

FAREWELL TO THE “BLIND AND LAME” (2 SAMUEL 5:6–10)

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The biblical passage concerning the siege of Jerusalem by David (2 Sam 5:6–10) has drawn scholarly attention numerous times over the years. The formula of exclusion of the blind and lame from the Hebrew cult, which became popular in biblical literature, made this story particularly attractive. Despite the voluminous commentary devoted to this passage, there still remain alternative explanations and interpretations of the phrase that have not been sufficiently explored. To wit, it is possible that the passage contains words the original meaning of which have been forgotten. The present study aims to explore the possibility of re-interpreting the saying about blind and lame in Jerusalem and its role anew.

Leviticus 21:18–20 is linked to 2 Sam 5:8, which refers to exclusion from the faith-community and the prohibition from sacrificial offerings by the physically disabled: “For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.” Among the “physical blemishes” mentioned are those referred to in the story of David’s conquest of Jerusalem: “blind” (עוֹר) and “lame” (פֶּסֶחַ).¹ Connecting these two physical disabilities is quite common in biblical texts; for example, it suffices to cite Job 29:15; Jer 31:8; Matt 11:5 and Luke 14:31. There is no doubt that the exclusion of “the disabled” from the temple service was well known, and very likely practiced in the world of the Ancient Hebrews. However, such a cultic restriction – regardless of its origin and the degree to which it was observed – in no way explains the reference to “blind and lame” at the walls of Jerusalem, during the attack of David’s forces.

Recently, a fresh attempt to deal with the difficulties created by the passage in 2 Sam 5 was undertaken by Craig W. Tyson.² Tyson’s argument focuses on the concept of insider/outsider opposition, and its role in exclusion, as seen in 2 Sam 5:8b. This study shows that with all our

knowledge and previous studies, there are still biblical passages whose meanings remain obscure. Certainly this is the case with the passage in question.

2 Samuel 5:6–10 relates the story of David’s conquest of Jebusite-inhabited Jerusalem. This well-known story includes the intriguing detail: “[The Jebusites] said to David, ‘You will not come in here, even the blind and the lame will turn you back’ – thinking, ‘David cannot come in here’” (2 Sam 5:6). This phrase, often underlined in previous scholarship, expresses loathing and disdain towards David and his army ruling from Hebron, combined with confidence in the strength of Jerusalem’s defences – which were presumably so strong that even the disabled would suffice to defend it.³ However, in the next phrase the situation can no longer be interpreted in this manner: “David had said on that day, ‘Whoever would strike down the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, those whom David hates.’ Therefore it is said, ‘The blind and the lame shall not come into the house’” (2 Sam 5:8).⁴ Despite the textual difficulties and lexical obstacles,⁴ the sense of David’s expression remains clear – the king put some sort of difficult task before his soldiers. This difficulty is openly stated in 1 Chronicles, where David’s words are reported: “Whoever attacks the Jebusites first shall be chief and commander” (1 Chr 11:6). It would be rather nonsensical to interpret this task to have been a battle against the disabled.

There are widely different explanations proposed in scholarship for the presence of the blind and lame at Jerusalem’s walls. Apart from the literal interpretations, accepting the text *prima facie*, commentators have sought a religious key to the scene. Religious rituals, during which soldiers took an oath in which they swore they should be blemished if they acted unfaithfully, have been suggested; the presence of disabled people would remind the soldiers of their oath.⁵ Even if such an explanation is hard to disprove, though equally hard to prove, one might look for a simpler solution requiring fewer hypothetical constructs – for example, that there were in fact real soldiers at the Jerusalem wall, instead of disabled people. Posting a well-armed, high-quality force on the city walls during the siege would have been the most logical defence manoeuvre. Even should any religious ceremonies have taken place alongside the military action, their role and importance would have been secondary to fending off the attacking army. The presence of competent defenders would have been important to both sides; by providing hope to defenders, and real enemies, true obstacles to be surmounted, for the besiegers. The efficacy of a lame and blind military is questionable to say the least.

Perhaps the reason this passages has caused so many interpretative problems lies in our presuppositions concerning the very words used. As seen above, the lame and blind turned out to be proverbial, and yet the presence of the lame and blind themselves in the battle scene are not fundamentally questioned. In fact, these words may be key to understanding the passage. The possibility should not be excluded that the meaning of the words in 2 Sam 5:6–8 meant something else altogether at the time they were written, only acquiring their present meaning at a later date.

The blind mentioned above are referred to in the MT as **העורים**, from the root *ʿwr*. “The lame,” **הפסחים**, derives from the root *psh*. The verb *ʿwr* is used very often in the Bible and its meaning is not disputed. Therefore, any challenges to the lexical consensus, supported by ancient versions, proposed emendations of the text or suggestions of alternate meaning should be based on a reinterpretation of the nouns used. The textual difficulties alone, without any support in ancient translations, make any emendation doubtful. However, one may look for different meanings of the words.

A hint may be found in the meaning of the root *ʿwr*, “to awake,” “to rouse.” This verb is used in the description of the heroic acts of David’s soldiers, and its very meaning may shed light on our text. “Now Abishai son of Zeruiah, the brother of Joab, was chief of the Thirty. With his spear (**חנית**) he fought (**עורר**) against three hundred men and killed them, and won a name beside the Three” (2 Sam 23:18). Similar use of the verb is to be found in the description of the acts of another hero: “Jashobeam, son of Hachmoni, was chief of the Three; he wielded (**עורר**) his spear (**חנית**) against three hundred whom he killed at one time” (1 Chr 11:11).⁶

Abishai’s and Jashobeam’s act are described as **הוא עורר את־חניתו** in 2 Sam 23:18 and 1 Chr 11:11, respectively. The verb *ʿwr* primarily means “to rouse oneself,” “awake”; in Poel it has the meaning “to rouse” and “to incite to activity.” This allows the phrase to be interpreted as: “He brandished the spear”⁷ thus potentially lending the verb *ʿwr* a meaning linking it to military action. The verb is used in such a manner in Isa 10:26 where specifically a whip is wielded with God as the subject. Similarly, Zech 9:13 and 13:7, where the verb *ʿwr* refers to the sword (**חרב**), a military context is provided.⁸ This usage of the verb in a military context, where *ʿwr* refers to a weapon and means “to brandish” or “to wave,” links it with the noun **העורים**. If this is accepted, then the noun in 2 Sam 5:6–8 could be understood as “the brandishers” or “the wavers (of a weapon).” Such an interpretation of **העורים** suggests the existence of a certain category of military unit whose name reflected the fact that it

was an armed unit, or of the particular kind of weapon with which it was equipped. This understanding would better suit the context of a siege and the need for the best soldiers to take part in the defence of the city. It stands to reason that if a term describing a specific unit or its arms was coined, their particular function, importance and skills could likewise be defined. The עורים may have been a highly prestigious military unit consisting of the best soldiers, armed with a particular weapon or using it in a particular way. Using this interpretation David was not fighting the blind but rather against specialized military units armed with spears or swords.

An alternate explanation of the meaning of עורים could be based on the Ugaritic verb *ʿr/ʿrr*, meaning “to guard”; in some instances, such as Deut 32:11; Job 8:6 and Mal 2:12, the verb *ʿwr* in the Bible have been interpreted as “to guard” or “to protect.”⁹ In Deuteronomy God’s protection over Israel is compared to an eagle’s care of its chicks and nest – כנשר יעיר קנו. The translation of this phrase as “like an eagle protecting its nest” seems most appropriate to the context. The phrase in Job 8:6 is more ambiguous, leaving it open to speculation whether the sense of protection should be rather than “to arouse.” The interpretation of Mal 2:12 remains similarly inconclusive. In sum, the arguments for verb *ʿwr*’s meaning “to protect,” are rather weak. The strongest argument remains the Ugaritic verb, the influence of which on Hebrew remains possible though not incontrovertible. However, proving such a meaning would establish the link between the protection described by the verb *ʿwr* and the function of the military protectors mentioned in 2 Sam 5:6–8. Whatever the case may be, both these interpretations provide alternative ways of understanding the term in question and eliminate the unfortunate blind from the siege of Jerusalem.

Larger difficulties arise when interpreting the noun הפסחים. Usually this noun is linked to the root *psh*, and its primary meaning “to lame.” Passover is supposedly linked to the same root, though no scholarly consensus has been reached regarding this etymology.¹⁰ The link between Passover (the feast and the sacrifice) and the verb “to lame” is far from straightforward.¹¹ Even if dictionaries univocally claim the meaning of this verb as “to lame” or “to be lame,” other Semitic languages hardly make use of such a verb in this way.¹² The primary meaning of the word derived from the root *psh*, and its understanding, is obviously conditioned by the name of Passover – the main Jewish feast. The connection between the verb and the name of the feast is explicitly stated: “It is the Passover sacrifice (זבח־פסח) to the Lord, for he passed over (פסח) the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses” (Exod 12:27; cf. Exod 12:23).

The abovementioned sentence from Exodus mentions the act of God “passing over” the houses of the Hebrews. However, the meaning of passing over, is – in a way – derived from the primary meaning of the verb and within this context the expression could be understood as “protected” or “saved.”¹³ This was probably the original meaning of the sacrifice, which served as protection and guaranteed shelter under God’s protection. This definition agrees with the LXX version of Exod 12:27, where the Hebrew verb *psh* is rendered in Greek as *σχεπάσζω* – “to protect, to cover, to hide, to shelter.”¹⁴ Setting aside the concept of the lame and concentrating on the Passover sacrifice as the price for God’s protection and salvation, this particular element made Passover the most important feast for the Jews. This very meaning underlies the importance of this feast for the Jews, as well as the Christian understanding of Christian sacrifice, where Jesus – as the proper Passover sacrifice – protects (and saves) humankind.¹⁵

This is the sense in which the verb *psh* is used in the following passage from Isaiah: “Like birds hovering overhead, so the Lord of hosts will protect Jerusalem; He will protect and deliver it, He will spare (פסח) and rescue it” (Isa 31:5). In this verse the verb *psh* is used in conjunction with the verbs *gmn* (“to cover, surround, defend”), *nsl* (“to snatch away, rescue, recover, deliver from”) and *mlt* (“to slip away, escape, deliver”), to which it is probably semantically close. This interpretation of the phrase is supported by the Targum and the LXX. The Targumic version reads גין וישזיב יציל ויעדי. The verb *psh* from MT is here rendered as the Aramaic verb *ʔll* (“to cover”; cf. Hebrew and Aramaic *ʔl*, “shade,” “protection”). The Greek version, however, may indicate a lack of understanding of this expression. Instead of four verbs in the MT, the Greek version uses only three: *ἐξελίτται* (“to rescue”), *περιποιέω* (“to keep alive,” “to preserve”) and *σώζω* (“to save,” “to keep alive,” “to protect”).

It would be appropriate to point out as well the existence of the proper name derived from the same root: Pasaḥ, mentioned in the Bible at Neh 3:6; Ezra 2:49 and 1 Chr 4:12, as well as in a seal dated to the seventh/sixth century BCE (*CWSSS*, 323). It is not impossible that someone would be named “lame”; however, consequently one is led to suppose that the name actually had a different meaning. This again points to the words deriving from *psh* having a broader meaning.

Accepting “to protect” as the meaning of the verb *psh*, instead of the commonly assumed meaning “to be lame,” advances an alternate hypothesis concerning the usage of the term in 2 Sam 5:6–8. The פסחים used in the passage does not necessarily refer literally to the lame;

instead, it could refer to protectors or defenders of the city. In the light of the above, I am inclined to advance the hypothesis that there were neither blind nor lame people at the Jerusalem walls as referred to in 2 Sam 5:6–8, but rather a highly specialized military unit called “the brandishers” or “the protectors.” Moreover, if the noun העורים (“the protectors, the guards”) were preferred, both terms, העורים and הפסחים, would match close semantic parallelism. In either case, they have a similar meaning, referring to people devoted to protection in the strict military sense of the word. Another possible explanation of the term הפסחים takes into account the context of Passover. The people called פסחים may have been soldiers designated as Passover victims. This explanation, however, lacks any solid foundation even if the connection between Passover and the first-born can easily be established. I find this explanation unlikely. I would posit that the verb *psḥ* meant “to protect” and referred to a certain kind of soldier.

This proposal concerning the original meaning of the name of Passover is obviously not new. However, scholars still believe in the presence of the “lame” and “blind” at Jerusalem’s walls. The suggested understanding of terms העורים and הפסחים in 2 Sam 5:6–8 as “brandishers” and “protectors,” which may be technical terms for a kind of military unit, suits the context well. It may also adequately explain the phrase: “Therefore it is said, ‘The blind and the lame shall not come into the house,’” which now may be well seen as the gloss, aiming to explain terms the meaning of which were already obscure to the editors.¹⁶

How should one explain the fact that these military terms were already unfamiliar to biblical editors and later ancient translators? Some hypothetical reconstruction is needed in order to answer. First, the addition of the gloss in 2 Sam 5:8b, containing the saying establishing the exclusion of the “lame and blind” from the temple service, and linking 2 Sam 5:8 to Lev 21:18–20 (and other cultic prohibition laws), may be both the result of the terms’ obscurity as well as its reason. Second, the military terms were apparently not used in later times. One may even speculate whether such military terminology was part of the heritage of Jerusalem’s pre-Judean society, whether it was Canaanite, Jebusite or Philistine. That would explain the presence of these terms in an old text and their subsequent obscurity. The other explanation would point to an intentional “hiding” of the original meaning, which is less likely, unless the reason for such manipulation can be found.

Notes

1. S. Olyan, "'Anyone Blind or Lame Shall Not Enter the House': On the Interpretation of 2 Samuel 5:8b," *CBQ* 60 (1988), pp. 218–27.
2. C. W. Tyson, "Who's In? Who's Out? II Sam 5,8b and Narrative Reversal," *ZAW* 122 (2010), pp. 546–57, with updated bibliography.
3. Samuel R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2nd edn, 1913), p. 258; Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 2004), pp. 319–20.
4. P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel* (Anchor Bible 9; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 135–40.
5. Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands: In the Light of Archaeological Study* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), pp. 267–70; cf. the comments and further bibliography in McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 138.
6. This verse allows scholars to change the text in 2 Sam 23:8: "Joshebbasshebeth a Tahchemonite; he was chief of the Three; he wielded (עדינו → עורר) his spear against eight hundred whom he killed at one time."
7. McCarter, *II Samuel*, pp. 488–90.
8. Cf. *TDOT*, vol. 10, p. 571.
9. *TDOT*, vol. 10, p. 569.
10. Cf. *TDOT*, vol. 12, pp. 1–29.
11. Giovanni Garbini, *Note di lessicografia ebraica* (Brescia: Paideia, 1998), pp. 105–11.
12. Cf. Garbini, *Note di lessicografia*, pp. 105–106.
13. W. H. Irwin, *Isaiah 28–33: translation with philological notes* (Biblica et Orientalia 30; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1977), p. 114; T. F. Glasson, "The 'Passover', a Misnomer: The Meaning of the Verb Pasach," *JTS* 10 (1959), pp. 79–84.
14. William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18* (AB 2; Garden City: Doubleday, 1999), p. 401.
15. About the link between Passover and *molk* sacrifice, see Ł. Niesiołowski-Spanò, "Child Sacrifice in Seventh-Century Judah and the Origins of Passover," *Przełqd Humanistyczny* 437, no. 2 (2013), pp. 161–70.
16. *TDOT*, vol. 12, p. 27.

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