Kelle, Brad E.

*Ancient Israel at War 853–586 BC*


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This book is part of the Essential Histories series released by Osprey Publishing, a set of works presenting introductions to the political, strategic, cultural, and other facets of many major wars, both ancient and modern. Each book in the series is less than one hundred pages in length, and each focuses on one particular geographical area or military engagement. Like the rest of the series, this volume is aimed at a popular audience; as the title makes clear, it focuses on a three-hundred-year period of Israel’s history and the political interactions of the Israelite kingdoms with each other, as well as with surrounding groups and empires.

Kelle’s work has much to recommend it, especially to those with a general interest in ancient history. His writing style is clear and engaging, and the book has wonderful maps and photos (primarily of ancient reliefs), most of them in color, as well as a detailed timeline of Israelite military history (12–13). In addition to the political impact of war, the book also addresses the social, economic, and religious influences and ramifications of warfare and is thus broad enough in its scope that it could serve as a popular introduction, albeit an abbreviated one, to Israelite history as a whole. The brevity of the volume necessitates that the difficulties of Israelite history be addressed in the simplest of terms, but, to his credit, Kelle does illuminate various complexities of studying ancient
Near Eastern history and warfare. It should be noted, however, that Kelle’s coverage of
the ancient Near East is largely focused on Mesopotamia and its dealings with ancient
Israel; ancient Egypt is covered less, although groups such as the Arameans, Ammonites,
Moabites, and—toward the end of the book—Persians receive a good deal of attention.

Considering the book’s many positive features, I expect that general readers and students
will respond quite positively to it. Nonetheless, the work does have a few drawbacks that
should be addressed. The first concerns citation of sources. Apart from the books
suggested by Kelle at the end of the work for further reading, he gives no indication of
what secondary sources he may have drawn upon in writing different sections of the
book. Thus, the information he provides, as is so typical of historical works of this kind, is
often given the illusion of being uncontested fact. For the most part, this is
unproblematic, but in a few areas (e.g., the discussion of Hezekiah’s “storage and supply
system” on 49–50) the straightforward presentation of the material is more misleading,
and this characteristic is exacerbated, if not created, by a lack of scholarly citation. Kelle
does cite primary sources in a very spare endnote section but rather curiously does not
use parenthetical citations for citing biblical sources quoted in the body of the text;
instead, he merely italicizes such quotations to show that they are in fact quotations and
not his own writing. These quotations were often not introduced at all in the text. Hence,
the only manner of uncovering what particular source was being quoted was to flip over
to the endnotes. This is something that I imagine most readers would find confusing and
that a few parenthetical citations would have addressed quite easily.

While the features mentioned above are common to many popularly oriented works, one
might point to a few characteristics more specific to this book that could also be seen as
problematic. One of these is in how Kelle deals with ancient Near Eastern sources’ use of
numbers. As is well known, ancient sources tend to exaggerate in relating numbers of
soldiers mustered, numbers of enemies killed, and numbers of towns sacked. Kelle
addresses this fact on 34–35—in the book’s fifth section, after he has already made
reference to the figures presented by several ancient sources without commenting on
their problematic nature. Perhaps the most striking example of this is his quotation of
2 Chr 26:13’s claim that Uzziah’s army had over three hundred thousand troops, a claim
he lets pass with nary a word of protest, merely stating: “Second Kings 13: 7 [sic] describes
Judah’s army during a time of oppression by Aram-Damascus as consisting of 10,000
soldiers … but texts reflecting other periods credit the Judean army with as many as
300,000 soldiers” (21). Of course, archaeological estimates of Judah’s population in the
monarchic period make such a number highly unlikely, and it is surprising that Kelle did
not say as much.
Another part of the book worth commenting upon is his treatment of the “world around war,” that is, the affects of warfare on society, economy, and religion (64–69). Kelle’s treatment here is quite intriguing, as he connects warfare with features of Israelite culture and society that are normally not understood as relating directly to military conflict. Yet while reading this section I wondered if Kelle did not perhaps exaggerate the level of socioeconomic division and strife found in the late preexilic period. While I would certainly agree that social stratification grew steadily more entrenched over the course of the monarchic period, his characterization of this period and the extent of problems such as debt slavery seemed to me more apt for describing the social situation in the Hellenistic and, especially, the Roman periods. In addition, Kelle describes the effects of warfare as having been so pervasive in influencing ancient Israelite society that it almost seems that everything was an epiphenomenon of war and conflict. Despite the concerns just stated, this section of the book certainly remains worth reading.

More problematic than any of the issues discussed above is that the latter part of the book fell prey to various failures of editing. On page 75 Kelle writes that the Babylonians “executed the Davidic king Zedekiah, as well as most of the royal officials, top priests, and local leaders, and took many inhabitants into exile to Babylonia,” and cites in a note only 2 Kgs 25:11–12. Yet these verses say nothing of Zedekiah’s execution, and 2 Kgs 25:7, Jer 39:6–7, and 52:10–11 all state that it was not in fact Zedekiah but his sons who were killed. Zedekiah, on the other hand, had his eyes gouged out by the Babylonians and, like so many others, was taken into exile. In addition, the name of Gedaliah son of Ahikam, whom the Babylonians made governor of Judah during the exilic period (2 Kgs 25:12–26), is repeatedly misspelled as “Gedeliah,” even in the book’s index (75–79, 95). The Ammonites are also mislabeled the “Ammanites” on page 79, a typographical error only worth noting in light of these others.

Despite the various problems I have outlined, this work is on the whole informative, engaging, and both visually and stylistically pleasant. Kelle utilizes a wide range of evidence in discussing Israelite warfare, and the information he provides is not only succinctly presented but up-to-date. I certainly hope that in the future Kelle will expand and revise this book into a fuller and more academically oriented work on Israelite warfare. Biblical scholarship would benefit greatly from such a work.