

ITTAI THE GITTITE

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The dialogue between King David and Ittai the Gittite is the first of five dialogues reported in the narrative of David's escape from his capital Jerusalem at the time of Absalom's revolt (2 Sam 15:13-16:14). Just before the retreat from the city, David reviewed the troops that remained loyal to him. After the professional troops of the Cherethites and Pelethites marched a contingent of six hundred men from Gath. David urged their leader Ittai to turn back to Jerusalem, "for you are a foreigner, and also an exile from your home. You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander about with us, seeing I go I know not where?" (v. 20). But Ittai remains loyal to the fleeing king and swears to share his fate (v. 21 "As the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever the lord my king shall be, whether for death or for life, there also will your servant be"). His loyalty is in marked contrast to the conduct of Absalom, the king's son, and the people of Judah who rebelled against their lord. It is clear that the author deliberately chose a foreigner so as to emphasize the treachery of the king's son and his followers by contrast with the foreigner's devotion and loyalty (in addition to the commentaries, see Fokkelman 1981: 175-183; Görg 1991; Ehrlich 1996: 36, 122-125).

Ittai is, no doubt, a literary figure devised by the author to play a particular role in the narrative and to convey certain messages about the king and his adversaries. The etymology of his name is unclear, although we may expect a non-Semitic origin (see Delcor 1978: 411-413). What kind of social background did the narrator have in mind in

the portrait of Ittai? He led a contingent of six hundred men “who came after him from Gath” (v. 18b). “After him (*brglw*)”, as the MT stands, can refer only to David; but such interpretation makes little sense, and a reference to Ittai is wanted here. It seems, therefore, that Ittai’s name fell due to haplography, and that he was the original subject of “after him” (see e.g., Smith 1899: 344; Driver 1913: 313).

In biblical historiography a unit of six hundred men stands for a brigade/band (*g^edūd*) (Malamat 1954: 432-433; 1970: 9). There is an unmistakable parallel between David and Ittai. The former was a leader of a band of six hundred men (1 Sam 23:13; 27:2; 30:9) who fled from the king of Israel and sought shelter in the territory of Achish of Gath; the latter was a man of Gath who came with his band to Jerusalem, Israel’s capital.

Ittai’s image as a leader of a band of outlaws is supported by 2 Sam 15:22b: “So Ittai the Gittite passed on, with all his men and all the little ones (*taf*) who were with him”. The combination of a contingent of warriors plus women and children is typical of bands, and is mentioned several times in the stories of David’s wanderings (1 Sam 27:2-3; 30:2-3,18-19; 2 Sam 2:2-3). The migrating Danites are likewise depicted as a brigade of six hundred armed men, as well as children (*taf*), cattle and chattels (Judg 18:11, 16-17, 20). The narrator described the Danites’ behaviour as more brigand-like than a pastoral clan, and their way of life does not differ from that of other bands of outlaws depicted in the Bible (i.e., the bands of Jeptah, David, Gaal, and Sheba) (Na’aman 1986: 278-285, with earlier literature).

The migrating bands are known in the ancient Near Eastern sources by the name ‘Apiru (see Bottéro 1972-75; 1980; Lemche 1992, with earlier literature). People designated as ‘Apiru were uprooted from their original political and social background

and forced to adapt to a new environment. The organization of the fugitives in a band under a prominent leader was one way of adapting to the new circumstances in a foreign land. The predatory nature of such bands resulted from their social status. In the course of time, members of bands married, had children, and their numbers increased. Hence the inclusion of women and children among the members of the band, and the need to find shelter and protection in the framework of more stable social and political entities.

Of all the scholars who discussed the Ittai's social status, Smith (1899: 343) came the closest to the target when he wrote: "He (i.e., Ittai) was ... a soldier of fortune, who had just enlisted in David's service with a band of followers".

Classifying Ittai as a leader of a migrating band at once clarifies his figure as described in 2 Sam 15:18-22. David calls him a "foreigner" addressing him as "exile from your home", thereby defining his social status as an uprooted migrant. He and his band (*g'dūd*) of six hundred men, with their wives and children (*taf*), found shelter in David's court and served as mercenaries. Hence their place besides the professional troops of the Cherethites and the Pelethites in David's review of his troops. The appointment of Ittai to command over third of the troops that fought against Absalom, along with Joab and Abishai (2 Sam 18:2), was the king's reward for his loyalty.

As noted above, the figure of Ittai is literary and was created in order to convey messages about the care of the king for those who served him, and about the devotion of the foreigner in contrast to the treachery of the king's son and his followers (Fokkelman 1981: 179-183). Ittai, the leader of a band of outlaws, is in a situation similar to that of David in his youth, and this accounts for the sympathy that David must have felt for him (as noted correctly by Fokkelman). Moreover, on leaving Jerusalem, David was embarking on a second exile, and he would naturally feel close to another person who

had left his homeland. In creating the secondary figure of Ittai, the author of the story deliberately devised a one that shares common elements with the main hero, David, thereby making the substance of his narrative richer.

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