

1 Samuel 16; 17: Appearance or Reality?*

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As in the case of other memorable figures of the Old Testament such as Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the call of David constitutes not only a turning point in his own life, but also a significant advance theologically in the progress of revelation. The purpose of this study is to consider the anointing of David as (future) king of Israel and the two events which immediately follow it in the text in order to understand the literary and theological dimensions of this narrative.

Before concentrating on the first two chapters of 1 Samuel in which references to David are found, a brief review¹ of the structure of the books of Samuel is in order. We suggest that one of the fundamental themes around which this work is oriented is that the ruler of God's people must be a man after God's own heart, whose election and elevation to eternal rule will be due exclusively to God's efficacious intervention (1 Sam. 13:14; cf. Acts 13:22). Saul, of course, is the negative example while the

shepherd-king constitutes the positive (and definitive, at least for the Old Testament) model. As far as the progression of the narrative is concerned, the book of 1 Samuel begins with the divine preparation and even miraculous procreation of the prophet Samuel in view of the divine judgment on the priestly family of Eli (1 Sam. 1-4). This material represents, from a literary perspective, not only a historical introduction to the subsequent narrative, but a theological orientation to the major message of 1 Samuel: the election and preparation of David in view of the divine judgment upon the royal family of Saul (1 Sam. 13-2 Sam. 4). The greater part of 2 Samuel traces the fortunes of the Davidic dynasty from its establishment in Hebron over Judah and then over the entire nation in Jerusalem through its near overthrow in a series of tragedies and rebellions, rooted ultimately in David's own sins, to its final consolidation. Thus, although Jesse's youngest son reveals himself to be a man capable of failures equal to, and perhaps even greater than, those of Eli and Saul, this person and his "house," while judged by God, are purged and purified rather than finally overthrown.

Turning our attention now to 1 Samuel 16 and 17, we find that these two chapters are composed of three events that seem to be unrelated: the anointing of David, a youthful shepherd, as the future king of Israel by the prophet Samuel (who, after performing this final official act, plays virtually no further part in these chapters, not, excepting his brief appearance to Saul in 1 Sam. 28:15-19, in the rest of these books); the invitation extended to David, the skillful musician and "all-around" Israelite, to the court of Saul to soothe the monarch's psychological distress; and finally the battle between Israel and the Philistines in which David, once again portrayed as a youthful shepherd, unexpectedly arrives at the scene of battle and carries the day by slaying the enemy champion. Of course, David is a common denominator in each of these pericopes, but he can be considered the protagonist only in the latter portion of chapter 17, while in the earlier passages he is more or less passively involved in the action or activity described.²

Moreover, not only do these various events seem to be quite unrelated to one another, as can be seen by the fact that Samuel, then Saul, and finally Goliath are spotlighted by the text as leading figures, but also there seems to be a significant degree of tension between the second and third

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¹For helpful surveys of recent perspectives on the books of Samuel and relevant bibliography, see Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979, 263-280, P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *1 Samuel*, Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1980, 3-44, and D. Gino Bresan, *Samuele*, Rome, Marietti, 1960, 1-53. For a succinct presentation of the overall structure of the book of Samuel, see Yehuda T. Raddy, "Chiasm in Samuel," *Linguistica Biblica*, Heft 9/10, October, 1971, 21-31.

²Other common denominators are likewise present in each of these three pericopes. Saul, for example, is first portrayed as the rejected king, then as the afflicted monarch, and finally as an impotent and incapable general.

of them (16:14-23 and 17:1-58). In the second passage which deals specifically with David, he is introduced to the court of Saul and wins the favor of the king to such an extent that he is virtually made a permanent member of the royal staff. In the third, however, David, when presented to the king both prior to and following his combat with Goliath, is apparently not recognized by Saul, who seems unaware of his name or his family. In light of such considerations, it is little wonder that critical scholars have sought either to dismember the text and/or declare this or that part (or the whole!) of it as nonhistorical. While not pretending to be able to resolve successfully every tension in the narrative as it now stands, it is our conviction that as a whole it exhibits a fundamental coherence, especially from a literary and theological point of view (though by this it is not implied that its historicity is indefensible³). However, before we can proceed to an examination of these three events which, we hope, will highlight this literary and theological coherence, we must address the textual problems present in the passage.

I. 1 SAMUEL 17: MT OR LXX?

Unfortunately, a good deal of doubt exists concerning the text of the books of Samuel. The scholarly consensus is expressed by McCarter as follows:

The received Hebrew text of Samuel in its Masoretic dress (MT) is in poor repair. It is a short text, but its shortness is not the wholesome shortness of a text free of expansion and interpolation; rather it is the result of countless copying errors and omissions, some of them extensive, scattered throughout the book.⁴

³See below. It is interesting to note that chapter 16 opens and chapter 17 concludes with a reference to violent death. When God instructs Samuel regarding his mission, the prophet objects that Saul will kill him (16:1), and Goliath's death at the hands of David is recorded toward the end of this section (17:50, 51).

⁴McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 5. With this judgment the Catholic commentator Bressan is in substantial agreement, though he indicates that these numerous errors have by no means obscured the fundamental sense of the narrative: "E' ormai un luogo comune il dire che pochi libri del V.T. hanno sofferto, nella secolare trasmissione del testo, quanto Samuele . . ."

"Val la pena notare subito un fatto. Il nostro apparato critico apparirà ampio, invadente anzi, in modo sconcertante: chiaro segno del triste stato di conservazione del testo, come or ora dicevamo. Ebbene, chi avrà la pazienza e la curiosità di percorrerlo per intero, avrà chiara la prova della conservazione mirabile del sacro libro per quanto riguarda la sostanza. Vedrà come le innumerevoli corruzioni non

Regarding the passage under consideration, chapter 17 is substantially different in the Vaticanus manuscript of the Septuagint, containing as it does only verses 1-11, 32-40, 42-48a, 49, 51-54. Both Bressan and McCarter maintain that the text underlying the Septuagintal version of Samuel goes back to a Hebrew textual tradition different from the Masoretic, and that each instance in which a difference is evident between the Masoretic and Greek texts must be carefully examined in order to determine which is in fact the original reading.⁵ In other words, any given reading must be evaluated on its own merits and the resulting, critical text of the books of Samuel will be eclectic in nature. However, while McCarter favors the Vaticanus' text as original, at least as far as chapter 17 is concerned, Bressan opts for the Masoretic here.⁶

It is our conviction, first, that the absence of an external control means that literary (and theological!) considerations must be carefully weighed.⁷ Since the textual traditions contrast, and since there is no other known historical narrative available by which to check the contents of this passage,⁸ only a careful reading is likely to indicate which, if any, of its parts are in fact fundamentally irrelevant to its overall sense and thus

mutino ne la fisionomia storica dei fatti, nei contenuti dottrinali. Ne solo nelle proporzioni generali, ma anche nei singoli episodi. Si avrà un dettaglio, una notizia, una sfumatura in più o in meno: non altro" (Bressan, *Samuele*, 6, 7).

In the light of this consensus it is surprising to read Fokkelmann's statement that "the Masoretic text form is rather sound and requires much less intervention than is usually assumed and practiced" (J.P. Fokkelmann, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Volume 1: King David*, Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981, 8). He claims that "the reliability of the Hebrew text renders a consultation of the old versions as a source of inspiration or change almost superfluous. The Septuagint alone serves occasionally as support . . ." (*ibid.*, 448, 449) and contrasts the 400 corrections to the text of the books of Samuel as translated in the Jerusalem Bible with the twelve modifications that he has introduced in the section 2 Samuel 9 - 20 and 1 Kings 1, 2.

⁵ . . . There are several ancient witnesses that compete for the attention of the modern text critic, each with a claim to originality at any given point in Samuel. . . . At times the MT must be followed, at other times the LXX⁸; often both must be rejected in favor of the evidence of the LXX¹ and/or the scrolls" (McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 8).

⁶*Ibid.*, 306. Bressan, *Samuele*, 251-253.

⁷H. Jason analyzes 1 Samuel 17 according to the categories of folk epic and on this basis argues for the authenticity of the Masoretic text against that of the Septuagint. See his article, "The Story of David and Goliath: A Folk Epic?" *Biblica* 60, 1979, 36-70.

⁸"Since controlling historical data are meager, how are we to go about testing the priority of the one block of material over against the other?" (Simon J. De Vries, "David's Victory over the Philistine as Saga and as Legend," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92, 1973, 24).

inherently improbable as part of the original narrative. The following factors in our opinion point to the Masoretic text as the original, regardless of the corruption it has suffered in matters of detail:

(1) The smoother character of the Vaticanus text is seen by a number of scholars to be of a very suspicious nature. DeVries states:

... There can be little doubt but that the LXX does contain a simpler and more cohesive account than that of the MT. It is not immediately apparent, however, that the Greek text is superior in the sense of being earlier or more original, in spite of confident claims to the contrary on the part of a number of recent scholars. It is very probable that the Hebrew recension on which the Greek text is based was created in an effort to improve by omission a confused and conflated Vorlage that was substantially the same as our present Hebrew text.⁹

(2) That which is considered by critical scholars to be one of the most prominent inconsistencies of the Hebrew text is not, in fact, absent from the Septuagint. Jason notes:

We find additional support for the opinion that the longer Hebrew text is the original in the discrepancy which remains in the Septuagint reading. I am referring to verses 33-41. Here David is still a youth, a shepherd, not knowledgeable in war, while in chapter 16, 21 (also present in the Septuagint), he is already Saul's armour-bearer, in other words, a soldier, or at least a trainee.¹⁰

(3) Regarding 17:12-31, we feel that this text evidences a literary and theological perspective consistent with the preceding narrative (especially 16:1-13). David is associated with his father's flocks, while his brothers, already described by means of the same verb earlier used of Saul, are brought into close relation to the king in that they join themselves to his army.¹¹ More specifically, the response of Eliab to David found in 17:28 contains two key terms crucial to the preceding narrative: "heart" and "see." Chapter 17 would suffer noticeably, moreover, if verses 12-31 were excised as secondary additions, since verse 24 develops the emphasis of verse 11 and, perhaps even more significantly, verse 26, the first time in all of Scripture that David himself is heard to speak and virtually the central verse in the entire Goliath episode (verses 1-54), contains the

⁹*Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰Jason, "The Story of David and Goliath," 67.

¹¹In chapter 16 God states that He had "rejected" (רָשָׁה) Saul and also that He has rejected Eliab. In chapter 17 the rejected brothers of David follow (evidently upon their own initiative) the rejected king!

first explicit reference to God in this entire passage. All of these considerations in our opinion argue unequivocally for the authenticity of verses 12-31.¹²

II. 1 SAMUEL 16:1-13: THE ELECTIVE ANOINTING OF DAVID

Having given some attention to the textual problems of the passage, we wish now to examine each of the three pericopes in these two chapters to grasp their fundamental structure and essential meaning. Following the dual rejection of Saul, first in a dynastic (13:13, 14) and then in a personal sense (15:22, 23), God's command comes to the grief-stricken prophet:

How long will you grieve over Saul, seeing I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons (16:1).¹³

¹²It seems that at least one of the reasons some critics prefer the Septuagint to the Masoretic text of 1 Samuel is related to the seeming inconsistencies and doublets present if the Masoretic readings are retained. However, we would insist that problems of historical harmonization must be kept separate from questions of literary authenticity. Further, as Jason points out, "too many narrative elements and events are duplicated in the Bible for them to be explained away as a chance, mechanical combination of earlier sources" ("The Story of David and Goliath," 60).

In regard to other verses in this chapter A. R. Ceresko stresses the symmetry and balance of 17:34-37 which obviates the need for textual emendation as proposed by McCarter in his commentary. See his article, "A Rhetorical Analysis of David's 'Boast' (1 Samuel 17:34-37): Some Reflections on Method" (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, 1, January, 1985, 59-74). While Ralph W. Klein regards 17:12-31, 50, 55-58 and 18:1-5 as "a series of excerpts from one or more alternate accounts," he insists: "Since these additions are not internally consistent nor do we know their extent or their non-canonical function, it is futile to interpret them separately from their present context. . . . The best way to interpret these verses is to note their function in the recension of MT and not in a hypothetical and indeterminable non-MT version" (*Word Biblical Commentary 10: 1 Samuel*, Waco: Word Books, 1983, 174).

¹³All the quotations of the biblical text are taken from the Revised Standard Version. In the verse cited here, note the verb רָשָׁה (translated by the RSV as "I have provided") where רָשָׁה ("I have chosen") would have been expected. Of course, this immediately orients the discussion around the theme of perception as well as that of divine election and rejection. Martin Kessler, in "Narrative Technique in 1 Samuel 16, 1-13" (*Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32, 1970, 549, 550) comments: "In verse 1 Yahweh had said (to Samuel the ro'ei) ra'ity . . . melek (I have seen . . . a king). When Samuel saw Jesse's family, his eye fell on the oldest son, Eliab: wayyar' et-ely'ab (and he saw Eliab). In fact the key root r'h (to see) illustrates superbly the progress of the narration. Thus in 7 the imperfect yir'eh occurs three times to express the contrast between Yahweh's and man's way of seeing. . . ."

Samuel, however, fears to implement this divine command,¹⁴ at which point God suggests to the prophet a tactic by which he can legitimize his mission. Upon arriving in Bethlehem, Samuel is met by fearful village leaders¹⁵ whom he reassures by reference to the sacrificial purpose of his visit. Jesse and his sons are invited to the sacrifice and the prophet assumes that the eldest is God's choice. Before he is able to carry out the symbolic act of anointing this son, however, God warns him:

Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart (16:7).

As each of Jesse's sons passes by the prophet, the same divine prohibition makes itself felt in the mind of Samuel. The strangeness of the situation leads him to ask if all the family has indeed been summoned, and he discovers that the youngest had been left to tend the flocks. Ordering him to be called immediately, Samuel anoints David upon the latter's arrival, in response to the divine command. This first passage concludes noting the coming of the Spirit of God upon David and Samuel's departure to Ramah.¹⁶

Theologically, the key motif is that of divine election and rejection: Saul has been rejected, as are Jesse's seven eldest sons, while David is chosen.¹⁷ In relation to this motif the principle expressed in verse 7 cited above explains the basis of God's choice: not according to a perception

¹⁴"Samuel's fear that his journey to Bethlehem would arouse Saul's mistrust is connected with the geographical situation. If Samuel goes from Ramah to Bethlehem he must pass through Gibeah of Saul" (H. W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel*, London: SCM Press, 1964, 137).

¹⁵Hertzberg suggests that their fear was related to their knowledge of the discord between Saul and Samuel (*ibid.*, 137), but W. Eichrodt affirms: "The people receive the coming of the man of God with anxious terror, for fear that he may bring hitherto overlooked and unpunished sin to God's remembrance" (*Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967, 395).

¹⁶In closely associating these two events, our author seems to affirm that only now can Samuel really retire, since the Spirit has come to rest upon David. Note also how Samuel's filling of his horn with oil indicates the beginning of this, his most important act of ministry, while its emptying is associated with the coming of the Spirit on David and thus the final fulfillment by Samuel of his prophetic mission. Kessler comments (*Narrative Technique in I Samuel*, 552): "The horn filled with oil occurs at the beginning and the end and thus serves as an indication of the limits of the pericope, a device which is called *inclusio* or ring composition."

¹⁷We have already noted the repetition of the verb "reject" (כָּסַף) in relation to both Saul and Eliab (note 11, above). It is important to recognize, however, that the rejection of these individuals is in reference to a specific ministry, that of kingship

of the physical or visual dimensions of reality (all too often the deciding factor in human selection), but according to essential spiritual realities.¹⁸ Yet while this principle governing divine election is presented clearly enough, it is by no means evident why God's choice fell on David, since in these verses we catch but a fleeting glimpse of him, and only as he appeared outwardly to human eyes (verse 12)—the one factor that had already been explicitly excluded as the ground of God's decision (verse 7)! It seems evident, then, that this text was never meant to stand alone, but finds its necessary clarification in the subsequent events which are narrated in chapters 16 and 17. Before turning to them, however, 16:7 merits particular consideration.

III. THE INTERPRETATION OF 1 SAMUEL 16:7

We have already noted in 16:7 the divine reaction to Samuel's assumption that Jesse's firstborn, Eliab, was the one God intended as Saul's replacement. The words of this verse, so familiar to all students of the Old Testament, deserve careful consideration not only because of their significance but also because of the problems involved in their correct interpretation. First, two textual emendations are customarily suggested in relation to the Masoretic text. *לֹא בְּאֵשׁ* is to be corrected to *לֹא בְּאֵשׁ* and *וְיָרָא הָאֵלִים* is to be inserted between the two occurrences of *וְיָרָא הָאֵלִים*.¹⁹

Assuming the correctness of such textual emendation does not, however, resolve all of the questions associated with the interpretation of this passage. The last half of the verse, which contrasts man's perspective with that of God, makes reference to the eyes in relation to the former and to the heart in relation to the latter. It is commonly assumed that the first term, *עֵינַיִם*, accompanied as it is by the preposition, *בְּ*, should be understood as the object of the verb *וְיָרָא* and thus translated as "[outward] appearance" rather than according to its more literal and common meaning, "eyes."²⁰

rather than to eternal salvation in a New Testament sense. It is also worthy of note that 16:7 virtually transforms Eliab into another Saul, since it is implied that they have in common an imposing stature; and future events (the Goliath episode) will subsequently associate these two once again in a negative fashion: Both Saul and Eliab who resembles him are reduced to helplessness (if not speechlessness, 17:28!) by the Philistine champion.

¹⁸As 1 Samuel 2:35 and 13:14 had already indicated.

¹⁹S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1913, 133.

²⁰The Septuagint evidences such an understanding of this expression, as its rendering *εἰς πρόσωπον* makes clear.

While such a translation seems reasonable, especially in view of the Bible's frequent figurative use of language, Henry Preserved Smith noted that:

עַיִן is difficult, because it does not occur elsewhere in this sense—though nearly so in Leviticus 13:5 and Numbers 11:7(?), cf. Leviticus 13:55 cited by Driver. It must be contrasted with עֵינָיִם; as the latter must mean (Yahweh looks) at the inner man (cf. BDB, s.v.) we need an expression meaning at the outer man. . . .²¹

It would appear, however, that such a translation of the term risks obscuring several preceding passages in which there is an explicit reference to the eyes and to certain unfortunate consequences related to a course of action associated in some way with them. Lasine notes:

Both Genesis 19 and Judges 19 are preceded by stories in which someone acts according to what is "good" or "right" in his or her eyes and violence is the result. In Genesis 16:6 Abram tells Sarai to do what is good in her eyes to Hagar, whereupon Sarai "abuses her" or "treats her so violently" that she has to flee from her mistress. The verb used here (*inna*) is also used to describe the rape of the concubine in Judges 19:24. In Judges 16:3, Samson chooses a wife from the Philistines, because she is "the right one in his eyes." Although Yahweh is actually behind Samson's choice (16:4), Samson's choosing on the basis of what is right in his eyes soon leads to violence, and eventually to his eyes being poked out.²²

He goes on to comment that "the topsy-turvy world described in Judges 17-21 demonstrates that doing what is right in one's own eyes is often the same as doing what is evil in Yahweh's eyes."²³

Turning our attention next to the book of 1 Samuel itself, in the very first chapter we find yet another instance of visual perception which leads to a false judgment: Eli the priest, seeing Hannah's lips move but hearing no accompanying sounds, hastily condemns her for her presumed drunkenness. But the truth of the matter, as the narrative immediately makes clear, is quite otherwise, for she is in fact a woman in the very act of struggling with God and prevailing (1:12-17). Then, in the case of King Saul's violation of the priestly office, Israel's first monarch attempts to justify, or at least excuse, his action by saying: "When I saw that the people

²¹H. P. Smith, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1904, 146.

²²Stuart Lasine, "Guest and Host in Judges 19: Lot's Hospitality in an Inverted World," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29, 1984, 54, n. 17.

²³*Ibid.*, 55, n. 19.

were scattering from me . . ." (13:11). Here again, as in the case of Eli, a perception of the visual dimension of reality leads to a mistake, but this time with evidently irreversible negative consequences.²⁴ The perceptive reader who keeps all this in mind recognizes, then, that God is warning Samuel in 16:7 against adopting a visual perspective as the sole or primary criterion of judgment which in Israel's past had proved—for both of his predecessors in the office of judge (Samson and Eli), for the king and the nation as a whole—so erroneous and, ultimately, disastrous.

In the light of these considerations, it would seem at least equally possible to translate the preposition *al* as indicating "the principle with regard to which an act is done."²⁵ To our knowledge, the only scholar who has applied to this text such an alternate (but documented) use of this preposition is B. D. Eerdmans, who, on the basis of Ezekiel 12:12 and other texts, argues for the sense of 1 Samuel 16:7b as "to see with the eyes or to see with the heart."²⁶ Thus the contrast between God's seeing and man's is not only a difference regarding the object contemplated, but even more significantly a difference in relation to the faculty employed—in man's case the eyes, but in God's case the heart.

The probability that such an understanding of this verse is correct is, we believe, increased not only by the fact that *עַיִן* can be rendered according to its more common meaning, but also by the references to the heart of God as the ultimate standard according to which men are measured. In 1 Samuel 2:35, in the context of a prophetic oracle of doom, Eli is told that after the judgment of his family and its removal from the priestly office, the Lord "will raise up . . . a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and mind." Then, in 13:14, when Samuel announces to Saul his disqualification as the founder of Israel's royal dynasty, he adds that "the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart; and the Lord has appointed him to be prince over his people." In both of these passages the heart of God is clearly a reference to His fundamental character and the

²⁴1 Samuel 13:13, 14.

²⁵F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1907, 516, S. j. (b) (although they do not include 1 Samuel 16:7 as an example of such a use of this preposition).

²⁶B. D. Eerdmans, "DeGedachte-Zonde in Het O. T.," *Theologische Tijdschrift*, Leiden: S. C. Van Doesburgh, 1905, 310-314. "The statements about the 'heart' of God are worth thinking about, because they always concern God's relationship to man. The heart of God is most often mentioned as the organ of God's distinct will, against which man is judged" (H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974, 55).

norm which will govern the selection of His future human servants in the priestly and royal offices. We believe, then, that such an understanding of this verse is grammatically permissible, textually probable and, in the light of literary and theological considerations, preferable. At the same time we would add that an adequate understanding of 16:7 includes both a reference to the objects of perception ("Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature," 7a), and the contrasting faculties of perception ("eyes" versus "heart," 7b). In fact the object contemplated invariably indicates the respective faculty employed.

IV. 1 SAMUEL 16:14-24: THE HUMAN SELECTION OF DAVID

After the account of David's anointing by Samuel and his reception of the Spirit, the narrative abruptly shifts its focus to Saul, who has been abandoned by that Spirit.²⁷ The king's courtiers accurately diagnose their sovereign's malady, however, and suggest that a search be initiated to find a musician capable of soothing him during his crises. Upon receiving an affirmative response, one of the royal servants volunteers the name of an appropriate candidate, one who from every point of view possesses the necessary qualifications for this important yet delicate task: David, the son of Jesse. Thus David is called by the king, proves his worth and is (eventually?) made a permanent member of the royal staff.

The main point of this passage, then, centers on the choice of David, but in this case by man rather than by God, and because of his complete suitability for the task to which he has been appointed. It is instructive to note the parallels between this and the preceding section, for a high degree of correspondence emerges:

16:1-13 God and His servant

Saul rejected but mourned

The divinely directed mission of the prophet of God to the family of Jesse

The rejection of others and the choice of David for hidden reasons by God

David favored by God and endowed with His Spirit's constant presence

16:14-23 The King and His servants

Saul sick but assisted

The humanly directed search of the servants of the king toward the family of Jesse

——the choice of David by man for obvious reasons

David favored by Saul and permanently in his presence²⁸

²⁷Note how David's skillful playing (v. 23) is efficacious to such an extent that it succeeds even in overcoming (if only temporarily) the pernicious effects of the evil spirit and, in fact, driving that spirit away from the king.

²⁸Chapters 16, 17 could be understood from another perspective as three "di-

The theological dimension of 16:14-23 underscores the role of the Spirit of God and a spirit from God in the life of Saul.²⁹ The departure of the former exposes the king to affliction by the latter, though the precise nature of the distress or its visible manifestation is not specified. David's skillful playing, in any case, invariably exerts a comforting influence on Saul and the king's ready acceptance of David upon his arrival closely parallels the Lord's indication of David as his choice immediately upon his arrival before Samuel (v. 21, cp. v. 12). While it is not explicitly affirmed in 16:14-23 that the Spirit of the Lord was upon David (though such was stated in the closing verse of the previous section), the concluding comment in the description of David by one of Saul's servants ("and the LORD is with him," v. 18) certainly points in that direction.³⁰ These two passages which comprise chapter 16, then, for all their apparent diversity, are unified not only by the principal figures of Saul and David, but also

lemma" passages: (1) 16:1-13—the prophet's dilemma (what to do in view of the divine rejection of Saul?); (2) 16:14-24—the dilemma of Saul's servants (what to do in view of Saul's mental illness?); (3) 17:1-58—the nation's dilemma (what to do in the face of the Philistines' overwhelming challenge?). Whether or not these three distinct, though related, dilemmas are arranged according to a scale of increasing seriousness, David is clearly portrayed as the key to the resolution of each one.

²⁹The writer distinguishes between the "Spirit of God" (רוח יהוה) which departed from Saul and "an evil spirit from the Lord" which began to afflict him (רוח רע יהוה). While a comprehensive consideration of the dimension of the spirit lies outside the scope of this paper, the following points are worthy of mention: (1) Saul's experience of the Spirit of God seems clearly to reflect that of the judges (especially Samson—compare 1 Sam. 11:6 with Judg. 14:6 and 1 Sam. 16:14 with Judg. 16:20). At the same time, however, Saul's affliction by an evil spirit to a certain extent anticipates the experience of Ahab (1 Kings 22:19-23), though the specific consequences of this spiritual opposition were different. (2) In sharp contrast to all of this, David's experience of the Spirit of God seems very different from that of Saul and the judges: First, the coming of the Spirit on David was not evidenced by any immediate manifestations of its presence. In fact, even in chapter 17 there is little if any indication of a sudden charismatic outburst; obvious, however, is David's unshakable confidence in Yahweh's victory against the pagan challenge. Further, and even more significantly, the coming of the Spirit on David is in some sense definitive. Not only is there no reference to such a coming of the Spirit upon any of the subsequent kings of Israel or Judah (even in the case of those who are credited with having followed him most closely, Hezekiah and Josiah), but the Spirit is never said to have left David, not even in his darkest moments. Finally, the prophetic hope of the Old Testament is consistently and invariably Davidic in character and so the coming of the Spirit of God upon the Lord Jesus at the moment of his baptism by the last of the prophets is a clear indication that in him the Davidic promises find their fulfillment.

³⁰Thus, at an implicit level the text seems almost to suggest that in the person of David the Spirit of God again drew near to the king, whom He had previously abandoned.

by their common theme of the "election" of David, first by God through His prophet and then by the king through his servants,³¹ and as well by reference to the activity and presence or absence of the Spirit/spirit of God in the lives of both of these individuals. At the same time the choice of David by God remains enigmatic, in contrast to the evident reasons which resulted in his promotion to the royal court. Thus 16:1-13 remains incomplete and this incompleteness serves to direct the attention of the reader to the following events (chapter 17).

V. 16:14-23: CHRONOLOGY AND HISTORY

The chronological relationship of the second half of chapter 16 to the rest of the narrative is probably the most difficult problem of its kind in either of the books of Samuel and has been the subject of numerous conjectures. H. P. Smith states flatly: "No supposition will enable us to harmonize this statement (16:18) with the earlier part of this chapter, and with some parts of 17."³² While taking for granted the impossibility of any satisfactory harmonistic solution, several recent attempts to interpret this section seem more concerned with the essential contribution of this material than with their strict logical or temporal consistency in relation to the rest of the narrative. Robert Alter approaches the problem literarily in the following manner:

Logically, of course, Saul would have had to meet David for the first time either as music therapist in his court or as giant-killer on the battlefield, but he could not have done both. Both stories are necessary, however, for the writer's binocular vision of David . . . if (the author) chose to combine two versions of David's debut, one theological in cast and the other folkloric, it was because both were necessary to his conception of David's character and historical role.³³

He goes on to note R. Gros Louis' interpretation, which is more explicitly psychological in character:

. . . The two interpretations of David correspond to two different aspects of the future king which are reflected in his relationship with Saul and which will remain in tension throughout his story—the private person and

³¹Note also the verbal parallel between 16:1 and 16:18: Both God and one of the servants of Saul say, referring to David: "I have seen (וָיִרְאֵה) a son of Jesse. . ."

³²H. P. Smith, *Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, 149.

³³Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York: Basic Books, 1981, 147.

the public figure. Saul, in his different roles as troubled individual and jealous monarch, responds in different ways to these two aspects of David. "Saul the man can love his comforter and recall the refreshment brought to him by his music; Saul the king cannot bear to hear the Israelite women singing, 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.'"³⁴

It should be added that the text's own explicit references to Saul's disturbed mental condition provide at least a partial legitimate explanation for any apparent divergence between 16:14-23 and 17:32-39 and 55-58. To dismiss this as a desperate attempt at the forced harmonization of the biblical text fails to ascribe full weight to the seriousness of the king's psychological and spiritual malaise, which is underscored by the fact that no one in the entire royal administration was adequately equipped to deal with it.

In our opinion, however, the most satisfactory attempt to deal with this passage is the interpretation offered by John T. Willis in his article "The Function of Comprehensive Anticipatory Redactional Joins in 1 Samuel 16-18."³⁵ He postulates:

. . . the use of relatively brief paragraphs, sentences, and phrases by a redactor to introduce a main theme, a major point, or a series of important themes which the traditions that he has inherited reveal in the following complex or unit.³⁶

After a succinct survey and evaluation of scholarly approaches to this conundrum, Willis notes nine specific elements in 16:14-23 that find precise parallels in the following narrative³⁷ and concludes:

These comparisons, along with a study of the nature of the text in 1 Sam. 16-20, give the impression that what is said in 16:14-23 in terse, concise, capsule form is said in more expanded, detailed, and sequential forms in chapters 17-20. It seems logical to conclude from this that a redactor (in the case of 16:14-23, probably the final redactor) inherited the

³⁴*Ibid.*, 147, 148. The last sentence in the quotation cited is from Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, "The Difficulty of Ruling Well: King David of Israel" (*Semeia* 9, 1971, 22, 23).

³⁵ZAW 85, 1973, 294-314.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 295.

³⁷16:14 and 16:16 in 18:10 and 19:9 (the evil spirit and David's playing); 16:18 in 17:12 and 17:58 (David a son of Jesse); 16:18 in 17:33 and 18:5 (David a man of war); 16:18 in 17:37; 18:12, 14, 28; 20:13 and 2 Samuel 5:10 (the Lord "with" David); 16:19 in 17:15, 34 (David a keeper of sheep); 16:21, 22 in 18:2 (David in Saul's service); 16:22 in 18:13 (David a commander in Saul's army).

traditions which now appear in 1 Sam. 17-20 (either in their present order and approximate form, or more likely, separately). These traditions made a certain theological impression on him, which he desired to share with some group in Judah which was interested in factors contributing to David's rise, or with some group whom he wished to convince that David was Saul's legitimate successor to the throne because he was divinely chosen (16:1-13), directed, and protected (ch. 17-20). In order that the emphasis which he wished to convey might be clearly understood by his audience, he prefaced this material by his own introduction in which he summarized the major relevant themes of the traditions which he was preserving, viz., 16:14-28.³⁸

The question regarding the strict historicity and thus the truthfulness of the passage presents itself at this point. Did not then the events recorded in 16:14-23 occur in the fashion and at the moment that a strictly consecutive reading of the text would imply? To this we would respond by noting that virtually all of the significant elements contained in these verses did in fact occur, if the subsequent narrative of 1 and 2 Samuel is accepted. This would bring the technique of our author or redactor close to that of the evangelists in the New Testament.³⁹ Further, James Barr, in his critical evaluation of fundamentalism, makes the important distinction between truth as correspondence to external reality and truth as significance,⁴⁰ a distinction to which conservative evangelicals (to use his term) have not always been sensitive. We believe that 16:14-23 is "truthful" in the fullest sense of the term because of its high correspondence to the following material (as demonstrated by Willis) and thus according to its essential significance in the narrative (to use a concept advanced by Barr).

VI. 1 SAMUEL 17: THE VINDICATION OF DAVID'S ELECTION— THE ENCOUNTER WITH GOLIATH

The narrative concerning David to this point has evidenced tensions in personal relationships: Samuel's fear of the king; the elders' anxious reception of the prophet; the rejection of seven of Jesse's sons and the choice of the youngest; and the mental problems of Saul. Only in chapter

17, however, does open conflict occur, and in several dimensions. First, the contest between Israel and the Philistines presents the reader with a classic example of strife in the Old Testament in a political-military sense. Second, the relationships between Jesse, David, and Eliab illustrate, in the case of the first two, the themes of parental authority and filial piety, but in the case of the last two that of sibling rivalry,⁴¹ conflict on the personal level, and that in the context of the family. Finally, the dialogues between David and Saul on one hand, and between David and Goliath on the other, exhibit respectively a loyal subject's service to his sovereign and the implacable opposition of the faithful subject of Yahweh to an aggressive paganism, even though it be of superhuman proportions.⁴² Thus, we see David in the context of family, political, military and spiritual relationships.

As interesting and important as all these themes are, however, the central issue with which this study is concerned revolves around the significance of chapter 17 for the preceding narrative, and especially in relation to the account of David's election. In connection with that event we noted that a central element, indeed the fundamental principle, involved the criterion according to which God chose him who was to serve as the king of His people. The emphasis was upon spiritual rather than physical, material, or visual standards. How, then, does David's conflict with Goliath relate to this fundamental principle, and in what way does this event validate God's selection of David as opposed to, for example, any of his brothers?

As chapter 17 unfolds, while Israel is locked in combat with the Philistines,⁴³ David is described as faithfully fulfilling his familiar role as

⁴¹The parallel to the story of Joseph and his brothers is obvious.

⁴²Note the "Do not fear" with which David begins his address to Saul (v. 32), his insistence that, though young, he is by no means inexperienced (vv. 34ff.), and his reliance on the deliverance of God with which he concludes his remarks (v. 37). Also note the implicit parallel between the pastoral and military dimensions, between David as the faithful caretaker of helpless sheep and as the courageous defender of the people of God ("the sheep of His pasture!" as a psalm put it) against an arrogant aggressor.

⁴³The reference to the Philistines brings to mind the first record of Saul's conflict with them (chapters 13, 14), which was also the occasion of his failure and subsequent disqualification as the founder of a royal dynasty in Israel. Thus the Philistines furnish, if not in every, at least in several cases the occasion for fatal steps downward in his life and career: partial victory and dynastic disqualification (chapters 13, 14); complete incapacity and immobility (ch. 17); and final defeat, death, and disgrace (ch. 31). Moreover, it was the Philistines who frustrated, by their untimely invasion, Saul's near apprehension of David (23:25-28).

³⁸Willis, "Anticipatory Redactional Joins," 302.

³⁹It would seem, for example, that John has deliberately removed the account of the temple cleansing by our Lord from its actual historical setting in the final week of his ministry to a time much earlier in his gospel for specific theological reasons.

⁴⁰James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, London: SCM Press, 1977, 49.

the family shepherd. Regardless of the chronology of 16:14ff., it seems that David's anointing has not "gone to his head," and we do not find him making yet any preparations for that day when he will exchange the flock of his earthly father for that of his heavenly One. Obedient to Jesse's instructions, yet without abandoning his pastoral duties,⁴⁴ he travels to the battle front in search of his brothers.⁴⁵

VII. CONTRASTING REACTIONS

No sooner does David arrive at the scene of battle than he witnesses the challenge flung down by Goliath to the Israelites. The reaction of Saul's troops indicates their desperate condition psychologically, for at his mere appearance⁴⁶ they fall back in disarray and dismay (v. 24).⁴⁷ Overwhelmed by the physical stature and provocative self-assurance of the Philistine champion, Israel's army faces not simply defeat but virtual disintegration. David, by contrast, seems strangely composed, though by no means complacent. Overhearing talk of the reward that king Saul has offered for the one who would successfully meet the Philistine in combat,⁴⁸ David inquires further, expressing almost as an afterthought his opinion of Goliath. In view of the fact that, as we have already noted, this is the very first time in all of Scripture that David is heard to speak, his words here assume a particular importance.⁴⁹ It is worth noting that in this entire

⁴⁴He is careful to entrust the sheep to others (17:20). The reference to his departure in the early morning in this verse recalls Abraham's ready obedience at a most critical point in his life (Gen. 22:3), the preparations for the crossing of the Jordan (Josh. 3:1), and (less happily) the attempt of the unbelieving Israelites to reverse their decision to refuse the promised land (Num. 14:40).

⁴⁵It is interesting to note that on this errand David is to be a messenger of "peace" (שלום, vv. 18 and 22).

⁴⁶גִּלְיָת, which recalls the גִּלְיָת of 16:7. Of course, the explicit reference to Goliath's exceptional height (גָּבוֹהַ) in 17:4 is a clear reminder of the rejected criterion of human stature as the basis of the divine choice in the preceding chapter.

⁴⁷In both verses 11 and 24 reference is made to the "great fear" (תַּרְסָא בְּאֵד) of the Israelites before Goliath, but in the latter of these two verses their fleeing from him has replaced their (simply) trembling before him.

⁴⁸One should not miss the theological significance of the king's offer: it was nothing other than an attempt to buy salvation, something intrinsically impossible but the only stratagem that Saul can formulate at this point.

⁴⁹"And who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (v. 26.)

chapter David is the only one to make reference to God,⁵⁰ apparently the only true believer in either camp! Evidently, while Goliath's gigantic frame fills the others' field of vision, David has his gaze controlled by unseen, but even more important, realities. The contrast is striking, for at the very moment in which Israel's retreat is in danger of turning into a rout, David does not regard the victory itself as uncertain, but only the one through whom it will be accomplished. Further, David's confidence in this matter is reflected in his persistence which eventually carries him before the king (vv. 30, 31). This emphasis on contrasting reactions to Goliath reaches its climax, not only in his counsel to the king "not to worry," and in his spontaneous offer to meet the enemy challenge, but even more in the boldness with which he confronts the Philistine on the field of battle (vv. 45-47).

VIII. CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES

The contrasting reactions that have just been noted are rooted in contrasting perspectives which our text highlights. Significantly, the initiative in this situation seems to lie with the Philistines, who are mentioned first (and somewhat abruptly, 17:1). As the geographic data indicate, the events here recorded took place in Israelite territory, though in proximity to the Philistine holdings.⁵¹ The text loses no time in drawing our attention to Goliath, describing his formidable appearance as he throws down the gauntlet to Israel. In all that could be said, however, concerning the manner in which he challenges the Israelites, the earth-bound dimensions of his words are the most notable. Though his perspective is military ("drawn up for battle," v. 8), cultural or ethnic ("Philistine" versus the "servants of Saul"), political (who will serve whom, v. 9) and even personal ("Give me a man!" v. 10), yet when all is said and done it is solely human. The horizontal frame of reference is not simply more

⁵⁰We consider the remark of Saul to David, "Go and the Lord be with you" (v. 37) to be roughly the equivalent of our own "Goodbye and good luck!" rather than a sincere attempt to invoke upon him a divine blessing. In any case, even if these words were sincere they were empty, for how could Saul, who had lost the blessing of the Lord, invoke it upon someone else?

⁵¹"The struggle between Israel and Philistia spread throughout the outlying settlements of the Shephelah. The Philistines, who already held Azekah, strove to conquer Socoh on the opposite side of the vale of Elah" (Y. Aharone and M. Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, New York: The Macmillan Publishing Co., 1968, 62).

prominent than the vertical, it is in fact the only viewpoint evident in Goliath's words.

The first Israelite interpretation of the significance of Goliath's challenge comes in verse 25, when it is recognized that he is intent upon defying Israel. But this statement, so obvious as to be superfluous, does nothing to enlarge the boundaries of the story beyond those already marked out by Goliath. The contest is seen as military, political, and perhaps even cultural in its essential dimensions, but the contestants are simply men, whatever may be their number or stature, and any spiritual perspective is conspicuous by its absence.

It is David, speaking here as we have noted for the first time (v. 26), who, though naturally curious concerning the price that has been placed on Goliath's head by Saul, asks a question that unshackles the events from their earthbound limitations: "And who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" Yet such zeal proves to be anything but immediately contagious among Saul's troops. In fact, the next speaker to come to the fore in the text is none other than David's eldest brother Eliab. His smoldering resentment (rooted in the events of chapter 16?) breaks out in harsh and mocking criticism directed, not against David's words, but at his mere presence at the battlefield. Personal insignificance (in the reference to the "few sheep") and irresponsibility ("with whom did you leave them in the wilderness?") are seen by Eliab to be rooted in David's sinful character and inquisitiveness.⁵² It is interesting that Eliab claims to have that spiritual insight which the text has already denied him (16:6, 7), and attributes to David the desire to be stimulated by the spectacle of physical combat. Yet the reader, aware of David's obedience to his father's command to provide for his brothers and bring news of them, sees through the cynical comments of Eliab and grasps immediately that the truth of the matter can only be had by applying to the eldest son of Jesse the very words he has directed against his youngest brother. In any event, the importance of all this in relation to our text's central thesis should not be ignored: Eliab is judging (in this case David) strictly on the basis of outward appearance and human insight. Once again, just as in the case of Goliath's challenge to Israel and the Israelites' response to it (or lack of it!), any spiritual dimension is all too painfully absent.

⁵²"Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption, and the evil of your heart; for you have come down to see the battle" (17:28).

The next voice we hear is that of Saul, when David is brought before him. To the boy-shepherd's offer to face the Philistine, Saul's response might be paraphrased thus: "Impossible! He's been fighting longer than you've been living!" (v. 33). This prompts the first lengthy statement by David, who seeks to convince Saul that his youthfulness is no indication of any lack of experience. On the contrary, his vigilant care of his father's flocks involved not only the rescue of the sheep but the destruction of ferocious predators. Therefore, just as God's deliverance was efficacious for David in the case of wild beasts, so would it prove to be in the case of this arrogant pagan. Once again, the spiritual perspective is clearly evident in David's reasoning before the king, to such an extent in fact that it is even feebly seconded by him.⁵³

As the narrative moves toward its denouement, Goliath is met by David and, in a tone of voice not much different from that of Eliab, first ridicules and then savagely threatens his diminutive adversary. The theological and spiritual aspects of the conflict at last come explicitly to the fore, as the Philistine "curses David by his gods" (v. 43b). Now, for the third time David's voice is heard, and in his words emerges the principle proclaimed previously by God Himself to Samuel in 16:7. While not shutting his eyes to material realities,⁵⁴ his fundamental weapon is not his sling or the expertise with which he wields it but that spiritual reality represented by "the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel" (v. 45). In other words, not that faculty of physical sight oriented around the visible world, but rather that of a believing heart anchored in the invisible and eternal nature of Israel's (and the world's!) Creator and Savior will determine the final outcome of the contest. And that for two distinct though related reasons:

(That) the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel . . . and (that) all those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give all of you into our hands (vv. 46, 47).

⁵³"Go, and the Lord be with you" (v. 37b). The inability of David to use the king's armor, and his meeting Goliath without it, has the effect of excluding Saul in the most complete fashion from playing any part, even indirectly, in David's victory.

⁵⁴Note his awareness of Goliath's weaponry, indicated by his explicit reference to it (v. 45). The fact that David's arsenal consisted merely of a sling and five stones freshly plucked from a brook underscores the fact that he did not possess any sophisticated technology (in contrast to the iron monopoly of the Philistines—13:19-22), but was able to use even the most common objects in the realization of the most uncommon feats.

This, then, is that which, in our opinion, intimately ties these two chapters together and makes chapter 17 the vindication and the explanation of the divine election of David in chapter 16.⁵⁵ Just as God does not base His choices or actions on factors related to the perception of the visual dimensions of reality, so the man of God reflects and reacts, not on the basis of the material, tangible, or visible dimensions, no matter how apparently threatening or overwhelming, but with reference to that which only the heart of faith can “see”—the Holy One of Israel, sovereign and faithful in all His ways.

⁵⁵This is not to the exclusion of other factors which serve to unite these chapters. William Dumbrell, in his work *Creation and Covenant* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1984, 140), states that “in the case of David, the successful encounter with Goliath the Philistine (1 Sam. 17) completes the sequence of election, anointing, reception of the Spirit and demonstration of power” that is also exemplified in the experience of our Lord as portrayed in the synoptic Gospels.