



'And the Winner is ...!'

Reflections on the David-Goliath Battle

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Myths and Legends

I was watching a documentary about the Hong Kong protest movement. An exiled protest leader was interviewed. He compared the futility of the protests against China as a 'David and Goliath' situation. Every time a smaller power confronts a bigger one, this biblical story is invoked. Unfortunately, at the military and political levels, David inevitably loses.

This rather brief encounter in the Hebrew Bible has become the stuff of legends. One of those legends is a version I recall from my childhood even though I cannot recall the source (Church story tellers were often creative to the extreme). In this version, David, about 10 or 11 years of age, confronts the ugly ginormous ogre, Goliath, with his little play sling (kind of like my childhood catapult). As David released the small pebble, an angel swooped down from heaven, grabbed the pebble and crashed it into the giant's forehead and 'the giant came tumbling down'.

However, we must ask: What is the reality? What is biblical fact? What is manufactured myth?

The Battle (1 Samuel 17)

I begin with an assertion: David went into the battle with Goliath knowing he would be victorious. However, we should step back to understand the backdrop scenarios.

David

In the preceding chapter (1 Sam 16), David was anointed to be the next king of Israel. At the time of Samuel's visitation to the family, David was tending the sheep all alone (not a child's situation). He would have been in his late teens at that point, perhaps 16 or 17 years of age.

A more significant indicator is provided later in that same chapter when they were looking for someone to serve as therapist for the increasingly volatile King Saul.

One of the servants said to Saul, "One of Jesse's sons from Bethlehem is a talented harp player. Not only that—he is a brave warrior, a man of war, and has good judgment. He is also a fine-looking young man, and the LORD is with him."

So David went to Saul and began serving him. Saul loved David very much, and David became his armor bearer. (1 Samuel 16.18, 21 NLT)

Clearly, David was not a little boy but a young adult. He would have been about 20 years old at this point and was already a soldier in the army. Besides, what sort of father would Jesse have been to send a young boy far away from home and into a battlefield?

Goliath

No one would doubt that Goliath was big, very big. But a giant? We should consider the actual facts laid out for us. The Hebrew Bible provides figures in

cubits, but even that is somewhat nebulous. There were two main types of cubits, one equivalent to about 18 cm (7 inch), while the other was about 21 cm (8 inch). There is uncertainty as to which one is being utilised in 1 Samuel. For arguments sake, I suggest the longer measurement.

Applying these figures to Goliath we have the following. The Hebrew Bible (known as Masoretic Text) places Goliath at around 3.5 m (11 feet 6 inch) in height (for simpler reading I am using rounded numbers). Since the established average height of Israelite males at the time was around 1.65 m (5 feet 4 inch), Goliath would indeed be a giant. But this does not settle the matter because the Greek Old Testament known as Septuagint (LXX) and the Dead Sea Scroll on this text make Goliath at only around 2.5 m (8 feet 2 inch) (very tall but certainly not gigantic). King Saul himself was depicted as unusually tall ('a head taller than anyone else' [1 Sam 10.23]), possibly near 2 m (6 feet 6 inch). If we follow the second source, then Goliath is no taller than many of today's NBA players. Additionally, Goliath may have had a genetic condition of gigantism which would have affected his movement, big and strong but not necessarily very mobile.

Tools and Tactics of War

Both Goliath and David employed psychological warfare against each other. While Goliath's was more about taunting his opponent (vs 42-43), David's was more about his faith in God (vs 45-47). We should not be surprised about this since military conflicts in the Ancient Near East were also deemed to be contestations of the gods. If we peel off this religious jargon, we can view the battle in its purer form. Incidentally, David's lengthier speech had the desired outcome; Goliath, enraged, committed a tactical error by perhaps removing his helmet and exposing his head.

Mostly unnoticed by many Bible students, is the fair amount of detail concerning Goliath's weaponry. He carried a sword which we may assume was proportionate to his size. He also carried a javelin (spear) with a rather long and heavy shaft and an iron spearhead which weighed about 7 kgs (15 lbs). He wore bronze body armour weighing about 60 kgs (132 lbs). He also wore a bronze helmet and bronze leg armour. His armour bearer carried his shield and walked in front of him. Goliath would have appeared very

intimidating but also rather weighed down. This unexpected attention to detail is clearly intended to underscore Goliath's disadvantages in the battle.

By contrast, there is David. He walked into the battle with the knowledge that he had the advantage. Allow me to elucidate. When King Saul offered his armour, David refused, stating that it would stymie his approach (vs 38-39). He also recited his previous conquests of animal predators, lion and bear (vs 34-36). Against Goliath, David carried his sling and took time to select the proper stones (vs 40). His weapon was long range (an expert slinger could hit a target from as far away as 400 m) and light weight. David could have run circles around Goliath all day long, whereas the giant needed a closeup, hand-to-hand combat (no way for him to win).

A brief examination of David's weapon may also help. Stones exiting slings have been tested to achieve speeds of about 160 km/h (100 mph). Sling stones varied in size from about that of a snooker ball to that of a tennis ball. A longer sling provided more power, while a shorter one was more accurate. David's sling could have been about 1 m (39 inch) in length. Slings were immensely accurate as well as powerful. In Judges 20.16 we are told that expert slingers could hit a single hair. Goliath was an XXL target; hard to miss for an expert slinger like David. In 2 Kings 3.25 we learn how Israel's army used slings to demolish the walls of a Moabite city since they did not have battering rams. David's sling stone crashed through Goliath's forehead and embedded itself in the brain (vs 49).

David knew exactly how to fight this battle and win. In addition, his inner resolved was strengthened by his close connection with God (vs 45-47). There was no way for David to lose or Goliath to win (he really, never stood a chance). The way the story is told, there was to be only one winner, David.

Shalom!