Kelle, Brad E.

*Ancient Israel at War 853–586 BC*


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The publisher of the Essential Histories series specializes in military history on a global scale. The general reader is well served by Kelle’s treatment of the essentials of Israelite and Judean political and social history from the tenth through the fifth centuries, and well beyond the temporal range announced by the title. The treatment is moderate mainstream, that is, along the lines of Miller and Hayes or Donner, and the author reflects briefly but succinctly the epistemological problem of doing history with biblical texts. I do not hesitate to recommend this history for undergraduate classroom use in religious or Western culture studies.

I am not quite sure whether each and every military historian will be equally happy with the book. One might doubt Kelle’s view that Nebuchadnezzar campaigned as far as Beersheba in 586 B.C.E., on the assumption that the Judean south became Edomite as early as 597. His reconstruction of Sennacherib’s campaign in 701 follows the biblical and Assyrian narrative even where the geographical, not chronological, arrangement of the latter makes little sense from the point of view of military operations. (Kelle might have found Grabbe 2003 useful.) Here I will elaborate my criticism only on the point of Ahab’s two thousand chariots at Qarqar.
Given the inadequacies of battlefield control and command in those days, there were only two possible outcomes of a major battle: a rout, if one side panicked; or a draw, if none of the two sides turned heels. I do not disagree, therefore, with Kelle’s evaluation of Qarqar as “a [tactical] draw and [not: or] a strategic victory of the coalition” (36–37; the brackets are mine, based on Spalinger 2005’s magisterial reconstruction of the battle of Qadesh on the Orontes as a tactical triumph for Ramesses II and a strategic victory for the Hittites). This is not necessarily a contradiction to Mayer’s 1995 conclusion that the Assyrians remained masters of the field. I also agree with Kelle that Ahab did indeed contribute some two thousand chariots, including contingents from Judah and other vassals and/or allies (36; among “others,” I would, however, look for Gath, Ashkelon, and Gaza rather than Moab and Edom). I contest, however, his reference to the reduction of this number to as little as two hundred by some critics (35), especially in the light of the two reasons cited in support of this “emendation”: the population of the city of Samaria; and the lack of sufficient stable space at Megiddo (see 21). First, the “Megiddo of the Stables” (Megiddo IVB) did not yet exist in the Omride period—this is the Megiddo of Jeroboam II; second, the size of an army does not depend on the size of the population it is supposed to protect—or Great Britain must have had less than half the population of Prussia in 1739.

In the ninth and eighth centuries, the Israelite, Aramaean, and Assyrian armies had units of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten (20), and not just for the infantry. Let us transcribe that hierarchy into military terms and talk of regiments, squadrons, troops, and sections. Regiments of twenty troops recall one the proposed etymologies for the term hussar (of disputed, either Polish or Hungarian, origin): every “twentieth man” to fight, the other nineteen to feed him. A troop of fifty was the percentage of men from a regiment’s district of recruitment that could be kept under arms all the time under the restraints of contemporary agricultural productivity. Perhaps the serving troop rotated; the rest of the (feudal) levy was not called up until mobilization. In this case, one should not distinguish (as Kelle does) between the “levy” and the “regular army.” In addition, there were the household troops (the royal guard, in all probability not very numerous in Israel), but Kelle disregards two categories of troops in Near Eastern armies, from the pharaohs to the Ottomans, which were, according to biblical references, employed by the kings of Israel and Judah and/or their Babylonian, Moabite, and Edomite opponents: mercenaries and freelancers (or volunteers). Mercenaries, in the pre-Hellenistic world, were groups of warriors with a foreign ethnic background taken into the service of the king and recompensed with land rather than money (as attested from the Egyptian Middle Kingdom through the reign of David). Freelancers joined fights on the condition of “deferred payment” in form of booty (like the Ottoman akinçi).

Could Shalmaneser have seen two hundred chariots at Qarqar and put down “two thousand” due to its better sound? What were a field commander’s options to estimate
the opposing numbers, with no telescopes or aerial photography available? Some generals of later periods are reported to have developed a sense for space-people correlation on sight and to have produced good guesses; others did not. So the means that come to mind are (1) intelligence and (2) counting and evaluating the formations in the *ordre de bataille*. “Intelligence” would imply that Shalmaneser knew the number of his enemies’ regiments and inserted these into his battle report (in this case, two regiments of chariots and ten of foot soldiers comprised the Israelite military establishment; the number of soldiers actually on the field of Qarqar would remain unknown). One observation argues that “intelligence” was indeed involved: for the distant Israelites, the Assyrians knew only the number of regiments; for Damascus and Hamath, they could go down to the squadron level (twelve and seven of chariotry and cavalry each); for Arwad and Shiannu, they could even count sections. The “observation of tactical formations” would imply that the Israelites formed their chariotry in two masses that the Assyrians judged to be regiments, whereas the Aramaeans kept them in smaller units that looked like nineteen squadrons.

For an estimate of the magnitude of error involved in these two methods of military (ac)counting, the “Charge of the Light Brigade” might provide a good example. The Russians knew that they were about to be attacked by five regiments, so they might have expected some three thousand sabers. They also knew from the *Times*, which they eagerly read, that the British were far from their full compliment in the autumn of 1854, so they might have halved that number. The brigade charged in three lines: two regiments in the first and third, the 11th Hussars in the second. If the dust (or dirt) was dense enough to cloud the differences in uniforms, the Russians might have concluded that they were attacked by two or three regiments: 600–900 men with the above-mentioned reduction. Or they recognized the five different units but realized that each did not consume more space than a squadron, making for 250–300 men (again with the above-mentioned reduction). In estimates such as these, it is common procedure to strike out the extremes and cling to the average. They would have felt they were being attacked by approximately six hundred men: Tennyson’s “noble six hundred,” which were actually 673.

Is the number of two thousand Israelite chariots “disproportionate” to the Aramaean and Assyrian numbers (see 20–21)? Not at all. The chariot was a mobile platform for archers; chariots were neither cavalry nor tanks but were the equivalent of mounted rifles. In the ninth century, it was discovered (first, it seems, by the Assyrians) that horses without chariots could serve in the same function as well. Much later someone realized that men not only on but together with horses could be more detrimental to their enemies in other ways; that was the birth of the real cavalry, but this leads us well beyond the ninth century B.C.E. Assyria was leading, the Aramaeans were following, but Israel in 853 was still thinking in Late Bronze Age terms. Chariotry was the past; cavalry was the future. But then the Omrides did reinvent Egyptian patterns of military control from the Late Bronze
period: the ratio of 1:5 between regiments of foot and chariot; the unfortified cities (as in ninth-century Megiddo); the army concentrated in fortified camps (as in Jezreel and Hazor). In the Assyrian army, riders still worked in pairs: the archer and his “driver,” or shield-bearer. The Aramaeans, in order to produce some “cavalry” on short notice, evidently put riders on the reserve horses of the chariots (because the numbers of chariots and cavalymen match). These may or may not have worked in pairs. What counts for the outcome of the battle is not the chariot-to-foot ratio but the ratio of mounted bows to infantry.

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<tr>
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<th>Chariots</th>
<th>Cavalry</th>
<th>Mounted Bows 1</th>
<th>Mounted Bows 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Damascus and Hamath</td>
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<td>1,900</td>
<td>3,800</td>
<td>2,650</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Coalition</td>
<td>3,940</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>5,840</td>
<td>4,690</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assyria</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>[7,500]</td>
<td>4,750</td>
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In the table, Mounted Bows 1 assumes that every cavalryman was an archer (clearly not the case in Assyria); Mounted Bows 2 counts half the cavalry as archers. Only this calculation leads to nearly equal numbers on both sides. If Israel would have supplied much less than two thousand chariots, it would not have been a prominent military player of the time, and the coalition would sure have been licked.

Could the kingdom of Israel have afforded and accommodated this number of chariots? Yes. Omri’s annexation of the Canaanite cities, Moab, and the Galilee should have filled the royal coffers much in the same way as Henry VIII financed his running expenses (and, for a short time, even a fleet) by his “reformation” of the church. When Elizabeth took over, the money was gone. Booty was, and remained for the next couple of centuries, an important factor in state economics. Egyptian-type chariots were not very expensive (40–50 sheqels, 60 percent of it for the beam, which is why chariots were always drawn by two horses; a one-horse chariot would have needed two beams). Nor were horses horribly expensive once one had learned to breed them. What was expensive was the upkeep of four thousand horses, except in the Jezreel and the upper Jordan Valley, where water and pasture were abundant all year round. It is easy to determine where the two Israelite
regiments of chariots were quartered: in the military camps of Jezreel and Hazor. In all probability, one company (fifty chariots with one hundred men and one hundred horses) were stationed there permanently to guard the camp and to care for the horses (with some additional staff); 950 other chariots had to be kept in storage. An Egyptian-type chariot needs 1.5 square meters storage area (if stored on its “back,” beam up); that means that it would have required 0.15 hectare to store 950 chariots. Ninth-century Hazor and Jezreel covered between 3 and 4 hectares; in addition to one regiment of chariots, each fortress or military camp could easily have accommodated several depots of infantry.

Kelle has given us a decent, readable, and useful short history of Israel, but his book contains not what I would expect to read in a military history of ancient Israel.

References

