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A Case Study of Reciprocal Middles in Biblical Hebrew: the Niphal of **לחם***

Camil STAPS

The Hebrew verb לחם in the niphal is traditionally translated as “fight”. At first sight, this translation seems unambiguous. On closer inspection, it can in fact mean very different things: do we imagine a physical fight or two persons quarreling? Is the event symmetric in that the different persons have identical roles, or is one of them, for instance, presented with more agentivity? Are the actors persons, nations or even concepts (“The government is fighting terror”)? Usually context makes the meaning clear. But what may seem “clear from context” to us may have been understood very differently by the original speech community. Although some scholars have attempted to trace the etymology of לחם, a detailed semantic study is still lacking¹.

The verb לחם is particularly interesting because it overwhelmingly appears in the niphal stem: 167× with the meaning “fight” against only four qal forms, isolated in Psalms. The semantics of the niphal stem are still not entirely clear, although modern scholarship tends toward a passive-middle interpretation (Boyd 1993, Jenni 2012, Van Wolde 2018). Usually scholars explain the niphal of לחם as reciprocal (e.g. Jenni 2012, 244). A precise definition of reciprocity is given by Kemmer (1993), drawing on Lichtenberk (1985). She defines the prototypical reciprocal context as “a two-participant event in which there are two relations; each participant serves in the role of Initiator in one of those relations and Endpoint in the other” (Kemmer 1993, 96–97). Jenni (2012, 244) describes לחם as a verb for which reciprocity can be derived from context.

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¹ Five qal occurrences of לחם, in Psalms and Proverbs, carry a food-related meaning (Ps 141:4; Prov 4:17; 9:5; 23:1, 6). We also have the noun לחם “bread”. According to most authors, it is not a coincidence that “fighting” and “eating” are homonyms in Hebrew. Krotkoff (1969, 77) has argued that both words originate from a root meaning “compact”. He also writes that Hebrew לחם and other Semitic words related to fighting (Hebrew מלחמה “war”, Moabitic *lthm* “fight”) would be related to “compact” in the sense that in the Ancient Near East context, any fight would be close combat (80). On the other hand, Gluck (1976) claims that the original meaning is directly related to “slaughtered”.

In Kemmer’s framework, that would be called a naturally reciprocal event, an event that is “necessarily or else very frequently semantically reciprocal” (Kemmer 1993, 102). However, a quick sample from the Hebrew Bible shows many occurrences where the subject of להם is a single army whereas the adversary is marked with a preposition, like ב or על (e.g. Josh 10:5; 2 Sam 12:26). This puts attacker and defender in different semantic roles, which is reflected in many translations that use the niphals as active transitive forms, as in “Joshua ... moved ... to Libnah and attacked (להם) it” (Josh 10:29 ESV). Hence, a (naturally) reciprocal reading is not free from problems: the attacker seems to participate in the event only as an Initiator and the defender only as an Endpoint.

The goal of this paper is then to articulate the exact meaning of להם in order to gain a better understanding of reciprocal niphals in biblical Hebrew. For that purpose, we consider all 171 occurrences of להם with the meaning “fight” in the Hebrew Bible. In the next section, we investigate the way different prepositions are used with להם. After that, we look at the verbs commonly associated with להם. We finish with a discussion of the results.

Prepositions

The verb להם occurs with a variety of prepositions, apparently independent of the general preferences of specific books. Table 1 shows the distribution of prepositions throughout the corpus.

Table 1: Distribution of prepositions with להם throughout the Hebrew Bible. Only prepositions indicating fighting parties are considered.

	Total	Exod	Num	Deut	Josh	Judg	Sam	Kgs	Chr	Neh	Pss	Prov	Isa	Jer	Dan	Zech
ב	60	4	4		3	21	14	3	4	1			4			2
עם	29	1		1	4	4	5	4	7					1	2	
את	22				2	1	4	6	2		1		1	5		
על	20			2	4	1		3		1			2	7		
ל	12	2		3	4	1				1	1					
אל	2													2		

In this section, we look at the nuances that different prepositions carry. We only consider prepositions marking fighting parties, leaving out locative, instrumental and other common uses of prepositions, because we expect those to operate as in any other context. When possible, we will look at

contrastive pairs (trios, ...), groups of occurrences that are as comparable as possible².

Normally, a preposition marks the opponent, which can be a person, city, nation, or, in rare cases, abstract concepts. Only the preposition ל is unambiguously used for a benefited or defended party. With other prepositions, particularly when the marked noun is a city, it is not always easy to distinguish the opponent from a benefited party or the goal of the fight. For example, in Josh 10:34, we may understand “it” as the opponent, if we take it as representative for its people and army. However, we can also understand “it” as the goal of the fight: Joshua fights to gain control *over* the city.

- (1) Josh 10:34: ויעבר יהושע וכל־ישראל עמו מלכיש עגלנה ויחנו עליה וילחמו עליה:
And passed over Joshua and all Israel with him from Lachish to Eglon
and they camped against it and fought **against/over** it.

In the remainder of this section, we consider the prepositions that occur with לחם one by one, in order to narrow down their meaning in the context.

ב

When ב is used, the act of fighting has destruction as its goal, as opposed to, for instance, fighting for power over a city as we will see with על. Perhaps the most telling example of ב in a fight with destruction as its only goal is Jdg 9:45:

- (2) Jdg 9:45: ואבימלך נלחם בעיר כל היום ההוא וילכד את־העיר ואת־העם אשר־בה:
הרג ויתץ את־העיר ויזרעה מלח
And Abimelech fought **against** the city whole day that and took the
city and the people that was in it he killed and he tore down the city
and sowed it with salt.

Concerning מלח ויזרעה מלח “and he sowed it with salt”, Fensham (1962, 50) writes:

[S]alt is regarded as effecting infertility [...] This idea is then used as a curse against a person who breaks a covenant, and is extended to his property. The curse is demonstrated by the ritual act of sowing salt. In

²Looking at contrastive pairs is a common approach, also used by Boyd (1993, 126–128) and Benton (2009, 19–20), among others (the latter writes of *minimal pairs* rather than *contrastive pairs*).

to destroy the attacker; hence the destructive ב . In v. 8, the weaker עם is used, since the clause describes background information and the exact nature of the fight is unknown or irrelevant. We find the same usage for defensive attacks in Exod 14:25; 17:10; Josh 24:11; Jdg 9:38–39; 10:18; 11:6, 8–9, 32; 12:1, 3; 1 Sam 19:8; 23:5; 2 Sam 8:10 (cf. v. 3); 2 Kgs 3:21⁷; 1 Chr 18:10.

Similarly, ב is also used for revolts against hostile rulers. An example is Gideon's resistance against Midian in Jdg 8:1 after a seven year oppression (cf. 6:1). In Exod 1:10, this usage occurs in speech by Egypt's king, the oppressor, so the use of ב is either empathic or from the Hebrew narrator's perspective. Other occurrences are found in Jdg 11:12 (cf. v. 13), 25, 27; Zech 14:3b. The preposition is also used for preventive attacks, as can be seen in Num 22:11. Bileam wants to attack the Israelites (with ב) — not because they started a fight (which did not happen yet, cf. v. 1), but because Moab is afraid of Israel (v. 3). This episode is referred to in Josh 24:9, again with ב . Other occurrences of this use are Num 21:1, 23; 2 Chr 35:22b⁸.

We have still failed to mention one occurrence of ב with להם . In 1 Kgs 20:1–3, the king of Aram is reported to threaten and ransom Samaria. His intention appears to be possession rather than destruction, especially when he perseveres in v. 6. At present, we cannot fit this into our scheme other than suggesting that the narrator wants to focus on the ability of the king to destroy Samaria.

את

In only two instances, את appears as an accusative marker. In the other cases, it functions as a preposition that decreases the distinguishability of attacker and defender.

In 1 Sam 8:20, את marks מלחמתנו “our battles”. Several other times, להם carries an object, but in those instances את is omitted: in the niphal we have 1 Sam 18:17; 25:28; 2 Chr 32:8; in the qal, Ps 35:1d. In all these cases with niphal להם , the object is derived from מלחמה “battle”. The other time that את is an accusative marker is for a qal form in Ps 35:1c. The object is human. In v. 1d, the pronominal suffix י is the object, again for a qal form. The use of human objects is reserved for qal forms.

⁷ 2 Kgs 3:21 describes the reaction to the Moabite rebellion in v. 5. This rebellion is conceived of as an attack, so the reaction is defensive.

⁸ The text itself does not give Josiah's reasons for this movement. The ב preposition in v. 20 is locative. Malamat (1950, 219) argues that Josiah attempts to prevent Egypt from assisting Assyria in a mutual pact against Babylon, to which Judah may have been allied. This would support a defensive reading, but ultimately there is not enough context to be sure.

When **א** is used as a preposition, the subject of **לחם** is usually the attacker and the word marked by the preposition is the defender. Our hypothesis is that **א** decreases their distinguishability, thus focusing on the activity of fighting rather than the beginning of the fight (which distinguishes attacker and defender) or the end of the fight (which distinguishes winner and loser). This is supported by the contrastive trio in Jer 21:2–5:

- (4) Jer 21:2b: **כי** נבוכדראצר מלך־בבל נלחם עלינו
For Nebukadrezzar king of Babylon fights **against** us.
- (5) Jer 21:4c: אתם נלחמים בם את־מלך בבל ואת־הכשדים הצרים עליכם
You are fighting using them **with** the king of Babylon and **with** the Chaldeans that besiege you.
- (6) Jer 21:5a: ונלחמתי אני אתכם
And I will fight myself **with** you.

In v. 2, the subject takes the initiative for the fight. In v. 4 however, the subject consists of the defenders of the overall battle. They do not initiate the fight but are involved in it. Also in v. 5, God says to go fight, but he does not take the initiative for it. In this conflict, God chooses sides against Israel, but he cannot be seen as the single attacker.

We see that both **ב** and **א** are used when the defender in the wider context is the subject. The difference lies in the distinguishability of the participants: **ב** is used when an oppressed party takes initiative to fight against their oppressor, with the goal to destroy them; **א** is used for the defending parties in a fight, because they do not take initiative for it. We also see that **א** is used when there is some ambiguity as to who is attacking and who is defending. This is consistent with the basic meaning of the preposition, i.e. “with”. Another contrastive trio in Josh 24:8–11 supports this:

- (7) Josh 24:8ab: ואביא אתכם אל־ארץ האמרי היושב בעבר הירדן וילחמו אתכם
And I brought you to the land of the Amorites that dwelled on the other side of the Jordan and they fought **with** you.
- (8) Josh 24:9ab: ויקם בלק בן־צפור מלך מואב וילחם בישראל
And arose Balak son of Zippor king of Moab and fought **against** Israel.
- (9) Josh 24:11ab: ותעברו את־הירדן ותבאו אל־יריחו בכם בעל־יריחו ... והיבוסים
And you passed over the Jordan and came to Jericho and fought **against** you the men of Jericho the Amorites ... and the Jebusites.

In v. 8, a general overview of the East Jordan campaign in Numbers 21 and 31 is given. It is followed by two examples in vv. 9 and 11, as noted by Butler (1983, 272). In v. 8, we cannot clearly identify attacker and defender.

Both parties attacked; native peoples (e.g. Num 21:23) and Israel (e.g. Num 21:32). In vv. 9 and 11, there are clear attackers, which explains why **ב** is used there instead.

We find the same contrast in Josh 10:25, 29, 31, 34, 36, 38. In v. 25, a word of courage is brought to Israel, showing what Yahweh will do with “all your enemies *with* (**את**) whom you fight”. Who is attacking is not relevant for Yahweh’s support. The next five occurrences use **על**, **ב** and **עם**: these verses describe concrete battles.

Other instances of weak distinguishability are Jdg 12:4; 2 Sam 11:17 (both parties take initiative); 1 Sam 17:9 (an organized duel); 2 Sam 21:15; 1 Kgs 20:23–25 (summarizing, similar to Josh 10:25 discussed above); 1 Kgs 22:31; 2 Chr 18:30 (from the defender’s perspective); 2 Kgs 8:29; 9:15; 19:9; 2 Chr 22:6; Isa 37:9; Jer 32:5; 37:10 (the attacker is irrelevant); Jer 33:5 (the Chaldeans are the original invaders).

עם

This is the last preposition (after **ב** and **את**) that can mark the adversary. We see that **עם** stands somewhere between **ב** and **את**. Like **ב**, **עם** makes a clear distinction between the attacker and the defender. On the other hand, like **את**, **עם** can serve a generalizing or summarizing function. Furthermore, **עם** does not carry the strong sense of destruction that we saw with **ב**. Because of its neutral meaning, the preposition is often used when **לחם** describes background information.

In example (3) above we already saw a contrastive trio with **ב**, where the clause with **עם** draws up the situation and the clause with **ב** is the main focus of the story. We find similar occurrences in Jdg 11:4–9⁹; 1 Sam 13:5¹⁰; 17:19.

Thrice, the preposition occurs in a summary of a king’s life: 2 Kgs 13:12; 14:15; 2 Chr 27:5. Similar summaries contain **לחם** without preposition in 1 Kgs 14:19; 22:46; 2 Kgs 14:28, but no such summary has other prepositions. The preposition is also used for other kinds of summaries in Jdg 5:20; 2 Chr 17:10; 20:29. Also in Deut 20:4 it is used without referring to a specific battle.

Four instances in 1 Kgs 12:21, 24; 2 Chr 11:1, 4 clearly use **עם** in its neutral meaning. The goal is to subdue Israel, not to destroy it (as with **ב**) and the two parties are clearly distinguished (unlike with **את**). We find **עם** for similar reasons in 2 Chr 13:12; Dan 10:20; 11:11.

⁹ **עם** in vv. 4–5; **ב** in vv. 6, 8–9. In v. 12, a reference is made to the background information in vv. 4–5, with **ב** instead of **עם**. Presumably, Jephthah intends to put forward the battle as destructive.

¹⁰ Vv. 2–7a set the scene for Samuel’s rejection of Saul in vv. 7b–15a (Campbell 2003, 134–135).

In some cases, the difference between עַם and בּ is unclear. For example, Jdg 11:20 (with עַם) repeats Num 21:23 (with בּ). Other instances where we might expect בּ are Josh 9:2; 11:5; 2 Sam 10:17; 1 Chr 19:17; Jer 41:12. The difference with אַת is not always clear either: two usages in 1 Sam 17:32–33 occur in the same setting as in v. 9, where אַת is used.

The cases in Josh 10:29; 19:47 seem similar to those of עַל, described below. Note that the BHS mentions some manuscripts have עַל for עַם in Josh 10:29.

עַל

This preposition can mark both an attacked city and a defended party. It is clear that these two usages are conceptually related: the goal of the fight is to gain control over a city or to maintain control over a defended party. The preposition is best translated as “over” or “about”.

The other prepositions used with cities are בּ (10×) and עַם (2×). Josh 10:29–38 contains three occurrences of עַל, one of בּ and one of עַם in a similar context. However, there is not enough context to consider it a contrastive quintet. From a general overview, it seems that the distinction is as follows. When עַל is used, the attacker aims to conquer the city. It is a fight “for” territory. The preposition בּ can be translated with “against”. The attacked city is destroyed and the attacker returns home. We have only one occurrence of עַם outside Josh 10 for a city (Josh 19:47); here the meaning is similar to that of עַל.

One clear example of the use of עַל is Deut 20:19:

(10) Deut 20:19a: כִּי־תִצּוֹר אֶל־עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עֲלֶיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ

When you besiege unto a city days many by fighting **over** it to take it.

The complement לְתַפְשָׁה “to take it” makes it clear that the intention is not to destroy the city. This means that Deut 20:10 should be understood similarly. Other clear instances are 2 Kgs 12:18 and Jer 21:2; the context is the Babylonian exile. Even though Josh 10:5 does not specifically mention the fight to be “over” Gibeon, it is clear that the attacking alliance feels threatened by Israel’s movements and wants to strengthen their control over the region, rather than destroy it (Butler 1983, 115). Also for Josh 10:34, 36, 38 the context makes it clear that the aim is to seize the attacked cities.

It is true that for all occurrences in Jeremiah except 21:1 (Jer 32:24, 29; 34:1, 7, 22; 37:8) the aim is to destroy. However, in 32:29–30 the destruction is explained as a purification act, where Yahweh wants to take back his city from Baal and other gods:

29 The Babylonians who are attacking this city will come in and set it on fire; they will burn it down, along with the houses where the people aroused my anger by burning incense on the roofs to Baal and by pouring out drink offerings to other gods. 30 The people of Israel and Judah have done nothing but arouse my anger with what their hands have made, declares the Lord. (NIV)

In three instances (2 Kgs 19:8; Isa 7:1; 37:8) we did not find enough evidence to support or contradict our hypothesis concerning על.

The proposed distinction between ב and על fits in the general picture of the two stories of the Canaanite campaign in Josh 10 and Jdg 1–3. Walzer (1992) notes that the holy war in Josh 1–11 ends with a political victory (11:23) after all the Canaanites except the Gibeonites have been destroyed (e.g. 6:21). The campaign in Jdg 1–3 on the other hand ends with the religious failure of the Israelites living among the Canaanites and worshiping their gods (3:5–6). In Joshua (especially chapter 10), the campaign is mainly described with על marking the cities. From this perspective, the campaign was a success. The war in Judges — the use of לחם is concentrated in chapter 1 — is described with ב marking nations. From that perspective, the conquest was a failure, since the nations were not utterly destroyed.

In Jdg 9:17, 2 Kgs 10:3 and Neh 4:8, על marks the defended party, which does not fight itself.

- (11) Neh 4:8b–c: אל־תִּירָאוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם אֶת־אֲדָנֵי הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא זָכוּרוּ וְהִלַּחְמוּ עַל־אֲחֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם נְשִׂיכֶם וּבְתֵיבֵיכֶם
Do not be afraid of them the Lord great and awesome remember and fight **for** your brothers your sons and your daughters your wives and your houses.

Here, the Israelites are threatened by foreign armies. This verse is an encouragement to fight for their lives and possessions. Note that this usage matches well with the more common usage with attacked cities. The preposition, in general, marks an entity that is fought over. When the attacker is allied to that entity, the entity is the party that benefits from the fight; otherwise, it is the attacked party.

ל

The use of ל with לחם seems straightforward. It appears nine times out of twelve with Yahweh as the subject and Israel as the noun marked by ל: Exod 14:14, 25; Deut 1:30; 3:22; 20:4; Josh 10:14, 42; 23:3, 10. For example:

(12) Josh 10:42: ואת כל־המלכים האלה ואת־ארצם לכד יהושע פעם אחת כי יהוה: אלהי ישראל נלחם לישראל

And all kings these and their land took Joshua at time one for Yahweh god of Israel fought **for** Israel.

In all of these cases except Deut 20:4, there are no other verbs in the immediate context that have Yahweh as their subject. One may think that the phrase “Yahweh [your god] fights for [you]” is a general expression for courage (e.g. Exod 14:14). However, this is not likely. The expression appears more often as an explanation for a victory (e.g. Josh 10:42), and is also used that way by non-Israelites (Exod 14:25). Also, in Neh 4:14 and Jdg 1:1¹¹ we find the same expression (though not as an explanation) with a human subject. Lastly, as Longman (1997, 786) notes, “Yahweh did not fight for Israel at that nation’s whim. God would choose battles where he graced Israel’s armies with his presence”. Hence, it would be incorrect to understand “Yahweh fights for Israel” as a universal. Rather, the instances describe distinctive events.

The only deviant occurrence of ל is the qal form in Ps 56:3¹².

אל

The usage of אל is limited to Jeremiah (1:19; 15:20). The same book makes extensive use of על. We do not have enough data to discern the proto-

¹¹ Although many translations follow the LXX and Vulgate, taking לנו as “who of us” (NIV), we follow Groß (2009, 119) in reading “who for us”, since in what follows Judah acts on behalf of the whole country, not only his territory.

¹² The interpretation of לי “for me” depends on the way we read מרום.

(13) Ps 56:3: שאפו וררי כלהיום כִּירבים להמים לי מרום: Pursue my enemies all day for many who fight **to** me מרום.

Several suggestions have been given in the literature (Hossfeld and Zenger 2000, 107; Tate 1983):

- Hossfeld and Zenger (2000, 107) mention the option that the “I” is in fact a benefited category, and understand “from above” similar to Jdg 5:20 where “the stars fight from the heaven”. However, this breaks the parallelism with v. 2, and it remains unclear why such a phrase would come at this position in the Psalm.
- If we were to read מרום as ממרום “from on high”, as suggested by the BHS, we could also read ל as a locative. This gives the image of someone beaten on from above, which is advantageous in direct combat. However, this understanding of ל is doubtful, and the solution requires a textual adaptation.
- Other suggestions include (variations on) “in their *pride* many are attacking me” (NIV) and taking מרום as a designation of God or an imperative (Tate 1983, 66). However, these do not shed light on the way we should understand לי.

Also note that, according to the BHS, one version reads על instead of ל, which would allow us to resolve the issue by reading “I” as the goal of the fight. Lastly, note that the difference in meaning of לחם with ל may be related to the verbal stem.

typical meaning of the preposition for להם. It is well-known that אל and על are often used interchangeably in Jeremiah (Fischer 2005, 51). It makes sense to consider these two occurrences as having the same sense as על. Therefore, the usage of להם with אל is likely specific to Jeremiah.

Prototypical Scenario

In this section, we investigate the prototypical scenario of להם. This is a research method developed by Van Wolde (2009, 59–60). Looking at the verbs and concepts in immediate context, we can get an idea of the semantic world a native would intuitively associate with the word. We first discuss the general chain of events of this scenario, before discussing some special cases.

The most common usage of להם is that of real, physical fight of two armies in the context of war. Note that the army or nation is often represented by its commander as a *pars pro toto* (e.g. 1 Sam 19:8). The chain of events takes us through the gathering of an army, its journey, the fight, its result and the aftermath. The scenario consists of the stages listed below. Not all of these stages have to be present; almost any combination is attested. However, the order of the stages is always the same. An overview of all the verses that attest this chain of events is given in table 2 at the end of this article.

1. **Gathering.** In this stage, the attacking army is gathered. The verb here is usually אסף “gather” (8×), although בחר “choose (men)”, יעד “meet up”, הביה “be” with לקצין “like a commander”, קבץ “gather together” and לקח “take (men)” also occur.
2. **Motion.** The army moves to the battleground. A variety of common verbs is used: עלה “go up” (17×), בוא “come” (14×), יצא “go out” (13×), עבר “pass over” (9×), הלך “go” (8×), etc.; sometimes, more than one¹³.
3. **Preparation.** Once arrived at the battlefield, the army prepares itself. This includes the general חנה “encamp” (7×), the more specific ערך “set in array”, צור “besiege”¹⁴ and the combination of יצב “set” with עמד “stand”.

¹³ Which verb is used can often be explained geographically, yet this is not relevant for the scenario. For instance, in Joshua’s conquest in Josh 10:29–39, עבר “pass over” is used for the movement from Makkedah through Libnah and Lachish to Eglon, but עלה “go up” for the route to Hebron and שוב “turn” for the final journey to Debir. The first three trips are in the plain, but Hebron lies in the mountains and to go from Hebron to Debir, Joshua needed to make a sharp turn. As for עלה “go up”, Hobbs (1985, 35) suggests it is not related to geography but a technical term for “approach to do battle”. Either way, it does not seem the verb of motion used has a significant influence on the meaning of להם.

¹⁴ The difference between this verb and להם itself is not always clear. However, based on e.g. Jdg 9:31 (“[they] are *stirring up* (צור) the city” NIV) and the fact that when it occurs with

4. At this point, להם is used. Its exact role in this scenario will be discussed below, after we have seen the verbs that appear after it.
5. **Settlement.** Here it becomes clear who wins. For cities, לכד “take” is often used (12×). The formula “Yahweh gave ... in ...’s hand” with נתן “give” is used more generically (8×). We also consider יכל “prevail”, נצל “save”, ישע “save” and עמד “remain standing before” to belong to this category.
6. **Physical conclusion.** After the fight has been settled, the final blow still has to be given. The word used for this is נכה “strike” (17×)¹⁵.

Note that in the *settlement* and *physical conclusion* stages the subject may change, depending on the winner of the fight.

After the physical conclusion, one of three different outcomes may follow. Most commonly, they describe the winner taking possession of the land of the enemy. However, the winner may also set a city on fire or exterminate its population. Less frequently, the loser flees and is chased.

- A7. **Possession.** The winner takes possession of the land, city or people of the opponent — usually with ירש “possess” (4×). Other verbs are שבה “take captive”, לקח “take”, תפש “seize” and כנע “subdue”. In 1 Sam 17:9, we find והיינו לכם לעבדים “we shall be slaves to you” and, at the end of the verse, עבד “serve”.
- B7. **Violence.** The alternative to annexing land is to destroy it; to enslaving people, to kill them. A wide variety of verbs is used here, including הרם “exterminate” and כלה “wipe out”. It can be followed by a negated form of שאר “leave behind”.

In Josh 24:8 we find both a verb of possession and a verb of violence, suggesting that the *possession* and *violence* scenarios are not separate but could merge:

- (14) Josh 24:8b–e: וילחמו אתכם ואתן אותם בידכם ותירשו את־ארצם ואשמידם מפניכם
 And they fought with you and I gave them into your hand and you **possessed** their land and I **destroyed** them from before you.

להם, it precedes that verb, we understand צור as the act of surrounding and shutting off a city. In that sense, it is similar to חנה “encamp” and ערך “set in array”, and therefore fits in this category.

¹⁵ The verb is also used in Jer 21:5–6, but in a different meaning: to strike with disease. This occurrence is not included in the count.

However, שָׂמַד “destroy” should be understood as chronologically simultaneous with יָרַשׁ “possess”, because the verse is a summary of several battles. We might translate, “took possession of their land, *while* I destroyed them from before you.” Some translations swap the order of the verbs, e.g. “I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land” (NIV).

We now proceed with the third possible ending. The losing party flees, and may be chased and killed by the winner.

C7. Fleeing and chasing. Hebrew uses נוֹס “flee” exclusively (8×). Only twice is the chase made explicit, with רָדַף “chase” in Jdg 1:5 and 9:39. One could include Exod 1:10 with עלה “leave (the country)” here as well, but it differs from the prototype because the fleeing of the Israelites is not a direct result of the battle.

C8. Violence. In only one case (and Exod 1:10, if we would include it in the previous stage), the fleeing party manages to escape (1 Sam 19:8). Frequently, however, נוֹס “flee” is followed by הָרַג “kill” or נָפַל “fall”.

We can summarize the prototypical chain of events with the schema in figure 1. Note that the *fleeing and chasing* scenario does not co-occur with the *settlement* stage. This may be due to historical coincidence, though a more likely explanation is that the fight is not settled yet if a party can still flee.

1. Gathering		
2. Motion		
3. Preparation		
4. להם		
5. Settlement		
6. Physical conclusion		
A7. Possession	B7. Violence	C7. Fleeing and chasing
		C8. Violence

Figure 1: A schematic representation of the prototypical scenario of להם. Stages 1 through 6 are common to all three sub-scenarios, although 5 is not attested in the *fleeing* scenario.

A typical example of this chain of events is Jdg 11:20–21:

(15) Jdg 11:20b–21: וַיֹּאסֶף סִיחֹן אֶת־כָּל־עַמּוֹ וַיַּחֲנוּ בִיהֶצָה וַיִּלְחֶם עִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־סִיחֹן וְאֶת־כָּל־עַמּוֹ בְּיַד יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּכּוּם וַיִּירֶשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת כָּל־אֶרֶץ הָאֲמֹרִי יוֹשֵׁב הָאֶרֶץ הַהִיא
 And **gathered** Sihon its whole people and **camped** in Jahaz and

fought with Israel. And **gave** Yahweh god of Israel Sihon and its whole people in the hand of Israel and **struck** and **possessed** Israel the whole land of the Amorites inhabiting country that.

We find *gathering* (אסף “gather”), *preparation* (חנה “encamp”) and להם, followed by *settlement* (נתן “give”), *physical conclusion* (נכה “strike”) and the *possession* ending (ירש “possess”). Only *motion* is left out, possibly because the movement is less interesting since the fight occurs on Sihon’s territory. Table 2 at the end of this article gives a complete overview of the 99 verses that attest the prototypical chain of events.

The prototypical scenario above allows us to further articulate the meaning of להם in the context described above. We have seen that להם only occurs after an army has been mustered. Again, the army has moved to the battleground and prepared itself for the fight there. All that is left to happen is the physical conflict itself. This is consistent with the verbs that appear after להם: although a *settlement* with נתן “give” could be understood as preceding the physical fight, a *settlement* with לכד cannot. The only other verb implying physical fighting, נכה “strike”, is used after the *settlement* stage as a *physical conclusion*. According to Van Dam (1997), it is clear that נכה “strike” is usually a single act, so the actual battle activity is still expressed by להם.

Earlier, in the section on prepositions, we saw that ב indicates destructive fight, while על is used when the attacker wants to expand their territory. Based on the chain of events above, we might expect that instances of the *possession* scenario would frequently occur with על, and instances of the *violence* scenario with ב. However, there is no correlation whatsoever. This is due to changes in the syntactical participants of the events in the chain. For example, Num 21:23–24 reads: “When [Sihon] reached Jahaz, he *fought* with Israel. Israel, however, put him to the sword and *took over* his land ...” The goal of the fight is to prevent Israel from passing Sihon’s territory. After the fight, the subject switches to Israel, taking possession of Sihon’s land. It is therefore clear that the goal of the fight is primarily indicated by the preposition used.

Sometimes להם occurs without any chain of events. Further context however often allows us to judge whether we are dealing with the same scenario as the one described above. For example, in Josh 10:25 (“This is what the Lord will do to all the enemies you are going to fight” NIV) we know from the preceding story that this scenario is intended. Three occurrences in Jdg 5:19–20 (apart from the first in v. 19) recount a war story from Judges 4 and can be classified as such as well¹⁶. Other cases where the war scenario becomes clear

¹⁶The use of להם with כוכב “star” as subject in v. 20 is unique in the Hebrew Bible. The

from context are Jdg 11:4–5, 9; 11:25, 27; 1 Sam 4:9 (considering v. 10); 12:9 (referring to Jdg 4:2; 13:1; 3:12); 14:47; 17:19; 28:15; 2 Sam 2:28; 11:20; 2 Kgs 6:8; 8:29; 9:15; 19:8; 2 Chr 17:10; 22:6; 35:22b; Neh 4:8; Isa 37:8; Jer 21:2, 4; 32:24, 29 (cf. v. 5); 51:30; Zech 14:3c, 14.

It is not infrequent to have לָחַם in a final overview of a king's life. An example is 1 Kgs 14:19: "Now the rest of the acts of Jeroboam, how *he warred* and how he reigned, behold, they are written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel" (ESV, emphasis mine). We consider these cases as belonging to the war scenario as well, because some instances like 2 Chr 26:6; 27:5 fit the same chain of events. Other occurrences do not stand in an elaborate chain of events, but are included here for their similarity with these cases: 1 Kgs 22:46; 2 Kgs 13:12; 14:15, 28. We also find some generalizing statements similar to these summarizing statements. In 1 Sam 18:17 and 25:28, no specific battle is designated: David is asked and said to "fight the battles of Yahweh". Also in Zech 10:5 no particular fight or opponent is mentioned or presupposed. Judah is promised enhanced fighting capability (Floyd 2000, 477).

Although in the majority of cases the participants to the לָחַם event are armies (of nations and cities, sometimes represented by their leader as *pars pro toto*); in a couple of instances there is a man-to-man fight. This includes occurrences in the Goliath story described in more detail below (1 Sam 17:9, 10, 33), a battle of Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs 22:31–32; 2 Chr 18:30–31) and a prophesy about chaos in Egypt (Isa 19:2). All instances clearly occur in a context of war.

Seventeen times, Yahweh is the subject of לָחַם , mostly in expressions like "..., for the Lord fought for Israel" (Josh 10:14 ESV), i.e., without verbs in the same chain of events. However, all but one of these occurrences should be understood in the war scenario¹⁷. All these cases refer in one way or another back to the Exodus story which has occurrences of לָחַם with Yahweh as subject in Exod 14:14 and 25. In the first verse, Moses comforts the people when the Egyptians are chasing them: "the Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." The second verse has the Egyptians affirming the power of Yahweh: "the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt" (both NIV). The presence of Yahweh in Israel's battles becomes a theme, as mentioned explicitly in Deut 1:30; Josh 23:10 and implicitly in Deut 3:22; Josh 10:14, 42; 23:3; Neh 4:14; Isa 30:32; Zech 14:3 (2×). Its importance is underlined by the inclusion of the phrase in the laws concerning warfare (Deut 20:4, used in 2 Chr 20:29). In Isa 63:10 and Jer 21:5, Yahweh is said to fight *against* Israel. In both instances, this is

war context of v. 19 makes it clear that the stars are represented as warriors, justifying our classification. On the meaning of the expression, see e.g. Lindars (1983, 268–269).

¹⁷Ps 35:1d will be discussed below.

emphasized with *ויהפך להם לאויב* “He turned to be their enemy” and *אני* “I”, respectively. Hence, these events occur in the same conceptual field: they are opposed to Yahweh’s fighting *for* Israel.

Two of the above verses do contain verbs from the prototypical chain of events. One of these is Deut 20:4:

- (16) Deut 20:4: *כי יהיה אלהיכם ההלך עמכם להלחם לכם עם־אויביכם להושיע אתכם*
 For Yahweh your god is he who **goes** with you to **fight** for you with your enemies to **save** you.

We have verbs of *motion* (*הלך* “go”) and of *settlement* (*ישע* “save”), making this a clear instance of the chain of events described above. The other case with a more elaborate chain of events is Zech 14:3b with *יצא* “go out”. Since these cases are indistinguishable from the prototypical chain of events and all the aforementioned verses with Yahweh as subject operate in the same conceptual field, we classify the whole group as belonging to the same scenario.

On one occasion, Yahweh appears as the attacked party, in a warning uttered by Abijah, king of Judah, to the Israelites to “not fight against the Lord ... for you will not succeed” (2 Chr 13:12 NIV). In the first part of the verse, Abijah claims Yahweh’s presence in his army.¹⁸ Yahweh is here presented as a warrior in person and the context indicates that this verse belongs to the war scenario as well. This is consistent with the general picture drawn by Longman (1997, 786) when he writes that “[a]t the heart of warfare in the HB is the belief that Yahweh was a ‘warrior.’”

Seven times *לחם* occurs next to *יכל* “be able to”. Twice, *יכל* comes after *לחם* in the *settlement* stage. These cases (Jer 1:19; 15:20) have been discussed above (and in table 2). Five times, however, *לחם* appears as an infinitive object to *יכל*. These cases may seem problematic for the proposed chain of events, because the traditional reading “peradventure I shall be able to overcome (*לחם*) them, and drive them out” (Num 22:11 KJV) puts *לחם* in the final phase of the battle, i.e., in the *settlement* or *physical conclusion* stage.

When *יכל* is used without infinitive object, it means something like “to bear” or “to prevail over” (Ringgren et al. 1990, 74–75). The latter is the case in the two occurrences in Jeremiah. With an infinitive object, it can mean “to be able”, “to succeed”, “to endure”, etc. (ibid., 72). Ringgren analyses the occurrence in 2 Kgs 16:5 as “they were not able to do battle with [the enemy]” but Num 22:11 and Isa 7:1 as “they could not conquer it” (ibid., 73). However,

¹⁸ The Hebrew *ראש* “head” is ambiguous here and could mean either “Yahweh is with us at our head” (cf. ESV, NASB) or “Yahweh is our leader” (cf. NIV, ISV). Either way, Abijah claims God’s presence for his army.

if we want to accurately describe the activity that להם describes, we should consider all these three cases in the first meaning. To be able to fight means to not perish instantly, not to be able to win. This is also the sense of 1 Sam 17:33. However, in 1 Sam 17:9, this interpretation makes no sense, since not perishing instantly would be an odd condition for Goliath's challenge. This clause is traditionally translated as something like "If he is able to fight and kill me" (NIV), making נכה an object of יכל. The Hebrew, however, has יכל and נכה at the same level:

(17) 1 Sam 17:9a–d:

אם־יוכל להלחם אתי והכני והיינו לכם לעבדים

If he יכל to להם with me and [if] he strikes me then we will be to them as servants.

We should therefore rather read "If he יכל to fight with me and [if he] kills me". This is also the way the LXX translator understands the clause: *καὶ ἐὰν δυνήθη πολέμησαι πρὸς με καὶ ἐὰν πατάξῃ με, καὶ ἐσόμεθα ὑμῖν εἰς δούλους* "and if he δύναμαι fight against me *and if* he strikes me, ..."¹⁹. We should rather understand להלחם as "being able to bring yourself to fight", i.e., a mental ability comparable to Gen 37:4 and Job 4:2 (an aspect not mentioned by Ringgren et al. and listed by Gesenius 1846, but not in later editions). We should then translate: "If he can bring himself to fight with me", i.e., "If he dares to fight with me". Note that "dare" is also one of the meanings of Greek δύναμαι. Our reading furthermore clarifies why this part of Goliath's challenge is not repeated in the second part of the verse that describes what happens if Goliath wins. It is unquestionable Goliath dares to fight with David. All in all the correct understanding of יכל shows that here, like in the prototypical chain of events, להם indicates the actual activity of fighting. We also have cases where יכל is used with other verbs belonging to the chain of events (e.g. עלה "go up" and צור "besiege" in 2 Kgs 16:5). This shows that these should be read in the same context.

In all five cases in Psalms (4 times in qal: 35:1 (bis); 56:2–3; once in niph'al: 109:3), we cannot consider להם designating real physical fight. The attacked party can be generic or vague (35:1 "those who contend with me"; 56:2–3: "my enemies"; "my adversaries"; 109:2: the "wicked and deceitful"; all NIV). The use of להם in Psalms seems to mean "to counteract" rather than "to fight". However, in all three occurrences we have distinct warfare imagery:

¹⁹For a discussion about the change in word order and the repetition of ἐάν (Hebrew אם), see Johnson (2015, 86–87).

החזק מגן וצנה “take shield and buckler” (35:2); באהז אתו פלשתים בגת “when the Philistines took him [David] in Gath” (56:1)²⁰; ודברי שנהא סבבוני “surround with words of hatred” (109:3). Therefore, the verb does not have a general meaning like “counteract” but rather indicates (metaphorical) physical fight.

Concluding Remarks

All occurrences of *לחם* show that a state of war is present. This state is introduced by other verbs, like those of *gathering*, *motion*, and *preparation*, or clarified by context. Events are rounded up with the *settlement* of the fight (e.g. “Yahweh gave ... in the hands of ...”) and a *physical conclusion* (the final blow). Thus, *לחם* means neither “go to battle” (inceptive) nor “overcome” (resultative). Rather, it indicates an actual combat²¹. Normally, the participants are groups of people represented as a whole, but in a couple of instances personal fights are described with *לחם*. Cases where Yahweh is a participant are not distinguishable from other uses, supporting the idea that Yahweh was a warrior (Longman 1997, 786). We have seen how a clearer understanding of the activity indicated by *לחם* helps to understand occurrences with *יכל* “to be able”, in particular in the Goliath story, and how warfare imagery is also used in idiomatic contexts.

Due to its reciprocity the niph'al is an expected stem for *לחם*. This entails the affectedness of the Agent, because there is always a (possibly implicit) participant who defends and fights against the Agent. Therefore, our analysis enforces the current consensus that the niph'al has middle force (Jenni 2012; Van Wolde 2018).

The verb *לחם* is by its nature reciprocal, so the basic meaning is a symmetric fighting event between two armies.²² However, prepositions impose different nuances: *על* is used to mark an entity fought *over*; *ב* indicates a fight with the goal of destroying the opponent; *א* is closest to a prototypical symmetric event, while *עם* provides a middle ground between *ב* and *א*. Finally, *ל* marks benefited parties that are not opposed to the subject and may even not be

²⁰ Also *ממרום* “from on high”, if we read the problematic Hebrew this way (see note 12), may be understood as a description of private combat.

²¹ To further narrow down the semantics summarized in this study, the analysis can be extended to include the noun *מלחמה* “battle” (319×). Also other verbs in the same semantic domain, both in the niph'al and in other stems, can help to further articulate the meaning of *לחם*.

²² In note 1, we discussed two theories concerning the etymology of *לחם*. Both considered the verb to derive its meaning from words related to food: one through the concept of slaughtering (Gluck 1976); the other through “compactness” and “close combat” (Krotkoff 1969). Considering the reciprocity of the verb, the latter suggestion seems more viable: “to be compact with someone else” is to some degree a symmetric event, whereas “to slaughter” is not. However, more research is needed to be able to make a decisive claim on this issue.

involved in the physical fight at all. We can depict the prepositions on a scale of symmetry to illustrate this (figure 2). ל is not included in this figure, because it does not mark an adversary.



Figure 2: Degree of symmetry indicated by prepositions.

This kind of constructions has recently received attention cross-linguistically. Dimitriadis (2008) discusses *discontinuous reciprocal constructions*, “in which the logical subject of a reciprocal verb appears to be split between the syntactic subject and a *comitative argument*” (387, italics original). Bar-Asher Siegal (2016) considers these constructions in Modern Hebrew, noting that the results are relevant cross-linguistically, and comes to the conclusion that “symmetry is a characteristic of an event and not of a predicate” (26). That applies here as well: we clearly see that symmetry depends on a construction as a whole, as embedded in context. In particular, we have seen how prepositions reflect the extent of the symmetry in the case of להם.

Table 2: Hebrew evidence for the prototypical chain of events. Stage numbers refer to the stages of preparation, motion, etc. For stage 4, prepositions are mentioned, but the verb (always להם) is omitted. For stage 7, the sub-scenario (A: possession, B: violence or C: fleeing, as shown in figure 1) is noted in the cell. Stage 8 only occurs in the fleeing scenario.

Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Exod 1:10	יִסֶּף			ב				
Exod 17:8		בּוֹא		עִם				
Exod 17:9–10	בָּחַר	יֵצֵא		ב	חִלֵּשׁ ²³			
Num 21:1				ב			A: שְׁבָה	
Num 21:23	אִסַּף	בּוֹא, יֵצֵא		ב		נָכַח	A: יָרַשׁ	
Num 21:26				ב			A: לָקַח	
Deut 1:41		עָלָה						
Deut 1:42		עָלָה			בָּגַד			

(follows)

²³In v. 13.

Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Deut 20:4		הלך		עם	ישע			
Deut 20:10		קרב		על				
Deut 20:19				על			A: תפש	
Josh 9:2	קבץ			עם				
Josh 10:5	אסף	עלה	חנה	על				
Josh 10:29		עבר		עם	נתן	נכה	B: שאר	
Josh 10:31		עבר	חנה	ב	לכד, נתן	נכה		
Josh 10:34		עבר	חנה	על	לכד	נכה	B: חרם	
Josh 10:36		עלה		על	לכד	נכה	B: שאר, חרם	
Josh 10:38		שוב		על	לכד	נכה	B: שאר, חרם	
Josh 11:5	יעד	בוא	חנה	עם				
Josh 19:47		עלה, יצא		עם	לכד	נכה	A: ירש	
Josh 24:8				את	נתן		AB: ירש, נשמד ²⁴	
Josh 24:9			קום	ב				
Josh 24:11		עבר, בוא		ב	נתן			
Jdg 1:1		עלה		ב				
Jdg 1:3		עלה		ב				
Jdg 1:5				ב		נכה	C: רדף, גוס	קבץ
Jdg 1:8				ב	לכד	נכה	B: שלח	
Jdg 1:9		ירד		ב				
Jdg 5:19		בוא						
Jdg 8:1		הלך		ב				
Jdg 9:17				על	נצל			
Jdg 9:38		יצא		ב				
Jdg 9:39		יצא		ב			C: נוס, רדף	נפל
Jdg 9:45		פשט	עמד	ב	לכד		B: זרע, נתן, הרג ²⁵	
Jdg 9:52		בוא		ב				
Jdg 10:9		עבר		ב				
Jdg 10:18	אסף		חנה	ב				

(follows)

²⁴ For the classification of this verse as A or B, see the discussion around example (14).

²⁵ The symbolic meaning of וירעה מלח "and he sowed it with salt" has been discussed around example (2). This justifies the classification of this verb as *violence*.

Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Jdg 11:6	היה ²⁶			ב				
Jdg 11:8		הלך		ב				
Jdg 11:12		בוא		ב				
Jdg 11:20	אסף		חנה	עם	נתן	נכה	A: ירש	
Jdg 11:32		עבר		ב	נתן	נכה	B: כנע	
Jdg 12:1		עבר		ב				
Jdg 12:3		עלה		ב				
Jdg 12:4	קבץ			את		נכה		
1 Sam 4:10					נגף		C: נוס	נפל
1 Sam 8:20		יצא		את ²⁷				
1 Sam 13:5	אסף	עלה	חנה	עם				
1 Sam 15:18		הלך		ב			B: כלה	
1 Sam 17:32		הלך		עם				
1 Sam 19:8		יצא		ב		נכה	C: נוס	
1 Sam 23:1				ב			B: שטה ²⁸	
1 Sam 23:5		הלך		ב		נכה		
1 Sam 28:1	קבץ			ב				
1 Sam 29:8		בוא		ב				
1 Sam 31:1				ב			C: נוס	נפל
2 Sam 8:10				ב		נכה		
2 Sam 10:17	אסף	בוא, עבר	ערך	עם			C: נוס	הרג
2 Sam 11:17 ²⁹		יצא		את				
2 Sam 12:26–27				ב	לכד			
2 Sam 12:29	אסף	הלך		ב	לכד		A: לקח, ... ³⁰	
2 Sam 21:15		ירד		את				
1 Kgs 12:21	קהל			עם			A: שוב ³¹	
1 Kgs 12:24		עלה		עם				

(follows)

²⁶ "be our commander" (NIV).²⁷ As an accusative marker.²⁸ As we have seen in the section on ב, although שטה "plunder" would typically indicate possession, it is likely that the main reason for this act was distressing the opponent.²⁹ The forms of נפל "fall" and מות "die" here are considered to be simultaneous with להם, so they are not included in the chain of events.³⁰ Vv. 30–31 contains an enumeration of acts that fit in the possession scenario: יצא (2×), עבר, שום.³¹ "regain the kingdom" (NIV).

Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Kgs 20:1	קבץ	עלה	צור	ב				
1 Kgs 20:23				את	חזק			
1 Kgs 20:25	מנא ³²			את	חזק			
2 Kgs 3:21		עלה		ב				
2 Kgs 10:3					עמד			
2 Kgs 12:18		עלה		על	לכד			
2 Kgs 16:5		עלה	צור					
2 Kgs 19:9		יצא		את				
1 Chr 10:1				ב			C: נוס	נפל
1 Chr 18:10				ב		נכה		
1 Chr 19:17	אסף	בוא, עבר	ערך	עם			C: נוס	הרג
2 Chr 11:1	קהל			עם			A: שוב ³³	
2 Chr 11:4		עלה		עם				
2 Chr 20:17			עמד, יצב					
2 Chr 26:6		יצא		ב			B: פרץ	
2 Chr 27:5				עם	חזק			
2 Chr 35:20		עלה						
2 Chr 35:22d		בוא						
Neh 4:2	קשר	בוא		ב			B: עשה ³⁴	
Isa 7:1		עלה		על				
Isa 20:1		בוא		ב			A: לכד	
Isa 37:9		יצא		את				
Jer 1:19				אל	יכל			
Jer 15:20				אל	יכל			
Jer 32:5				את	צלח			
Jer 33:5		בוא		את				
Jer 34:1				על	נתן		B: שרף	
Jer 34:7				על	נתן		B: שרף	
Jer 34:22				על	לכד		B: שרף	

(follows)

³² "raise an army" (NIV).³³ "regain the kingdom" (NIV).³⁴ "stir up trouble." Although this is not necessarily an act of violence, the intention is clearly destructive.

Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Jer 37:8		שוב		על	לכד		B: שרף	
Jer 37:10				את		נכה		
Jer 41:12	לקח ³⁵	הלך		עם				
Dan 10:20		שוב		עם				
Dan 11:11		יצא		עם				
Zech 14:3b		יצא		ב				

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³⁵ “they took all their men” (NIV).

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