

On a Mission from God? Putting the “Banned” Together Again in the Historical Books of the Old Testament

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Abstract: Although words associated with the root חרם have typically been associated with the meaning “destruction,” this paper argues that within the Old Testament’s historical books, both the verbal and nominal terms derived from it only include the meaning “destruction” when there are additional words associated with physical attack. Rather, by surveying all occurrences of the root across the historical books, it is proposed that its primary sense is of human renunciation of that declared חרם such that it belongs to YHWH. Although “destruction” cannot be excluded in all cases, this meaning occurs only when there are other contextual factors present.

Keywords: destruction, the ban, historical books

There can be little doubt that the Israelite practice of the “ban” (חרם) represents one of the most troubling features of the Old Testament. In this respect, there is no need to go to non-Christian rejecters of Christian faith and of the importance of the Bible such as Richard Dawkins, though it is something on which they gleefully seize.¹ Even a committed evangelical such as Christopher J. H. Wright treats it as one of the things about God he does not fully understand.² It should be said that this article will not resolve all the challenges that it poses. Neither is it a work of apologetics that seeks to justify God as he is reflected in those texts which speak of the ban.³ Rather, it is an attempt to reach a fresh understanding of the ban, especially as it is presented in the books of Judges, Samuel and Kings, in the hope that the insights generated there might in turn be significant for the other texts in the Old Testament that mention it. None of it will necessarily make the ban an easy topic to consider, but because there is such a significant linguistic, historical, and cultural gap between us and the biblical world, we should not be surprised that aspects of what we find in the Old Testament will be difficult. However, if the thesis of this article, that the root חרם relates to renunciation rather than destruction, is sustained, then it might at least form a basis from which those challenges might begin to be addressed.

¹ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 280, claims that the application of the ban in Joshua cannot be distinguished from modern acts of genocide.

² Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand*, 88.

³ Here, we might point especially to works such as Copan and Flanagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?*, and Copan, *Is God a Vindictive Bully?*.

Goals and Background

In this article, I wish to build on two pieces of prior work and extend it into the books noted above and then (very briefly) the rest of the Old Testament's Historical Books.⁴ In examining Joshua, I have argued that the language of the ban forms part of the book's hyperbolic language of warfare.⁵ Hence, if we follow the common pattern of translating occurrences of חָרַם with something like "utterly destroy," then we immediately run into a problem since we have instances of towns that are apparently utterly destroyed, yet which shortly after are apparently still present and occupied. The clearest example of this is the case of Hebron, which is seemingly "utterly destroyed" and left without population in Josh 10:36–37 and yet still occupied and apparently defensible in Josh 14:6–15. If we assume for a moment that the book of Joshua is internally coherent, then attributing a sense of "destruction" here is impossible. But once we recognise the presence of hyperbole as a key feature of the book's narrative form, it becomes possible to see that language of the ban is not used in Joshua to mean "destruction." Rather, it is part of a wider discourse that points to a comprehensive victory that was given by YHWH, but not one in which destruction is a necessary (or even primary) sense. Likewise, the metals placed under the ban in Josh 6:19 are clearly not destroyed, being transferred instead to YHWH's treasury.⁶ Moving from this initial work on Joshua, I have argued that Joshua's function as a text that bridges the books of the Pentateuch and Former Prophets means that we are called to read parts of Deuteronomy (especially) in light of what has happened in Joshua. This process makes clear that when Deuteronomy 7 introduces the ban,⁷ it too is using it without necessary reference to destruction.⁸ To be clear, the ban can be associated with destruction in both Deuteronomy and Joshua, but that destruction needs to be indicated in other ways, as it is not intrinsic to either the verbal or nominal forms of חָרַם. The purpose of this article is thus to extend this argument into the remaining books of the Former Prophets, using them as a basis for how we understand the ban as it occurs elsewhere.

It might be observed that the argument presented above is largely negative—what the ban is not. And it is finally insufficient to argue that we should not render references to the ban with language like "utterly destroy" without providing an alternative. That said, if it removes a misleading translation that is still a help. My own preference is to opt for something like "place under the ban" for the verb and "the ban" for the noun, partly because such language is somewhat awkward and can serve as a helpful reminder that חָרַם has no easy equivalent in English. It is a practice that is remote from the modern world, and a translation that forces readers to ask about what they are reading might help with that. But a translation equivalent is not the same as a statement about meaning—it is only ever an approximation of that meaning. Here, I want to affirm John Walton's careful argument for under-

⁴ The Hebrew canon, of course, does not recognize such a category, but it is a familiar grouping in the Protestant tradition.

⁵ Firth, *Joshua*, 26–27. Firth, *Including the Stranger*, 13–18.

⁶ The punishment on Achan (Joshua 7) for having taken some of these metals (along with some clothing) demonstrates that they were still removed from normal human use.

⁷ As well as when it is taken up in Deuteronomy 20.

⁸ See Firth, "Reading Deuteronomy after Joshua".

standing the ban as removing someone or something from human use, itself a function of the fact that what is placed under the ban belongs to God, not humans.⁹

Some clarification of the above is needed in light of the important work of Philip Stern.¹⁰ Stern has demonstrated that the ban was not something that originated in Israel, his careful study of the Mesha Inscription showing that it was part of the wider culture of the ancient Near East.¹¹ The evidence from the Mesha Inscription does show an understanding of the ban that involved destruction, perhaps understood as the logical extension of removing something from human use. If Stern is right, then the wider culture did include the element of destruction within its conceptualization of the ban. This insight is important, because Israel did not exist in a cultural vacuum, and we will find points where the wider understanding of the ban does intrude into the Old Testament, though it will be argued that it is never the affirmed understanding. Alongside this, it is also important to note Stern's distinction between the "war-חרם" and the "priestly-חרם." Although he argues that the latter retains elements of the bellicose element found in the war-חרם, he regards this as a more bureaucratic expression of the concept,¹² something primarily concerned with administration by priests rather than with the transition of the land of Canaan into a place of Israelite world order as with the war-חרם. Here, however, I will argue that we need to bring these expressions of the ban more closely together, seeing them as part of a unified sense for the ban, albeit one that is accessed in different ways, rather than separating them. That is, war represented one setting in which the ban could be accessed, but there were also priestly modes of doing this, and both result in that which is banned being removed from human use.

Method

It is not possible in an article such as this to consider all occurrences of the root חרם. Nevertheless, a starting point for this investigation is to consider all points where the root occurs in the books of Judges, Samuel and Kings. Because each of these are primarily works of narrative, it will be important to attend to how the narrative shapes the sense given to חרם. In doing so, we attend primarily to synchronic factors of usage rather than possible etymology since usage should always have priority. Here, it will be important to distinguish between instances where the ban is introduced by God as opposed to human characters. For human characters, there is the additional need of distinguishing between speakers if we are to determine the sense of the term and whether it is an approved understanding or not. We also need to consider the verb and the noun separately, even though there is a broad consensus that the verb (which occurs only in the *hiphil* and *hophal* stems) is derived from the noun. Derived forms, such as the city name Hormah (Judg 1:17), are not considered separately because their sense is shown by the wider narrative. If the verb is derived from the noun, then it is

⁹ Walton and Walton, *Lost World of the Israelite Conquest*, 169–71. There is a great deal of overlap between my position and that of the Waltons at this point, though they were reached independently of one another. However, their proposal of "renounce" as the appropriate translation seems to place too much emphasis on human initiative, though it is in the right area.

¹⁰ Stern, *Biblical Herem*.

¹¹ Ibid., 19–56. See also, Brekelmans, חרם, 474.

¹² Stern, *Biblical Herem*, 2.

appropriate to begin with an investigation of the noun. Within this investigation, we shall therefore need to consider the following texts:

1. Noun – 1 Sam 15:21, 1 Kgs 20:42
2. Verb – Judg 1:17, 21:11; 1 Sam 15:3, 8–9, 15, 18, 20; 1 Kgs 9:21; 2 Kgs 19:11

In each case, we shall ask whether חרם refers to destruction or the removal from common use, while accepting that the removal from common use might require destruction under certain circumstances. Where this is required, we would expect to find other language that makes this clear, suggesting that חרם alone does not have this force. The occurrences of the verb in 1 Samuel 15 shall be treated together since they clearly form one narrative unit, though it should be noted that attention to the noun will have a clarifying function, especially as it is the final mention of the ban in the narrative.

Survey of Texts

Nouns

1 Samuel 15:21

This occurrence of the noun falls in the narrative of Saul's battle with Amalek. Since this will be a primary focus in our analysis of the verb, we can pass over much of the larger narrative setting. Here, we can simply note that, consistent with the echoes of the Achan story that runs through the chapter (Josh 7),¹³ we have an instance of items having been taken from the ban. Unlike the account at Jericho (Josh 6:17–18), mention of the ban has not also led to a reminder of the fact that Israel was not to take from that which was banned. However, this feature can be assumed here since the taking of spoil from the ban forms the basis of Samuel's accusation to Saul (1 Sam 15:19). Although Samuel will finally slay the Amalekite king Agag, the assumption being that an enemy king should not survive, the primary issue is the fact that items have been taken from the ban. Saul's attempt to defend himself in verse 21 by noting that the people had taken from the best of the ban to sacrifice them to YHWH does not really help, because Samuel's point to him is that the men did not have the right to access this spoil. As items under the ban, they had been removed from common use, and that included offering them as sacrifice. Since the items under the ban already belonged to YHWH, it was impossible to sacrifice them—one cannot sacrifice to YHWH what is already his. Nevertheless, destruction is not the core of either Samuel's accusation or Saul's defence. In that Samuel has brought YHWH's message, and Saul's response aligns with it, we can assume that the sense they give to the noun is regarded as appropriate.

1 Kings 20:42

The introduction of the noun here is perhaps somewhat unexpected since nothing previously in this narrative has suggested that the ban was being applied. Rather, in a setting in which we have seen various battles between Aram and Israel, always initiated by Aram, we might have expected that this would represent a normal situation where the spoils of war could be claimed by the victors. As such,

¹³ See Firth, "Achan Typology in the Former Prophets", 27–29; Michael, "The Achan /Achor Traditions".

the announcement by a prophet that Israel's king, Ahab, had released someone whom YHWH had placed under the ban may come as something of a surprise. The wording here is also a little unusual in that the Aramean king is described as *אֶת־אִישׁ חֲרָמִי*, perhaps “the man of my ban.”¹⁴ It should also be noted that in this instance the ban is applied to a king who was not among the seven peoples typically regarded as residents of the land (cf. Deut. 7:1), though this will also apply to the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15. This suggests that although the ban was not necessarily a recurring feature of Israel's warfare, it was not necessarily restricted to the time of the conquest, even if that represents the largest concentration of points where the ban was applied. But the unusual instance of YHWH declaring something or someone to be “my” ban is important,¹⁵ since here it is the Aramean king who is the specific object of the ban. We cannot therefore apply the ban to other spoil—as is also clear from the final encounter between Ahab and the prophet when he specifically charges Ahab with having released Ben-hadad because of the covenant made between them (1 Kgs 20:34).

We need, however, to pause and consider some wider features of the narrative, as the final encounter between Ahab and the prophet represents the climax of a repeating pattern and the careful use of *Leitwörter* through the narrative.¹⁶ We should note that once the battle accounts have begun, each encounter between the armies is preceded by a prophetic announcement (1 Kgs 20:13, 22), a pattern that makes clear that Ahab's success is because of YHWH's actions on his behalf. Moreover, the Aramean king has been assured that Israel's gods are stronger only in the mountains and cannot prevail on the plain,¹⁷ leading to a further prophetic input (1 Kgs 20:28), one that makes clear that Ahab, and through him Israel, is to know YHWH.¹⁸ This knowledge is also built on the clear difference in size between the two armies—Aram's forces are significantly larger than Israel's, and they have also claimed land better suited to their army for the battle.

Following the battle, Ben-hadad sought mercy from Ahab. Received by Ahab into his chariot, Ben-hadad offered to return Israelite cities and give trading rights to Ahab in Damascus (1 Kgs 20:34). Having agreed and made a covenant, Ahab then “released” (*שָׁלַח*) Ben-hadad. Use of this verb immediately picks up a *Leitwort* from verses 1–10, with this verb occurring six times in these verses alone, always with Ben-hadad as the subject.¹⁹ Yet now, Ahab is the subject, and Ben-hadad the one sent away. It is this *Leitwort* that in turn is picked up by the prophet who confronts Ahab, reporting that YHWH's charge against Ahab is that he has “released” (*שָׁלַח*) Ben-hadad. The narrative of the wars

¹⁴ Some (e.g., Stern, *Biblical Herem*, 45) have noted that we could have a homonym here, with *חֲרָמִי* here having the sense of “my net.” The possibility should be acknowledged, and we may have a play on words here (as perhaps in Hab 1:15), but a reference to the ban seems more likely in that Ahab's life is to substitute for Ben-hadad's.

¹⁵ Elsewhere only in Isa 34:5, where *עַל־עַם חֲרָמִי* is formally similar.

¹⁶ See Beal, *1 & 2 Kings*, 262–63.

¹⁷ The comparison of YHWH to other deities by Ben-hadad here is consistent with Ahab's initial oath at the outset of the conflict which also invoked the gods (1 Kgs 20:10).

¹⁸ Note the plural verbal verb here, *וַיִּדְעָתֶם*, which broadens the scope of the previous statement unless we follow LXX and read the singular here. But MT is the more difficult reading and so should probably be retained.

¹⁹ McKenzie, *1 Kings 16–2 Kings 16*, 162.

in this chapter is thus bound by the use of this *Leitwort*. Yet what matters more for our purposes is that the charge against Ahab is not that he failed to kill Ben-hadad, only that he sent him away. He has been claimed by YHWH, and as such Ahab cannot release him. We should note that both instances of שָׁלַח where Ahab is the subject are *piel*, indicating that Ben-hadad had been constrained but is now released, unlike the other instances in *qal* which mean more simply “send.” The implication of this is that prior to this he already belonged to YHWH as someone under the ban, and that Ahab (like Achan and Saul) has in effect taken from that which was under the ban. The narrative does not explain how Ben-hadad was already under the ban, but of course this does not need to be explained to an audience familiar (to some extent, at least) with the ban. But if we ask how Ben-hadad could already have been under the ban, then the most probable explanation is that his condition was akin to that of the Gibeonites from Joshua 9, people assigned to YHWH’s work. That is, he would in some way be under priestly supervision, indicating that the priestly aspects of the ban were not distinct from the bellicose ones.²⁰ Quite how this worked in the northern kingdom is open to question, though Ahab’s sponsorship of the worship of other gods did not mean that YHWH worship ceased. The victory has made YHWH known, and in some way Ben-hadad’s position under the ban would continue to attest to this. Ahab’s life is therefore forfeit because he has taken from the ban, aligning him further with Achan.²¹

Verbs

Judges 1:17

The first occurrence of the verb in Judges falls in the book’s opening account of the Israelite tribes as they enter the land. This instance is only a vignette in the report on the tribe of Judah (often working with Simeon), and as such provides only limited information that could be used in support either of the destruction reading or the removal from common use. This is because the entire report is completed in the verse, and there is a lack of other information on which to draw in interpreting the verb here.

In this instance, Judah travels with Simeon to a place called Zephath, a settlement that is probably located in the Negeb. The vignette simply noted that they struck (נָכַח) the Canaanites who lived there and placed them under the ban. As is typical in the book of Joshua, use of the verb נָכַח here probably indicates victory over the Canaanites there, though the extent of the victory is not made clear. But if usage from Joshua remains an appropriate guide, then the statement that they placed them under the ban would then suggest a comprehensive victory. In light of this, they then rename the site “Hormah.” The toponym clearly indicates that the location is placed under the ban. Although Robert G. Boling regards the application of the ban here as irregular since he believes it only came about through a

²⁰ See further, Firth, *Joshua*, 183.

²¹ Contrast this reading with that of Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 208. Fritz sees here an attempt to align the earlier part of the account with laws which require destruction and the handing over of booty to YHWH, an approach that leads him to conclude that verses 35–40 are part of a later redactional layer. Fritz is right to note the novel introduction of the ban at this point, but the conclusions he draws are unnecessary in that they claim considerably more than the laws in Deuteronomy require, even if we grant that the ban could have meant “destruction.” In any case, they do not attend to the specifics of the prophet’s charge.

divine decree,²² the parallel with Num 21:1–3 would suggest that although it would perhaps more often originate with a decree from YHWH, it could also come about as a result of an Israelite vow. In any case, it is also possible that Judah and Simeon are portrayed here as continuing the application of the ban that applied in Joshua. The brevity of the report does not provide sufficient information to adjudicate on this matter.

This brevity does mean that we cannot exclude the sense of “destruction” here, though the background from Joshua would not require it. However, we can note that naming the site Hormah (“Banned”) could suggest that the point is that the site was no longer accessible to Israel for occupation. If we assume that this is a different site from the one that comes to bear the same name in Num 21:1–3,²³ then this could indicate that this toponym was used to mark off sites that had been renounced by Israel to YHWH. However, given that the two sites could be close, it might also represent an expansion of the area previously placed under the ban. In either case, the possibility exists here that the verb and its related toponym both point to Israelite renunciation of the site, and thus its removal from common use.

Judges 21:11

The only other instance of the ban in Judges comes in the closing chapter, part of a range of elements that link the book’s introductory and closing sections.²⁴ But where the book’s opening (Judg 1:1–3:6) shows some successes among its reports of failure, the book’s close presents a relentlessly negative portrayal of Israel. Here, they have become indistinguishable from the enduring Canaanite population, often echoing the figure of Achan.²⁵ The reference here to the ban occurs in the aftermath of the disastrous civil war with Benjamin (Judges 20) that followed the rape and death of a Levite’s concubine at Gibeah (Judges 19). Staying just with evidence from Judges 20, there are immediately good reasons for being suspicious of the motives and claims of the Israelites who have gathered at Mizpah (Judg 21:1). Here we begin a pattern of oaths being sworn, albeit oaths that later oaths will attempt to find a way of circumventing. Indeed, the oath that is initially reported becomes the very thing that Israel quickly tries to find a way around.

With Benjamin finally defeated, only six hundred men from the tribe survived (Judg 20:47) after being struck down by the other Israelites (Judg 20:48). There may be some hyperbole here, but the limited numbers surviving in Benjamin, which is what becomes the problem for Israel, suggest that we should understand this as a more or less literal—though clearly round—number. Given the level of slaughter, it is perhaps curious that the language of the ban is not invoked in Judges 20, especially since the opening vow declares that no one will give their daughter in marriage to a Benjaminite (Judg 21:1), effectively a form of renunciation. If the ban includes destruction as a core element, then we

²² Boling, *Judges*, 58.

²³ The site in Numbers is said to be near Arad, and the king list in Josh 12:14 treats these as different sites, each with its own king.

²⁴ See Beldman, *Completion of Judges*.

²⁵ Firth, *Including the Stranger*, 86.

might have expected that to be mentioned in Judges 20, though of course we always need to be careful about arguments from silence.

The vow prohibiting marriage with a Benjaminite is presented as the triggering moment that brought the tribes to Bethel, initially to lament the loss of one tribe. While there, they built an altar where they offered up burnt and fellowship offerings. This triggered an unexpected question about which tribe had not come up to this assembly, though there was no report of a summons. Only after this are we told that they had taken another oath, that whoever had not come to Mizpah for the assembly would be put to death, though apparently not under the ban. Reflecting the narrative's shifting chronological perspectives, this oath likewise occurred in the gap between the end of the events in chapter 20 and the start of chapter 21. Mention of these two oaths prepares for the statement that Israel had compassion on Benjamin, wondering what they could do to resolve the cutting off of one tribe in light of the vow not to give their daughters in marriage to them. That is, the oath had become a problem for them, though the problems that arise from making such promises to God are consistent with Jephthah's problems in following his vow (Judg 11:29–40).²⁶

Having identified that the town of Jabesh-gilead was unrepresented, the Israelite assembly sent an elite group of warriors there with instructions to “strike” (נכה) the town's inhabitants (Judg 21:10), with an explanatory note that this included the women and children, that is, the non-combatants, language that echoes Num 31:17–18. A further comment is then provided in verse 11, which stipulates that any male and any woman who was not a virgin (וכל-אשה ידעת משכב-זכר) were to be placed under the ban (תחרימו). In this instance, language of destruction is clearly present, though we need to ask what difference is provided by the reference to the ban after the mention of striking the town's inhabitants, language that on its own can refer to putting people to death.

We can begin by noting that the statement in verse 10 must be hyperbolic since it leaves no exceptions, even though the goal is to find potential wives for Benjamin. Here, we can point to Josh 6:21 which is similarly hyperbolic. Moreover, the fact that virgin women were excluded from the ban indicates that some women were expected to survive, and of course the narrative subsequently reports that four hundred virgin women were found. As Trent C. Butler notes, there is a wry sense of humour at work here since it is far from clear how the soldiers would know which women they were to place in each category.²⁷ Focusing specifically on the meaning of חרם here, we can observe that the women who survive are indeed kept alive for the purpose of marriage and are thus not given over to God. The others, however, are placed under the ban.

Should we therefore admit this as an instance of the ban carrying the meaning of “destruction”? The answer is that it is certainly linked with destruction, but in this case the reality of this has been communicated by the initial use of נכה. That is, it is not the placing of these people under the ban which initiated their destruction. What can be said is that the Israelites are not meant to benefit from the execution of the people placed under the ban, though given that this account presents them using various devices to get around seemingly secure oaths, we should not necessarily imply any particular

²⁶ The language differs between Jephthah and the Israelites, but “oath” and “vow” are conceptually related.

²⁷ Butler, *Judges*, 459.

virtue in renunciation on their part in determining that these people are under the ban. They are, in any case, applying the ban to meet their own ends, as there is no evidence that Jabesh-gilead's absence from the assembly rendered them liable to the ban in terms of Deut 13:12–18, the only situation in which it is imagined that an Israelite town might be placed under the ban. This application of the ban cannot, therefore, be regarded as legitimate, something the narrative makes clear through its report of the various ways the assembly sought to invalidate its oaths. The destruction commanded and wrought could be understood as representing a faulty understanding of the ban, but it is more likely that the existing possibility of the ban being associated with destruction (e.g., Deut 7:1–6, 23) brings it into this semantic realm here. If so, then even here, it is not destruction that is the primary focus of the ban, even though its potential for association with war means it can be linked to it.²⁸

1 Samuel 15

Since we have a cluster of references to the ban in this chapter, we can treat the verbal occurrences together, though it is important to note the point made above about the noun—that the accusation against Saul was not a failure to destroy Amalek but rather that he took from the ban, failing to recognize that whatever was placed under the ban was no longer available for him, even for something otherwise virtuous such as offering sacrifice to YHWH. Indeed, this dimension is already evident when the ban is first mentioned (1 Sam 15:3) when Saul is directed to go and “strike” (נכה) Amalek and place under the ban (*hiphil* חרם) all that they have.²⁹ As with Judg 21:11, we should note that the element of destructive warfare is provided by the initial verb, נכה, and not the mention of the ban. Clearly, the ban here is applied in the context of war, part of an enduring conflict with Amalek that reaches back to the time of the exodus (Exod 17:8–16) and YHWH's enduring war against them because of their opposition to Israel at that time. Along with this, Saul is told that he is not to have compassion on them, but to “put [them all] to death” (*hiphil* מות), irrespective of gender or age, including both humans and livestock (1 Sam 15:3). Taken literally, we would expect no Amalekite to survive, but there is again good reason for thinking this language is intentionally hyperbolic, a means of ensuring that Saul does indeed gain a significant victory. Moreover, some of this language is formulaic—we can note that the livestock listing corresponds to that of Judg 6:4 and that in both cases the language is representative rather than specific.

That some degree of hyperbole is intended may already be evident in this chapter. In verse 7, we are told that Saul “struck” (נכה) Amalek, apparently defeating them over a vast area after having lain in wait in a valley beside their city. We cannot locate where these events occurred, not least because the Bible typically presents Amalek as nomads, so the “city” here would need to be some form of fortified location, perhaps not permanent. Likewise, the places described cover a large swathe of the Negeb and northern Arabian Peninsula. The implication is perhaps more that Saul gained control of this region by defeating Amalek than that the battle covered this whole area, but if so, we already see a

²⁸ As noted above, in Joshua the verb typically occurs in a hyperbolic setting, and the same is probable here given that the verb נכה is also used hyperbolically. This does not directly impact the semantic range, though it would alter the pragmatic intent.

²⁹ In an earlier publication, I rendered the verb here “devote to destruction” (Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 168). It should be clear that I no longer regard this as the correct translation.

degree of hyperbole. Harry A. Hoffner notes this range, but rejects the possibility of hyperbole, arguing instead that it merely means they “eliminated” their main center.³⁰ Yet this is surely precisely what is meant by hyperbole, a deliberate overstatement for rhetorical effect. If what is meant is more restricted than a wooden reading of the language allows, then we have hyperbole. That is, what is described is a comprehensive victory over Amalek. Moreover, that several Amalekites appear later in Samuel (e.g., 1 Samuel 30) means that considerably more Amalekites survived than just Agag. The book of Samuel sees no problem with this survival, most likely because it recognizes that the genre of battle language is hyperbolic.

The presence of hyperbole and a battle context is important for understanding verse 8 which reports that Saul captured Agag alive but placed all the people under the ban “with the edge of the sword” (לפִּי־חֶרֶב). The verse creates a key contrast between Agag and the rest of Amalek, noting that Saul must have taken the opportunity to capture Agag alive, something apparently denied the rest of the people. Further, the enduring presence of Amalekites makes clear here that the “all” is a further example of hyperbole. Nevertheless, even if we grant the presence of hyperbole, the people affected were placed under the ban with the edge of the sword in a setting of warfare. In this case, we need to recognize that the renunciation of the people here in a context of war could result in the death of those placed under the ban. This is not, however, intrinsic to the ban but rather an effect of it being applied during war.

It also becomes clear that Saul’s failure to press home the ban then led to the rest of the soldiers failing to do so,³¹ taking the best of the livestock and all that was good for themselves. That is, they failed to carry out the ban. Saul has spared Agag and because of this both livestock and other valuables were held back, with only that which was of no value placed under the ban (verse 9). Rather than the defeat of Amalek giving glory to YHWH, the people have seen in Saul’s failure an opportunity to enrich themselves. Notably, it is the absence of renunciation that is the narrator’s primary focus.

Discussion of the ban pauses while the narrative turns again to Samuel when he hears³² about Saul’s failure from YHWH and then tracks Saul to Gilgal to confront him (verses 10–12). Since there are several sites called Gilgal we cannot be certain which is meant here, but since the site where Israel first entered the land is probably meant in 1 Sam 11:14–15 (for the renewal of Saul’s kingship) and 1 Sam 13:8–15 (where Saul was initially rejected), we should probably assume the same place here. If so, then Saul has journeyed a long way from the battle, having crossed most of Judah.³³ As such, he has kept Agag with him for some time, making clear that he has made a deliberate choice. On meeting Samuel, Saul’s initial claim is that he has fulfilled YHWH’s command, something immediately challenged by Samuel noting that he could hear livestock (verses 13–14). Saul then explains that the people (again, note the switch to the plural) had spared the best of the livestock for sacrifice

³⁰ Hoffner, Jr., *1 & 2 Samuel*, 1:510. Here, he is engaging with the view of Klein, *1 Samuel*, 150.

³¹ Note the shift from the singular verb in v. 9, which initially refers to Saul, to the plural verbs that follow, so that Saul’s sparing of Agag leads to a corporate failure in the application of the ban. See also Garsiel, *The Book of Samuel*, 340.

³² Note that “hear” (שָׁמַע) is a *Leitwort* in this chapter.

³³ The “Carmel” mentioned in 1 Sam 15:12 would be the Negeb town, not the site in Israel’s north.

to YHWH, but they had placed the rest under the ban (verse 15). Several things are immediately clear here, not least that Saul introduces a claim about the people that was not reported by the narrator earlier. Rather than accepting a leading role, Saul points to the choice of the people. But for our purposes, the key point to note is that Saul's contrast concerning the people is about what they kept and what they placed under the ban. Destruction may be implied for at least some of it because of the military setting, but that is a secondary point here. Someone could only sacrifice what belonged to them, and a legitimate sacrifice could not be made with what belonged to someone else. The renunciation of the livestock here probably means that it had been slaughtered, but the key point is that the sacrifice (if this is indeed what was intended) could not be legitimate. Moreover, if the "sacrifice" (זבח) mentioned in verse 15 permitted the people to eat from the sacrifice, then they would in fact benefit from livestock rather than renouncing it completely. It is a failure to carry through on the military dimension of striking Amalek, a point reiterated in verse 18, that leads to a failure to apply the ban. Both Saul and the people have failed to renounce that which was gained under the war according to YHWH's directive, and that is the key point Samuel makes again in verse 22–23.

1 Kings 9:21

The use of the verb here occurs in a passage which refers back to the passages in Joshua describing Israel's failure to expel various peoples from the land during the conquest period.³⁴ Oswalt points to the Gibeonites as a key example of this (Josh 9) since they were put to work in the sanctuary.³⁵ There were various peoples Israel was unable to control during the settlement period, but under Solomon a point was reached where greater control could be enforced. In particular, it is noted that Israel had been unable to place them under the ban. Once in a position of relative power, Solomon placed them into forced labour. The difficulty in determining the meaning of the verb here is simply that we have no significant context. Mention of the remaining nations in Joshua 13–19 typically refers to an inability to expel them (e.g., Josh 15:63; 16:10) or an additional failure to possess the land (e.g., Josh 17:12–13). As such, we could understand the reference here in Kings as meaning that the inability of the conquest and settlement period to expel these peoples was equivalent to a failure to apply the ban. Destruction need not be the issue so much as the fact that the peoples' continued presence in some way meant a lack of renunciation by the Israelites. Certainly, enslaving them does not involve any renunciation to YHWH since Israel now gained benefit from their labour. However, conclusions here need to be held lightly because of the lack of contextual information and the fact that the verb חרם was not used in the relevant contexts in Joshua.

2 Kings 19:11

Our final text offers perhaps the strongest case for understanding the verb in the sense of "destroy." However, attending to the narrative setting may suggest that we are to understand this as an inappropriate application of the ban.³⁶

³⁴ See Firth, *Including the Stranger*, 38–41.

³⁵ Oswalt, *1 & 2 Kings*, 1:235.

³⁶ The points made here are equally applicable to the parallel text in Isa 37:11.

This verse occurs in the setting of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem at the time of Hezekiah. At this point, Isaiah has reassured Hezekiah after he had sent messengers to inquire of him, declaring that YHWH would ensure the Assyrian king returned to his land and would die there. But, consistent with the pattern of the larger narrative block (2 Kgs 18:13–19:37), we encounter various claims about deities being set against one another.³⁷ So here, Isaiah's word of reassurance is immediately followed by the boastful claim of a senior Assyrian figure, the Rabshakeh.³⁸ This officer, in part responding to possible Egyptian intervention through messengers, warned Hezekiah not to trust in YHWH. His reason is that no other deity has rescued their city from the Assyrians, and Hezekiah should not imagine that YHWH will be the exception to this, effectively repeating the claim from 2 Kgs 18:33–35, except that this time the message is given directly to Hezekiah. Indeed, he is confident that Hezekiah will have heard of what the Assyrian kings have done to other lands, even placing them under the ban, making this the fresh point in the argument. Given the nature of Assyrian war ideology, we should probably imagine that the verb here does refer to destruction to at least some extent, though probably as a form of hyperbole that aims to persuade Hezekiah to yield. In any case, given that a primary goal in the Assyrian expansionist policy was to obtain wealth and slaves from the captured peoples, destruction is not necessarily the dominant feature here. Assyria may have mastered the art of ruthless violence, but violence was not the goal. Rather, operating on an economic model that assumed limited wealth in which the way one nation became richer was through taking from another, placing these lands under the ban was primarily about claiming their wealth, giving it to Assyria. Although the Assyrians therefore use the language of the ban and probably include a degree of destruction as part of it, they present it differently to what we have seen above for Israel, seeing it as a means of enrichment, even if some of it no doubt went to the temple of Asshur. In that the Assyrians are shown as not understanding YHWH, we should not be surprised if their attempt at using Israel's terminology fails to understand Israel's own nuances, instead reflecting the wider ANE pattern also seen in the Mesha Inscription.

Conclusion

It is time to draw some conclusions from this study. The most important is that when we examine the use of both the nominal and verbal forms of חָרַם in these texts, there is no instance where it clearly means “destroy” without other contextual language which situates it in this semantic range. Both instances of the noun are more clearly related to the concept of renouncing a human claim to what is under the ban rather than destruction, a point made clear by the prophetic accusation in each case. Although we cannot assert with certainty that no instance of the verb refers to destruction, we can observe that it only comes to have this sense when other elements are present. As such, we may reasonably conclude that although the ban can be closely associated with destruction, it is not something inherent to it. Rather, the primary element is one of renouncing whatever is under the ban and yielding it to YHWH alone. This does not mean, as we see in Judg 21:11, that Israel cannot misuse

³⁷ See Fewell, “Sennacherib's Defeat”.

³⁸ The term means “chief eunuch,” but we should probably understand it to mean someone with a senior position in the army. See Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 256.

the ban, attempting to pervert it to their own benefit. These texts thus engage with a concept that existed more widely in the ANE, and perhaps existed before Israel's arrival into the land, but show that Israel is led to nuance the concept. Its presence in war settings means that the bellicose element is not absent from any of the passages considered here, but we have noted that the separation from the priestly ban is not borne out by these texts. They are not really two separate approaches to the ban but rather points on a continuum, with renunciation as the key element.

Can this be applied more broadly to other instances of the ban in the Old Testament? Here, our comments can only be suggestive. Obviously, the close parallel that exists between 2 Kgs 19:11 and Isa 37:11 means that our conclusions can be carried across with confidence to that passage. The same is true of 2 Chr 32:14, even if the Chronicler does not follow the source material quite as closely. Forfeiture of resources would also seem the intent in Ezra 10:8. By contrast, 2 Chr 20:23 portrays other ANE peoples applying the ban, and therefore their approach is consistent with the wider ANE pattern. Further attention is needed for the additional references in the Latter Prophets, but it is reasonable to expect that renunciation rather than destruction is the core idea there too and that the distinction between the war and priestly forms of the ban need not be retained.

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