Several passages are chosen and subjected to a consistent narratological analysis. He seeks to analyse literary characteristics in relation to ideology. The aim is to explore the literature of the Ancient Near East, the role of God and the king in stories of war and what was distinctive about the biblical texts.

Van der Deijl provides a translation of the text with notes. He takes the MT as his starting point for a literary analysis. This literary approach considers in detail the characterisation, the role of time, place and focalization. He lists the repetitions and play of sounds. There is discussion of intertextuality which draws attention to how the passage refers to other parts of the Bible such as 1 Samuel 8. Van der Deijl then moves to look at the structure of the passage. Finally he discusses the theology/ideology of the text. The war is viewed negatively. The passage explores the relationship between divine and human activity and stresses the importance of obeying God. The King should obey God.

The second passage which is selected for discussion is 1 Kgs. 12. The approach is the same as for 1 Kgs. 12 with van der Deijl addressing similar aspects of the text. He takes the unity of the text as his starting point. The main question in the war is who is God? The answer is the Lord, not a god of the hills. God acts in history and gives victories. Van der Deijl then turns his attention to 1 Kgs. 22:1-38 and employs the same approach. There has been much discussion of the sources underlying this text. However, the tensions in the way the passage addresses one of the main issues of the story, the question of true and false prophecy, need not necessarily point to multiple sources.

The fourth passage to be considered is 2 Kgs. 3. Van der Deijl considers the historical questions posed, particularly by comparison with the Mesha Stela, and finds it difficult to characterize the story as historical. He then proceeds as before with a literary analysis. YHWH is the Lord of history who has made his will in the Torah by which kings should abide. Van der Deijl then turns his attention to his fifth passage, 2 Kgs. 6:8-7:20. His addresses the same issues in the text as before. In this passage war is considered a disaster which should have been avoided. The final passage to be analysed is 2 Kgs. 18:13-19:37 where van der Deijl applies the same methodology.

Some of the structural analysis of texts does not always convince. For example, whilst the chiastic structure proposed in the discussion of 1 Kgs. 22 is plausible, the parallel passages vary in length which make one doubt whether such a plan was in the mind of the writer or would have been obvious to the reader.

From his analysis of these passages van der Deijl draws together some conclusions. The writers of the books of Kings did not judge history in terms of whether or not the king was successful, but rather focussed on whether his relationship with God was right from a prophetic perspective. Indeed the prophet was one of the major players in these stories. Particular attention is paid to divine intervention, not just in terms of the Lord ensuring a good outcome, but also in preventing wars and in punishing. He is the one who determines the course of history. There is much inter-textual connection with the book of Deuteronomy. Van der Deijl concludes that the stories were written to illustrate the book of Deuteronomy, for example by showing the benefits of keeping God’s law. Never in these stories is war regarded as holy nor is it idolised or seen as something beautiful. There is always something of a crisis about war.

The third chapter of the book looks at war in the following extra-biblical texts: the Stela of Mesha, the Kulanuwa Inscription, the Zakkur inscription, a selection from Sennacherib’s annals, Prophecies for Esarhaddon, the report of Esarhaddon
to Ashur, from the annals of Ashurbanipal, the Verse Account on Nabonidus, the Cyrus cylinder, and the Chronicle of Esarhaddon. Van der Deijl follows similar methodology in looking at these texts as he did for the book of Kings. In all these texts the theme of war occurs. Van der Deijl gives a translation followed by discussion of the state of the material, historical background and genre. He looks at place, interventions in the order of time, tempo, focalizations, repetition, play upon sounds, and intertextuality. There is careful structural analysis, particularly with regard to chiastic and parallel structures, which, as noted for the book of Kings do not always convince. There is then a section on the theology/ideology of the text which includes a valuation of the war. In the annals of Sennacherib there is imperialist ideology. Waging war in these texts is the task of the god, and construction and maintenance of the temple that of the king. The deity wages war on behalf of the king and the king rebuilds. The texts address the legitimacy of the ruler and serve as propaganda. Reference is made to other literature such as Enuma Elish. Throughout these texts the king is the vicarius deorum by the grace of his god. He was the god’s viceroy. He protects his people and guards international law abroad and at home brings prosperity. In the texts of the Ancient Near East military success comes from divine favour in contrast to the book of Kings where, with one exception the war is treated negatively. The books of Kings emphasize that YHWH is the creator and lord of all. He is in control of history, but still allows people freedom of action. In contrast to this monotheism, the Ancient Near Eastern texts are polytheistic and speak of national gods. Van de Deijl likens YHWH’s relation to his people to a chess grandmaster. The books of kings emphasise God’s power and human responsibility with YHWH intervening rarely. A major difference between Kings and the other texts is that YHWH’s will is given by prophets, whereas the king has the mediating position between god and the people in the other texts.

The final chapter of the monograph makes some concluding remarks. There are no holy wars in the Bible or Ancient Near Eastern literature. There was though reflection on the justification of war. Criticism of kings in the Ancient Near East was not generally about ethical matters. In contrast in Israel and Judah there was an attempt to subdue power to law. That is what is distinctive about the Old Testament. War is not regarded as holy in the Jewish tradition. Consequently though influenced by the thought of the Ancient Near East the writers of the Bible had their own different and important emphases. Finally van der Deijl suggests that his findings have relevance for contemporary theologies of peace.

Van der Deijl has made a major contribution to the study of war in the Ancient Near East which will be of great benefit to scholars. There is a mass of material here which will be essential for those working in the field to consult. Unfortunately the book is marred by a considerable number of typographical errors. The translation has led to some awkward phrases; often the Dutch word ‘de’ is printed instead of ‘the’. The book is rather long and there is considerable repetition in the content. However, van der Deijl has provided a stimulating survey of the texts which provides helpful insights.

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This monograph is a reworked version of the author’s 2002 thesis that was originally written in Dutch. It is composed of a brief history of scholarship followed by six chapters. Chapters 1-2 are translations and critical notes on Ezekiel 18 and 20 respectively. Chapter 3 is an in-depth summary of the life and work of H. Wheeler Robinson. Chapter 4 focuses on the ways Robinson applied his idea of corporate personality to the Hebrew Bible and Robinson’s influence on subsequent biblical scholarship. Chapter 5 explores various scholarly critiques of Robinson’s ideas and assesses what, if anything, remains of value in Robinson’s work today. In chapter 6, Mol attempts to explain the tensions between the seemingly individualistic emphasis of Ezekiel 18 and the more communal emphasis found in chapter 20 by means of his proposed much more modest, revised definition of corporate personality. This 6th chapter is really the heart of the project. The book has a brief concluding summary along with a useful bibliography and an index of modern authors (but no scriptural index).

Before critically evaluating this work, it seems important to place my own possible biases on the table. This book builds upon my first monograph and the author cites my book a number of times. Generally, Mol speaks well of my work on this topic. Although he occasionally criticizes certain aspects of my argument, he does so in a fair-minded fashion. Thus my reservations about Mol’s book are not, to use an Ezekielian phrase in an inexact manner, a case of “sour grapes.” My criticisms fall into several categories including: the organization of Mol’s argument, his tendency to cite all possible scholarly variations of an argument, and the poor quality of the English translation. In terms of organization, the reader must wade through 200 pages before the author puts the theory he is interested in discussing into dialogue with the materials in Ezekiel 18 and 20. One suspects that the first 5 chapters could have been greatly condensed. A better alternative yet would have been for the author to place a condensed version of chapters 3-5 up front and then integrate the argument in chapter 6 with the close analysis of the grammar, philology, and structure of Ezekiel 18 and 20 that now resides in chapters 1-2. Inasmuch as Mol ultimately finds very little of Robinson’s notion of corporate personality usable, only preserving the term while giving it a whole new meaning, it seems odd he dedicates nearly 100 pages to this topic.

The fact that the author cites so many slightly different variations of each argument he addresses is no doubt due in part to the fact that this work was originally penned as a thesis. But this tendency toward scholarly excess, can at times make it difficult to locate the central thread of Mol’s argument. A good editor might have suggested drawing out three or four major variations and placing them along a continuum, which in turn would have thrown his own argument into clearer relief.

Yet another serious (if unfortunate) problem with this book is that the translation from the original Dutch into English is frequently infelicitous and sometimes incoherent, often making it difficult to determine exactly what Mol is
arguing. I will give two brief examples, but there are many poorly constructed sentences that left this reader confused or baffled. Note the following sentence found on page 236: “The description of Ezekiel 18 and 20 shows that no contradiction exists between the trains of thought which the bases of both chapters are.” Or skipping a single sentence forward one finds the following example: “Attention to the difference overcomes the reproach to be occupied with a ‘harmonizing exegesis.’”

There is no question that Mol has read widely in the area and that he has intelligent things to say both about Robinson’s life and work, as well as about Ezekiel 18 and 20. Thus his contention that scholars may have been too quick to jettison all of Robinson’s insights because they were embedded within larger theories that are flawed is quite sound. In fact, it is a point I made in my own work on this subject. Further, even while I am ultimately unconvinced by Mol’s central thesis, he makes a thoughtful and reasoned argument that tensions between Ezekiel 18 and 20 are more apparent than real once one recognizes that both passages contain individualistic and communal notes. But these worthy insights are not set into a tightly argued, well-organized book. It is unfortunate that this author did not receive better editorial advice and that his work was not rendered into better English by the translator. In its current state of disarray, I would only recommend Mol’s book to scholars working directly on either the topic of corporate personality or on questions surrounding tensions between more individualistic and more corporate passages in the book of Ezekiel. And even here, with deep regret I feel compelled to say that I think the vast majority of readers would be better served by consulting the host of scholars Mol cites rather than Mol’s own book.

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