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“Not Just a Children’s Story”

1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49

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1 Samuel 17:1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-49. Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle; they were gathered at Socoh, which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephes-dammim. ⁴And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. ⁵He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armored with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. ⁶He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. ⁷The 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. ⁸He 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? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. ⁹If 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.’ ¹⁰And the Philistine said, ‘Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together.’ ¹¹When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

¹⁹ Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. ²⁰David rose early in the morning, left someone in charge of the sheep, took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him. He came to the encampment as the army was going forth to the battle line, shouting the war cry. ²¹Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. ²²David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. ²³As he talked with them, 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. ³²David said to Saul, ‘Let no one’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.’ ³³Saul said to David, ‘You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth.’ ³⁴But David said to Saul, ‘Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, ³⁵I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. ³⁶Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God.’ ³⁷David said, ‘The LORD, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.’ So Saul said to David, ‘Go, and may the LORD be with you!’

³⁸ Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. ³⁹David strapped Saul’s sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, ‘I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them.’ So David removed them. ⁴⁰Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd’s bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.

⁴¹ The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. ⁴²When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. ⁴³The Philistine said to David, ‘Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?’ And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. ⁴⁴The Philistine said to David, ‘Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field.’ ⁴⁵But David said to the Philistine, ‘You come to me with sword and spear and 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. ⁴⁶This very 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 Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, ⁴⁷and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD’s and he will give you into our hand.’

⁴⁸ When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly towards the battle line to meet the Philistine. ⁴⁹David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

I can’t remember the first time I ever heard this story. It’s one I’ve just always *known*. It was in my children’s storybook Bible, countless faithful Sunday school teachers illustrated it on felt boards, and a Veggie Tales’ version of this story lives rent-free in my brain—with a little asparagus David singing defiantly to the giant pickle Goliath, “You’re big, but God’s bigger....” I bet that if you grew up around a church or synagogue, this is a story you’ve heard before, too. No wonder, it is a story rife with illustrations—a boy and his slingshot, a menacing giant decked out for battle. We love stories of young David, before he grew up and made, shall we say, less than desirable choices.



We love picturing him with the sheep and his harp, the youngest of all his brothers—and yet the bravest. And we remember that, according to Scripture, God calls David a “man after my own heart.”

But when we revisit this rather grisly scene with a more grownup lens, we see it’s pretty violent. Were we to read on past v49, we would read how David not only sleighs the great warrior Goliath, but then cuts off his head with a sword. Perhaps that verse is more the stuff of nightmare than bedtime story.

The story of David and Goliath is a long story, as you’ve heard, with lots of detail—from the location of the battle, to the armor and weapons Goliath wielded. I Samuel takes a lot of time to fill in the scene. Interestingly, however, textual critics (those scholars who work to discern the earliest textual traditions in scripture from that later ones) point out a curious fact about this passage. Largely, that the version of the Bible Jesus read, the Old Testament, as we call it, would have been missing great big chunks of the David and Goliath story in Jesus’ day. According to Dr. Tim McNinch, Hebrew Bible professor at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, IN, the Bible Jesus read some 2,000 years ago, the one the early church would have had, probably had a much shorter version of this story. Now, scholars argue that this can be explained in one of two ways. Either the scribes that produced that version of the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint, as it is called) left out, or deleted, these parts from I Samuel 17. Or these details were added in later.

The general consensus among biblical scholars is that the sections that were missing from the Septuagint were added later—as late as 700 years after the time of David.ⁱ They surmise that these verses (most of which we read today) came from a different version of the David and Goliath story that circulated separately from the Bible over the centuries. It’s fascinating, really, that this is just one of the examples of how the Bible we have today is the product of many generations of scribal framing and updating and addition.

So, what has been added? The parts of our story that talk about David as a shepherd boy who comes to battle and happens to overhear Goliath’s taunt. The version of the story where David is a nobody from nowhere is what was left out. This is all in contrast to another version of this scene found in the Old Testament in which David is not a simple shepherd boy, but already a senior military man in Saul’s army.ⁱⁱ

Does this make this section of Scripture any less important? Any less inspired? Certainly not. It just adds nuance; it begs us to dig a little deeper, to want to know more. It calls us to wrestle with the text and be reminded that it is the Living Word of God.



Knowing this, a good question for us to ask is why—why was more added to the biblical tradition long after the text was originally written and handed down? What was happening in the world for this addition to the David story to be inserted? It must have been incredibly important to the community that wove in this second thread—this thread that David encountered Goliath not as a senior military man, but as a poor, young shepherd, unknown to the royal court. There must have been good reason for them to emphasize that God’s help can come from those outside of the established systems of power—even from those who appear, on the surface, to be meek and unimpressive. This move likely represents an historical moment when the Jewish people felt their own smallness and powerlessness in the face of an overwhelming giant—perhaps the Greek or Roman empires, for example. (Goliath *is* dressed in Greek military outfit, for instance.) By holding up their own communal struggle alongside the legend about a beloved hero—a young, unassuming David—the story reveals that outward appearance isn’t everything. It’s a reminder that the people of God have an invisible ally who will support them even in the face of overwhelming odds.ⁱⁱⁱ

One of my favorite books to read to our daughter Eleanor is a children’s book by Helen Lester called *Hooray for Rodney Rat!*^{iv} The story centers on a young rat named Rodney Rat who can’t pronounce his R’s. The other rodents in his rodent class tease him mercilessly. Poor Rodney Rat. One day, a new student arrives in school. Camilla Capybara is big—huge next to Rodney Rat. And Camilla Capybara is a bully. She announces right away that she is bigger, meaner, and smarter than anyone else in the class. And, right away, everyone is afraid of her, especially Rodney Rat. She makes life miserable for the whole school, even the teacher.

Finally, at recess one afternoon, during a rousing game of Simon Says, it becomes Rodney’s turn to play Simon. As you remember, Rodney can’t say his R’s. All of his old classmates know this about him, and they’ve learned how to listen and understand him with his impediment. So, when Rodney says, “Simon says wake the leaves,” his classmates know he is telling them to RAKE the leaves. But Camilla thinks she has to literally WAKE up the leaves, and yells at the leaves to “wake up!” Laughter from her classmates ensues. As you can imagine there are a series of commands that begin with the letter R that Camilla gets wrong over and over again. She’s losing her patience, growing more and more angry, still determined to win when Rodney finally says, “Simon says go west.” Well, everyone else knows that “go west” for Rodney means “go rest.” That “Simon says, ‘go rest.’” And his classmates fall down and pretend to sleep. But Camilla Capybara hears this word, figures out which direction is geographically west, and starts walking (literally) west – on and on, off into the sunset. Camilla Capybara is never seen nor heard from again. The class rejoices with the unlikely hero, Rodney Rat. One little word fell the mighty giant. Hooray for Rodney Rat!



As Rodney or any school aged child could tell you, no one *wants* to fight the bully—especially a BIG bully.

Goliath was humongous. Standing nearly ten feet tall, he was a sight to behold. Clad in armor and loud as a foghorn, it's easy to see why he was so intimidating. Every morning, he came out and yelled at the Israelites to send out one of their own to fight him. But there were never any takers. This went on for forty days (a number that almost always has meaning in Scripture), and despite their shame, no one in the Israelite army could muster their courage.

Intimidation, sheer volume can be a powerful tool. If you can make those around you believe they don't have what it takes to stand up to you, you can boss around a whole school—or an entire army.

Anna Carter Florence writes, perhaps this story is so beloved by many of us because we know Goliath well.^v He shows up at our workplaces and our schools and communities, and he stomps his foot and shakes his fist and yells at us. He bellows about everything—how small we are, how unprepared we are, how unfit or untalented or unimportant we are. And if he can provoke us to meet him on his level, returning violence for violence, rather than the Word of God, we know he'll have us.^{vi}

Goliath is a stand in for the enemy we face. He must be defeated, but not on his own terms. Not with the battle he longs for, not with his own spears and swords. As Carter Florence puts it, we fight back with the Word of God, which is all any of us has to fight with in the end anyway: “the liberating, life-giving, soul-saving, body-redeeming Word of God. We meet it in Scripture, and with God's help, we speak it. When justice comes to earth, when the oppressed go free, it will not be with Goliath's weapons. It will be with the Word, sharper and stronger than any sword, with *proclamation* in all its forms.”^{vii}

So, how do we stand up to Goliath's noise and bluster without losing heart? Carter Florence argues that we ought to take a cue from our younger friends.

Adolescents have daily experience in the subject of bullies. They know what Goliath looks like, sounds like, and smells like. They know how close they can get to him before he roars, and they know how far they can push. They're also developmentally programmed to overestimate their own strength. David was perfect for this match—an adolescent at the peak of his idealism will believe himself capable of sleighing a giant. A teenager who weighs less than Goliath's armor will



dare to take him on. It's the gift of youth, and, Carter Florence argues, many of us would do well to reclaim when our courage fails.

Shepherding is brave and dangerous work. Young David has been learning all kinds of survival skills out in the wild. He's not frightened by lion or bear, and he's shocked to learn that no one in Saul's army has stepped up to meet Goliath head on.

If God is for him, who can be against him? None of the grownups in this story expect David to survive the encounter. That is *their* age-related challenge: we adults are developmentally programmed to be dreadfully realistic.

But thankfully, we know how the story goes. David fells Goliath with one well-aimed stone. He does it without the trappings of grown-up warfare. He won't wear armor that isn't his. He won't carry weapons he doesn't know. He simply goes to meet the giant with what he knows—some stones, a slingshot, and the Word of God. Sometimes, the humblest, most basic things are all we need to silence a loud giant.

So, back to our question from the start... Why did this story matter to Israel? Why would they be sure to include it in its detail? Perhaps for the very same reason we read it to our children and consider it here today. It's a story the people of God need to remember. It's a story that reminds us God's help can come from unlikely places. It's a story that tells us outward appearance isn't everything. It's a reminder that *we* have an invisible ally who loves and supports us. And, as Carter Florence writes, "Whenever we're intimidated by the bullies on the block—we need to reread this story. If we believe Goliath, he'll always win. If we put on armor that isn't ours, we won't get far. The way to fell a giant is with a well-placed word of truth."^{viii} As young David puts it—in both the Bible Jesus read and our own—"the Lord does not save by sword and spear."

The Word of the Lord stands forever. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Tim McNinch, "Summer Shorts: I Sam 17," First Reading Podcast, June 10, 2024.

Also, to read a translation of the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) with these verses absent, visit:

https://biblehub.com/sep/1_samuel/17.htm

ⁱⁱ In I Samuel 16, David is described as a warrior, and begins serving as Saul's armor-bearer.

ⁱⁱⁱ McNinch.

^{iv} Helen Lester, *Hooway for Wodney Wat!* (New York: 2002).

^v Anna Carter Florence, *A is for Alabaster: 52 Reflections on the Stories of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2023), 30.

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 31.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 33.

