I Samuel 17 as Paradigm for Militia Operations in Ancient Israel

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Abstract

1 Samuel 17, the story of David and Goliath, gives us a useful overview of the standard practices of the tribal militia which formed the backbone of Israel's military throughout the pre-Exilic period. The Israelite militia mustered voluntarily when called and was organized along family and tribal lines. It was primarily supplied by the family and tribe from which each element came and that these family supplied provisions were collected and distributed at some kind of central logistical facility under the control of a professional staff officer. The primary compensation of the militia soldiers was the looting of the camp and corpses of the enemy after a victory. Militia units were commanded by professional officers who were appointed by the king and who were recipients of royal land grants and contributions by the families of the soldiers under the officer's command. During the era of the monarchy, the militia served as support troops with the professional units being the primary forces in a battle.

Keywords: Israelite militia, Tribes, military, warfare

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Throughout the pre-Exilic period of Israel's history, the mainstay of the Israelite tribes' military was the militia which was made up of the adult male citizens of Israel under arms. This citizen's militia went by many names: "Israel," "all Israel", "the men of Israel", "all the men of Israel", "all the tribes of Israel," "the people of Israel," "all the people," and other names both national and tribal. But in spite of the widespread use and longevity of this institution, very little in the Hebrew texts speak directly to how the militias operated and much of the administrative, tactical, and strategic aspects of militia employment is unclear (Meyers, 1983, p. 54)[2]. One text which deals rather directly with this subject is the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17.

While this text was not intended as a depiction of militia operations, the events narrated in the story give us important glimpses of several aspects of the workings of the militia which followed Saul against the Philistine invaders. The historicity of the background concept of military operations and procedures is not inextricably linked to the question of the historicity of the duel between David and Goliath, which clearly has achieved a legendary character, and is outside the scope of this study (Wong, 2013)[3]. Much of the material about David is apologetic in character and must be treated with care as history. Whitelam has rightly shown that much of the cycle of David functions as political propaganda for the Davidic dynasty and was written by and for the elites of the Davidic kingdom (Whitelam, 1984, p. 71-73).

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[2] Meyers C. says that the militia system stayed in effect throughout the period from the judges through David's reign and remained static in function and process for the entire period.
[3] In this vein, Wong supports the theory that David's stone struck Goliath's knee instead of his forehead, based on a textual emendation, and makes the case that the story intends to show that faith in arms instead of in YHWH is misplaced. However, slings were standard military arms, as seen in Judges 20:16; 2 Kings 3:25; 1 Chronicles 12:2; 2 Chronicles 26:14.

Good propaganda must be believable and therefore has to contain much truth and above all be believable against its background. It is therefore reasonable to expect that the shapers of the text knew or could learn enough about the workings of the various elements of Israel's military to present a plausible, accurate depiction of normal militia functions (Zorn, 2010).[4] If the story of David and Goliath spent any time as oral tradition, as seems likely, many of the shapers and transmitters of the story would be intimately familiar with militia processes, being members of the militia themselves (Beck, 2006).[5]

Long has defined "historical narrative" as "…that kind of story which, while not necessarily suiting our modern standards of objectivity, nevertheless in the main presents plot and characters realistically…" (Long, 1985, p. 405) This definition seems to fit our use of 1 Samuel 17 as an accurate depiction of normal Israelite processes since without passing judgment on the historicity of individual plot elements, the basic background of the story can be seen as authentic. Realistic depiction of plot and character can take place independently of historically accurate story as writers of historical fiction have proven.

When seen in conjunction with several other biblical texts, a clearer picture emerges of the ways in which the Israelite militias were organized, employed, and serviced.While 1 Samuel 17 and several other of the texts used in this study have been thoroughly infused and overlaid with folklore elements and legend, they were still seen by Israel at some point as authentic sounding traditions about militia operations, a subject which many of the bearers of the tradition would be quite familiar (Frolov & Wright, 2011).[6] These texts may serve as useful pictures of the processes of utilizing the Israelite tribal militias, whatever their value as straightforward histories of the events portrayed in the story (Niditch, 1993, p. 10-12).[7]

1. Muster

The first step in any militia operation is the mustering of the force and this function is mentioned in verses 1-2 of our text. Both the Philistine army and the Israelite army are mentioned in these verses and the same root verb *'sp*, "gathered" is used for the gathering of both armies, but with a significant difference.   The mustering of the Israelite military is in the Niphal *n'spw*, while for the Philistine muster, both the Niphal*n'spw* and the Qal *y'spw* are used.

Despite the widespread usage of this root for musterings both martial and sacral (which do not seem to be differentiated in the sources), it does not seem to be a technical term for such gatherings. The same root in the same stems is used for a broad variety of events, including: death and burial ("gathered to his people," Gen 25:8, 17, etc.), being restored to full community status (Num 12:14-15), an administrative gathering of elders (Exod 4:29), and the harvesting of produce (Jer 40:12; Lev 23:39).   A full study of the terms used for such gatherings and musters may prove productive, but such lies outside the scope of this study.

1 Samuel 17 does hint at a possible difference between the Philistine and the Israelite political approach to military operations.   The Philistines' muster is described by "the Philistines gathered their armies for battle" in the Qal implying that the "lords of the Philistines" ordered a military formation. Then the Philistine armies are said "they were gathered" in the Nif'al in response to the order. This implies that an authority called the armies out. Israel, in contrast is said, "Saul and the men of Israel were gathered" with both Saul and the Israelite army as the subject of the Nif'al verb. Saul's inclusion with the militia in the passive implies a theoretical gathering of equals, of volunteers who come of their own volition instead of being ordered.   This difference could possibly show this tradition stream's views on Philistine and Israelite political philosophy.

A factor in Israelite military musters which somewhat supports this view of Israel's militia as a voluntary gathering and is clearly shown in 1 Samuel 17 is that even though the resultant formation is sometimes called "all Israel", the reality was considerably short of that.

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[4] Zorn follows Yadin in seeing a historically accurate depiction of a late Mycenaean or Sea Peoples soldier during the latter period of the bronze age. This indicates that the text of 1 Samuel 17 carries accurate information about military matters.

[5] Beck finds a high degree of accuracy in the tactical and strategic setting of 1 Samuel 17.

[6] Frolov and Wright argue for a dependence of 1 Samuel 17 on the Babylonian stories "The Story of Sinuhe" and "The Epic of Gilgamesh" thus indicating that Israel may have adapted other cultures stories into its own. Their contention applies primarily to plot lines and major themes and would not affect the basic accuracy of accounts of military details.

[7] Niditch is refering more to conceptual matters than to historical, but the principle applies to technical aspects of warfare as well as to cultural and sociological concepts.

Jesse is said to have eight sons but only three are active participants in the call-up, with a fourth carrying supplies to them. This picture of selective response to the summons to military service is also seen in several other texts. In 2 Samuel 24, the resistance to David's census by Joab (and God) is probably due to the conviction in Israel that answering a call to military duty is voluntary and that the families and tribes select those who serve, something which David's census was likely to have been intended to circumvent.Deut 20:5-8 and 24:5 also preserve instructions for deferring military service for a rather large number of situations, resulting in a partial response to calls to military duty (Rofe, 1985; Borowski, 2003).

At a higher, tribal level, Deborah's song lists some tribes who chose not to answer her call to fight against Hazor and while she roundly excoriates them for their failure to respond, she can levy no more severe sanctions than verbal abuse, since the non-performing tribes' right to determine their own course of action is assumed by all concerned (Globe, 1975; Schloen, 1993).

2. Logistics

One element of military administration for which 1 Samuel 17 gives us a rather clear picture is the lowest level of the logistics of the militia. The individual soldiers from Jesse's family are kept supplied by the family with a son not in service making repeated trips to the military camp to carry provisions for the brothers who were serving in military capacity.   While verse 15 implies that David's role as carrier of provisions was an occasional duty and that more of his time was taken up by animal husbandry than supply runs to Saul's camp, it also seems to imply that the carrying of provisions to the older brothers was a repetitive task. This shows a situation in which the family which sent the soldiers into military service also provided the bulk of their logistical support as well (King, 2000; Meyers, 1983).[8] The amount carried by David to the brothers would be sufficient for several days yet not be a burdensome load for the three brothers should they need to carry it during the army's movements. The amount would also explain the need for repeated trips by the younger brother during an extended deployment (King & Stager, 2001, p. 240; Yadin, 1963, p. 107-109, 236).

Another aspect of the text shows that logistical factors other than family self-supply were at work. This is David's delivery of his food items to the "keeper of the baggage." While this inexact phrase does not give us sufficient information to precisely define this keeper's function, it does reveal the presence of a central storage facility for the Israelite army and it would require no great leap of imagination to see this as organized logistical trains with wagons, draft animals, and even possibly some equipment repair facilities. The delivery to this person of one family's food sent to that family's members in service and to their commander hints at a central distribution system which would require some rather sophisticated planning and staffing of such an effort. If the cheeses sent to the commander of a thousand were intended for provisioning those soldiers without or with insufficient family support, distribution would be best handled from such a central facility.

Further evidence that this logistical establishment was a substantial operation is seen in Judg 20:26 and 1 Sam 19:9 where the armies in camp offer sacrifices. This shows that the military camps had access to live animals and it is highly plausible to expect that these animals had been brought as provisions and these would most likely have been present normally in the logistical trains.

That some substantial stores of supplies and foodstuffs requiring substantial storage and transportation (and therefore a substantial number of personnel for driving, handling, herding, and security) would accompany a similar Semitic army of that era is seen in 2 Kings 7 where the residents of Samaria loot the camp of the army of Aram. The siege had been so severe that food prices had become exorbitant in the city, and after the looting of the enemy camp, prices of grain had fallen tremendously, implying that stores of grain in the enemy baggage train were large enough to meet Samaria's immediate needs. While the text of 1 Samuel 17 does not necessarily imply a logistical institution of this size, that the armies of that time and place knew how to mount a well-organized supply establishment is clearly seen.

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[8] King sees this passage as showing that soldiers provided their own food and weapons. Meyers 53, sees the militia in Israel being based of tribal and familial structures which would also point toward self-supply of those family members in service.

Another relevant text is the notice in 2 Sam 17:27-29 that David's hurried flight from Jerusalem was without adequate logistical preparation and that his people were suffering from this lack. The list of supplies provided by the people of Gilead is a useful list of what the Israelites saw as necessary supplies for a mobilized military force. The amount and variety of material contained in this list strongly hint that some organized method of distribution of these supplies would be established, again probably through a central facility.

The ruling of the outlaw chief David in 1 Sam 30:22-25 that an equal share of loot would be provided to those who protected the "baggage" shows that even a small, hastily organized force had some level of organic logistical support (also seen in 1 Sam 25:13).That such logistical efforts pre-dated the era of David and Saul is seen in the thirteenth century reliefs representing the camp of Rameses II. These reliefs show oxcarts, donkeys, feeding of horses, food storage and preparation, and possibly the servicing of equipment, all taking place in relatively close proximity to one another. This strongly implies that there was a large, organized, and specific portion of the Egyptian army which was dedicated to supply and maintenance functions (Yadin, 1963, p. 14, 107-109, 136).

These parallels show that the idea of an organized logistical establishment in Saul's army serving as a receiving and distribution point for supplies was a realistic option, well known among armies of that time and practiced in the armies of one of the great powers and in the army of a smaller nation closely comparable to Israel. From the seemingly well-organized Egyptian supply and maintenance function to the *ad hoc* security of packs performed by exhausted soldiers in David's outlaw band, these support the idea that Saul's "keeper of the baggage" was a logistical staff officer over an organization which was specifically dedicated to logistics. We can therefore infer, based on David's delivery of supplies intended for specific individuals to this "keeper of the baggage"that this official was responsible for overseeing the collection, storage, and distribution of supplies for the whole Israelite encampment, a rather large responsibility.

A text which seems to reflect both ideas, that families provided supplies for their own members in service, and that these supplies were collected and managed at a central distribution point is supported in the story of the Benjaminite war in Judges 20. There, in verse 20, the army composed of the assembled tribes decides that every level of the army would detail ten per cent of its strength to the provisioning of the combat force. In this text, each unit, which is presumably family based, is responsible for its own provisions, and the size of the effort would suggest some necessity for organization of the operation. This procedure seems to reflect a similar concept as 1 Samuel 17 and agrees with the position taken here that this concept of military logistics was a standard one for the Israelite tribal militias (Weisman, 1981, p. 445).[9]

Another element of logistical support of the Israelite military which is found in this text is the payment of the militia troops. This appears to be on a much more informal basis than the supply effort and consists primarily of the chance to loot the camp and bodies of the opposing army after an Israelite victory.   David in particular is quite well compensated in this manner since he takes possession of Goliath's armor which consists of a large amount of bronze.

The looting of a defeated enemy as a benefit of military service is also seen in several other texts (Yadin, 1963, p. 108).[10] Gideon and Israel took a large amount of gold and other valuables from the defeated Midianites in Judg 8:21-26. Saul and the Israelite army took several sheep and cattle from the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15, to consume them at a sacrificial meal, and Philistine animals were eaten by Israel as a sacrificial meal after the Philistine defeat at Michmash and ensuing pursuit in 1 Samuel 14. David's band captured Philistine cattle at the siege of Keilah in 1 Samuel 23, and they captured a large amount of Amalekite goods and second-hand Philistine booty by defeating the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 30. The Philistine religious artifacts, presumably of intrinsic value as well as religious, which are captured by David in 2 Sam 5:21 were carried off by David's forces. Very importantly in this context, in 2 Samuel 12, Joab ensures that the Israelite militia is present for the sacking of Rabbah, even when there is no great military need for the militia's presence in the final assault. Joab's insistence on militia participation is probably to provide the members of the militia with the chance to share in the "very great amount" of the spoil from the defeated city.

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[9] Weisman sees this ten per cent as elite shock troops instead of quartermaster troops.   The clear meaning of the text seems preferable.

[10] Yadin tells of a parallel from the Egyptian-Hittite wars. This Hittite example also points out a serious weakness inherent in an army looting a defeated enemy. The Egyptian counterattack catches the Hittite army during the looting with disastrous results for the Hittites.

These examples of looting of a defeated enemy were a structural part of the Israelite militia ethos and not isolated instances of excessive exuberance by young, untrained troops (Gottwald, 1979, p. 237-344).[11] This is shown clearly in Deuteronomy 20 and 21 which specifically gives instructions that defeated cities are to be despoiled and that "you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you" (Deut 20:14). This spoil also explicitly includes human captives, particularly women and children (Deut 20:14; 21:10-14).

In most of these instances, the spoil was divided among the combatants and a successful campaign could enrich a soldier considerably (Gottwald, 1979, p 239).[12] That this was a significant inducement to answer a summons to duty and that being chosen for service was a preferred status is indicated in verse 13 of our text, where it is the oldest sons who are sent to battle, and the younger are kept at home and presumably do not fully share in the profits (Gottwald, 1979, p. 274).

3. Command Structure

David takes food not only to his brothers but to a person which Jesse calls the "commander of a thousand" which is probably not a family term. Apparently this person is an officer appointed by Saul to command that portion of the militia of Judah which includes the sons of Jesse (Gottwald, 1979, p. 363-368).[13] The specific purpose of the cheeses sent to this officer by Jesse is not explicit but it is likely seen as a part of the normal compensation of a professional officer with substantial responsibilities. This fits well with the notice in 1 Sam 14:52 that Saul instituted a nucleus of professional soldiers (Mazar, 2003, p. 319-320).[14] One probability is that some of these professional soldiers in Saul's entourage were the commanders of hundreds, and commanders of thousands which Saul mentions in 1 Sam 22:7 as having been commissioned by him and implies that they have been given land grants upon receiving that status(Lambert, 1994, p. 20-31; Mendenhall, 1958, p. 54-55). These land grants would be the major payment for their services and the contributions by the commanded troops' families would be another important source of income and provision for the commanded unit.[15]

Yadin and Gottwald also see support for the concept of professional officers commanding militia units in I Chr 27:1-15 which they both believe to be authentic to the reign of David, although imperfectly preserved (Gottwald, 1979, p. 363; Yadin, 1963, p. 222). This passage portrays the army of Israel as being divided into twelve divisions with a professional soldier in charge of each division (Olyan, 1982).[16]

Deut 20:9 may support this view of commanders being appointed from outside the family structure when it commands the installation of commanders at the muster by the already existing officers after the priests and officers have performed the necessary preliminary actions (Rofe, 1985, p. 32). If the existing officers and newly appointed commanders were the family leaders, there would be no need for their selection at the encampment since their status would have derived from their family standing rather than selection at the muster (Mendenhall, 1958, p. 54-55).

This all points to the probability that Saul appointed professional officers as commanders of the Israelite militia and that these officers were paid by royal land grants and direct payments by the families of the men in service, these direct payments also serving as additional provisions for the unit, if needed.

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[11] Gottwald sees the spoils of battle as payment for tribesmen, especially in times of famine.

[12] Gottwald ties plunder to the herem, but suggests that the ban was enforced in such a way that economic benefit accrued to the battle participants.

[13] Gottwald states that professional officers were over tribal militias and may have served as tax collectors as well. In his view, 1 Chronicles 15 supports this view.

[14] Mazar also sees the king's military staff as commanders of non-professional units, but in the time of David's kingship.

[15] Ben Barak describes the larger concept of land grants in Israel and on p. 75 sees Saul's statement in 1 Sam 22:5 as reflecting this system of rewarding military officers. He also sees Achish's grant of Ziklag to David as a parallel and affirms that Israel's system of land grants is generally similar to the ancient Near Eastern land grant systems. Such a system is attested in Egypt. See Snell, (1997).

[16] Olyan has a detailed but rather speculative description of the organization of David's tribal militia as it relates to Zadokite participation in the Davidic government.

4. Strategic Employment

One element of the employment of the Israelite militia which receives only hints in 1 Samuel 17 but which is seen more clearly elsewhere is the strategic employment of the militia as a part of a larger military force. The key characters in 1 Samuel 17 are Saul and Abner, who are members of the professional ranks, and David, who serves as champion rather than as private militia soldier and who is taken into the professional ranks immediately thereafter. The tribal militias serve in a supporting role and are only employed after the professionals and the champion have begun the battle.

This supporting role for the militia is seen much more clearly in 2 Samuel 11-12 where David's professional soldiers are the main besieging force, supported by some of the tribal militia, and the full militia is brought in only for the final assault (Meyers, 1983, p. 54).[17] A very similar strategy in an open battlefield is seen in 1 Kgs 20:13-21 where the leading troops in an attack on the invading Syrian army are the professional troops and the militia follow to exploit the victory of the shock troops (DeVaux, 1961, p. 221).The reason for the militia's strategic relegation to a supporting role is clearly seen in 2 Samuel 18, in which David's professional army defeats the much larger army of Absalom which consists of the militia, thus revealing a serious disparity of military proficiency between the two types of military force.

5. Summary

We see that the Israelite militia mustered voluntarily when called and was organized along family and tribal lines. It was primarily supplied by the family and tribe from which each element came and that these family supplied provisions were collected and distributed at some kind of central logistical facility under the control of a professional staff officer. The primary compensation of the militia soldiers was the looting of the camp and corpses of the enemy after a victory. Militia units were commanded by professional officers who were appointed by the king and who were recipients of royal land grants and contributions by the families of the soldiers under the officer's command. During the era of the monarchy, the militia served as support troops with the professional units being the primary forces in a battle.

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[17] Meyers believes that David incorporated pre-existing militia and profesional units into his military system.

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