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David and Goliath: history or legend?

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Caravaggio, David with the Head of Goliath, c. 1607, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Gemäldegalerie, Vienna

The story of the boy David slaying the giant Goliath is undoubtedly one of the best known stories in the Bible. But did it really happen? Are all the stories in the Bible meant to be taken as historical facts, or were some of them written for some other purpose? We tell stories, we read fiction and watch films and television series for all sorts of reasons, including simply for entertainment. Is it possible that some of the stories in the Bible served similar purposes, including merely to entertain? If so, how can we tell when a story in the Bible is meant to give an historical account of actual events, or if it served some other purpose? In this post I’ll look at the popular story of David and Goliath.

The story is recorded only in 1 Samuel 17. The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint) has a shorter version, omitting verses 12-31 and 55-18:5 which describe how David came to be at the battlefield (his father sent him with some provisions for his three older brothers who were at the battle, and an odd detail about also sending some cheese for their commander); how David heard the threats made by the Philistine giant, Goliath; how he was introduced to king Saul; and a long section detailing how Saul enquired about David after he had killed Goliath. This second omitted section contains important clues as to the veracity of the story:

**1 Samuel 17:55** When Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, “Abner, whose son is this young man?” Abner said, “As your soul lives, O king, I do not know.” **56** The king said, “Inquire whose son the stripling is.” **57** On David’s return from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with the head of the Philistine in his hand. **58** Saul said to him, “Whose son are you, young man?” And David answered, “I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite.”

**18:1** When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. **2** Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father’s house. **3** Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. **4** Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. **5** David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved. (1 Samuel 17:55-18:5).

There is a considerable problem with this section. It reads as though this is the first time Saul had met David or heard of him. This is a major difficulty because immediately preceeding the David and Goliath incident (v.16) there is a different account of David’s introduction to Saul in the previous chapter:

**1 Samuel 16:14** Now the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him. **15** And Saul’s servants said to him, “See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. **16** Let our lord now command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better.” **17** So Saul said to his servants, “Provide for me someone who can play well, and bring him to me.” **18** One of the young men answered, “I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the LORD is with him.” **19** So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, “Send me your son David who is with the sheep.” **20** Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine, and a kid, and sent them by his son David to Saul. **21** And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armour-bearer. **22** Saul sent to Jesse, saying, “Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.” **23** And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.

There is a clear contradiction between the two stories. If the first actually happened then by the time Saul goes out to do battle with the Philistines David was already in his service as his armour-bearer and personal musician, and Saul “loved him greatly.” It’s possible that the Septuagint translators deleted this section in chapter 18 because of the obvious difficulty that David was introduced to Saul twice, the second time after he was already well known to Saul and loved by him. It’s equally possible that this second introduction wasn’t in the Hebrew version they translated from because it was added later. The Dead Sea Scrolls don’t help us here because the Samuel manuscripts are fragmentary, having fallen prey to worms and the ravages of time, and the entire section from 1 Samuel 17:7 to 18:16 is missing. So the incident where David is introduced to Saul could have been deleted by the translators who noticed the difficulty and removed it in order to avoid the problem, or the discrepancy was created by a late editor of the Hebrew text who added it. If so, it’s unlikely that the editor wouldn’t have seen the problem; it’s more likely that he wanted to preserve both accounts of David’s introduction to Saul and wasn’t concerned about the contradiction. He was simply preserving two differing traditional accounts.  (Most scholars these days accept Emanuel Tov’s arguments for the Septuagint being the older version and the Masoretic Text being a later expansion. [1])

That’s not the only difficulty with the story. In both the Hebrew and Greek versions there is the detail that after killing Goliath David severed his head and “David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem; but he put his armour in his tent” (17:54). The first problem here is that Jerusalem wasn’t under the control of Israel at the time and it wasn’t until decades later that David himself is attributed with capturing it from the Jebusites (2 Samuel 5:6-9). It is unthinkable that the Jebusites would have allowed David to take Goliath’s head there, and for what purpose? (I’ll go into further detail about the conquest of Jerusalem in a [later post](http://blog.stephencook.com.au/2020/04/10/david-and-jerusalem/)). The second difficulty is that David is said to have put Goliath’s armour in his tent. What tent? The Hebrew version of the story tells us that David was at the battlefield simply to deliver some provisions to his brothers, who didn’t particularly welcome their kid-brother being there. David wasn’t one of the fighting soldiers, so he is unlikely to have had his own tent there. There is a clue here that this version of the story could itself have been a merging of two older stories: in one David was visiting his brothers with provisions; in the other he was one of the fighting men camped there.

There is a further contradiction between the story of David killing Goliath and another account of Goliath’s death which is almost glossed over later in Samuel and also in Chronicles.

Then there was another battle with the Philistines at Gob; and Elhanan son of Jair, the Bethlehemite, killed Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam. (2 Samuel 21:19) [2]

Although this is a brief account two details support the conclusion that it’s the same “Goliath” apart from the fact that it’s an uncommon name. First “Goliath the Gittite” means the same as “Goliath of Gath”  (1 Samuel 17:4), and second, the expression “the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam” occurs in both accounts but nowhere else. The size of the spear was clearly noteworthy and it’s highly unlikely that there would be two different people with the same name from the same city whose spears were noteworthy. It’s likely that the story of Elhanan killing Goliath was taken over and adapted as part of the legend of David’s fighting prowess and added to Samuel later. The fact that both Elhanan and David were from Bethlehem may have made it easy to appropriate a story about a local hero and apply it to another local boy.

The two stories about David being introduced to Saul cast David in a good light, and make Saul appear as weak and ineffective, and with a mental illness. It’s easy to see why the writer or editor wants to preserve them both. It’s also interesting that the Chronicler, who generally portrays David in glowing terms, doesn’t include these stories in his Chronicles. We might think they would serve his purpose, but perhaps he hadn’t heard them or he didn’t regard this information as historically reliable, or it simply didn’t fit with his story which begins with the death of Saul.

It’s still a good story, but we should accept that it’s probably just that: a good story! And that’s ok. We shouldn’t assume that the writers of the Bible intended for every story to be taken as historical fact. They were as capable as anyone of telling a ripping good yarn to make a point. The important thing is the point they were making, not whether the story is true.

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[1] Emanuel Tov, “The Composition of 1 Samuel 16-18 in the light of the Septuagint Version,” in J. H. Tigay (ed.), *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism* (Philadelphia, 1985), 98-130.

[2] Chronicles has an almost identical parallel:  “Again there was war with the Philistines; and Elhanan son of Jair the Bethlehemite, struck down Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam” (1 Chronicles 20:5). In both cases I’ve followed Robert Alter’s translation (Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019.