David’s Triumph Over Goliath: 1 Samuel 17:54 and Ancient Near Eastern Analogues

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Abstract

The Story of David and Goliath is surely one of the best-known dramatic narratives in the Bible. Biblical scholars and archaeologists have investigated the duel from the perspective of archaeology, especially concentrating on the weaponry involved. One aspect of the story that has not been sufficiently studied and clarified is found in 1 Samuel 17:54, which reads, “David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem; but he put his armor in his tent.” These rather enigmatic statements will be the focus of this paper. We will investigate what is the significance of removing Goliath’s head to Jerusalem, a Jebusite stronghold, and we will attempt to resolve the question of “whose tent” was taken and why. By carefully examining the text of 1 Samuel 17:54 and offering some contextual data about ancient Near Eastern military practice, we will attempt to answer what was behind David’s strange antics after slaying the Philistine champion. Furthermore, these questions will be examined within the present debate about the historiographical value of 1 Samuel 17 as raised by I. Finkelstein and A. Yadin who have independently proposed Greek influence on the biblical narrative.

Introduction

David son of Jesse, the dynastic progenitor of the kings of Judah, has been the subject of countless studies by biblical scholars and archaeologists during the past two decades. The Bible’s portrayal of David as a powerful conquering monarch has been questioned in recent years as literary studies of the Hebrew books of Samuel have challenged their historiographic intent, and even the historicity of the biblical character has been questioned.  

This negative assessment was challenged in the view of many by the discovery in 1993 and 1994 of the Tell Dan fragmentary stela with byt dwd, “house of David” on it. That in turn has produced scores of articles and studies about David and his dynasty. In fact, within a decade of the discovery of the first fragment, Lawson Younger has documented, no fewer than 95 articles and one monograph had been published on this text, and more has followed.

1 Some recent monographs that take up the question of the historicity of David include McKenzie, King David: A Biography; Halpern, David’s Secret Demons; Thompson, The Messiah Myth; Finkelstein and Silberman, David and Solomon; Van Seters, The Biblical Saga of King David.

2 Younger, “‘Hazael, Son of a Nobody.’” For a more recent discussion of the text and an up-to-date bibliography, see Hagelia, The Tel Dan Inscription. I am grateful to professor Hagelia for giving me a copy of his monograph.
In addition to the recent Tell Dan reference, Andre Lamaire has proposed a previously unrecognized reading of byt dwd in the Mesha Stela. And finally Kenneth Kitchen has proposed a possible reading of David as a toponym in the Shishak/Shoshenq list at Karnak. These references to the dynasty of David or David notwithstanding, questions remain surrounding the historical David.

**David and Goliath in Recent Research**

Indubitably David’s victory over the Philistine champion, Goliath, is one of the best-known stories in the Old Testament. In recent years scholars have devoted considerable attention to textual issues surrounding the David and Goliath episode, particularly examining the differences in the textual traditions preserved in the Septuagint (LXX) and the Hebrew (MT). Because of what appears to be an alternative tradition that Elhanan killed Goliath of Gath (2 Sam. 21:19), some biblical scholars have distanced themselves from the traditional understanding that David slew Goliath, preferring to see that David’s biographers embellished the Elhanan story and transformed it into a legendary or romantic story about David.

Over sixty years ago, A.M. Honeyman proposed that Elhanan was the birth name, while David was his throne name. McCarter demurs, pointing out that this solution creates more problems than it resolves. Indeed both Elhanan and David are identified as Bethlehemites, but their patrimony is not the same, Jaare-oregim and Jesse respectively. There is no dispute that there are serious textual problems with 2 Samuel 21:19 and various emendations have been proposed. Rather than viewing the Chronicler’s version of this verse (1 Chron. 20:5) as an attempt to harmonize 1 Samuel 17 and 2 Samuel 21:19 and resolve the conflicting testimonies, it has been suggested that the Chronicler actually better preserves the earlier Hebrew text behind 21:19: “Elhanan the son of Jair struck down Lahmi the brother of Goliath the Gittite” (1 Chron. 20:5).

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3 Lemaire, “‘House of David’ Restored in Moabite Inscription.”
4 Kitchen, “A Possible Mention of David in the Late 10th Century BCE, and Deity *Dod as Dead as the Dodo?”
5 Several recent monographs devoted to text critical and literary questions are Pisano, *Additions or Omissions in the Books of Samuel*; Barthélemy, et al., *The Story of David and Goliath*; and Isser, *The Sword of Goliath*. The latter has a fairly comprehensive bibliography on critical issues surrounding this narrative.
6 See the sources cited in note 1.
7 Honeyman, “The Evidence for Regnal Names among the Hebrews.”
10 For a helpful treatment of the text of 2 Sam. 21:19, see Harrison, *Introduction to...*