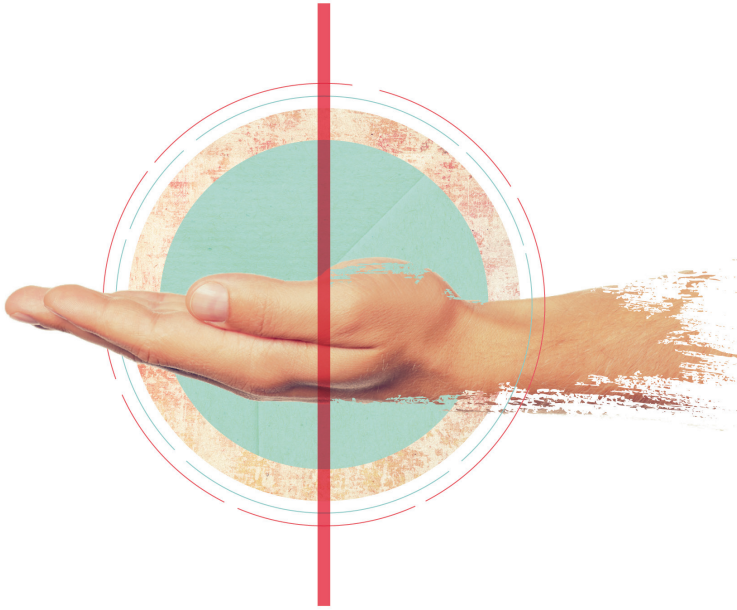


Giant Tales, Underdog Tropes

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We all love the story of David and Goliath—so much that we invoke their names anytime an underdog comes up against a powerhouse, in everything from sports to lawsuits. The account in 1 Samuel 17 is so beloved (and scrutinized) that we tend to find spiritual lessons even in the details: the bear and lion victories, the poor fit of the armor, or the five smooth stones.

When we read the Bible, how should we decide which parts we should apply to our lives and which are simply narrative? Should we, like David, bring our leaders grain, bread, and cheeses (1 Sam 17:17-18)? Should we always ask what is in it for us when we serve (17:26)? As a rule, should we rush into battles (17:48)? And what about those other four stones?

Scripture often guides us to the intended lessons in the narrative. By asking three questions about biblical themes, we can more effectively discern what biblical narratives are communicating. Let's apply this technique to 1 Samuel 17 and the story of David and Goliath.

What themes does the story emphasize?

One theme of 1 Samuel involves the contrasts between fear and courage, weakness and strength. The author often compares the fear that binds Saul and his men with the courage that empowers David. Four times we read of Goliath challenging Israel's troops—and they run away every time (17:11, 16, 24, 32). When they see Goliath, they see only his height and armor. David, however, declares three times that victory resides in God's hands (17:26, 37, 45-47). He sees that the battle is about God's strength, not Goliath's. The author of 1 Samuel wanted us to know this truth, too, so he repeats it often.

What themes connect the surrounding stories?

The incident with David and Goliath is not an isolated event; it happens within a larger narrative. The Bible's authors tell that narrative by weaving together multiple stories and themes.

For instance, one theme that runs throughout 1 Samuel is the faulty nature of human perception. Eli thinks that Hannah is drunk in the house of the Lord (1:14), but in fact she is voicing her earnest plea before Yahweh (1:10-11). Hannah's not drunk; she's devoted. Saul is handsome and literally stands out among the people due to his height (9:1-2), but his confident appearance can't offset his spiritual insecurity. Saul desperately grabs the hem of Samuel's robe, begging the prophet to stand beside him so that Israel will believe that the Lord is still with him (15:26-31).

After God rejects Saul, Samuel notices the impressive stature of David's older brother Eliab and concludes that he must be God's choice to lead Israel (16:6). But on the battlefield, Eliab's response to David reveals the heart of an angry coward (17:28-29). All these elements serve to highlight the contrast between David's unimpressive physical appearance and his overwhelming heart for God (16:12; 17:45-47).

What themes connect this story with other parts of the Bible?


When we look at a single story against the backdrop of the entire Bible, we discover patterns we might have missed otherwise. David's story in 1 Samuel calls our attention to God's habit—seen all throughout Scripture—of choosing unexpected people to advance his purposes.

The joy we find in the David-and-Goliath contest comes from the unlikelihood of a boy taking down a seasoned warrior (17:33). David is so young and small that, a chapter earlier, when God sends Samuel to anoint one of Jesse's sons as king, Jesse doesn't even think to summon David for consideration (16:10-11). Even when Samuel asks again, Jesse refers to David as "the youngest," using a Hebrew word that most often means "smallest" or "most inconsequential" (see 2 Sam 12:3; 2 Chr 34:30).

David's anointing and his triumph over Goliath remind us of other unlikely people whom God chooses throughout the Bible. He selects a childless couple, Abraham and Sarah, as the starting point for his chosen people. He chooses Jacob over Esau, and Joseph over his brothers. He calls on stammering Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. He chooses Amos the shepherd,

Mary the teenager, and Peter the fisherman. Saul, persecutor of the church, becomes Paul, proclaimer of the gospel, who writes:

The foolish things of the world God chose ... and the weak things of the world God chose ... and the insignificant of the world, and the despised, God chose ... so that all flesh may not boast before God (1 Cor 1:27-29).

When we face decisions, our tendency is to focus on the most beautiful, successful, and obvious options. David's story and the greater narrative of the Bible show us how God's approach is different. He embraces options that often seem unlikely: the small, the weak, the not-so-significant—in other words, people just like us. And in doing so, he creates opportunities for our weakness and frailty to reveal his glory. 

Scripture quotations are from the Lexham English Bible (LEB).



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