

1 SAMUEL 17

17:1–2

The valley of Elah is located to the west of Jerusalem between the hill country of Israel and the flat, fertile plains that meet the Mediterranean Sea. The area is broadly known as the Shephelah.

17:4

Goliath was from Gath, one of the five listed cities controlled by the Philistines. Because of this reference here, the name Goliath has become synonymous with giants. If the measurement is accurate, Goliath stood around nine feet tall (274 cm). By way of comparison, André the Giant, a famous wrestler in the 1980s best known for his role in the movie *The Princess Bride*, was seven feet four inches tall (224 cm) and weighed around 520 pounds (236 kg).

The word *champion* literally means “a man between the two armies”—namely, a man who didn’t fight like an ordinary soldier in the ranks. Warfare by champion was known anciently throughout the Mediterranean world. The classic example is the battle between Achilles and Hector in Homer’s *Iliad*.

17:5–7

Goliath was fully armored according to the war technology of the time. His great size and armor would have made him an imposing figure.

The mail coat was probably made of iron scales. Although the exact weight of the shekel at that time isn’t known, the approximate weight of the mail would have been 157 pounds (71 kg). That weight may be

exaggerated to demonstrate Goliath's great strength. The weight of the spear at around 17 to 18 pounds (8 kg) would be possible for a strong warrior to wield and would do considerable damage.¹

17:12–18

The repetition of David's story and family connections is a literary device that may indicate that the original source was an oral history rather than a written one.

Since Jesse had several sons fighting in the war with the Philistines, he sent food for their support and for the general support of the army. He sent David, his youngest son, on the errand with instructions to bring back news about his brothers.

17:22–27

David left his baggage ("carriage") and found his brothers in the war camp. While there, Goliath issued another challenge to fight Saul's champion instead of fighting a battle.

David learned that whoever killed Goliath would become rich and famous, a prelude to God's plan to overthrow King Saul and crown David in his place. David understood this was his chance to prove himself with the people. All agreed that whoever could kill Goliath would become the king's favorite.

David's reference to the "uncircumcised Philistine" (verse 26) makes it clear that Goliath and the Philistines did not follow Jehovah nor His commandments. David's reference to "the living God" (verse 26) demonstrated his understanding of the Lord, apart from all the false gods.²

17:28–29

In a very human moment, David's older brother Eliab got angry with his younger brother and accused him of being proud and of having a wicked heart. This exchange between an older and a younger brother reflects a motif found in other narratives in scripture: with Cain and Able (Genesis 4); Esau and Isaac (Genesis 25); Joseph and all his older brothers (Genesis 37); and, in the Book of Mormon, Laman and Lemuel versus Nephi (1 Nephi 3).

¹ All weights are taken from Bible Dictionary, "Weights and measures," online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

² On the phrase "the living God," see, for example, Joshua 3:10; 2 Kings 19:4; Psalm 42:2; 84:2.

David responded to Eliab, “Is there not a cause?” (verse 29). David understood that Saul’s position as king had been compromised and that Goliath’s challenge was insolent.

17:31–33

The story of David and Goliath represents several motifs: the Lord, through His righteous servants, accomplishes miracles; the Lord is a Divine Warrior whom His people can trust; and the Lord remembers His covenant with His people, even if the people have forgotten it.

The battle between David and Goliath also represents the archetype of the hero who conquers despite the odds. Even today, the phrase “David and Goliath” alludes to the underdog who overcomes great obstacles eventually to prevail.

17:34–37

David recounted his own story of killing a lion and a bear. The story alluded to the heroic deeds of the Hebrew judges, especially Samson. David’s purpose, however, was not to compare himself to the judges but to acknowledge that the Lord had delivered him and would do so again.

David’s assurance in the strength of the Lord is a major theme throughout scripture. It is through the Lord’s strength and purpose that a young shepherd could kill a large and mighty man of war in order to save God’s people.

17:42–46

Boasting and taunting enemies were common practices between armies that stood across from each other with the battlefield between them. In this narrative, however, Goliath boasted of his own strength, but David boasted of the Lord.³ The two pre-battle speeches couldn’t have been more different.

17:47

Even though David and Goliath would fight with traditional weapons, David noted that the Lord “saveth” without weapons of war. The Hebrew *yehoshia’* not only connotes saving from physical harm such as during a battle but also connotes that God would redeem and save His people spiritually. David’s message, like that of Samuel the prophet, was that the people needed to trust in the Lord and not in kings or the weapons of war.

³ For other examples, see 2 Corinthians 10:17; Jeremiah 9:23; and Alma 26:16.

17:56–58

This narrative seems awkward since in a previous chapter, Saul and David had already met. It may be that several years had passed between meetings and that David had grown from a child into a young man.

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