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Q&A#34 Should We Read the Story of David and Goliath Primarily as an Underdog Narrative?

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Today's question: "Was David's victory over Goliath a miracle? Was he really an underdog or was this a case of misperception as to who was the favorite? We know it is not uncommon for smaller people to defeat larger people in fights."

Within this episode I recommend Peter Leithart's commentary on 1&2 Samuel, 'A Son To Me', available for purchase here: <https://amzn.to/2oo0HG0>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, was David's victory over Goliath a miracle? Was he really an underdog? Or was this a case of misperception as to who was the favorite? We know it is not uncommon for smaller people to defeat larger people in fights. The story of David and Goliath has become synonymous with underdog victories within our culture, but I don't think this is the main point of the story within 1 Samuel.

Within 1 Samuel, the point of the story is more about marking out David as the true leader of Israel, than it is about David being the underdog and some miraculous victory being given to him over the Goliath, the Philistine. The point of the story is that Israel has a giant, and Israel's giant does not stand against the Philistine giant. Rather, David is the one who stands against the Philistine giant.

We've already seen Saul being identified as head and shoulders above all the other Israelites. He is marked out by his sheer stature. He is a tall man.

He's a man that's imposing height. And yet he does not stand against this enemy of the people of God. It would seem that he is the natural leader of the people, the natural giant to stand against the Philistine's giant, but he fails at this point.

And this is in a series of failures, just the latest one of Saul's failures to follow the word of God, failure to act in the way that he should have done. Saul has already been tested near the beginning of his reign against Nahash, whose name means serpent. And he stands against him and defeats him.

But now there's another serpent-like figure, one who's dressed in scaly armor, and he fails to stand against this one. This one who would seem to be his counterpart among the Philistines. This story also draws our mind back to the story of the conquest of the land.

Goliath comes from Gath, and the Anakim were the giants of the land. They were driven away from the land by Joshua. And they ended up in the cities of Gath, in Gaza and Ashdod.

And Goliath comes from Gath. He seems to be a descendant of the Anakim, who have not yet been wiped out. And so Saul has this calling, just as he has a calling to act against the Amalekites.

And he fails in that. And now he fails to complete the calling of Joshua against the Anakim, the giants of the land. Now David is the one who stands as the true heir of Joshua, the one who can look like the good spies and see that the land is ready for the taking, to see things in terms of God's vision.

And this story is less about being an underdog than it is about seeing things in God's eyes. And so seeing things through God's eyes. So in the original conquest of the land, the bad spies came back and they just saw the giants and were scared of them and had a sense of their inability.

The wise spies came back and they gave a report of the land being ready for the taking and the knowledge that God was with them changed the way that they viewed things. And David here exhibits that sort of faith, that sort of confidence in God's word. And in the process, he marks himself out as the true heir of Saul.

Now, Goliath stands against the people in the Valley of Elah for 40 days. This might draw our minds back to the testing of Israel for 40 years in the wilderness. A testing associated with their failure to enter into the land, their failure to stand against the giant.

And so as they're carrying in fear in the Valley of Elah, they are also replaying the

carrying of fear of Israel in the wilderness, failing to enter into the land and having to wait for 40 days for deliverance until Joshua enters into the land and leads them into the victory over the giants. Here they have a similar experience. There's also something that anticipates Christ's coming.

The enemy of the people standing against them for 40 days. David is anointed the chapter before and now the serpent figure stands against him and Israel for 40 days. Jesus is anointed in the Jordan in his baptism.

And then he is tempted for 40 days in the wilderness or fast for 40 days and is tested by Satan. And so we see parallels there as well. This is a significant way to bring these two stories into correspondence with each other.

Saul offers David his armour. That is another significant thing. David is taking on the part of Saul here.

And he doesn't wear Saul's armour, but he is marked out as the true Saul. He's also someone who defeats the serpent with a slingshot and a stone. Benjamin, the tribe of Benjamin, were renowned for their gift with the slingshot.

And we see that in Judges 20, I think it is. And David here uses the Benjamite weapon. In many respects, he is taking the part of the Benjamite Saul.

The Benjamite Saul who is failing in his office. So he stands against the giant, just as the Israelite giant should have stood against Goliath. He is the one who drives out the anarchy from the land, the anarchy about to take over the land, just as he is the one who will stand against the Amalekites.

He is the one who also uses the Benjamite weapon. And he's the one who crushes the serpent's head. This one dressed in scaly armour has his head crushed and his head removed.

And so David is marked out as the true Benjamite, the true king of Israel. He's marked out as the true heir of the throne. He's marked out as the true Joshua.

He's marked out as the one who will crush the serpent's head, the seed of the woman. And in all of these respects, that helps to characterise David. It helps to characterise Saul in certain respects.

And it helps to frame what will happen next, the conflict between David and Saul that occurs in the chapters that follow. And so I think this is a more helpful way to approach that chapter rather than thinking of it in terms that are more familiar to us within our culture of the underdog victory. Another context might be David as Joseph.

That David is sent by his father to his brothers who are out in the field doing the work, as

it were, whether that's tending the sheep or fighting in battle. And then he ends up being the one who's going to inherit and the one who's going to rule over his brethren and they reject him. And so there are similar themes playing there.

And so we see throughout the David story, there are a number of points where we see connections. David is connected with the wise spies, the good spies entering into the land. And we see that elsewhere in the story of Michael and Saul as Michael delivers David through the window down by a cord that is playing out similar themes from the story of Rahab and the spies.

We see the connection between David and Jacob. Jacob is the one who... The tensions between Laban, his father-in-law, and David, and we see these playing out with David and Saul. And then also with David and Nabal, Nabal whose name is a reverse of Laban.

And many of the themes that are playing out in that story are playing out themes that should be familiar from Genesis 30, 31, these sorts of chapters. And so as we read the story of David, I think it will help us as we see these deeper themes in scripture, and don't just come to it with our fairly basic categories of underdog victory. There's a lot more going on than that.

Goliath is a giant. Goliath is a serpent. He gets his head crushed.

He is driven out of the land. And he's a Philistine. The Philistines are associated with the Egyptians.

They come from the same people as we see in Genesis 10. And so when we've got all those themes together, there's a far richer framework within which to read what's going on. Likewise, Saul's victory over Nahash, a serpent figure whose name is associated with serpents, and then David's victory over Goliath, another serpent figure dressed in scales, having his head crushed.

These things mark out the leaders of Israel. And these characters are playing off against each other. And so I think this is the best way to approach the passage.

There's a lot more going on there, and it's worth digging into it. I recommend something like Peter Lighthouse's commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel, Samuel, a son to me. I'll leave the link to that below.

And I'd highly recommend that you read that book if you'd like to get into some of these deeper themes within the book of Samuel. Thank you. If you have any further questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account.

If you would like to recommend these videos to friends, thank you very much. It's a blessing to have people watching these videos and benefiting from them. And I want to particularly thank those of you who have supported me on my Patreon account.

It's made it possible for me to do these videos on a more regular basis. And if anyone would like to support me using my Patreon account, I'll leave the link for that below too. I hope to be back tomorrow, and if you have any further questions, please bring them forward.

Thank you.