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DOEG'S JOB

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Abstract

In this brief study I follow up on a recent JBL *article in which SZ Aster discusses and rejects proposed emendations for the title* אביר הרעים *(1 Sam 21:8) applied to the Edomite Doeg, Saul's instrument in killing the priests of Nob. I offer one more possible explanation of his title via the Mari archives and use that explanation to expand on Doeg's vita.*

The Issue

In a recent issue of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Shawn Zelig Aster published an article whose title establishes its goals: "What Was Doeg the Edomite's Title? Textual Emendations versus a Comparative Approach to 1 Samuel 21:8."[1] The relevant verse in Samuel says that when David fabricated a reason for getting food and weapons from the priest of Nob, "One of Saul's servants (איש מעבדי שאול) was there that day, detained before the LORD (נעצר לפני יהוה), his name was Doeg the Edomite, mightiest of Saul's herdsmen (אביר הרעים אשר לשאול) (TNK)." While it is true that the camels, donkeys, and sheep belonging to David were supervised by foreigners (1 Chr 27:30-31), the matter of Doeg's title is an issue because for many scholars אביר הרעים, (*'abbîr hārō'îm*) "mightiest among herdsmen" (i.e. "Top Herdsman") does not seem to match Doeg's vita as displayed in the narratives. Rather than evoking supervision of animal herding, Doeg's activities parallel the control of security that was among the assignments held by Joab and Benaiah. Close to the king, whose safety he guarded, Doeg sought favor by doing unappetizing jobs, such as executing the priests of Nob for harboring David (1 Sam 22:18) when Saul's Benjaminites runners (*rāṣîm*) refused to carry out orders to do so.

Aster examines a string of suggested emendations for אביר הרעים, some retaining currency in scholarship for many centuries, and rejects them all. He is right to do so; for while scholars might well emend hopelessly corrupt words, they ought not change perfectly reasonable vocabulary simply to accommodate a preconceived sense of a phrase or idiom. Aster then finds ancient near eastern analogues for titles that etymologically recall shepherding but refer to military officers for example ^{lú}GAL NA.GAD ("Chief Shepherd") from second millennium Anatolia or ^{lú}GAL SIPA.MEŠ (Chief of Shepherds") from first millennium Assyria. I do not dispute Aster's reasoning; but in this brief paper dedicated to a dear friend, Yehoshua Gitay, I wish to add one more title for consideration, that of *merḥûm*, as it explains Doeg's status better and prompts some new suggestions on his role in the Saul narratives.

Doeg the Edomite

Here is what is said in the HB about Doeg, with a few comments on each attribute:

1. *His name was "Doeg."* Doeg's name, given as דאג, דואג, or דויג, gives no clue to his background or position. The root דאג, available in Hebrew (so plausible also in Edom) has to do with anxiety, and may have been given to children by parents under some

1. *JBL* 122(2003): 353-361.

stress, such as in carrying a baby to term. If the root is דוג, we would be dealing with a "fisherman" or the like, whether the meaning is actual or metaphoric. The Talmud has much lore on Doeg, over the centuries turning him into a wise person gone wrong.[2] *BSanh* 106b gives the following fanciful etymology, "God sits and is anxious (דואג) lest people go wrong. Once a person does so, God says, 'Woe (דויג) that he followed evil ways.'"

2. *He was an Edomite*, אדמי (1 Sam 21:8, 22:9, 18, 22, Ps 52:2). The Greek often uses "Syrian" to translate "Edomite," occasionally also "Idumean." This has encouraged scholars to regard him as an Aramean, without adequately explaining what is at stake when so emended.[3] We should not be concerned with the seeming anomaly of an Edomite working for a king who had recently defeated his nation (1 Sam 14:47) because, as we will shortly notice, foreign officers that were drawn from enemy nations, were well represented at all times during the Monarchic period.
3. *He was one of Saul's functionaries*, איש מעבדי שאול (1 Sam 21:8); *Supervisor's of Saul's functionaries*, הוא נצב על־עבדי־שאול (1 Sam 22:9). The versions have interesting readings here (LXX, ὁ καθεστηκὼς ἐπὶ τὰς ἡμιόνους "in charge of the mules"), fostering the kind of emendations nicely documented by Aster. TNK translates the last phrase of the Hebrew blandly ("who was standing among the courtiers of Saul"), so effectively removing it as a clue to Doeg's stature. Indeed, there are plenty of occasions in which this idiom carry this meaning, but mostly when the object is the person in question, for example in Gen 18:2 (Abraham sees three angels standing by him, נצבים עליו). But the idiom in question conveys something more precise when a group is the object, for example in Ruth 2:6 (a servant manages Boaz's reapers) or in 1 Sam 19:20 (Samuel supervises other prophets). Doeg, then, was likely an "overseer of Saul's servants," so a majordomo of a sort. One hesitates to notice that Psalm 52, allegedly inspired by Doeg's denunciation of David, seems to call Doeg a גבור, "warrior."
4. *He was "held back before the Lord"* נעצר לפני יהוה (1 Sam 21:8). This clause is difficult to decipher, however parsed philologically. While all commentators acknowledge that the story plotline required Doeg to be at Nob, where a massacre was to occur, they have nevertheless offered explanations for this phrase, unfortunately none decisive or compelling. The idiom is unique to this verse, with the niphal of the verb construed with a preposition, so it has encouraged speculation: Doeg was there to fulfil a vow; he was practising ascesis; he was there to receive an oracle. (See the commentaries.) The last is made more probable in 1 Sam 22: 9-10 in which Doeg declares that he witnessed David receiving an oracle from God. (Doeg, of course, may be giving false testimony; but either one of the two other accusations – that David got food as well as a consecrated weapon – would have been enough to inflame Saul.[4]) A clue on the use of the idiom

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2. Kalmin, Richard "Doeg the Edomite: From Biblical Villain to Rabbinic Sage," pp. 390-405 in Evans, Craig A (ed.), *The Interpretation of Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity Studies in Language and Tradition* (Studies in Scripture in Early Judaism in Christianity, 7; Journal for The Study of the Pseudepigrapha. Supplement Series, 33; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).
3. Ben Zion Luria argues that anyone who comes before YHWH must be a Hebrew ("Methodological Notes on Biblical Studies," Beit Mikra 24 [1979]: 426 – 36).
4. The incident at Nob and Doeg's role in it, have elicited differing interpretation, as do the best of Hebrew narratives. Interesting is Samuel A Meier's take ("The Heading of Psalm 52," *Hebrew Annual Review* 14[1994]: 143-158), in which David is culpable in misleading the priests, with the unfortunate results. In this opinion, he proves to be a harbinger of spate of recent books (by Halpern, Baruch and McKenzie, Steve) in which David is a trickster, for good, but mostly for evil. Somewhat similar is Pamela T Reis's analysis in which David and Ahimelech, priest of Nob, are in collusion to deceive Doeg (and Saul), also with bad results:

comes earlier on in the same incident, where the verb occurs in the passive rather than in the niphal. When a famished David is told that the only bread available is consecrated and cannot be shared with sexually compromised men, David replies, כי אם־אשה עצרה־לנו כתמול שלשם בצאתי, "women were indeed kept from us, as always, when I go (on a mission)" (1 Sam 21:5-6). Here too there is a ritual implication.

5. *He was the "mightiest of Saul's herdsmen"* אביר הרעים אשר לשאול (1 Sam 21:8), with the Greek going its own way, νέμων τὰς ἡμιόνους Σαουλ "tending Saul's mules." This is the Hebrew phrase for which I am proposing a new understanding.

The *merḥûm* at Mari[5]

In the Mari archives a number of highly placed officials were called *merḥûms*, the evidence about them stemming mostly from the reign of King Zimri-Lim, albeit they were known sporadically from previous reigns. Around 1775 BCE, Zimri-Lim recaptured the throne his father Yahdun-Lim lost some 20 years earlier. In doing so, he had help from diverse quarters, among them an Amorite tribe to which he belonged, the Sim'alites (lit. "sons of the left," so, when facing East, "Northerners"). As is reflected by his official title, "King of Mari and of the Nomad Territory (lugal Mari *u māt Hana*)," Zimri-Lim ruled settled towns as well as tribal elements, his two orbits of power.[6] After subjecting inherited bureaucrats and diviners to powerful oaths, he relied on them to run his palaces in fortified town. In each of the four districts under his immediate control, a *šāpitum* – as with Israel's שפט, a governor rather than a judge – became the king's top representative, often assisted by an *abu bītim*, "majordomo" and a *ša sikkatim*, "land agent."[7] Such appointed people – and they include many others, such as messengers (*mār šiprim*), royal agents (*suqāqum*), delegates to vassals (*hazannum*), plenipotentiaries (*rākib imērim*[8]) – , owe their tenure to their proven administrative capacity. But the king also delegated much responsibility to tribal kinfolk, using a *merhûm* as liaison. Given the number of tribes in the area there were likely to be several operating at any one time; but the most trusted *merḥûms* came from the Sim'alite tribe, to which the king belonged.

"Collusion at Nob: A New Reading of 1 Samuel 21 22," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 61 (1994): 59 73 = *Reading the Lines. A Fresh Look at the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), pp. 131-146).

5. Mari bibliography is hirsute and it is more economical for me to cite whenever applicable texts by recent compendia rather than by original publications. Documents published as *ARM* (*Archives royales de Mari*) 26 and 27 receive English translations (sequentially numbered) in *LKM* (W. Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari A New Translation, with Historical Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* [Mesopotamian Civilizations 12; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003]). Other Mari documents receive fresh translations in *LAPO* (Jean-Mari Durand, *Documents épistolaires du palais de Mari*, 1-3 (Littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient, 16-18; Paris: les Editions du Cerf, 1997-2000.)

6. See Frayne, Douglas R *The Old Babylonian Period (2003-1595)* (The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Early Periods, 4; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pp. 626-627. There is a by-now a famous letter sent by one of the king's officials, ARM 6 76 (LAPO 17 732, pp. 484-488) that is worth quoting (from line 13):

   > I once told my lord the following, "Certainly, the land of Yahdun-Lim [Zimri-Lim's father] has reverted to my lord. Because this land is clothed in Akkadian garb, my lord should pay honor to his majesty. Since you are (firstly) king of the nomads and you are, secondly, king of Akkad (land), my lord ought not ride horses; rather, it is upon a mule-pulled chariot (lit.: chariot and mules) that my lord ought to ride, and in this way he can pay honor to his majesty." This is what I told my lord… .

7. A fine study of this institution is Brigitte Lion's, "Les gouverneurs provinciaux du royaume de Mari à l'époque de Zimri-Lîm," *Amurru* 2(2001): 141-209.

8. Literally, "donkey rider"; this term is applicable to the רכבי עירים/אתנות of Judg 5:10, 10:4 and 12:14.

The title *merḥûm* comes from the West Semitic Amorite world of the Middle Bronze Age and is found exclusively in the Mari archives.[9] *Merḥûm* is an Amorite rather than an Akkadian term, most likely a noun formation based on a 3rd-weak root, *rh+*. In the cuneiform writing system Akkadians inherited from the Sumerians, a number of Semitic phonemes were hidden behind the consonant *h*, and that repertoire increased when Amorite words were written with it. Among these phonemes was *ʻayin*, and so we have *habdu* for *ʼabdu* and *hammu* for *ʼammu*. The word *merḥûm* could be a participial causative of the root that has to do with pasturing *rʻh*, (so "The Pasture Planner" or the like).[10] Or it could be a *mapras(t)* formation that in Akkadian (so maybe not quite so in Amorite) denoted time, place, or instrument.[11] If the latter, the Hebrew equivalent would be *mirʻĕh*, *marʻît*, both dealing with "pasturage," with the last word almost always found in figurative expressions, such as *ṣōʼn marʻîtô*, when speaking of God as shepherding his flock.

If one sticks to etymology, a *merḥûm* would ostensibly be in charge of a *nawûm* – a word that means "flocks" but that also conveys the non-urban space in which these flocks roam; but to do so would be equivalent to insisting that chancellors should bar doors (Late Latin *cancellarius*, via *cancell*, "bars, latticework") or stewards must guard styes (O.E., from *stig* "pen" + weard "guard."). A *merḥûm* undoubtedly controlled flocks, likely the king's, but this was just one of his many functions. There are a great number of allusions to the title *merḥûm* in the Mari documents and we need not be exhaustive about its occurrences to assess its function. Keeping in mind that in Mari, as elsewhere in the ancient world, the latitude granted individuals had more to do with character, personal accomplishment, and kinship to the throne rather than to any strict job profiles, we might not be surprised that chemistry between the appointee and the king no less than the loyalty they displayed to each other were crucial in how much authority an individual *merḥûm* wielded.

From administrative records that allude to them, but above all from the letters they exchanged, we know much about a half a dozen *merḥûms* during Zimri-Lim's reign. None was as influential as Bannum, whose seal says much about his claim to influence, "Baninum [a variant of Bannum] of Mulhan [a town], servant of Yahdun-lim, who reinstated Yahdun-Lim's line."[12] This is unprecedented *chutzpah*, and it explains why Bannum could write bracing, even vituperative, letters to a king he helped enthrone, trying to block the appointment of potential rivals and to resist any attempt to shift his office of *merḥûm* to beyond the heartland.[13] Luckily for Zimri-Lim, Bannum died within a couple of years of the king's ascent and we begin to hear much more about Ibal-pi-El and Ibal-El, two *merḥûms* that roamed diverse segments of the upper Balikh region, and about Meptum, who had had control of the flocks in the southern portion of the kingdom. In reconstructing their story, we quickly note how inadequate would the application of etymology be to defining the tasks they fulfilled. Ibal-El could take care of the *nawûm* and

9. Still serviceable is Jonathan D Safren's study, "*merḥûm* and *merḥûtum* in Mari," *Orientalia* 51 (1982): 1-29.
10. Birot, M *Textes administratifs de la salle 5 du palais* (Archives royales de Mari 9; Paris: Imprimerie Nationale), p. 329 and n. 1.
11. Durand, Jean-Marie *Archives Épistolaires de Mari, I/1* (Archives royales de Mari, 26/1; Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1988), p. 225 (sub 86d); but see *LAPO* 17, p. 471.
12. For this cylinder seal, see Charpin, D and Durand, J-M "La prise du pouvoir par Zimri-Lim," *MARI* 4(1985): 323-324. The reading of the seal remains under discussion.
13. The story is well told in Villard, Pierre "Nomination d'un Scheich," pp. 291-334 in Charpin, D and Durand, J-M *Florilegium marianum, 2. Recueil d'études à la mémoire de Maurice Birot* (Mémoires de N.A.B.U., 3; Paris: SEPOA, 1994).

command troops against a mortal enemy; but he did much more, such as harvesting sensitive information about their movements (*ARM* 26 27 = *LKM*, pp. 191-192), reassuring skittish allies of his king's support (*ARM* 2 33 = *LAPO* 17 383), and representing the king in some very tense negotiations with regional kings.[14] He can even make a theodicy out of reports on the death of Zuzu, king of Apum (*LAPO* 16 333).[15]

Ibal-pi-El is even more accessible to us, because his dossier is larger, but also because he wrote an engaging prose, at once chatty and precise, no doubt because of his secure relationship with the king. He played a major role in the military and diplomatic enterprises that joined Mari and Babylon (*ARM* 2 21 = *LAPO* 16 350, and many other letters in *ARM* 26). Aside from keeping vigil on the king's flocks, he communicated the omens of diviners on the welfare of the kingdom. Sure of the king's ear, Ibal-pi-El could spice his reports with tidbits about officials with whom he felt in competition, plying his king with so much information and opinions that others complained of their inability to get their messages through (*ARM* 27 137 = *LKM*, p. 456). This accusation of abuse of a privileged position, in fact, is sensed in the correspondence of a number of officers, from diviners (*ARM* 26 101 = *LKM*, p. 215), commanders (*ARM* 26 380 = *LKM*, pp. 329-330), and diplomats (*ARM* 26 126 = *LKM*, pp. 223-224). One of the longest letters in the Mari archives (over 200 lines!) is a multi-front assault against Ibal-pi-El's arrogance (*ARM* 27 151 = *LKM*, pp. 461-464).[16]

Doeg, the Foreigner

The above notices about the Mari *merḫûm* should suffice to deliver the lesson that by itself a title does not explain a function, and this brings us back to Doeg.[17] It is true that what we know about Doeg comes from a much-edited narrative with little chance of certified confirmation, so not at all equivalent to our connection with individual Mari *merḫûms*. But if we pursue the notion that these *merḫûms* fulfilled their role because of a special chemistry with a ruler with whom they shared tribal affiliation, we might note that Doeg's Edomite background in fact may be relevant to the special role (however unappetizing) he played in Saul's inner circle. We first note that Doeg is among a very few of Saul's officers to be named: Abner, his army commander, and Ahijah, the oracular priest, being just two others. (We may also add Saul's sons, Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua.) We should not be surprised that an outsider would be singled out for attention because, during the United Monarchy, foreigners played a particular role as guardians of the king, their allegiance bought for money, spoils, and privileges – so consequently less likely to shift with the political wind. The list of David's "warriors" gives prominence to a number of them (2 Sam 23:36-39, see 1 Chr 11:39–41, 44); but they were at his side from his earliest days (2 Sam 26:6), and they could be trusted even to shelter the ark while David tried to decipher God's intentions (2 Sam 9-11). It is striking to notice that when the tribes

14. This document, in which Ibal-Addu finalizes an alliance by sacrificing a donkey-foal when the others wanted to immolate a goat and a puppy dog [a new text substitutes "bull"], (see *ANET3*, 482-483). It has been re-edited with other versions in Charpin, D "Un souverain éphémère en Ida-maraṣ: Išme-Addu d'Ašnakkum," *MARI* 7 (1993): 165-191.

15. This document, reporting three different accounts of an enemy's death, is a must read for all historians; see my study, "On Reading the Diplomatic Letters in the Mari Archives," *Amurru* 2 (*Mari, Ébla et les Hourrites, dix ans de travaux. Deuxième partie. Actes du colloque international, Paris, mai 1993*) 2001: 329-338.

16. See the index of *LKM*, sub Ibal-Pi-El, pp. 540-541.

17. Once we realize this point, we can place in the same category the many claques that are collected in Aster's article cited in the opening paragraph, such as Ugaritic *rb nqdm*, Hittite gal na.gad and gal.sipa (Sumerograms both) and *Assyrian rab rā'î* (lú.gal sipa.meš), each of which has more than its etymology implied.

of Israel abandoned David for Absalom in droves, his small circle of remaining loyalists included Cherethites, Pelethites, and Gittites (2 Sam 15: 13-23).

What is interesting is the extant to which the narratives of this period played on the foreign background of persons close to the king. The exchange between Ittay and David (2 Sam 15: 19-22), in which this Philistine mercenary refused to abandon his king when all of Israel had gone over to Absalom, accentuates the hopelessness of David's plight; but it also brackets the more famous exchange David had with Uriah the Hittite (so a North Syrian, not an Anatolian), in which loyalty to the king brings unhappy (and undeserved) end to a trusting warrior (2 Sam 11). It is true that David's many attempts to get Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba are played for their comic potential and so are made to contrast with the scene's tragic resolution, in which Uriah and the son of the adulterous pair die; but it must also be realized that the story could not have had its received shape had Uriah not been a foreigner, for both David and his lover would have faced grimmer consequences had they cuckolded an Israelite.

So, too, is the case of Doeg. His foreign status, rather than the kinship of a *merḥûm* to his king, explains his special attachment to Saul. It also elucidates why Saul could turn to him when no Israelite would do his bidding. For these reasons, the narrator could create such a character without investing him with either pre-history (Doeg has no past when he arrives on the scene) or afterlife (surprising, given David's relentless pursuit of any of Saul's supporters). As a character in a drama, Doeg was there as a *deus ex machina*, saddled with a chore that Hebrew narrators could not easily assign to an Israelite. When Saul asks him to extirpate Ahimelech and his household, Doeg goes beyond the call of duty: "He put Nob, a town for priests, to the sword: men and women, children and infants, oxen, asses, and sheep -- all to the sword (1 Sam 22:19)." The deed had gone beyond punishment for *lèse-majesté*, and it is in fact the (almost) complete fulfillment of a *ḥerem* imposed years earlier, when a prophet delivered a sentence on Eli's descendents (1 Sam 2:33).[18] From this perspective on Doeg's deed, we may go back to the enigmatic phrase נעצר לִפני יהוה of 1 Sam 21:8. Even if we remain stumped by its precise meaning, the idiom nonetheless permits us to recognize that, whatever were the reasons that brought Doeg to Nob, he was there because he was completing a cosmic assignment. Doeg, the Edomite, had become an instrument of God's vengeance against those who demeaned him.

In Conclusion

The title אביר הרעים occurs nowhere else in Scripture, giving us little opportunity to test our proposal not to define its function etymologically. I am hoping that my friend Yehoshua will not find this pursuit trivial nor judge it an extravagant effort to confer historicity on a biblical anecdote by rooting a unique phrase in an Amorite past. In fact, lacking contemporaneous documents, we can hardly authenticate the lives of major personalities of the early Monarchic period, let alone secondary characters such as Doeg. Rather, I would wish him to join me in concluding that by locating a plausible antecedent for Doeg's seemingly odd title, אביר הרעים, we pay tribute to the archival instinct of biblical traditions as they forge elaborate paradigms for prophecy and fulfillment, guilt and retribution, crime and punishment. As in the best of canvases, the clues are in the details.

18. The final blow occurred when Solomon dismissed Abiathar, the last of Eli's line, 1 Kgs 2:26-27.