

The *yēlîdê hārāpā*—A Cultic Association of Warriors

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In 2 Sam 21:15-22 (// 1 Chr 20:4-8) we learn of four powerful Philistine warriors who were killed by David's men. The Philistine heroes are said to be among the *yēlîdê hārāpāh*.¹ This phrase has almost universally been understood as a statement of the ancestry of the Philistine heroes: they would be descendants of (*hā*)*rāpāh*, eponymous ancestor of the Rephaim (*rēpā'im*), hence "giants."² This conventional interpretation has been challenged by F. Willeson in a study of the term *yālîd*.³ The latter word occurs 13 times in the Hebrew Bible and, whether it is in the singular or the plural, it is always in the construct state. Only three nouns occur as its *nomen rectum*: *bāyit* (Gen 14:14; 17:12, 13, 23, 27; Lev 22:11; Jer 2:14), *hā'ānāq* (Num 13:22, 28; Josh 15:14) and *hārāpāh* (2 Sam 21:16, 18; *hārēpā'im* in 1 Chr 20:4). Willeson questions the correctness of the dictionaries which assign to *yālîd* the meaning "(house-)born slave" when it is in construct with *bāyit*, but the meaning "son" in the other constructions. He argues that in fact it never refers to genealogical lineage. Rather, the *yālîd* was a person "of slave status and dedicated to the deity who was head of the social unit into which he was admitted by a consecration."⁴

The case against the meaning "sons" in the constructions with *hārāpāh* or *hā'ānāq* is very strong. The regular and very frequent means of expressing ethnic identity in Hebrew consists of *b'nê* followed by the name of the people or its eponymous ancestor (*b'nê yisrā'el*, *b'nê 'ammôn*, etc.). When we find that, before *hārāpāh* and

hā'ānāq and only in these two cases, the word *yēlîdê* is used, we must suspect that it does not mean the same thing as *b'nê*.⁵ Moreover, in both cases the *nomen rectum* is highly questionable as an eponym because of the presence of the definite article, which is not used with proper nouns.⁶ Finally, the preposition in the expression *bîlîdê hārāpāh* (2 Sam 21:16, 18) is not what one would expect if its meaning were analogous to expressions like *mibb'nê yisrā'el*, etc. We must conclude with Willeson that *yēlîdê hārāpāh* does not mean "the children/descendants of Raphah."

Turning to Willeson's claim that the *yālîd* became a member of the group by consecration, we find that his case is based on the apposition of *hānîkā(y)w* and *yēlîdê bêtô* in Gen 14:14, as well as on the conjecture that the ceremony of ear-piercing performed upon a slave who had forfeited the right of manumission (Exod 21:5-6; Deut 15:16-17) was precisely the "consecration" which made one a *yēlîd bāyit*. Since the ritual took place at the door of the slave owner's house and at the same time in the presence of *hā'ēlōhîm* (Ex 21:6), Willeson supposes that the procedure established a bond with the "house-god." In this sense, the *yēlîd bāyit* was "born" as a "son" of the house, where *bāyit* stands in effect for the household deity. Unfortunately, Willeson's position is highly conjectural at this point. There is no evidence of a connection between the ceremony of Ex 21:5-6; Deut 15:16-17 and the category *yēlîd bāyit*. It still seems better to take the latter as designating a child born of a slave, as is suggested by the contrast of *yēlîd bāyit* and *miqnat kēsep* in Gen 17:12, 13, 23, 27; cf. Lev 22:1.

Since Willeson's argument that the *yēlîd bāyit* was consecrated to the deity identified by the second

¹ The exact phrase is *'āser bîlîdê hārāpāh* in 2 Sam 21:16, 18; *mîlîdê hārēpā'im* in 1 Chr 20:4; *yullad l'hārāpāh* in 2 Sam 21:20; *yull'dū l'hārāpāh* in 2 Sam 21:22; *nôlad l'hārāpā'* in 1 Chr 20:6; *nûll'dū l'hārāpā'* in 1 Chr 20:8. We presume that the phrases with a passive verb are equivalent in meaning to the nominal construction. The significance of the variation between *rph* and *rp'* is discussed below.

² Experiencing difficulty with the presence of the article, Driver (1913) 353, read *hārāpāh* as a collective designation for the Rephaim, but this does not significantly alter the sense of the phrase.

³ Willeson (1958b) 192-210.

⁴ Willeson (1958b) 210.

⁵ The distinction had apparently been lost sight of by the time of the final editing of the Pentateuch since *b'nê 'ānāq* occurs in Num 13:33 next to *yēlîdê hā'ānāq* in Num 13:22, 28.

⁶ GK §125c. The position of J. M. Myers (1965) 141, is puzzling. He says in his commentary on 1 Chr 20, "These giants were said to be descendants of Rapha, the eponymous ancestor of the Rephaim. The use of the article with Rapha, 'the giants,' in vss. 6, 8 points up this fact."

term of the construct chain is not conclusive, then *a fortiori* his extension of this interpretation to the phrase *yēlidē hārāpāh* is without support. Nevertheless, if *yālid* does not mean “son, descendant,” in that expression, it has to mean something and Willesen’s thesis suggests a reasonable working hypothesis. Our working hypothesis, based on Willesen but with minor alterations, involves the following assumptions: (1) *yēlidē hārāpāh* designates a group to which the Philistine heroes belonged (hence the preposition *bē* in 2 Sam 21:16, 18); (2) since the statements about these heroes intend to point out their extraordinary prowess in battle, it is natural to assume that this is a military group (similarly, *yēlidē hāʾānāq* in Num 13:22, 28); (3) the term *yālid* does not designate a physical descendant, but one who is born into the group by adoption, initiation or consecration;⁷ (4) the second element in the phrase might then be the name of the group, or its emblem, or the name of the group’s patron, whether human or divine.

As to the specific identification of *hārāpāh*, Willesen argues that the initial *he* is not the definite article but is part of the root. This receives support from the occurrence of *hārāpāh* in 2 Sam 21:20, 22 where the *he* would normally be lost by syncope if it were the article (GK §35n). Furthermore, Willesen finds a play on words involving the verb *hrp* (2 Sam 21:21; cf. 1 Sam 17:10, 25, 26, 36, 45) and *hārāpāh*, confirming that in the latter, *he* is part of the root. The incomplete etymological correspondence between *hrp* and *hrph* suggests to him that the latter is a foreign word. In view of the Aegean origins of the Philistines, he looks to Greek and finds *harpē*, “sickle, scimitar,” as a suitable equivalent. The scimitar would have been the sacred emblem of the *yēlidē hārāpāh*, “the corps of the scimitar.”⁸ It is doubtful, however, that the punning found by Willesen is in fact present in the passage and the *he* in *hārāpāh* need not be part of the root. In any case, though a Greek loan-word is not impossible, few Semitists are likely to be comfortable with *harpē* as the source of *hārāpāh*.

As an alternative to Willesen’s suggestion, we would like to make a proposal which is still in keeping with the working hypothesis enunciated

⁷ The same meaning is quite feasible for *yullad hārāpāh* and variants. Willesen (1958b) 200-201, seems to go beyond the evidence in claiming that some such specialized meaning attached to the *pual* (or *qal* perfect) in contrast to the *nifal*. Nevertheless the nuance of adoption for *yullad* seems to be found in Ruth 4:17 and probably also in Is 9:5 (cf. Ps 2:7).

⁸ Willesen (1958a) 327-35.

above, but which is based on Semitic etymology and which places the *yēlidē hārāpāh* in the context of phenomena which are documented for the Syro-Palestinian area. This new proposal is based upon a recent reinterpretation of the Ugaritic data concerning *rpʾ* and *rpʾm*.⁹ The main points of this reinterpretation as it bears upon our present inquiry are as follows: (1) the term *rpʾ* was a divine epithet with a general meaning appropriate to a number of different gods;¹⁰ (2) it was applied to the god El as the *rpʾ* par excellence, or in the plural to all the gods in El’s entourage (compare Yahweh as *haqqādōš* and the angels as *haqqe-dōšim*); (3) the god El, specifically under the epithet *rpʾ* was patron of an elite group having both aristocratic and military features; (4) this patron-relationship led to expressions such as *mt rpʾ*, “the man of *rpʾ*,” an epithet of Dnʾl, as well as *rpʾ arš*, “the earthly *rpʾm*,” an aristocratic warrior group to which King Keret belonged.¹¹

If this interpretation of the Ugaritic material is correct, it provides a plausible basis for understanding *yēlidē hārāpāh*. According to Willesen, the second element of the phrase should be “the symbol of the deity or the deity proper to whom the body was dedicated.”¹² Ugaritic *rpʾ* provides a logical candidate for this position.¹³ Not only does it fit from the philological point of view,¹⁴ but it is perfectly suited to the context since at Ugarit *rpʾ* already occurs as patron of elite warriors. In fact, the parallel between Ugaritic *mt rpʾ* and Hebrew *yēlidē hārāpāh* is precise in every respect except for the difference in grammatical number. We urge, therefore, that the *yēlidē hārāpāh*, “the votaries of Rapha,”¹⁵ were fighting men initiated

⁹ L’Heureux (1974) 265-74.

¹⁰ We understand this word, vocalized *rapiʾu* as a stative formation meaning “one who is in a healthy condition.” Possible translation values would be “hale, hearty, robust, vigorous, lusty, etc.”

¹¹ For details see L’Heureux (1974). The *rpʾ arš* are understood as an “elite warrior guild” by Margulis (1970) 292-304, esp. 301.

¹² Willesen (1958b) 209.

¹³ Other students of the Ugaritic material have also made a connection between Ugaritic *rpʾ* and *hārāpāh* of 2 Sam 21. The views of Margulis (1970) 299-302, are similar in important respects to those reached independently by the author. Margulis, however, persists in understanding *yēlidē* as referring to genealogical descent. Parker (1972) 103, n. 50, wonders if *hārāpāh* might be a historicization of Ugaritic *rpʾ* but prefers to view the former as “an eponymous hero from the (here) ethnic title, Rephaim.”

¹⁴ The article is expected when an appellative is used to refer to a specific individual as in *haqqādōš* for Yahweh. See GK § 126e. For final *ʾalef* rather than *he*, see below.

¹⁵ This translation is suggested with considerable reservation.

into an elite group whose patron was (*h*)*rp'*. This institution would have been borrowed from the Canaanites, though the sociological structure of the group need not have been exactly the same among the Philistines as it was at Ugarit.¹⁶ Furthermore, we have no way of knowing if *hārāpā'* continued to be associated with El.

As will be obvious, our position presumes that the text of 1 Chr 20 is correct in preserving 'alef instead of *he* as the last letter in *hārāpā'*. The documentation of final *he* in 2 Sam 21 therefore needs to be accounted for. This can be done in one of a number of ways. There is always the possibility of simple confusion between roots with final *he* and those with final 'alef as occurs elsewhere in biblical Hebrew.¹⁷ Another possibility is that the change from *hārāpā'* to *hārāpāh* constitutes a conscious play on words. The definite article plus substantive would have been reinterpreted as the perfect of the verb *rāpāh* preceded by the article in its function as "relative pronoun" (GK §138i). The mighty warriors of the Philistines would thus be connected

"Votaries" is not as close as we would like to the basic meaning connected with the root *yld*. "Rapha" obscures the fact that the Hebrew has an appellation preceded by the definite article but it may perhaps receive wider acceptance than our actual preference, "the Hale One," or "the Vigorous One."

¹⁶ It was precisely at Gath, the cultic center of the *y^elîdê hārāpā'* (2 Sam 21:20,22), that David is said to have acted like a madman, playing the tambourine (thus LXX) and letting his spittle run down his beard (1 Sam 21:13-15). One wonders if this might reflect the drunken revel associated with *rp'* and the *rp'm* at Ugarit. In view of David's relationship with the king of Gath (1 Sam 27:1-28:2), perhaps he had been initiated into the *y^elîdê hārāpā'*, although the present shape of the tradition in 1 Sam 21:12-15 attempts to disguise the fact.

¹⁷ Thus Margulis (1970) 300, n. 14. The change could have been encouraged by the knowledge that there was a hypocoristic personal name spelled *rāpāh* (1 Chr 8:37).

with "the one who became weak." The slight alteration required to produce this thoroughly appropriate pun could have taken place whether or not its author was conscious of the original meaning of *y^elîdê hārāpā'*.¹⁸ If something like this has happened, then we might also have an explanation for the anomalous presence of *he* in *hārāpāh* (2 Sam 21:20, 22): since the "article" functioned in a relatively rare capacity, it was not subjected to the usual syncope.

We do not know if the "votaries of Rapha" among the Philistines were themselves called *rpā'im* as they were at Ugarit. It is interesting to note, however, that the Valley of the Rephaim (*emeq rpā'im*) is mentioned only 8 times in the Bible and 5 of those times involve notices that the Philistines were encamped there. Possibly the valley received this name precisely because it was one of the places where Israel fought the *y^elîdê hārāpā'* (though the geographical indications in the reports of 2 Sam 21:15-22 are different). Or, if the valley had the name already, perhaps it was chosen by the Philistines because of its cultic or historical significance for the votaries of Rapha. In any case, the presence of the Philistine army in the Valley of the Rephaim offers a measure of confirmation to our view that the references to the *y^elîdê hārāpā'* are not due to a fanciful attempt to create an eponymous ancestor for the warriors in question.

¹⁸ If the awareness that *hārāpā'* was in effect a pagan divine name was still alive at the time, then the change to *hārāpāh* might be associated with the editorial processes which led to the substitution of *bōšet*, "shame," for Baal in personal names within the books of Samuel, though the text of Chronicles preserves the original names! See Mulder (1968) 113-14. Compare also the change of *b'l zbl*, "Prince Baal," to *b'yal z'hub*, "Lord of the Flies," in 2 Kgs 1:2.

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