

HEIGHT THEOLOGY: THE THEOLOGICAL USE OF LEXICAL AMBIGUITY IN THE DAVID AND GOLIATH STORY

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CREATING THE IMAGE OF LITTLE DAVID

We first meet David when Samuel arrives at the home of Jesse, seeking a new king among Jesse's sons: *When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is before Him.' But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord sees not as man sees; for man looks to the eyes, but the Lord looks to the heart'* (I Sam. 16:6-7).¹

In telling Samuel not to look "on the height of his stature," we are led to compare Samuel's mistake in regard to Eliab with his earlier choosing of the tall Saul, but we are also subtly led to juxtapose David with Eliab and Saul, and imagine David to be short.² After the issue of height has been raised in David's absence, we are told: *And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, 'The Lord has not chosen these.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep'* (I Sam. 16:10-11).

In context, David is described as "the youngest" of Jesse's sons. But the Hebrew word employed by the text is not "tza'ir" (youngest)³ but "katan" (smallest), which can refer either to size or age.⁴ It is only at this point that David is presented to Samuel: *And he sent, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome* (I Sam. 16:12).

This is the picture of the handsome young shepherd that we imagine in the David and Goliath tale. David is a boy. We do not know how tall he is, but the text implies that his brother Eliab is tall, and we assume that if tall Eliab is the wrong choice, then David – who is *katan* – must be short. This impression is reinforced further on: *The three eldest sons of Jesse had followed Saul to the battle . . . and David was the youngest [ha-katan]* (I Sam. 17:13-14). Once again,

David is described as being the youngest by employing the word *katan*. This image of David as a young, inexperienced boy is further emphasized by re-

ferring to David as a “lad” [*na’ar*], while Goliath is referred to as a “man” [*ish*] and a “champion” [*ish ha-beynayim*] (I Sam 17:4).⁵

Again, when David stands before Saul, we read: *And Saul said to David, ‘You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth [na’ar], and he has been a man of war [ish milhama] from his youth [mi-ne’urav]’* (I Sam. 17:33). In context, the term *na’ar* clearly means “youth” or “lad”. David is a youth, as compared to Goliath, who has been a *man* of war [*ish milhama*] from his *youth* [*mi-ne’urav*]. But the term *na’ar* also has a broader semantic field, and does not exclusively refer to age as such. It is also used in the Bible to refer to servants,⁶ and in I Sam. 30:17 the term *ish na’ar* is used to describe soldiers.⁷

While the author of the David narrative tells us that David was both a *na’ar* and *katan*, David is never unambiguously described as a *na’ar katan*.⁸ The author does not explicitly say that David was a child or a boy, but rather employs ambiguous terms that convey the image of a young lad, but at the same time, do not expressly contradict the description of David as a soldier, *a man of valor, a man of war* (I Sam. 16:18).

This use of the terms *na’ar* and *katan* to create an impression that may be inconsistent with reality is not without precedent. The same strategy is employed in Genesis to describe Benjamin (Gen. 44:22-34). There, the repeated use of the terms *na’ar* and *katon* emphasize the youth of someone who is clearly not a child. After all, Joseph was sold by his brothers at seventeen (Gen. 37:2), he is thirty when he is brought before Pharaoh (41:46), and the brothers go to Egypt only after the seven bountiful years. Although we therefore know that Benjamin must at least be in his twenties, the use of the terms *na’ar* and *katon* allow us to imagine that Benjamin – the “baby” of the family – is a boy who must be protected by his adult brother Judah.

Our general impression of a small boy comes to fruition when David faces Goliath: *And when the Philistine looked, and saw David, he disdained him; for he was but a youth [na’ar], ruddy and comely in appearance* (I Sam. 17:42).

The David who faces Goliath is just a boy, too small to threaten the giant. There is a theological message here that is pointed out by the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum (I Sam. 17:39) in explaining why David removed Saul’s armor: The miracle would not be seen. Our perception of David’s relative

insignificance is important in emphasizing God's hand in the outcome. The story of "little" David serves the narrative of the mighty God, and of God's role in history.

This message is made explicit when Saul objects that David is a mere youth, while Goliath is an experienced warrior: *And David said, 'The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine'* (I Sam. 17:37). David does not claim any military prowess. Rather, he argues that he will prevail because God will deliver him.

The picture created of the "little" David is perfect. As McCarter so well depicts it:

"Here David is small, apparently defenseless, with none of the bearing or equipment of a trained soldier – the perfect personification of the tiny nation of Judah. And against him stands the gigantic enemy, heavily armed and evidently irresistible, as the enemies of Judah so often seemed. David has no real hope in force of arms, and despite his courage and wit he finally must rely on the one good hope that Judah, too, had in times of danger . . . He means to win the contest so that "all the world will know that there is a god in Israel" (v 46). The theological implications are clear: it is Yahweh who gives victory, and he may give it to the weak (Israel) in order that his power might be known to all."⁹

The description of David has led us to imagine him in a way that serves a clear theological purpose.

CREATING THE IMAGE OF BIG DAVID

DAVID IN THE ARMOR OF SAUL

The image of "little" David is created by the ambiguous descriptive terms used to depict him. But the situations, and David's actions, seem to present a very different David. The image of a small David is belied by a backdrop against which he appears monumentally heroic and physically imposing. Besides his obvious prowess in the field of battle,¹⁰ there are several other elements that imply that David was physically large.

When David arrives at the Israelite camp, our initial impression is of a curious youngster. That impression is reinforced by the reproof he receives from his eldest brother. But those around him seem to take David far more seriously, and report David's conversation with Eliab to Saul (I Sam. 17:31). When Saul sends for David, he initially expresses some doubt as to David's ability to stand as Israel's champion, but his doubt makes no mention of David's size. Rather, he is concerned by David's youth and relative inexperience.¹¹

Of course, one would hardly expect size to be Saul's primary concern, inasmuch as opposite a giant, a few inches one way or the other would not have been decisive. But Saul's next act is telling: *And Saul clothed David with his battle garb and put a bronze helmet on his head, and clothed him in armor* (I Sam. 17:38).

Alter concludes that "David is clothed in battle gear too big for him."¹² In discussing David's removal of the armor, Alter adds "that since this is the armor of the hulking Saul, it is in any case far too big for him."¹³ McCarter goes even further: "This incident gives a lighthearted touch to the narrative, while serving the serious purposes of reemphasizing David's lack of training...on the one hand and calling attention to his vulnerability...on the other."¹⁴ Similarly, McKenzie refers to the "humorous interlude where David tries on Saul's armor".¹⁵ Zakovitch & Shinan draw the same conclusion, stating: "The narrator of our story employs a variety of ways to convince the reader that the victory is indeed achieved by the aid of God: The first is the comic picture of David struggling, with the help of his king, to clothe himself in battle garb, armor and weapons."¹⁶ But if the armor was obviously too big, why did Saul offer it? And what purpose is served by a "lighthearted touch", a "humorous interlude", or a "comic picture" in this otherwise dramatic tale?

Experience tells us that a person will offer his clothing to another only if it looks like it will fit. In offering his armor, Saul is saying something like "you're about my size, why don't you try on my armor?"¹⁷ David does not reject the offer out of hand, as one might expect if the size difference were significant. Instead, he puts on Saul's battle garb, helmet and armor, and even then, he does not say that the armor is too big. Indeed, if it were too big, what need would there have been for an excuse? He would have looked ridiculous, as McCarter, McKenzie, and Zakovich & Shinan suggest. But instead we are

told that David had difficulty moving in the armor, not that he was too small or that it was too large. David says: *I cannot go with these; for I am not used to them* (I Sam. 17:39). This sense that Saul's garb must have fit David prompted the biblical commentator Rashi to explain that Saul's garb miraculously shrank to David's size, and that David's excuse was given in response to his sense of Saul's anger at seeing that his battle garb fit David.¹⁸

Saul's idea is not to make his champion appear silly, which would make the choice of David seem foolhardy, and reflect poorly on the king's judgment. If there were any ulterior motive, it would seem more likely to have been a desire to make David look like Saul so that he might be mistaken for the king on the battlefield. Were David to face Goliath while dressed in Saul's armor, the scene would not be unlike that of Patroclus facing Hector dressed in Achilles' armor.

David's excuse serves three purposes. Firstly, wearing Saul's armor does not serve David's battle plan. As Hillel Millgram notes:

David is wise; he will not try to meet the Philistine on the terms Goliath proposed. As an armored warrior he is no match for the monster, neither in mass nor in fighting skill. Instead he will fight him on his own terms, light, mobile, and with the weapon with which he is familiar.¹⁹

David has no intention of coming within striking distance of Goliath's weapons. Therefore, he does not need the protection the armor might provide him. It would give him no defensive benefit, but it would encumber him and detract from his ability to evade Goliath and maintain the distance that is his strategic advantage.

The second element is that of Saul's suspicion alluded to earlier. This element is referred to in a midrash:

And when he clothed him in his garb, David was short, and Saul was head and shoulders tall, but his garb fit David perfectly, and this was proof that David of blessed memory was fit to be king. When he saw that his garb fit David perfectly, he looked upon him with an evil eye. When David saw that Saul was staring at him, he said to him "No my lord, take your garb, for I cannot go with these".²⁰

The author of the midrash suggests that upon seeing David clothed in regal garb, Saul realizes that David poses a threat to his throne. David must immediately act to undo that impression.

Lastly, the image of David as a formidable warrior clad in the king's armor undermines the theological message of the narrative.

GOLIATH'S SWORD

Another hint at David's size is found soon after the confrontation with Goliath, and refers to it. Fleeing from Saul, David arrives at Nob and requests food and weapons. Ahimelech offers him Goliath's sword (I Samuel 21:9). Presumably, the sword of the giant would have been an unwieldy weapon in the hands of a man of no more than average size.

The narrative does not actually tell us anything about Goliath's sword other than David's statement: *There is none like it* (I Samuel 21:9). We are not told what makes the sword unique. One may conjecture that it was the sword's beauty or balance, that it was particularly light or sharp, or that it was made of iron rather than bronze. In the absence of any description, the reader is left only to draw a conclusion based upon Goliath's size, and the detailed descriptions of his armor and weaponry. Goliath's breastplate is described as bronze weighing five thousand shekels. We are told that the shaft of his spear was *like a weaver's bar* (I Samuel 17:7), that its head weighed six hundred shekels, and as opposed to all of his other equipment, we are specifically informed that it was made of iron. With nothing more to go on, we are left to imagine that the giant wielded a gigantic sword.²¹

It is therefore understandable that Alter, who sees the sword as a kind of Excalibur, important for its symbolic value, simply assumes the sword's great size and attempts to dismiss what he sees as an apparent anomaly: "The fact that this huge sword might be too big for David is submerged by the symbolic notion that it is the weapon of the Philistine champion he vanquished which he now takes up."²²

The implication seems clear: A man big enough to wear Saul's armor, is big enough to wield Goliath's sword. The objection to this depiction of David is not factual but theological. The victory over Goliath would not appear as miraculous if it were achieved by a man who stood head-and-shoulders above

everyone, and was physically capable of brandishing the defeated giant's sword.²³

TWO DAVIDS

First, David is considered a candidate for single combat against Goliath. Second, he is clothed in Saul's armor. Third, when he needs a weapon, he will take Goliath's sword. These three elements portray a different David than we have been led to imagine. This presents a dilemma. Either we find a way to explain how these elements are consistent with a small David, or we conclude that David was large and the text contradictory.

But does the text actually tell us that David was small?

When God refers to Eliab's height, the comparison is not to David, but to Saul. Like Saul, Eliab is tall, and so Samuel is drawn to him as a natural leader. David is not in the room, and so we do not have to wonder about David's size. For all we know, David may be taller than Eliab, but he is absent and therefore cannot be compared. When David arrives, height is no longer relevant. The emphasis shifts to David's "beautiful eyes".

The scene actually tells us nothing about David's size. Instead, it delivers the theological message that God sees differently than humans. We see superficially, whereas God sees our true nature. There is a dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual, between subjective perception and objective truth. David's appearance itself – through the very ambiguity created by the narrator as to David's size – is part of this theological argument.

The ambiguity about David's size serves the narrator in the meeting between David and Saul. Saul is portrayed as seeing a physical David who cannot prevail in battle, thus allowing David to respond with the theological message: *The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine* (I Sam. 17:37). David tells Saul that he is looking at the wrong things. He does not see what is really important.

Then, in the field of battle, this theological point is made more forcefully. Goliath expresses his disdain for David: *Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?* (I Sam. 17:43). Once again, the perception is of the physical, through the eyes. To this, David responds: *You come to me with a sword and a spear*

and with 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 defied...that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with the sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand (I Sam. 17:45-47). The author paints a vivid physical picture of Goliath and of what Goliath sees. David then delivers the theological message. All is not as it seems. You do not see as God sees.

CONCLUSION

How tall was David? It would appear that there is no single answer to that simple question. We imagine that the David who was anointed by Samuel, who appeared before Saul and who was sent out to do battle with Goliath was small. That David could wear Saul's armor and wield Goliath's sword implies that he was very large. Recognizing this, the midrash explains: "Even if a man is short and he is appointed king, he becomes tall. Why? Because when he is anointed with the anointing oil he becomes greater than all others."²⁴ The Bible gives the impression that David was both short and tall without expressly saying either. The descriptions are sufficiently ambiguous to allow us to imagine David either way.

We can approach the David narrative as one in which the heroic David of history is molded into the David of theology. By employing the same linguistic ambiguity used in Genesis to emphasize the youth of an adult Benjamin, the author of the David and Goliath narrative causes us to imagine that David was small while hinting at his impressive height. Through this device, the narrator succeeds in presenting David as the hero of a story in which God is the chief actor. As Alter observes: "One must assume that he [the author] had considerably greater freedom as to what he 'had' to include than did the Genesis author, and therefore that if he chose to combine two versions of David's debut...it was because both were necessary to his conception of David's character and historical role".²⁵

NOTES

1. The Hebrew reads: *ki ha-adam yir'eh la-einayim va-adonai yir'eh la-levav*. The KJV translates: "for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." RSV has: "man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." As will be seen, these translations – while contextually correct and capturing the immediate sense – lose an element of

the Hebrew expressed by the juxtaposition of “eyes” and “heart” that is important to the broader context. Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), translates: “For man sees with the eyes and the Lord sees with the heart.” I have chosen a more literal translation in order to stress the poetic parallelism and grammatical awkwardness of the Hebrew expression, which seems intended to draw the reader’s attention to the idea of “looking to the eyes” before introducing David, who has “beautiful eyes”.

2. Indeed, on this basis, and a conjecture about the possible size of the *teraphim* in I Samuel 19:16, McKenzie speculates that “we may imagine David as a short man” (Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 64-65).

3. See Gen. 25:23, 43:33, 48:14, and Judges 6:15.

4. Thus we find *katan* referring to a younger brother, e.g., Jacob (Gen. 27:15, 27:42); Benjamin (e.g., Gen. 42:13, 42:15, 42:20), Ephraim (Gen. 48:19); and to something small, e.g. Ex. 18:22 (a small matter); I Sam. 2:19 (a little cloak). McKenzie also notes this ambiguous use of the word *katan* in context (McKenzie, *King David*, p. 64).

5. For a different understanding of the term “*ish ha-beynayim*”, see Jeffrey R. Zorn, “Reconsidering Goliath: An Iron Age I Philistine Chariot Warrior,” 360 BASOR 1 (November 2010).

6. E.g., Genesis 22:3; I Sam. 2:15; 25:14; II Sam. 9:9; 16:1; II Kings 5:20.

7. As Alter notes on I Samuel 30:17: “Again, the versatile *na’ar* is not an indication of chronological age but is used in its military sense, which appears to be something like ‘elite troops,’ or perhaps simply ‘fighting men.’” Alter, *The David Story*, p. 186. And see II Samuel 18 where the term *na’ar* is repeatedly used in reference to the rebellious Absalom.

8. This term appears in I Samuel 20:35; I Kings 3:7 and 11:17, and in II Kings 5:14.

9. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *The Anchor Bible, 1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes & Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. 297.

10. See, e.g., I Sam. 18:27.

11. See *Anchor Bible*, p. 293: “Saul objects (v 33) not so much on the grounds of David’s youth and small stature as of his lack of training and experience...David is ‘only a lad’...and not a combatant, whereas the Philistine is a professionally trained and battle seasoned soldier, ‘a warrior since his youth.’”

12. Alter, *The David Story*, 107.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

14. *Anchor Bible*, 1 Samuel, p. 293.

15. McKenzie, *King David*, p. 74

16. Yair Zakovich & Avigdor Shinan, *Lo Kach Katuv Ba-Tanakh* (Tel Aviv: Miskal – Yediot Ahronoth Books and Chemed Books, 2004), p. 191 (Hebrew) (translation mine – A.S.).

17. And see: TB *Yevamot* 76b: “*And Saul clothed David in his own battle garb* (I Samuel 17:38), being of the same size as his, and about Saul it is written, *head and shoulders taller than all the people* (I Samuel 9:2).”

18. Rashi on I Sam. 17:38: “They became David’s size because he had been anointed with the anointing oil, even though they were Saul’s, who was head-and-shoulders taller than all the people. And when Saul saw this, he looked upon him with an evil eye, and David sensed it.” (In giving this explanation, Rashi draws upon the midrash, see, e.g., *Midrash Aggada* (Buber), Lev. 21:15).

Vol. 45, No. 4, 2017

19. Hillel I. Millgram, *The Invention of Monotheist Ethics* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2010), vol. I, 163.
20. *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), Parashat Emor 6, and see *Midrash Aggada* (Buber), Lev. 21:15; *Leviticus Rabbah* (Margulies) 26:9; and see TB *Yevamot* 76b.
21. For a detailed discussion of Goliath's sword, see: Zorn, "Reconsidering Goliath," pp. 9-14, and see also: Stanley Isser, *The Sword of Goliath: David in Heroic Literature* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) pp. 34-37.
22. Alter, *The David Story*, 133.
23. It is not my intention to conjecture as to David's precise height, or the possible height of an Iron Age giant, nor to weigh in on the question of Goliath's height as reflected by the Masoretic Text (six cubits and a span), as opposed to the Septuagint, Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls text of Samuel, and the reading adopted by the International Standard Version (four cubits and a span), and whether any of these descriptions should be taken at face value. I would note, however, that the weight of Goliath's gear cannot serve as a definitive indicator for preferring one figure over the other, bearing in mind that a recent study shows that a modern U.S. marine, although standing well under four cubits and a span, can carry an "assault load" of as much as 135 lbs., and notes: "He is still as heavily burdened as the soldier of 1000 years B.C." *Lightening the Load* (Naval Research Advisory Committee Report (Sept. 2007)) https://www.nrac.navy.mil/docs/2007_rpt_lightening_the_load.pdf. For a discussion of Goliath's height, see: McKenzie, *King David*, pp. 73-74 (who describes Goliath as "just tall enough to play guard or maybe small forward in the NBA"); and see: J. Daniel Hays, "Reconsidering the Height of Goliath," 48 (4) *JETS* 701-714 (2005).
24. *Midrash Tanhuma* (Buber), Parashat Emor 6, and see *Midrash Aggada* (Buber), Leviticus 21; *Leviticus Rabbah* (Margulies) 26:9.
25. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 148.



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