Goliath of Troy
Motifs of the Trojan War in I Samuel 17

Nicholas Guarracino ’18

Few stories of the Old Testament are as influential and as vital to our understanding of the Biblical timeframe as the tale of David and Goliath. Set in a time of disarray, for both the Hebrews and for the Bronze Age world in which they lived, this story of a “boy who would be king” who vanquishes his foreign enemies and saves his people still represents the idealized victory of the virtuous few over the corrupt many. However, the story stands out as an exception, not an example, in the story of the Hebrew people’s conquest of Canaan. After conquering the Canaanites, the Hebrews find a new enemy in the Philistines. There is no explanation as to where or why they landed on the shores of Canaan. Goliath himself, a giant measuring “six cubits and a span”, is an outlier as well. According to Genesis, the Nephilim (giants) were the “mighty men that were of old, the men of renown” (Genesis 6:4, JPS), yet here one stands against Israel. The Bible does not explain Goliath and his Philistines and they seem to have no part in the Bible. This is until one examines not only the Levant but also the Eastern Mediterranean region as a whole. The story of Goliath fits into the mythic context of the ancient Mediterranean. The myth of David and Goliath is not the only tale of the Bronze Age to reach the modern ears; one can find the Homeric in the Abrahamic, and Goliath finds a double at Troy. Indeed, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Goliath and his death at the hands of David are influenced by the mythic duel between Hector and Achilles at Troy, a story not unlikely known to the Philistines and their champion.

To understand the Eastern Mediterranean in the time of King David, one must understand the Sea Peoples. They were many disparate peoples and tribes who wandered the Mediterranean, seeking riches and often acquiring them by force. They often worked as mercenaries, as the Egyptians recorded. According to the Egyptians, “the earliest [Sea Peoples], named in the fourteenth-century Amarna Letters… are the Denyan, Lukka, Shardana, and Shekelesh… The Denyans are often identified with the Danaans… the Lukka live in Lycia… the other two have been identified tentatively as Sardinians and Sicilians.”1 As can be seen in the Amarna letters, the Sea Peoples
were a varied group from all over the Mediterranean, with ports as far West as the Italian isles.

Although their origin is unknown, it is known that the Philistines found employment in the Levant, and serving alongside various other tribes. According to scholar Emily Vermeule, the Philistines were one of these Sea Peoples, fighting wherever they could find employment. Indeed, “inscriptions tell us that the Danaans had been... fighting the Egyptians by the side of the Peleset (Philistines), [and] the Alasa (Cypriotes)”.2 So here is proof enough to state that the Philistines of the Bible did in fact interact peacefully with the Danaans, a name commonly used in the classical world to refer to the Greeks and the Greeks at Troy. The Greeks and Philistines fought together, as allies, perhaps sharing harbors, campfires, and stories of past victories. These myths reveal connections between the Trojan civilization and the Bible.

During the transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age, many varied Mediterranean civilizations were crumbling. Cities and citadels from Greece to the Levant emptied and depopulated, and war was the norm. For the purposes of a hypothesized connection between Troy and Goliath, the most important of these sacked cities was Troy itself. According to archeological evidence, “Troy”, as it was discovered by archeologist Heinrich Schliemann, is thought to have fallen between 1334-1135 B.C.3 This dating fits perfectly within the timeframe of the Bronze Age Collapse and the founding of David’s Israel. Not only does this timeframe give the warriors and mercenaries who fought at Troy ample time to resettle and return home, but it gives time for the myth and story of the Trojan War to spread. In Vergil’s much latter Aeneid, the Trojan Aeneas arrives at Carthage to find that news of Troy’s fall is already widespread. Perhaps there is truth to this famous legend of how quickly news can spread, especially if the far-flung Sea Peoples like the Danaans (who, as recorded by the Egyptians, were allied with the Philistines), or possibly even some of the Philistines themselves, participated in the war.

As the myths in the Aegean tell of wayward sailors like Ulysses returning home, the Philistines found one for themselves. One explanation for their settling in Canaan is that “an unsuccessful assault on Egypt had carried them into the Southern part of the Palestinian coastal plain.”4 What truly matters is what remains of their settlement: the Philistine Pentapolis of Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gath. Scholar Mario Liverani attests to the Philistines having Aegean
names. He also explains that that their sites contained Mycenaean pottery, before the development of a closely related style of native Philistine pottery. Moreover, what little can be gathered of their language supposedly holds clues to their origins and influences; the Philistine word for lord or king, *seren*, possibly being related to the Greek word for the same title, *tyrannos* (compare with the word for lord in Hebrew, *adonai*). Though not much is left of the Philistine settlement, what remains attests to an Aegean heritage.

The Old Testament also alludes to an Aegean origin of Philistine culture, and the Hellenistic myths they might have carried. Twice in the Bible, the Philistines are said to be from Crete. In Genesis, God mentions “the Caphtorim [Cretans], whence the Philistines came forth” (Genesis 10:14), and in Amos, God says to the titular prophet that “I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor”. (Amos 9:7, JPS) Whether the Hebrews themselves knew the homeland of the Philistines was debatable, but it cannot be denied that twice in the Bible the Philistines are said to have originated in the Aegean.

Having connected the Aegeans to the Philistines, Troy and its legend can be connected to Goliath. And if one breaks down both Goliath’s and Hector’s stories into their components it becomes possible that some aspects of the Hellenistic myth of Troy made their way into the writing of I Samuel 17. The three main motifs that connect the stories of David and Goliath and of Achilles and Hector are thus: the description of the challenger, the challenger calling out the challenged, and the desecration of the fallen challenger.

Goliath’s description is in I Samuel 17, the same book in which he dies. “A champion of the Philistines forces stepped forward; his name was Goliath of Gath, and he was six cubits and a span tall. He had a bronze helmet on his head, and wore a breastplate of scale armor, a bronze breastplate weighing five thousand shekels.” (I Samuel 17:4-5, JPS) Notice how the Biblical author describes not only his height, but his armor. The author gives special attention to the helmet, which is said to be bronze. This aligns very well to what is seen in the Iliad, Book II, when Hector is described by Homer as “tall Hector with helmet flashing”. (Iliad II. 927) Not only the height of the challenger, but also the garb match. The helmet is a strong indicator of the connection between Hector and Goliath, as the description “Hector with helmet flashing” is distinctive to his character, one which Homer transformed into one of his most famous epithets.
That Goliath as well is described as being armed with a bronze helmet is very telling, as the two champions share this linking attribute.

The next motif is the challenging, which again matches. Goliath strides out of the fortified hilltop encampment of the Philistines and declares, “I herewith defy the ranks of Israel. Get me a man and let’s fight it out!” (I Samuel 17:10, JPS) Hector, likewise, follows a similar (if more complex) trajectory. After motivating himself in the book prior, telling himself that it would be “better by far for me/ to stand up to Achilles, kill him, come home alive/ or die at his hands in glory out before the walls” (Iliad XXII. 129-131), Hector meets Achilles in battle in Book XXII of the Iliad. Leaving his fortified sanctum, he goes out to meet the Danaan warrior “furious to fight Achilles to the death.” (Iliad XXII. 40) Here we see a similar image: the armored champion leaving his well defended safe-haven to challenge and defeat his enemy.

The final motif is that of the desecration of the body; specifically, the challenged threatens the challenger with dishonoring the corpse, before following up on his word. In I Samuel 17, David is forthright, claiming to Goliath that he will “kill [him] and cut off [his] head”. (I Samuel 17:46, JPS) After bringing down Goliath with his sling, David “grasped [Goliath’s] sword and pulled it from its sheath; and with it he dispatched him and cut off his head” (I Samuel 17:51, JPS). Just as he promised, David slew Goliath, and lifted up the champion's head for all to see. Achilles, driven by vendetta against Hector, is far less open with his threat to Hector. When Hector asks Achilles to observe the Hellenistic tradition of honoring the bodies of the fallen for funeral, Achilles simply claims that “there are no binding oaths between men and lions - / wolves and lambs can enjoy no meeting of the minds - / they are all bent on hating each other to death.” (Iliad XXII, 310-312) Achilles’s threat befits the enraged state he is in at the moment, while also serving as a portent of what is to come. Achilles defiles the corpse of Hector. Later, like David, he turns the fallen warrior into a trophy to display before the defeated. “Piercing the tendons, ankle to heel behind both feet,/ he knotted straps of rawhide through them both,/ lashed them to his chariot, left the head to drag”. (Iliad XXII. 467-469) Victorious, David and Achilles both show off their prize to their enemies.

The argument made for allusions to Troy in I Samuel 17, the issue remains as to how a Hellenistic myth influenced a Jewish text. Indeed, this is perhaps the greatest hurdle for the
argument to overcome. To this problem there are three plausible answers. The first is emulation. The well-armed warrior Goliath could very well have been emulating a hero of his myths: Hector of the flashing helmet. If this is true, then the myth of Troy did influence the Bible, but the motif of the victor showing off his trophy is a similarity, not a correlation.

The second is both the hardest to prove and the one least involved with the actual events of I Samuel 17 and the history of the region: that the authors of I Samuel 17 did not encounter the raw myth of Troy from the Philistines, but the far more refined Iliad of Homer. Again, this is the hardest explanation to prove, but not impossible; Homer predates the writing of the Deuterocanonical Histories, so his work existed at the time of the writing of Samuel. The rest is speculation as to how or why it could have influenced the Deuterocanonical Historians. If there is any merit to this theory, it is that it helps to better explain the shared motif of desecrating the fallen warrior as a trophy.

The third possible explanation is absorption of the Philistines and their myths into the Kingdom of Israel, and this one best helps the argument. It is a known fact that the Hebrews absorbed the pagan Canaanites into their society after their conquest. Indeed, after the successes of David and Solomon, many Philistines would have found themselves to be members of a Hebrew Kingdom, with their myths intermingling with theirs before eventually being recorded as one. This solution is perhaps the best at fully explaining the background of the story. Not only does it support hypothetical Trojan allusions in the fight between David and Goliath, it best explains the shared motif of desecrating the fallen, and also reflects the Hellenistic origin of the Philistines. It also melds well with the first proposition; that Goliath was emulating one of his heroes.

There exists one other possible hindrance to this theory; Goliath appears two other times in the Bible, and in one of those instances he is killed by someone other than David. Indeed II Samuel 21:19 says that a man named Elhanan killed Goliath. Moreover, I Chronicles 20:5 says that Elhanan killed Goliath’s brother Lahmi. These claims are short and passing, and are never mentioned again. It is possible that “Goliath-slaying” might have been a motif of regional heroes, or that Elhanan’s myth is a corruption of David’s. Whatever the reason, it can be agreed that Elhanan’s stories do not hold a candle to David’s when it comes to sheer thematic and dramatic detail; David’s story tells us far more concerning Goliath and his death, and is
by far the more remembered. David’s is clearly the story that the Biblical authors put care in, not Elhanan’s.

And so, having explained the Hellenistic origins of the Philistines and breaking down the famous duel scenes between David and Goliath and Achilles and Hector, the connection between the Trojan and Davidic myths becomes clear. However, that this does not take away from the importance of King David, nor does it stand as an attack against the sanctity of the Bible. Far from it, this foreign connection between Troy and Israel would fit well in the Bible, which has proven to be a universal book with universal influences. Just as myths of Babylon, symbology of Egypt, and vocabulary of the Stoics are found and justifiably belong in different parts of the Bible, enlivening it and giving the modern world a better picture of the ancient one, so too do the shadows of the heroes of Troy belong in the Bible.
Bibliography


Notes

1 Vermuele, p.271
2 Vermuele, p.273
3 Vermuele, p.276
4 Noth, p.78
5 Liverani, p.37
6 Wiseman, p. 62