the syntactical subject of the clause מִלְחָמָה אִישׁ ("The Lord is a man of war"), is described by means of the construct phrase מִלְחָמָה אִישׁ ("man of war"), which functions as the predicate of the clause. In all other occurrences of the phrase אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה in the Hebrew Bible, it refers to human beings. For example, Makhir, the firstborn son of Menashe (the father of Gilead), is described in the Hebrew Bible thus: מִלְחָמָה הָיָה הוּא כִּי ("for he was a man of war") (Josh 17:1). David, the youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem, is described as מִלְחָמָה וְאִישׁ חַיִל וְגִבּוֹר נַגֵּן ("skillful in playing, and a mighty man of valor, and a man of war") (1 Sam 16:18). Even Goliath the Philistine is referred to with the same expression: מִלְחָמָה הוּא ("and he was a man of war from his youth") (1 Sam 17:33). There are additional occurrences of this expression in the Hebrew Bible.

6. Since this expression almost always describes human beings, it also appears in the Hebrew Bible in the plural form. For example, מִלְחָמָה ("men of war") “until the entire generation, the men of war were consumed” (Deut 2:14), מִלְחָמָה ("men of war") “when all the men of war were consumed” (Deut 23:6), מִלְחָמָה ("men of war") “But of the children of Israel [...] they were men of war” (2 Chr 8:9). There are many more occurrences of this phrase. It occurs also with a pronominal suffix; for example, מִלְחָמָה ("they that warred against you"—literally, “your men of war”) (Isa 42:12).

7. There are occurrences in the Hebrew Bible of this construct phrase where the nomen rectum takes the plural form: אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה. For example, this is the form in one of David's addresses to the leaders of the nation shortly before his death: אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה ("But God said unto me [...] because you are a man of war ..."
(1 Chr 28:3). This is also the case in a verse that appears in the Hebrew Bible twice: אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה ("For a man of wars [with] Toi had Hadadezer been," literally, “for Hadadezer was Toi's man of war” (2 Sam 8:10); the same form occurs in the parallel verse of 1 Chr 18:10.)