I Samuel 17:52 Khirbet Qeiyafa and the United Monarchy

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In the early 1980's a new school of thought in biblical studies developed in Copenhagen, which questioned the historicity of the biblical tradition regarding the 10th century BCE – the time of David and Solomon. According to this new approach, these two kings were not actual historic figures, but mythological ones who did not exist in the real world.

However, in 1993 a 9th Cent. BCE Aramaic inscription was unearthed at Tel Dan in northern Israel, which mentioned King David as the founding father of a dynasty. This was the first historical source outside the bible to mention David, and that caused a revision of the theory. Since it was no longer possible to argue that David never existed, in 1996 it was suggested that he was merely a local tribal leader, and that in his time there was still no real kingdom, no fortified cities, no writing and no regional administration in Judah.

Indeed, in the 1990s there was no clear archaeological data about the kingdom of Judah during the 10th century BCE. However, that situation changed completely in 2007 when new excavations at Khirbet Qeiyafa uncovered a well-planned, fortified city, dated (using the Carbon 14 isotope method) to ca. 1000 BCE, the time of King David.

Khirbet Qeiyafa is a 2.3-hectare (5.7 acre) site surrounded by massive megalithic fortifications, which still stand to a height of 2–3 meters (6.5-10 feet). It is located on the western border of the Kingdom of Judah, opposite Gath, the mighty Philistine center. The city is located on the summit of a hill overlooking the Elah Valley from the north. The large-scale excavations, conducted between 2007 and 2013, revealed a vivid picture of the urban character of the site.

The finds included a casemate city wall (two parallel walls with small intervening rooms to protect against battering rams), two gates (a rarity) each with a gate piazza, dwelling units, drainage systems for rainwater and sewage, cultic artifacts, elongated pillared storage rooms, a stable and a palace. The urban planning of the site includes the casemate wall and a belt of houses abutting the casemates and incorporating them as rooms. This is a typical feature of city planning in Judean cities, as can also be seen at the Judahite cities of Tell en-Nasbeh, Beth-Shemesh, Tell Beth Mirsim, and Beersheba.

The main question regarding Khirbet Qeiyafa is its relation to the biblical texts describing the state-formation processes in Judah, King David’s activities, and the intensive military clashes in the Elah Valley with the Philistine city of Gath, including the battle between David and Goliath. If Khirbet Qeiyafa was a Philistine or Canaanite city or was an outpost belonging to the northern Kingdom of Israel, as some scholars suggest, it cannot be connected with the traditions about King David. If, however, Khirbet Qeiyafa was a Judahite city, it is of crucial importance for understanding David and the beginning of a kingdom in Judah.

The following distinctive components indicate that the site was indeed part of Judah.

1. As explained above, the site was built according to the typical Judahite urban plan, with houses and the casemate wall incorporated into each other, a plan that is not found in any city in the Kingdom of Israel.
2. No pig bones were found in the city, while they are extremely common in Philistine sites.
3. Excavations at the site revealed nearly 700 impressed jar handles, a typical Judahite administrative device. Impressed jar handles are not found in meaningful quantities in the Kingdom of Israel.
4. The site did not yield the figurines that are characteristic of sites in the Kingdom of Israel in this period.
5. Two early alphabetic inscriptions have been found in the site, and two others in Jerusalem and Beth-Shemesh. All three of these sites are in the core area of the Kingdom of Judah.
6. The site’s location in the Elah Valley, on the main road from Philistia to Jerusalem, was of great military importance to the Kingdom of Judah (as described in the Bible) but had no particular importance for any other political entity.

The expedition suggested that the ancient name of Khirbet Qeiyafa was Shaarayim. This city appears in the biblical tradition three times (here, Josh. 15:36, and I Chron. 4:31). In two of these places (here and Joshua) the text locates Shaarayim near the Valley of Elah, and in two of them (here and Chronicles) it is associated with David. The meaning of “Shaarayim” is “two gates.” Khirbet Qeiyafa is located in the Valley of Elah, is dated to the time of David, and has two gates.

Of special importance are the two inscriptions uncovered at the site: a large text written in ink on a pottery sherd, known as the Qeiyafa Ostracon, and an incised pottery jar. The ostracon has five lines with some 70 letters. The text is not clear, but there are a few readable words, including judge (שפט) and king (מלך). The appearance of these two words is interesting, as this is exactly the period of transition from the political organization of tribes with judges to a state ruled by kings. On the jar, the name of a person is inscribed: Ishbaal son of Beda. The father’s name does not appear in the Tanakh and is unknown from ancient inscriptions and historical sources. But the name Ishbaal, which means man of Baal, is known from the biblical text (2 Chr. 8:33) as the name of King Saul’s son who ruled after him for two years. (In 2 Samuel 2:10 and elsewhere his name is Ishboshet. According to most scholars, though, this is because the author of Samuel did not like the component Baal in the name and changed it to Ishboshet, which means “man of shame.”)

The four inscriptions known today from this era – the two from Khirbet Qeiyafa, and one each from Beth Shemesh and Jerusalem – testify that writing existed in Judah in the 10th century BCE. Hence, historical memories could have been documented in writing and transferred from generation to generation.

Another extremely important item discovered at the site was a stone box carved as a miniature building. The beams of the roof are presented in groups of three, and the opening is depicted with three recessed doorframes. These are typical characteristics of royal architecture in the region during the 10th to 6th centuries BCE, known from Syria, Turkey and Cyprus. These exact two architectural elements appear in the description of Solomon’s palace and temple in the book of Kings. Thus, the miniature building indicates that the royal architecture described in Jerusalem in the 10th century BCE was indeed known in Judah at that time.