THE LIST OF DAVID’S OFFICERS (ŠALÎŠÎM)

by

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The biblical term šališ was recently discussed in great detail by B. A. Mastin. He credibly rejected the commonly held interpretation of the šališ as the third man of the chariot and succeeded in demonstrating that every occurrence of šališ in the Old Testament referred to an officer. As he points out, the šališ was sometimes of relatively high rank, and the three individual šališim who are mentioned in the books of Kings were adjutants (2 Kgs vii 2, 17, 19, ix 25, xv 25). Since a number of qatl formation are titles of officials, Mastin considers it likely that šališim were high-ranking officers who were called “of the third rank” simply because they came after the king and his senior officers (pp. 153-4). Alternatively, the title “of the third rank” may have referred to the army hierarchy; i.e., they came after the king (the official head of the army) and his chief of staff.

It seems to me that this interpretation of the term šališ is the key to the solution of the frequently discussed problem of David’s “mighty men” (gibbôrîm) (2 Sam. xxiii 8-39; 1 Chr. xi 10-41a).
In the early days of modern biblical research, O. Thenius defined 2 Sam. xxiii as a list of David’s “knights” (šālīšîm). He described the šālīšîm as “die vornehmsten, die Könige oder Oberfeldherrn zunächst umgebenden Krieger”, suggesting that the term appears in vv. 8, 9, 13, 18, 22, 23, 24. This suggestion was unhappily abandoned in favour of the vocalization š’lōšîm (“Thirty”), which is followed by the Revised Standard Version and recent versions of the Bible; the list was interpreted as referring to the collegium of the Three and Thirty mighty men (gibbōrim).

The most comprehensive discussion of the text is that of K. Elliger ([n. 3], pp. 29-75). He divided it into two sections: first the names and deeds of several well known heroes (vv. 8-23), and then the list of the Thirty (vv. 24b-39). The stylistic difference between the two parts is obvious: the first gives full description of the heroes’ exploits; the second is merely a roster of names. Elliger emphasized that the text refers to a certain institution (“eine bestimmte Einrichtung”) called “the Thirty” whose number of members was not necessarily limited to thirty. He compared the institution of the Thirty to the Egyptian mēbzy; however, since the latter is a juridical body, the comparison is not particularly relevant.

B. Mazar similarly compared the Thirty with pre-monarchical Israelite traditions “where there is frequent mention of thirty companions, or sons, who were associated with a charismatic personality or with the head of a clan” ([n. 3], p. 310).

The institution of the Thirty was regarded by Elliger as the staff (“Stab”) of the king’s most loyal men, who served as his bodyguard (p. 68). Mazar likewise defined the Thirty as a “military élite” that “had formed a kind of supreme command” (p. 310). The institution was established, according to Elliger, at

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