SHORT NOTES

“... AND THE STONE SANK INTO HIS FOREHEAD”.

A NOTE ON 1 SAMUEL XVII 49

When Goliath appeared on the battlefield “He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. And he had greaves of bronze upon his legs . . .” (1 Sam. xvii 5-6). This armor is described by Y. Yadin as that of a typical Aegean warrior. Yadin also points out that, like other Philistine warriors depicted on the Egyptian reliefs, Goliath was not armed with a bow. He explains that this circumstance was exploited by David, who used his sling, and could therefore operate beyond the range of Goliath’s weapon, but he does not dwell on the manner in which David carried out this operation. The nature of David’s tactic does however call for further explanation.

The biblical account in 1 Sam. xvii 48-49 narrates that Goliath, clad in his impressive but rather heavy equipment, “arose and came and drew near to meet David. David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. And David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone, and slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead”. At this point, although Goliath was wearing his bronze helmet, “the stone sank into his forehead and he fell on his face to the ground”.

In the Egyptian reliefs at Medinet Habu, the Sea-People’s army is made up entirely of soldiers wearing feather-topped helmets. The mercenaries, Sherdens, Sea People in the service of the Egyptians, wear helmets topped by horns. The anthropoid coffins of Philistine warriors found at Beth Shan also feature the feathered helmets as do a stone seal and a picture on an ivory board from Enkomi. In almost all these cases, the helmet clearly covers the forehead, often reaching the bridge of the nose. It seems strange, therefore, that the slingstone should have been aimed at Goliath’s forehead. Or was it?

Yadin, when commenting on Goliath’s javelin, explains that this type of weapon had not been seen in Israel and had no name in Hebrew. It would appear that not only the javelin was novel to

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the Israelites and had no Hebrew terminology. Thus, in our account, "a greave" is denoted in 1 Sam. xvii 6 by the hapax legomenon mishat morphologically the singular construct form of the feminine noun related to meṣab—"forehead". The choice of this word to designate "greave"—knee armor—may be due to its shape, which resembles (in reversed position) the tip of the helmet that protects the meṣab, the forehead. Although the MT of v. 6 reads mishat (Sg.f.cons.), the principal ancient versions have a plural noun implying the vocalization (mishor) in accordance with the succeeding phrase 'al raglaw—"on his legs", in the dual. mish, however, need not necessarily represent a plural of the feminine singular mshb. It could simply be the plural feminine ending to the masculine noun meṣab—"forehead" as in Ezek. ix 4—mish, "foreheads".

Thus, we are now in the position to suggest that the crucial verse, v. 49 traditionally rendered: "... and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead..." be read: "...and he struck out at the Philistine, at his greave ('el-mishi), the stone sank into his greave, (bemisbi) and he fell on his face to the ground".

It is noteworthy that elements of a similar tradition are echoed in the rather elaborate apocryphal account of the heroic feats of the sons of Jacob. In the Testament of Judah iii 114), Judah is said to have killed an armored Canaanite king single-handed! "... I rushed upon the king of Hazor, and smote him on the greaves (πτι τας κρεμμένας) and dragged him down, and so I slew him". The practice here is first to make the armored enemy fall, rendering him temporarily immobile and helpless, then to run to him and slay him.

As the biblical battle-scene now unfolds, the heavily armoured Goliath approaches clumsily. The agile young shepherd, skilled with his sling, aims his stone at the shin-bone, immediately above the tip of the greave. Thus the stone would hit the upper shin or knee and fall into the space which must be left to allow the knee to bend and enable the warrior to walk. It is exactly at this vulnerable space that David deliberately aims, thereby causing the stone to "sink" into the greave, that is between the greave and the knee, so that the Philistine—who at the moment is awkwardly making his way towards David—will stumble forward and fall, "on his face". The first part of the tactic is accomplished. While the giant is still on the ground, trapped by the weight of his five thousand shekel bronze armor, David, himself unencumbered by any armor, runs over, snatches Goliath's own sword and slays the foe (v. 51). Cool calculation and