The Battle Belongs to the Word

The Role of Theological Discourse in David's Victory over Saul and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17

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The story of David and Goliath has firmly imprinted itself on the mythic psyche of the Western world. This story from 1 Samuel 17, which picks up on and amplifies ancient mythic themes of the youth who rises to the occasion to deliver a community from some monstrous challenge or danger and is amply rewarded for it, has become for us a paradigm through which we read all sorts of events.

This paradigm is so ingrained in our psyche that in the summer of 2000, during the U.S. Tennis Open, a sports commentator at the end of the men's singles final—which was won by Wimbledon champion Pete Sampras—mentioned that although David (the challenger) had tried valiantly, he had been unable to defeat Goliath (Sampras). A more appropriate example, perhaps, comes from the 2000 Sydney summer Olympic Games. The greatest upset of those games occurred in Greco-Roman wrestling, where Alexandre Karelin, the six-foot, four-inch Russian undefeated champion—winner of three Olympic gold medals in the sport, undefeated in thirteen years of international competition—was defeated decisively by Rulon Gardner, a Wyoming farm boy who had never won a gold medal in any major wrestling competition. And, yes, said the commentator with great excitement, David has defeated Goliath.

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented in May 2001 at the annual meeting of the Canadian Theological Society at Université Laval, Québec City, QC. The paper was significantly revised with the aid of a Summer Professional Activities Grant from Roberts Wesleyan College and was presented in January 2003 as part of the Cultural Life Lecture Series at Roberts Wesleyan College, Rochester, N.Y.

In its explicitly religious use, Christians have often read the story typologically, as prefiguring Jesus’ unlikely victory over the monstrous powers of evil, and, by extension, our own victory over evil, as we participate in what Christ has accomplished. One contemporary manifestation of this use of the story is the contemporary praise song “The Battle Belongs to the Lord,” whose title is taken from 1 Samuel 17:47. Utilizing militaristic language of armor and weapons, powers of darkness, enemies and courage, the song articulates Christian confidence in overcoming all the evil that confronts and opposes us, on analogy with David’s victory over Goliath.

And, of course, these are all appropriate uses of this paradigmatic story, celebrating the victory of the young, unknown David over the towering, battle-seasoned Philistine, against all humanly calculated odds. But a careful reading of the story as found in 1 Samuel 17 discloses some other dimensions of the text that are not often noticed, and that I intend to pay attention to. Not only are these crucial dimensions of the story itself, but they raise important questions for us as contemporary readers of Scripture.

My approach to 1 Samuel 17 in this essay will be twofold. First, I will engage in a close reading of 1 Samuel 17, attending to the text’s own foregrounding of speech as key to David’s rise. This emphasis on the role of speech (especially theological speech—talk about God) is something not often mentioned in popular interpretations of the story. In highlighting David’s verbal victory over Saul and Goliath, I will attempt to read the story with David, sympathetically.

But, second, I will problematize this sympathetic reading by raising a fundamental ethical question about the legitimation of violence in this portrayal of David. This ethical question arises initially for me as a contemporary reader of the story, and is undoubtedly influenced by the profound ethical vision of my teacher and colleague, James Olthuis (in whose honor this collection of essays is published). Nevertheless, I will explore a number of ways in which the question is not extrinsic to the text, derived solely from contemporary ethical sensibilities, but is itself rooted in and suggested by a careful reading of various intra- and intertextual details.

In my ethical interrogation of the text, it is my goal to practice what Olthuis has articulated as a nonviolent “hermeneutics of connection.” In Olthuis’s hermeneutics is an extension of his basic Christian ethical stance of nonviolent love,

which involves honoring the alterity of the other without suppressing one’s own subjectivity (for that would do violence to the self). Nonviolent love thus involves both attending to the other and being fully present to the other, in a manner that takes seriously both partners in the relationship. Thus, following my teacher, I intend to engage the story of 1 Samuel 17 in a critical dialogue, listening to and attending to the text’s own distinctive voice (without subsuming it to my own), while bringing myself as a human subject fully to the interpretive conversation (eschewing the illusion of objectivity). As Olthuis has beautifully articulated, the affirmation of subjectivity is not an impediment to good interpretation. On the contrary, healthy interpretation begins when we subjectively open ourselves to listen attentively to the voice of another. Thus I start with a sympathetic reading of David’s victory.

A Sympathetic Reading of David’s Victory—The Priority of Speech

The Battle Scene (1 Samuel 17:48–54)

The first thing that strikes the reader as quite odd about this story is how little space in the 58 verses that make up the narrative is devoted to the actual battle between David and Goliath—only four verses.

When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. David 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.

So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, striking down the Philistine and killing him; there was no sword in David’s hand. Then David ran and stood over the Philistine; he gripped his sword, drew it out of its sheath, and killed him; then he cut off his head with it.

When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled. (1 Sam. 17:48–51)

Then follow three almost perfunctory verses on the rout of the Philistine army.

The troops of Israel and Judah rose up with a shout and pursued the Philistines as far as Gath and the gates of Ekron, so that the wounded Philistines fell on the way from Shaaraim as far as Gath and Ekron. The Israelites came back from chasing the Philistines, and they plundered their camp. David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem; but he put his armor in his tent. (1 Sam. 17:52–54)

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4. Walter Brueggemann takes the David and Goliath story to be an upbeat, naïve celebration of David, in contrast to what he regards as other, more complicated accounts and portrayals of David in the Old Testament. See Brueggemann, David’s Truth in Israel’s Imagination and Memory (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), chap. 1: “The Trustful Truth of the Tribe” (for the David and Goliath story, see pp. 30–35), and also his commentary First and Second Samuel: Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1980), pp. 127–134. The analysis in David’s Truth also emphasizes the central place of David’s speech in the story.


6. All block, indented quotations of Scripture are from the NRSV. Occasional biblical quotations in the text of the essay that depart from the NRSV are my own translations.
But these short action scenes come late in the text and are continually delayed—by talk. Typically, dialogue fills the space, and delays the action. However, what sets up the story initially is a monologue, a speech with no response.

**The Opening Scene—The Philistine Challenge (1 Samuel 17:1–11)**

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. Saul and the Israelites gathered and encamped in the valley of Elah, and formed ranks against the Philistines. The Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them. And there came out of the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The 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. He 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. If 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.” And the Philistine said, “Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together.” When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid. (1 Sam. 17:1–11)

This first scene, in which the Philistine champion appears (vv. 1–11), has two main foci. The first focus is a most uncharacteristically detailed description of Goliath’s armor and weapons. It is uncharacteristic because Hebrew narrative rarely provides such detailed visual descriptions; stylistically, it is much more like Homer than the Bible. But it does serve to present Goliath as a formidable challenge to Israel. Both the size of this champion and the sheer weight of his military accoutrements are amazing. His armor weighs one hundred and twenty-five pounds and his spearhead alone weighs over fifteen pounds. And the man himself is gigantic. Even if we amend the six cubits and a span of the Masoretic text (which would make him nine feet six inches tall) to the more modest four cubits and a span found in both the Septuagint and a Hebrew manuscript of Samuel from Qumran, he would still be almost seven feet tall (raller than any known human remains from antiquity). In his great size and in his formidable armor and weaponry, Goliath is portrayed as the epitome of the powerful Philistines, who are regarded in the text as a primary threat to Israel. Indeed, in 1 Samuel 17, the name Goliath is used only twice (in vv. 4 and 23). He is typically called simply “the Philistine.” He is the Philistine par excellence.

But the other focus of this first scene, over which the narrator lingers, is what Goliath says, his arrogant challenge to Israel (starting in v. 8). Come on, fight me! I’m a Philistine, he boasts. But you, baah! You’re slaves of Saul. Choose a representative and let him come and face me alone. Now, what the nswv renders twice as “kill” in verse 9 is the powerful Hebrew verb hikā (the root nikā in intensive/causative form), which the King James Version renders famously as “smite.” If your champion prevails, says Goliath, and smites me . . . or if I smite him—well, that will decide the battle, one way or another.

And to make it clear that this is a monologue, a speech with no reply, verse 10 continues with “And the Philistine said,” which is strictly unnecessary, as he had just been speaking in verses 8–9. Its redundancy suggests that there was no response to his challenge in the previous two verses. Perhaps there was just a communally indrawn breath from the Israelite troops. So, the Philistine speaks again, after a pregnant pause, in effect saying, What’s the matter? I’ve just insulted you. Come on, send someone out to fight me!

And again, there is no reply. The text says that King Saul heard, as did “all Israel” with him (v. 11)—but their only response was terror. They were paralyzed with fear.

**David’s Visit to the Front (1 Samuel 17:12–24)**

This first scene (vv. 1–11) is juxtaposed with the next (vv. 12–24), in which the young David is sent by his father to bring food to his three eldest brothers, who are part of Saul’s army. Actually, this next scene has two parts. It begins with a description of a typical state of affairs, depicting a pattern in which

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7. Erich Auerbach, in his famous study, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), calls this characteristic of Homer “fully externalized description” (p. 22) and contrasts it with Old Testament narrative, which he suggests typically withholds such explicit description and is, instead, “taught with background” (p. 12). For Auerbach’s full analysis of the contrast between the Homer and the Old Testament, which ranges from stylistic differences regarding visual description and depth of characterization to matters of the texts’ substantive theological and ontological claims, see ch. 1: “Odysses’ Scar” (pp. 3–23). For his use of the binding of Isaac narrative in Genesis 22 as a test case for his analysis, see pp. 7–12. It is interesting that this similarity of the opening scene in 1 Samuel 17 with Homeric modes of description occurs in a text about Philistines, who are associated by a complex web of connections (via biblical and classical sources and archaeological evidence) with ancient Greece and the Aegean world. For an attempt to sort out these connections as to their historicity, see Israel Finkelstein, “The Philistines in the Bible: A Late-Monarchic Perspective,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27, 2 (2002): 131–67; Finkelstein (p. 147) also notes that the idea of a contest of champions (including speeches before battle) can be seen as “Homeric” (Hector versus Ajax, Iliad 7.206–304; Paris versus Menelaus, Iliad 3.355–94), and that the description of Goliath’s armor evokes that of Achilles (Iliad 18.480, 606–12; 19.153, 569–85).

8. I have chosen not to use quotation marks for my own paraphrases of various speeches in the text. I will reserve quotation marks for direct quotation.

David travels back and forth between his home and the battlefield and in which Goliath appears at the front twice daily to utter his challenge.

Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years. The names of his three eldest sons of Jesse had followed Saul to the battle; the names of his three children who went to the battle were Eliab the firstborn, and next to him Abinadab, and the third Shammah. David was the youngest; the three eldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father’s sheep at Bethlehem. For forty days the Philistine came forward and took his stand, morning and evening. (1 Sam. 17:12–16)

Then this typical state of affairs is followed by an account of one particular visit of David to the front, which happens to coincide with one of Goliath’s challenges.

Jesse said to his son David, “Take for your brothers an ephah of this parched grain and these ten loaves, and carry them quickly to the camp to your brothers; also take these ten cheeses to the commander of their thousand. See how your brothers fare, and bring some token from them.”

Now Saul, and they, and all the men of Israel, were in the valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. David rose early in the morning, left the sheep with a keeper, 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. Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers. As 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.

All the Israelites, when they saw the man, fled from him and were very much afraid. (1 Sam. 17:17–24)

When David arrives at the scene of battle, he finds the Israelite army camped on the other side of the valley from the Philistines and shouting the battle cry—whooping it up, hurling insults (v. 20). But that is the extent of the battle. Given the suggestion of “fighting” in verse 19, this revelation in verse 20 is a rhetorical letdown.

And as David arrives, Goliath comes forth from the Philistine ranks and gives his usual spiel (which isn’t actually repeated in v. 23—perhaps if it were, that would delay the action a bit too long). This time, however, the Israelite army doesn’t even wait for the monologue. The difference between their previous response in verse 11 and their response here in verse 24 is significant. They no longer wait for the speech. As soon as they see the Philistine, they run away in fear (v. 24). And David, who is present to hear the Philistine’s speech (v. 23), undoubtedly witnesses this display of fear on the part of the Israelite troops. Then the multiple scenes of dialogue begin in earnest.

David’s Conversations with the Troops (1 Samuel 17:25–30)

The Israelites said, “Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel. The king will greatly enrich the man who kills him, and will give him his daughter and make his family free in Israel.” David said to the men who stood by him, “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” The people answered him in the same way, “So shall it be done for the man who kills him.”

His eldest brother Eliab heard him talking to the men; and Eliab’s anger was kindled against David. He said, “Why have you come down? With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart; for you have come down just to see the battle.” David said, “What have I done now? It was only a question.” He turned away from him toward another and spoke in the same way; and the people answered him again as before. (1 Sam. 17:25–30)

First, in verse 25, David hears someone say, Have you seen this guy? He comes to insult us! And whoever smites him the king will reward greatly. Now David is standing right there and clearly hears this. Nevertheless, he says aloud, in verse 26 (rhetorically, for effect), to the group of men standing near him, Tell me again what will be done for the person who smites that Philistine and takes away the insult from Israel. Then David intensifies the rhetoric. For whereas the previous speaker had mentioned the Philistine insulting the Israelite troops, David asks, Who is this Philistine that he dares insult the army of the living God? The troops then answer David, Thus and so (as the narrator puts it) will be done for the one who smites him (v. 27).

Notice what David has done. He has put himself forward by his rhetoric (his words) to be noticed as someone interested in the defeat of this threat to Israel. And the reader might think that he is entirely too forward, even calculating and prideful. But that objection might simply suggest that we’ve never been in a situation of marginality, where we had to force others to notice the contribution we might make if given half a chance.

However we evaluate that forwardness or self-promotion (which is clearly in the text), it is important to note that David reframes the insult from something done to Israel, to something done to God. This is the first time in the story that someone has spoken of God.

But Eliab, David’s oldest brother, overhears the conversation and is incensed (v. 28). What might be the basis of his anger and indignation? Could it be that he had been passed over by Samuel in chapter 16 and saw the prophet anoint this, his youngest brother, to be the future king of Israel? Is he motivated here by jealousy? Or, alternately, does he feel some guilt or shame about his own paralysis in the face of this Philistine threat? Or could it be some combination of jealousy and shame? It is certainly a fact that a great deal of anger is rooted in insecurity and a sense of inadequacy. Lashing out is a typical form of avoidance.
of our own problems. So, Eliab criticizes David and questions his motives, and claims to know the evil in his (David’s) heart. You’re getting too big for your britches, he in effect says. Just who do you think you are?

And David’s response (in verse 29) is perhaps the most telling line in the entire story: “What have I done now? It was only a question” (nswv). Or, “it was only talk” (Robert Alter). Actually, the Hebrew has David ask Eliab a question: הָלָּךְ וַעֲרָבָּר הָאָרָּא? Literally, “Wasn’t it (just) a word?”

An intriguing comment about the importance of David’s talk or words occurs in the previous chapter of 1 Samuel. There, in chapter 16, Saul had sent his servants to find a skilled musician for him, to soothe his moods. One servant reports that he has found David, and in verse 18 describes him in a fivefold characterization. Besides being (1) a good musician, he is described as (2) a strong or valiant warrior (something Saul will explicitly deny later, in ch. 17), (3) good-looking (something Goliath will later notice); and (4) Yahweh is with him, adds the servant. But tucked away in this list of characteristics (right in the middle), the servant observes that David is (5) “skilled in speaking” (נְבָּן דָּבָאָר). Since David never actually speaks in chapter 16, this may well be a comment on chapter 17. We are, at the very least, put on notice about David’s skill with words.

So, yes, it was only talk. But then David turns to another person nearby and talks some more (v. 30). He proceeds to ask the same question about what will be done for the man who defeats the Philistine. And he is answered by multiple people, to the same effect as before.

Then the word (the talk) begins to spread about David, this nobody, just a shepherd (probably a teenager). And this talk (just words) gets repeated to Saul, the king of Israel, living in fear of Goliath and the Philistines (v. 31). And Saul calls for David. (You see, first you have to get the interview.)

David’s Conversation with Saul (1 Samuel 17:31–37)

When the words that David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul; and he sent for him. David said to Saul, "Let no one’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are not a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." But 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, I 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. Your 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." David 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!" (1 Sam. 17:31–37)

The first thing David says to Saul (in v. 32) is, Don’t let anyone be afraid! This young boy not only manages to get a hearing, he accurately discerns the root issue here—as those on the outside of power are often able to. The root issue is fear, outright paralysis in the face of what seems to be an overwhelming threat. And he immediately has a proposal for addressing that threat. “Your servant,” he says (deferentially referring to himself), will do battle with this Philistine. That’s quite a combination of self-deprecation and outrageous forwardness!

And I’d imagine that Saul’s jaw drops open. You can almost hear him sputter, But you can’t do that! You’re just a youth and he’s a seasoned warrior!

Whereas the prophet Jeremiah will later object, at his call, that he is just a youth, and both Moses and Jeremiah tell Yahweh that they have no skill in speaking (Exodus 3; Jeremiah 1), here David is ready for the job. It is Saul who believes that David is unqualified due to his chronological age and his lack of experience and formal credentials. So Saul divides David. He is not part of the established institution (the army) and has no battle experience.

But David has transferable skills and he explains this in his speech to Saul (in vv. 34–37), which is a masterful presentation of his résumé, his curriculum vitae.

Using deferential language, referring to himself as “your servant” (in vv. 34 and 36), David nevertheless deftly and skillfully articulates his own accomplishments as a shepherd. When a lion or a bear would attack the flock, explains David, I would go out after it, smite it, and deliver or rescue the sheep. And then, if the beast attacked me, I would seize it, smite it, and kill it. The deferential “your servant” thus belies David’s forceful assertion of agency, his ability to act decisively. Indeed, he uses six verbs in the first person singular, five of which are in the Hebrew hiphil or causative stem. This choice of language has the cumulative effect of rhetorically presenting David as an active, powerful, dynamic agent or subject (he is no passive doormat, but someone to be reckoned with).

Having recounted this life experience, David then comes to the punch line of his argument in verse 36, namely, that this experience is transferable to the task at hand. Both lion and bear, he says, "your servant" smote. And this Philistine will be like one of them, since he has insulted the armies of the living God. Again, we find David’s powerful reframing, his use of theological language to depict the Philistine threat. The threat isn’t, as David articulates it, simply a military matter—this has to do with God.

And just as the Philistine earlier (at the end of v. 9) received no reply (from Saul or Israel) after his challenge, and so had to resume the challenge (in v. 10), so David at the end of verse 36 receives no reply from Saul, who still seems to be dazed by David’s bold, improbable offer. He’s in shock. So, David resumes his speech in verse 37, and takes the opportunity to put an even more explicit theological spin on matters.10

10. This is the point at which Alter (p. 107) makes his suggestion about speech resumption and lack of response, which I have applied also to Goliath’s earlier speech.
It is not just that the Philistine has insulted God (which David has previously mentioned in his question to the troops and now in his words to Saul), and it is not just that David is a powerful agent, who is able to defeat Goliath (as he has just articulated in his job interview). David goes on to appeal directly to God's own agency (to God as actor), both in his past shepherd experience and in the battle to come. Yahweh, who delivered/rescued me from the lion and bear, will deliver/rescue me also from this Philistine (v. 37). That David here uses the divine name Yahweh and the verb "deliver"/"rescue" (nāṣal), both of which are associated with God's powerful intervention on behalf of Israel at the exodus, makes this a particularly bold claim.11

And Saul gives him the job. "Go, and may [Yahweh] be with you!" It is possible that Saul responds with genuine piety. It is more likely, however, that he articulates a piety he thinks would be appropriate, without really believing it. He may well be simply out of options and figures that he might as well send David out, before full battle is joined. I can even entertain the possibility that his answer is ironic, like wishing someone to live in interesting times. Go and may Yahweh be with you—you'll need it!

David and Saul's Armor (1 Samuel 17:38–41)

Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. David 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. Then 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.

The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. (1 Sam. 17:38–41)

This famous scene, in which Saul attempts to foist his own armor and sword on David, is significant for a number of reasons. First, it reminds us of the earlier description in which Goliath's armor and weapons are described (vv. 5–7), and by comparison Saul's seems paltry. It's like producing a World War I single-propeller biplane with a Gatling gun to go up against an F-18 fighter jet that can do Mach 2, equipped with Sidewinder missiles. There would be no contest. The point here is that David cannot hope to fight Goliath on his own terms and win.

There is also the further possibility that the scene with Saul's armor and sword indicates that David's willingness to fight the giant is predicated on the knowledge that he can use his mobility to his advantage. He did, after all, pursue the lion and the bear, and did not need either sword or armor to defeat them. It is thus possible that the earlier description of Goliath's weighty armor might serve the narrative purpose of alerting the reader to David's awareness of what is, from his perspective, a limitation on Goliath's part. The giant's armor, formidable as it is, weighs him down—and suggests to David a way to defeat him.12

Saul, however, does not grasp any of this. In fact, Saul is portrayed here quite badly. First of all, the king of Israel, who stands head and shoulders above other men (according to 1 Sam. 9:2), seems oblivious to the fact that his armor would simply be too big and heavy for the smaller David. But the episode with the armor also shows that Saul gives no credence either to David's past experience with the lion and bear (which required mobility but no sword or armor) or to his theological framing—certainly the more important point. God simply does not enter into Saul's equations.

The episode with Saul's armor thus suggests a subtle comparison between Goliath and Saul—both of whom are armored (though one better than the other), both of whom are tall (though one taller than the other), both of whom despise David and look down on him (Goliath will do this in a moment). But, more important, neither the Philistine champion nor the Israelite king has any regard for the God of Israel as a significant factor in history. In the end, both Goliath and Saul stand—in different ways—in opposition to David. And it is appropriate to think that in this narrative David does battle with them both.

It is even possible that David's agonistic or oppositional relation to Saul is evident in the straightforward, almost brusque, comment he makes in verse 39, which is characterized by a definite lack of deferential language, in contrast to his earlier language of "your servant." After trying on the armor, he says simply, "I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them."

David, then, without the armor, approaches the Philistine with shepherd's stick, sling, and stones. At last we're getting down to the action! But no, it is delayed once again, by dialogue.

David and Goliath Exchange Words (1 Samuel 17:42–47)

When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The 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." But 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. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I

11. The divine name Yahweh is revealed to Moses in Exod. 3:14–15 in connection with God delivering (nāṣal) the Israelites from Egyptian bondage (Exod. 3:8). Nāṣal is also used of this deliverance in Exod. 5:23; 6:6; and 18:9.

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, and 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." (1 Sam. 17:42-47)

When Goliath sees who has come out to fight him, he reacts—like Saul—to David's youth and despises him. Then follows more dialogue, in which the Philistine mocks David's weapons, curses him by his gods, and tells him to prepare to die and have his body desecrated by exposure to wild animals (vv. 43-44). David's response, which is the longest speech in the entire narrative (vv. 45-47), contains a concentration and accumulation of God language. Whereas previously David has mentioned God twice (vv. 26 and 36) and Yahweh once (v. 37), in this single speech (vv. 45-47) we find two references to God and four to Yahweh, one of these in the compound name Yahweh of Hosts. This proliferation of references to God accrues around three theological statements that David makes. It is perhaps important to note that David fearlessly addresses these statements not only to the Philistine, but probably to the listening Israelite troops as well.

First of all (in v. 45), David contrasts the weapons or source of power of the Philistine with his own source of power: You come to me with sword, spear, and javelin (powerful conventional weapons). I come to you in the name of Yahweh of Hosts, God of the armies of Israel, whom you have insulted. David is not afraid to claim that he comes in God's name and that this, by implication, more than compensates for his lack of traditional "firepower."

David's second theological statement (in v. 46) is an assertion of what we might call divine-human synergy, and it involves a twofold claim. This twofold claim serves to interpret the anticipated victory over Goliath. On the one hand, Yahweh will deliver the Philistine over to David (God's agency is primary). Yet, on the other hand, this divine agency will be manifested precisely through David's agency, which is articulated using and heightening the language of Goliath's challenge, but this time with David as subject: I will smite you, and cut off your head, and give the corpses of the entire Philistine army to the wild animals to desecrate.

The third theological claim David makes in his speech to Goliath concerns the purpose or outcome of this Philistine defeat through David's agency. That purpose or outcome is twofold. First, as a result of his victory all the earth will know that there is a God in Israel (v. 46). The recognition of the reality of Israel's God seems to be David's foremost concern. But a second purpose or outcome is stated in verse 47, namely, that all this assembly (the assembly of Israel) will know—because in David's opinion they don't know, or they wouldn't be paralyzed—that Yahweh doesn't save or deliver by means of conventional weapons of power. The battle, says David, belongs to the Lord. God controls the outcome, not human actors. And so David tells Goliath, Yahweh is the one who will deliver you over to us.

Now, it is important to note that neither the character of David nor the narrator understands human action or human agency to be insignificant. Indeed, among the important human contributions David brings to the battle are (1) his life experience defending the flock, (2) perhaps his perceptive discernment that his mobility and skill with a sling would count for something against the heavily armored Philistine, and (3) certainly the shrewd tactical move in verse 48 of suddenly running forward to get in range for his shot—aiming for probably the only vulnerable spot on Goliath's anatomy, the forehead (where neurologists now know is the highest concentration of nerve endings in the body, and where the brain is closest to the skull itself). Without all this human experience, discernment, and skill, it is likely that Yahweh's power in this story would be stymied. So the text is not contrasting the human and the divine per se. Rather, it is David's claim that Yahweh is at work precisely through human agency and experience—but agency and experience that seem by official or institutional standards to be marginal and insignificant.

And even though Yahweh is at work through the skillful actions of David, the way the story unfolds suggests that even more important than actions are words. Indeed, it is words that articulate the claim of both human and divine agency, human words that people speak—especially that David speaks. The battle, indeed, belongs to the Lord, as verse 47 claims. But I want to suggest that in 1 Samuel 17 the battle belongs to the word as much as to the Lord.

And by the time David has finished his speech to Goliath (at the end of v. 47), a speech overheard by Israel, and by Saul—a speech that brings to a climax David's explicit theological framing of the conflict—at least one battle has already been won: the contest with Saul for the leadership of Israel. Yes, David will defeat the Philistine and that will require both word and sling. But his defeat of the paralyzed, fearful Saul is already accomplished. And wasn't it just a word?

But words are crucial in this text, and speech is revelatory of character. In particular, speech reveals who is the more qualified leader. David's earlier questioning of bystanders (in v. 26) characterizes him as a go-getter, who is willing to take the initiative to get a hearing with Saul. And David's explicit theological speech—not only during that questioning, but also in his interview with Saul (vv. 36-37) and finally in his confrontation with Goliath (vv. 45-47)—characterizes him as one who takes the God of Israel seriously and who expects this God to act in concrete ways, on behalf of his people.

This is a significant contrast with Saul. Both his initial lack of speech—his failure to respond to Goliath's threat (v. 11)—and his later incredulous words...
in response to David's offer to fight the Philistine (v. 33) serve to portray Saul as a weak, paralyzed leader, who does not take the God of Israel seriously as a significant factor in human affairs. But more than that, the final scene of the narrative portrays Saul as an anxious, dithering, even senile leader, who doesn't know who David is.

*The Final Scene—Saul's Inquiry into David's Identity (1 Samuel 17:55–58)*

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." The king said, "Inquire whose son the striping is." 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. Saul said to him, "Whose son are you, young man?" And David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite." (1 Sam. 17:55–58)

Having just interviewed him, so to speak, in verses 31–37 and having previously brought the young David to his court in 1 Samuel 16, Saul is here in this final scene perplexed about David's identity. Yes, I know that chapters 16 and 17 are probably two independent traditions about David's introduction to Saul. But some editor saw fit to put them together and thus to highlight Saul's lack of perceptiveness by his perplexed query to Abner, his commander. Indeed, the question (Whose son is that youth/lad?) shows Saul's preoccupation with institutional legitimacy. David's is defined as being young and his identity must be located in terms of family and connections, patriarchally conceived. When Abner swears he doesn't know the answer to Saul's question, Saul presses him to inquire into the matter, repeating both elements of the inquiry (David's youth and parentage). And finally when Abner brings David to Saul, Saul asks David face to face, again noting his youth and inquiring into his parentage: "Whose son are you, young man?" That this final repetition of the question is addressed directly to the one who has just defeated the Philistine giant and initiated a rout of the entire Philistine army (and is portrayed as standing before Saul with Goliath's head in his hand) serves to portray Saul as utterly clueless. And David answers, almost incredulously: I'm Jesse's son, from Bethlehem. Duh?!

Of course, I may be reading too much into Saul's questioning and into David's answer. Even if the text does not intend to portray Saul as a dithering idiot, this seems to be a rhetorical effect of the text—at least on this reader. However, one decides this particular matter, it is quite clear that David's contest is not just with Goliath, but also with Saul. Underneath and around the explicit, overt battle (involving both words and deeds) between David the shepherd boy and the giant Philistine is the implicit, more subtle—but nevertheless real—contest between the uncredentialed but courageous David, and the official but impotent and paralyzed leader of Israel, King Saul. Whereas the former contest was said (early in the story) to have as an outcome that David will receive the king's daughter in marriage and freedom (from taxation?) for his family (v. 25), the latter purely verbal contest will have as its (unsaid) outcome the right to the leadership of Israel, as becomes clear by the placement of the David and Goliath story at the start of David's meteoric rise in power and popularity—a rise that begins in the next chapter and that culminates with David's ascent to the throne in 2 Samuel 5.

Most crucially, David's defeat of both Saul and the Philistine depends on his mode of speech. It is thus clear that in 1 Samuel 17 words matter.¹⁴ The story is not simply a naive celebration of the rise of the inexperienced underdog who risks everything against insurmountable odds in a bold and daring action against a powerful opponent. It also involves a contest of words.

And this contest is won by David because of his explicit theological framing of a real situation of public (even military) conflict in terms of an affront to God and the victory of God over the enemy of his people—a victory explicitly linked with human action (David's action). While David's assertion to Saul that he is able to defeat Goliath is certainly a bold claim, even bolder is his further claim that his victory is God's victory—Yahweh is the one who will deliver him (and, by implication, all Israel) from the Philistine champion (and thus from the Philistine army).

*Problematizing David's Speech—The Ethical Question*

So far, I have been reading the text *with* David, sympathetically, on his behalf. In this respect, I have followed the basic approach of most commentators on 1 Samuel 17, which interpret the outlines of the David and Goliath story as a relatively uncomplicated, unambiguous celebration of David's rise to power, either as a genuine memory of David (a story in its own right) or as a cipher for later Jewish ascendency over its enemies.¹⁵ My only complication of this simple reading has been to emphasize the importance of David's speech in the narrative and to note that his contest has been with *both* Saul and Goliath—but these are also gains of recent studies of the text.

It is now time, however, to problematize even this more nuanced reading of the narrative, to challenge either version of a naive, uncomplicated affirmation of David's rise. The basic question I want to raise is whether David's theological framing of a situation of marginality and conflict is ethically appropriate. Is it right, for either David or us today, to draw God into human affairs, especially into historically conditioned situations of threat or conflict, such that an insult to us is interpreted as an insult to God (vv. 26 and 36) and that God is portrayed

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¹⁴. This could be seen as a pun on *dabar*, which can mean either "word" or "matter/issue." Words, indeed, are the central matter/issue in 1 Samuel 17.

as acting through us against our enemies (vv. 45–57), who are taken simply to be God’s enemies? Even when we are in a situation of relative powerlessness vis-à-vis our opponents (as David was), is it appropriate to claim that God is on our side of the conflict? This is a very difficult question, not subject to any simple answer. There are, in my opinion, two important considerations here.

On the one hand, we need to be open to the genuine possibility of discerning God at work in situations of conflict and threat in the real world. The denial that such a discernment would ever be possible leaves us trapped in the straitjacket of autonomous secularism or possibly in some form of hyper- transcendental spirituality. In either case, we would be in danger of denying the reality and relevance of God for ordinary human life (which is inextricably messy and permeated by conflict). If we are to take seriously the reality of the biblical God (who is not a human construct), we cannot exclude, in principle, the sort of theological framing that David engages in.

On the other hand, however, we need to take with utmost seriousness the danger of fanaticism, where we are unable to distinguish our agendas and perspectives from God’s. The inability to make such a distinction puts us in danger of denying the transcendence of God, and thus exempting ourselves from the possibility of judgment. If God simply acts through us, and our enemies are God’s enemies, how could God ever call us, and our actions, into question? To put the issue another way, what formal or structural difference is there between David’s theological framing of his victory over Goliath and the theological framings of conflict that we find in Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda movement? Both sets of actors (ancient and contemporary) perceive themselves as in the minority, facing monstrous opposition, and claim that God works through them in explicitly violent ways.16

The David and Goliath story thus raises for me, as a reader of Scripture, a central ethical question about the appropriate use of theological language in situations of conflict. On the face of it, I find such language, especially when used to legitimize a military victory, highly problematic. Nevertheless, simply rejecting the use of theological language out of hand is not a viable option—not if I want to remain in significant connection with Scripture, which certainly contains such uses. Nor may I reinterpret the text of 1 Samuel 17 to make it say what I want it to, which would be an act of interpretive violence, subsuming the otherness of the text under my own voice.

As an alternative to both forms of interpretive violence, I propose that we pay attention to some important features of the text itself. Some of these are intratextual features, found within the text of 1 Samuel 17, and some are intertextual features, which arise from reading 1 Samuel 17 in conversation with other parts of 1 and 2 Samuel (which was originally, after all, one continuous book). In particular, I want to examine five interlocking questions or issues that arise from such (intra- and intertextual reading, each of which serves, in different ways, to problematize my prior uncomplicated reading of 1 Samuel 17.

Who Killed Goliath?

First of all, there is the famous question of who really killed Goliath. Careful biblical readers have long noted that 2 Samuel 21:19 (near the end of 1 and 2 Samuel) credits the victory over Goliath to Elhanan, one of David’s warriors. This claim occurs in a brief note concerning the victories of four of David’s warriors over four Philistine giants (2 Sam. 21:15–22). This brief note itself occurs in the final four chapters of Samuel, which are often thought to contrast sharply in style with that of the rest of the book and which most scholars have concluded constitute a sort of appendix of disparate material that was added to Samuel at some later date.17

A now famous explanation, which tries to reconcile the two seemingly contradictory accounts—going back to the nineteenth century—has been to claim that Elhanan and David are the same person and that Elhanan is David’s personal name, while David is his throne name.18 This claim, however, besides having no support from anywhere else in Scripture, makes no sense of the context of 21:19, since David is clearly differentiated from Elhanan in 21:15–22.19 Certainly, the book of Chronicles, which is a later rewriting of Israel’s history, after the exile, understood Elhanan to be different from David, and found it problematic. Thus the parallel text in 1 Chronicles 20:5 changes Goliath to “the brother of Goliath” in order to remove this difficulty.20 Chronicles actually removes a number of “difficulties” from the story of David so as to sanitize his reign (thus the Bathsheba and Uriah incident is entirely missing from Chronicles). In the case of the note about Elhanan, it is significant that whereas 2 Samuel 21:15–22 lists Goliath as the third of four Philistines said to be defeated by David’s warriors, 1 Chronicles 20:4–5 conveniently omits the first of these four, since that section of the text portrays David as too weak to fight and hence prevented by his warriors from going out to battle anymore.


17. These four chapters have a chiastic structure (though the units are of quite varied length), consisting of a narrative (21:1–14), a liturgy (21:15–22), a poem (ch. 22); then a poem (23:1–7), a list (23:8–39), and a narrative (ch. 24).


19. Neither is it likely these are two different Philistines with the same name or title (as has sometimes been suggested), since both texts—in a rather distinctive phrase—compare the shaft of Goliath’s spear to a weaver’s beam (1 Sam. 17:7; 2 Sam. 21:19).

20. 1 Chron. 20:5 supplies the name Lahmi for Goliath’s brother, which is taken from בֵּית הַבָּלָּם (Bethlehemite), a phrase that designated Elhanan’s tribal affiliation in 2 Sam. 21:19.
What, then, might be the relationship between the two accounts of the killing of Goliath? Is it, as most scholars have concluded, that a victory by one of David's warriors was later transferred to David himself? And, if so, was there at one time an independent story of David's victory over a Philistine, whose true name has now been forgotten? However one decides that matter, we are still left with the fact that some editor appended 2 Samuel 21:15–22 to the narrative of 1 and 2 Samuel and that this appendix portrays Elhanan's victory over Goliath as occurring while David is so weak that his men prevent him from going out into battle. Whatever the editorial intent, which is no longer recoverable with any certainty, one powerful effect of the placement of this text at the conclusion of the extended narrative of David's reign is that it subverts or destabilizes any naïve affirmation of the claims of 1 Samuel 17.21 This is something that canonical readers of Scripture cannot afford to ignore.

The Difference between Hebrew (MT) and Greek (LXX) Texts of 1 Samuel 17

Another important issue that readers of Scripture need to grapple with is that the version of the David and Goliath story found in one important edition of the Septuagint (LXX) differs significantly from the version found in the Masoretic Text (MT). It is now well known that the Septuagint is not a single entity, but that there are various textual traditions of Old Greek renderings of the Hebrew Bible. The final phase of one important textual tradition is represented by Codex Vaticanus (LXX\textsuperscript{6}), a fourth-century codex or book that includes both Old and New Testaments in Greek. This particular Greek Bible contains significant omissions in 1 Samuel 17–18, when compared to the Hebrew MT. Those sections of the David and Goliath story that are missing include David's visit to the front and conversation with the troops, followed by the report of this conversation to king Saul (17:12–31) and the final scene in which Saul inquires of David's identity (17:55–58), as well as a few other lines concerning the battle itself (17:41, 48b, and 50).22 In other words, quite a bit—though not all—of the dialogue scenes that present David's self-promotion and that signal the beginning of his verbal victory over Saul is missing from Codex Vaticanus.

Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls it was typical to explain discrepancies between the LXX and the MT by assuming that the LXX was at fault. Perhaps the translators mistranslated the MT or even added to the text (though in 1 Samuel 17 it looked like they had omitted sections of the text). However, the fact that portions of the Hebrew Bible found at Qumran are closer to various versions of the LXX suggests that matters are not that simple. Indeed, there is a Qumran Samuel text (4QSam\textsuperscript{1}) that is closer to Codex Vaticanus than to the MT when it comes to 1 Samuel 17.

There is at present no unanimity about the textual history of 1 Samuel 17 in the MT. Although it is possible that originally two independent versions of the David and Goliath story were woven together, the sections of the story unique to the MT do not seem to constitute an independent narrative. Thus it is more likely that either an originally longer story was shortened at some point or that an originally shorter story was later lengthened by additions (all these positions have been argued).23 However one decides this issue, the question still remains as to which version of the story is to be preferred. To put it differently, which version ought we to read today? Apart from the question of whether David or Elhanan "originally" killed Goliath, is it possible to say which extant version of the David and Goliath story in 1 Samuel 17 is scriptural, or canonical? Indeed, as a matter of historical fact, both have been canonical, since Codex Vaticanus functioned as Scripture for a significant portion of the Christian church (who had no practical access to the MT) over the course of a number of centuries. What is the theological significance of this textual (even canonical) diversity? And how does it bear on our reading of the David and Goliath story today? Those are difficult questions to answer. Minimally, the fact that we have to choose which version of the story to read complicates our reading and disabuses us of any simplistic attempt at providing a definitive interpretation.

Does the Narrator or God Ever Validate David's Theological Interpretation?

A further problem for any naïve, uncomplicated reading of 1 Samuel 17 is that David's theological framing of his victory over Goliath is never validated by either God or the narrator. Although it is characteristic of 1 and 2 Samuel that both the character of God and the narrator typically refrain from evaluative judgments about characters in the story,24 there are exceptions. Some of the most explicit (negative) judgments in the book include (1) God's statement to Samuel that the people's desire for a king is simply a new form of their age-old rejection of divine rule (1 Samuel 8); (2) God's clear condemnation of David's sin concerning Bathsheba and Uriah, conveyed through the prophet Nathan (1 Samuel 12); and (3) God's censure of David's census of the people (2 Samuel 24). In the case of

23. For a discussion of the various arguments by both biblical scholars and textual critics, see Barthélémy et al., Story of David and Goliath.
David’s victory over Goliath, however, is significant that there is no statement from either God or the narrator to corroborate David’s theological interpretation of that event. Given the fact that the narrator sometimes notes that Yahweh was with David (1 Sam. 18:14; 2 Sam. 5:10), it is telling that he refrains from any such comment in connection with the Goliath episode. Only Jonathan explicitly agrees with David’s interpretation, something that comes to light when he pleads with Saul to save David’s life and gives as a reason that “He took his life in his hand when he attacked the Philistine, and the Lord brought about a great victory for all Israel. You saw it and rejoiced” (1 Sam. 19:5). But not only is Jonathan predisposed to such an interpretation since he himself engaged in a similar theological framing of his own daring battle with the Philistines on a previous occasion (1 Sam. 14:6, 10, 12), he is David’s closest friend and thus presumably biased in his favor. The lack of corroboration, however, by either the narrator or God constitutes an important lacuna in the text. It thus remains an open question from the point of view of the text itself whether David’s explicit theological framing of his victory was appropriate.

David’s Good Looks and His Status as a Warrior

The portrayal of David in 1 Samuel 17 as one who is significantly different from Saul, and thus who wins over Goliath on different grounds from Saul, is complicated by the fact that chapter 16 previously attributed to David two characteristics that are also true of Saul. First Samuel 16:18 describes David as a powerful warrior (something Saul explicitly denies in his interview with Abigail), which is later disputed by the narrator who claims that Saul was more powerful (2 Sam. 18:3). However, Abigail’s opinion on the matter is decisively conditioned by her relationship with David, in this case by her attempt to get on his good side.

On the issue of the text’s evaluation of David, it may be relevant to note Robert Alter’s point that a person’s first words in a Hebrew narrative are often revelatory of his or her character. It is thus telling that David’s first recorded speech is his inquiry into the reward that comes from defeating Goliath (1 Sam. 17:26). Thus, beyond the function of putting himself forward as a candidate for fighting Goliath (which I previously suggested), it is possible that David’s first speech reveals his baser instincts, which must be taken into account along with his more noble claim to be concerned with the insult to Israel’s God. In this light, perhaps we need to reconsider Abigail’s upholding of David and his claim to know the evil of his heart (2 Sam. 18). Perhaps, as Keith Bodner has suggested, Abigail’s critique of David is “double-voiced,” expressing not just his own sense of outrage at his young, upstart brother, but also the narrator’s hint that all is not right in David’s “heart.” Indeed, David’s defensive response to Abigail, “What have I done?” occurs in none of the contexts in 1 Samuel, where David tries to deflect various accusations (20:1, with Jonathan; 26:18, with Saul; 29:8, with Achish, king of Gath). See Keith Bodner’s perceptive essay, “Eliah and the Deuteronomist” (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 28/1 (2003): 55–71), in which he addresses the narrative function of Eliah’s earlier appearance (in 1 Sam. 16:5–7) and the reappearance of much of Eliah’s phraseology in the prophet Nathan’s parable directed in critique of David and in David’s initial response to the parable (2 Samuel 12).

While I would not want to claim that good looks are an impediment to godly character or to heroic action on behalf of God, it is interesting that when Saul is first introduced back in 1 Samuel 9:2, he is described as “a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else.” This characterization has led many commentators to suggest that we have here an indication of Saul’s superficiality, as if external appearance (both good looks and height) are a legitimate qualification for leadership of Israel. The question, then, is why Saul’s servant mentions this particular characteristic of David (16:18), especially when God tells Samuel earlier in the same chapter, at David’s anointing, that he does not value external appearance, but looks at the heart (16:7). Even more pointedly, why does the narrator himself mention David’s good looks in a threefold description, just verses after God’s disavowal of the importance of external appearance? When David is described as (literally) “ruddy, with handsome eyes, and good looking” (16:12), the phrase that God looks not at appearance but at the heart (16:7) is still ringing in our ears.

Similarly, why is David described as a warrior in chapter 16, but as inexperienced in battle in chapter 17? Although David is probably not a child (as he is sometimes popularly depicted), it is clear that he is portrayed in 17:12–15 as too young for the Israelite army (only his three eldest brothers have joined), and that his lack of military experience distinguishes him from both Goliath and Saul. Indeed, that David is not a member of the army and does not fight with traditional weapons is integral to his claim in 1 Samuel 17 that Yahweh is the source of his power. Yet 1 Samuel 16:18 describes him emphatically, in two powerful Hebrew phrases, as “a valiant warrior/mighty man” and “a man of battle/war.”

The question, then, is why some editor juxtaposed these two quite different introductory characterizations of David? Or, since questions about editorial intent are ultimately unanswerable with any certainty, we may ask what the rhetorical effect is of reading the David and Goliath story in the context of the prior portrayal of David as a good-looking warrior in chapter 16. To say the least, this introduces a further complication into what initially seemed to be a relatively uncomplicated affirmation of David’s victory over Goliath. In particular, it introduces an ambiguity concerning the basis of David’s victory and of his later rise to power, which seems tied to this victory. This ambiguity is heightened in the next chapter of 1 Samuel when David skyrockets in popularity as a great warrior: “Saul has killed thousands, and David his ten thousands” (18:7). Besides his ability to outdo Saul in killing Philistines, one wonders whether David’s popularity with the women of Israel, who come out to sing his praises, is not at least partially dependent on his good looks.
But either mode of theological discourse can be dangerous, especially when we apply such discourse to a situation of conflict, when our opponents are identified with God’s enemies—particularly when violence is involved. Whatever our pious intentions, such theological discourse may function to legitimate our own aspirations and ambitions by identifying them, without remainder, with the will of God.

It is interesting that in the later story of David’s adultery with Bathsheba and his subsequent attempt to cover it up by killing her husband Uriah (2 Samuel 11), this moral failure turns on the matter of whose perspective is right, David’s or God’s. This theme is expressed by the use of the phrase “evil in [someone’s] eyes” at two crucial points. Whereas David assures Joab, his general, not to regard the death of Uriah (which he had participated in) as evil in his eyes (11:25), the text goes on two verses later to say that the matter was, however, evil in Yahweh’s eyes (11:27). The contrast is explicit and suggests the need to distinguish clearly our (fallible) perspectives from God’s perspective and not to imagine that our perspective is absolute. Identifying the two is tantamount to idolatry, putting ourselves in God’s place, and is precisely what allows us to commit violence with impunity. I have thus come to wonder whether David’s theological discourse in 1 Samuel 17 (especially when combined with his evident self-promotion in the text) signals the beginning of the very trajectory that culminates in his acts of adultery and murder in 2 Samuel 11. Could David’s mode of speech in 1 Samuel 17 signal the beginning of an attitude on David’s part—an attitude that does not sufficiently distinguish his own agenda from God’s—that leads to his later overstepping of bounds with Bathsheba and Uriah?

The question is, of course, unanswerable in any definitive way, as is the broader ethical question I have raised in the second half of this essay. Such questions are technically undecidable, in that there is simply no incontrovertible ground or basis for a decision. Yet neutrality is impossible. Decisions must—and will—be made. Life must be lived. And Scripture will be interpreted. Serious wrestling with such ethical questions in the very process of interpreting Scripture, however, constitutes a faithful mode of engagement with the text and, indeed, with the God to whom the text testifies. The struggle of biblical interpretation may thus be understood as an aspect of moral formation, as communities of readers seek to attend to—and embrace—God’s claim on the complexity of human life. It is this ethical understanding of the interpretive process that James Olthuis so well exemplifies in his life, his teaching, and his writing—for which I (along with many of his students) remain immensely grateful.

28. This is often obscured in contemporary translations. A more literal rendering clearly links the David story with the time of the Judges, when everyone “did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:5; 21:25), and with the typical negative judgment on the later kings of Israel and Judah, who did evil in the eyes of Yahweh.

29. I have addressed this possibility more systematically in “Is Violence the Primal Sin? The Socio-Ethical Significance of Boundary Transgression in Genesis 3,” a paper presented in May 2003 at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.