

SHAMGAR
Judges
Barry Webb

This brief note about Shamgar is marked by the same grotesque, satirical qualities as the Ehud story to which it is attached. Again the enemy is not only defeated, but made to look utterly ridiculous by the single-handed virtuoso performance of a savior who is a most unlikely hero. Again our attention is drawn specifically to the weapon he used.¹ This time it is improvised rather than purpose-made, and marks its bearer even more clearly as a makeshift warrior. Like Ehud, Shamgar is a man who is apparently fitted for one role (someone who drives oxen) but fulfills a quite different one (a savior).² But just as his weapon is much less subtle than Ehud's, so is his method. He overcomes an enemy force of six hundred by a feat of superhuman strength and dexterity, goading them to death like so many oxen that have displeased him (cf. Samson's feat in 15:15).

Shamgar is the son of *Anath*, which is the name of a female Canaanite god. He may have been the son of a woman named after this god, or may himself have been a devotee of the god. Narrative poems on clay tablets from Ras Shamra in Syria, the site of the ancient city of Ugarit, tell about Anath (or Anat) as a goddess of war worshiped by the people who lived there in the centuries immediately before Israel's arrival in Canaan. In Ugarit literature Anath is "female, but not a fertility goddess; she is not male, but she is a warrior."³ Her activities are described in the poems in particularly gruesome and bloodthirsty terms. Bronze arrowheads from early Iron Age Palestine, and inscribed with names of the type, "X, son of Anath," seem to indicate the existence of a warrior class associated with Anath as their patron deity.⁴ Shamgar displays something of the violent character of Anath and her devotees, but his improvised weapon (an ox goad) suggests that he was an amateur rather than a professional, making his feat even more remarkable than it would otherwise be.

The passing reference to the Philistines in 3:3 has prepared the way for their appearance here as active enemies of Israel. For their origins and time of arrival in Canaan see the excursus after 3:1-6. No details are given about them in the present note except how many of them Shamgar clashed with. The number *six hundred* is commonly used of an organized force under a commander,⁵ and if that



¹ The ancient versions do not agree in their rendering of the hapax *malmad*. Some render it "goad," others "plow head" or "plow beam." "Goad" still commends itself to most scholars, See the discussion in A. van Selms, "Judge Shamgar," VT 14, no. 1 (1964): 306. He draws attention to the use of the word in the Mishnah, e.g., Sanhedrin 10.28: "called *malmad* because it teaches [the ox]."

² cf. Saul in 1 Sam. 11:4-8.

³ Mobley, *Empty Men*, pp. 22-23.

⁴ The relevant evidence is given by Mobley in *Empty Men*, pp. 27-30.

⁵ For example, 1 Sam. 13:15; 14:2; 27:2; 2 Sam. 15:18. Cf. Vam Seems, "Judge Shamgar." P. 305, and the six hundred warriors sent by the tribe of Dan to conquer Laish in 18:11.

is the case here, it makes Shamgar's feat all the more remarkable. The Philistines may have been making an exploratory probe into territory they were unfamiliar with, giving Shamgar the advantage of surprise, or even ambush. But such natural factors, even if they contributed to Shamgar's victory, fall far short of being able to explain it, and another order of explanation is in fact implied by the way the note is related to its context. It is connected to the story of Ehud, not only by the *w^e'ah^arāyw* (after him) at the beginning, but also by the *gam-hû* (*he, too*) near the end: he too, saved Israel. The implication is that Shamgar was another deliverer like Ehud, and therefore an agent of Yahweh. And confirmation is supplied in 10:11, which alludes back to this note: "When the . . . Philistines . . . oppressed you . . . didn't I [Yahweh] save you from their hands?" Nevertheless, Shamgar's family and tribal connections are not given as Ehud's were,⁶ and what is given (his name) only adds to the mystery surrounding his person, leaving open the possibility that he was not a worshiper of Yahweh, and perhaps not even Israelite.

Thus, by means of a more extreme example, this note adds to the impression created by the Ehud story itself, that while Yahweh does save Israel from its enemies, his chosen means of doing so may not be easy to predict or explain. This issue will be taken up again in the Deborah-Barak episode that follows, in which "the days of Shamgar ben Anath" are explicitly recalled (5:6).

⁶ Contrast, too, the details regularly given in the other short notices of 10:1-5 and 12:8-15.