

Deuteronomy 20:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people,

Analysis

And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people וְיֹאכַל כָּבֵדְכֶם אֶל-מִלְחָמָה וְנִגְשֵׁה כֶּהָן וְדִבֶּר אֶל-^{וּ} כָּבֵדְכֶם, ve-hayah ke-qorvekhem el-ha-milchamah ve-nigash ha-kohen ve-dibber el-ha'am)—the kohen (כהן, priest) had both religious and military functions in holy war. Unlike surrounding nations where military chaplains offered sacrifices to appease war gods, Israel's priest proclaimed theological truth: Yahweh fights for Israel (v. 4).

The timing is significant: **when ye are come nigh unto the battle** suggests the priest spoke just before engagement, when fear would be strongest. This wasn't generic religious ceremony but specific pastoral care for soldiers facing death. The priest's role distinguished Israelite warfare as covenant conflict—not merely political expansion but executing divine judgment on Canaanite wickedness (Deuteronomy 9:4-5) and defending the holy nation.

Historical Context

Deuteronomy 20 regulates Israelite warfare during the conquest period (c. 1406-1390 BC) and beyond. The priest mentioned here was likely the high priest or a designated priestly representative, not local priests. Israel's military theology was unique: Yahweh was the Divine Warrior who fought for His people (Exodus 15:3), making military success dependent on covenant faithfulness rather than mere tactical superiority. The priest's pre-battle address provided theological

reassurance rooted in covenant promises. Later, during the divided monarchy, priests sometimes accompanied armies (2 Chronicles 13:12, 20:21-22), continuing this tradition of spiritual leadership in warfare.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does the priest's role in warfare demonstrate that Israel's battles were fundamentally theological, not merely political?
2. What parallels exist between the priest's encouragement before battle and pastoral preparation of believers for spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:10-20)?

Interlinear Text

וְיִהְיֶה	וְקָרְבָּנָה מִ	אֵל	בְּמָלֹתָם הַ	יְהִי שֶׁ
H1961	And it shall be when ye are come nigh	H413	unto the battle	shall approach
	H7126		H4421	H5066
בְּכֶתֶת	אֵל יְדַבֵּר	בְּאַתְּמָה :		
that the priest	and speak	H413	unto the people	
H3548	H1696		H5971	

Additional Cross-References

2 Chronicles 13:12 (Parallel theme): And, behold, God himself is with us for our captain, and his priests with sounding trumpets to cry alarm against you. O children of Israel, fight ye not against the LORD God of your fathers; for ye shall not prosper.

Numbers 31:6 (Parallel theme): And Moses sent them to the war, a thousand of every tribe, them and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, to the war, with the holy instruments, and the trumpets to blow in his hand.

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