



BY CLAUDE F. MARIOTTINI

SWORDS

Their Development and Use

AFTER ADAM AND EVE sinned against God by eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were excluded from eating from the tree of life. To protect the tree of life from Adam and his descendants, the Lord placed cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:24).

The Sword as a Weapon of War

The Bible generally speaks of a sword in the context of war and personal combat. Weapons played an important part in the life of Israel since the nation had to spend much time fighting against its enemies, first against the Canaanites and eventually against others nations, especially the Arameans, Assyrians, and Babylonians. Thus, the Old Testament has much to say about various kinds of weapons, both defensive and offensive.

The biblical writers do not give, however, an exact description of many of the battle weapons. Information in the Scriptures does not provide the details necessary to understand these weapons' true nature.

One of the most popular weapons the Bible mentions is the sword. The Hebrew word for sword is *hereb*. The word appears over 400 times in the Old Testament and designates various kinds of weapons and tools.¹ The word *hereb* designated "flint knives" or "swords of rock" that Joshua used to circumcise the Israelites after they crossed the Jordan (Josh. 5:2). This use of the expression "swords of rock" indicates that persons made knives or swords from flint before the introduction of bronze (about 3150 B.C.) and iron (about 1200 B.C.). The Old Testament also uses the word "sword" to designate a chisel (Ex. 20:25) or simply an iron tool (Ezek. 26:9, HCSB).

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN SWORDS



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/7/70)

Ur's Early Dynastic III
(2600–2500 B.C.)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/19/77)

Mycenaean
(1300–1100 B.C.)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JAMES MCLEMORE/ ISTANBUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (10/34/15)

Hittite sickle sword
(13th century B.C.)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/15/51)

Elamite
(10th–9th centuries B.C.)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ/ HATAY ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (12/16/3)

Hittite
(9th–8th centuries B.C.)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, OXFORD (31/32/44)

Roman Period
(1st century B.C.)

The sword may designate a two-edged dagger or a short sword like the one Ehud used to kill Moab's King Eglon. His double-edged sword was "a gommed in length" (Judg. 3:16, HCSB note). A gommed was a short cubit, about 18 inches long, a measurement that went from the elbow to the knuckles of a clenched fist.² The sword's size allowed Ehud to conceal the weapon under his garment. The King James Version translates the Hebrew word as "dagger," suggesting that Ehud's sword was shorter than other swords.

Persons in ancient societies used two main types of swords in combat: the short sword for stabbing and the single-edge scimitar or the long sword for striking. The striking sword was generally straight, with a long metal blade. The expression "the edge of the sword" (Josh. 6:21) may refer to a single-edge striking sword. Other striking swords, though, were curved. The curved scimitar resembled a sickle, thus it became known as the sickle sword.³ Most of the early swords were bronze. As people learned how to manufacture and work with

hard metals, they developed better and sturdier swords. Blacksmiths forged swords of iron (Joel 3:10). At the beginning of the monarchy, the Philistines controlled the production of weapons made of iron. Israel had no blacksmiths. "So on the day of battle not a sword or spear could be found in the hand of any of the troops who were with Saul and Jonathan; only Saul and his son Jonathan had weapons" made of iron (1 Sam. 13:22, HCSB).

The sword was the most important weapon soldiers used in close-contact combat. One of the earliest

In southern Israel, Egyptian smelting area dating to about 1300–1100 B.C. Ovens were used mostly for smelting copper ore, abundant in the area around Timna.

Page 51: Dated to the 15th cent. B.C., excavated from a Mycenaean tomb, a gold hilt and pommel revetment decorated with hammered spirals and concentric circles.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KRISTEN HILLER



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KRISTEN HILLER



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRENT BRUCE/ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, OXFORD (32/41/62)

Left: Part of a flint sickle; from Beth-Shemesh; dated to Iron Age III (701-586 B.C.). Flint sickles were in use after the invention of metallurgy. In the Iron Age, flint sickles were composite tools made of several pieces of flint set in a wooden handle.

Left: In Madaba, Jordan, located adjacent to the Church of the Prophet Elias (Elijah), is a crypt decorated with a mosaic depicting the tree of life.

uses of the sword as a weapon in the Bible occurred when Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and killed every male of Shechem as retribution for the violation of their sister (Gen. 34:25). The biblical narratives mention the sword several times during the period of the wars of conquest of the land of Canaan.

Sword type dictated its military use. Generally, soldiers carried the sword in a sheath buckled to a belt. Joab, the captain of David's army, wore a uniform and over it was a belt around his waist with a sword in its sheath (2 Sam. 20:8). Goliath also used a sword he kept in its sheath (1 Sam. 17:50-51). The gruesome description of how a single

stroke of Joab's sword disemboweled Amasa attests to the extent of a sword's potential for wounding someone (2 Sam. 20:8-12).

The Sword of the Lord

Old Testament writers portrayed God as taking the sword, either to defend Israel against its enemies or against Israel as a punishment for its covenantal violations. When the sword was used to judge Israel for its unfaithfulness, the sword was mentioned together with famine and plague (2 Chron. 20:9).

In Joshua 5:13-14, the man standing before Joshua with a drawn

Right: Terra-cotta plaque dated to about 450 B.C. depicts a rider holding a sword with a two-edged straight blade and a massive hand-guard. The mythological hero Bellerophon is riding Pegasus and raising his sword over the mythological fire-breathing creature Chimaera.

The beast has taken the form of a lioness with a snake for a tail, and a goat emerging from its back. Made on the Island of Melos.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (81/18/54)

Left: From Rash-Sharma, Late Bronze (1300–1200 B.C.), cuneiform tablet with a mythological

the work of Baal. The Ugaritic god Kothar, patron of the blacksmiths, declares Baal victorious over his adversaries.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ LOUVRE MUSEUM (35/15/93)

sword in his hand was the commander of the Lord's army who came to fight with Israel as they prepared to conquer Jericho. Also, Deuteronomy 33:29 identified the Lord as a shield that protected Israel and as the sword of their triumph. The psalmist spoke of God's sharpened sword (Ps. 7:12) and God's saving sword, which He used to deliver His people.

When the Assyrians were preparing to attack Jerusalem, Isaiah prophesied that the Assyrians would fall by a sword, but not by a human sword (Isa. 31:8), for the Lord, as a warrior (Ex. 15:3), would fight for Israel. In the day of

the Lord's revenge against Israel's enemies, the sword of the Lord was to be used to punish the Cushites (Zeph. 2:12) and to cause the devastation of Philistine cities (Jer. 47:1-7). When God's judgment against the Philistines came by the hands of the Babylonians, the devastation was so great that Jeremiah pictured the Philistines pleading with God to stop the devastation: "Ah, sword of the LORD! How long will you be restless? Go back to your scabbard; be still; be silent!" (v. 6, HCSB).

The Figurative Use of Sword

The Old Testament's figurative usage of the sword reflects this weapon's popularity in Israelite society.⁴ The call to gird one's sword (Ps. 45:3) was a call to prepare for war. A man able to draw the sword (Judg. 8:10, KJV) denotes one able to serve in the army. The sword itself was the symbol of war and slaughter (Lev. 26:25; Isa. 34:5), of divine judgment (Deut. 32:41), and

of power and authority (Rom. 13:4).

The Word of God is "the sword" of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17). The Bible additionally speaks of the sword to represent the Word of God (Heb. 4:12); the protection of God (Deut. 33:29); severe calamities (Ezek. 6:3); deep anguish (Luke 2:35); the wicked's tongue (Ps. 64:3); the evil done by wicked people (37:14); and false witnesses (Prov. 25:18).

Drawing one's sword was figurative of war and destruction (Lev. 26:33); sheathing the sword symbolized peace and the end of violence (1 Chron. 21:27); living by the sword was a sign of seizing things by violence (Gen. 27:40); the sword not departing was a sign of continuing calamity and conflict (2 Sam. 12:10).

Thus, the flaming sword God sent to protect the tree of life in the garden was not in the hands of the cherubim since the word cherubim is plural and the word for sword is singular. Rather, the flaming sword was the sword of the Lord, the sword of divine justice preventing fallen humanity from gaining access to the tree of life. **B**

1. O. Kaiser, "הרב" [hereb; sword], in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. David E. Green, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 155-56.

2. "גומד" [gomed; cubit] in Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 167.

3. Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Times*, vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1963), 44, 60-61.

4. "Sword" in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, gen. ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic Press, 1998), 835-36.

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