# "Goliath" Found in New Inscription (What's New in Archaeology)

Michael G. Hasel
*Southern Adventist University*, mhasel@southern.edu

# W H A T ' S   N E W   I N   A R C H A E O L O G Y



Michael G. Hasel*

## "GOLIATH" FOUND IN NEW INSCRIPTION

The story of David and Goliath has captured the imagination of millions of Bible students through the ages. It is the story of the faith of a vulnerable young boy withstanding an armored Philistine champion. It is the story of an Israelite army cowering in the Valley of Elah while the Philistines taunt them and their God. Five stones against iron shields, helmets, and sword.

But what is the history behind the story? Was there a Goliath and a David? Recent critical scholarship questions the historicity of this biblical story. In 1992, Philip Davies, professor of biblical studies at the University of Sheffield, appealed to archaeology and wrote, "The biblical 'empire' of David and Solomon has not the faintest echo in the archaeological record—as yet."[1] He concluded that David and Solomon are no more historical than King Arthur of the Round Table.

But his argument is one from silence. In the view of Davies and other postmodern scholars, the characters and stories of the Bible must have a historical (archaeological) counterpart. "Unless this is done, there can be no real basis for claiming that biblical 'Israel' *has* any particular relationship to history."[2] The Bible is considered guilty until proven innocent. But such arguments from silence are dangerous in any discipline. In archaeology—with hundreds of archaeologists working in the Middle East today—it can be devastating.

Just this past summer, an exciting archaeological discovery was made that sheds new light on the story of David and Goliath. According to the Bible, Goliath came from Gath, one of the five cities of the Philistines (1 Sam. 17:4). Modern excavations at Gath (*Tel es-Safi*) directed by Aren

*Michael G. Hasel, Ph.D., is Director of the Institute of Archaeology and Curator of the Lynn H. Wood Archaeological Museum at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee.*

Maeir of Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv, uncovered a broken piece of pottery with an inscription during the 2005 season. According to Dr. Maeir in his November 2005 presentation to the American Schools of Oriental Research in Philadelphia,[3] the letters are written in a proto-Canaanite script (in Semitic letters). The letters written without vowels are: ALWT and WLT. Though the script is Semitic, however, it is written in the Indo-European language. The names could thus be constructed as "Wylattes or Alyattes." In the hearing of an Israelite it might sound like this Wylattes/WLT/Goliath. That the names are written in Indo-European in a Semitic script is significant. Indo-European points to an Aegean (Greek) origin, which is the same place that the Bible describes as the origin of the Philistines (Gen. 10:14). Its writing in a Semitic script indicates some adaptation of the language in written form to the local Canaanite environment where the Philistines settled.

Where was this inscription found? As archaeologists uncover the ancient cities layer by layer, they can date artifacts stratigraphically within those layers. This inscription was clearly found below the massive destruction of the city that archaeologists have identified with the military campaign of Hazael of Syria (2 Kings 12:17). The inscription is then sealed in a stratigraphic context and can be dated to the 10th-9th centuries B.C., around 950 B.C. to no later than 880 B.C. The context is important, because it establishes that the name *Goliath* was known at Philistine Gath about 70 years *after* the event between David and Goliath as recorded in 1 Samuel 17. Dr. Maeir, a well respected archaeologist who is currently director of the Institute of Archaeology at Bar-Ilan University, concludes that though the inscription probably does not name the biblical Goliath directly, it does point to "a Goliath or rather two Goliath-like names." This affirms that these names were used at Philistine Gath some years after the Bible records the conflict between David and Goliath.

**REFERENCES**

[1] "In Search of Ancient Israel," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament,* Supplement 148 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), p. 67.

[2] Ibid., p. 60.

[3] Aren Maier, "An Iron Age IIA Proto-Canaanite, Philistine Inscription and Other New Finds From Tel es-Safi-Gath." A Paper Presented to the Annual Meetings of the American Schools of Oriental Research, Philadelphia, Penna., November 18, 2005.