

# FROM PHILISTINE TO THRONE

(1 Samuel 16:14-18:16)

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The story of David and Goliath is a widely known Bible story; without doubt, it is also often a misunderstood one. The all-too-frequent tenor of its telling is the triumph of the bare-footed shepherd boy over the mighty Philistine warrior, through sheer trust in the power of God. Yet the description of himself given by David does not fit this picture. And besides this, any Israelite with minimal experience of military matters knew that a slinger was a dangerously accurate marksman (see Judg 20:16, also 2 Chron 26:14). An astonishing victory over the Philistine is not the primary concern. Instead, the narrative sets up a contrast between the dismayed and fearful Saul, who has been abandoned by God, and the courageous, resolute David whose trust in God brings victory. Set in its context, the story makes clear that David is destined for the throne of Israel. A study of the origins of the present text throws valuable light on this understanding.

The combination of traditions around the emergence of David at Saul's court is well-known. So is the fact that chapters 16-18 of 1 Samuel are preserved in quite different versions in the Hebrew and the Greek. The combination of two stories, of different genres, has contributed to obscuring the structure and meaning of both. Our task in this paper is to identify these two stories clearly and to bring out the communication that is carefully crafted into one of them, and which is still present in the combined text.

The variety of traditions involved is worth sketching briefly. Samuel is sent to anoint a king in place of the rejected Saul, and he anoints David, son of Jesse (16:1-13); there is no further mention of this anointing until a veiled reference to it in 2 Sam 5:2b.<sup>1</sup> 1 Sam 16:14-23 recounts a rather accomplished David's coming to the court of Saul, as a skilled lyre player, to free Saul from the evil spirit which tormented him.<sup>2</sup> Then, in 1 Samuel 17, David appears as the young shepherd, bringing provisions to his elder brothers in the army (17:12-31). Brought before Saul, he professes his readiness to fight Goliath, and he prevails over Saul's misgivings (17:32-40). He also prevails over Goliath. Returning from his victory, with the spoils of his foe, Saul inquires about his identity, as though David were quite unknown to him (17:55-58). David and Jonathan begin their friendship (18:1-5); the singing women trigger Saul's jealousy (18:6-9); Saul attempts to pin David with his spear (18:10-11), and finally has two tries at having the Philistines end his life instead, using as bait the hand in marriage of first Merab then Michal (18:17-29). The variety of traditions is considerable.

Within the story of single combat with the Philistine champion, Goliath, there are a number of difficulties with the present text, which argue against its unity. Briefly, these are: (1) 17:12 gives the impression of being the beginning of a new story;<sup>3</sup> (2) 17:15 gives the impression of being a harmonising addition, holding together differing traditions of David at Saul's camp and David back at the family farm; (3) 17:16 is inconsistent with its context which implies surprise and consternation at the appearance of the Philistine champion (17:24-25); (4) 17:19 repeats details about the locality already supplied in 17:2; (5) 17:23 repeats a full identification of the Philistine champion, already supplied in 17:4; (6) the mass flight and fear suggests that this is intended as the first appearance of the Philistine (see also v. 20b), despite the harmonisation in v. 23, "he spoke the same words as before"; (7) 17:50 has the Philistine killed by the slingstone, while in v. 51 David takes the Philistine's sword, kills him with it, and cuts off his head; (8) 17:55 gives no indication of Saul's already having had a conversation with David (cf. vv. 32-39) — it is not merely a question of not knowing his name; (9) 17:57b is in conflict with 17:54a, at least in the narrative sequence; (10) 18:5 is a conclusion, with a perspective extending beyond the events of the day; 18:6, on the other hand, relates immediately to the combat with the Philistine; (11) 18:10-11 is a doublet of 19:9-10 and appears better placed in the context of chapter 19.

It is rare that literary critical problems can be solved along the lines of different traditions preserved in the textual transmission. But that is precisely the case here. When the text which is common to both MT and LXX<sup>B</sup> (i.e. 17:1-11, 32-40, 42-48a, 49, 51-54; 18:6a $\beta$ -9, 12a, 13) is separated from the text which is preserved in MT but not in LXX<sup>B</sup> (i.e. 17:12-31, 41, 48b, 50, 55-18:6a $\alpha$ ; 18:10-11, 12b, 17-19, 21b, 29b-30) all the literary critical problems noted above are resolved.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, two adequate and coherent narratives emerge, of different genres, but each integral within their respective horizons.

We may note briefly the story contained in the MT additions, only to set it aside. As P. Kyle McCarter correctly observes these materials, when collected by themselves, can be seen to form a more or less complete narrative of their own.<sup>5</sup> The story tends toward the folktale form of the young man who, by deeds of derring-do, wins the hand of a princess in marriage and half of her father's kingdom. So, stripped of minor bits of harmonisation, 17:12-31 depict the young shepherd, left at home with the flock when his elder brothers go off to the war, who is sent to the military camp with provisions for his brothers and a gift to their commander. He arrives at the camp as the battle is about to begin and witnesses the challenge of the awesome Philistine champion. He hears the soldiers around him saying, "The man who kills him, the king will enrich with great riches, and will give him his daughter, and make his father's house free in Israel" (v. 25). He hears the same thing being said by other soldiers (v. 30). In the light of 18:55-58, it is clear that v. 31 is a harmonising link to the other story; in this story, there is no commissioning by Saul. If one assumes the text to be complete at this point, which is possible, the understanding would be that the Philistine drew near to where David was (v. 41), and David then dashed out at him (v. 48b). The combat is rapidly sketched: the

Philistine advanced and drew near to David, (v. 41, with the note that his shield-bearer was before him); David ran quickly toward him (v. 48b, possibly indicating a surprise attack, while the shield was still in the hands of the shield-bearer); and David prevailed over the Philistine, using his sling to strike and kill the Philistine, without a sword (v. 50).<sup>6</sup> David is then summoned before the king, and is attached to his court, becoming firm friends with the crown prince; and he has great success as a military leader (17:55-18:5). His success may motivate Saul's jealousy. He is offered the hand of the princess Merab, with an incitement to further military valour, in the hope that he might die of an overdose of bravery. When this fails, he is at first passed over (vv. 17-19). Then he is offered another daughter's hand in marriage (v. 21b). His winning of Michal has probably been suppressed in favour of the story from the other version. So the story ends with the note that Saul remained hostile to David, and David remained more successful than all Saul's commanders (vv. 29b-30).

As far as the general picture of David's emergence at Saul's court is concerned, this story has much in common with the other. Its fundamental difference is in the motivation attributed to David. While there is a cursory nod to theology in 17:26, the basic motivation in the story is riches and marriage to the king's daughter; the story is developed along the lines of success being too successful.

The second story is the central interest of this paper; it is the one represented in LXX<sup>B</sup>, i.e., without the additional material in MT. This story has its beginning in 16:14-23, which brings David to the court of Saul, as lyre-player and as armour-bearer (v. 21). Beginning the story at 16:14 is legitimate. 16:1-13 is the work of later prophetic redaction, part of a much broader context.<sup>7</sup> At its earlier level, 1 Samuel 15 probably contained Samuel's rebuke of Saul, rather than outright rejection.<sup>8</sup> This provides the context for the departure of the spirit of the Lord from Saul; it is clear, though, that 16:14 is the start of a new unit.

16:14-23, then, brings David to the court of Saul, as lyre-player and as armour-bearer; it is the first appearance of David on the scene.<sup>9</sup> Promptly, the narrative moves to the gathering for battle between the Philistines and Israel (17:1-11). Once 17:12-31 has been recognised as belonging to another tradition, the narrative receives very significant shape. The Philistine champion comes to the fore and puts a challenge which threatens the independence and freedom of Israel: "then you shall be our servants and serve us" (v. 9).<sup>10</sup> Confronted with this threat, Saul and all Israel were "dismayed and greatly afraid" (v. 11). In what is now the very next verse, David, who is standing beside Saul as his armour-bearer, immediately presents a diametrically opposed attitude: "Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine" (v. 32).

This is a crucial moment for Israel; it is also a crucial moment in the story, and a turning point in the lives of Saul and David. Here they are presented side by side, Saul dismayed by unkingly fear and David bearing himself in thoroughly kingly fashion. It is the king's role to be military leader and deliverer of his people, but Saul is depicted as unmanned by fear; the deliverer role passes to

David. The contrast is central to the whole portrayal of David's rise to power in Israel. As the tribes said at Hebron: "In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you that led out and brought in Israel" (2 Sam 5:2a). Saul ceased to be effective in the role of deliverer and protector; the defeat on Mt. Gilboa was the final climax of this failure. By contrast, David became increasingly effective as guerilla leader against the Philistines.

The story continues the contrast. Saul opposes David (v. 33); David maintains his willingness (vv. 34-37). It is not merely the opposing attitudes which are contrasted, but more importantly the motivation behind them. Saul argues from military wisdom: David is inexperienced (a youth); the Philistine is an experienced warrior (from his youth). In theological terms, Saul's judgement is based on trust in arms. David is portrayed as putting his trust in Yahweh (v. 37). He begins with his own experience: as a shepherd, faced with a marauding lion or bear plundering a lamb from the flock, he has had the experience of pursuing the predator and forcing it to release its prey; if it turned on him, he caught it by the beard and killed it. He is ready to treat the uncircumcised Philistine in the same way. The conclusions from his experience are given a theological colour: "this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God" (v. 36). This aspect is then made explicit; David's confidence is based on trust in Yahweh (v. 37a).<sup>11</sup> So the contrast is advanced: Saul trusts in arms, but David trusts in Yahweh; Saul is doomed to failure, but David will succeed.

This theological contrast should not blind us to the picture of David presented in his description of his experience as shepherd. Faced by a lion or a bear, he went after it—so he is brave. He could catch up with it and force it to release its prey—so he is fast and tough. And if the beast turned on him, he could grab it under the jaw as a prelude to killing it—so he is not only tough, but his reflexes are very good. A little reflection on this autobiographical passage shows why David was, in fact, the ideal person to take up the Philistine's challenge. Instead of man-to-man combat with the huge warrior, skilled in the use of his own weapons, David will use the tactics of speed and surprise. His speed is able to get him within slingshot range before the Philistine realises his danger and takes cover behind his shield; the quality of his reflexes will ensure that his slingstone does not miss. His demonstrated courage and toughness will enable him to carry it off. But we anticipate. The storyteller is not yet finished with the contrast between Saul and David.

Saul is portrayed putting his armour on David—trust in arms again. David is portrayed taking it off—excellent tactics, as well as a mark of his inexperience, but also narratively symbolic of not putting his trust in arms.<sup>12</sup> The Philistine is depicted taking the same tack as Saul, hardly to Saul's credit; he despises David's youthful appearance and his equipment, a stick.<sup>13</sup> This is trust in arms. David replies with a long speech, emphatically trusting in Yahweh. And, of course, when battle is joined, David emerges victorious.

The primary contrast in the story is not between the inexperienced David and the massive Philistine, but between the unmanned Saul and the spirited David. The narrative of LXX<sup>B</sup> continues this direction. After the rout of the Philistines (17:51-54), there follows the victory song of the women, again contrasting Saul and David. Saul's reaction is depicted as angry and jealous: "What more can he have but the kingdom?" (18:8). In reality, it is outrageous overreaction; in the context of the narrative, it points in precisely the right direction. David is headed toward kingship. He has demonstrated his ability as deliverer.

The narrative is brought to an end by 18:12a,13-16. Saul was afraid of David (v. 12a) and gave him a military command to get him away from the court. The result was to increase his leadership role: "he went out and came in before the people" (v. 13b). Once again, both in v. 13b and v. 16b, there is an echo of the tribes at Hebron (2 Sam 5:2a).

Between these two echoes of the end, there are three highly stylised sentences. David had success, and Yahweh was with him (v. 14). Saul saw this success, and stood in awe of him (v. 15). All Israel and Judah loved David, because he provided leadership (v. 16). These are not the sentences of storytelling; they are summary statements. They describe the three players in the Story of David's Rise: David, Saul, and the people. Sandwiched between the echoes of 2 Sam 5:2a, here at the beginning they anticipate the end. Saul has failed to deliver Israel in its hour of need, for the spirit of Yahweh had left him. David has risen to the occasion and provided that deliverance; he has continued to provide leadership in Israel. The people have recognised this, and their allegiance is with David.

The narrative from 16:14-18:16, without the MT additions which are not in LXX<sup>B</sup>, is a rounded and compact whole. The talented David leaves his father's farm to go to Saul's court as lyre-player and armour-bearer to the king. In a moment of critical challenge to Israel, David displays the spirited courage which wins victory and deliverance, while Saul quails in fear and dismay. David's qualities are recognised and his success overshadows Saul, for Yahweh is with him; and all the people are well aware of this.

Here, in a microcosm, is the whole of the story of David's rise to power. Placed here in the text, this narrative sets the tone for the extensive collection of stories which follows, ending in David's kingship. As Saul left his oxen to deliver Israel, so here David left his sheep to deliver Israel. Abandoned by Yahweh, Saul could no longer deliver Israel; it became increasingly evident that David had taken over the role of deliverer in Israel, and "the Lord was with him" (18:14b). Whatever the historical and political reality may have been, the perception of this narrative is that this is the quality which carried David to victory over the Philistine and eventually brought him to the throne, to reign over all Israel.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The account of David's anointing by Samuel is to be attributed to prophetic redaction, and should be seen within the wider context of the document created by these prophetic redactors; see my *Of Prophets and Kings: A Late Ninth-Century Document (1 Samuel 1-2 Kings 10)*, (CBQMS 17; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, 16:18 describes David as a very accomplished young man. Six attributes are listed, each succinctly expressed in two words, very much like a list of the qualities required in a young courtier. Among them is "skilled in war". Since David is not named in the verse—simply "a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite"—it may have replaced an earlier and less formal description. The purpose of the addition would have been to establish David as the model courtier (cf. G. von Rad, *Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel*, [5th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969] 41).

David was made Saul's armour-bearer (16:21); given the rather rudimentary nature of Saul's court, this need not imply particular military training and experience.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the intrusive "this" (*hazzē*) for Jesse, "this Ephrathite".

<sup>4</sup> For recent discussions of the textual situation, see P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel*, (AB 8; Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 284-309; Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, (WBC 10; Waco: Word Books, 1983), pp. 173-74, 187; and H.J. Stoebe, *Das erste Buch Samuelis*, (KAT 8/1; Gutersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1973), pp. 312-15. Also Stoebe, "Die Goliathperikope 1 Sam. XVII 1-XVIII 5 und die Textform der Septuaginta", *VT* 6, (1956), pp. 397-413; S.J. De Vries, "David's Victory over the Philistine as Saga and as Legend", *JBL* 92, (1973), pp. 23-36.

<sup>5</sup> McCarter, *1 Samuel*, p. 307. McCarter continues: "This strongly suggests that they represent the bulk of a full alternative account of David's arrival and early days at court that was interpolated *in toto* into the primary narrative at some time subsequent to the divergence of the ancestral textual traditions that lie behind MT and LXX" (*ibid.*). Klein prefers redactional additions to an independent account (*1 Samuel*, pp. 173-74, 187). The text I follow here is substantially that of the MT additions; the sole exceptions are minor harmonisations (e.g., 17:15-16, 31; 18:6aα), the omission of 18:10-11, 12b since they reflect the lyre-playing tradition, and the probability of a suppressed story between 18:21b and 29b-30. The minor differences from McCarter cannot be discussed here.

<sup>6</sup> The *RSV* correctly begins v. 50 with "So", but this is translating the present combined text; the Hebrew, of course, has "And".

<sup>7</sup> For this broader context, see, *Of Prophets and Kings*. Chapter 4 deals with the text of 1 Samuel 9-15 prior to this prophetic redaction.

<sup>8</sup> For the details of the analysis, see, *Of Prophets and Kings*, pp. 132-36.

<sup>9</sup> It is often believed that the accomplished David of 16:14-23 is in tension with the shepherd of chapter 17. The tension comes from falsely intensifying the extremes. Two points need comment. In 17:33, the contrast is not between the boy and the man, but between the inexperienced soldier (*na'ar*) and the experienced challenger who has been a warrior from his youth. *Na'ar* here has its frequent sense of young soldier, capable of killing (2 Sam 2:12-16) and of intercourse (1 Sam 21:5). H.-P. Stähli, in his monograph on the term (*Knabe-Jüngling-Knecht*, [BET 7; Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1978]), shows the range of its meanings from newborn child (1 Sam 1:22) to royal overseer (1 Kgs 11:28), as well as the two basic senses underlying these; the precise nuance is determined by the context. Here, in 1 Sam 17:33, Stähli gives it the sense of "half-grown youth", without a full discussion (*Knabe-Jüngling-Knecht*, pp. 91-92), rejecting H.J. Stoebe's juxtaposition of 1 Sam 16:14-23 with 17:1-11, 32-54 ("Goliathperikope", pp. 405-10; *Das erste Buch Samuelis*, p. 335) which is assumed here.

In 17:40, the shepherd's bag is a gloss for the unusual term translated pouch or wallet (*yalquṯ*), and not the other way round (McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 288; Klein, *I Samuel*, p. 179). It may derive from the use of *hakkeli* in v. 49.

- <sup>10</sup> It is worth noting here that the mention of Goliath of Gath's name is clearly intrusive in 17:23, and probably so in 17:4. The original story most probably featured an unnamed Philistine champion. The identification with Goliath resulted from the transfer of the heroic deed of one of David's men to David himself (cf. 2 Sam 21:19, 22) and its association with this battle story.
- <sup>11</sup> With the repetition of the introduction, "And David said", it is possible to see v. 37a as an addition, emphasising this aspect of trust in Yahweh. The presence of the motif of v. 36 in the other version of the story (v. 26) might be seen as supporting this possibility. If v. 37a were an addition, it emphasises what is already in the story, and it is impossible to say when it would have been added. But it is not all sure that it is an addition. The same would then have to be said of v. 10, which has the same repeated introduction. Yet there it seems more likely to be a stylistic trick to highlight the summary and conclusion of the challenger's speech. If so there, it may equally be a stylistic trick in v. 37a where it has the same function. Rather similar repetition is present in vv. 43-44. See the discussion by McCarter, *I Samuel*, pp. 287-88.
- <sup>12</sup> The story does not go into detail here, and the text is uncertain (see McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 288). In terms of the realities of the combat, two things need to be remembered. Tradition has it Saul was a very big man (1 Sam 10:23), and we may assume that the king's armour was more elaborate than most. More significantly, perhaps, in a combat between the slinger and the heavily armed warrior, David had to be ready to rely on speed and agility, both for attack and defence. In terms of the narrative in this version, these tactics are not to the fore; the Philistine comes toward David (vv. 48a, 49, as against v. 48b). The symbolism of not trusting in arms may predominate.
- <sup>13</sup> The tactical value of the stick in the story is worth noting. For the storyteller's sense of verisimilitude, it can help keep the Philistine unaware till too late that he has to defend himself against a sling.
- <sup>14</sup> The two theological positions latent in these materials are worth highlighting. In the principal story, as discussed here, God's role is to empower David to use his human talents and prowess in a courageous and daring act. With the shift in emphasis toward David as the little shepherd boy—not necessarily present in 17:12-31, where the youngest son need not be so little (cf. 18:1-5), but already present in the Septuagint (*paidarion*)—there is a shift in God's role. God is no longer portrayed enabling full human potential to be realised, but substituting divine wonder for human weakness. The theological implications invite reflection, but cannot be pursued here.