The Biblical Herem
Stern, Philip D.

Published by Brown Judaic Studies

Stern, Philip D.
The Biblical Herem: A Window in Israel's Religious Experience.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/75386

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2608006
PREFACE

The term הֵרֶם or herem which is the focus of this study, is still commonly recognized and even used by traditional Jews, although no longer with the biblical meaning. The same root also occurs in modern Hebrew with connotations that are well removed from the kind of divine-and-human warfare that characterizes most of the root’s usage in the Hebrew Bible. Due to the fact that the הֵרֶם weds large scale massacre of an enemy with the biblical concept of holiness, the subject is one which may easily cause gnashings of teeth, chills of the spine, and head-scratching bewilderment to many readers of the Bible. Such a reaction is understandable, but it unless it leads to a search for answers, it does not lead to greater understanding. The two greatest prophets of ancient Israel, Moses and Samuel, were each associated with the הֵרֶם, so it is plain that this behavior was no embarrassment to the people better known today for the Ten Commandments.

My own interest in this fairly obscure practice was quite minimal until a different project brought it indirectly into view, and my teacher, Baruch A. Levine, suggested it as a dissertation topic. My response was somewhat tentative, as I wondered whether such a subject could sustain a new, large scale treatment. Time and tide proved that it could. Moreover, research into such a area, so foreign to our modern way of thinking, proved fascinating, since the only approach that made sense was to try and understand how the ancients came to create and take pride in this particular action. The results of that attempt are here now in this revised work; additional results will undoubtedly come in the future and different approaches will be tried, as this extraordinary topic will continue to attract new ways of thinking about it. I hope that one of the consequences of this essay will be to stimulate a rethinking of the subject.

Prof. Levine not only provided me with the benefit of his wide knowledge and insight into the Bible, but he predicted early on that the result would be published, making him a better candidate than Saul for a place among the prophets.

Prof. William W. Hallo has shown me a great deal of generosity; he showed much interest in my work, which would be substantially poorer in its comparative reach as well as in its bibliography, if he had not donated so much of his time.

Prof. Jeffrey Tigay, a former teacher of mine, helped me avoid certain methodological pitfalls and demonstrated his helpfulness, which is well known to his students.

Prof. Jacob Milgrom read a section of my dissertation and sent me his encouraging critique. Prof. Susan Niditch has been a great source of encouragement, for which I am thankful.

I am extremely grateful to Prof. Stephen Dempster for sending me a copy of his very fine master’s thesis, which was both interesting and of material assistance to me.

Closer to home, Prof. Cyrus H. Gordon, Norman K. Gottwald, and S. David Sperling read all or part of the original dissertation, offering me friendly criticism and the opportunity to test my evolving ideas on them.
Profs. Michael Carter and Larry Schiffman were most helpful in dealing with areas of my research which touched their fields. Prof. Mervin Dilts steered me away from a chimera in Sophocles.

On the ancient Egyptian side, Prof. Ogden Goelet kept me on track and away from various pitfalls. Mr. Paul O'Rourke of the Brooklyn Museum graciously supplied me with the Egyptian parallel found in chapter four. At that same museum, I met Prof. Alan R. Schulman, who gave me important references. Prof. Edward Greenstein gave me both lunch and his opinions, an excellent combination.

In all-too-brief encounters with Profs. Michel C. Astour and Erica Reiner, I had the opportunity to discuss technical philological points. I also had the good fortune to consult and benefit from the expertise of a number of other distinguished Assyriologists: Douglas Frayne, William Lambert, Ira Spar, and Christopher Walker. I also had the privilege of consulting with two scholars from Jerusalem, Profs. Jonas Greenfield and Ephraim Stern. To all of the above I am grateful for sharing their time and thought.

I am pleased to record something of my debt of gratitude to my father, Rabbi Chaim Stern; in this case for his assistance in various ways, notably in taking on the role of computer consultant and in other ways helping me prepare the manuscript.

Lastly, but scarcely leastly, I would like to thank Profs. Jacob Neusner and Ernest Frerichs for giving me the opportunity to bring my work to the Brown Judaic Series, and to thank Dr. Dennis Ford of Scholar's Press for his ready assistance.