Not by Spear or Sword: Reflections on David and Goliath in Biblical Theology. 1 Samuel 17

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1. Introduction

My first exposure to the issue of how or how not to preach from the Old Testament came from reading Graeme Goldsworthy’s book, Gospel & Kingdom. He begins his book by offering a ‘typical’ exposition of the David and Goliath story. In this fictitious account David is said to take up the sling of ‘faith’ and gather the five stones of ‘obedience’, ‘service’ and so on. The application involves the listeners applying these weapons to the Goliath ‘sins’ in their lives.

Goldsworthy’s critique of this approach inspired me to learn how to handle God’s Word more carefully and how to honour Christ in preaching the Old Testament. Even more so, when shortly afterwards I endured a prominent preacher giving almost a carbon copy of the allegorical Goldsworthy critiqued!

1 Samuel 17 is without doubt one of the most treasured stories from the Old Testament. The story’s ‘folkloric’ nature has given it life membership to any children’s Bible or Sunday School curriculum. The David and Goliath story of ‘right versus might’ and of ‘faith overcoming fear’ has enriched the lives of many for centuries. However, it is also true that such familiarity has led to unbridled allegorisation and a failure to come to terms with the text in its context. This paper will seek to examine the narrative of 1 Samuel 17 in its literary context as Christian Scripture.

2. Some critical concerns

This passage has some contextual and textual difficulties that have confounded commentators. Firstly, it is difficult to reconcile Saul’s previous love of David (16:21-22) and his later ignorance of David’s identity (17:55-58). Two separate sources or traditions are commonly postulated to explain these and other discrepancies. However, the question remains as to why the final redactor has not done a better job of ironing out the difficulties.

Alter suggests that chapters 16 and 17 demonstrate ‘the writer’s binocular vision of David’, providing different perspectives on David’s fitness for the throne. He argues that this is an important narrative technique, used also in the twin accounts of creation in Genesis 1 & 2.

Brueggemann, similarly, claims that these chapters offer a threefold introduction of David as shepherd boy, musician and warrior. The question of historical credibility takes a backseat to the literary function of the passages in these interpretations. We will consider some of these contextual difficulties in the course of our exegesis, while allowing chapter 16 to provide the ‘background’ that shapes our understanding of chapter 17.

Secondly, there is considerable debate about the text of 1 Samuel 17. The Septuagint omits many verses that are included in the Masoretic Text. Verses 12-31, 41, 50, and 55-58 (also 18:1-5) are removed, leaving a neater and more consistent account. While accepting the harmonising difficulties created by the MT account, Gordon argues that the abridged account has problems of its own. It is most likely that the omissions indicate an ‘unimaginative approach to the business of story telling’ by a scribe or translator. We will examine all the verses of the MT as they are translated in our English Bibles and seek to explain the text in its context.

3. 1 Samuel 1-15 as background
1 Samuel introduces the reader to the origins of Israel’s king. Throughout the book of Judges God had preserved his people without the need of a king (Judges 21:25). This theme is continued throughout 1 Samuel 1-7, where the hand of the LORD delivers his people from their enemies, the Philistines. Hannah’s song (2:1-10) is important in establishing the paradigm for God’s anointed king. He will win victory and rule, not through his own strength, but in weakness, according to the might of the LORD. However, throughout chapters 8 to 12 there is a tension between the people’s sinful desire for a king like all the nations and God’s plans to install his monarch. Saul is anointed as king and confirms his reign through victory in battle. Throughout chapters 13 to 15 Saul is involved in conflict with the Philistines, but he fails to remain faithful as God’s anointed, and God rejects him as king.

4. 1 Samuel 16 as background

In chapter 16 we meet God’s choice of king to replace Saul. David is anointed by Samuel and receives the Spirit of the LORD, who had departed from Saul. The suitability of David to be king of Israel does not rest in his stature or prowess, but in the will of God alone. This chapter heightens the tension between the outgoing and incoming kings by showing the intersection of their paths as David soothes the tormented Saul by his music. The affirmation that God sees not as man sees, with his eyes, but with his heart (16:7) is foundational to interpreting the significance of the events in chapter 17. The reader is being prepared to look for a theological angle in contrast the anthropological perspective of most of the characters in the chapter. We will discover that David, himself, carries this perspective.

5. 1 Samuel 17 in view

1-3 Setting the scene

Chapter 17 moves us from the court of Saul to the battle front between the Philistines and Israel. The Philistines have been described throughout 1 Samuel as the main enemy of Israel, and now they are encroaching into Judah. Saul was given the mandate of saving God’s people from the Philistine enemy (9:16), but proved to be unable to bring about their defeat (14:52). Saul is poised to make another attempt, but the reader should not be expecting much, given the context of Saul’s regal deposition and personal disarray.

4-11 Enter Goliath

The Philistine champion, Goliath, is given a long introduction. Attention is drawn to his awesome size and the weight of his armour and weaponry. However, it is his arrogant bravado that dominates this section, as he defies and mocks the ranks of Israel. This derision is repeated often throughout the narrative and invites us to see these events as a challenge to the honour of God. The reader has already been warned not to take too much notice of the outward appearance of this challenger (16:7). If the appearance of Goliath directs us anywhere, it is to Saul who stood taller than all Israel (9:2), and should be considered the match for Goliath. However, Saul and his people only look upon their predicament with their ‘eyes’ and are left in fear and dismay (17:11). Saul’s failure is confirmed again.

12-24 Enter David

David’s reintroduction in 17:12ff does more than repeat his family and place of origin. It reminds the reader that we are meeting again God’s anointed. The reference to Eliab and his warrior brothers emphasises that David is a different kind of Messiah. Verse 15 is described by many commentators as a variously successful or unsuccessful attempt by the redactor to harmonise the accounts of chapters 16 and 17. However, this is to ignore the integration of this verse in its context. The three brothers are described twice as ‘following Saul’, whereas David merely goes back and forth to feed his father’s sheep. Goliath is described as taking his stand for 40 days, which is a holy and complete number emphasising the total humiliation of Israel. Significant in this section, and throughout the chapter, is that Goliath is only named twice. On every other occasion he is described as ‘the Philistine’. This man is the representative of God’s enemies, and not a lone nemesis. Likewise, the attention has now shifted from Saul and his armies to the one young man who will represent God and his people. Once David has heard the Philistine, this section concludes as the previous one, with the fear of Israel.

25-27 David speaks

David has now become engaged in the conflict and the reader hears the voice of David for the first time in the narrative.

Alter identifies David’s first words as being ‘in biblical narrative convention, a defining moment
of characterisation’. However, Alter’s explanation in primarily political terms is inadequate. Rather, David provides a theological injection through which to interpret the scene. David is able to ‘see’ as God sees, in contrast to his countrymen. They see a formidable giant, whereas David merely sees an ‘uncircumcised Philistine’, representing dead idols, who opposes the representatives of the living God.

### 28-40 I’ll do it God’s way

The exchange with Eliab resonates with all who have older brothers, but its place in the narrative warrants more than psycho-social explanation. Again, chapter 16 prepares the reader to view Eliab as a mirror of Saul, and indeed Goliath. Yet, it is not only his appearance (16:6), but his contempt of his weakling brother that corresponds to Goliath. In fact, Davis suggests that ‘David has to fight three Goliaths in this chapter’, adding Saul, who also shows contempt for David’s youth and demonstrates the same warrior mentality as the Philistine.

The progression of the narrative is very slow as the conflict edges closer. Again, the reader pauses to hear the words of David that will provide the right understanding of the impending conflict. Each of David’s speeches are theologically loaded. ‘It is as if the writer makes David his expositor.’ David describes his credentials for battle in terms of his responsibilities as a shepherd. However, even his victories over the wild beasts are not cause for pride, for it is God who was and will be the deliverer (17:37). Once more, David affirms that the real issue in this conflict is the honour of the living God (17:36).

In his final preparations, David refuses to wear the armour of Saul. On the surface it could be argued that it was simply too big. However, the ill fit is ultimately of a different kind. How can God’s anointed wear the battle clothing of the one whom God has rejected? How can he fight the enemy using the enemy’s strategies? The messiah will win the conflict, such that it will be clear that the LORD is the deliver. The reader has been prepared for this since chapter 2, and David marks himself as a king according to God’s heart.

### 41-54 David versus Goliath

Once again, the Philistine’s disdain for God’s people is vented, but now focused toward God’s chosen representative. Goliath’s words drip with irony as he is in fact a ‘dog’, who like the lions and bears, will be destroyed by David. Again, David’s commentary reminds the reader that the conflict is over God’s honour and that God alone will be the deliverer. God’s power will be demonstrated through weakness and so his glory will be manifest to all the earth. Each of David’s speeches and his actions demonstrate the reality of his faith in the LORD to deliver him, and his people.

The battle is over almost before it has begun. With very few gory details, the emphasis is given to the fact that the Philistine was not killed by the military methods of the Philistines, or of Saul for that matter. The reader is repeatedly told that it was not the sword that killed Goliath. He is dead before David takes up the Philistine sword. This completes a contrast with the ways of Saul, who sought to conquer the Philistines on their own terms. Finally, the representative nature of this victory is established as the Philistines flee and their camp is plundered.

However, this is more than a conflict between David and Goliath, or even David and Saul. It is ultimately a conflict between the living God and idols. Hence, Goliath’s collapse face down is reminiscent of the twofold falling of the Philistine god, Dagon, in chapter 5. This is further confirmed as Goliath is beheaded (5:4).

Verse 54 reveals another chronological difficulty in the text, for Jerusalem was at that time still a Jebusite city. Perhaps a time adjunct is imagined, such as ‘Much later David…’. At any rate, its theological significance will become clear in 2 Samuel, and it is poignant that the victory of David is here connected with the city of David.

### 55-58 A question of identity

This chapter closes with the puzzling questions from Saul about whose son is David. This is enigmatic, given Saul’s previous awareness of David and his family in chapter 16. Whatever explanations are given must account for the fact that the redactor records Saul questioning three times. Has Saul’s mental illness made him forgetful? Is there a flashback being offered that is chronologically prior to 1 Samuel 16:14? It is beyond the scope or purpose of this paper to resolve the historical chronology question. However, this can be explained in narrative terms as directing the reader back to chapter 16, to be reminded that the victorious youth is none other than God’s messiah.
Conclusions

Chapter 17 is a highpoint in the narrative of the books of Samuel. The honour of the living God is declared. He is affirmed as the true king who brings deliverance for his people. However, he is shown to do this through his chosen messiah, who wins the victory through his faith in God and by means of weakness. David’s actions acclaim him as the rightful king (see 18:7) and so make public, what has already taken place in private through David’s anointing by Samuel.

While David can be shown to be a model of faith for all who will follow God, it is the significance of David as God’s messiah that shapes our Christian understanding of this chapter. David becomes the prototype of Jesus Christ who maintains his faithful obedience in God unto death (Philippians 2:6-8). Like David, we meet a messiah who will be God’s representative to deliver many (Mark 10:45; Romans 5:19). Jesus will be tempted with alternative means to take his place on the throne (Luke 4:1-13). In the very event that brings salvation, Jesus will be mocked and ridiculed (Luke 23). His method of bringing deliverance will be a scandal to his fellow Israelites and foolishness to the nations. However, in both David and Jesus Christ, we see the power of God and the wisdom of God at work through human weakness (1 Corinthians 1:24).

Praise be to the LORD!

ENDNOTES

Robert Alter, The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 104. Alter sees the story of David and Goliath as a folk tale, which has been included in the narrative. Without prejudging the historicity of 1 Samuel 17, it is fair to say that this story has captured the imaginations of many, in a manner similar to more recent folk tales.


Gordon, 66.

“...man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” 16:7b (ESV). The Hebrew for ‘outward appearance’ literally means ‘eyes’. It makes more sense to understand this as a contrast between the means of looking rather than the object looked at. Thus, we follow Alter’s translation: “For man sees with the eyes and the LORD sees with the heart.” Alter, The David Story, 96. This verse, then is seen to be describing how God sees David, not what God sees in David.


Alter, The David Story, 105.

Davis, 149.

Davis, 152.

Contra Alter, 109. ‘The gigantic Philistine is stunned but perhaps not dead….’ Alter’s choice to ignore the explicit affirmation of the text ignores the significance of victory without the sword. See especially 13:19-22 & 14:20.

Fokkelman, 205.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


