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Notes on the Origin of the Biblical Tradition Regarding Achish King of Gath

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Abstract

In early biblical tradition the king of Gath was probably anonymous. Later, Achish, the non-Semitic name of the well-known seventh century king of Ekron was borrowed to emphasize the “otherness” of the Philistine ruler of David’s time.

Keywords

Achish, Gath, Ekron, Abimelek, 1 Sam 21:10–15, 27:1–6, Ps 34:1

Achish in the biblical tradition

According to biblical tradition, Achish was the Philistine king of Gath from the time of Saul (1 Sam 21:10–15 [Hebrew text: vv. 11–16]; 27:2–28:2; 29:2–10) until the beginning of Solomon’s reign (1 Kgs 2:39). David supposedly twice sought refuge from Saul at Achish’s court in Gath. In the first instance, David’s flight to Gath marks his departure from the territory of Benjamin and his first attempt to secure the protection of a foreign ruler (cf. 1 Sam 22:3–4). On this occasion, Achish’s courtiers recognized David as the “king of the land”, popularly known for slaying tens of thousands (1 Sam 21:11, cf. 18:7), and they might have identified him because he carried Goliath’s sword (1 Sam 21:9). David overheard them—implying that they spoke west Semitic—and feigned madness in fear of a hostile reception by Achish. As a result, Achish dismissed David as an innocuous madman.

A variant of this incident is preserved in the superscription of Ps 34. However, the Psalm superscription makes no reference to Gath, Philistines or enemy territory, and further identifies the king before whom David “changed his behavior” as Abimelek rather than Achish. It would appear that the scribe who devised the superscription was not quoting from a Samuel scroll, but

was familiar with a core tradition in which David “changed his behavior” before an unidentified Philistine ruler. If so, then the tendency to identify anonymous figures might have led him to identify the king of Gath with Abimelek, since Abimelek (of Gerar!) figures as king of the Philistines in Gen 26:1.

On the second occasion, David sought Achish after his final encounter with Saul in the Judean wilderness (1 Sam 27:1-2), but this time David was chief of a band of six hundred men. Achish received David as a vassal and granted him Ziklag as a fief in reward for his service (1 Sam 27:5-12). In this account Achish makes no sign that he met David before and his officers (*sārim*) object to David with the same language used previously by Achish’s courtiers (1 Sam 29:5, cf. 21:11). Therefore, the two accounts of David’s reception at Achish’s court are usually viewed as variant traditions of a single event. 1 Sam 27:5-12 is frequently thought to reflect historical circumstances, while 1 Sam 21:10-15 is regarded as a tendentious reworking of a folk-tale, in which David dupes the Philistine king (Vermeylen, pp. 134-135, 161-162). Some think the account in 1 Sam 21:10-15 was added in order to place Achish in a ludicrous light (Jobling, pp. 240-241), while others suggest that it was devised to clear David of complicity with the Philistines by having him expelled from Achish’s court. These attempts to explain why 1Sam 21:10-15 was added to the account of David’s wanderings are not convincing, since apologetics are equally evident in the account of David’s sojourn among the Philistines in chapters 27-29, and here too, the narrator highlights Achish’s gullibility (McKenzie, pp. 33, 62).

Whatever their origin, the double accounts of David’s reception at Gath help structure the main body of the flight and pursuit section of the story of David’s rise (Edenburg, p. 79). The account of David’s first sojourn at Gath opens by commenting that David “fled that day from Saul” (1 Sam 21:10) while the later report that David finally found refuge in Gath concludes with the note that Saul stopped his pursuit of David (1 Sam 27:4). This frame encloses another set of double accounts in which David declines to take advantage of an opportunity to kill Saul unawares (1 Sam 24, 26). These concentric frames set off their center—the encounter with Abigail (1 Sam 25), in which she anticipates Nathan’s promise of a “steadfast house” and David’s designation as *nāgid* over Israel (25:28-30).

Achish is mentioned again in 1 Kgs 2:39-40, which relates how Shimei ben Gera, a kinsman of Saul (2 Sam 16:5), violated the terms of the house arrest imposed upon him by Solomon. Shimei ostensibly left Jerusalem and

journeyed to Gath to retrieve his runaway slaves, however, given the narrative precedent of David's sojourn there as a renegade under Achish's protection, Shimei could be suspect of consorting with the enemy. Ironically, in the history of David's rise the narrator takes pains to excuse David's defection to Achish at Gath by emphasizing Saul's determination to eliminate David (1 Sam 27:1), but now, within the context of the succession narrative, Solomon, son of David, is equally determined to do away with Shimei, the kinsman of Saul (1 Kgs 2:8-9), and this new Gath incident is but a flimsy pretext to eliminate the kinsman of Saul.

Common to all the narratives dealing with Achish is the figure of the enemy king who harbours renegade vassals and runaway slaves (cf. also 2 Sam 4:3). Apart from Abimelech of Gerar (Gen 26:1, 8), Achish is the only Philistine king in the Bible who is mentioned by name and only these two are designated *melek*. Otherwise, Philistine rulers mentioned by the Bible are titled *seren* (e.g., Josh 13:3; Judg 3:3); however, within the biblical narrative dealing with Achish (1 Sam 29:2-10), *seren* appears synonymous with *sār*, which designates officer or commander in military contexts.

Achish of Gath and Akish of Ekron

The name *'kyš* occurs as ruler (*šr*) of Ekron in a seventh century B.C.E. dedicatory inscription from Ekron (Tel Miqne), and has been identified with Ikausu king of Amqar(r)una who figures in Assyrian inscriptions of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. According to Naveh (pp. 35-36), *'kyš* derives from Akhayus (Ἀκαϊός) signifying "Achaean" or "Greek" and should be understood as an appellative the king assumed in order to assert non-Semitic roots for the Ekron dynasty, despite the fact that all his antecedents bear west-Semitic names. If so, this appeal to ancient origin traditions might have served to support the claims of Akhayus' house, for Na'amani (2003, p. 82) suggests that the lengthy lineage detailed by Akhayus in the Ekron inscription was intended to legitimize the dynasty, which in actuality had been established by his father, Padi. Others relate *'kyš* with Anchises (Ἀγκίστης), the name of the father of Aeneas (Homer *Il.* 2.819, 12.98; Byrne, pp. 9-12). In either case, the name represents the only attested instance of a non-Semitic personal name for a ruler of one of the five city states in Philistia. Therefore, I think it likely that the name of the king of Gath in 1 Samuel and 1 Kings is a reflection of the Akhayus or Ikausu of Ekron in the inscriptions. The name of the Philistine king David served may

not have been preserved in the early tradition, and the compiler of the David traditions may have intended to emphasize the “otherness” of the king of Gath by borrowing the non-Semitic name of the well-known seventh cent. king of Ekron.

Otherwise, the David traditions are closely associated with Gath, while Ekron figures in them only once (1 Sam 17:52). The prominence of Gath in the David traditions derives from both its geopolitical and historical standing. The site identified with Gath (Tell es-Şâfi) covers an extensive area (ca. 125 acres) compared to the other Philistine sites, and its location along the route running through the Elah valley facilitated access to the hills of Judah and Benjamin (Schniedewind, pp. 70-71; Maeir, pp. 320-323). Gath was destroyed during the late ninth or early eighth century, probably following its conquest by Hazael (2 Kgs 12:17 [Hebrew Text: v. 18], cf. Amos 6:2), therefore Na'aman (2002, pp. 210-212) suggests that the David traditions must reflect the standing of Gath no later than the ninth century, when it was the most prominent Philistine city-state. If so, then it is possible to surmise that the stories about David's relations with the Philistines originally dealt with an anonymous king of Gath, and a subsequent seventh century Judean scribe identified the anonymous king as Achish, since the non-Semitic name enhanced the Philistine identity of the king, or because Gath had been superseded in his day, and he wished to impart upon the king of Gath in the David stories the same standing accorded to the more recent king of Ekron.

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