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THE HEIGHT OF GOLIATH: A RESPONSE TO CLYDE BILLINGTON

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I. INTRODUCTION

Clyde Billington has suggested an interesting proposal regarding the textual variant problem in 1 Sam 17:4 concerning the height of Goliath. My response is limited to six central aspects: the difficulty of defining a cubit with certainty; the implausibility of the scribal change; the unexplained DSS evidence; Saul's fear and the narrative context; Goliath's armor and weapons; and the relevance of the data regarding giants.

II. THE DIFFICULTY OF DEFINING A CUBIT WITH CERTAINTY

In Bill Cosby's famous dialogue between God and Noah, God declares to Noah that he is going to destroy the world. Noah answers, "Right!" God then tells Noah to build an ark 300 cubits by 50 cubits by 30 cubits. Noah answers, "Right! What's a cubit?" Much of Billington's discussion revolves around trying to answer that question. First of all, Billington states that I "assumed" that the ancient cubit was 18 inches and that I had been misled into this conclusion by "many modern reference works." Actually, I stated that the cubit was "approximately" 18 inches, acknowledging that defining the precise modern equivalent of the biblical cubit with certainty is difficult because of the lack of standardization in the ancient world. I confess to following the "many modern reference" works, for most of the serious discussions regarding the length of the cubit underscore that 18 inches is our best approximate average, but that the precise length represented by the term "cubit" throughout the ancient world varied.[1] Furthermore, I am a bit puzzled by Billington's discussion. He cites the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (1976) several times to support his view (he cites the author as Tenney; however, my former professor F. B. Huey actually wrote the article; Tenney is the editor). In this article, regarding the cubit, F. B. Huey comes to nearly the same conclusion that I did, stating, "The length usually varies from seventeen to eighteen inches."[2]

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[1] See, for example, Marvin Powell, "Weights and Measurements," *ABD* 6.898–99. Powell states that English translations to modern equivalents of length are never more accurate than +/– 5% and probably +/– 10%.

[2] F. B. Huey, "Weights and Measures," *ZPEB* 5.914.

Central to Billington's thesis is the argument that Jewish scribes in Egypt translating the Septuagint changed Goliath's height from four cubits and a span to six cubits and a span because they were converting the biblical common cubit to the Egyptian royal cubit. However, there does not appear to be any compelling evidence that Jewish scribes working on literary projects in Ptolemaic Egypt felt compelled to use the Egyptian royal cubit. First of all, the Egyptian royal cubit was not as constant as Billington claims, and his source citation for this argument is misleading. Billington states, "In Egypt the standardized royal cubit remained constant at 20.65 inches *throughout its history*" (emphasis added), and he then cites Huey's article as the source.

However, first of all, Huey *never* says that the Egyptian royal cubit remained constant throughout Egyptian history. What Huey says is, "There were longer and shorter cubits, as in Babylon and Egypt . . . the two Egyptian cubits measured 20.65 and 17.6 inches."[3] Second, for much of Egypt's history, down until the end of the Third Intermediate Period (1069–747 BC), Egyptian artists used the "short" cubit (17.7 inches). In addition, during the Persian occupation of Egypt, the Persian system of weights and measurements was implemented.[4]

Furthermore, following the Persian Empire, in many regions of the ancient Near East that came under Hellenistic rule, the Persian system of weights and measures was retained. It is unclear whether the Ptolemys ruling Egypt retained the Persian system of standardized measurements or whether they returned to the old royal Egyptian cubit as the official measurement. However, throughout these various empires and rulers, outside of official projects and transactions, the common cubit (17″–18″ +/–), imprecise as it was, continued to be used. Thus throughout Egyptian history there does not seem to be the consistency regarding the royal cubit that Billington suggests.

Having miscited Huey's article in support, Billington then states, "The Egyptian common cubit is sometimes given in reference books as 17½ inches, but this is very misleading, since there was no standardized common cubit in ancient Egypt, or for that matter anywhere else." However, it is important to note that the common cubit was nonetheless used in Israel and throughout the ancient Near East, including Egypt, however, even if it was imprecise (by modern standards). Thus as modern interpreters of the text we can best define the common cubit as approximately 18 inches, realizing that in reality it may have been slightly more or less.

Billington does not cite any evidence indicating that scribes in the Ptolemaic period always used the royal cubit in their literary works. The continued presence of the common cubit measurement, both in Egypt and the Hellenistic world, raises doubts concerning Billington's thesis that scribes in Egypt would update measurements in the Hebrew Scriptures to be in compliance with the true length of the Egyptian royal cubit.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, "Measurement," *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* (London: The British Museum, 1995).

On the other hand, it is clear that the writers of the OT were familiar with at least two differing cubit lengths. Reference to two differing cubits is made in 2 Chr 3:3 and in Ezek 40:5; 43:13, but the context for these two differing cubits is probably that of Babylonian measurements and not Egyptian ones.[5] Thus Billington's proposal that the textual variants in 1 Sam 17:4 might be related to differing understandings of the cubit measurement is at least plausible. However, the specificity of his argument—that is, that the Jewish translators of the Septuagint converted measurements to the Egyptian royal cubit—is unlikely, and as discussed below, contains several problems.

III. THE IMPLAUSIBILITY OF THE SCRIBAL CHANGE

As mentioned above, Billington's central thesis is that Jewish scribes working in Egypt on the Greek translation of the OT (what was to become the Septuagint) changed the height of Goliath from six cubits and a span to four cubits and a span in order to convert from the common cubit to the Egyptian royal cubit. This is highly improbable, for several reasons:

(1) Billington stresses a "royal" connection for the production of the Septuagint. He states this twice, writing, "The key feature to keep in mind is that the LXX was a translation made in Alexandria, Egypt, and according to tradition, it was made for the pharaoh" and again, "According to Jewish tradition, the LXX translation was made at the request of Pharaoh Ptolemy II of Egypt (285–247 BC)." He strongly implies that the "Jewish tradition" is correct, forming one of the reasons that the scribes making the translation would use the royal cubit.

However, the tradition concerning Ptolemy II is based on the *Letter of Aristeas*. Few scholars accept this letter as an authentic account of how the Septuagint was formed.[6] Jellicoe notes that there is a fairly wide consensus that "the translation was an official undertaking, initiated by Jewish rather than Egyptian authority, though it might have been undertaken with the good will, and conceivably the good offices, of Philadelphus [Ptolemy II]."[7] Also note that while the translation of the Pentateuch may have begun in the time of Ptolemy II, there is a strong probability that Samuel-Kings was translated later.

Billington himself notes this, writing, "it is probable that most of the rest of the LXX Old Testament was translated later." But then he apparently assumes that even though completed later, the rest of the translation was

[5] Powell, "Weights and Measurements" 900.

[6] Rejecting the authenticity of the description in the *Letter of Aristeas* is Martin Hengel, *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002) 25. Also rejecting the authenticity of the *Letter of Aristeas*, but noting that some aspects of the tradition described in this letter might be helpful historically, are Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 34.

[7] Sidney Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993) 55.

also done for the pharaoh and thus needed to use Egyptian royal measurements. However, it would probably be safe to say that the consensus view of serious Septuagint scholars is that Samuel-Kings was definitely not translated for any Egyptian pharaoh or at the instigation of any pharaoh. In all likelihood (and this is the near consensus view of scholarship) the Septuagint was a Jewish project undertaken by Jewish scribes for a Greek-speaking Jewish constituency.

(2) There is no evidence that a Jewish scribe in Alexandria, translating from Hebrew to Greek for a Greek-speaking Jewish audience, would have been concerned in the slightest about revising references to cubits in order to conform to the Egyptian royal cubit.

(3) If the Jewish translators of the Samuel-Kings portion of the Septuagint did change the numbers in 1 Sam 17:4 to conform to the Egyptian royal cubit, one would expect to find numerous other changes regarding cubit lengths as well. Specifically, one would expect to see a consistent scaling down of the cubit measurements throughout Samuel-Kings. However, this is not the case. The Hebrew word for cubit (*'ammah*) occurs 49 times in Samuel-Kings. In all but a few cases, the Septuagint reflects the exact same number that the MT has.

For example, in 1 Kgs 6:23 the height of the cherubim in the MT is 10 cubits, and the Septuagint likewise has 10 cubits. When there are variants, the changes are inconsistent and they go in both directions. In 1 Kgs 6:2 the MT gives the dimensions of Solomon's temple as 60 cubits long by 20 cubits wide by 30 cubits high. The Septuagint cites the dimensions as 40 cubits long by 20 cubits wide by 25 cubits high, thus scaling down two dimensions but maintaining the third. Also, for this particular variant, Codex Alexandrinus follows the MT. Furthermore, in 1 Kgs 7:27 the MT cites the measurements for the bronze stands in the Temple as 4 cubits long, 4 cubits wide and 3 cubits high. The Septuagint gives the dimensions as 5 cubits long, 4 cubits wide and 6 cubits high.

Thus there does not appear to be any consistent mathematical rationale for these variants. In the vast majority of cases, the Septuagint reflects the same cubit number that the MT does. Thus there does not appear to be any kind of consistent scaling down of dimensions in order to match the Egyptian royal cubit (or any other cubit). When there are variants, the size difference goes in both directions, suggesting that this problem is one that should be approached through standard text-critical approaches.

(4) Billington suggests that the Jewish scribes translating Samuel-Kings may also have been familiar with and influenced by the Egyptian document entitled *The Craft of the Scribes*, which dates to 1250 BC. Unless there is evidence that this document was translated into Greek, this proposed connection is highly unlikely. It is improbable that Jewish scribes in Hellenistic Egypt were familiar with Egyptian hieroglyphic literature from 1000 years earlier.

(5) One of the main underlying weaknesses running throughout Billington's article is that it reflects a very limited and often inaccurate understanding of text criticism and text transmission. For example, consider the statement:

"Incidentally, apparently another LXX translator of 1 Sam 17 opted for 5 cubits, since the Greek Codex Venetus has 5 cubits and a span." Codex Venetus is a Greek Bible, dating to the 8th century AD. It is separated from the production of the Septuagint by approximately 900 years!

Likewise, later he states, "It should also be noted that one of the most important LXX texts, which has the 4-cubits reading is 'Alexandrinus,' and it unquestionably came originally from the city of Alexandria, a city where the educated Greeks would have known and used the royal Egyptian cubit." Like Codex Venetus, Codex Alexandrinus is not the original Septuagint translation, but rather a hand-written copy of the Greek Bible produced in the 5th century AD, 600 years after the Septuagint was translated.

IV. THE UNEXPLAINED DEAD SEA SCROLLS EVIDENCE

The fact remains that the earliest Hebrew text of 1 Sam 17:4 is 4QSam^{a} (part of the DSS), which dates to 50–25 BC. Billington assumes throughout his article that the MT reading of six cubits and a span was the original reading. However, the strong external text evidence is otherwise. The earliest Hebrew text reads four cubits and a span.

If the original reading was six cubits and a span, as Billington argues, and if the Septuagint translators converted the number to four cubits to match the Egyptian royal measurement, how did four cubits appear in 4QSam^{a}? Billington offers two weak possibilities: either the Hebrew text was corrected on the basis of the Septuagint, or the scribe who copied 4QSam^{a} was from Alexandria and made the conversion to Egyptian royal cubits. Besides the fact that both of these suggested scenarios are highly unlikely, note that a huge problem remains. If the Hebrew text tradition (as reflected in 4QSam^{a}, our only extant Hebrew text from this era) was changed from six cubits to four cubits, how did the tradition change back to six cubits?

That is, Billington still has a text-critical problem. He has to explain why an early Hebrew text reads four cubits and later Hebrew texts read six cubits. If a Jewish scribe changed the Hebrew text tradition to 4 cubits (as reflected in 4QSam^{a}) in order to conform to the Egyptian royal cubit or to match the Septuagint (as Billington proposes), then did another Jewish scribe later change it back to six cubits (as the MT reads) in order to conform to the common cubit again? This is a pretty far-fetched hypothesis.

The four cubits reading of 4QSam^{a} is a huge problem for Billington's thesis. His innovative solutions to this problem are contrary to mainstream scholarship from the fields of OT text criticism and the study of the DSS.

V. SAUL'S FEAR AND THE NARRATIVE CONTEXT

One of my arguments comes from the narrative context. I argue that the larger literary unit is about David and Saul. The Goliath episode is but a foil to further illustrate the superior character and heart of David in contrast to Saul. Since 1 Sam 9:2 states that Saul was a head taller than anyone else in Israel, I argued that he and Goliath would have been close to the same size

(if Goliath is approx. 6′9″ feet tall), underscoring that Saul was the only logical candidate to fight Goliath. Billington apparently missed the point. He states that shrinking Goliath down to the same approximate size as Saul would "make Saul into a world-class coward." That is precisely the point of the narrative story.

Billington then counters with an inaccurate statement: "However, 1 Samuel 17 clearly considers Goliath as much taller than Saul." *Never does the text say this*! In fact, as I point out, when David tells Saul that he will go and fight Goliath, Saul's answer is: "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy and he has been a fighting man from his youth" (1 Sam 17:33). Saul points to Goliath's training, not his height, as the most dangerous feature of the Philistine champion. Goliath is still a very large and tall man—at least a foot taller than most of the Israelite soldiers, but so is Saul. Goliath is well armed and well armored (this is the stress of 1 Sam 17:4–7), but Saul also has armor and armaments (1 Sam 17:38–39). What frightens Saul is the superior training of Goliath, not his height.

VI. GOLIATH'S ARMOR AND WEAPONS

The issue regarding the weight of Goliath's armor and weapons is a minor issue. I discussed it merely because some scholars point to this weight as evidence that Goliath was indeed a giant over nine feet tall. I countered this with two main points. First, the weight of Goliath's armor is no more than that often carried into battle by US Marines. Thus it does not take one with giant-like strength to carry it. Second, it is important to note that *strength is not related to height*. Shane Hammon, America's strongest man, is only 5′9″. So the weight of the armor does nothing to suggest that Goliath had to be a giant. It does suggest that he was a big, strong man, but certainly many big men in the 6′6″ to 6′9″ range could handle this armor (as could Shane Hammon).

Again, Billington seems to miss the point. He misquotes me by stating, "Hays also argues that Goliath, because he was so strong, wore armor thicker than other soldiers, and that this explains the great weight of his armor." I did not say anything about the thickness of Goliath's armor. Likewise, I was not arguing that the weight of the armor proved that Goliath was only 6′9″. I was merely pointing out that the weight of the armor definitely does not require a 9′+ giant to carry it.

Regarding Goliath's spear, Billington writes, "Hays, in trying to defuse the issue of the weight of Goliath's armor and spear, makes a historical error in his discussion on Goliath's spear. Based on an article by the famous archaeologist Yigael Yadin, Hays incorrectly assumes that Goliath threw his huge spear in battle. Spears in the ancient world were used for thrusting and only javelins were thrown, as 1 Chr 11:20 clearly shows." I am not clear as to the relevance of 1 Chr 11:20. In that verse Abishai kills three hundred men with a spear. I suppose that implies that he did not throw the spear, but used it for thrusting.

On the other hand, certainly if one is confronted with 300 opponents, he will not hurl his only weapon at them, even if it happened to be a javelin. Samson kills 1000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey; that hardly defines the total range of usage for donkey jawbones. It does not mean that Samson could not have thrown the jawbone at the last Philistine standing.

Much more relevant to the point, and in the immediate context of Goliath, are 1 Sam 18:11 and 20:33. In these verses Saul *hurls his spear* at David. The Hebrew word for "spear" used here is the same as that used of Goliath's weapon in 1 Sam 17:7. The verb translated "hurl" is used specifically for throwing weapons like the javelin. Billington is correct in the sense that javelins were normally a longer-range weapon while spears were a shorter-range weapon. And, without doubt, spears were most commonly used for thrusting. But obviously, as Saul's example shows, spears could also be hurled, and they were probably more deadly than javelins at close range because they were heavier and could penetrate armor.

Furthermore, as I note, 1 Sam 17:7 does not state that Goliath's spear was as big as a weaver's beam, but rather that his spear had a shaft "as a weaver's beam." Yadin, not in an article as Billington states, but rather in *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, the classic two-volume work on warfare and weaponry in ancient Israel, states that "as a weaver's beam" in 1 Sam 17:7 is a reference to the loop and cord used for giving extra distance in throwing the weapon. Yadin provides pictures of a real weaver's beam as well as ancient paintings of soldiers from the ancient Near East holding such looped weapons.[8] His evidence is so convincing that, as I point out, the majority of commentators on 1 Samuel follow Yadin.[9]

VII. THE RELEVANCE OF THE DATA RELATING TO GIANTS

Billington provides quite a bit of interesting (and helpful) data regarding literary references to "giants" in and around ancient Palestine. However, note that neither the presence nor the absence of giants in the ancient Near East affects my argument. I do not propose a "four cubits and a span" (approx. 6′9″) Goliath in order to make the story scientifically believable. I do not have any trouble accepting a 9′9″ Goliath, if that is what the original text stated.

My approach and my argumentation is text-critical (as well as literary). If text criticism and exegesis establish that Goliath was abnormally tall, then Billington's data on giants in Palestine have significant relevance. But if text criticism establishes that the original text read "four cubits and a span," as I believe it does, then the discussion on giants is not relevant. The story has nothing to do with giants; rather it deals with two men who stood a foot taller than anyone else, and the young man David who outdoes both of them.

[8] Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963) 10, 354–55.

[9] I cite Klein, Bergen, Youngblood, Baldwin, and McCarter.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Billington has provided some interesting and helpful data relating to the meaning of "cubit" and to the literary evidence of "giants" in Palestine. However, his data does not jell together into a strong, convincing explanation for the textual variant in 1 Sam 17:4. His thesis contains several critical weaknesses and is built upon a less than solid understanding of text criticism and text transmission. There is absolutely no evidence indicating that a Jewish scribe translating Samuel from Hebrew to Greek in Ptolemaic Egypt would have converted cubit dimensions in the Hebrew text to royal Egyptian dimensions in the Greek text. Furthermore, Billington has not provided plausible explanation for why 4QSam^{a} in the DSS reads the same as the Septuagint.

On the other hand, my argument can be summarized as follows:

(1) The earliest extant Hebrew text (4QSam^{a}) dates to the first century BC and reads "four cubits and a span."
(2) The major early Septuagint texts also have this reading.
(3) There is a good, standard text-critical explanation for how the error of "six cubits" was introduced through scribal "wandering eye" type error.
(4) The story never refers to Goliath as a giant.
(5) Nothing in the story, including the weapons and armor, indicate that Goliath is six cubits and a span.
(6) Saul's answer to David does not mention the height of Goliath.
(7) The narrative context of contrasting David to Saul implies that Saul should have been the one to fight Goliath. If Goliath was four cubits and a span while Saul stood a head taller than anyone in Israel, then they were close to the same size. This fits very well with the broad story running through this part of 1 Samuel. Thus, Goliath was probably about the size of an NFL lineman like Flozell Adams of the Dallas Cowboys (or perhaps I should use Michael Strahan of the Giants as my illustration?).