

The "Naar" in Israelite Society

One of the significant contributions of archeology has been that, through the discovery of ancient documents from Bible lands, we have a better understanding of the original Hebrew and Greek languages of the Old and New Testaments. One scholar, John MacDonald from the University of Glasgow, recently published a study on the Hebrew word *naar*, which appears frequently in the Old Testament, and found that the term is pregnant with meaning hitherto unsuspected.

Naar is translated in our Bibles as "child", "young man", or "servant". In studying the use of this word in the Ugaritic texts,¹ however, MacDonald found that the term was used to designate a male of high birth. The *naar* was in an upper stratum of society, a person associated with a professional guild or class, or a superior military figure.

MacDonald analyzed the use of *naar* in the Bible and concluded that the status of the *naar* in Israelite society could be divided into two main categories: civilian and military. In the non-military realm, the *naar* was one of high birth who could be in charge of household servants, or be a member of a particular professional guild. The term is used without regard to age, but when the *naar* was old enough, he assumed responsible duties. In the royal court, he was a noble whose advice was acceptable to kings. The *naar* was the member of a hierarchy, whether in the royal palace or in the household of wealthy aristocracy. If he was the son of a king or noble, he was himself in the ranks of nobility. The *naar* could hold property, be wealthy, receive gifts from famous persons or, in certain cases, be salaried. But the best known role of the *naar* in Israelite society was that of

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an elite military officer.

In the elite corps of the army, the *naar* was of full warrior status; he could serve as a scout or the armor-bearer of a senior military man. A *naar's* success as a military leader could lead to his elevation in rank and the captaincy of soldiers. A very high-ranking *naar* could have a place at court and eat at the royal table. MacDonald concluded that the best term for the Hebrew military *naar* is "squire", a well-known figure in the military organization of the later middle ages. A squire was a young man of good birth attendant upon a knight, one ranking next to a knight under the feudal system of military service and tenure, or a personal attendant for a sovereign or nobleman. A *naar* in Israelite military service was, according to MacDonald, a member of the aristocracy, a young knight.

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