

# YHWH blew and they were scattered

*Flavit יהוה et dissipati sunt*

p.sanders@pthu.nl



*Dutch commemorative medal, 1588 (Teylers Museum Haarlem)*

The title of this article is the translation of a slogan on one of the Dutch commemorative medals struck in 1588 to commemorate the destruction of the Spanish Armada. The text expresses the joy of the Dutch supporters of the uprising against Spain. It encloses a picture of ships on a troubled sea.

With the approval of the Pope, the Spanish king Philip II had sent his superbly armed fleet north to subjugate England and the rebellious Dutch provinces and to fight the Reformation. After minor fighting during the passage through the English Channel, the decisive naval battle took place off the coast of Flanders. It became clear that the combat strength of the English and Dutch ships was greater than expected, mainly because of their manoeuvrability. The Spanish commanders saw that the Armada was not invincible and decided to have their ships sail back to Spain, around Scotland and Ireland.

During this long retreat, much of the Spanish naval power went under. Many ships crashed on the cliffs of Ireland's west coast; others had come out of the fighting so damaged that storms easily broke them apart. Probably less than half of the original fleet reached Spain. Thanksgiving services were celebrated in England and the Netherlands, and commemorative medals were also struck.<sup>1</sup>

The reverse of the medal discussed here shows a church on a rock amidst stormy waves. This image emphasises the religious character of the quarrel with the catholic opponents, shown here as waves that threaten the true Church. The picture is surrounded by the following slogan: *Allidor non laedor*, "I am assailed, not injured." Below is the coat of arms of Maurice of Orange-Nassau. It emphasises the role of this governor of Holland and Zeeland in the defence of the real Church.

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<sup>1</sup> See Neil Hanson, *The Confident Hope of a Miracle: The True History of the Spanish Armada*, London 2003, 451-455.

## Biblical background

The use of the Hebrew name of God יהוה (YHWH) on the front of the commemorative medal already indicates that the slogan *Flavit יהוה et dissipati sunt* has biblical roots. It is probably rightly believed that the phrasing was influenced by Job 4:9-11. There Elifaz says:

By God's breath (Vulgate: *flante Deo*, "when God blew") they perish;  
and by the blast of his nose they are consumed.  
The lion's roaring and the fierce lion's voice  
and the young lions' teeth are broken.  
The lion perishes for lack of prey;  
and the whelps of the lioness are scattered (Vulgate: *dissipati sunt*).

How did Dutch followers of the Reformation read this passage after the fall of the Armada? It is obvious that they saw in the lion, which the text designates with different Hebrew words, the Spanish enemy, whom God had hit hard. They may not have realised that this passage refers to something else. Eliphaz, who had little understanding for his suffering "friend" Job, wanted to demonstrate that only sinners suffer.

It is clear, however, that the Latin phrase reflects many more biblical texts, including some thanksgiving songs that – just like the commemorative medal – look back on an extraordinary, supposedly God-induced redemption. Exodus 15:10 looks back on the defeat of the Egyptian army in the Sea of Reeds and praises God for it:

When you blew with your breath (Vulgate: *flavit spiritus tuus*), the sea covered them;  
they sank like lead into the mighty water.

In the thanksgiving song 2 Samuel 22, ascribed to David, this is said of God's destruction of the enemies (22:15):

He shot arrows and scattered them (Vulgate: *dissipavit eos*),  
a flash and confused them.

Prosaic texts also describe God's extraordinary intervention for his people through the use of atmospheric forces. A fine example is the exciting story about the unexpected defeat of the Philistines near Mizpah in 1 Samuel 7. It first points out that Israel had removed all other gods and was devoted only to YHWH (7:3-4). Then it recounts that the Philistines were approaching and that the Israelites feared them very much. Samuel prayed for the people and offered a lamb. At the end there is the special intervention of God:

That same day YHWH thundered with a mighty voice against the Philistines and confused them, and they were defeated before Israel. (1 Samuel 7:10b)

It is surprising that Israel won the battle, since it was the much weaker party. It was only thanks to God's special intervention that for Israel a period of peace and stability began, which lasted as long as Samuel judged Israel (7:13-17).

Since the narrative contains some "deuteronomistic" expressions, especially in the verses about Israel's devotion to YHWH, many scholars regard it as heterogeneous.<sup>2</sup> In my opinion, however, the transmitted text is more uniform than is sometimes assumed. Israel's turn to YHWH is the indispensable condition for God's intervention (7:3b), and God's extraordinary

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, P. Kyle McCarter Jr, *1 Samuel*, Garden City, NY 1980 (Anchor Bible), 142-143; Walter Dietrich, *Samuel*, Bd. 1: *1 Sam 1-12*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2011 (BKAT), 310-315.

response confirms that Israel's behaviour had been right. Thus, we see that the defeat of the Philistines not only called for praise to God, but also confirmed the correctness of Israel's decision to serve this God only.

When the English and Dutch supporters of the Reformation looked back on the fall of the Armada, it was no different. The supposedly God-given liberation from the enemies not only led to gratitude to God, but also confirmed that the decision to follow the Reformation had been correct.

### A surprising parallel

Strangely enough, similar memories were passed down in the cultures surrounding ancient Israel. A good example is the description of the campaign against the land of Arzawa in the so-called Ten-Year Annals of the Hittite king Mursili II, who reigned ca. 1321–1295 BCE.<sup>3</sup> These annals were written about seven years after this campaign. Mursili reports at the beginning of the text that, in contrast to his father, he served the Sungoddess of Arinna faithfully and that she answered his prayer for redemption from the enemies. In the following descriptions of his campaigns he usually indicates that this goddess, the Stormgod and the other gods let him achieve victory.

The description of his third year of reign contains a detailed scene that reports on the special actions of the Stormgod when the Hittites attacked Arzawa in western Asia Minor. Mursili states that he wrote the following to the enemy king Uḫḫaziti in a letter:

Now, come, we will fight. Let the Stormgod, my lord, decide our lawsuit.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Mursili emphasises the sovereignty of the Stormgod and gives the impression that he would accept a defeat caused by this god. Precisely because this god can make his judgment independently, it is instructive that he then intervenes in favour of the Hittite army:

When I had gone and when I had arrived in Lawaša, the victorious Stormgod, my lord, showed his divine power. He shot a lightning bolt. My troops saw the lightning bolt and the land of Arzawa saw it. The lightning bolt went and struck Arzawa. It struck Apāša (Ephesus?), the city of Uḫḫaziti. Uḫḫaziti fell on his knees and became ill.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the exact meaning of the Hittite word <sup>giš</sup>*kalmiš(a)naš*, which is translated here as “lightning bolt”, is not entirely certain.<sup>6</sup> For the further course of the narrative, however, this is of little importance. More relevant is that Arzawa was weakened considerably and that Mursili, thanks to the special war act of the Stormgod, was able to achieve victory.

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<sup>3</sup> A good translation, which I also quote below, is that of Richard H. Beal, in: *The Context of Scripture (CoS)*, Vol. 2, Leiden und Boston 2003, 82-90. The transcription of the Hittite text and a German translation are provided by Albrecht Götze, *Die Annalen des Muršiliš*, Leipzig 1933. For a more recent German translation, see Hans Martin Kümmel in: *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments (TUAT)*, Bd. I, Gütersloh 1985, 471-481. Other parallels in extra-biblical texts from the ancient Near East are discussed by Moshe Weinfeld, “Divine Intervention in War in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East,” in: H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (eds): *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures*, Jerusalem and Leiden 1984, 121-147.

<sup>4</sup> *CoS*, Vol. 2, 85.

<sup>5</sup> *CoS*, Vol. 2, 85.

<sup>6</sup> See now Alwin Kloekhorst, *Etymological Dictionary of the Hittite Inherited Lexicon*, Leiden and Boston 2008, 431. The word is translated as “météorite” in Jean-Pierre Grégoire, “Les annales décennales de Mursili II (CTH 61, I),” in: *Hethitica* 9 (1988), 17-145, here 79, 117.

Of course, Mursili was happy to have this version of the events narrated. The description shows that the Stormgod knowingly favoured him. Mursili's "Comprehensive Annals", written many years later, tell anew about the same submission of Arzawa.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately the text is very damaged. It is clear that the description includes elements that were missing in the Ten-Year Annals. However, this text also points to the decisive intervention of the Stormgod with the help of the <sup>gis</sup>*kalmiš(a)naš*.

### Selective memory

The commemorative medal with the text *Flavit יהוה et dissipati sunt* was struck soon after the fall of the Armada. Mursili's Ten-Year Annals were written about seven years after the Arzawa campaign. The account of the defeat of the Philistines in 1 Samuel 7 could have been written long after the events of which it relates, but the parallels with Mursili's description of his battle with Arzawa show that memories of real events may also have been incorporated in this biblical account. What speaks against assuming that the Israelites won a victory thanks to extremely bad weather?

It is likely that the role of the deity in achieving the victory was seen as crucial from the start. Before the battle, there was great fear and much uncertainty. It was clear that winning was only partially dependent on factors that could be controlled. If factors beyond one's control made victory possible, it was reasonable to attribute them to the intervention of a god.

Why then was this aspect of the memories so emphasised? The human role could also have been highlighted. In order to achieve victory, preparations for war, a military strategy, the deployment of troops, perseverance, etc., were also necessary.

We know nothing of the historical backgrounds of 1 Samuel 7 and the Hittite description of the campaign against Arzawa. In these texts, the acts of war of the gods are described as decisive interventions, whereby the victory could be achieved quite easily. We can no longer find out which events played a role in the background.

The events of 1588 are clearer because we not only know the slogan *Flavit יהוה et dissipati sunt* but also know a lot about the historical background. The fact that the English and Dutch ships had dealt such a severe blow to the Armada off the Flemish coast had to do with their agility, the tactical insight of their captains, the perseverance of their marines, the poor Spanish leadership and communication, and the technological backlog of the Spanish fleet. There was no need to stress God's intervention. In addition, the reference to divine intervention was problematic anyway, since the weather was sometimes benevolent not to the English and Dutch ships but to the Armada.<sup>8</sup>

The slogan deliberately brought a single event to the fore. Other memories faded into the background or were even forgotten. Why was there so much emphasis on the intervention of the deity in question in completely different contexts? The answer can only be that it implied a divine approval of one's own actions. Mursili's reference to the intervention of the Stormgod indicates that – unlike his father – he had taken the correct religious measures. YHWH's act of war in favour of the Israelites in Samuel's time makes it clear that the decision to serve only this God pleased him. In the same way, the slogan *Flavit יהוה et dissipati sunt* showed that God supported the Reformation, although the catholic opponents had also counted on God's help. The message for the many residents of the Dutch provinces who had remained catholic was to join the true Church and to support the struggle against Spain. In all of these cases, the triumphant party attributed its victory to the deity.

The highest possible authority, namely God himself, had supported this party. What more could you wish?

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<sup>7</sup> For a transcription and translation of the Hittite text passage, see Götze, *Die Annalen des Muršiliš*, 44-49.

<sup>8</sup> See Hanson, *The Confident Hope*, 451-453.