We can find almost anything in the Hebrew Bible, especially if we define the phenomenon we are seeking in a suitable fashion. For this reason, the definition we choose for martyrdom is of more than academic interest—it will determine whether or not martyrdom actually existed in ancient Israel. It is well known that the English word “martyr” ultimately derives from the Greek μάρτυς, “witness,” which passed into Latin and from there to the Romance languages. This is, for example, the predominant sense of the word in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, where it often appears in a juridical context, translating “witness” (καταδικάζειν). The more usual sense of martyr, however, developed within the Christian community in the second century C.E.; it focuses on persecution, suffering, and death.

It is tempting to search for an equivalent Hebrew technical term for martyr. The term kiddushhashem, “sanctification of the name,” closely identified with the crusades and even the holocaust, immediately presents itself. Though this term is based on biblical usage, particularly on the prophet Ezekiel, it is not a suitable starting point for investigating martyrdom in the Hebrew Bible. In Ezekiel, it is typically God who sanctifies his name by saving Israel while the nations watch; see, for example, Ezekiel 36:22–23: “Say to the House of Israel: ‘Thus said the Lord God: Not for your sake will I act, O House of Israel, but for my holy name, which you have caused to be profaned among the nations to which you have come. I will sanctify My great name which has been profaned among the nations—among whom you have caused it to be profaned. And the
nations shall know that I am the Lord—declares the Lord God—when I manifest My holiness before their eyes through you.”

In contrast to martyrdom, Israel here is a passive participant, while God is the active character. The difference between the biblical *kiddush hashem* and the rabbinic *kiddush hashem*, which in some of its forms has many similarities to the predominant Christian notion of martyrdom, has been appreciated by Holtz, who notes that the rabbinic concept of “sanctification by death is a complete reversal of the biblical concept of the sanctification of the Name by miraculous but joyous, events in history.”

The absence of a term for martyr in the Hebrew Bible does not suggest that martyrs and martyrdom did not exist; after all, theodicy is a central issue of the Book of Job, but neither that book nor any other biblical work offers a Hebrew term for theodicy. Job is a particularly instructive example of how a text may assume a phenomenon without naming it. Readers of Job would agree that the first chapters of the book describe the testing or trial of Job as background to the poetic center, though any word related to the root “to try or test” (*nsh*) is absent. Job must be a central text in any serious discussion of theodicy or of how or why God tests people, even though it lacks the crucial Hebrew terminology for assigning it to these categories. Similarly, the Hebrew Bible belongs in the discussion of the development of the idea of martyr and martyrdom. Different scholars have proposed various definitions for the term martyr. I will here adopt the defining characteristics proposed by Droge and Tabor in their study of Hebrew, Greek, and early Christian attitudes toward different types of suicide, *A Noble Death*. This definition is useful in that it allows the biblical evidence to be incorporated into more general discussions of martyrdom. Droge and Tabor enumerate the following five characteristics of martyrs, placing special emphasis on the fifth:

1. They reflect situations of opposition and persecution.
2. The choice to die, which these individuals make, is viewed by the authors as necessary, noble, and heroic.
3. These individuals are often eager to die; indeed, in several cases they end up directly *killing themselves*.
4. There is often the idea of vicarious benefit resulting from their suffering and death.
5. The expectation of vindication and reward beyond death, more often than not, is a prime motivation for their choice of death.
What is immediately striking once we begin to work with this conception of martyr is the general absence of martyrs in the Hebrew Bible. This point becomes quite clear once we examine the individuals who commit suicide in the Hebrew Bible. Certainly, suicide and martyrdom are closely related; as Droge and Tabor note, “One person’s martyr was another person’s suicide, and vice versa.” Six individuals commit suicide in the Bible: Abimelek, Saul, Saul’s armor bearer, Samson, Ahitophel, and Zimri. I will comment only on Saul and Samson, the best known of these individuals, whose deaths most closely approach those of martyrs.

The final chapter of First Samuel describes Saul’s suicide in a single verse: “Saul said to his arms-bearer, ‘Draw your sword and run me through, so that the uncircumcised may not run me through and make sport of me’” (31:4). Saul chose suicide in the middle of a losing battle against the Philistines; he was afraid that the Philistines would abuse his corpse, a fate which, according to the continuation of the chapter, befell him anyway. Yet, he was no martyr. He fulfills the first three criteria: he dies at a time of military opposition; the author seems to view his choice to die as noble and heroic; and he does (indirectly) kill himself. The last two criteria, however, that there would be some vicarious benefit from his death and that there would be some reward beyond death, are lacking.

Samson’s death, though, approaches martyrdom. It fulfills all the criteria of Saul’s death; in addition, there certainly is a vicarious benefit from his death: he killed many Philistines as he committed suicide, bringing down the Temple of Dagon on himself and the assembled celebrants. The text makes this quite clear, by claiming that Samson’s final words were “Let me die with the Philistines!” (Judges 16:30a) and by summarizing the episode “Those who were slain by him as he died outnumbered those who had been slain by him when he lived” (16:30b). Yet the final aspect, “the expectation of vindication and reward beyond death, more often than not, is a prime motivation for their choice of death,” is absent. The Book of Judges makes it quite clear that Samson’s vindication is the death of many Philistines, not some other-worldly reward. Additionally, many depictions of martyrs are typically paradigmatic, with the hero portrayed as an example of righteousness that others should follow. This is certainly not the case with Samson, whose behavior is so problematic that one scholar considers the Samson stories to be a type of allegory describing wayward Israel.

I would like to turn briefly to resistance, a phenomenon which can turn into martyrdom, but, as we shall see, in ancient Israel typically did
not do so. Several biblical texts from the Book of Kings reflect resistance to foreign political domination over the land of Israel in the preexilic period. A second, fundamentally different type of resistance may be seen in two of the latest biblical texts from the Persian and Greek periods, Esther and Daniel.

For much of the period during which the First Temple was standing, approximately 950–586 B.C.E., the Israelites did not enjoy political autonomy. Rather, they were a vassal state, often subjugated to one of the great Mesopotamian powers of Assyria or Babylon. This is not an arcane historical fact but rather an issue that is of fundamental importance for understanding the Bible and the ancient Israelite perception of self. Phrased differently, ancient Israel was a provincial country, situated between the great powers of Egypt and Mesopotamia, which had been flourishing for millennia before Israel arose. Ancient Israel found itself in the unenviable position of being a buffer state between these two great imperial powers—two high civilizations with old and sophisticated literatures, arts, and religions. It is certainly striking that under such circumstances, the people of the country could maintain their ethnic and religious identity to any degree, rather than becoming absorbed into the mainstream cultures. In fact, in various periods there was active resistance against these powers—against tremendous odds.

Our knowledge of much of the political, social, and religious history of biblical Israel is far from complete. There are few extrabiblical texts that offer knowledge concerning Israel; archeological evidence is often very difficult to interpret, and most biblical historical texts are written from a highly ideological perspective, making it difficult to use them to reconstruct the past. But it remains difficult to discount completely the many biblical texts that suggest extreme forms of acculturation to the surrounding societies. The tendency toward accommodation in the biblical period may be seen most clearly in the stories in Kings concerning the prophet Elijah, whom I will examine later as a protomartyr. Elijah is presented as the lone remaining prophet to the God of Israel, fighting against an entire nation which had been swayed by the religion of the contiguous Phoenicians. Elijah states twice in the famous chapter in which God appears to him through “a small still voice”: “I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life” (1 Kings 19:10, 14). Even once we factor in the exaggerated nature of this statement, it still likely reflects some reality of abandonment of native Israelite traditions to those of the surrounding cultures,
especially given the political alliances between Israel and these city-states. In the words of a drier account in an earlier chapter of Kings: “Ahab son of Omri did what was displeasing to the Lord . . . he took as wife Jezebel Daughter of King Ethbaal of the Phoenicians, and he went and served Baal and worshipped him. He erected an altar to Baal in the temple of Baal which he erected in Samara . . . ”\(^{15}\) (17:30).

This account of northern Israelite religion in the ninth century B.C.E. is in no way unique. One of the most significant chapters for studying ancient biblical theology and the issues of exclusivity, acculturation, and assimilation is Jeremiah 44, which focuses on women’s popular religion.\(^{16}\) Jeremiah began prophesying while the First Temple was still standing, around the time of Josiah’s reform—a reform which according to the Bible instituted strict Yahwism centered around Jerusalem and abolished the worship of other deities—and he continued to prophesy after the destruction of that Temple in 586 B.C.E. Chapter 44 is set after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple and is addressed to the community of exiles in Egypt. One of Jeremiah’s most difficult tasks was to convince these exiles that their punishment was deserved, caused by the people’s abandonment of God for other deities. The response of the Judean–Egyptian community to his harangue is quite significant:

We will not listen to you in the matter about which you spoke to us in the name of the Lord. On the contrary, we will do everything that we have vowed—to make offerings to the Queen of Heaven and to pour libations to her, as we used to do, we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty to eat, we were well off, and suffered no misfortune. But ever since we have stopped making offerings to the Queen of Heaven and pouring libations to her, we have lacked everything, and we have been consumed by the sword and by famine.\(^ {17}\)

The people here are saying that they have conducted an empirical experiment: before the days of the Josianic reform, when they worshiped the Queen of Heaven, almost certainly some form of the Mesopotamian high goddess Ishtar, all was well. However, after Josiah’s reform, when exclusive Yahwism was instituted and the worship of Ishtar ceased, the nation’s fate quickly declined—after all, the great reforming king, Josiah, was killed in battle by the Egyptian king a mere thirteen years after his religious reform, and several decades later, the Temple lay in ruins and much of the upper-class population was forcibly exiled to Babylonia. The results of the experiment are clear—avoid
extreme nationalism, certainly on the religious level, but quite possibly on the political level as well. It is better to live a Babylonian lifestyle as a vassal of Babylon than to have Judah turned into a Babylonian province, depopulated of Judeans. Thus, this chapter reflects an early form of the argument that assimilation assures survival.

This was not, however, the only biblical view. In the late eighth century, Judah was a vassal of the mighty Assyrian empire. That culture had a tremendous influence on Judah: Assyrian loan words appear in the Bible, and some of the prophecies of Isaiah reflect an intimate knowledge of Assyrian literary texts. Assyrian religious practices also infiltrated into Judah. It was earlier felt that these were forced by the Assyrian overlords, but more recent studies have debated this contention, noting that the Assyrians did not typically impose their religious beliefs on their vassals. Most recently, a cogent middle position has developed: “Whether something is ‘imposed’ or ‘voluntarily adopted’ is a matter of perspective. To cite a modern illustration, an American visitor and an African national might have opposite views about the significance of an African bride wearing a very Western-looking white lace wedding gown. What the American might view as voluntary imitation, the African might consider cultural imperialism.”

Yet, what is decisive even in this new position is that the vassals were not punished if they maintained their native religious practices; just as Africans are not punished by Americans or Europeans for wearing traditional tribal garb during a wedding ceremony, the Judeans and Israelites who adhered to strict Yahwism were not punished by the Babylonians or the Assyrians. In the context of Judah as an Assyrian vassal, when Judah had adopted many Assyrian religious customs, the events of 701 B.C.E. are quite remarkable. The most accurate biblical account of that year’s events reads: “Hezekiah son of King Ahaz became king . . . He abolished the shrines and smashed the pillars and cut down the sacred post . . . He trusted only in the Lord the God of Israel . . . He clung to the Lord; he did not turn away from following Him, but kept the commandments that the Lord had given to Moses . . . He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him” (2 Kings 18:1–7). Thus, rebellion against the Assyrian overlord and reintroduction of strict monotheistic practices and the rejection of Assyrian religious customs went hand in hand; the Bible depicts a political and religious rebellion. But what was the result of such a revolt? According to an Assyrian source, which is remarkably similar to one account found in 2 Kings 18:13–16: “As to Hezekiah, the Judean, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the
Hezekiah’s attempt at gaining political freedom did not end well—the political situation of the Judeans was drastically reduced, and the following king, Manasseh, undid his father’s reforms: “He rebuilt the shrines that his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he erected altars for Baal and made a sacred post . . . He bowed down to all the host of heaven and worshipped them, and . . . he built altars for all the hosts of heaven in the two courts of the House of the Lord” (2 Kings 21:3–5).

In sum, the evidence of Kings presents religious purists versus extreme assimilationists, with all sorts of stripes in between. The more typical reaction then, as in more recent times, was accommodation. Hezekiah, at the very end of the eighth century, is an example of extreme resistance; he dared to oppose the mighty Assyrians, the great imperial power of his time that had overrun much of the ancient world. Though the Assyrians did not systematically slaughter the nations they conquered—these people were too valuable for forced labor—their extreme cruelty is evidenced in their literary texts, where they slay the enemy until their blood flows in rivers, or in various reliefs, which show enemy men, naked and impaled, reminiscent of more recent and contemporary horrors. The Bible depicts Hezekiah’s religious and political idealism as highly positive, although it was political and military suicide—like the fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto, he believed in resistance at all costs.

Should Hezekiah be considered a martyr? Though a very broad definition of the term might view him as one, he does not fulfill certain crucial criteria of my understanding of the term. First, he is not killed; though his rebellion against the power of Assyria might be viewed as suicidal, it did not ultimately result in suicide. Though hindsight suggests that the attempt to rebel against “the might that was Assyria” is quite foolhardy, there is no suggestion that Hezekiah was “eager to die” in this rebellion. More significant, the rebellion does not take place because of a situation of persecution. As noted before, the Assyrians did not enforce Assyrian religion or the worship of Assyrian gods on their vassals, though, much like today, many Israelites might have opted to incorporate elements of that religion in order to blend in with the politically dominant power. Most significantly, the rebellion was an attempt at gaining political (and economic) freedom. There is not the
slightest hint that religious issues stood behind this rebellion or that through overthrowing his overlord, Hezekiah expected a “reward beyond death.”

I have spent so much time discussing Hezekiah because a careful analysis of his rebellion and its failure helps to highlight why it is so difficult to discuss martyrdom within the context of preexilic Israel, namely, the absence of religious persecution in the ancient Near Eastern world. Oddly enough, Israel seems to be the only nation of that time that was, on occasion, fundamentally intolerant of other religions. This is, of course, connected to the emergent monotheistic nature of some forms of Israelite religion, a long and complicated development which cannot be traced here. Fundamental to this issue is the development of the notion of the *herem*, translated as either “the ban” or “proscription,” legislation that suggests that the autochthonous nations of Canaan must be exterminated because they will lead the radically monotheistic *Israelites* astray. This legislation, which may have reflected an ideal of religious purity rather than actual practice, is a reflection of a type of religious intolerance of a group of people whom Morton Smith calls the “Yahweh-alone party.” This party was locked in fundamental conflict with those who practiced a syncretistic brand of Yahwism, the people whom Elijah alludes to in his famous words: “How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; and if Baal, follow him!” (1 Kings 18:21b).

The Book of Kings presents a picture of Elijah as the lone survivor of the conflict between the Yahweh-alone party, which he heads, and the syncretistic party, headed by Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Should either Elijah or those who belonged to his party, whom the text suggests the king had killed, be considered martyrs?

Elijah fulfills several of the criteria for martyrdom. The entire Elijah cycle reflects “situations of opposition and persecution”, at one point, in 1 Kings 19, a chapter full of allusions to Moses, Elijah is eager to die (1 Kings 19:4), and this choice seems to be viewed positively by the narrator, though God does not fulfill Elijah’s will. Two Kings 9:7 suggests that various prophets contemporaneous with Elijah were actually killed. There even is, to some extent, “the expectation of vindication and reward beyond death,” as is made clear from Elijah’s comment to his disciple (2 Kings 2:10), which suggests that Elijah knew that he would not die a natural death. Yet, there is no “idea of vicarious benefit resulting from [his] suffering and death.” Additionally, the text presents the end of Elijah’s life on earth as an extraordinary event; other Israelites could not expect to leave this world in “a fiery chariot
with fiery horses” (v. 11). This absence of a widespread concept of “reward beyond death” is a decisive factor responsible for the lack of martyrdom in the preexilic period.

The analysis of Hezekiah’s revolt and of the Elijah pericope highlights the fact that a full-blown ideology of martyrdom could not exist in preexilic Israel because that society typically lived in an era of religious tolerance and did not have a developed notion of a positive afterlife. In contrast to Elijah and Enoch, “whom God took” (Gen. 5:24), most Israelites expected to enter sheol upon their death. Sheol, the underworld, was a rather unpleasant place, in which the individual lived a half-life of sorts. It was removed from the divine realm; various psalmists note that the dead do not praise God. It is also the great equalizer; in the words of Job 3:19a, “Small and great alike are there.” It would only be in the postexilic era, once the notions of the afterlife would begin to change and Israel would be confronted with extreme religious intolerance, that the notion of martyrdom could fully develop.

One of these elements, the confrontation with extreme religious intolerance, is first reflected in the Book of Esther. The story of Esther is well known. It is set in the Persian empire, where Mordecai, a Jew, refuses to bow down to the king’s vizier Haman the Agagite. As a result of this action, Haman decided to kill the entire Jewish population and had Mordecai not intervened with the help of his relative Esther, one of the king’s wives, the Jews would have all been killed. Instead, “the opposite happened” (Esther 9:1); Haman was killed, the Jewish community was saved, many members of the non-Jewish community were massacred, and Mordecai the Jew was exalted, replacing his archenemy Haman.

The action that sets the problems into motion is quite obscure—Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman. What is Mordecai’s problem? The traditional Jewish position assimilates Mordecai into the martyr paradigm, claiming that it was forbidden to bow to a human being. However, bowing to a person is never prohibited in any biblical legislation, and people bow down to each other throughout the Bible—indeed, toward the end of the book (8:3), Esther bows down to Ahasuerus! In any case, as a result of Mordecai’s actions, Haman decides that killing Mordecai alone is insufficient—all the Jews, Mordecai’s coreligionists, must be killed (3:6). The verses in which Haman makes his request (3:8–9) are so significant that they are worth quoting: “Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realms, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; and it in not in your majesty’s inter-
A major focus of these verses is that somehow difference is evil, a notion anticipated earlier when Mordecai took exception to the norm of bowing to Haman. Yet, this perception of difference was a minority opinion—according to the scroll, the city of Susa was dismayed when the edict concerning the destruction of the Jews was announced (3:15), and overjoyed at the eventual deliverance of the Jews (8:15). In fact, it is quite possible that Ahasuerus’s edict was not at all motivated by what some would call anti-Semitism—Haman offers Ahasuerus an astronomical sum to pass the edict, computed by some to be over 60 percent of the annual tax revenues. Haman is certainly motivated by fear of difference; Ahasuerus is motivated by monetary greed. Phrased differently, to the extent that ideology is central to the production of martyrs, Haman’s reasons, based on difference, are highly ideological and reflect issues connected to martyrdom, while the motivation attributed to Ahasuerus is economic and should not be connected to the ideology of martyrdom.

The Jews succeeded through physical resistance. Esther, jeopardizing her life, obtained permission for the Jews to fight back, and in typical biblical measure-for-measure fashion, to do unto their enemies exactly what their enemies were intending to do to them.

Should Esther be considered a potential martyr? In some senses she is, for when Esther followed Mordecai’s advice to go to the king and ask permission for the Jews to fight back, she risked death, since such unsolicited visits could result in death if the king did not show the visitor favor (4:11). The risk that she took saved the community as a whole. Yet, according to the definition proposed earlier, she could not be a martyr, for the central element of “the expectation of vindication and reward beyond death” is lacking.

Still, Esther is a fundamental text for understanding the development of martyrdom, for it is the earliest biblical text to suggest an ideological opposition to difference—in this case, practice of the Jewish religion. Though the Persians were not typically xenophobic, ethnic strife could and did erupt in the vast Persian empire. The Book of Esther must at least reflect the fear of such strife being directed against the Jewish community, if not an actual attempt to harm or to destroy that community. That book served as a significant myth of encouragement, telling the Jewish community that such attempts at destruction cannot, and will not, succeed. Finally, the Jewish community, despite its fears of being so different, or perhaps because of those fears, could actually create as part of their story the idea that many of the people either converted or pretended to be Jews, an inversion of the much
later Conversos. Thus, although the Book of Esther introduces the element of national persecution, a fundamental element of martyrdom, this book is ultimately anti-martyrdom—the Jews of Esther redefine themselves as political victors rather than victims.

The themes of persecution and of the transformation of victim into victor also appear in the first six chapters of Daniel, which is similar to Esther in other significant aspects as well.49 Daniel is an amazingly complex book, full of critical problems that have not been resolved.50 All scholars agree that in terms of genre, the first six chapters, which are stories, should be distinguished from the last six chapters of the book, which are apocalyptic visions. There is, however, serious disagreement concerning the dating of the first part of the book. While there is a scholarly consensus that chapters 7–12 date from the period of persecution under Antiochus IV in the middle of the second pre-Christian century,51 it is uncertain whether the first six chapters date from this period as well or whether they were written several centuries earlier.52 In any case, these chapters show significant similarities to Esther.53 They are both postexilic biblical texts set in the foreign court. Yet, it is not the mere placement of the Jew in the royal court that makes these stories relevant; in both, following certain well-established folk-tale patterns, a great danger—what folklorists call a “complication”—arises to either the Jewish individual or people, and through various unexpected twists, the problem is resolved, the situation of the Jews is improved, and they all live happily ever after.

Some of the stories from the first six chapters of Daniel are well known, at least from Western art—for example, Daniel in the lion’s den from chapter 6 or the three friends of Daniel in the fiery furnace in chapter 3.54 The book in its current form begins with the rather tame story of Daniel and his four friends succeeding in the royal court because they adhere to the Jewish dietary requirements (Dan. 1). This suggests that there is no need for Jews to be separate; divine intervention would assure that they could fully integrate. This story’s author believed or hoped that God always intervenes to help his people.

The stories in Daniel get better and better. In chapter 3, Daniel’s three friends refuse to bow down to an image, though failure to bow down was punishable by death in a fiery furnace.55 The chapter is a literary masterpiece, including fine details—like the fact that the furnace was so hot, the people who threw the Jews into it were killed by the heat, and when Daniel’s three friends emerged from the flames, they were totally unscathed, not even the odor of fire clung to them. The king, after viewing this “miracle,” says that anyone who blasphemes
this God “shall be torn limb from limb” (v. 29) and notes of the Jewish God: “His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion endures throughout the generations” (v. 33). Quite an amazing sentiment to come from the mouth of King Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed the First Temple!

Daniel 6 is the most remarkable, and most fanciful, of these three stories. Various royal officials conspire against Daniel and get an edict passed that for the next thirty days prayers and petitions may only be addressed to the king, Darius. Yet, “When Daniel learned that [the decree] had been put in writing, he went to his house . . . knelt down, prayed and made confession to his God, as he had always done” (v. 11). The king, who loved Daniel, was beside himself, but had no choice—Daniel was thrown into the lions’ den, which was closed with a rock and sealed with the royal signet ring. Yet, Daniel was saved by a divine angel “and no injury was found on him, for he had trusted in his God” (v. 24). The officials who wanted Daniel dead were then thrown into the lions’ den along with their families, and “They had hardly reached the bottom of the den when the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones” (v. 25). The chapter ends with a prayer by Darius to God, which is longer and more powerful than the earlier prayer of Nebuchadnezzar. The first part of Daniel concludes with a wonderful crescendo.

Like Esther, the stories of Daniel 1–6 all have as their basis the idea that “different is suspect.”56 Yet, this difference does not lead to genocide; it is only applied against powerful individuals, like Daniel and his friends, who are willing to die because of their beliefs. They do not eat the impure food; they do not bow to the statue; and they continue to pray to God. They feel that over the Jewish religion itself, there is no compromise.57 And God hears their voices; such powerful and complete spiritual, nonviolent resistance is rewarded by God.

Here, too, we have a model of behavior that approaches martyrdom, of individuals willing to die at a time of persecution. But like Esther, these individuals should not be considered full-fledged martyrs, for they are not killed and, more fundamentally, they do not look forward to death as being better than life. The stories make it quite clear that the protagonists do not expect to die. They have great faith that God will intervene and save them; there is no sense that there will be a reward in the afterlife.

It is only in the final chapters of the Book of Daniel, representing the very latest of the canonical books of the Hebrew Bible, that all the necessary elements for martyrdom come together, as the notion of res-
urrection is first clearly seen in the Bible. The verses in question read, “Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence. And the knowledgeable will be radiant like the bright expanse of sky, and those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever” (12:2–3). The origin of the idea of resurrection as it appears in Daniel is debated. Some see the text in Daniel as the culmination of a long biblical development, going back to the preexilic period. Much more likely, however, is the possibility that this notion developed in the postexilic period, largely under Persian or Greek influence. This explains why, for example, none of the people who opt for death in the preexilic period ever expresses the notion that death is life. Exactly when this idea entered Judaism, and the process through which it began to replace the earlier idea of sheol, is quite unclear. However, given the relative attractiveness of a positive afterlife to the half-life of sheol, it is quite easy to imagine this idea quickly winning acceptance, paving the way for a full-fledged concept of martyrdom.

The last chapters of Daniel, with the idea of resurrection where the knowledgeable and/or righteous will be like stars, comes from the period of 167–164 B.C.E., during the persecution of the Jewish community under the Greek Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who, according to various traditions, desecrated the Second Temple and forbade central Jewish legal requirements, including circumcision and the study of Torah. Antiochus was eventually defeated by the Maccabees, but for several years the community in Israel was terrorized by his decrees, decrees that were not at all normative for Seleucid rule, which was typically quite tolerant of non-Hellenistic religious practices. The reasons for Antiochus’s extremism are unclear, though it is worth pointing out that several classical authors punned on his name Antiochus Epiphanes, “manifest (as god),” calling him Epimanes, “utterly mad,” thus perhaps we need not look at the decrees of Antiochus as part of a fully conceived political or religious plan.

This shift to full-scale religious persecution is the last missing piece that allowed the idea of martyrdom to develop. The persecution is referred to in the typically difficult and obscure language of the concluding chapters of Daniel, which state concerning Antiochus: “He will have great strength, but not through his own strength. He will be extraordinarily destructive; he will prosper in what he does, and destroy the mighty and the people of holy ones” (8:24). The entire time period is conceived of as an era of “wrath” (8:19).
The Book of Daniel sees the coalescence of these ideas of extreme religious persecution and immortality, leading, at the very end of what is considered the biblical period, to the only biblical example of true martyrdom. It is possible that the large-scale persecution of Jews for the observance of the Torah aided in fostering the notions of resurrection and immortality, but as noted above, these ideas probably did not develop *de novo* in this period. To the extent that they are Greek ideas, it is ironic that they should have been accepted by the extreme anti-Hellenistic community responsible for writing the second half of Daniel.

In sum, the question posed by this essay’s title should largely be answered in the negative. There was no concept of martyrdom for most of the biblical period. Some of the preconditions for martyrdom developed, but the civilizations that ruled over ancient Israel were typically tolerant of this small religious minority, so that religious persecution, essential for the development of martyrdom, was absent. This began to change only with the writing of the Book of Esther. Even then, however, “the expectation of vindication and reward beyond death” as “a prime motivation for their choice of death” was absent.

It is only in Daniel, the very latest book of the Hebrew Bible, where we find the coalescence of all the factors necessary for true martyrdom, and the first descriptions of martyrdom as a religious ideal in Judaism. When embedded within a culture that is persecuted for its religious beliefs and believes in an afterlife, martyrdom becomes a very attractive idea and ideal, and thus it is no surprise that early Judaism continued to use and develop this idea. Various postbiblical historical figures were depicted as martyrs, sometimes by their contemporaries, at other times by later tradents; in this period even biblical figures could anachronistically be depicted as martyrs. An example of the latter is the treatment of Isaac as a prototypical martyr in some of the Targumim (Aramaic translations of the Bible). There are many illustrations of the former. Prominent examples include the story told about a mother who martyred herself along with her seven children, either during the persecution of Antiochus or during the later Hadrianic persecutions and Bar Kochba Revolt (132–35 C.E.), to the story, which exists in many forms and is historically impossible, of the ten sages put to death during the Hadrianic persecutions. These stories would reach a new crescendo during the Crusades.

A clear understanding of the biblical period, which rarely depicts martyrdom, is indispensable for understanding why this phenomenon only developed in the second century B.C.E., in the very latest part of the biblical period. Some scholars have argued recently for a strong
discontinuity between the Bible and Hellenistic Judaism and have gone as far as suggesting that Judaism is a fundamentally Hellenistic phenomenon. Though I disagree with the broad strokes of this picture, for particular historical reasons, the observation is valid for the history of Jewish martyrdom, which is first evidenced during the Hellenistic period, perhaps under Hellenistic influence, and then becomes a fundamental element of Jewish religion.

Notes

I would like to thank Susie Tanchel of Brandeis University for her assistance in preparing this essay, which was last updated in 1997. The abbreviations follow the Journal of Biblical Literature.

8. For a survey, aside from the various studies in this volume, see the works in Die Entstehung der Jüdischen Martyrologie, ed. J. W. van Henten (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), especially the discussion on 220–23.
10. Ibid., 75.
11. Ibid., 188.
12. The most extensive discussion of these individuals is ibid., 53–60.


Jeremiah 44:16–18.


R. H. Lowery, *The Reforming Kings: Cults and Society in First Temple Judah*, JSOTSup 120 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991); the quote is from p. 140.

is there martyrdom in the hebrew bible?


24. For this model, see Smith, Palestinian Parties.


28. For various explorations for why this was so, see Mark G. Brett, ed., Ethnicity and the Bible (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), especially 25–169.


32. This is the position suggested by Moshe Greenberg, “Herem,” EJ 8 (1972): 349.

33. Smith, Palestinian Parties, especially 15–56.


35. I emphasize the word “reflects.” The Elijah cycle has gone through a long history of development and it is often difficult to determine the extent to which it contains factual information. On its history, see the relevant sections of Alexander Roë, The Prophetic Call: The Narratives about the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible: Their Literary Types and History, trans. D. Levy et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988). If the suggestion of Steven L. McKenzie, The Trouble with Kings: The Composition of the Book of Kings in the Deuteronomistic History, SVT 42 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 81–100, that the Elijah pericope is post-Deuteronomistic, is correct, it is then especially distant from the events that it purports to describe and must be used with extreme caution in reconstructing history.

37. For material on the death of the prophets, see Mitchell Glenn Reddish, “The Theme of Martyrdom in the Book of Revelation” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982), 21–25. For the assimilation of these messages into the martyr paradigm, see Alexander Rofé, *The Prophetic Stories*, 197–213 (“The Rise of Martyrology”). Though we use different definitions of martyrology, the following observation is especially apposite: “it is not surprising that martyrology is completely absent from early biblical historiography, and especially from the prophetic stories—the historical circumstances of those times simply did not lend themselves to the development of this type of literature” (p. 199).


41. For various suggestions on this refusal to bow down, including sources for the predominant Hebrew school answer, see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 42–45 and Levenson, *Esther*, 67–68.

42. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 51–52.


44. On the predominance of this theme in the Hebrew Bible, see Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets: A Stylistic and Theological Analysis*, SBLMS 27 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982).

45. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 49.


47. I use “myth” in the sense developed by Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), which emphasizes the positive social role of myths, as well as their tendency to develop certain literary rather than historical features.

48. The key term *mythym* (8:17) is ambiguous; see the commentaries.


53. See n. 50, above.

54. My discussion of these stories is especially indebted to Danna Nolan Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty: A Story of Stories in Daniel 1–6, JSOTSup 72 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988).


56. Fewell, Circle of Sovereignty, 70.


62. For this formulation of the key element of martyrdom, see Droge and Tabor, *A Noble Death*, 85, “Death was seen, paradoxically, as life.”


64. See the standard commentaries and n. 52, above.

65. The outlines of this persecution may be filled in with detail from much less esoteric writings, such as the First Book of Maccabees. For this work as a historical source, see Jewish *Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus*, Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, section 2, ed. Michael E. Stone (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1984), 171–76 and Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian* 1: 222–24.


SACRIFICING THE SELF

Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion

EDITED BY MARGARET CORMACK

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2002
Martyrdom is a political as well as religious act, and like organized violence, social or economic pressure, intimidation, negotiation, and war, martyrdom can be a tool for promoting change. While most of the afore mentioned tactics may be employed by any group negotiating power, martyrdom is a tool of the unempowered. Although destroyed by the dominant power, the martyr’s very willingness to die is a powerful symbol of the resistance and solidarity of the undergroup. In cultures influenced by the Abrahamic religions (that is, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), martyrdom is a kind of self-sacrifice.

He could not cite any biblical stories about martyrdom since there are none.[23] The consistent message of the Hebrew Bible is that righteous behavior will be rewarded in the end. Even Job has his fortunes restored and redoubled at the end of the book. Many biblical texts do teach the lesson that the mother quotes from Isaiah 43:2—Nevertheless, in the Bible it has a different meaning than that implied by the mother: God will protect you, so you do not have to become a martyr. The mother’s speech in 4 Maccabees with its list of biblical stories that don’t work as precedents makes the gap between the values of biblical Judaism and later Judaism very clear. The whole Hebrew Bible in parallel verse by verse with the English translation of Jewish Publication Society edition of 1917. We have added signs for the paragraphs found in the original Hebrew: In the poetical books of Psalms, Job (aside from the beginning and end), and Proverbs, each verse normally starts on a new line; where there is a new line within a verse, we added {N}, and when there is a blank line, we added {P}. In the rest of the books, we added {S} for setumah (open space within a line) and {P} for petuHah (new paragraph on new line) according to our Hebrew Bible. We have not tried to reproduce the complex structure of the special songs such as in Exodus 15 and Deuteronomy 32, as we do not think that th