

War, Memory, and National Identity in the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible is permeated with depictions of military conflicts that have profoundly shaped the way many think about war. Why does war occupy so much space in the Bible? In this book, Jacob Wright offers a fresh and fascinating response to this question: War pervades the Bible not because ancient Israel was governed by religious factors (such as “holy war”) or because this people, along with its neighbors in the ancient Near East, was especially bellicose. The reason is rather that the Bible is fundamentally a project of constructing a new national identity for Israel, one that can both transcend deep divisions within the population and withstand military conquest by imperial armies. Drawing on the intriguing interdisciplinary research on war commemoration, Wright shows how biblical authors, like the architects of national identities from more recent times, constructed their groundbreaking new notion of peoplehood in direct relation to memories of war, both real and imagined. This book is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.

Jacob L. Wright is a professor at Emory University in the Candler School of Theology. He writes on a wide array of topics, ranging from material culture to commensality and uricide. His first book, *Rebuilding Identity* (De Gruyter, 2003), won the Templeton Prize, and his most recent book, *David, King of Israel* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), won the Nancy Lapp Popular Book Award. His free online course (The Bible’s Prehistory, Purpose, and Political Future) consistently ranks among the top online courses in the humanities.

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*For Tamara Cohn Eskenazi,
a model of courage, wisdom, humanity, and friendship.*

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Preface

Most of the work underlying this book was completed five years ago, and it expands upon the approach that I developed when working on King David. Since then, the world has witnessed populist upheavals and nationalistic ferment on a scale that I never imagined having to face in my lifetime. Although I did not write this book in response to the current political climate, my work demonstrates the power of a written, national narrative that fosters both veneration of the nation's laws and a sense of kinship and solidarity capable of bridging deep divides. The national identity constructed in the biblical narrative is far removed from the xenophobic, insular, chauvinistic discourse that, with the help of villainous leaders, is gaining traction both at home and abroad.

This book is a prelude to a more ambitious monograph, also to be published by Cambridge University Press, that I wrote for a broad audience after finishing the work on my Coursera course (The Bible's Prehistory, Purpose, and Political Future). In that volume, I tell the story of the rise and fall of Israel's kingdoms, provide a new model for the formation of the biblical corpus, and explore the strategies that the biblical scribes adopted in an effort to fashion what has proved to be one of the most influential paradigms of the nation.

The present work would not have been completed without the encouragement and inspiration provided by my colleagues and students. I am fortunate to have exceptionally capable and gracious editors: Beatrice Rehl and Eilidh Burrett. The Mellon Foundation and the Digital Publishing in the Humanities initiative at Emory University (under the direction of Sara McKee) awarded a generous grant that made it possible

to publish this work in an open access format on the Cambridge University Press platform.

I dedicate this book to my dearest friend, Professor Rabbi Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, who has been a joy to know and learn from for many years now.