

Hebrew Word Study Number Three: *Na'ar* in Military Contexts

by

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INTRODUCTION

“A lad, youth.”¹ “Boy, youth, servant.”² These are ways the Hebrew *na'ar* is often translated. The focus is on the young age; if it is seen at all, the idea of “servant” is an afterthought even though “servant” is a very common translation of the word. While tying the word to “child, children,” *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* concedes regarding Samuel, “the particular word is no guide to his age.”³ This study shall show that while *na'ar* may be used for one who is a child, the idea of servitude even beyond youth should not be overlooked,⁴ for this word is often used of servants in military contexts.

MACDONALD'S RECOGNITION

Recognizing that the above definitions were generally representative of how *na'ar* is defined, John MacDonald wrote that “these renderings are inadequate and produce a totally false impression of the person involved.”⁵ Conceding that the word “frequently” represented “a person, probably more often than not a young person [though he may be, as Joseph, thirty years old⁶], in domestic service”⁷ who “was of high birth” and was serving one “highly placed in society,”⁸ MacDonald considered many examples of non-military servants given this title. These were not children, but were ones “whose advice or suggestion was acceptable to kings and other

¹ Pick, Aaron. *Dictionary of Old Testament Words for English Readers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1977. 225.

² Van Pelt, Miles V. and Gary D. Pratico. *The Vocabulary Guide to Biblical Hebrew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003. 11.

³ Harrison, Everett F., ed. *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978. 114.

⁴ Davidson (Davidson, Benjamin. *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*. Lynn, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1981. 555) and Wilson (Wilson, William. *Old Testament Word Studies*. McLean, VA: Mac Donald Publishing Co., nd. 531) put the “servant” meaning of *na'ar* in low positions as fourth and fifth definitions, respectively.

⁵ MacDonald, John. “The Status and Role of the Na'ar in Israelite Society.” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 35:3 (1976): 147.

⁶ MacDonald, 157.

⁷ MacDonald, 148.

⁸ MacDonald, 149.

great personages” and who “existed as one of a hierarchy ... and may have belonged in some cases to a professional guild perhaps including itinerant priests” and who “could hold property, be wealthy, receive gifts from famous personas or, in certain cases, be salaried.”⁹ All of that is impressive, but all of that was only prelude to this statement: “But his best-known role in Israelite society was that of élite military officer.”¹⁰

EXAMPLES PROVING THE CASE

Among the examples MacDonald used of such military *ne'arim* was Joseph “servant to the captain of the guard” (Gen. 41:12), “a member of the élite part of the Egyptian army.”¹¹ Also there was Zadok, one of David’s mighty men who was described as “a young man [*na'ar*] mighty of valour.” This word also describes the two spies sent by Joshua into Jericho (Jos. 6:23); incidentally, they had been called “men” in Joshua 2:1-3. Phurah, would would give courage to Gideon (Judg. 7:10,11) was a *na'ar* as well. Another *na'ar* was able to give Gideon important details regarding the strength and organization of the men of Succoth (Judg. 8:14). Saul had a *na'ar* with him when he searched for Kish’s donkeys; MacDonald called this a “military escort.”¹²

Not only was Jonathan’s armor-bearer a *na'ar* (1 Sam. 14:1), David was an armor-bearer for Saul (1 Sam. 16:21). This latter point is interesting, for David was also described as a *na'ar* (1 Sam. 17:33) and, more importantly, “a mighty valiant man, and a man of war” (1 Sam. 16:18). MacDonald also had an interesting discussion of the *na'ar* being capable of issuing capital

⁹ MacDonald, 157.

¹⁰ MacDonald, 157.

¹¹ MacDonald, 157.

¹² MacDonald, 159.

punishment, but incapable of killing a king¹³ (the latter being reminiscent of the attitude of David in First Samuel 24:6).

CONCLUSION

MacDonald saw the *na'ar*, then, not as a mere child, but one who “would be expected to accompany his lord or his lord’s son on a variety of missions” and who might “make acceptable suggestions and offer helpful advice” and who potentially could serve as “a military leader”; accordingly, MacDonald suggested a better translation for *na'ar* might be “squire.”¹⁴

¹³ MacDonald, 158, 159.

¹⁴ MacDonald, 169.

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