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Peter Tran

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, ptran001@csbsju.edu

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ABSTRACT:

The story of David and Goliath is a tale of courage, duty, and faith in God. What is taken for granted, however, is that David was actually the one who killed Goliath. Some critical scholars have begun to question the long-standing claim that David defeated Goliath, but a thorough examination will reveal that the story is most likely accurate as written in 1 Samuel 17, which maintains the important theological implications of David as the representative of Israel's faithfulness to the covenant.

Keeping Covenant

The Story and Scholarly Scrutiny of David and Goliath

by Peter Tran

Few biblical narratives capture the imagination of readers as much as David and Goliath. In this story, found in 1 Samuel 17, David, a mere boy, does what no other soldier is willing or able to do: face the giant Goliath in a fight to the death. Having faith in God, David defeats Goliath, which makes him a hero to the Israelites and propels him to eventually be declared king. It is a tale of courage, duty, and faith in God, a tale of Israel being called into covenant relationship with Yahweh.



Their response requires trust in the face of apparently insurmountable odds. The newly anointed David, the fitting representative of Israel, is the symbol who will demonstrate the nation's response to God. Given the significance of this story in helping to shape Israel's identity, scholarly challenges to the accuracy of the story, namely that it was not David who killed Goliath, pose serious theological consequences. This paper will argue that 1 Samuel 17 is most likely historically accurate and that this accuracy is important to the story's message of the necessity of trusting God in all situations.

THE NARRATIVE BACKGROUND

To appreciate the gravity of the circumstances in which Israel is asked to trust in God, an understanding of the narrative background is necessary. To start, the author of 1 Samuel 17 reports on the geography of the event in great detail because it is central to the Israelites' situation. As John Beck notes, "In the fifty-four verses of this story, the reader meets twenty specific geographical references ... [making this] clearly a story of place."¹ Three cities are mentioned in the first four verses of the story alone: Socoh and Azekah in Judah and Gath in Philistia. All three cities lie within the Elah Valley. Gath guarded the western entrance of the valley in Philistia. In Judah, Azekah was in the interior of the valley. The furthest within Judah, Socoh was east of both Gath and Azekah.² Controlling this valley was of the utmost importance for the Israelites. As Beck points out, "Control of these ridges and valleys had both economic and security implications."³ On the economic side, the Elah Valley produced valuable sycamore and terebinth trees for lumber and caulk, respectively. The valley also offered rich soil and rainfall, allowing for strong grain fields and maintaining livestock. Since the Israelites mostly lived on mountains and cliffs, to lose this valley would have been devastating. More important than the growing conditions were the security implications of controlling the Elah Valley. Judah's mountains granted protection from a more organized and well-equipped Philistine army. The Elah

1 John A Beck, "David and Goliath, a Story of Place: The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of 1 Samuel 17," *Westminster Theological Journal* 68, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 321-22.

2 Beck, "Story of Place," 324.

3 Beck, "Story of Place," 325.

Valley, however, was “the weak link in the Judeans’ chain of defense, offering invaders attack routes leading to the interior of the hill country.”⁴ For the safety and security of their whole people, control of the valley was imperative for the Israelites. As described in 2 Chronicles 11:5 and Jeremiah 34:7, the Elah Valley was a buffer zone lying between the heart of Judah and the heart of Philistia with a fort in Gath for the Philistines and forts in Socoh and Azekah for the Judeans. Losing the valley meant the potential fall of much of Judah if not Israel itself. Due to these economic and security implications, it is easy to understand why the Elah Valley frequently became the battleground for wars fought throughout Israel’s history.

In the battle between Israel and Philistia, the author of 1 Samuel 17 places the Philistine camp in Ephes Dammim, between Socoh and Azekah. Saul and his forces are backed up into the eastern part of the Elah Valley near Socoh. As verse three points out, “The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites the other, with the valley between them.”⁵ The author is making a point that the Philistines are in a place they are not supposed to be. They penetrated the Elah Valley and are encamped between two Judean cities. The valley is “not only threatened but occupied by the enemy.”⁶ The tension is felt. The Philistines are poised to attack. Israel is on the verge of collapse. To make things worse, the Philistines brought their great champion, Goliath of Gath.

Biblical sources differ in their accounts of Goliath’s size. Although 1 Samuel 17:4 from the Leningrad codex and the Hebrew Masoretic text describe Goliath’s height as “six cubits and a span” (around nine feet six inches tall), the more ancient Qumran scrolls along with the more widespread Septuagint texts tells of Goliath being “four cubits and a span” (around six feet six inches tall).⁷ Given the average Israelite’s height was slightly less than five and a half feet (Young David was probably closer to five feet.), Goliath would have “[retained] his gigantic

4 Beck, “Story of Place,” 326.

5 All biblical references are to the New International Version.

6 Beck, “Story of Place,” 327.

7 Michael S Heiser, “Clash of the Manuscripts: Goliath & the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament,” *Bible Study Magazine* 1, issue 4 (May/June 2009): 33.

significance”⁸ regardless of which account of Goliath’s height is followed. His armor weighed five thousand bronze shekels (almost 125 pounds); the tip of his spear weighed six hundred iron shekels (almost fifteen pounds); and his possible son, mentioned in 2 Samuel 21:20-21, “had on every hand six fingers, and on every foot six toes.” According to Madadh Richey, it is clear to the author of 1 Samuel 17 that Goliath was a monster.⁹ Israel was in a lot of trouble.

It was the king’s job to protect Israel from their enemies, and the Israelite people clearly wanted their king to go out before them and fight this monster, as shown in 1 Samuel 8:20. Despite his people’s wishes, King Saul remained suspiciously quiet. The author seems to suggest that it is Saul’s responsibility to fight Goliath. All the makings of a true heavyweight battle were in place. In 1 Samuel 9:2, Saul is described as a full head taller than everyone else in Israel (probably over six feet tall). He was also a great warrior who had led Israel on many successful campaigns. More importantly, however, he was Israel’s king. If ever there was a time for Saul to act, to show his valor and faith, this was it. Yet Saul remained deafeningly, conspicuously silent. No one, not even the king himself, was willing to fight the Philistine champion. Saul would transgress his covenantal call while David would step in and fulfill it.

The relationship between Saul and David is fraught from the moment David makes his first appearance in 1 Samuel 16:12-15 when Samuel anoints David king despite Saul being on the throne. The tension, built up by the author, carries over to 1 Samuel 17, causing the reader to ask the question: Who is really king, Saul or David? With Saul unwilling to fulfill his kingly precept of battling Israel’s enemies, the newly anointed David stepped in on behalf of Israel. Arriving at the front of the Israelite army, David caught a glimpse of Goliath for the first time. As shown in 1 Samuel 17:11 and 17:24, forty days had passed with Goliath blaspheming the name of the living God. Unwilling to bear this, David went to the one whose responsibility it was to fight Goliath, Saul. With approval from the king, David prepared to battle the Philistine champion in Saul’s stead.

8 Madadh Richey, “Goliath Among the Giants: Monster Decapitation and Capital Display in 1 Samuel 17 and Beyond,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 3, no. 45 (2021): 347.

9 Richey, “Monster Decapitation,” 348-56.

The narrative of the battle is actually quite short, consisting of only three verses, 1 Samuel 17:49-51. David reached in his kit, slung a single stone, and struck Goliath's head with the stone so hard that it "sank into" Goliath's forehead. David then grabbed Goliath's own sword and used it to kill the giant. What happens next drips with all the flavor of a human versus monster battle. Like the tales of Gilgamesh vs. Humbaba or Perseus vs. Medusa, David chops off Goliath's head. As Richey points out, "Concentration of personhood in the head is what constructs decapitation as a particularly effective means of contesting and establishing superiority."¹⁰ Having control of a monster's head not only claimed personal ability to conquer but also to be "uniquely dominant over monstrous enemies" on a grander scale.¹¹ In David's case, it signified his ability to conquer Israel's monstrous enemies on all sides, a precept of being king. In 1 Samuel 17:54, David affirms this superiority by taking Goliath's head to Jerusalem to put it on display.

While decapitation is not an uncommon means of execution in scripture, putting decapitated heads on display was quite rare. One of the few cases is found in 2 Kings 10:7-8 when Jehu ordered the decapitation and display of the heads of seventy members of Ahab's household at the city gate. For his political move to work, however, he was forced to pile them in two heaps. Richey notes that "because Jehu is working only with ordinary human-sized heads, his propaganda requires two veritable piles of thirty-five heads each."¹² Not so with Goliath. The Philistine foe is unique, "not because he is politically powerful but on the basis of his ... physical features."¹³ Unlike the decapitated heads of Ahab's entire household, the single, solitary head of Goliath is enough to hammer home the political point. After the death of their champion, 1 Samuel 17:52 tells of the Philistines leaving the Elah Valley in Judah and fleeing back to Gath and Ekron, in Philistia. Displaying Goliath's head in Jerusalem affirmed that, for the time, Israel was safe. Moreover, it cemented David as God's anointed one and Israel's official monster slayer.

10 Richey, "Monster Decapitation," 355.

11 Richey, "Monster Decapitation," 336.

12 Richey, "Monster Decapitation," 344.

13 Richey, "Monster Decapitation," 345.

THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

Goliath's challenge in 1 Samuel 17:9 gives the battle a theological dimension, making it clear that it was not only Israel's physical existence that was threatened, but perhaps more importantly, their covenant with Yahweh. If Israel's champion lost, then the Israelites would become the Philistine's servants *and serve them*. George believes that this extra use of the words "and serve them" had theological implications for Israel.¹⁴ As throughout the Deuteronomistic History, Israel was once again called on to decide whom they will serve, foreign gods or Yahweh. George argues that, "This qualification by Goliath...[implied] that, if the Israelite champion lost to Goliath, Israel will be forced to serve not only the Philistines, but also the Philistine gods."¹⁵

David, representing Israel, affirms the theological dimension of this battle. In Samuel 17:26, he inquires, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God." Not only did this insult Goliath but it also drew "a subtle distinction between Goliath's identity and Israel's"¹⁶ as circumcision was the mark that identified Israel's covenant with Yahweh. In Samuel 17:37, David trusted in the assistance Yahweh gave in the past and accepted the challenge. Goliath shamed the God of Israel. In this name, Yahweh, David would fight. All the earth would know there is a God in Israel. As 1 Samuel 17:46-47 affirms, the battle was Yahweh's. The newly anointed David was "the person who [embodied] Yahweh in the battle"¹⁷ and God's conduit of justice to Goliath and the Philistines.

To better understand the theological dimension of the details of the battle and the beheading, Contra Fokkelman argues that the reader must first be acquainted with what happened in 1 Samuel 5.¹⁸ There, the ark is captured by the Philistines and placed in the temple of Dagon as a sign of Yahweh's subservience to the Philistine god. As told in 1 Samuel 5:3-4,

14 Mark K George, "Constructing Identity in 1 Samuel 17," *Biblical Interpretations* 7, no. 4 (October 1999): 398.

15 George, "Constructing Identity," 398.

16 George, "Constructing Identity," 403.

17 George, "Constructing Identity," 406.

18 George, "Constructing Identity," 406-7.

not once but twice Dagon “falls facedown to the ground before the ark of the Lord.” Similarly, in 1 Samuel 17:49, when David slung the stone that hit and “sank into [Goliath’s] forehead,” Goliath “fell facedown on the ground” before David. Just as in 1 Samuel 5:4, when Dagon, after falling before the ark of the covenant, lost its head, so too does Goliath lose his head when David kills and decapitates him with his own sword. As Yahweh defeated Dagon, so too does Yahweh, through David, defeat Goliath as a sign that “what makes Israel unique among the nations is its relationship to YHWH.”¹⁹

THE SECOND CONFLICT: BIBLICAL SCHOLARS

A growing number of modern interpreters are beginning to question the historicity of the story of David and Goliath, which has significant theological implications, given David’s role representing Israel’s faithfulness to Yahweh. Both ancient and modern biblical interpreters notice several apparent contradictions in the texts. One contradiction is found between 1 Samuel 17, where it distinctly tells of a young David killing Goliath, and 2 Samuel 21:19 where it paints a vastly different picture. Here, one of David’s mighty warriors, Elhanan, performed the deed. The authors of Targum Pseudo-Jonathon²⁰ and of Midrash Rabbah Ruth and Yalkut Shimoni²¹ try to reconcile this discrepancy by seeing Elhanan not as a person’s name but as a descriptive noun for David. Nevertheless, Kaspars Ozolins writes that, “An identification [of Elhanan] with David does not seem to work in context of the four pericopae themselves, which have already repeatedly identified David as distinct from his warriors.”²²

Many modern interpreters including P. Lyle McCarter see a genuine contradiction between 2 Samuel 21:19 and 1 Samuel 17. McCarter writes, “Deeds of obscure heroes tend to attach themselves to famous heroes. There is no doubt that the tradition attributing the slaying of Goliath to Elhanan is older than that which credits the deed to David.”²³ While

19 George, “Constructing Identity,” 401.

20 Kaspars Ozolins, “Killing Goliath? Elhanan the Bethlehemite and the Text of 2 Samuel 21:19,” *Vetus Testamentum*, (December 17, 2021): 3.

21 Steven A Moss, “Who Killed Goliath?,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (Fall 1989): 39.

22 Ozolins, “Killing Goliath?” 4.

23 Ozolins, “Killing Goliath?” 4-5.

McCarter does not go so far as to suspect sinister motives for the apparent contradiction, Rabbi Steven Moss and other interpreters have not been so restrained. Moss writes, “It would seem that [scripture], the rabbinic sources, and commentaries are in a cover-up of Elhanan’s deed.”²⁴ He continues, “As they could not and would not take away the honor of victory over Goliath from David, they worked at reworking the text of 2 Sam. 21:19...to keep David’s slaying of Goliath as part of his image.”²⁵

Are interpreters like McCarter and Moss correct? Did the scriptural authors lie and attach David to a heroic deed performed by Elhanan to make history fit the theology they wanted to teach? Likely, the answer is no. David Wolfers, in his response to Steven Moss, notes several problems with his perspective. Wolfers first illustrates that “if David did not kill Goliath, the appearance of the giant and his family in the Bible is altogether pointless.”²⁶ In other words, the sole reason Goliath is mentioned in the bible at all is *because* David killed him. Wolfers does not deny the purpose of the story was to glorify David, but “without this chapter [1 Sam. 17], no later reference to Goliath in the Bible has any relevance at all.”²⁷ Wolfers next asserts that Elhanan doesn’t come into the story until many years after the killing of Goliath, and thus couldn’t have been the one to kill him. In 2 Samuel 16, David, now king, encounters Ishbi-benob, who is described as “the son of the giant,” that is, Goliath’s son. This encounter must have occurred about twenty-three years after the slaying of Goliath because Saul’s reign was twenty years, and then there were three years of famine. Yet the passage in which Elhanan is said to slay Goliath comes after this encounter in 2 Samuel 21. Wolfers concludes, “There is thus probably a generation intervening between Goliath’s death and that of those described of the sons of the giant.... To accept Elhanan as the slayer of Goliath on the basis of 2 Sam. 21 is to accept that he slew him perhaps twenty years after he was already dead!”²⁸

Paralleling Wolfers, both Kaspars Ozolins and Michael S. Heiser indicate

24 Moss “Who Killed Goliath?,” 39-40.

25 Moss, “Who Killed Goliath?,” 39-40

26 David Wolfers, “Who Killed Goliath? A Response to Steven Moss,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1989 – 1990): 114.

27 Wolfers, “Response to Steven Moss,” 114.

28 Wolfers, “Response to Steven Moss,” 115.

the most likely cause of the contradicting texts has more to do with an error of a scribe who was copying an older text than anything nefarious. While Ozolins and Heiser disagree on what the text originally said in 2 Samuel 21:19, both agree that, at some point in the history of the text, a scribe made a simple error that had big consequences. The sister verse of 2 Samuel 21:19 is found in 1 Chronicles 20:5. Comparing the two, they are almost identical, save two small distinctions. First, they both tell of an “Elhanan the son of Jaare” who “killed” someone. They both also include the name “Goliath the Gittite.” Where they differ is in the Hebrew word אָת found in 2 Samuel 21:19, which “indicates the direct object of a sentence,” and the Hebrew word אָתָּךְ from 1 Chronicles 20:5, which “means brother of.”²⁹ The similarities of these words are abundantly evident. The minute change of omitting the small letter ך (yod) changes the meaning entirely from “brother of” to an accusative case pointing toward the direct object of a sentence.³⁰

Secondly, the two passages differ in the Hebrew words בְּתֵלְמִית in 2 Samuel 21:19 which means “the Bethlehemite,” and לַחִמִּי from 1 Chronicles 20:5, which translates to the name “Lahimi.”³¹ As in the previous example, the similarities are apparent. Intriguingly, where “Bethlehem” means “house of bread,” “Lahimi” means “bread.” The similarities are too stark to be ignored. Heiser argues that “The solution to the contradiction between 2 Sam. 21:19 and 1 Chr. 20:5 is recognizing that 2 Sam. 21:19 is a defective reading.”³² With a similar but slightly different conclusion, Ozolins argues that both texts are defective and the original text of which the authors would have made use would have translated to “Elhanan son of Jaare-oregim, the Bethlehemite, killed the brother of Goliath the Gittite.”³³ Whatever the original text of 2 Samuel 21:19 and 1 Chronicles 20:5 was, Wolfers argues that both would have taken their foundation from 1 Samuel 17 where the story of David killing Goliath is found because 2 Samuel 21:19 and 1 Chronicles 20:5 contain the same direct quote from 1 Samuel 17, which says of Goliath the Gittite, “the

29 Heiser, “Clash of the Manuscripts,” 34.

30 Ozolins, “Killing Goliath?” 10.

31 Heiser, “Clash of the Manuscripts,” 34-35.

32 Heiser, “Clash of the Manuscripts,” 35.

33 Ozolins, “Killing Goliath?” 5-17.

staff of whose spear was like a weaver's beam."³⁴ Scribal copying error — a simple, logical explanation — not only accounts for the differences in the texts but also seems to reconcile the contradictions themselves. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that one or two simple scribal oversights, not some sinister motive, caused the scriptural contradictions.

CONCLUSION

Despite scholarly debate about the historicity of David being Goliath's killer, a critical analysis shows that David, Israel's future king, was truly the one whose actions demonstrated the nation's faithfulness to its covenant with Yahweh. After the exile and return from Babylon, Israel had to give up its former ways of wanting to "be like all the other nations" (1 Samuel 8:20) to respond to the overwhelming challenges it would face. "The community had to construct its identity not simply in military and political terms but in terms of its identity as YHWH's covenant people."³⁵ They needed to move from the fear and despair of Saul to the courage and faith of David. The exposition of David and Goliath demonstrated that Yahweh remained faithful to His covenant when Israel faced overwhelming odds. God had delivered them in the past, and He would do it again in the future. When facing insurmountable odds, the necessity of abiding trust in God is a universal message that resonates in the deepest part of every human soul. It is a story of fortitude and faith. It is a story of our utter dependence on God for the victory of all our battles, great and small. It is a story of the truth written on every human heart: trust in God.



34 Wolfers, "Response to Steven Moss," 114-5.

35 George, "Constructing Identity," 411.

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