

Hunting and Trapping

- I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
- II. Judaism

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Before the first settlements were established in the Near East approximately 10,000 years ago, all humans lived as hunters and gatherers. The Sea of Galilee and Lake Hula provided ideal conditions for hunting animals that came looking for fresh water (cf., e.g., the archaeological excavations at Enan on the western shore of the Hula lake that brought to light numerous bones of wild animals). Once humans started breeding domestic animals, they were able to regularly slaughter animals and thus secure their meat supply. Nevertheless, humans continued to hunt wild animals primarily in barren territories (e.g., highlands, deserts, or steppes; cf. Jer 16:16; Gen 27:39) and therefore to live in non-arable areas.

In the OT, written in part from the perspective of an agricultural, cultivated land and society, hunters and hunting played only a marginal role. Genesis 10:9 (Nimrod) implies that hunters were highly regarded among some social groups at least (cf., also, heroic deeds in Judg 14:5; 1 Sam 17:34; 2 Sam 23:20). The narrative of Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:27–28; 27) clearly illustrates the differences between the “quiet” cultivator (Gen 25:27) and the “wild” hunter in monarchic Palestine. Jacob, representing Israel that mainly lives off agriculture, is confronted with Esau who represents Edom and lives as a hunter. Success in hunting always also depends on luck and the possibilities of spotting and bagging an animal (Gen 27:20). The animals’ blood was considered to be a carrier of life which is why its consumption was prohibited (Lev 17:13).

People hunted both edible animals, like gazelles, fallow deer, ibexes (Gen 27:31; Lev 17:13; 1 Kgs 5:3), or birds (Lev 17:13; Jer 5:26; Lam 3:52; Ezek 13:20), and wild animals that posed a danger to humans, like lions (Job 10:16), bears (2 Kgs 2:24; Amos 5:19), and wild ox (Job 39:9). Typically, bow and arrow (Gen 27:3; cf. Lam 3:12)

as well as throwing sticks (Amos 3:5) were used for hunting as documented in rock engravings found in Jordan, Sinai, and the Negev (cf., e.g., Anati). Early hunting aids included the so-called “desert kites,” low V-shaped lines of stones with pits dug at the points of intersection. When trying to get away, animals do not tend to jump across such walls. In a chase, they inevitably moved toward the pit and fell into it, thus becoming an easy prey. This hunting method seems to still have been in use in the 1st millennium BCE (cf. numerous biblical references to the enemies digging a pit in order to catch the praying man). Sometimes, trapping pits (primarily for lions) seem to have been dug and camouflaged: the animal or person who trod on it fell down and was trapped (e.g., Ezek 19:4.8). In all likelihood, wild animals trapped in these pits were struck to death with stones (Lam 3:53). Ancient Near Eastern depictions of hunting scenes show animals being chased toward a net (cf. Josh 23:13; Mic 7:2 et al.). In swamplands (in Palestine: Hula Valley and the area between modern-day Tel Aviv and Mount Carmel), birds were caught in large clap nets (cf. Prov 1:17; Lam 1:13; Ps 10:9) or in clap traps that were triggered by the birds themselves (cf. Hos 5:1; 9:8; Amos 3:5, which includes functional specifications!; Ps 124:7; Prov 7:23 etc.).

Bibliography: ■ Anati, E., *Felskunst im Negev und auf Sinai* (Bergisch Gladbach 1981). ■ Bar-Oz, G. et al., “Mass Hunting Game Traps in the Southern Levant: The Negev and Arabah ‘Desert Kites,’” *NEA* 74 (2011) 208–15. ■ Dalman, G., *Zeltleben, Vieh- und Milchwirtschaft, Jagd, Fischfang*, vol. 6 of id., *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina* (Gütersloh 1939). [Esp. 314–343] ■ Riede, P., *Im Netz des Jägers: Studien zur Feindmetaphorik der Individualpsalmen* (WMANT 85; Neukirchen-Vluyn 2000).

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