History and Drama in the Story of David and Goliath

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Personal Remarks

It is an honor for me to be able to contribute to this volume of the Reformed Review celebrating Elton's years of service to the Reformed Church. He has played an important role in the lives of so many of us. I will always remember him for his willingness, despite his busy schedule, to listen to the complaints of a group of brash young men and to invest himself in their education. We would hardly have survived in graduate school without his tutelage.

The article that follows deals indirectly with a subject dear to Elton's heart—biblical ethics. The people of Israel thought deeply about what is good and bad, about moral duty and obligation. Some of their most profound thoughts came to expression in their stories. However, these stories are often misunderstood, and consequently their ethical insights have been passed over. In this article I have attempted to provide an example of how Israel's stories should be approached and how these insights can be culled.

The Story

The stories found in the Old Testament do not correspond exactly to any literary type which is familiar to us today. Storytelling is simply no longer practiced in our society as it once was in Israel's. Therefore, if we desire to understand and appreciate Israelite storytelling more fully, we have to analyse it carefully on its own terms. In other words, we have to avoid identifying it prematurely with literary types more familiar to us, and we have to permit the story itself to define the manner and technique of its telling. In what follows I will take what is perhaps the best-known and best-loved of all the Israelite stories, David and Goliath, and will attempt to analyse it on its own terms. It is my hope that this analysis will contribute to a fuller understanding of this story and at the same time provide an example of how the reader can approach other Old Testament stories.

The story of David and Goliath in I Samuel 17:1-54 suits my purposes well for it is of manageable length, and it is self-contained. It narrates the resolution of a specific conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines and assumes no prior knowledge on the audience's part of this conflict or the principals involved. Simultaneously, it narrates the fulfilment of Jesse's threefold command to David. He had ordered his son: 1. to take provisions to Saul's camp for his brothers and their commander; 2. to inquire after the welfare of his brothers; 3. and to bring some token of their welfare back (I Samuel 17:17-18). The first two parts of this command David fulfilled upon arriving at the encampment (I Samuel 17:22) but the third part only at the very end of the story when he brought Goliath's armor to his tent/home (I Samuel 17:54). Being self-contained, the story of David and Goliath is only loosely connected with the surrounding stories. In this story, for example, David is a Bethlehemite.
shepherd unaccustomed to the ways of war, while in the previous story he is a man of war (I Samuel 16:18) already member of Saul’s entourage. Such discrepancies between adjacent stories indicate in all likelihood that they once circulated independently before they were taken up into the larger narrative complexes with which we are now familiar.

Were one to describe how the Israelite storyteller shaped the story of David and Goliath, and were one to describe this in terms of how authors in our society shape their material, then one might venture cautiously the opinion that the storyteller was part historian and part dramatist.

Like a historian the storyteller narrates an event, a specific conflict in the protracted war between the Israelites and the Philistines. We learn from this narrative that in this conflict the same sequence of events was repeated twice daily for a long period of time. Morning and evening for forty-one days, the armies of Israel and Philistia confronted one another; morning and evening Goliath uttered his challenge; morning and evening the Israelites cowered when they heard it. This sequence of events, which for mnemonic reasons I will label: confrontation/challenge/consternation, is reflected in the basic structure of the story. The storyteller records three instances of it, effectively dividing his story into three parts. The structure of the story can be outlined as follows:

Part I

confrontation

1 - 3

The Philistines and Israelites face one another

3 - 7

The appearance of Goliath

challenge

8 - 10

Goliath reproaches the ranks of Israel: give me a man that we may fight together

consternation

11

When Saul and all Israel heard these words, they were dismayed and greatly afraid

Part II

confrontation

12 - 20

The appearance of David in the camp of the Israelites

21 - 22

The Philistines and Israelites face one another

challenge

23

David hears Goliath who speaks the same words as before

consternation

24 - 30

An indignant David converses with the fearful men of Israel and with his angry brother

31 - 39

David volunteers before an indecisive Saul

Part III

confrontation

40 - 41

David and Goliath face one another

challenge

42 - 37

David and Goliath each summon one another to combat in the name of their gods

consternation

48 - 51a

The combat between David and Goliath

51b - 54

The Philistines flee before the Israelites
From our vantage point it is impossible to determine the sources upon which the storyteller may have based his account of this conflict. Some scholars suggest that he had two at his disposal. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures which according to tradition was commissioned by Ptolemy II (ca. 285-247 B.C.E.) in Alexandria, renders verses 1-11; 32-40; 42-48a; 51-54 of our present text but omits the remaining verses 12-31; 41; 48b; 50. Such an extensive omission may indicate that the Greek translators had a different version of the story before them. When one considers that each of these two sets of verses offers a rough account of David's heroic victory, one begins to suspect that each may represent an independent account of it. The verses not included in the Septuagint view the conflict in the light of David's familial relations, and the verses included in it view the conflict in the light of the theme of the efficacy of weaponry. It is plausible that these two sources were available to our storyteller in some form. However, such speculation about his possible sources is ultimately barren; it cannot be verified, and it does not really add to our understanding of the meaning of the story in its present form.

Like a historian the storyteller focuses his attention on an event in the history of the people of Israel. However, in relating this event, he operates more like a dramatist. The storyteller chooses to narrate only certain crucial and exciting moments in the conflict. Unlike a historian he remorselessly passes over most of what transpired with this remark: "For forty days the Philistine came forward and took his stand, morning and evening" (I Samuel 17:16). He tells only of the circumstances surrounding the three pivotal instances of Goliath's challenge, namely his challenge on the first day (verses 1-11), his challenge on the forty-first day, which was overheard by David (verses 12-39), and his challenge to David (verses 40-54), as is clear from the outline given above.

These three instances of Goliath's challenge are not described as a historian would, i.e., in third-person narrative style, but as a dramatist would, i.e., in scenic narrative style. Each instance of the giant's challenge is composed as a scene in which a limited number of characters—Goliath, Saul, and David being the main ones; Jesse, Eliab, and the men of Israel, who speak with one voice, the minor ones—converse and interact with one another. The storyteller uses third-person narrative and in some cases descriptive narrative (I Samuel 17:3-7) with varying frequency in each scene to prepare the way for the more significant conversations and interactions of his main characters.

From these three scenes the storyteller has constructed a well-knit plot. In the opening scene a single, overriding issue is raised which must be resolved. The views of the three main characters in the story regarding the way to resolve this issue emerge in their vexed interactions with one another. These interactions follow a distinct pattern which corresponds to the scenic structure of the story and can be diagrammed as follows:

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 I Samuel 17:1-11
 Scene I

    view of
    Goliath/Philistia

 issue

    view of
    Saul/Israel

 Scene III
 I Samuel 17:40-54

    view of
    David

 Scene II
 I Samuel 17:12-39
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Finally, in the closing scene of the story the issue is dramatically resolved with the view of one party being vindicated and those of the other two exposed.

Let us turn now to the story itself to flesh out this bare skeleton of the plot. We will consider in succession: raising the issue; the view of Goliath/Philistia and Saul/Israel in Scene I; the views of Saul/Israel and David in Scene II; the view of David and Goliath/Philistia in Scene III; and finally the resolution of the issue.

**Raising the Issue**

In ancient times the issue of the mastery of one nation over another, and concomitantly of one god over another, was decided on the battlefield. There the physical and spiritual resources of one nation were pitted against those of the other, and the future mastery or servitude of each hung in the balance. In our story the issue of mastery comes into especially sharp focus. The army of Israel stood on one mountain and the army of Philistia on the other. The battle was about to be fought in the valley between them. Yet this was not to be a conventional battle, for out of the ranks of the Philistines came a single man. No ordinary man was he, but a colossal, heavily-armed champion, Goliath of Gath. He uttered this challenge which would dramatically change the expected course of events:

> 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... I reproach the ranks of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together (I Samuel 17:8-10).

Goliath challenged the servants of Saul to settle the issue of mastery by individual combat. The mastery of one man over another was to determine that of one nation over another and that of one god over another. Israel had no choice but to accept the challenge on Goliath’s terms. To be unwilling to put the mastery of her god, her army, and her prospective champion to this test would be to bear the reproach of the giant, to admit inferiority and to accept the role of servitude without a contest. Mastery then is the overriding issue of this story, and mastery is to be resolved by individual combat.

**Scene I: The Views of Goliath/Philistia and Saul/Israel**

Goliath, the Philistine champion, is absolutely confident that he and his people will prove masters in the pending contest, so much so that he dares reproach the ranks of Israel. Upon what does this confidence rest? Upon the man Goliath himself. In what, to the best of my knowledge, is the most detailed physical description of any found in scripture, the audience learns that Goliath measures six cubits and a span and that he wears a helmet of bronze, a coat of mail weighing five thousand shekels of bronze, greaves of bronze, a javelin of bronze, and a spear whose shaft was like a weaver’s beam and whose tip weighed six hundred shekels of iron (I Samuel 17:3-7). The emphasis which the storyteller places on Goliath’s stature and weaponry is more than sufficient to explain his confidence. Goliath feels he is invincible.
Saul and the men of Israel share Goliath's estimate of the situation. When they heard the giant's reproachful challenge for the first time, "they were dismayed and greatly afraid" (I Samuel 17:12). When they heard the same challenge forty days later, "all the men of Israel... fled from him, and were much afraid" (I Samuel 17:24). Day in, day out, the men of Israel fearfully endured the abuse which Goliath and the men of Philistia heaped upon them because they felt they had no one to match their champion. So great was their fear that even the extravagant rewards which Saul offered to the man who could kill Goliath—great riches, the hand of the king's daughter, and freedom for the house of the volunteer's father (I Samuel 17:25)—were not sufficient to allay it. Debilitated by the fear of Goliath and the reproach he incessantly heaped upon them, the men of Israel were panic stricken and vulnerable before the Philistines. In past wars the Israelites, confident that the Lord had granted them victory, had seen their enemies destroy themselves in terror and confusion before them. Now the roles had been reversed.

Scene II: The Views of Saul/Israel and David

In the second scene of the story an outsider arrives in camp whose assessment of the situation differs radically from that of Saul and the men of Israel. David, a shepherd boy and youngest son of Jesse, had been sent by his father to the camp to take provisions, to inquire after the welfare of his brothers, and to bring some token from them. Fulfilling the second part of this command brought David into contact with Goliath. While on the battle-line inquiring after the welfare of his brothers, David hears Goliath's challenge and experiences firsthand the consternation in the ranks of the Israelites. David's view of this contest for mastery begins to emerge in his subsequent conversation with the man of Israel and with Saul.

David overhears the men of Israel saying the following about the Philistine champion:

A Have you seen this man who has come up?
B Surely he has come up to reproach Israel.
C And the man who kills him, the king will enrich with great riches and will give him his daughter, and make his father's house free in Israel (I Samuel 17:25).

Whereupon David queries:

C What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel?
A For who is this uncircumcised Philistine?
B For he reproaches the armies of the living God (I Samuel 17:26).

In his query, David repeats the three statements of the men of Israel, but he alters them according to his own perspective of the challenge. "The man who kills him" has become "the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach Israel"; "this man" has become "this uncircumcised Philistine"; "to reproach Israel" has become "to reproach the armies of the living God". These alterations reveal that David interprets this contest from a perspective quite different to that of the men of Israel. They see an insuperable, fearsome giant who is reproaching Israel; David sees merely an uncircumcised Philistine who has the audacity to reproach the armies of the living God.
The contrast between David’s words of indignation and the soldiers’ words of resignation did not go unnoticed. Saul was told, and he sent for him. In the subsequent dialogue David’s view of the contest for mastery is contrasted with that of Saul’s. David opens the dialogue: “Let no man’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine” (I Samuel 17:32). Saul, however, is unimpressed with his volunteer: “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth” (I Samuel 17:33). Saul evaluates David solely on the basis of his military potential. Having seen the man of war in all his magnificence, there is no doubt in his mind that a mere youth lacks the ability to do battle with him.

Undaunted by Saul’s assessment of his ability, David attempts to persuade him of his suitability as the champion of Israel’s cause. He does so by telling the king of the triumphal role he once played in a situation which, he feels, is comparable to Israel’s present situation. The sheep of his father had often been threatened by predators, lions and bears, which carried away lambs from the flock. In each case David, their shepherd, had pursued the predator, delivered from his mouth, and killed the beast. Now this same situation had repeated itself on a grander scale. The armies (flock) of the living God (father) were being threatened by a predator (Goliath). David the shepherd again stood ready to pursue, deliver, and kill: “Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, seeing he has reproached the armies of the living God” (I Samuel 17:36). David had triumphed before against seemingly impossible odds and would, he assures Saul, triumph again. However, deliverance would come not through his own ability but through the Lord. This the youth makes perfectly clear to Saul at the close of his speech: “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear, will deliver me from the paw/hand of this Philistine” (I Samuel 17:37a).

The essence of David’s argument is his claim: “the Lord will deliver me”. He had delivered David from beasts in the past, and he will deliver him from this beast of a man. Saul finds this claim persuasive, and he changes his view of the imminent contest completely. Suddenly the “man of war from his youth” does not seem so imposing, and the “youth” seems more able. Saul retracts his earlier statement and says to David: “Go! And the Lord will be with you” (I Samuel 17:37b).

Some form of the phrase “the Lord will be with you” is found repeatedly in stories of Israel’s wars, and it is laden with meaning. From these stories we learn that when the Lord is with a judge/champion, he is tangibly present with him in all his glory and his power in order to fight for him and to deliver him and his people from the enemy, no matter how mighty or how numerous. Saul thus seems to acknowledge that the Lord is with David in this special way.

However, does Saul grasp the full significance of David’s claim, “the Lord will deliver me”, and his response, “the Lord will be with you”? He may have, and then again he may not have. An answer to this question depends on how one interprets Saul’s subsequent gesture:

And Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a helmet of bronze on his head, and clothed him with a coat of mail. And David girded his sword over this armor... (I Samuel 17:38-39).
In the Israelite view of things, clothes and weapons, being close to a man, are imbued with his essence and are therefore very precious. When, in exceptional circumstances, they are offered to another, they, by their very nature, create or strengthen the bond between the giver and the receiver. In the very next chapter of the book of Samuel, we read the following about David and Jonathan:

Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his armour, and even his sword, his bow and his girdle (I Samuel 18:3-4).

If Saul's gesture is to be viewed in this light, then he may be attempting in this scene to form a bond between himself and the youth and in this way to claim a share in the certain success of one who is graced by the Lord's presence. Victory would have been won by David protected by the armor of Saul and wielding the sword of Saul, won thus in part by the king himself. Such a picture of Saul calculating to gain a share of the Lord's favor would correspond to the one we are given of him in other stories. If this was Saul's plan, it was not to meet with success for David, unaccustomed to armor and weapons, put them off, an action which would surely have affronted and estranged the king.

However, the motivation behind Saul's gesture may have been entirely different, and he may not have understood the full significance of his statement, "the Lord will be with you." Saul could be viewed as the ordinary man who through the force of events has to weigh the merits of two extraordinary men. He had to decide whether the awesome man of war, who relied solely on his weapons and prowess, or the resolute youth, who relied solely on the Lord, would emerge from the pending contest victorious. Saul, an ordinary man, was indecisive, finding some merit in both points of view. In coming to a decision, he vacillated, first favoring Goliath (You are not able to go against this Philistine; for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth) and later David (Go! And the Lord will be with you). Clothing David with his armor and weapons may represent a final, tortured attempt on Saul's part to synthesize Goliath's and David's conflicting views and to provide a third one of his own. In short, Saul may have decided in the end that victory could be achieved by relying on a combination of the power of the sword and the Lord. If this interpretation of Saul's gesture is correct, then Saul's third view of how mastery could be achieved, embodied in an armed David, is satirized in the story. For a David clothed with a helmet of bronze and a coat of mail, the exact words used in describing Goliath earlier, is nothing more than a feeble replica of the original.

Scene III: The Views of David and Goliath/Philistia

In the final scene the two main views regarding the issue of mastery that have been gradually emerging in the course of the story are recapitulated and put into sharp focus in the speech which David delivers before Goliath. After the giant, confident as ever in his size and weapons, belittles David for his lack of the very same (I Samuel 17:42-44), the latter retorts:

You come to me with a sword, and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you with the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel whom you have reproached (I Samuel 17:45).
This statement succinctly captures and contrasts the essence of the two points of view. Goliath trusts in his advanced weaponry and David in the name of the Lord. Continuing his speech, David predicts a total, devastating victory over Goliath and the Philistines. The carcass of Goliath will be headless, and the carcasses of the Philistines will be graveless, food for the birds and beasts. The sheer scope of this victory, David says, will lead “all the earth” and “all this assembly” from ignorance to knowledge. All the earth will know that there is a God in Israel, and all this assembly will know that warfare is the province of the Lord, i.e., that the Lord determines the outcome of battles and not weapons (I Samuel 17:46-47). As we shall soon see, the moment of recognition for all the earth and all this assembly is soon to come.

Resolution of the Issue

Both having predicted victory in their preliminary addresses, Goliath and David approach one another. The long-awaited contest will decide the issue of mastery. Two actions in the ensuing struggle dramatically vindicate David and expose Goliath.

Having rejected weapons similar to those of Goliath, David bore a staff, a sling and five smooth stones into battle. Engaging the Philistine, David reached into his bag, drew out a stone, and slung it. The stone struck the giant’s forehead and sank into it, whereupon we hear: “And he fell on his face to the ground” (I Samuel 17:49). This action is pregnant with meaning in the light of what has preceded it in the story. Let me remind the reader of the opening scene in which the issue of mastery was first raised by the Philistine champion. There he challenged Israel to produce a champion and said:

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 (I Samuel 17:9).

In this final scene Goliath fulfills his part of the bargain, albeit unconsciously. The indomitable Goliath bows down like a servant to acknowledge the mastery of David and behind him Israel and behind them the Lord. All the earth, when they hear of Goliath’s obeisance, will know that there is a God in Israel, as David had predicted in his speech.

A second action follows on the heels of this one, and it too is pregnant with meaning. While Goliath lies prostrate on the ground, David runs forward and stands over his only servant. The storyteller describes David’s next act in the following way:

And he took his sword, and drew it out of its sheath, and killed him, and cut off his head with it (I Samuel 17:51).

David kills and beheads the Philistine champion with a sword, that is to say with the Philistine’s own sword, that is to say with the very sword upon which Goliath relied for victory. In one fell stroke, we have a dramatic reversal of Goliath’s expectations. In one fell stroke we have a poignant exposure of Goliath’s view regarding the issue of mastery and the vindication of David’s view. Seeing David kill and behead Goliath, all the assembly, both Philistines and Israelites know, in the fullest sense of that word, that “the Lord saves not with sword and spear” and “the battle belongs to the Lord” (I Samuel 17:47), again as David said they would. The knowledge gained from witnessing these two actions, Goliath doing obeisance and David killing the giant with his own sword, caused the once swelling
hearts of the Philistines to melt and the once melting hearts of the Israelites to swell. The contest for mastery ends with the frightened Philistines fleeing before the exultant Israelites.

One of the potential benefits of the analytical method exemplified in this article is the possibility it affords for uncovering thematic similarities between stories that on the surface appear to be quite different, especially similarities between stories of the Old and New Testaments. I would like to close this article by briefly describing the similarities between the story of David and Goliath and three other stories familiar to the reader.

The story of David and Goliath depicts the total mastery of the Lord, his people and his champion over their Philistine counterparts in no uncertain terms. David inflicts a humiliating and annihilating defeat on Goliath. As we have just seen, the giant is made first to bow down before his masters and then is decapitated. Goliath's humiliation and annihilation remind one immediately of similar circumstances in the story of the capture of the ark (I Samuel 4 and 5). Having defeated the Israelites and having captured the ark itself, the Philistines brought their trophy to Ashdod and placed it before their apparently triumphal god, Dagon. Whereupon, the storyteller relates: "And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord" (I Samuel 5:3a). With a subtle, yet pungent caricature of idolatry, the storyteller continues: "So they took Dagon and put him back in his place" (I Samuel 5:3b). Having taken matters into their own hands, as it were, and having placed their god back on his pedestal, the people of Ashdod encountered this situation on the very next day: "But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him" (I Samuel 5:4). The total mastery of the Lord over the Philistine God Dagon and over the Philistine champion Goliath was portrayed by the respective storytellers in the same way.

The story of David and Goliath in its totality presents a clear picture of how Israel felt war ideally should be viewed and conducted. The statement which David made before Goliath, "the battle belongs to the Lord" (I Samuel 17:47), provides a concise summary of Israel's views. Since the Lord was sovereign over warfare, as indeed over all of Israel's life, only he could grant victory. No matter how strong or numerous the foe, he would decide the matter in favor of his people, if they, like David, put their complete trust in him.

Not surprisingly, this Israelite view of warfare is attested in many other stories about her battles. One of these, the story of Gideon (Judges 6 and 7), contains the very same constellation of themes found in the story of David and Goliath. In each story the Lord's champion is seemingly insignificant. David is but a shepherd boy, and Gideon, who was least in his family and whose clan was weakest in Manasseh, heads a band having been reduced from thirty-two thousand to three hundred men. In each story Israel's enemy appears insuperable. David faces Goliath, a giant with gigantic weapons, and Gideon faces the assembled host of the Midianites, the Amalekites and the people of the East, who were "like locusts for multitude" (Judges 7:12). In each story the Lord's champion bears unconventional, apparently innocuous weapons. David brandishes a staff, sling and stones; Gideon and his band, jars and trumpets. In each story Israel's enemy meets the same fate. Goliath is
slain by his own sword, and the assembled host of the Midianites and company in total disarray set their swords against one another ( Judges 7:22 ).

These themes associated with Israel's view of warfare, attested in the story of David and Goliath and the story at Gideon, reappear in Matthew's account of Jesus' capture in the Garden of Gethsemane ( Matthew 26:47-56 ). The time for Jesus' confrontation with his enemies was drawing near. After having prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that his cup might pass from him, Jesus was seized by a great crowd with swords and clubs led by Judas. One of Jesus' supporters then "stretched out his hand and drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear" ( Matthew 26:51 ), to which Jesus responded:

Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you not think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so? ( Matthew 26:52-54 )

The parallels between David in our story and Jesus in this one provide a basis for a potentially fruitful comparison of the two men and their respective missions. As one of Israel's earlier champions, David refused weapons and relied only on the Lord for victory over his seemingly invincible foe. As one of Israel's later champions, Jesus does the same. Indeed, the maxim which Jesus quotes to explain why he refuses to rely on weapons, "all who take the sword will perish by the sword," may well have been originally coined from reflection on a story like that of David and Goliath.

FOOTNOTES
1 Recently two books on the manner of Israelite storytelling have been published, Jacob Licht's, Storytelling in the Bible, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1978, and Robert Alter's, The Art of Biblical Narrative, London: Allen & Unwin, 1981. The publication of these two books testifies to the growing interest among Old Testament scholars in this subject and signals a definite shift of emphasis within the field as a whole. For the greater part of this century scholars have been absorbed in the task of isolating and analyzing the sources which lie behind the story, and consequently they have neglected the task of analyzing the composition of the story itself. The interested reader will find Licht's books especially lucid and rewarding.
2 An obedient son would not ignore any part of his father's command. David in this story dutifully carries out not only the first two, but also the third part of Jesse's command although this was being overlooked by most commentators. What better token of his brothers, i.e., of their welfare, than the armor of the giant who had been threatening them. At one level David merely fulfills Jesse's command, but at another level he fulfills a higher command. He assumes responsibility not only for his brothers, but also for his Israelite brothers, as he was destined to do. cf. note 5.
4 For more on scenic narrative, cf. Licht, 30-33.
5 The comparison which David draws in this speech between sheep/predator and Israel/Goliath attests to his awakening to a change of role, and the theme of his awakening to a change of role forms a sub-plot in this story. David had been shepherd of his father's flock, but soon he would become the shepherd of the Lord's Israel. In confronting Goliath, David defends the scattered armies of Israel and thereby assumes the role normally belonging to the kind, a role which Saul in this crisis by implication relinquishes. David in actuality supplants Saul, and hereafter their future relationship can only be marred by strife.

David's change of role is implicit in his speech but explicit in the story taken as a whole. When introducing David, the storyteller emphasizes that he was a shepherd ( I Samuel 17:15 ), and his brother later refers to him disparagingly as a keeper of a few sheep in the wilderness ( I Samuel 17:28 ). Yet the storyteller informs his audience in no uncertain terms that David separates himself from this role in order to fulfill his father's command: "And David rose early in the morning, and left the sheep with a keeper, and took the provisions, and went as Jesse had commanded him; and he came to the encampment as the host was going forth to the battle line... ( I Samuel 17:20 ).
David was never to watch over those few sheep in the wilderness again, for while on his mission among the armies of Israel, he assumes in his interchange with Saul the new role of shepherd/champion of Israel. He then proceeds to reject Saul’s weapons and to confront the giant with those of a shepherd, namely his staff, sling, and five smooth stones resting in his shepherd’s bag (I Samuel 17:40). After his miraculous defeat of Goliath, the shepherd/champion of Israel is not allowed to return home but it taken up into the king’s entourage where he continues his miraculous exploits (I Samuel 18:1-7). Thus in this story an important passage in the life of David is depicted: David moves from boyhood to manhood, from being shepherd of the flock to shepherd of Israel, from being a civilian; to being a soldier, from being subject to being leader. cf. Edmund Leach’s discussion of rites of passage in New Testament literature, “Against genres: are parables lights set in candlesticks or put under a bushel?” in Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycock, eds. *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 89-112.


* Sandwiched between the report of Goliath’s falling down (verse 49) and David’s running up to him (verse 51), verse 50 stops the action momentarily and comments on the significance of what has just transpired in the light of the themes that have been emerging. David had rejected Saul’s sword (I Samuel 17:39) for his sling and stones (I Samuel 17:40), and he had just said that all this assembly will know that the Lord saves not with sword or spear (I Samuel 17:47). Now the storyteller comments: “And David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, and he struck the Philistine and killed him (eventually); and there was no sword in the hand of David.” This is the only comment which the storyteller offers in the whole of his story. The rest consists entirely of third-person narrative, descriptive narrative, and scenic narrative. Its placement seems awkward to us because it anticipates the death of Goliath which is not recorded until verse 51, but then our views of what makes a consistent narrative are not necessarily the same as those of the biblical storyteller. The comment is apparently intended to raise the question, if there was no sword in the hand of David, how then did he kill Goliath?, which is then answered in verse 51. Goliath was killed by his own sword.