

# David—the man after God’s own heart

## 3. Encounters with Saul

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**T**EXTUAL DIFFICULTIES thought by scholars to have been caused by a mix-up of manuscripts have led to much uncertainty regarding details of the early life of David after his anointing by Samuel. As a result, time periods and sequences have been treated entirely differently by writers and commentators anxious to avoid inconsistencies in the narrative. For example, one well-known writer places David’s encounter with Goliath of Gath before his arrival at court to play music for Saul—which makes even more attractive the suggestion that he was very young and therefore especially brave in accepting the challenge. Others—indeed, the majority—having put first the musical attendances to soothe Saul in his depression, find difficulty with the servant’s recommendation that he was already “a mighty valiant man, and a man of war, and prudent in matters” (1 Sam. 16:18, AV). To address this point, David’s time spent as a shepherd has been lengthened, and David is said to have engaged in skirmishes with Philistine bands and even (according to legend) marauding Bedouin tribesmen.

In this narrative a middle course has been adopted, assuming that the visits by David to court took place both before and after the combat with Goliath. This allows David further time to mature, yet explains the contempt with which his older brothers greeted him when he turned up at the camp.

### Experiences gained

What with travelling north fifteen miles to the royal residence at Gibeah when requested, and his glimpses of life at court, David must have enlarged his outlook and experience to a far greater extent than his older brothers had been able to do, and this was bound to have added to their jealousy of him. But his personal standing and relationship with the king at this stage is hard

to assess in view of Saul’s assessment of him on the battlefield as still “but a youth” (17:33, AV). By way of explanation some have suggested that Saul’s mental disturbances had been accompanied by amnesia towards those who had ministered to him, but this, like all other attempts to rationalise the record, is only speculation.<sup>1</sup>

The climax in David’s early career did not come through events at court, but when— notwithstanding earlier victories by Saul and his son Jonathan—the Philistines attacked the people of God with what they hoped would be a knock-out blow. They had probably heard of the rift between Samuel, the prophet and guide of the Israelites, and Saul their king, and considered the kingdom considerably weakened by it.

Accordingly they emerged from their coastland cities in considerable array and made their stand along the line of a valley and watercourse running roughly east-west some sixteen miles south of Bethlehem, prepared for a pitched battle which they expected to win and thereby bring Israel into servitude. Indeed, so confident were they in their well-armed forces and their champion warrior, Goliath of Gath, that they were prepared to risk all in a preliminary bout between him and a single soldier from Israel, after which their demoralised opponents would surely be put to flight.

### Unwelcome arrivals

In the army of Israel, summoned hurriedly from field and hill, were David’s three oldest brothers, Eliab, Abinadab and Shammah, carrying such weapons as came to hand. What they encountered as they joined their fellows facing the Philistines across the watercourse was a daily confrontation on the enemy side by the largest man they had

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1. For a balanced view of the textual difficulties see Roy Standeven, *The Warrior Tamed*, Roelian Books, 2003, pp. 3-7.

ever seen in their lives. Taking the cubit measurement as eighteen inches, he was almost ten feet tall, and so big in proportion that he dwarfed the armour bearer who carried his shield ahead of him. Moreover, his armaments and accoutrements were such as his enemies could not match. Except for his face, he was armoured from head to toe, wearing a helmet of brass, a coat of mail weighing about two hundredweight, and a metal-corselet to his knees, below which were greaves of bronze protecting his legs and ankles. His weapons equalled the giant in might, with a spear so heavy that it was likened to a weaver's beam (of which the iron head alone weighed about eighteen pounds) and a bronze javelin slung across his back.

Thus equipped, and doubtless with a voice to match, Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel: "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us . . . This day I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other!"<sup>2</sup> It was an early but a striking example of psychological warfare.

With normal human reactions, King Saul and all his men were dismayed and terrified. Even Saul, head and shoulders above the rest, could not consider himself a match for this colossal man, as for forty days, morning and evening, he came forward to make his challenge.

Meanwhile, David was still at home looking after his sheep until Jesse, his father, said to him one day, "Take this ephah of roasted corn and these ten loaves of bread for your brothers and hurry to their camp. Take along these ten cheeses to the commander of their unit. See how your brothers are and bring back some assurance from them. They are with Saul and all the men of Israel in the Valley of Elah, fighting against the Philistines."

### **An unexpected volunteer**

There can be no doubt about the enthusiasm with which David, early next morning, handed over the care of his flock to another shepherd and set

out on the way to Elah. What young man could possibly have refused an opportunity to see two armies drawn up in battle array? And, just in case it were needed, he had brought with him a sling, the only weapon he could muster. He arrived at the Valley of Elah just as Saul's forces moved forward to battle positions, shouting their war-cry as they did so. Leaving his provisions with the man in charge of the commissariat, David quickly found his brothers in the ranks, and even as he spoke to them he saw Goliath come forward on the other side of the stream and, for the second time that day, bellow his defiant challenge. And what dismayed the young visitor was to see the men of Israel nearest to Goliath hurriedly backing away from him in great fear.

He heard the soldiers nearest to him say, "Do you see how this man keeps coming out? He comes out to defy Israel. The king will give great wealth to the man who kills him. He will also give him his daughter in marriage and will exempt his father's family from taxes in Israel." Almost as if he could not believe his ears, David asked those around him to repeat what the king had promised. Then he demanded, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"

Hearing this from his upstart young brother, Jesse's oldest son Eliab turned on him angrily, and asked, "Why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the desert? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle." Thus, with a venom stored up from long-held jealousy, Eliab spoke for the older trio, whereupon David, also demonstrating his long-held realisation of their attitude towards him, rejoined, "Now what have I done? . . . Can't I even speak?"

But the fact was that he *had* spoken, and what he had said had been reported to the king, who immediately sent for him. On his arrival, Saul, to his amazement, heard this lithe young man say, "Let no-one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him."

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2. This section closely follows the narrative in 1 Samuel 17. All quotations from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

[\(To be continued\)](#)