

# 1 Samuel 17

## Setting: geographical placement of the conflict between Philistines and Israel (17.1-3)

- 1 Now the **Philistines** gathered their armies for battle;  
and they were gathered at **Socoh** which belongs to Judah,  
and they camped between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephes-dammim.
- 2 And **Saul and the men of Israel** were gathered,  
and camped in the **valley of Elah**,  
and drew up in battle array to encounter the Philistines.
- 3 And the **Philistines** stood on the mountain on one side  
while **Israel** stood on the mountain on the other side, with the valley between them.

## Introduction of Goliath (17.4-11)

- 4 Then a champion came out from the armies of the Philistines named **Goliath**, from **Gath**,

- Literary insertion device: Goliath's weapons

- whose height was six cubits and a span.
- 5 And he had a bronze helmet on his head,  
and he was clothed with scale-armor  
which weighed five thousand shekels of bronze.
- 6 He also had bronze greaves on his legs  
and a bronze javelin slung between his shoulders.
- 7 And the shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam,  
and the head of his spear weighed six hundred shekels of iron;  
his shield-carrier also walked before him.

- Goliath's challenge

- 8 And he stood and shouted to the **ranks of Israel**, and said to them,

"Why do you come out to draw up in battle array?  
Am I not the Philistine  
and you servants of Saul?"

- 9 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 become your servants;  
but if I prevail against him and kill him,  
then you shall become our servants and serve us."

- 10 Again the Philistine said,

"I **defy** the ranks of Israel this day;  
give me a man that we may fight together."

- Israel's response to the challenge

- 11 When **Saul** and all **Israel** heard these words of the Philistine,  
they were dismayed  
and greatly afraid.

Waw is initial with wayqtl followed by stated subject. Strategic importance was to secure the Valley of Elah, which was the natural point of entry from the Philistine homeland into the hill country of Saul's kingdom. That is why the battle was crucial.

Socoh is in the Shephelah 14 miles west of Bethlehem. Joshua 15.35 mentions the town as belonging to Judah, so the placement of the battle shows the Philistines were encroaching on Judah. Azekah was 2-3 miles northwest of Socoh and controlled the main road across the valley. (It is referred to on an ostracoon from Lachish). Ephes-dammim's location is not known but the Hebrew says it was between the two other towns and was no doubt on the river in the Valley of Elah. It would make sense for the Israelite army to be on the eastern side and the Philistine army on the western on opposing hills. The stream running through the Valley of the terebinth is the Wadi es-Sant, running westward from the town of Bethlehem toward Gath.

The wayqtl with stated subject starts a new discourse unit. The details of his weapons slow down the narrative and interrupt the sequence of main verbs "came out...stood...shouted...said" (literary insertion device). The "champion" is the one who steps out between the two battle lines. Parallel with Hector and Menelaus in the Iliad (3.69). Goliath is only named two times in the text and is called "the Philistine" 27 times. The name may have been an old name for a giant-hero, applied also later to Elhanan's enemy (2 Sam 21.19). He measured 9' 9" if a cubit is 18" = 3 meters. This would have been the result of a pituitary gland dysfunction. Compare with John Middleton (1578-1623) buried in Hale, Liverpool, 9'3" in around 1600, and Robert Wadlow 8'11" (1940).

The details in the insertion device serve to heighten the intimidation and effect. The armor is contemporary with the Iliad and very similar. Goliath would have been dressed differently from ordinary soldiers. Could have been imported from Syria or Anatolia. Bronze helmet may have followed Assyrian style. Armor for the torso represented in Shisha's armor, 57 kg=126 lbs. Greaves (hapax) made of molded bronze encircling entire calf and padded with leather. Sword or "javelin" (kidon) for close action, scimitar. The spear's shaft was like a weaver's beam in its mass. Head of spear weighed 15 lb=6.8 kg. Made of iron at a period when iron was new and costly (hi-tec!). Shield was a standing shield covering the whole body and held by a shield-bearer. Weight made his movements slow. Point of view is from Goliath himself: "shield-bearer was going..."

The action of 17.4a continues in the next series of verbs. This is a taunt speech. The Philistines will not surrender in the end. The phrase "I myself defy the armies of Israel" (אֲנִי הַרְפֵּיתִי אֶת־מַעְרְכֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל הַיּוֹם) conveys the tone. The verb is a key word which conveys reproach and contempt (shame and humiliation as in childlessness, marrying the uncircumcized, being a slave in Egypt, Nabal's contempt for David, rape of Tamar by Amnon). His use of the phrase "and you the servants of Saul" (וְאַתֶּם עֲבָדֵי יְהוָה) intends to humiliate—"you are only his slaves!"

The people of Israel and their king Saul are totally demoralized. The Philistines were cultivated and highly civilized, coming from the Aegean civilization.

## Introduction of David

- 12 Now **David** was the son of the Ephrathite of **Bethlehem** in Judah, whose name was **Jesse**, and he had eight sons.  
And Jesse was old in the days of Saul, advanced in years among men.
- 13 And the three older sons of Jesse had gone after Saul to the battle. And the names of his three sons who went to the battle were **Eliab** the first-born, and the second to him **Abinadab**, and the third **Shammah**.
- 14 And David was the youngest.  
Now the three oldest followed Saul,
- 15 but David went back and forth from Saul to tend his father's flock at **Bethlehem**.

## Goliath's repeated challenges

- 16 And the Philistine came forward morning and evening for forty days, and took his stand.

## David's unwitting introduction into the conflict

- 17 Then **Jesse** said to **David** his son, "Take now for your brothers an ephah of this roasted grain and these ten loaves, and run to the camp to your brothers.
- 18 "Bring also these ten cuts of cheese to the commander of their thousand, and look into the welfare of your brothers, and bring back news of them.
- 19 "For **Saul** and they and all the men of Israel are in the **valley of Elah**, fighting with the Philistines."
- 20 So **David** arose early in the morning and left the flock with a **keeper** and took the supplies and went as Jesse had commanded him. And he came to the circle of the camp while the army was going out in battle array shouting the war cry.
- 21 And Israel and the Philistines drew up in battle array, army against army.
- 22 Then **David** left his baggage in the care of the **baggage keeper**, and ran to the battle line and entered in order to greet his **brothers**.
- 23 As he was talking with them, behold, the champion, the Philistine from **Gath** named **Goliath**,
- 24 When all the **men of Israel** saw the man, they fled from him and were greatly afraid.
- 25 And the **men of Israel** said, "Have you seen this man who is coming up? Surely he is coming up to defy **Israel**. And it will be that the king ❶ will enrich the man who kills him with great riches ❷ and will give him his daughter ❸ and make his father's house free in Israel."
- 26 Then **David** spoke to the **men** who were standing by him, saying, "What will 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 taunt the armies of the living God?"
- 27 And the people answered him in accord with this word, saying, "Thus it will be done for the man who kills him."

The flow of the passage is now interrupted by a new paragraph about the family of David. The effect is of complex literary insertion once again.

David's father was Jesse, the grandson of Boaz, who lived during the times of the judges. By this time Jesse has become a senior, no longer required to serve as a military man or engage in civil service. The term does not indicate he was old and feeble.

Jesse had eight sons already introduced in the previous chapter (16:6-13). Elab, Abinadab and then Shammah and the other four remaining sons have passed by Samuel as candidates for anointing as king before David appears. The three oldest sons of eight have gone out to battle the Philistines, so we see the same three who were introduced in chapter 16. The verse is not in conflict with the account in chapter 16. David served as Saul's minstrel and officially as a weapon-bearer at Saul's court (16:21) but cared intermittently for Jesse's sheep in Bethlehem. The switching back and forth between David and Saul's name is intentional to draw attention to their relationship.

Verse 16 pictures the continuing threat and anxiety in the Israelite camp. Goliath is menacing the Jews just twelve miles (20 km) west of Bethlehem, the distance from Luxembourg center to the French border after Esch.

Just as Joseph was told by his father to check out things with his 11 brothers, David is told to get news on his brothers. As Joseph meets with destiny (Genesis 37:12), so does David. On the other hand, this must have been a very common experience. David takes a simple meal to his brothers of parched grain and loaves of bread. Jesse wants David to secure some token of the brothers' well-being, perhaps simply a receipt of the food.

The paragraph beginning with 17:20 shows that David followed instructions. The ordinary task of an ordinary day prepares him in the plan of God to do an extraordinary thing. How often that can happen to us!

The number of the sons of Jesse is hard to determine. This text says there were eight; in chapter 16 there are 7 and in the genealogy of 1 Chronicles 2:13 pn.y seven are mentioned. It is possible that one son died and was not listed because he had no posterity. Jesse also had two daughters, named Zeruiah and Abigail, who later would play an important role in the history of Israel. Nathanel, Radai and Ozem were the younger brothers who were not on the battle field.

David follows his father's instructions and gets up early to make the trip of 20 km toward the place of conflict. He leaves the flock he normally cared for in the care of a keeper (עֲלֵי-שֹׁמֵר), the phrase uses the participle "one who stands watch, guard". He takes the supplies and goes to the designated destination. The change of points of view ("went...came to") moves the focus of the action from Bethlehem to the Valley of Elah. The הַמַּעְיָנָה is the circular entrenchment of an army camp. The Israelite army is drawn up in battle array against the philistines and they are shouting to rally their forces. It is an exciting moment for David to arrive. If he left early in the morning he may have been able to walk the distance in a half a day. Just as he leaves the materials he has brought for his brothers, Goliath the champion (אִישׁ הַבְּנִי, "single fighter"), also called "the Philistine" from here on, walks to a higher spot where his voice could be heard by the Israelite army ("was coming up") and repeats his taunts. The narrative builds suspense.

The Israeli army run away from Goliath as they had in 17:11. They identify the key issue as an attempt to reproach Israel (לְהַרְףֵּ אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל) "taunt, reproach, revile" as used in 17:11). The repetition of the term underscores the point: Goliath stands against the promised people and therefore against Jehovah Himself.

was coming up from the army of the Philistines, and he spoke these same words; and David heard them.

In a collective sense the "man of Israel" (singular) flees from the Philistine in great fear and rehearses with one another the reason why Goliath is coming up: he is defiant of Israel. Saul will go to great lengths to see him defeated: pay him a large sum of money, marry him off to the royal family and free the man's household—including from 50-100 people living in a cluster of dwellings, including married sons and their families, male and female servants and their families, and perhaps Levites—that is, freeing them from taxes and other obligations to the palace.

When David, now among the soldiers, asks what will be done, the armies respond with the same answer they have given to each other by rehearsing Saul's promises. But David's question gets at the underlying issue for clearly than the question of the armies. The Philistine is attacking the armies of the living God (כִּי הָרַף מֵעַרְבוֹת אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים): David is concerned about the reproach (הַרְפָּה, "disgrace, scorn, abuse") brought upon Israel as a result of these taunts.

- 28 Now **Eliab** his oldest brother heard when he spoke to the men; and Eliab's anger burned against David and he said,  
 "Why have you come down?  
 And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness?  
 I know your insolence and the wickedness of your heart;  
 for you have come down in order to see the battle."
- 29 But **David** said,  
 "What have I done now?  
 Was it not just a question?"
- 30 Then he turned away from him to another and said the same thing; and the **people** answered the same thing as before.

### Saul convenes David

- 31 When the words which David spoke were heard, they told them to **Saul**, and he sent for him.
- 32 And **David** said to **Saul**,  
 "Let no man's heart fail on account of him;  
 your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."
- 33 Then **Saul** said to **David**,  
 "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him;  
 for you are but a youth while he has been a warrior from his youth."
- 34 But **David** said to **Saul**,  
 "Your servant was tending his father's sheep.  
 When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock,  
 I went out after him and attacked him,  
 and rescued it from his mouth;  
 and when he rose up against me,  
 I seized him by his beard and struck him and killed him.
- 35 I went out after him and attacked him,  
 and rescued it from his mouth;  
 and when he rose up against me,  
 I seized him by his beard and struck him and killed him.
- 36 "Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear;  
 and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them,  
 since he has taunted the armies of the living God."
- 37 And **David** said,  
 "The LORD who delivered me  
 from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear,  
 He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

And **Saul** said to **David**,

"Go, and may the LORD be with you."

- 38 Then **Saul** clothed **David** with his garments and put a bronze helmet on his head, and he clothed him with armor.
- 39 And **David** girded his sword over his armor and tried to walk, for he had not tested them.  
 So **David** said to **Saul**, "I cannot go with these, for I have not tested them."  
 And **David** took them off.
- 40 And he took his stick in his hand and chose for himself five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in the shepherd's bag which he had, even in his pouch, and his sling was in his hand; and he approached the **Philistine**.

### David confronts Goliath

- 41 Then the **Philistine** came on and approached **David**, with the shield-bearer in front of him.
- 42 When the **Philistine** looked and saw **David**, he despised him; for he was but a youth, and ruddy, with a handsome appearance.
- 43 And the **Philistine** said to **David**,  
 "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?"  
 And the **Philistine** cursed David by his gods.
- 44 The **Philistine** also said to **David**,  
 "**Come** to me, and I **will give** your flesh  
 to the birds of the sky  
 and the beasts of the field."

In the midst of David's inquiry David's older brother Eliab hears the questions and he becomes very angry. He accuses David the "kid brother" of severe motivations, of being a curiosity seeker: he accuses David of insolence (יָדָוּן "presumption, arrogance" as in Prov 21:24, the scoffer who acts in insolent pride, the opposite of meekness) and wickedness of heart (עָוֹן "evil"). Being about ten years older than David, Eliab plays the part of the jealous older brother. His accusation is radical. These words appear in paired form only here in the Bible. For other examples of insolence see:  
 Deut 17.12, the man who acts presumptuously by not listening to the priest  
 Deut 18.22, the prophet speaks presumptuously who says God will do something that does not occur.  
 Jer 7:24, people walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil heart and went backward and not forward.

David responds, "Is it not just a word?" = "Can't I say anything" = "wasn't it just a question?" = "May I not even speak?" = "I was only asking a question" = "I happen to have been asking about a very important matter!". David continues to interview the men in the army and continues to get the same answer.

The action now moves to a conversation between Saul and David. David is willing to go and fight with Goliath. Perhaps David had already been speaking confidently about his readiness to fight Goliath in the hearing of Eliab. David continues to use the derogatory **הַפְּלִשְׁתִּי הַזֶּה**, "this Philistine".

Saul uses the same argument before David that Eliab has used: "you are young, whereas Goliath is an experienced warrior! You have no military training or experience". But David appeals to his having faced lions and bears in Israel (they were indeed there in the days of the Israelite period). David is confident in the power of God to deliver him from "this Philistine", who has dared to taunt the armies of the living God. Again he shows he understands the key issue, which is Goliath's attitude toward God the God's chosen people. Instead of confronting, menacing, killing, taxing and repressing Israel, Philistines could have asked for peace and blessed the people of Israel as the Abrahamic covenant stated (Gen 12:1-3).

Saul allows David to go with his blessing, but tries to impose his own weapons of warfare: bronze helmet, armor and sword. But they were awkward for David, who tried to walk with them but found them an encumbrance. He laid them aside and took only his stick and sling. Having selected from the dry wadi of the valley of Elah five smooth stones that would fit in the sling, he approached (אֶתְּ) the Philistine. The implication is that he is crossing the enemy line that divides the valley. We must not forget the armies of the Benjamites, which included 700 left-handed slingers who could sling a stone at a hair and not miss (Judges 20:16).

The actual confrontation between the two begins in 17:41 and extends to verse 54. The opening section is a series of five wayqtl + stated object statements, each one of them a discourse unit. They suggest Goliath's laborious, plodding movements, in contrast to David's vigorous movements.

- Goliath approaches David with the shield-bearer in front of him
- Goliath looks down at David (literally) and despises him because he is a youth (נָעַר) "youth, boy, young man, teenager".
- Goliath intimidates David with satire and a curse. "Am I a dog...?"
- Goliath curses David by the name of Goliath's dead gods (probably Dagon and Astartes).
- Goliath threatens to give David's flesh to the animals of sky and field.

45 Then **David** said to the **Philistine**,

"You **come** to me with a **sword**, a **spear**, and a **javelin**,  
**but**

I **come** to you in the **name of the LORD of hosts**,  
the God of the armies of Israel,  
whom you have taunted.

46 "This day the **LORD will deliver** you up into my hands,  
and I **will strike** you down  
and **remove** your head from you.

And I **will give** the dead bodies  
of the army of the Philistines  
this day  
to the birds of the sky  
and the wild beasts of the earth,

that **all the earth may know**  
that there is a **God in Israel**,

47 and  
that **all this assembly may know**  
that the **LORD** does not deliver by sword or by spear;  
for the battle is the **LORD's**  
and  
He **will give** you into our hands."

### Denouement

48 Then it happened when the **Philistine** **rose**  
and **came**  
and **drew near**

to meet **David**,  
that **David ran** quickly  
toward the battle line  
to meet the **Philistine**.

49 And **David** **put** his hand into his bag  
and **took** from it a stone  
and **slung** it,  
and **struck** the **Philistine** on his forehead.  
And the stone **sank** into his forehead,  
so that he **fell** on his face to the ground.

50 Thus **David prevailed** over the **Philistine** with a sling and a stone,  
and he **struck** the **Philistine** and **killed** him;  
but there **was** no sword in David's hand.

51 Then **David** **ran**  
and **stood** over the **Philistine**  
and **took** his sword  
and **drew it out** of its sheath  
and **killed** him,  
and **cut off** his head with it.

When the **Philistines** **saw** that their champion was dead, they **fled**.

52 And the **men of Israel and Judah** **arose**  
and **shouted**  
and **pursued** the Philistines  
as far as the valley,  
and to the gates of Ekron.

And the slain **Philistines lay**  
along the way to **Shaaraim**,  
even to **Gath** and **Ekron**.

53 And the **sons of Israel** **returned** from chasing the Philistines  
and **plundered** their camps.

54 Then **David** **took** the **Philistine's** head  
and **brought** it to **Jerusalem**,  
but he **put** his weapons in his tent.

The emphasis in the following paragraph is the highlight of the chapter. It stands in marked contrast to the arrogance of Goliath and belies the false assumptions of Eliab and Saul, who consider David a "youth" and hence incapable of anything significant.

David's statement in 17:45-47 is filled with confidence and faith and spiritual discernment. He believes he will win the contest because God will give him victory.

See the simple faith of a youth as opposed to the arrogant cynicism of the old men in the text: Eliab the big brother, King Saul, and Goliath. Eliab is called the oldest brother (17:28), thus emphasizing the difference in age and the disdain he held for his kid brother. Saul says David is just a youth (17:33). Goliath challenges a man to come to him (17:10) and is insulted that a youth approaches him here (17:42); in the end a boy defeats him. This is certainly an emphasis of the text. **Youth with faith in God defeats age with faith in self.**

- Eliab, the first-born, was self-reliant from his position in the family, as many first-born children are, and showed it in his false accusation that David was merely a pesty curiosity-seeker.

- Saul was self-reliant because he believed David could not possibly fight the battle with Goliath unless he had the standard weapons of human warfare.

- Goliath, the pagan giant, was self-reliant because of his size and human power.

Note the contrasts in the statements:

- Goliath's short words, David's longer words

- Goliath's first words, David's last word

- you come to me, I come to you

- sword, spear, javelin vs. name of the Lord of armies

- "this very day" in 17:10 and here in 17:46. ( הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה )

Note how prominently the Lord features in the statement, not David.

Note the purposes:

- it must be known among the nations that there is a God in Israel

- it must be known among the Jews that God does not deliver by human power because the battle is the Lord's—He delivers the Philistines into their hands.

This statement is really the climax of the story. The confrontation reaches its apex here between the challenge of the false god who looks large and the true God who cannot even be seen but who rescues.

17:48 are really the denouement, not the climax. The action in 17: 48ff plays itself out very rapidly, certainly in a matter of minutes. The Philistine champion lumbers forward and David runs to meet him (he does not flee like the rest). While running he puts his hand in his bag and takes out a stone and slings it with his sling shot into the forehead of Goliath, who catches it in his forehead.

The structure of the section is AXB in verses 49-51, the X of 17:50 (David prevailed...he struck the Philistine and killed him") is a literary insertion so the dramatic effect sinks in. David uses the giant's own scimitar to behead him.

God used David to fight the Lord's battle against Israel's foes despite Eliab's misunderstanding, despite Saul's dissuasive words, and Goliath's insults.

- 55 Now when **Saul** saw **David** going out  
against the **Philistine**,  
he **said** to **Abner** the commander of the army,  
"**Abner**, whose son is this young man?"  
And **Abner said**,  
"By your life, O king, I **do not know**."
- 56 And the **king** said,  
"You **inquire** whose son the youth is."
- 57 So when **David returned** from killing the **Philistine**,  
**Abner** took him and brought him before **Saul**  
with the **Philistine's** head in his hand.
- 58 And **Saul** said to him,  
"Whose son are you, young man?"  
And **David** answered,  
"I am the son of your servant **Jesse the Bethlehemite**."