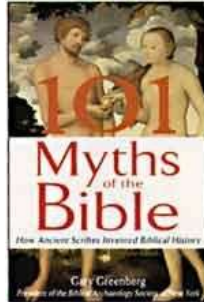# Myth 96: David Killed Goliath

(NOTE: The following material is a draft of a chapter from **101 Myths of the Bible** *and may vary slightly from the published version.)*

The Myth: And the Philistine [i.e., Goliath] came on and drew near unto David; and the man that bare the shield went before him. And when the Philistine looked about, and saw David, he disdained him: for he was but a youth, and ruddy, and of a fair countenance. And the Philistine said unto David, Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves? And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. And the Philistine said to David, Come to me, and I will give thy flesh unto the fowls of the air, and to the beasts of the field. Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. This day will the LORD deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcases of the host of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. And all this assembly shall know that the LORD saveth not with sword and spear: for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hands. And it came to pass, when the Philistine arose, and came and drew nigh to meet David, that David hasted, and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine. And David put his hand in his bag, and took thence a stone, and slang it, and smote the Philistine in his forehead, that the stone sunk into his forehead; and he fell upon his face to the earth. So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and smote the Philistine, and slew him; but there was no sword in the hand of David. Therefore David ran, and stood upon the Philistine, and took his sword, and drew it out of the sheath thereof, and slew him, and cut off his head therewith. And when the Philistines saw their champion was dead, they fled. *(1 Sam. 17:4151.)*

The Reality: The real killer of Goliath was Elhanan, who belonged to "The Thirty," King David's elite fighting cadre.

The story of how young David armed with only a slingshot and stones defeated a well-armored giant Philistine warrior named Goliath has become one of the most famous tales in all the bible. The slain enemy's name has become a synonym for "huge" and the phrase "David and Goliath" has become a literary cliché for a confrontation between opponents of unequal strength.

Unfortunately, David didn't kill Goliath, and he wasn't a youth when Goliath died.

According to the King James translation of *2 Sam. 21:19,*

> And there was again a battle in Gob with the Philistines, where Elhanan the son of Jaareoregim, a Bethlehemite, slew *the brother of* Goliath the Gittite, the staff of whose spear was like a weaver's beam.

Although this translation says Elhanan slew *the brother of* Goliath, the words "the brother of" do not appear in the Hebrew text. The actual wording of the passage says that Elhanan slew *Goliath,* not his brother.

The addition of these words in the English translation came about for two reasons. One, the translators didn't want to contradict the earlier story attributing the act to David, especially since David is so dramatically linked to Christ in Christian tradition. (Christ's credentials as Messiah, according to biblical prophesies, depend upon his descent from David.) Two, the author of *1 Chr. 20:5,* written centuries after the verse in *2 Sam 21:17* and faced with the same contradiction, wrote,

> Elhanan the son of Jair slew *Lahmi the brother of Goliath* the Gittite, whose spear staff was like a weaver's beam.

The English translators, relying on *1 Chr. 20:5,* inserted the words "the brother of" into *2 Sam. 21:19.*

Several clues indicate that later redactors gave David credit for what had originally been attributed to Elhanan.

In the version crediting David, after Goliath is slain, Saul says,

> Whose son is this youth? And Abner said, As thy soul liveth, O king, I cannot tell. And the king said, Inquire thou whose son the stripling is. *(1 Sam. 17:55.)*

If David were the killer, Saul would have known who he was because David was already a favorite in the royal court.

> And David came to Saul, and stood before him: and he loved him greatly; and he became his armourbearer. And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, Let David, I pray thee, stand before me; for he hath found favour in my sight. *(1 Sam. 16:21-22.)*

If David found favor in Saul's sight, how could Saul not know whom he had just sent out to fight with Goliath?

After David killed Goliath, the text says that he brought the head to Jerusalem, but during Saul's reign Jerusalem was in the hands of the Jebusites. It didn't come into Israelite hands, according to the bible, until after David became king. This suggests that in the original story David was already king when Goliath died.

Coincidentally, in the version crediting Elhanan with killing Goliath, David is already king, and Elhanan is a member of David' elite fighting group known as "The Thirty."

The Elhanan version also retains some of the original mythical flavor of the contest. It is one of a sequence of four short stories about individual members of "The Thirty" killing four different giants. Interestingly, in the introductory verse to these four stories about Elhanan and the others, we are told that "David waxed faint," had grown tired.
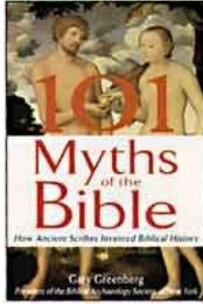
Although Elhanan's father is called Jaareoregim in the verses about Elhanan's victory over Goliath, the listing of the members of David's "Thirty" calls the father Dodo. Since the other three giant killers also belong to "The Thirty," this is the clearly same Elhanan. The connection between Elhanan and Dodo may have been the inspiration for crediting David with Elhanan's triumph. In Hebrew, the name Dodo is spelled *DWDW* and David is spelled *DWD.* The two names are virtually identical and stem from the same root, meaning "beloved." Dodo and David are also both called Bethlehemites, adding another reason why there may have been confusion over the killer's identity.

Another indication that the pro-David version of the story borrowed from the Elhanan source comes from the contextual appearance of Goliath's name. Throughout the David story, the name Goliath only appears twice. The several other references to this warrior simply describe him as "the Philistine" or "the Philistine of Gath." The manner in which Goliath's name appears suggests that it was a later insert into the story. For example, in *1 Sam. 17:23,* the text reads,

> And as he talked with them, behold, there came up the champion, the Philistine of Gath, *Goliath by name,* out of the armies of the Philistines, and spake according to the same words: and David heard them.

Since the bible had already given Goliath's name earlier in the story and had already described his great prowess, the phrase "Philistine of Gath, *Goliath by name"* the addition of the words "by name" sounds artificial.

Originally, the slaying of Goliath was one of a collection of tales in which many heroes slew giants. Elhanan was one of these valiant warriors as were other members of "The Thirty," many of whom were credited with such victories. "The Thirty" itself may have been a mythical group much like Arthur's Knights of the Round Table. As David became the greatest hero of the Judean court and Judeans were eager to believe their founding king capable of great deeds, his substitution for one of the other giant killers took no great suspension of credibility.

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