

# YAHWEH AND DIVINE WARFARE RITUALS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

IN ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CULTURES, earthly battles were thought to be extensions of heavenly battles between the gods. According to religious myths of the region, divine warfare usually followed a pattern of victory, kingship, housebuilding, and celebration.<sup>1</sup>

By following this pattern of divine warfare, Yahweh makes Himself known using the language and customs of the Canaanites. Israel's victories affirm that Yahweh is superior to all mythological gods. The divine-warrior pattern found throughout all the Bible establishes and celebrates God as the Creator and ruler of the universe.

1. *Warfare.* The people of the ancient Near East rightly believe that battles are fought in the heavens, which mortals cannot see. However, they don't understand who is in control. The world is not governed by the Baals of Mesopotamia or Marduk of Babylon, but by Yahweh.
2. *Victory.* The exodus, conquest, and establishment of Israel as a kingdom are the definitive victories of the Old Testament. However, throughout Scripture, God wins victories over His enemies. In the books of the Law, God frees His people from Egyptian bondage (the exodus). In the books of history, God fights the Canaanites to establish a new order based on His laws. Jesus's resurrection is the victory won in the New Testament. The final battle has yet to be fought. When Jesus returns, He will destroy Satan, death, and all the powers of darkness (1 Cor. 15:24–28).
3. *Kingship.* A coronation followed a decisive battle of the gods in ancient Near Eastern myths. Following the exodus, God becomes Israel's king. After Israel is established in Canaan, God anoints David as the king whose dynasty will last forever.
4. *Housebuilding.* Solomon's temple fulfills the ancient Near Eastern tradition of constructing a house for a worthy god. Unlike false gods who cannot respond to worshippers, Yahweh makes a dramatic appearance at the temple's dedication, proving He exists and desires to dwell among His people (2 Chron. 7:1).
5. *Celebration.* In the ancient Near East, victory in warfare affirmed a god as the source of life. Songs and poems were written to commemorate major victories. The Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1–43) and many of the Psalms are victory poems (e.g., Ps. 68) honoring Yahweh. The seven annual feasts the Lord institutes celebrate God's power over all aspects of life, including the cycles of nature, fertility, and prosperity.

<sup>1</sup>Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, chapter 6: "The Pattern of Divine Warfare in the Bible and the Ancient Near East," *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 83–85.