

1 Samuel 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] 1 Samuel chapter 17 Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle, and they were gathered at Soco, which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Soco and Ezeiel in Ephes-damim.

And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered, and encamped in the valley of Elah, and drew up in line of battle against the Philistines. And the Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them.

And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze.

And he had bronze armour on his legs, and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron.

And his shield-bearer went before him. He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul?

[1:04] Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us.

And the Philistines said, I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man that we may fight together. When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem and Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul, the man was already old and advanced in years. The three oldest sons of Jesse had followed Saul to the battle, and the names of his three sons who went to the battle were Eliab the firstborn, and next to him Abinadab, and the third Shammah.

David was the youngest. The three eldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at Bethlehem. For forty days the Philistine came forward and took his stand, morning and evening.

And Jesse said to David his son, Take for your brothers an ephah of this parched grain and these ten loaves, and carry them quickly to the camp to your brothers. Also take these ten cheeses to the commander of their thousand.

[2:17] See if your brothers are well, and bring some token from them. Now Saul and they and all the men of Israel were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. And David rose early in the morning and left the sheep with a keeper, and took the provisions and went, as Jesse had commanded him.

And he came to the encampment as the host was going out to the battle line, shouting the war cry. And Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. And David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, and ran to the ranks and went and greeted his brothers.

As he talked with them, behold the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him.

All the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him and were much afraid. And the men of Israel said, Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel.

And the king will enrich the man who kills him with great riches, and will give him his daughter and make his father's house free in Israel. And David said to the men who stood by him, What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel?

[3 : 25] For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God? And the people answered him in the same way, So shall it be done to the man who kills him. Now Eliab, his oldest brother, heard when he spoke to the men.

And Eliab's anger was kindled against David. And he said, Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle.

And David said, What have I done now? Was it not but a word? And he turned away from him toward another, and spoke in the same way. And the people answered him again as before. When the words that David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul, and he sent for him. And David said to Saul, Let no man's heart fail because of him. Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.

And Saul said to David, You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth. But David said to Saul, Your servant used to keep sheep for his father.

[4 : 27] And when there came a lion or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him.

Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God. And David said, The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.

And Saul said to David, Go, and the Lord be with you. Then Saul clothed David with his armour. He put a helmet of bronze on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. And David strapped his sword over his armour.

And he tried in vain to go, for he had not tested them. Then David said to Saul, I cannot go with these, for I have not tested them. So David put them off. Then he took his staff in his hand and chose five smooth stones from the brook and put them in his shepherd's pouch.

His sling was in his hand, and he approached the Philistine. And the Philistine moved forward and came near to David with his shield-bearer in front of him. And when the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was but a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance.

[5 : 41] And the Philistine said to David, Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks? And the Philistine cursed David by his guards. The Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field.

Then David said to the Philistine, You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.

This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves, not with sword and spear.

For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand. When the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, David rang quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine.

And David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone and slung it and struck the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground.

[6 : 52] So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him. There was no sword in the hand of David. Then David ran and stood over the Philistine and took his sword and drew it out of its sheath and killed him and cut off his head with it.

When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled. And the men of Israel and Judah rose with a shout and pursued the Philistines as far as Gath and the gates of Ekron, so that the wounded Philistines fell on the way from Shearim as far as Gath and Ekron.

And the people of Israel came back from chasing the Philistines, and they plundered their camp. And David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem, but he put his armour in his tent.

As soon as Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, Abner, whose son is this youth? And Abner said, As your soul lives, O king, I do not know. And the king said, Inquire whose son the boy is. And as soon as David returned from the striking down of the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul with the head of the Philistine in his hand.

[7 : 57] And Saul said to him, Whose son are you, young man? And David answered, I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite. 1 Samuel chapter 17 is one of the most famous narratives in the whole Bible, one with which we are all probably familiar from childhood.

It has become synonymous in the wider culture with an extreme underdog story. Perhaps on account of this familiarity, and how accustomed we are to hearing it divorced from its context, there is much that we might miss within it.

With closer study, especially in the light of what has preceded it, we may discover that there remains a great deal of insight to emerge from it yet. The account of David's defeat of Goliath is a vivid and scenic account, to a degree that is unusual for biblical narrative.

The battle is set in the territory of Judah, in David's tribal region. David begins his work in his own region, where the Philistines are encroaching. We need to read this in light of what has gone beforehand.

From the earlier chapters of 1 Samuel, we know that Saul is the giant of Israel. He stands head and shoulders taller than anyone else. He was also with Jonathan, the only man with iron weapons in his possession.

[9 : 06] If any Israelite would be expected to fight the Philistine giant with iron weaponry, it would be Saul. However, the spirit of the Lord has abandoned Saul in the previous chapter, and he was now afflicted with a harmful spirit from God.

It is quite possible that the Philistines had gotten wind of the fact that all was not well in the court of Israel's king. King Saul was apparently losing his sanity, and the Lord was no longer with him as he had once been.

In fact, reports were that the prophet Samuel had not seen him for years now. These are all signs of a promising time to attack. The two armies gather in battle lines against each other, one standing on one mountain, and the other standing on another mountain opposite.

A champion, Goliath of Gath, comes out from the Philistine camp. As the champion, he represents the entire Philistine force. He is spoken of as THE Philistine on several occasions in this chapter. He stands for all of the Philistines. His proposal is a duel between two representative champions, one of Israel and one of the Philistines, with the losers abiding by an agreement to become the slaves of the winners.

[10 : 08] This single combat was an alternative to a bloody battle between the two sides, a battle that the Philistines would most likely win. There seemed to be no one suited to fighting against Goliath, though, which led the people to despair.

Goliath is an imposing warrior. He's over nine feet tall. He has an array of armour and weaponry that make him stand out from the regular Philistine soldier, and of course, even more so from the Israelites, who were not well equipped with weapons.

Some of Goliath's armour was probably obtained from other nations. Verses 4-7 are entirely devoted to describing Goliath and his armour and weaponry. We might here remember the story of Nahash the Ammonite.

That story involved a deadly threat to Jabesh Gilead and a requirement that they surrender entirely, unless someone came to their aid. There Saul, coming in from the field with the oxen, comes to Jabesh Gilead's aid against the Ammonites.

Nahash's name means serpent, and he was defeated by Saul. Now there is another serpent, a giant in scale armour, a leviathan, who will end up getting his head crushed by the champion of Israel, David, who has just come from the field with the sheep.

[11 : 15] Just as David was sent with the signs of kingship in chapter 16 verse 20, his battle here reminds us of Saul's earlier rised kingship. David will replace and surpass Saul.

Goliath the giant should also remind us of the earlier story of spying out and conquering the land. There it was the giants who held Israel back in fear. The defeat of Og, the giant king of Bashan, the first great victory over a giant in Israel's story, and Caleb and Othniel's victory over the giants of Hebron in Joshua 15, were examples to which Israel should have looked.

We also discover that there were some lingering giants in the land, in this chapter in 2 Samuel chapter 21 and in 1 Chronicles 20. It is the fear of the Israelites in drawing back from the giants in the land that we are first reminded of here.

In Numbers chapter 13 and 14, Israel spied out the land for 40 days, and the people shrunk back from entering into the land due to their fear of the giants, even though the Judahite, Caleb, appealed to them not to fear.

Here Goliath the giant stands against Israel for 40 days, until David the Judahite courageously stands against him. When everyone else is shrinking back in fear, David, like Caleb, is the one who is confident in the Lord's promise, and wants to attack the giants.

[12 : 32] Later, of course, Caleb was the one who received the most giant-infested territory as his possession. David is sent on a mission, to see how his brothers are doing on the front line, and he is expected to bring back a report.

This should remind us of another character, of Joseph, who was sent by his father to check on his brothers in Genesis chapter 37. David is the youngest son, favoured over his elder brothers. He is also the eighth brother, perhaps something that we should associate with new creation. David is going to act as a new Adam, clearing out the giants and allowing Israel to enjoy possession of the land.

David is sent with food, bread from Bethlehem, the house of bread, and cheeses. In the previous chapter, he was also sent with food to Saul. And perhaps we are to see something in the fact that David is the one who brings the riches of food, and the bounty of the land.

David is seemingly reintroduced to us in this chapter, leading many to wonder about its consistency, connection, and continuity with the previous chapter. Shimon bar Efrat, however, observes that in the Hebrew, the reintroduction of David in verse 12 gestures back to the fact that we are already aware of the character in question.

[13 : 40] Also, verse 14 provides some continuity with the preceding chapter, by telling us that David went to and fro between Saul and his father's house. Meanwhile, his three oldest brothers are members of Saul's army.

He was already serving with Saul at this point then. However, we should not be surprised if there are temporal details out of sequence. It's quite a possibility. We encounter such dyschronology on a number of occasions in scripture, where the concern is more to tell the story in a way that brings out the meaning than it is to relate events in the strictest of possible sequence.

Some have suggested that we encounter such dyschronology at the end of this chapter, with David bringing the head of Goliath to Jerusalem. The narrator gives a lot of attention to the account of David's conversation with his brothers and the men concerning Goliath, and the reward offered for his defeat.

Eliab's opposition to David may recall the opposition to Joseph from his older brothers. David's older brothers are also destined to bow to him in the future. Eliab believes that David has ideas above his station.

Just as Joseph was favoured over his brothers by their father and given the firstborn status and the coat of many colours, so David was chosen over his brothers, and Eliab most particularly in the preceding chapter, as the appointed successor for Saul.

[14 : 55] David speaks of taking the reproach from Israel. This might recall the reproach of the Egyptians that was removed at Gilgal in Joshua chapter 5. The Egyptians had claimed that the Lord had brought Israel out into the wilderness to destroy them.

As they were brought into the promised land and circumcised, they were marked out as the Lord's own people and as those who would receive the land. This nullified the Egyptians' taunt. Goliath had ridiculed Saul and the Israelites, suggesting that their guard was powerless to save them, or perhaps that he had rejected them.

However, he is an uncircumcised pagan, and David is confident that the Lord can still deliver Israel. Just as Israel had been left outside of the land for 40 years on account of the 40 days of spying out the land, and their fear of the giants, so Israel had now shrunk back from the giant Goliath for 40 days.

We might think here of another Davidic champion, who after being anointed by the spirits, stood against a monster after 40 days. Saul had promised that the man to defeat Goliath would receive his daughter in marriage, and that his household would be made free in Israel, not having to pay any taxes.

The successful Israelite champion would be made son-in-law to Saul, adopted into the royal household, and would enjoy the privileges of royalty, being a recipient of taxes, rather than one having to pay them.

[16:14] Saul's promises might remind us of the promises made by Caleb to Othniel for going against the city of Kiriath-sepher in Joshua chapter 15, or perhaps also of the promise of Laban to give his daughter Rachel to Jacob if Jacob served him for seven years.

Like Laban, however, Saul will renege on his promise. David's response might also remind us of Saul's son Jonathan, who expressed the same confidence in going down alone to face the uncircumcised Philistines on the previous occasion when the Philistines and the Israelites stood on opposite hilltops, back in chapter 14.

David's words reach Saul. To this point, David has not said that he will fight the Philistine. Indeed, when challenged by his brother, he seems to deny that he was doing anything more than asking questions.

It seems strange that David is summoned to Saul, until we remember that David was already known to Saul, and those around him, and that he was particularly favoured by Saul. David isn't just a random Israelite kid asking about Goliath, but he is Saul's musician and armour bearer, his beloved servant, and the one seemingly fearless and faithful man in the camp.

Saul knows that the Lord is with David from his experience, and that David isn't just a reckless young loudmouth. Without the background of chapter 16, though, it might be difficult to make sense of why Saul acts in the way that he does.

[17:35] When he sees Saul, David expresses his willingness to fight Goliath himself. Saul questions David, but doesn't simply laugh him off, nor does he directly reject him.

David responds with a declaration of his faith in the Lord, and his experience as a shepherd. Like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses, David is a shepherd, and he can bring the skills of a shepherd to his task of fighting and leading.

He has, like Samson, killed a lion, and like Samson, the powerful champion of Israel, he is confident that, in the Lord's strength, he can defeat the Philistine too. The key fact is that Goliath has defied the armies of the living God.

The Lord's honour is at stake here. Considering how much is riding upon this, Saul accepts David's offer surprisingly readily. Again, it is very hard to believe that this is how the exchange would have gone had Saul not already been well acquainted with David.

David had been Saul's armour bearer. However, now Saul acts as armour bearer to David. He clothes David in his armour. Like the signs of the kingdom that were sent with David in the previous chapter, this is some powerful foreshadowing of the fact that David will replace Saul.

[18:47] However, David rejects the armour of Saul. He will not approach Goliath as a warrior in the mould of Saul, but as the young shepherd taken from the flock. Likewise, when he takes the place as king, he will not rule just as one of the kings of the nations, as Saul had attempted to do.

Saul's giving his armour to David also anticipates Jonathan, his son, giving his armour to David in the next chapter. In both cases, they are powerful symbols of the place that David will occupy as the replacement to both of them.

David takes his staff. He goes down into the valley. He chooses five smooth stones from the brook, puts them in his shepherd's pouch, has his sling in his hand and approaches the Philistine.

There are a lot of details here, and we should rightly wonder why they have been included. David is like a shepherd. He has a staff, a shepherd's pouch and a shepherd's sling.

He chooses five stones. Perhaps we are to think of the association between the Philistines and the number five. The Philistines had five chief cities and five lords. When they sent the golden tumours and golden mice back with the ark in chapter six, they sent five of each for this reason.

[19:56] Perhaps David chose a stone for each of the Philistine cities then. Goliath is of Gath, but there is a stone remaining for Ekron, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Gaza. Later in 2 Samuel chapter 21, we discover that there were giants and relatives of Goliath associated with others of these cities.

Perhaps there is a further allusion to the story of Jacob here. Jacob was the shepherd who was associated with the staff, with the setting up of stones, five of them in his story, and with smoothness.

He also had one-on-one combat with the angel. David is a Jacob-like character, and his Jacob-like traits will become more pronounced as the story progresses. However, they may be emerging

already here.

David also has a number of the characteristics of Esau, both of them being described as ruddy, much as Jacob matured into some of the traits of his brother. So David has these traits at this point in his story.

David is a man of action. He's a man of the field. He's a man of competence. He's a man whose hands are skilled with sling, with sword or with lyre. He's a valiant man, a hunter, a person who can kill wild beasts.

[21 : 02] There is a completeness and roundedness to David's character that brings together traits of both Jacob and Esau, and we'll see more of these as the story progresses. The Philistine champion curses David by his guards, while David declares that he comes in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom Goliath has defied.

Behind the two champions, then, is conflict between the Lord and the false guards of the Philistines. David expresses his confidence that the Lord saves, not by human strength, much as Jonathan did in chapter 14.

Here we should recall the story of Dagon from chapter 5.

Dagon fell flat on his face before the ark, and then later fell again and was decapitated. The Israelites then pursue the Philistines and plunder their camp. David takes the head of the Philistine and brings it to Jerusalem.

This may be a reference to a later time, or perhaps he brings it to somewhere in the region of Jerusalem, beyond the part currently controlled by the Jebusites. Saul now asks about David's identity.

[22 : 17] This is a detail that has led many to believe that this story is in conflict with the story that precedes it. In that story, David is already clearly known to Saul. Why then would he ask about his identity here?

We've already seen earlier in the story some hints of continuity with what proceeds, and some parts that make sense most when they are read against the background of what has gone beforehand. What then should we do with this?

I think the most obvious explanation is that although Saul knew David well, he did not know David's family well. As David had been employed by Saul to this point, it didn't really matter that much.

Some of his servants had alerted him to David's existence, and to his skills, and then he had been sent for from Jesse. It isn't entirely clear that Saul had first-hand acquaintance with Jesse.

However, now David's family matters.

It matters because David is going to be brought into the king's house in a new way, not just as his servant, but as his son-in-law. Also, David's family is going to be freed from the burden of taxation, and so Saul needs to discover which family is going to receive the reward.

[23 : 21] David's family background, then, is relevant information at this point in a way that it was not before. This also forms the climax of the story, as David declares himself as the son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, and as the future king declares his identity, the stage is set for the rest of the story.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which the events of this chapter set up David as the worthy and fitting replacement for Saul as king?