

Rescued From The Lion's Paw - the Motifs of Lions and Bears in 1 Sam 17:34-37¹

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Abstract. *When it comes to lions as a symbol in the Bible, and generally, in the Ancient Near East, numerous pages were written about it. On the other hand, only a few were dedicated to bears. However, when it comes to the lions and bears in the story of David and Goliath and young David's bragging about his endeavor, scholars have not paid much attention to it. Why this combination of lions and bears? Why not wolves and leopards? They were a greater threat to the shepherds of that time. Perhaps our author has something else in mind, especially if we know how large role lions played in the Ancient Near East's royal ideology, even up to the Hellenistic period. Can this usage of lions and bears tell us something more about the story itself? Why and when was it written? And what was its goal?*

Keywords: *David and Goliath, symbol, Ancient Near East, archaeology, Old Testament, humor.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The account of David and Goliath has become one of the most prominent Bible stories today. Even those who have never read a single word of the Holy Scripture know about this glorious battle. Newspapers, commercials, sports events, and many other contemporary media use the narrative from 1 Sam 17 to describe an underdog's victory against a much stronger opponent.

But is this story only a story of an underdog? Is it maybe a mere historical report of some battle that happened three thousand years ago? 1 Sam 17, which includes a little broader context (1 Sam 16:17 to 1 Sam 18:30), is attractive from many perspectives. It is, as mentioned above, one of the most famous biblical stories. It differs significantly in length between the manuscripts, it has a diversity of meanings, and it is rich in symbols.

And so, if we take a look at the narrative more carefully, we will see many layers this story has been hiding for centuries. This short paper will focus only on one: on the motif of lions and bears, which author chose to describe David's courage and give him a strong background, so Saul would let him fight Goliath (1 Sam 17:34-36). However, is it really possible for such a tiny boy to slain a grown-up bear or a lion? For those who see this moment just as a literary intervention, this question seems not so important: lions and bears are lethal animals, which could have at some point attack the shepherds. Therefore, an author used them to scale up David's undertaking. However, is it so simple? This question becomes more interesting when we

¹ This paper is part of the larger research on the narrative of David and Goliath, which was carried out as a part of archaeological excavations in Tel Azekah (Israel) conducted by the Universities in Heidelberg and Tel Aviv.

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take a look at E. Firmage's article about zoology in biblical times, where he underlines that even if the lions were threatening animals, for shepherds were wolves and leopards more dangerous.²

To figure out why the author used these motifs, we will analyze the Ancient Near East's iconography and look for the symbolism of lions and bears hidden in it. Afterward, we will look into some ancient and contemporary interpretations, and then, we will try to offer some suggestions to answer our question. However, before that, let us look at the text, its context, and its formation. We will first have to determine when this story appeared at all.

2. DESCRIPTION AND THE CONTEXT OF THE TEXT: 1 SAM 17:34-37

Let us first examine the text mentioning lions and bears. David came right before Saul and said to the king not to be afraid because he, who wants to take a chance and fight against the Philistine champion, was not as inexperienced as the king thought. Lions and bears used to come and raid his flock, and he would fight and win those wild animals and rescue his sheep. The uncircumcised Philistine would be just like one of these wild animals, especially because he challenged the ranks of the living God.³

1 Sam 17 according to MT ⁴		Translation	
34	ויאמר דוד אל־שאול רעה היה עבדך לאביו בצאן ובא הארי ואת־הדוב ונשא שה מהעדר: ⁵	34	And David said to Saul: <i>Your servant was a shepherd for his father among the flocks. The lion and the bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock.</i>
35	ויצאתי אחריו והכתי והצלתי מפיו ויקם עלי והחזקתי בזקנו והכתי והמיתיו:	35	<i>And I went after it, and struck it down and rescued it from its mouth. And it rose up against me, and I grabbed it by its beard⁶ and struck it and killed⁷ it.</i>

² E. Firmage, „Zoology,” in D. Freedman (ed), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 6., New York, Doubleday, 1992, p. 900-978.

³ See: R.W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 10), Nashville. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983, p. 179.

⁴ According to: *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), K. Elliger/W. Rudolph (ed.), Stuttgart, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, ⁵1997.

⁵ The accusative particle seems to be a little problematic. LXX translates it with simple *καί*, same as Peshitta. According to Dietrich, in targums is *ואף* (and also) to be find. See: W. Dietrich, *1 Samuel 13-26* (Biblicher Kommentar Altes Testament), Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener-Verlag, 2015, p. 303.

⁶ LXX uses the word *φάρυγγ* (throat). Interestingly, Flavius Josephus mentions here tail: *...and when he leaped upon me with violence, I took him by the tail, and dashed him against the ground...* (*Antiquitates Judaicae*, VI, 182)

⁷ Peshitta offers a little bit different translation: *...I struck it and wounded it...*

<p>גם את־הארי גם־הדוב הכה עבדך והיה הפלשתי הערל הזה 36 כאחד מהם כי חרף מערכת אלהים חיים:</p>	<p>Both lion and bear⁸ has slain your servant. And this uncircumcised Philistine shall be 36 like one of them, for he has disgraced the ranks of the Living God.</p>
<p>ויאמר דוד יהוה אשר הצלני מיד 37 הארי ומיד הדב הוא יצילני מיד הפלשתי הזה ויאמר שאול אל־דוד לך ויהוה יהיה עמך:</p>	<p>And David said: The LORD, who rescued me from the hand (paw) of the lion and from 37 the hand (paw) of the bear, He will rescue me from hand of this Philistine. So Saul said to David: Go, may the LORD be with you!</p>

The verses that interest us (1 Sam 17, 34-37) belong, as we have said, to one longer narrative, which describes the battle between young David and the Philistine champion (1 Sam 17). The very story of David's victory over Goliath, again, belongs to a wider whole, which includes the text from 1 Sam 16:17 to 1 Sam 18:30.⁹ On the other hand, this part belongs to the broader context about the story of Saul and David, and David's rise to the throne, and establishing the Davidic dynasty, as described in Samuel's books.

The traditional view of dating this story by both early Church Fathers and early Jewish interpreters is that story represents the accurate report of the battle that took place in the valley of Elah, written around the time these events or, at least, at the very latest, within a generation or two.¹⁰ When it comes to modern biblical criticism, it was initially thought that the story of David and Goliath could be attributed to the E document and thus dated back to the 8th Century BC, just before the fall of Samaria.¹¹

Today it is widely believed that this narrative is part of an early source (it includes the history of David's rise, described in 1 Sam 16 – 2 Sam 5), which was in front of the Deuteronomistic editor in the 6th century B.C., after the fall of Jerusalem, when he compiled the history of Israel.¹²

However, the problem of such an early dating of this story already occurs when one reads further the story of David's rule over Israel. In Chapter 21 of 2 Sam, Verse 19 mentions a certain Elhanan, son of Jaare-

⁸ MT omits the accusative particle, which is to be found in rabbinical quotations. See: Dietrich, *Samuel*, p. 303. LXX translates it with accusative, and it changes the order: καὶ τὴν ἄρκον...καὶ τὸν λέοντα. Here is to be found also one of the LXX pluses: οὐχὶ πορεύσομαι καὶ πατάξω αὐτὸν καὶ ἀφελῶ σήμερον ὄνειδος ἐξ Ἰσραὴλ διότι τίς ὁ ἀπερίτμητος οὗτος ὃς (Shall I not go and smite him and take away today a reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised one who...)

⁹ E. Tov, „The Composition of 1 Samuel 16-18 in Light of The Septuagint,“ in E.Tov (ed.), *The Greek and Hebrew Bible. Collected Essays on the Septuagint*, Leiden/Boston/Köln, Brill, 1999, p. 351-352.

¹⁰ A. Rofé, „David Overcomes Goliath (1 Samuel 17). Genre, Text, Origin and Message of the Story,“ in, *Henoch*, Vol 37., Torino, 2015, p. 73.

¹¹ See: K. Budde, *Die Bücher Richter und Samuel: ihre Quellen und ihr Aufbau*, Giessen: J. Ricker, 1890, p. 210-217.

¹² A. Rofé, *David*, p. 74.

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Oregim, a soldier of David, who kills Goliath the Gittite. A slightly wider context of this event (2 Sam 21:19-22) speaks of several wars between David and the Philistines, where David's heroes overcome in duels the Philistines' champions, whose individual descriptions remarkably resemble the description of Goliath from 1 Sam 17 4-7. This scene could point out to an older source, which the writer later used to create an epic battle between David and Goliath.

Interestingly, the clever medieval rabbinical tradition interpreted this place so that it identified Elhanan with David: his name was actually Elhanan, and David was a throne name.¹³ Early Christian interpreters of the Scriptures, having in mind the preserved sources, did not deal with this issue. For them, there was only a battle between David and Goliath, to the greatest extent, most likely considered as a historical report.

Yet, when writing about this event, the author of the Book of the Chronicles, which McKenzie dates most probably in the 4th Century BC,¹⁴ *corrects* this story from 2 Sam 21:19 by saying that Elhanan actually killed Lahmi, the brother of Goliath the Gittite (1 Ch 20:5). However, it is interesting that the chronicler does not mention such an important event like the battle between David and Goliath at all. Therefore it may be assumed that the story from 1 Sam 17 is much younger and that its appearance could be sought in the period between the end of the 7th or 6th Century BC and 4th Century BC.

On the other hand, looking at the archaeological hints, such as the description of Goliath's armor and equipment, and comparing them with the equipment of the Greek warriors from a later period I. Finkelstein dated this narrative at the earliest in the late 7th Century BC. He does not deny the possibility that there was an ancient legend of the battle between the Judean hero and the Philistine warrior, but he says that the story was told in the Homeric genre, describing Goliath as a Greek mercenary. It has a goal to encourage Judah, that the new David, Josiah, would win his opponents, and that he will reunite the kingdom, as David did, by beginning his conquest with the victory over Goliath *in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel* (1 Sam 17:45).¹⁵

That our narrative is probably not a historical report, but one story with a different intention, which can be dated in the Persian Period, thinks M. Oeming. According to him, an archaeological discovery brought by the Lautenschläger-Azekah-Expedition, which has been carried out since 2012 by the University of Tel Aviv and the University of Heidelberg, brings exciting facts. The results that archeologists had come to indicate that

¹³ I. Finkelstein, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition*, New York/London, Free Press, 2007, p. 196.

¹⁴ S. McKenzie, *I and II Chronicles*, Nashville/Edinburgh, Abingon/Alban, 2004, p. 32.

¹⁵ I. Finkelstein, *David and Solomon*, p. 196-199.

Azeka, the place where the famous battle happened, was in the late Bronze Age, about 1100 BC (100 years before David) completely destroyed and abandoned and that until about 850 BC at that location there was no settlement.¹⁶

A. Rofé comes to a similar conclusion following literary motifs, the structure, and the context of the text. He also examines the elements of the Hebrew language in our narrative. No doubt, according to Rofé, when it comes to the syntax, the sentence constructions, the way of writing, and the language itself, they are much closer to the language of the Chronicles than to the Deuteronomistic historical work. Rofé, in support of late dating, lists late Psalm 151, which is an integral part of the LXX Psalter, found in the Dead Sea scrolls, and which represents a rare later reception of such an important event like David's victory over Goliath. Although he points out that the origin of the story can not be accurately determined, he dates it back to the 4th century B.C., at the very end of the Persian Period (just before or during the rule of Alexander the Great).¹⁷

Bearing in mind the late formation of this story, the question arises: why did the Persian Period writer take the motifs of bears and lions and put them as opponents, or rather as a threat to the flock of the young shepherd David, whom he easily overcame? The question is even more interesting if we notice that for shepherds, as we already mentioned initially, the more frequent, and thus the bigger threats were wolves and leopards.¹⁸

3. DESCRIPTION OF MOTIFS

3.1. SYMBOLISM OF LIONS

When it comes to the Ancient Near East, the lions were, among the animals, most commonly used in ancient iconography. Their symbolism is multiple and colorful. When the Old Testament is concerned, the lion is one of the most referred animals, and it is mentioned more than 130 times.¹⁹ Knowing such a wide representation, we will focus only on several motifs in this short paper.

MT uses a few words to describe lions. Among them אריה (Dan 6:7) and ארי (1 Sam 17:34-37) referring to grown-up, male lions. For young male lions, it uses the word כפיר (Jdg 14:5) and for cubs גור (Gen 49:9). The

¹⁶ M. Oeming, „Erzählen lernen aus dem Alten Testament. Die Geschichte von David und Goliath als Lehrstück narrativer Theologie und Pädagogik,“ in: C. Wiesinger/S. Ahrnke (ed.), *Erzählen. Ingrid Schobert zum 60. Geburtstag*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2019, p. 127.

¹⁷ A. Rofé, *David*, p. 87.

¹⁸ E. Firmage, „Zoology,“ p. 949.

¹⁹ P. Riede, „Löwe,“ in: *WibiLex* (S. Alkier/M. Bauks/K. Koenen), (created: September 2010), IntRes: <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/25081/> Retrieved: 09.06.2021.

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lionesses are לְבִיָּא (Num 23:24), i.e., לְבִיָּא (Ez 19:2), and some other terms that describe lions are לִישׁ (Is 30:6) and לְשׂוֹן (Ps 91(90):13). On the other hand, LXX uses only one word: λέων.

Today, lions are restricted to Africa, but an Asian subspecies (*Panthera leo persica*) once lived in Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Iran. It became extinct in Palestine somewhere around 14th Century A.D., where the last one was killed near Megiddo. However, in Syria and Mesopotamia, they survived until the 19th Century.²⁰ Today, they are restricted to India. They were and are highly dangerous and lethal, especially because they can grow up to 2,80m and weigh between 110 and 190 kg.²¹

Lions are rampant in biblical, but also in ancient and antique world's literature from the very beginning. They are the strongest and most dangerous of all predatory beasts, whose roaring alone is terrifying also in the minds of ancient authors. The Old Testament describes many encounters between lions and humans, which usually end up fatal for some of them. For example, Benaiah (2 Sam 23:20), David (1 Sam 17:34-37), and Samson (Judg 14:6) manage to overcome their aggressors. Samson, like David, does it with the bare hands. In some cases, the lions kill their victims (1 Kings 13:24), but Daniel escapes unharmed from the lion's den (Dan 6:16-24). Amos (3:12) describes how a shepherd rescued a lamb from the mouth of a lion.²² The lions were also used in metaphors to describe the courage and strength of heroes (1 Macc 3:4 or 2 Macc 11:11), of tribes (Gen 49:9), or even the righteous men (Prov 28:1). In Ezekiel's vision, four beings were described, and they had four faces, one of which was the face of a lion (Ez 1:10). These creatures were described as incredibly powerful. On the other hand, the lion in Daniel's visions represents Babylon (Dan 7:4).²³ There are many examples, but in any case, the biblical writer understood the lions as very dangerous and powerful animals, and he surely was afraid of them, but he also admired them.

When it comes to Ancient Near East, demons have been portrayed in the form of lions in the many ancient representations. The lion was feared, and therefore, demons were endowed with its features. However, the

²⁰ I.U. Kohler-Rollefson, „Lion,” in: P. Alchtemeier (ed.), *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, San Francisco, HarperOne, 1996, p. 610.

²¹ R. Chellam, A.J.T. Johnsingh, „Management of Asiatic Lions in the Gir Forest, India,” in N. Dunstone, M.L. Gorman (ed.), *Mammals as Predators: The Proceedings of a Symposium Held by the Zoological Society of London and the Mammal Society of London*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 409–423.

²² I.U. Kohler-Rollefson, „Lion,” p. 611.

²³ P. Riede, „Lowe.”

lion was also admired, as evidenced by its appearance in the decoration of combs and seals.²⁴

A very important part of the iconography of the Ancient Near East was royal hunting on lions. The lions represented a great danger to men. They were often deadly, and in some way, they personified chaos, the power of darkness that ruins a life. On the other hand, the ruler personifies the state and power, and his ability to tamper with such animals to overcome them meant his ability to provide peace and give a chance for life to those over whom he rules. In this context, interesting is the representation of (probably) Gilgamesh, as Master of Animal from the Assyrian palace relief from Dur-Sharrukin (today preserved in Louvre), where he holds a lion under his left hand (around the second half of the 8th Century BC). The size of a hero holding a lion is also imposing (Figure 1).²⁵

According to E. Firmage, royal hunting was in one moment highly ritualized to that extent that it had lost its original function and had been invested with the new value as a purely symbolic activity. In the extreme case, no real hunting would even take place. The symbolic requirements of the ritual hunt could be satisfied if the king slew a token animal, such as a lion, which could be caught beforehand and bound so that it does not pose a real danger.²⁶



Figure 2: A sketch of a detail from a gypsum wall panel relief from the north palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, c. 645–635 BC

²⁴ O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World. Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, London, SPCK Publishing, 1997, p. 85-86.

²⁵ J. Delorme, „The Ancient World,“ in: M. Duncan (ed.), *The Larousse Encyclopedia of Ancient and Medieval History*, London: Harper & Row, 1981, p. 55.

²⁶ E. Firmage, „Zoology,“ p. 907.



Figure 1: A sketch of Master of Animal from the Assyrian palace relief from Dur-Sharrukin, c. 713-706 BC

Figure 3: A sketch of Alexander the Great lifetime tetradrachm from Amphipolis, Macedonia, c. 325-323 BC

One of the most famous depictions of the rulers in hunting is the one that is now in the British Museum, which represents the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal killing the lion (Figure 2). Assyrian rulers boasted of their heroism in slaying countless lions, and king Ashurbanipal in particular delighted in representing himself as a hunter and boasting of his accomplishments in hyperbolic inscriptions:

I, Ashurbanipal, king of the universe, king of Assyria . . . I went forth. In an open space in the plain, fierce lions, dreadful children of the mountains, came out. They surrounded the chariot, my royal vehicle . . . I shattered the might of those lions.²⁷

Palace reliefs, showing the corpses of lions piled in front of altars as a final gesture of religious offering, are accompanied by royal inscriptions:

The lions that I killed; I held the fierce bow of Ishtar, Lady of Battle, over them. I set up an offering over them, and I made a libation over them.²⁸

Thus the *bunt* morphed into a sacrifice. The Persians inherited the Assyrian ideology of the *bunt*. For this reason, Darius I was also often depicted shooting arrows at a roaring lion while the slain one lies beneath the chariot. In these scenes, as we have said, the lion represents chaos and

²⁷ S. Lewis, L. Llewellyn-Jones, *The Culture of Animals in Antiquity: A Sourcebook with Commentaries*, New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 327.

²⁸ J.M. Russel, *The Writing on the Wall: Studies in the Architectural Context of Late Assyrian Palace Inscriptions*, Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1999, p. 202.

disorder, and the ruler becomes a *Master of Animals*, who restored order in their lands.²⁹

On the other hand, in Greek mythology, the myth of Heracles and Nemean Lion is well known. Heracles killed this vicious monster, whose claws were sharper than any sword in the world, in his quest to complete the twelve tasks set by King Eurystheus. This lion could not be killed by mortals because their weapons could not break his golden fur. Heracles tried with various weapons, but he failed. During the fight, the lion bit off one of his fingers. In the end, he wrestled with the lion, and he strangled it with his bare hands.³⁰

Knowing this myth, impressive is the silver coin from the time of Alexander the Great, the so-called tetradrachm (Figure 3). The silver tetradrachm depicted the head of Heracles (or Alexander)³¹ with the helmet of Nemean Lion's skin on the front and seated Zeus holding scepter and eagle on the back. This, among others, represented Alexander's strength, as the one who was able, as Heracles in the past, to overcome the vicious beasts, defeat them with the bare hands, and thus save and keep safe his people.

Keeping in mind this aspect of depicting the lions in the iconography and the late dating of our story, one could assume the possible, obvious connection. However, let us take a look for a moment into a brief symbolism of bears.

3.2. SYMBOLISM OF BEARS

²⁹ See also: M.B. Garrison, „The Heroic Encounter in the Visual Arts of Ancient Iran and Iraq ca. 1000-500 BC,“ in D.B. Counts/B. Arnolds (ed.), *The Master of Animals in Old World Iconography*, Budapest, Archaeolingua, 2010, p. 151-161.

³⁰ W.B. Tyrrell, „On Making the Myth of the Nemean Lion,“ in *The Classical Journal*, Vol, 98, Chicago, 2002, p. 69–71.

³¹ The scholars do not agree if the head with the lion's helm is the head of Alexander or the head of Heracles. K. Sheedy and B. Ockinga, as well as D.M. Chico and A.G. Garcia write that the head at the front side of the coin is Heracle's (see: K. Sheedy, B. Ockinga, „The Crowned Ram's Head on Coins of Alexander the Great and the Rule of Ptolemy as Satrap of Egypt,“ in P. Wheatley, E. Baynham (ed.), *East and West in the World Empire of Alexander*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 197-365, and D.M. Chico, A.G. Garcia, „A Small Hoard of Alexander Tetradrachms from Batman (Turkey),“ in *The Numismatic Chronicle*, Vol. 178, London, 2018, p. 285-292) M.J. Olbrycht suggests that the Heracle actually represents the Alexander himself. This is, according to him, an attempt of his deification. This happened in two stages: first, Heracle was a prototype of Alexander and a bearer of a pan-Hellenic message; the second is understanding of Alexander as Herakles, the living son of Zeus. See: M.J. Olbrycht, „On Coin Portraits of Alexander the Great and His Iranian Regalia,“ in *Notae Numismaticae*, Vol. 6, Krakow, 2011, p. 13-29.

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Unlike lions, the iconography of bears is not even nearly so rich when it comes to this geographical area.³² It is rare to find, and in the Persian Period is almost nonexistent. Therefore, we will try to explore this subject in a little more detail.

When it comes to M.T., the word **בַּרְדַּל** is to be found 13 times³³ and depicts, most probably, Syrian brown bear or she-bear (*Ursus arctos syriacus*). It is a large bear with a wide range of colors, ranging from light to dark brown, and occupies a wide variety of habitats.³⁴ It can grow up to 140 cm (from nose to tail), weighing up to 250 kg.³⁵ This type of bear is almost extinct in the present-day territories of Syria and Palestine. Namely, due to the construction of many settlements and urbanization in ancient Israel, it comes to more frequent deforestation, especially in the hill county. Life in these settlements required a growing need for wood. Accelerated deforestation inevitably led to a change in the flora and, consequently, in this region's fauna. Due to these processes, there was a decline or even extinction of certain animal species, such as brown bear, wild boar, and various species of deer.³⁶ However, at the time, when the bears were widespread, they were considered to be very dangerous animals for people, almost equally powerful and violent as lions.³⁷ According to Lewis and Llewellyn-Jones, the slaughter of bears and lions – or even the aspiration to kill them – was praiseworthy.³⁸

When it comes to LXX, the word *ἄρκος*, which indicates the bear also appears in Jdg 1:35, Wis 11:17, Sir 25:17, and 47:3. Interestingly, in the New Testament, the word *ἄρκος* occurs only once: in Rev 13:2, when the first beast from the visions is described.

The Old Testament text often pairs, as we have seen, bear with lions and describes them as wild animals, which can endanger the shepherds (1 Sam 17:34-37), but also people in general (Am 5:19), and which often serve as a mean of enforcing God's justice (2 Kings 2:24, Wis 11:17). In Dan 7:5, the bear is the symbol of the Median Kingdom. The angry she-bear that lost

³² The bear motifs are more likely to be found among many North Asian and North European people.

³³ 1 Sam 17:34, 36, 37; 2 Kings 2:24; Is 11:7, 59:11; Am 5:19, Prov 28:15; Lam 3:10; 2 Sam 17:8, Hos 13:8; Prov 17:12; Dan 7:5.

³⁴ K. Kitchell, *Animals in the Ancient World from A to Z*, New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 12.

³⁵ M. Masseti, „Carnivores of Syria,” in E. Neubert, Z. Amr, S. Taiti, B. Gümüs (ed.), *Animal Biodiversity in the Middle East. Proceedings of the First Middle Eastern Biodiversity Congress*, Aqaba Academica Press, 2009, 229–252.

³⁶ E. Firmage, „Zoology,” p. 906-907.

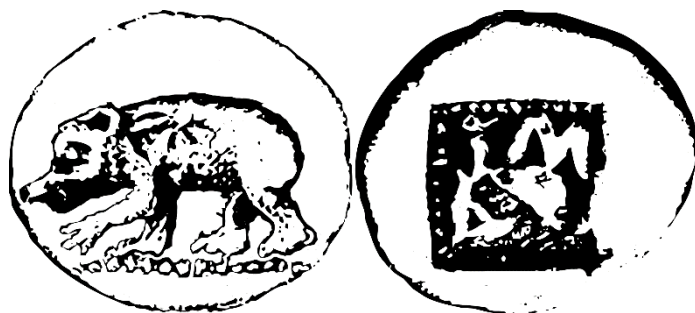
³⁷ P. Riede, *Im Spiegel der Tiere*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2002, p. 36. See also: L. Ryken, J.C. Wilhoit, T. Longman (ed.), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1998, p. 144-145; A.L. Weiss, *Figurative Language in Biblical Prose Narrative*, Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2006, p. 165.

³⁸ S. Lewis, L. Llewellyn-Jones, *Animals*, p. 318.

her cubs was also represented as the paradigm of the angry man, who is ready to do anything (2 Sam 17:8). The roaring bear is, according to Is 59:11, an image of an abandoned and mumbling man. On the other hand, in Is 11:7, the time of salvation is described as a time when there is peace between cows and bears, i.e., between domestic and wild animals.³⁹

Even archeology confirms the existence of bears in the area of the southern Levant. In the bone sample from the Iron II strata at Tell es-Sa'idiyeh, pigs, horses, bear, and lion were found, and it is assumed that they were also eaten.⁴⁰ Recent archaeological excavations in Palestine have uncovered remains of both the lion and the bear in Iron Age levels.⁴¹ It was reported that the Syrian bear was spotted last time in the Wadi Hammam at the beginning of the 20th Century.⁴²

The iconography of bears in the Ancient Near East is rare, unlike the north of Europe (and Europe overall) and Asia, where many deities were represented in bear shapes. Perhaps one of the most famous Greek-Roman myths is the one of Zeus (Jupiter) and his mistress Callisto. When Hera (Juno), the wife of Zeus, learned that Callisto and Zeus had a son called Arcas, she turned Callisto into a she-bear so that she could not attract Zeus anymore. When Arcas encountered his mother, now in the shape of a dangerous she-bear (Figure 4), he almost killed her because he was afraid the beast might attack him. He did not know that she-bear was his mother. Zeus prevented that from happening by turning Arcas into a bear. After that, he put them together in the sky, where they stand until today as the constellations of Ursa Major (Callisto) and Ursa Minor (Arcas).⁴³



³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ E. Firmage, „Zoology,“ p. 935.

⁴¹ J.N. Tubb, „Tell es-Sa'idiyeh: Preliminary Report on the First Three Seasons of Renewed Excavations,“ in *Levant*, Vol. 20, London, 1988, p. 83–84.

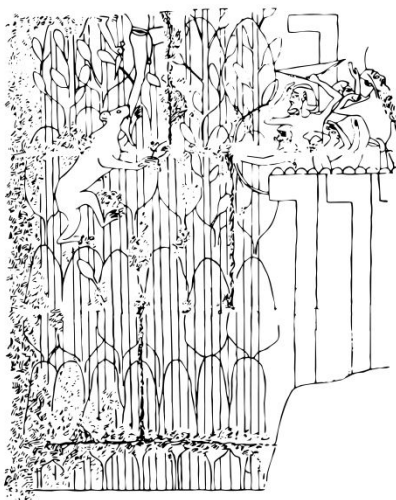
⁴² E. Firmage, „Zoology,“ p. 948.

⁴³ For more about the rare appearance of bears in ancient Greek culture see: E. Bevan, „The Goddess Artemis and the Dedication of Bears in Sanctuaries,“ in *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, Vol. 82, London, 1987, p. 17-21. For the relation between Greek mythology and literature on the example of goddess Athena and Iliad see: F. Parasca, „The Goddess Athena in Greek Mythology and in the Iliad,“ in *Astra Salvensis*, II, no. 3, 2013, p. 135-141.

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Figure 4: A sketch of a silver triobol coin with the bear on it from Matinea in Arcadia, c. 490 BC⁴⁴

On the other hand, something is more interesting for our narrative. One part in the top left corner of the Egyptian depiction from the Luxor Temple of Amun in Thebes shows the danger of the bear. During the Egyptian siege of the Syrian city of Satuna (probably during the time of Ramses II), a Syrian fugitive wanted to escape the fight, and he fled into a forest where he ran into a bear (or he was just climbing a tree because he wanted to escape from the bear). A bear grabbed his leg in its jaws. It is unclear if the refuge managed to kill the bear with the dagger, or his fellow soldier saved him by hitting the bear with the arrow from the city wall (Figure 5).⁴⁵ According to Lewis and Llewellyn-Jones, this dramatic depiction recalls an episode from the satirical Papyrus Anastasi I, where the prince of Asher (often interpreted as a coward) is discovered in a balsam tree by a hungry bear. That literary account was supposed to entertain, but the ancient people were well aware of the danger of the brown bear.⁴⁶



⁴⁴ Bear on the coin represents the Callisto, mother of Arcas, who was, according to the legend, the founder of Arcadia. See: S. Lewis, L. Llewellyn-Jones, *Animals*, p. 320.

⁴⁵ See: M. Burchardt, „Die Einnahme von Satuna,“ in, *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, Vol. 51, Berlin, 1914, p. 106-109, and G. Posener, „Le mésaventure d'un Syrien et le nom égyptien de l'ours,“ in *Orientalia*, Vol. 13, Rome, 1944, p. 193-204.

⁴⁶ S. Lewis, L. Llewellyn-Jones, „Animals,“ p. 317.

Figure 5: A sketch of an Egyptian wall-relief from the Luxor Temple of Amun, Thebes, during the reign of Ramses II, c. 1250 BC

Figure 6: A sketch of a wall painting from the tomb chapel of Rekhmire at Thebes showing the arrival of foreign tribute, including live animals

In the Tomb of an ancient Egyptian noble and official of the 18th Dynasty Rekhmire, who served as *Governor of the Town of Thebes* and Vizier during the reigns of Thutmosis III and Amenhotep II, archaeologists found a depiction of bear and elephant, which were brought as a gift for a pharaoh (Figure 6).⁴⁷ According to Lewis and Llewellyn-Jones, bears were known to the Egyptians only through importation, which is why their appearance in Egyptian art is highly sporadic. And most of these examples date from the 18th dynasty, where the bears are shown wearing collars and leashes.⁴⁸ Assyrian monarchs also used bears as exotic animals. An inscription of Esarhaddon from the annals of Ashurbanipal (669-631 BC) recalls how the king bound a captured enemy together with a bear and a dog and made him stand at the gate of Nineveh.⁴⁹

Lastly, according to O. Keel, the bear motive is entirely absent from the animal comparisons of the psalms. This could be coincidental, but Keel suggests that the psalms, more than any other book of the Old Testament, communicate with the generally common motifs from the Ancient Near East's big centers (Mesopotamia and Egypt). Because the bear is absent from the flat river valleys of Mesopotamia and Egypt, it is also absent from their representations of demons and from their royal imagery. That may be the reason for its absence from the animal comparisons of the psalms.⁵⁰ But why are they mentioned in 1 Sam 17?

One Hittite document is, however, interesting. It is the Chronicle attributed to King Anitta. It describes a royal hunt by saying:

I made a vow and [I went on] a hun[t]. On the first day I brought to my city Nesa two lions, seventy pigs, sixty wild boar, and 120 (other) wild animals, (among them) bears, leopards, lions, deer, gazelle and [wild goats].⁵¹

This means that even bears at some point were prey for the royal hunt, which served as propaganda to sustain the ruler's claim to the throne and its ability to rule. Together with the leopard, lion, and gazelle, the bear is

⁴⁷ S. Hodel-Hoernes, *Life and Death in Ancient Egypt: Scenes from Private Tombs in New Kingdom Thebes*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 140.

⁴⁸ S. Lewis, L. Llewellyn-Jones, *Animals*, p. 319.

⁴⁹ *Um die Erhabenheit Assurs, und der großen Götter, meiner Herren, zu zeigen, legte ich ihm eine schwere Strafe auf und stellte ihn in einen Käfig (šigaru) und band ihn mit Bären (und) Hunden zusammen (rakasu) und ließ ihn dann ein Tor in Ninive ... bewachen.* P. Riede, *Tiere*, p. 82.

⁵⁰ O. Keel, *Symbolism*, p. 88-89.

⁵¹ B.J. Collins, „Animals in Hittite Literature,“ in B.J. Collins (ed.), *History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East* (HAW), Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2002, p. 250.

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depicted in Hittite literature as *animal of the gods*.⁵² The bear hunting was also reported in the Greco-Roman period, and it had a very similar background and reasons as the Hittite one centuries before.⁵³

Since the iconography of the Ancient Near East, and especially Palestine, does not offer a lot concerning bears, much cannot be concluded. Shepherds may have really hunted bears, but they were probably doing that to defend their flocks.⁵⁴ What is certain and what can be concluded is that the bear was understood as a very dangerous animal, which, by its strength, could be compared with lions. Also, bears could have been an exotic gift given to the ruler, which showed, probably symbolically, that the ruler was mighty enough to rule over such vicious animals. However, keeping in mind the mentioned Hittite document, it is not impossible that the hunting of bears, like the hunting of lions, represented, even later, the prestige of the ruler and the proof that he is able to rule over these bloodthirsty beasts.

When it comes to our biblical text, it is thinkable that bears were mentioned only as an amplification of the motif because, for the listeners and readers, they must have had the same impact as the lions.

4. PROPOSED SOLUTION(S)

4.1 HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

If we look at the former interpretations of our problem, we will not find much helpful information. The early Christian tradition does not interpret a lot the moment of David's fight with lions and bears. Moreover, when it does, it is mostly allegorical or literally. In his Commentary on David and Goliath, Hippolytus sees the type of Christ in this scene because Christ is also a shepherd who watched his Father's sheep and saved them from Death, as David rescued his father's flock from lions.⁵⁵ Origen, in his fragments on Jeremiah, also interprets these events almost the same as Hippolytus: David's struggle with lions is τῦπος of Christ, who is spiritual David, who abolished every council of beasts.⁵⁶ On the other hand, Chrysostom saw this event as a historical one, and he sees bears⁵⁷ and lions as dangerous animals, which David could overcome only with the help and

⁵² B.J Collins, „Animals in the Religions of Ancient Anatolia,” in *HAW*, p. 328.

⁵³ K. Kitchell, *Animals*, 13.

⁵⁴ O. Borowski, „Animals in the Literature of Syria-Palestine,” in *HAW*, p. 293.

⁵⁵ G. N. Bonwetsch, *Drei georgisch erhaltene Schriften von Hippolytus*, Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs, 1904, p. 88.

⁵⁶ J. Smith, *Origen: Homilies on Jeremiah and Homily on 1 Kings 28*, Washington D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1998, p. 296.

⁵⁷ R. Hill, *St. John Chrysostom: Homilies on Genesis 46-67*, Washington D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1992, p. 9.

in the name of God.⁵⁸ For him, David speaks to Saul only about those endeavors that could force the king to allow him to fight Goliath.

Early modern Rabbi Menachem Azaria de Fano (1548-1620) sees in Verse 35 that David killed the bear and just struck the lion, which fled.⁵⁹ For Rabbi Menachem, this was symbolic of future national events. The sheep represents the Jewish nation (as in Jer 50:17), the lion represents the gentile nations (Jer 49:19) – in particular, Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 4:7), and the bear represents Persia and Media (Dan 7:5) – in particular, Persia's King Ahasuerus. David failed to kill the lion – therefore, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple. However, David killed the bear; correspondingly, the kings of Persia and Media were unsuccessful in their attempts to prevent the rebuilding of the Temple. David, according to Rabbi Menachem, understood this more profound meaning of his struggle.⁶⁰

When it comes to contemporary scholars, S. Bar-Efrat, in his commentary, does not elaborate on the symbolism and reason why the author chose lions and bears to depict the threat for David's flock. He just emphasizes that these have been there to convince Saul to let David into a fight and to emphasize the divine element and God's act by saving David.⁶¹ Almost exactly the same as Chrysostom six Centuries before him.

W. Dietrich points out how much were lions and bears dangerous and deadly in the Ancient Near East. For him, similar as for S. Bar-Efrat, the heroic victory over these bloodthirsty animals was there to persuade Saul to allow David to fight Goliath. However, for Dietrich, David stands here against ancient rulers: he is not a king – he is a shepherd; he does not hunt for entertainment – he is in need to protect his flock.⁶² Similarly to S. Bar-Efrat, H.J. Stoebe, R. Klein, and A. Campbell do not indulge much in the symbolism of lions and bears, but, based on biblical examples, they understand them as very dangerous animals, which David could overcome only with God's help.⁶³

However, without diminishing the significance of the allegoric and typological exegesis of Hippolytus and Origen, or the symbolic one of Rabbi Menachem, the question persists, why lions and bears? Especially if we know that E. Firmage writes in his article that while the lion captured the

⁵⁸ John Chrysostom, „Homilies on the Acts of the Apostoles and the Epistle to the Romans,“ in P. Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (NPNF 11), Vol. 11, Peabody, Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, p. 55.

⁵⁹ See footnote 7.

⁶⁰ Y. Weinberger, *Shmuel 1. A New Translation With a Commentary anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources*, Brooklyn, Mesorah Publications, 2011, p. 345.

⁶¹ S. Bar-Efrat, *Das Erste Buch Samuel. Ein narratologisch-philologischer Kommentar* (BWANT 176), Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2007, p. 236.

⁶² W. Dietrich, *Samuel*, p. 358.

⁶³ H.J. Stoebe, *Das erste Buch Samuelis*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1973, 335-336; R.W. Klein, *Samuel*, p. 179; A.F. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, Cambridge, W.B. Eerdmans, 2003, p. 181.

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imagination of biblical poets, the leopard and wolf seems to have had a more significant, real impact on human society. Firmage writes that leopard traps from as early as the Chalcolithic period are found in the Uvda Valley in the Southeastern Negeb.⁶⁴

4.2. POSSIBLE SOLUTION

If we accept the late formation of the 1 Sam 17 (4th century B.C.), and if we take into account the symbolism mentioned above: first of all the lions, as extremely dangerous animals, which in the ancient world have often personified the forces of darkness and chaos; and the bears, which were also understood in the similar, if not the same way; it is not impossible to assume that the author or editor of the story placed these animals in front of young David for the very same reason.

In the author's surroundings of the collapsed and conquered state, David represents an outstanding personality from the glorious past. Someone who established the state united the tribes and won the freedom for ancient Israel. He is the founder of the dynasty from which the promised Messiah should come – he is supposed to deliver the people out of trouble and bring them back the state again.⁶⁵ But not just that. David is also the one through whom God acts. David is not a king like Ashurbanipal, nor is he a demigod like Heracles (or Alexander). David is the tiny boy, a shepherd, the youngest of his brothers. However, God is with him. He is just a tiny, weak child, but he managed to overcome such tremendous and bloodthirsty beasts like bears and lions, which the ancient rulers barely managed to overcome with complicated weaponry. Moreover, he does it with bare hands. He is, in a way, a super-Ashurbanipal or a super-Hercules, precisely because God acts through him. And not any god, but *the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel* (1 Sam 17:45).

His descendant should be like this as well. And that is why by looking at that image with a lion's helmet, which Judeans have been seeing every day on the tetradrachm of Alexander the Great, and by reading and listening about the fearless beginnings of their ancestor David, they should be aware that the earthly rulers are nothing compared to the one with whom is God. David defeated lions and bears, the forces of darkness that the rulers of great kingdoms and gods were fighting. And with such ease that even the giant Goliath did not pose any problem. The *future* David should not be just a ruler like Alexander, but someone like David, someone who acts in the name of the Lord and through whom the Lord himself acts.

⁶⁴ E. Firmage, „Zoology,” p. 949.

⁶⁵ More on the usage of historical past see: Y. Tileubergenov, N. Pelevina, B. Taubaev, A. Vasiliev, „The Role of Social Memory in Reconstruction of the Historical Past. Social Memory and Historical Past,” in *Astra Salvensis*, VI, no. 12, 2018, p. 67-72.

5. CONCLUSION

One such analysis of motifs within the well-known biblical episode about David and Goliath attempts to explain the nature of the narrative itself. It is difficult to understand this event as a historical one (although the traces of a historical, glorious duel between Philistine champion and Judean hero should not be so easily rejected). The text itself and archeology also say the opposite. Hyperbole about the Goliath's height,⁶⁶ the legendary fight of the tiny barehanded David with adult lions and bears, who were at least three to four times bigger than him, humor (which is definitely present in this, but also in the later episode, when David does not have enough strength to wear a warrior armor which Saul gave him), and the story of the conflict between the brothers we meet in M.T... All this suggests that the author aims at something more than just recalling a glorious past.

Of course, the central figure of this story should be God and the theological dimension, which emphasizes God's action through tiny David. He is with David when he has to overcome the bloodthirsty beasts and when he has to beat the enormous Goliath. The story should tell the readers that God is always and at all times with them.

There is also the psychological dimension, which deals with the conflict between the brothers, and the sociological one, which is reflected in the description of the enemy. The Goliath seems to be put into the ancient past, but his appearance and equipment remind of the soldiers of the author's time. The soldiers whom he could have met in his own daily life. LXX does not even call Goliath the Philistine, but stranger, the one from another tribe (ἄλλόφυλος).

In the end, humor, which is definitely present in the story, has its own function — humor like turning attention from the problems, humor like a comfort, humor as a weapon. According to M. Oeming, these are all the elements that this story is trying to tell us.⁶⁷ And we could understand this very well today. It is enough to look at the contemporary Late Night Show shows, which often, through humor and satire, serve as a stress reliever for citizens unsatisfied because of the politics, economic situation, or war conflicts, especially in the less developed countries.

⁶⁶ Although it is questionable if Goliath is really a giant, who is three meters high or not. Much indicates that the texts found in LXX and 4QSam bring us more authentic and original data. See: B. Johnson, „Reconsidering 4QSam and the Textual Support for the Long and Short Versions of the David and Goliath Story,“ in *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 62, Leiden, 2012, p. 534-549.

⁶⁷ M. Oeming, *Erzählen*, p. 119-139.