Abstract: This article investigates the justifications of mass violence in Deuteronomistic historiography through the lens of cultural trauma. The analysis concentrates on the representation and justification of mass violence, that is mass killings and other forms of violence against non-combatants, in Israel’s conquest of the promised land in the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua as well as during the loss of the land at the hand of the Assyrian and Babylonian armies, as narrated in 2 Kings 17–25. A comparison of these texts and their respective historical backgrounds helps to profile the contrasts and continuities between them. Trauma theory sheds light on both narratives as media to recover agency and to reconstruct collective identity for emerging Judaism via the historiographical representation of cultural trauma.

Keywords: Deuteronomistic history, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Book of Kings, cultural trauma, violence, justification, historiography, collective identity
1 Cultural trauma and the justification of mass violence in historiography

*May that dreadful, stormy day – like rain that has fallen – never come back again.*
*May that dreadful, stormy day – that struck down the people – be utterly undone.*
*May it be locked up – as if by a door, barred against the night.*
*May that dreadful, stormy day not be given a place in treasured memory.*

These lines from the *Lament for Ur* reflect, in the early second millennium BCE, on a catastrophic event at the end of the third millennium BCE, namely the destruction of the Third Dynasty of Ur under king Ibibi-Sin by its enemies.³ The “day that struck down the people” refers to mass killings as part of violent warfare. While the text claims to blot out the memory of these events, paradoxically, it enshrined their commemoration for centuries. The “Catastrophe of Ibibi-Sin” was handed down in the Mesopotamian literary tradition through the second and first millennia BCE, as it was applied to ever recurring events of violent destruction.⁴ A pivotal element in the aetiology of the catastrophe was its theological interpretation: the key agents were not humans, but rather the gods whose wrath caused disaster in the human sphere.⁵

In the fourteenth century BCE, Hittite scribes developed the first works of elaborate historiography, especially under king Muršiliš II. *The Deeds of Suppiluliuma* in connection with *The Plague Prayers of Muršiliš* present historiography, as Jan Assmann has argued, that explains the disaster of an epidemic as a consequence of human guilt and divine wrath.⁶

Guilt is only one incentive – albeit a very powerful one – for memory work, reconstruction of the past, self-examination, and the writing of history. It stems from the experience of suffering, which struggles against two premises: meaningless chance and cyclical recurrence.⁷

Systematic historiography from the perspective of human guilt can be seen in Hittite, Neo-Babylonian, and, most elaborately, in biblical historiography.⁸ Deuteronomistic historiography was written, as Martin Noth argued, “with the final historical catastrophes in view,”⁹ that is the downfall of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel and Judah around 720 and 587 BCE. Deuteronomistic historiography has been a prime example for the application of trauma theory to its interpretation.¹⁰

Ancient historiography suggests that collective suffering is an important incentive for historiography, and human guilt a key notion for explaining it. Assmann’s concept of “cultural memory” concerns the essential function of historical memory for collective identity. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), Dominick LaCapra analysed the relationship between historiography and collective trauma, as he claimed that “all myths of origin include something like a founding trauma, through which the people pass and emerge strengthened; at least they have stood the test of this founding trauma.”¹¹

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2 Schaudig, *Explaining Disaster*, 1.
3 On the historical reconstruction see ibid., 45–8.
4 Analyised in Schaudig, *Explaining Disaster*.
5 On Enlil’s wrath against Ur see ibid., 250–6. On divine wrath and mercy in antiquity see Kratz and Spieckermann (eds.), *Divine Wrath*; Durand et al. (eds.), *Colères et Repentirs Divins*.
7 Ibid. 220.
9 Noth, *Deuteronomistic History*, 79; cf. idem, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien*, 91: “Mit den abschließenden geschichtlichen Katastrophen vor Augen.” On biblical writing of history from the perspective of the vanquished see Wright, “Commemoration of Defeat.”
11 LaCapra, *Writing History*, 161.
Sociologists have explored the notion of “collective trauma” since Kai Erikson’s work on the flood catastrophe in Buffalo Creek (1972), who defined it as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community.”¹² The notion of “historical trauma” is used in work on American Indian/Native Alaska Communities as referring to “a series of traumatic assaults that have had enduring consequences for families and communities.”¹³ Jeffrey Alexander’s concept of “cultural trauma,” in contrast, is disinterested in what actually happened to a given society through collective suffering, but methodologically concentrates on the imagination and construction of trauma narratives that redefine the group’s collective identity.¹⁴ What actually happens to societies in collective suffering, however, is a different matter from how they create narratives about it; both aspects deserve attention. I shall therefore use “collective/historical trauma” for reconstructions of actual collective suffering that caused large-scale social disintegration and transgenerational suffering,¹⁵ while “cultural trauma” refers to how suffering is represented in historiographical narratives by carrier groups to reconstruct a new collective identity for the future.

Collective trauma is frequently caused by “mass violence,” which includes “killings, but also forced removal or expulsion, enforced hunger or undersupply, forced labor, collective rape” etc.¹⁶ Sociological analysis suggests that mass violence has been related, in modernity, to nation-building.¹⁷ While nineteenth century nationalisms involved long and complex ideological and institutional processes, wars frequently catalysed nationalist fervour and in-group cohesion.¹⁸ In this context, Julius Wellhausen considered war the cradle of Israel as a nation.¹⁹ Yet, “it’s not war itself,” as Jacob Wright has pointed out, “but war commemoration that has served as an engine for Israel’s ethnogenesis as a people.”²⁰ Nationalist narratives regularly invoke heroism and victory in war, but the notion of cultural trauma indicates that collective suffering from violence can serve narratives that strengthen collective identity as well. As Aleida Assmann puts it, “the triumphant and the traumatic are the two modalities according to which mythic narratives construct a sense of national identity.”²¹ Both aspects occur in biblical historiography.

For the analysis of trauma narratives, Alexander singles out four aspects: the pain suffered, the victim group, the relation of the victim to the wider audience, and the attribution of responsibility.²³ While each of these aspects deserves attention, my focus in analysing Deuteronomistic historiography will be the issue of

12 Erikson, Everything in its Path, 154; see also Erikson, A New Species of Trouble, 226–42.
13 Evans-Campbell, “Historical Trauma,” 316.
14 See Alexander, “Toward a Theory,” 9: “... while every argument about trauma claims ontological reality, as cultural sociologists we are not primarily concerned with the accuracy of social actors’ claims, much less with evaluating their moral justification. We are concerned only with how and under what conditions the claims are made, and with what results.” Ídem, Trauma, 6–30, is a slightly edited version of “Toward a Theory.” See also Alexander and Breese, “Introduction.” Unfortunately, Alexander dismisses Erikson’s “collective trauma” as a form of “lay trauma theory” (“Toward a Theory,” 2–8). Alexander claims that “trauma has been translated from an idea in ordinary language into an intellectual concept in the academic languages in diverse disciplines” (ibid. 8). In fact, however, “trauma” was developed as a scholarly concept in medicine and psychology before becoming adopted into ordinary language and other disciplines. On the conceptual history see Luckhurst, The Trauma Question, 1–76.
15 For an overview of research on intergenerational transmission of trauma and violence see Berckmoes, “In the Aftermath of Atrocities.”
16 Gerlach, Extremely Violent Societies, 1. I am here using the term “mass violence” and avoiding “genocide,” since the latter is highly politicized and, therefore, problematic for scholarly analysis. Cf. Moses, Problems of Genocide. On the long history of mass killings see Kiernan, Blood and Soil.
17 Malešević, Identity as Ideology, 204–26, esp. 206: “To put it simply, the periodic genocidal outbursts of the nineteenth and twentieth century are not an aberrant exception to modernity’s rule of nation-state building, – they are the very rule!”
18 For an evaluation of theory on nationalism and war see Malešević, Sociology of War, 179–201.
20 Wright, War, 12.
21 Assmann, Shadows of Trauma, 3, against the background of Giesen, Triumph and Trauma.
responsibility, which proves more complicated than a simple victim-perpetrator dichotomy, since biblical historiography negotiates in-group, out-group, and divine responsibilities. Moreover, historiographical representations of mass violence often involve “justifications,” which is here used as an umbrella term, “subsuming divergent speech acts and pragmatics which have in common that they seek to make mass violence appear as ‘just’.”

In what follows, collective suffering in the history of Israel, its narrative representation and justifications of mass violence will be analysed in Deuteronomistic historiography, concentrating on the accounts of Israel’s conquest and loss of the Promised Land. While it is generally acknowledged that the historiographical complex in Genesis to Kings and, within it, Deuteronomistic historiography in Deuteronomy to Kings, grew in several stages of compositional and redactional processes,²⁴ I am here interested in the ideological features of the exilic and post-exilic compositional stages of these texts that foster a collective identity of emerging Judaism.²⁵

2 Justifications of mass violence in Israel’s conquest of the land

The historicity of the biblical stories that narrate Israel’s conquest of the Transjordanian (Num 21:21–35; Deut 2:16–3:17) and the Cisjordanian land (Joshua 1–12) has long been questioned and is today generally dismissed.²⁶ The archaeological evidence suggests that some sites that went into decline in the Late Bronze Age were partially resettled in the early Iron Age, while many new settlements emerged in the hill country.²⁷ The stratigraphy of prominent sites such as Jericho and Ai – conquered by the Israelites according to Joshua 6; 8 – were not inhabited during the period referred to in the biblical accounts so that they cannot be considered as reflecting historical reality. The Early Iron Age settlement of communities that came to define themselves as “Israel” in subsequent centuries²⁸ was a slow, gradual, and mostly peaceful process rather than one achieved through military conquest. It is all the more interesting to ask why this process is presented as an extremely violent conquest in biblical historiography and its ideological rhetoric. In what follows, I shall concentrate on the justifications given for the demand to annihilate the Canaanite peoples (especially in Deut 7; 12:29–31; 18:9–12; 20:15–17) before considering the conquest narratives, since these texts are most immediately relevant to what is here conceptualized as mass violence.²⁹

2.1 Justifications in Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy – presented as a sequence of Moses’ farewell discourses on the last day of his life – contains the most elaborate justifications of mass violence.³⁰ The book distinguishes two different

²³ Prade-Weiss et al., “Mass Violence as Tragedy.”
²⁴ See e.g. Römer, The So-Called Deuteronomistic History.
²⁵ See the “basic assumptions” in Markl, “Efficacy,” 122–3.
²⁶ Cf. Grabbe, Ancient Israel, 110–30; Frevel, Geschichte Israels, 73–9; Fritz, Emergence of Israel, 117–38. The assumption that “an actual eradication of the nations of Canaan was intended and has (partly) occurred” in Versluis, Command to Exterminate, 319–20, is a rare exception.
²⁷ Finkelstein, Archaeology; Fritz, Emergence of Israel, 82–117; Fritz, Das Buch Josua, 9–14.
²⁸ On Israel’s ethnogenesis see Killebrew, Biblical Peoples, esp. 184–5.
²⁹ Another text that envisions mass killings is Deut 13:13–19, where an apostate city within Israel is supposed to be annihilated, but this is not realized in any narrative. The mass killings in Jabesh-gilead (Judg 21:10) are considered a punishment for a moral crime. Another Pentateuchal narrative that involves mass violence is the war against the Medianites in Num 31:15–18.
³⁰ In what follows, biblical quotations render either my own translation or the New Revised Standard Version, sometimes with adaptations towards a more literal rendering of the Hebrew.
types of warfare for Israel. The war laws (esp. Deuteronomy 20)\(^{31}\) demand that Israel’s army, in case it besieges and conquers a town, kill the men, while the women, children, and elderly are supposed to be spared (vv. 13–14). In the immediately impending conquest wars against the Canaanite peoples, in contrast, nobody is to be spared (vv. 15–17). The distinction between the killing of (potential) warriors and other human beings is relevant here, since it marks a difference between killings that are considered as legitimate in normal warfare and mass violence that goes beyond it. While sparing women and children involves advantage for the conquerors, ethical considerations play a role as well, which is seen in the sparing of the elderly and the rules for the treatment of a war captive woman taken as a wife (21:10–14).\(^{32}\) The amount of Deuteronomy’s text on the extermination of the Canaanites is considerable, which suggests that it requires justification—even if presented in a largely “fictional” narrative world and refers to a “utopian” command.\(^{33}\) The argumentation of Deuteronomy 7, the most extensive justificatory speech, is complex and multi-layered. I shall here attempt to systematize it under four aspects.\(^{34}\)

First, the annihilation of the Canaanite peoples is *divinely sanctioned and a religious obligation*. It is divinely sanctioned since Israel’s God Yhwh himself will lead the people to the land, “clear away” the nations\(^{35}\) and, literally, “give them to your face so that you smite them” (7:2).\(^{36}\) It is a religious obligation, since Moses commands: “you must certainly ban them” (7:2). The root used here, *ḥrm*, usually translated as “ban, destroy,” refers to total destruction for religious reasons.\(^{37}\) In contrast to sacrifice, which has a “communicative function,” it signifies consecration in terms of destruction and removal from the deity, with a “distancing function.”\(^{38}\) The root, used in Hebrew as a verb (*ḥrm*) and as a noun (*ḥērem*), can be applied to both the killing of living beings (including people as in Deut 7:2 as well as animals, Josh 6:21) and the destruction of inanimate objects (e.g. Deut 7:26; Josh 7:1).\(^{39}\) The *ḥērem* thus provides a conceptual framework that justifies mass killings in a specific religious worldview that is also attested in the Mesha Stele (ca. 840 BCE).\(^{40}\) Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic conquest accounts apply this concept to the Canaanite nations, while comparable commands in the Pentateuch emphasize the idea of expulsion.\(^{41}\) The predominant religious reasoning behind the command to exterminate the Canaanites is seen in the idea that intermarriage with them would lead to the veneration of “other deities” (Deut 7:3–4).

Second, the annihilation of the Canaanites is presented as necessary to preserve the *collective identity* of Israel,\(^{42}\) “since you are a sacred people for Yhwh, your God” (7:6).\(^{43}\) This identity discourse is, again, strongly framed in religious terms. Population statistics are side-lined: compared to the other peoples, Israel is the smallest (7:7), which links with the idea that the seven Canaanite nations are “mightier and

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31 On these laws see Otto, *Deuteronomium 12,1–23,15, 1551–609*.
32 For an interpretation of this text and related discussions see Markl, “Women in War.”
34 According to Collins, “The Zeal of Phinehas,” 7, Deuteronomy “seeks to rationalize” the ban “by justifying it.”
35 The verb used in Deut 7:1, 22, *nšš*, can refer to diverse forms of removal (e.g. Exod 3:5; Deut 19:5).
36 The verb * mh (Deut 7:2) can mean “to beat” (e.g. Exod 2:13) or “to smite” in the sense of killing (e.g. Exod 2:12).
39 These two examples show that the “ban” can refer to precious metals of destroyed cult objects (Deut 7:26) as well as objects without religious functions such as the mantle, gold, and silver taken by Achan (Josh 7:21).
40 KAI 181, lines 14–18. For the state of research see Niehr and Römer (eds.), *Nouvelles Recherches*.
41 The divine voice announces to make the Canaanites disappear (Exod 23:23: * khd hi.), will cause them to take refuge (v.27), drive them away (v.28–30: *grš pi.;* cf. Exod 33:22; 34:24; Josh 24:12 *grš hi.); and hand them over to the Israelites so that they can drive them away (Exod 23:31). In the Holiness Laws, the divine voice announces to “send them away” (Lev 18:24; 20:23). Israel is supposed to drive out the inhabitants of the land (Num 33:55: *yřš hi.)*. For comparison and discussion see Weinfeld, “Expulsion.” On the historical relationship between these texts see Otto, *Deuteronomium 4,44–11,32, 855–7*.
42 Germany, “Self-Defense as a *Casus Belli,*” 43, contrasts this identity-related justification with “Mesopotamian and Hittite texts,” in which the “collective ‘self’ is perceived as threatened by the loss of access to economic resources (such as taxable land and human labor).”
43 The contrast between Israel as “sacred people” and the Canaanites is underlined by the semantics of “sacred” (*qâdôš*) as “Aus- und Abgrenzungslesem”: Otto, *Deuteronomium 4,44–11,32, 865*. 
more numerous than you” (7:1). What counts is divine election “to be for him a treasured people among all the peoples on the face of the land” (7:6). While Israel’s role is special in comparison to all other nations, only the Canaanites are subject to annihilation. Out of love, Yhwh rescued Israel from Egypt (v. 8), and his oath to the fathers (vv. 8, 12) will lead, in case of Israel’s obedience, to abundant blessing in the land (vv. 12-15), which is followed by the command: “And you shall devour [kî] all the peoples that Yhwh, your God, is giving you! Your eye must not have pity upon them!” (v. 16). The first command uses the metaphor of consumption for annihilation (cf. Deut 31:17), the latter addresses moral emotions that could prevent mass killings (cf. the prohibition to show mercy, ḥmn, in v. 2). Another inhibitive emotion, fear, is addressed in the following section. As Israel perceives that “these nations are more numerous than I” (7:17), they shall remember what Yhwh did to the Egyptians in the Exodus (vv. 18–19), since “thus Yhwh, your God, will do to all the peoples that you are afraid of” (v. 19). Yhwh will contribute to the extermination, sending hornets among those “who remain and have hidden from you” (v. 20). Even if the process of annihilation will be slowed down for practical reasons (“lest the beasts of the field multiply,” v. 22), Yhwh will “give them to your face” (v. 23, forming an inclusio with v. 1) and complete the process “until they are destroyed” (v. 23). All these motivations serve to preserve Israel’s identity as a small but sacred nation, loved by Yhwh, in contrast to the strong and numerous Canaanite nations. Israel’s establishment on the land promised to the patriarchs must, therefore, be realized through the utter destruction of its population and their cult objects (vv. 5, 25). Mass violence is seen here as a concomitant action of “nation-building.”

Third, the failure to annihilate the Canaanites implies an existential threat to Israel. This results from the idea that they would seduce the Israelites to worship other gods, which would cause Yhwh’s wrath so that “he would destroy [šmd] you quickly” (7:4). Israel would suffer the same fate that is the Canaanites’ destiny (cf. šmd in 7:23, 24). This motif of danger is also expressed in the metaphor of the “snare” (môgēs, 7:16), referring to Israel’s empathy that Moses seeks to prevent. Danger emanates even from the Canaanites’ destroyed cult items. If the Israelites were to take their silver or gold, they would “become ban [ḥērem] like it” (6:26). The mass killing of the Canaanites is thus conceived as a security measure to prevent Israel’s own annihilation. In contemporary terms, this could be considered an argument of “permanent security.”

A fourth ideological strategy, the attribution of guilt to the victim group, is advanced only indirectly in Deuteronomy 7, via the Canaanites’ deities that are considered an “abomination [tō ēbā] to Yhwh” (v. 25). The motif of the Canaanites’ evil deeds occurs prominently in three passages of the laws of Deuteronomy (12:29–31; 18:9–12; 20:18), according to which the Canaanites did “every abomination [tō ēbā] for Yhwh that he hates for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods” (12:31). The issue of child sacrifice, besides other cultic activities, is also referred to in 18:9-12 as an “abomination” because of which Yhwh “drives them away before your face” (18:12). While in these two passages, Yhwh is presented as the agent in the Canaanites’ removal, the Israelites’ agency is expressed in the context of the war legislation: “As for the towns of these peoples that Yhwh your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive” (20:16). The “ban” is, according to Moses’ claim, commanded by Yhwh himself (v. 17). All three passages are connected via the motifs of the Canaanites’ “abominations” (12:31; 18:12; 20:18) and the warning not to imitate them (12:30) or to learn from them.

44 While Malešević (see above, n.18) emphasizes the specifically modern traits of the relationship between mass killing and nation-building, Deuteronomy shows that this idea seems to have roots in antiquity.
45 The snare-motif occurs in Deut 7:25 in the verb qāš, in 12:30 in the verb ṭōqāš.
47 On “guilt attribution” as a typical feature of the portrayal of victims see Leader Maynard, Ideology and Mass Killing, 108–11.
48 In Deuteronomy 7, the Canaanites are frequently presented as objects of actions of Yhwh or the Israelites, but never as agents of any finite verb. They are thus not actively presented as evildoers in this chapter.
49 For my interpretation of these passages and related discussions see Markl, “Polemics Against Child Sacrifice,” 70–3.
50 Deut 12:29 employs the verb krt, “to cut off”; 18:12 yrš hi., “to drive away.” The passive formulation of šmd ni., “to be destroyed” in 12:30, leaves the agency open to interpretation.
Interestingly, the guilt attribution towards the Canaanites does not in any way refer to social suffering inflicted by them, but exclusively concerns religious practices.\(^{52}\)

\section*{2.2 The conquest narratives (Deut 2:16–3:17; Joshua 6–12)}

The conquest narratives are divided into two main phases: the conquest of the territories East of the Jordan, narrated by Moses in Deut 2:16–3:17 (cf. Num 21:21–35), and the conquest of the land of the Canaanite nations west of the Jordan, narrated in Joshua 6–12. Both conquests follow a common narrative scheme in three stages: “handing over – execution – ban,”\(^{53}\) in which the motif of the “ban” serves as a \textit{Leitwort}.\(^{54}\) Among the former narratives, explicit references to mass violence are made in Moses’ account of the defeat of kings Sihon and Og: the “ban” is applied to “males, women and children” (Deut 2:34; 3:6).\(^{55}\) The practice is justified by the preceding divine commands, quoted by Moses (2:31; 3:2).\(^{56}\)

Joshua 1–12 is framed by the divine command that Joshua conquers the lands west of the Jordan according to Moses’ instruction (Josh 1:1–9) and the affirmation that Joshua indeed fulfilled this command (11:15, 20, 21, 23).\(^{57}\) Ideologically laden is 11:20: “For it was Yhwh’s doing to harden their hearts so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed [ḥrm hi.], and might receive no mercy [taḥinā], but be destroyed [šmd hi.], just as Yhwh had commanded Moses.”\(^{58}\) The narratives of the conquest are elaborately unfolded. In Joshua’s voice, the removal of the Canaanites will be achieved by Yhwh himself: “By this you shall know that among you is the living God who will certainly drive out [yrš hi.] from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites” (Josh 3:10). The killing of non-combatants is explicitly mentioned in the conquest narratives of Jericho (Josh 6:21: “from man to woman, from young to old”) and Ai (8:24-26: “all inhabitants”). The Gibeonites rescue their lives via a trick (Joshua 9), but Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Gezer, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir are put to the ban, with regular affirmations that nobody was spared (10:28–39), so that the narrative can be summarized: “So Joshua smote [nkh hi.] all the country of the hills, and of the south, and of the vale, and of the springs, and all their kings: he left none remaining, but put to the ban [ḥrm hi.] all that breathed, as Yhwh God of Israel commanded” (10:40). A comparable account follows on the towns of the North, with the centre Hazor (11:1–11). “All the spoil of these towns, and the livestock, the

\(^{51}\) Lohfink, “Opferzentralisation,” relates this motif to the theory of mimetic desire. See also Brett, “Genocide,” 82–4.

\(^{52}\) A less surprising retaliatory rationale is seen, for example, in the narrative of the war with Arad in Num 21:1–3. After the king of Arad has attacked and taken captives, the Israelites take a vow to put those people to the ban, which is then fulfilled. This text is important as “an initial act of self-defense followed by the conquest of an entire region or population”: Germany, “Self-Defense as a \textit{Casus Belli},” 37.


\(^{55}\) The parallel narrative in Num 21:21–31 does not explicitly refer to the killing of non-combatants. Israel defeats the army of Sihon (Num 21:24) and Og (v. 35). In the latter context, the killing of “all his people” (\(\textit{am} \)) could refer, according to a maximalist interpretation, to the entire population, but in this context, the word is more likely to refer to the army (as in v. 23). The concept of the “ban” (\textit{ḥerem}) is not employed here, although it occurs in the account of the war against the king of Arad (Num 21:1–3).

\(^{56}\) The initiating divine command in Deut 2:31 has no parallel in Num 21:21–32, which foregrounds Sihon’s initial attack despite Israel’s peaceful words (21:22–23); the hostile attack of Og is followed by Yhwh’s encouragement in Num 21:33–34 and Deut 3:1–2. The comparison shows that the account of Num 21 highlights the justification of war as an act of self-defence (Germany, “Self-Defense as a \textit{Casus Belli},”) 37, while Moses’ account in Deuteronomy foregrounds the divine command.

\(^{57}\) While it is true that Josh 1–5; 6–12 are distinct parts and the military conquest is narrated only in chapters 6–12 (Krause, \textit{Exodus und Eiosodus}, 1–2), the aforementioned narrative ark still binds Josh 1–12 together.

\(^{58}\) The ban is here presented as a divine command (as in Deut 20:17); the no-mercy-motif, expressed by the noun \textit{tabhind}, resembles quite closely Deut 7:2 (verb \textit{ḥrm}), but the idea that God would harden the Canaanites’ hearts has no counterpart in Deuteronomy.
Israelites took for their booty; but all the people they smote \[ nk h \ hi. \] with the edge of the sword, until they had destroyed them \[ s m d \ hi. \], and they did not leave any who breathed" (11:14).

The conquest accounts\(^\text{69}\) are blunt and brutal in the directness of the presentation of mass violence, while justifications are relatively scarce. The divine command to conquer, the frequently repeated concept of the ban \( (h r m) \)^\(^\text{64}\) and few additional motifs such as the enemies’ attempted attack (Josh 11:1–8) and the hardening of their heart (Josh 11:20)\(^\text{62}\) seem to suffice to present a plausible narrative. While these narratives integrate motifs that resemble Neo-Assyrian conquest accounts and the motif of the ban that was known in the West-Semitic realm of the Iron Age, the narratives are highly ideologized and theologized. In an exilic context, the narratives of conquest were counter-factual. The “ban” is presented as a paradigmatic case of obedience to the divine will.\(^\text{63}\)

### 3 Justifications of mass violence in Israel’s loss of the land

In contrast to the largely fictional character of the stories of Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land, warfare in the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires involved frequent execution of mass violence as a matter of historical fact. The Neo-Assyrian Empire was based on expansion politics from the late tenth to the seventh centuries BCE, which involved regular violent warfare, including raids, conquests, sieges, and naval operations.\(^\text{64}\) In raids, “the army advanced deep into enemy territory, plundering, killing, and burning all along the way in order to destroy the enemy’s livelihood.”\(^\text{65}\) Assyrian tactics involved (frequently two-way and mass) deportations.\(^\text{66}\) Extreme forms of violence such as the extraction of foetuses from the wombs of women were applied in exceptional cases of punishment for rebellion.\(^\text{67}\) Assyrian warfare was accompanied by a broad arsenal of justifications that were grounded in divine commands\(^\text{68}\) and a mythological framework in which “the submission of the chaotic other was not merely morally

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\(^{59}\) This view of the radical execution of the ban is in tension with the historiographical view expressed in the Book of Judges (e.g. Judg 3:5–6).

\(^{60}\) Similarities between the conquest accounts in Joshua 9–12 and other ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts are analysed in Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*.

\(^{61}\) The root is used, referring to mass killings, no less than 17 times in Deut 2:34; 3:6 (2 ×); Josh 2:10; 6:17, 21; 8:26; 10:1, 28, 35, 37, 39, 40; 11:11, 12, 20, 21.

\(^{62}\) See Germany, “Self Defense as a *Casus Belli*,” 39.


\(^{65}\) Fuchs, “Assyria at War,” 390.

\(^{66}\) See now esp. Koch, “A Framework for the Study of Deportations.” Sano, *Deportationspraxis,* collected evidence of 257 deportations and calculated the number of the deportees in 219 deportations to have amounted to 1,205,570 persons (esp. 342), which leads to an estimation of 1.5 million deportees in total, while Oded, *Mass Deportations,* 21, estimated 4.4 million. On the cultural consequences of these population exchanges see Frahm, “Intellectual Background.”

\(^{67}\) Dubovský, “Ripping Open.”

\(^{68}\) See esp. Liverani, *Assyria,* 33–40; Oded, *War, Peace and Empire.* Fuchs, “Assyria at War,” 396: “People were convinced that their gods legitimized and approved the king’s rule and his policies. Accordingly, the king’s wars were wars of justice. Fighting against his gods’ enemies, he was entitled to punish and mistreat them as criminals and sinners with unrestrained brutality. The Assyrian kings openly boasted of their atrocities and made a show of them.” On Assyrian representations of gruesome violence see Fuchs, “Waren die Assyrer Grausam?” As a consequence of their ideology of victory, the Assyrians avoided addressing the issue of defeat: Melville, “Ideology.” On divine intervention in battles in Neo-Assyrian and West-Semitic sources see Schmitt, *Der “Heilige Krieg,”* 105–8.
tolerable but morally imperative.” Neo-Babylonian kings, especially Nebuchadnezzar II, struggled to take over the territories formerly dominated by the Assyrians. The Babylonians produced less propagandistic display of their warfare than the Assyrians, and their deportation strategy was one-way.

The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah were affected by Assyrian and Babylonian warfare and mass violence, especially in the conquest of Samaria and ensuing deportations (around 720 BCE). Sennacherib’s campaign against Judah that included, among many other towns, the destruction of Lachish (701 BCE), and the Babylonian sieges and conquests of Jerusalem with ensuing deportations (597 and 587 BCE), and the city’s destruction (587 BCE). Deuteronomistic historiography narrates these events in 2 Kings 17–25, framed by two comparable accounts of the invasions of Samaria and Jerusalem in 2 Kings 17; 24. The following analysis concentrates on the representation and etiological justifications of mass violence, before looking at how these issues are addressed in preceding texts, especially in Deuteronomy.

2 Kings 17–25 refers to mass violence committed by the Assyrians and Babylonians quite sparingly. The voice of the narrator generally appears like a detached reporter in describing military defeats of Israel and Judah. The three-year siege of Samaria, the city’s conquest, and the deportation of the population are reported in extremely terse matter-of-fact style (2 Kgs 17:5–6; cf. 18:9–11). Similarly, Sennacherib’s conquest of “all the fortified cities of Judah” is narrated in a single verse (18:13), while the sparing of Jerusalem is elaborately unfolded (18:17–19:37). The devastation of Judah by Chaldean and other bands under Jehoiakim’s reign is formulated in a single phrase (24:2). The first siege of Jerusalem under Jehoiachin is, again, reported tersely (24:10), while the first deportation is unfolded in greater detail (24:14–16). Jerusalem’s second conquest is narrated more elaborately than the first, including a reference to severe famine (25:1–3). The only killings mentioned in the course of the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem are the “slaughter” (šht) of king Zedekiah’s sons (v. 7) and the “slaying” (nkh) of 71 members of the city’s elite in Ribla (vv. 18–21). The description of the city’s destruction refers to the burning of buildings and fortifications (vv. 8–10) and the temple’s despoliation (vv. 13–17), but no casualties are mentioned. The second deportation to Babylonia (v. 11) and the flight of “all the people” to Egypt (v. 26) are mentioned without any further detail. All in all, the description of the fall of Jerusalem, the “darkest days of biblical Israel,” is “reticent... dry and laconic.”

Readers may easily imagine the mass violence that these events involved. Even more so, it is striking how little is said about it. Never do we read that ordinary men, women, and children fell victim to the Assyrian or Babylonian invasions. Never are their troops agents of the verbs “to smite” (nkh), “to kill” (mwt hi.), or “to destroy” (šmd). Only once, in 2 Kgs 24:2, the Chaldean and other troops are said “to make” Judah “perish” (bd hi.), but even here, according to the Masoretic text tradition, Yhw is the principal agent as the one who sends them. The motif of the “ban” (root hrm) occurs but one single time in the voice of Sennacherib’s messengers who refer to “what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, banning them” (2 Kgs 19:11), but never is this measure said to have been taken against any town in Israel or Judah.

69 Crouch, War and Ethics, 191. For a discussion of ethical assumptions in Assyrian warfare see ibid., 35–64 and 119–55. Wider ideological contexts are discussed in Otto, “Zwischen Imperialismus und Friedenssopon.”
71 See the contributions in Hasegawa et al. (eds.), The Last Days; Grabbe, Ancient Israel, 191–2; Frevel, Geschichte Israels, 266–77; Schoors, Kingdoms, 101–4; Grabbe (ed.), Like a Bird; Becking, The Fall of Samaria.
72 Grabbe, Ancient Israel, 238–44; Frevel, Geschichte Israels, 294–300.
73 Albertz, Israel in Exile, esp. 78–81. For a succinct overview see Dubovský, “Suspicious Similarities,” 47–51.
74 For an analysis of the parallels and differences see Dubovský, “Suspicious Similarities,” 53–9.
75 The literary motif of temple despoliation is extensively discussed in Martins, Treasures Lost.
76 Sonnet, “The Siege of Jerusalem,” 73.
77 The “king of Babylon” is the agent of the verb nkh in 2 Kgs 25:21. Twice it is used for killings by Judeans: the people kill the insurgents against king Amon (21:24) and Judean insurgents kill Gedaliah as well as Judeans and Babylonians around him (25:25). The angel of Yhw is said to have “struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians” (19:35).
78 Again, the “king of Babylon” is the agent of mwt hi. in 2 Kgs 25:21, and the Judean insurgents against Amon act as killers (21:23). In 2 Kings 17, lions are presented as killers (v. 26), but not the Assyrians.
79 LXX 2 Kgs 24:2 does not render any reference to Yhw so that the punishment takes place in the human sphere. Cf. Rom-Shiloni, Voices from the Ruins, 246.
King Manasseh of Judah is accused of having spilled streams of innocent blood (21:16; 24:4), but the Assyrians and Babylonians are never accused of this crime.

While the voice of the narrator is quite terse in its accounts of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests, some other voices in the narrative make more drastic claims about these events. The Rabshakeh refers to the “men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and to drink their own urine” (2 Kgs 18:27). Another reference to the hardship of siege is found in Hezekiah’s message to the prophet Isaiah: “This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to the birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth” (19:3). Isaiah refers to the devastation of towns during Sennacherib’s invasion and adds, “their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded; they have become like plants of the field and like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it is grown” (19:26). In the context of Manasseh’s sins, a divine word, conveyed via anonymous prophets, announces: “I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line for Samaria, and the plummet for the house of Ahab; I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down” (21:12–13). These metaphoric expressions are effective, as they refer to unspeakable events by concealing rather than revealing them, which forces addressees to activate their imagination to decode their message.

Although the description of the physical violence committed by the Assyrian and Babylonian armies is described in the most terse and general terms, much energy is spent on their explanation. Some political issues are mentioned as causing effects, but theological rationalizations and justifications are foregrounded, and they consist of two basic ingredients: divine wrath, caused by human sin. The most extensive reflection on this matter is provided in 2 Kings 17. The fall of Samaria is said to be caused by sin that provoked divine anger (17:7–18, 20–23; cf. 18:12); guilt is also attributed to Judah in an anticipatory aetiology of its fate (17:19). Manasseh’s sins are considered decisive for the fate of Judah (2 Kgs 21; 23:26) so that Josiah’s cultic purges are in vain (2 Kings 23) and even Yhwh’s temple is doomed to fall victim to his anger (23:26–27). As foreseen by prophets (21:15–16), king Josiah (22:13), and the prophetess Huldah (22:16–17), divine wrath is the ultimate cause for Babylonian invasions (24:3–4) and Jerusalem’s destruction (24:20). After this final theological reasoning, the actual description of Jerusalem’s fall is marked by “theological silence.”

The narration of 2 Kings 17–25 is prepared, however, by extensive historiography, including divine and prophetic revelation, especially in the Book of Deuteronomy. The grand aetiology of the ultimate disasters of Israel and Judah is elaborately prepared by manifold Deuteronomistic thematic threads: divine law that, if broken, inevitably leads to ruin. The issue of mass violence is most drastically unfolded in “rhetorical maximalism” in Moses’ curses of Deuteronomy 28. Especially the “siege curses” (28:49–57) provide scenes that are “missing” from the Deuteronomistic narrator’s account without any restraint. The “grim-faced nation showing no respect to the old or favour to the young” (28:50) could be applied to both the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Dispersed among the nations, Israel will suffer from emotional distress that is comparable to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (28:64–67).

80 For analysis, see Rom-Shiloni, Voices from the Ruins, 267–8.
81 Most notably, the rebellions (verb mrd) against the imperial overlords (2 Kgs 18:7; 24:1, 20) are followed by military campaigns (2 Kgs 18:9; 24:2; 25:1).
82 Rom-Shiloni, Voices from the Ruins, 250–1.
83 For a brief overview, see Markl, “Efficacy,” 128–32.
84 Sonnet, “The Siege of Jerusalem.”
85 Ibid., esp. 80–2.
86 As Otto, Deuteronomion 23:16–34:12, 2013, points out, “Yhwh will bring a nation upon you from far away, from the end of the earth... whose language you do not hear” (Deut 28:49) reads like a combination of Isa 5:26 (“he will carry a signal for nations from far away, and whistle for him from the end of the earth”) and Jer 5:15 (“I am bringing upon you a nation from far away ... whose language you do not know, and you do not hear what they speak”). While Jer 5:15 clearly refers to the Babylonian invasion, the plural “nations” in Isa 5:26 may reflect the multi-ethnic composition of the Assyrian army (Beuken, Jesaja, 155).
The preceding survey of 2 Kings 17–25 suggests that its representation of mass violence committed by the Assyrian and Babylonian armies is marked by avoidance, metaphorization, and theologization. Drastic and detailed descriptions are avoided by the narrator. Prophetic voices are introduced for metaphorical elaboration (esp. 19:26; 21:12–13). Both the narrator and prophetic voices emphasize theological reasons for the suffering: human sin that led to divine wrath. Since human sin justifies the anger of Yhwh, it serves the purpose of theodicy. Insofar as the justified divine wrath is the ultimate cause for the aggression of human agents against Israel and Judah, the Assyrians and Babylonians are indirectly justified as well. Their acts are not subject to moral judgment, since they are but instruments of divine wrath.

4 Conquest and defeat: contrasts and continuities

In Deuteronomistic historiography, the contrasts between the topics of the conquest and the loss of the land go together with the contrasting roles of Israel as perpetrator and victim of mass violence. In the representation of the actors of mass violence, it may surprise that Israel is portrayed as committing the murder of the entire population of many cities East and West of the Jordan with explicit and repeated references to the killing of women and children, while such acts are never attributed to the Assyrian and Babylonian armies. This, again, contrasts with the historiography’s relationship to historical reality, since the Israelites’ acts are attributed to an imagined past, whereas the violence actually suffered at the hand of the Assyrians and Babylonians is presented in general and distant terms, without detailing any gruesome experience in the historiographical account – although anticipated in the curses of Moses.

As to the justifications of mass violence, both narratives strongly emphasize theological aspects, but in quite different ways. While the concept of the “ban” (ḥrm) is central to the ideology of Israel’s conquest, it plays hardly any role in the representations of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests. Israel’s extermination of the Canaanites is elaborately motivated by the discourses of Moses in Deuteronomy. In contrast, no divine or prophetic word conveyed to the Assyrians or Babylonians is reported in 2 Kings 17–25. Israel’s extermination of the Canaanites is essentially justified and motivated as a necessary means to protect Israel from being contaminated by Canaanite cult practices. Israel’s defeat at the hand of the Assyrians and Babylonians, in contrast, is principally explained by Israel’s and Judah’s own misconduct in the cultic sphere.

The latter point directs towards a line of continuity between the violence suffered by the Canaanites and the Israelites. According to this line of Deuteronomistic thought, committing the same kinds of abominations, including child sacrifice, caused both the Canaanites and the Israelites to lose their land. This historiographical pattern is made explicit in Deuteronomy and Kings: Because of sin, Israel suffers the same fate “like the nations” (kagôyîm) that “Yhwh is making perish before you” (Deut 8:20) and that “Yhwh carried away before them” (2 Kgs 17:11). Both fall victim to the wrath of Yhwh, which is thus a governing principle of Deuteronomistic historiography. A related pattern of historiographical reasoning is obedience towards Yhwh. Both the conquest of the land and its loss are grounded in Moses’s discourses of Deuteronomy. The conquest of the land is grounded in his command and motivation, its loss in his

88 On theodicy in Deuteronomistic Historiography see Rom-Shiloni, Voices from the Ruins, 245–51.
89 The structural analogy between the biblical view of Assyria as an instrument of Yhwh and the Assyrian self-representation as acting according to divine command is pointed out by Salo, “Assur."
90 Assyrian ideology, as addressed to Judah, is represented in the discourses of Rabshakeh (2 Kings 18:19–25, 27, 28–35). While Rabshakeh claims to have received Yhwh’s command to destroy Jerusalem (19:25), the failure of his mission betrays his lie. For example Deut 18:9–12; 2 Kgs 17:17; 21:2, 6. See Markl, “Polemics Against Child Sacrifice,” 76–83.
92 Markl, “Polemics Against Child Sacrifice,” 79. For an analysis of typological conceptions of history in Deuteronomy and Joshua, see Lohfink, “Geschichtstypologisch orientierte Textstrukturen.”
Because of obedience, Israel was able to conquer the land, because of disobedience, Israel and Judah lost their land.

5 Triumph and trauma: Deuteronomistic justifications of mass violence

The triumph and trauma of Israel’s conquest and loss of the promised land frame Deuteronomistic historiography. Both aspects of the story contribute to constructing collective identity for Israel, that is, an implicit audience that identify with “Israel,” and both contain justifications of mass violence that can be illuminated by trauma theory. Historically, the military conquests by the Assyrians and Babylonians of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the eighth to sixth centuries BCE, inflicted upon them complete destruction as political entities and entailed waves of mass violence that caused “collective trauma” (in Erikson’s sense) on the respective populations. The scribal elite that was deported to Babylonia 597/587 BCE invested creative energy to recover cultural identity by composing and redacting Deuteronomistic historiography, thus producing a monument of “cultural trauma” (in Alexander’s sense).

The distance and lack of empathy with victims seen in the historiographical presentations of the falls of Israel and Judah in 2 Kings 17–25 has been interpreted as repression: “the narrative erases the psychological trauma of the exiles.”95 While it is true that the narrative gives hardly any room to individual traumatic experience, it does represent the disaster of the communities of Israel and Judah as body politic. Can such a narrative of ultimate defeat serve the purpose of reconstructing collective identity of a community to be restored in the future?96 If Deuteronomistic historiography envisions any future community of Israel or Judah, it insists that the ultimate failure must be acknowledged, not principally as a defeat at the hand of human agents, but as one inflicted by the failures of the kings and people of Israel and Judah.

In this sense, both narratives – of the conquest and the loss of the land – could be read as an attempt at recovering agency. Against the background of the experience of helpless exposure to mass violence and ultimate defeat, the story of the conquest of the land could serve as a counterfactual narrative that celebrates a primordial victory, involving phantasies of the perpetration of orgies of mass violence that are, at the same time, an expression of utmost obedience towards divine command. While these imaginations may well appear, to the modern mind, as a psychological distortion, they are comprehensible as the consequence of traumatic suffering. The attribution of guilt to the victims of mass violence works, in the conception of Deuteronomistic historiography, for the demise of preceding cultures in the land, whose archaeological remains are still visible as warning testimonies “until this day” (e.g. Josh 8:28),97 as well as the blows of destruction suffered by Israel and Judah themselves. The representation of the defeat in 2 Kings 17–25 reduces the agency of the human aggressors to a minimum and attributes full responsibility to the defeated and their deity. Against the experience of utter helplessness, history – and the future – are placed in the hands of the audience. If there is to be any future for them and their representatives, they must take responsibility for their own fate in terms of obedience towards Yhwh and the Torah of Moses.98 In this sense, Deuteronomistic representation and justification of mass violence, even in the ultimate defeat of Israel and Judah, provide the seed of resilience for the defeated.

94 For an overview, see Markl, “Efficacy,” 123–4 and 128–32.
95 Janzen, “Deuteronomistic History,” 430; cf., more elaborately, idem, Trauma and the Failure of History, 83–8.
96 This doubt seems to have been shared by the Chronicler, who set out to rewrite Deuteronomistic historiography with a more hopeful and “constructive” outlook.
The positive explication of the collective identity of Israel, to which Deuteronomistic historiography points its readers, is Deuteronomy itself. Deuteronomy presents wars as the “cradle of the nation” of Israel and provides large-scale justifications of mass violence: the wars of conquest under Joshua are sanctioned by divine will and a necessary means to protect the collective identity of Israel as “sacred nation” (Deut 7:6). At the same time, the terrible violence envisioned as a consequence of Israel’s disobedience in the curses of Deuteronomy 28 leads to the perspective of a small remnant of Israel among the nations (Deut 4:27) who are supposed to return to obedience (4:29–30) and to the land. The restoration of prosperity does not involve any demand of violence (30:1–10).⁹⁹ Obsessed with self-blame and the need to take responsibility for everything that had happened, Deuteronomistic historiography desperately strives, in the end, to break through the vicious cycles of history.

While trauma theory may help to understand the justifications of mass violence in Deuteronomistic historiography of Israel’s conquest and loss of the promised land as a recovery of agency by the victimized group, the problem of the transmission of these justifications, inscribed in authoritative textual traditions, remains. The justifications have been mitigated in much of the history of their interpretation,"¹⁰⁰ but they have also seen a problematic history of consequences.¹⁰¹ The collective trauma inflicted by Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian imperialism has generated justifications of mass violence that have been inscribed into the cultural canon of Judaism and Christianity. In a period that sees renewed justifications of war and killings of civilians, this legacy requires deep analysis and efficient response.

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