

Certainly, in the biblical framework, an important dimension of leadership is skill and courage in battle, and David's possession of these qualities is presented as unambiguously as possible in his first appearance on the national scene. We hear that the armies of Israel and the Philistines are arrayed on facing hilltops. Coming forth from the Philistine ranks is one Goliath of Gath, described as standing at a height of "six cubits and a span," which would put him at more than eight feet tall. This giant offered to take on a champion from the Israelite army, the winner of this single combat determining the outcome of the war: "If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us" (1 Sam. 17:9). As if the giant's stature was not intimidating enough, we are told how impressively Goliath is accoutered for war, a description that can only be characterized as "Homeric" in its specificity: "He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron" (1 Sam. 17:5–7). And if we are not yet sufficiently impressed by his martial might, we hear that a servant carries Goliath's great shield before him.

Probably more than any other figure in the Scriptures, Goliath, armed and defended by the most sophisticated military technology of the time, symbolizes the power that worldly rulers can muster. He is an anticipation of, and avatar for, Alexander, Caesar, and Stalin. I cannot help but see a connection between this extraordinary array of coverings on the body of Goliath and that first covering of leaves that Adam and Eve used to hide their nakedness, for the former is, in a way, but the full flowering of the latter. Once we step into the world of sin, we must adopt an attitude of suspicion vis-à-vis our fellows, defending ourselves and remaining constantly prepared for battle.

God's love is more powerful than all of the negativity of the sinful world.

All of Saul's army shrank from the challenge, and Goliath humiliated Israel with further taunts. At this juncture, young David, who had been carrying provisions from his father to his brothers at the front, became cognizant of the situation and eagerly inquired, "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Sam. 17:26). Significantly, these are the first words spoken by David in the Bible, and as is often the case in these scriptural narratives, the opening speech of a hero gives a strong indication of his character. Judging from his first lines, young David is ambitious, fearless, ready to act, and devoted to the Lord. This basic disposition will indeed remain more or less intact for the entire arc of David's life.

Indignant at the effrontery of the giant, David volunteers to take him on, and the young man is brought to the king. At first, Saul is incredulous: "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." But David protests that, as a shepherd, he successfully fought off lions and bears, and adds, with considerable bravado, "this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them" (1 Sam. 17:33–36). Persuaded, Saul endeavors to outfit the young man with the king's own armor, but David is unable to move under such weight and so encumbered. This is a key indication that this battle will be between worldly power and the higher power of God. Gathering a few stones from the dry creek bed, David goes out, simple sling in hand, to meet the armored titan. Shocked at David's youth and small stature, and certainly more than a little insulted that Israel would have chosen such a pathetic champion to confront him, Goliath cries, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks? . . . Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field." But David reveals the source of his power: "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied" (1 Sam. 17:43–45). And in short order, David slings a stone that embeds itself in the giant's forehead, and the prodigious warrior falls unconscious to the ground, at which point David decapitates Goliath with the Philistine's own sword. The clear implication of this memorable narrative is that the power of God is greater than even the most impressive military force mustered by human beings.

This motif, of course, is a commonplace in the Bible. Though the Scriptures certainly present a good deal of military conflict, and though Israel at times is fairly bloodthirsty, it is remarkable how often the incapacity of Israel is emphasized and the power of God working through its armies is brought to the fore. One thinks, for example, of the paltry band of 300 soldiers that manages, under Gideon, to win the day; or of the battle described in the tenth

chapter of Joshua, during which the stones hurled by God killed more than were killed by the sword; and perhaps most famously, of the conquest of Jericho which, as we saw, was accomplished not by arms but by a kind of liturgical enactment. Thus, apart from the active presence of God, the victory of an adolescent boy, armed only with a slingshot, over an armored giant, is unthinkable.

And all of this points toward the battle that is the culminating event in the history of salvation, the contest that took place on a cross erected on a squalid hill near a quarry outside the walls of Jerusalem. Arrayed against Jesus was the full might of both the Jewish and Roman establishment. The deeply unjust decisions of both the Sanhedrin and Pontius Pilate were backed up by the Roman soldiers stationed in the Antonia Fortress adjacent to the temple, and a coterie of armored Romans conducted Jesus to the instrument of torture that symbolized Rome's intimidation of its enemies. The condemned man was stripped naked and then nailed to the cross, a naked David going out against fully accoutered Goliath. But the power wielded by the crucified Jesus was apparent in His words, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). For the divine forgiveness is greater than anything that is in the world; cruelty, hatred, violence, injustice, and plain stupidity are swallowed up in the mercy of the God of Israel. What the first Christians understood in the wake of the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is that David had definitively defeated Goliath, that God's love is more powerful than all of the negativity of the sinful world.

Paul's ecstatic "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God" is a consequence of this victory (Rom. 8:38–39). Paul knows this because the sinful world killed God, and God returned in forgiving love: the shalom (peace) of the risen Christ (see John 20:19, 21). Jesus indeed came out against Goliath, not with the weapons of the world but "in the name of the Lord of hosts" (1 Sam. 17:45).