THE VALLEY OF ELAH BATTLE AND THE DUEL OF DAVID WITH GOLIATH: BETWEEN HISTORY AND ARTISTIC THEOLOGICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

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The description of the battle between the Philistines and the Israelites in the Valley of Elah, with its focus on the combat between David and Goliath (1 Sam 17), is one of the high points of artistic biblical historiography included in the Book of Samuel.¹

How should scholars approach such a book that contains historical information intertwined with theological and literary characteristics? There is no unified method of coping with this question. Many historians of the biblical period have tried to analyze the text in a critical way, to extract pieces of historical value from it, to add more information drawn from extra-biblical documents, from archaeological findings, etc.; and, based on all the above, to reconstruct the history of Israel in biblical times.² Other researchers who follow Wellhausen’s lead claim that in most cases the biblical historiography reflects the times of its late sources and their writers’ views rather than the early times about

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which they narrate. Another group of scholars concentrate on the history of traditions. The story of the Elah Valley battle, for instance, belongs, in their view, to a hypothetical ancient corpus of collected traditions defined as “The History of David’s Rise” (= HDR). This ancient collection provides legitimatization for David’s Kingship. The story of the Elah Valley battle contains problems and inconsistencies that have been considered as an outcome of this long process of traditions’ assemblage and growth. Such is the case with the inconsistency between the accounts in chapter 16 and chapter 17 regarding the issue of how David was introduced into the king’s court. This problem is intensified by the shorter version found in LXX. Another discrepancy arises around the question of who really did slay Goliath, Elhanan (2 Sam 21:19) or David? – All of the above stimulate examinations of the process of traditions’ growth. Many scholars believe that our story reached its final shape rather late, when it was incorporated within the Deuteronomistic History. And as against to the above diachronic approaches, there are other scholars, who are familiar with the discipline of general literature, and they tend to disregard the historical background as well as the process of compilation and the history of the text. They concentrate primarily on the literary aspects of the story as it is in its present shape, and interpret it according to one of several scholarly methods of literary criticism.

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