

RECONSIDERING THE HEIGHT OF GOLIATH

J. DANIEL HAYS*

I. INTRODUCTION

The story of David and Goliath is one of the best-known and best-loved stories in the entire OT. Goliath is nearly ten feet tall, and yet the young David bravely fights the giant and slays him with a single well-aimed stone from his sling. This version of the story is firmly embedded in our tradition, not only through the account of it in our English Bibles, but also through children's books, children's Sunday School lessons, art, and song. Indeed, David's heroic battle against the giant has become a classic paradigm within Western culture of the underdog's upset victory. It probably appears foolish to tamper with such a famous, firmly entrenched, and beloved story, but as I hope to demonstrate, the text-critical evidence, both external and internal, compels us to reconsider the height of Goliath, and suggests to us that we should probably cut the giant down at the knees, reducing him from 9'9" to 6'9".

II. OVERVIEW

Here is a summary of the case. The Masoretic Text (MT), that is, the "received" Hebrew text upon which most of our English OT translations are based, states in 1 Sam 17:4 that the height of Goliath is "six cubits and a span." A cubit is approximately 18 inches, and a span is about 9 inches. Thus, in the MT Goliath is 9'9" tall. Most of our English translations follow this reading.¹

On the other hand, in the major Septuagint (LXX) manuscripts Goliath's height is given as "four cubits and a span," which puts him at the much

* J. Daniel Hays is professor of Old Testament at Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, AR 71998-0001.

¹ The KJV stays with the literal "six cubits and a span" without explaining or interpreting the height. The NASB does the same, with no mention of the other variant reading. The NIV reads "over nine feet tall," with a footnote explaining that the Hebrew says "six cubits and a span." Nowhere does the NIV mention the LXX and 4QSam^a variant reading of 6'9". The NLB reads "over nine feet," but they include a footnote citing the "Greek" variant. The NRSV reads "six cubits and a span" with a note saying that the Qumran manuscripts and the Greek read "four." The HCSB reads "nine feet, nine inches tall," adding a note that states that the DSS and LXX read "four cubits and a span," but without explaining what "four cubits and a span" means. Only the New American Bible (a Catholic translation) follows the LXX and 4QSam^a, stating Goliath's height as "six and a half feet tall."

shorter height of 6'9". For much of the modern era, the LXX manuscripts were viewed as secondary witnesses to the OT text when compared to the MT. However, the discovery of the DSS changed that situation, because in several cases the older Hebrew texts found at Qumran supported the readings of the LXX over against the MT. Today the field of OT textual criticism is still struggling to interact with and to incorporate correctly the new textual data from these scrolls from the Judean Desert. Regarding 1–2 Samuel and the height of Goliath, the find at Qumran was quite significant. Although several small fragments of 1–2 Samuel were found, only one large substantial manuscript of 1–2 Samuel was discovered, referred to as 4QSam^a. Although some portions of the scroll are damaged, 1 Sam 17:3–6 is clear, and in this manuscript, by far our oldest Hebrew manuscript of this text, Goliath is listed as four cubits and a span, around 6'9", matching the height stated in the LXX.

III. THE LITERARY PROBLEM

1. *The nature of the problem.* Before we get too far into the text-critical discussion, however, it is important to point out that the varying heights of Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 are but part of a very significant and very complicated literary problem. As in the book of Jeremiah, there is quite a difference between the LXX text of 1–2 Samuel and the MT of 1–2 Samuel. Also similar to the textual situation in Jeremiah is the fact that in 1–2 Samuel the Hebrew text from the DSS (4QSam^a) generally aligns with the LXX over against the MT. In addition, the story in 1 Samuel 16–18 represents the place where the differences between the two are the most severe. In the LXX text of Codex Vaticanus, our oldest complete Greek Bible, 1 Samuel 16–18 is 44% shorter than in the MT.² Not only are entire verses missing but so are entire paragraphs. In the David and Goliath narrative these include 17:12–31, twenty verses dealing with David and his brothers and explaining how David came to be at the battle, and 17:55–58, the four puzzling verses in which Saul does not seem to know who David is in spite of the fact that David had been playing music for Saul back in 1 Samuel 16. As in Jeremiah, the differences between the LXX and the MT go well beyond anything that could be attributed to scribal errors or transmission mistakes. And 4QSam^a generally (but not always) agrees with the LXX against the MT. Either somebody added a large portion of text to the original autograph, somebody deleted a large portion of text, or else two different accounts of 1–2 Samuel developed separately. Text critics point to the standard text-critical principle that the shorter reading is more likely original than the longer one. They argue that the LXX reading, confirmed by 4QSam^a, is older and more original. The proponents of the MT, however, counter that the issue here is not textual transmission,

² Emanuel Tov, *The Greek and Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 333.

but literary development, which operates under different rules than text criticism.³ Although a few scholars have argued that the LXX translators actually deleted material, most proponents of the MT accept that the LXX/4QSam^a tradition is earlier, but argue that this tradition reflects merely an unfinished stage in the literary development of the text.

Unfortunately, the issues relating to the height of Goliath usually get buried in the larger complicated discussion of literary development. The assumption is made—usually without any evidence and often without any discussion—that the change in Goliath's height occurred at the same time as the large literary changes in the rest of the chapter occurred. Whoever added in the twenty plus verses that are in the MT must have increased Goliath's height at the same time, perhaps to heighten the bravery and miraculous victory of David. Or, on the other hand, if somebody deleted all these verses to produce the shorter LXX reading, then he changed Goliath's height at the same time to bring the story into the realm of the believable. Or so the argument goes.

2. *Separating the text-critical problem from the literary problem.* In my opinion, both of these approaches are wrong and are based on faulty, unsubstantiated assumptions. The verses introducing Goliath and describing his height are in both the long account (MT) and the short account (LXX and 4QSam^a). There is no evidence that the height change occurred at the same time that the expansion (or deletion) took place. Thus there is no evidence linking the height of Goliath variation to the literary development issue. Therefore, the variant readings for the height of Goliath should be analyzed from a text-critical perspective and not from a literary development perspective. We should remove our study of the variations in the height of Goliath from the larger, more complicated but probably unrelated literary development issue of why the MT has so many verses that are absent from the LXX and 4QSam^a. Instead, we should treat the problem as a text-critical problem, to be handled by text-critical methodology.

IV. EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

1. *Textual evidence for "four cubits and a span" (6'9").* Therefore, let us return to the manuscripts and revisit in more detail the external text-critical manuscript evidence. Several significant witnesses give the height of Goliath as "four cubits and a span" (i.e. about 6'9"). As mentioned above, the 4QSam^a scroll from the DSS has this reading. This scroll, dating to the middle of the first century BC, is our oldest extant Hebrew manuscript that contains

³ The literature on this discussion is extensive, but for good representative arguments of both sides (LXX priority, MT priority) see Dominique Barthélemy, David W. Gooding, Johan Lust, and Emanuel Tov, *The Story of David and Goliath: Textual and Literary Criticism: Papers of a Joint Research Venture* (OBO 73; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986).

1 Sam 17:4.⁴ The major LXX codices likewise read “four cubits and a span.” Thus we find the smaller Goliath in Codex Vaticanus (fourth century AD) and Codex Alexandrinus (fifth century AD).⁵ It is interesting to note that in regard to the rest of 1 Samuel 17–18 Vaticanus (fourth century AD) reflects the short text as found in 4QSam^a (i.e. approx. 23 verses shorter than the MT). Alexandrinus (fifth century AD), on the other hand, includes these verses, matching the MT. Those who produced Alexandrinus were probably influenced by Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, Origen’s Hexapla, or even the MT tradition itself to include the longer text of 1 Samuel 17–18. It is instructive to point out, however, that while the scribes of Alexandrinus followed the MT tradition and added the 23+/- verses to 1 Samuel 17–18 that the MT has but the LXX lacks, they nonetheless retained the reading “four cubits and a span” in 1 Sam 17:4, thus resisting the MT tradition for this particular reading.

Several other important witnesses also read “four cubits and a span.” The Lucian recension (third century AD) of the LXX as well as Josephus (first century AD, *Ant.* 6.171) have this reading. As in the case of the Alexandrinus Codex, the Lucian recension includes the longer form of 1 Samuel 17–18 (23 +/- more verses than Vaticanus and 4QSam^a), but it nonetheless gives the lower height (four cubits and a span) for Goliath. To find Josephus agreeing with the later Lucian recension is not unexpected. Josephus obviously used a Greek OT, and apparently the version that he used resembled the Lucian recension (called the Antiochene tradition by some). In 1 Samuel, this Lucian recension (as well as Josephus) regularly agrees with the tradition represented by 4QSam^a.⁶

Thus the textual witnesses for the variant that cites Goliath’s height at four cubits and a span (6’9”) include: (1) 4QSam^a, the oldest extant Hebrew manuscript for this text; (2) Vaticanus, the oldest complete Greek codex of the Bible; (3) Josephus, a non-biblical first-century AD reference; (4) the Lucian Greek recension, a third-century AD witness; and (5) other early codices such as Alexandrinus.

⁴ 4QSam^b dates roughly to 250 BC and 4QSam^c dates to 100–75 BC, but they contain only small portions of text, and nothing from 1 Samuel 17. See the discussion by Martin Abegg, Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1999) 211–12.

⁵ Codex Sinaiticus, the other major early Greek codex, is lacking 1–2 Samuel.

⁶ Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 55. In *Antiquities* Josephus often agrees with the Lucianic revision. Since Josephus precedes Lucian by 200 years, many scholars suggest that there was a proto-Lucian Greek text in circulation during the first century AD. Eugene Ulrich concludes his study by writing, “Finally, Josephus clearly employed a bible of the 4QSam^a tradition as his basis for the Samuel portion of the *Jewish Antiquities*, and he clearly used a Greek form of it. For the sections of Samuel for which 4QSam^a is extant, he shows not a single detail which is clearly or even dependant on a bible of the Masoretic tradition or on a biblical text in the Hebrew language. His bible was in Greek, it was a slightly revised form of OG [Old Greek], and it was intimately affiliated with the 4QSam^a tradition. In brief, Josephus used a bible which exactly fits our description of the proto-Lucianic Greek text” (*The Qumran Text of Samuel and Josephus* 259). Most scholars acknowledge that Josephus used a text that was similar to that found in the Lucian recension, and that in 1–2 Samuel this text resembles 4QSam^a. The issue of a proto-Lucian recension, however, continues to be debated. See Emanuel Tov, “Lucian and Proto-Lucian: Toward a New Solution of the Problem,” in *The Greek and Hebrew Bible* 477–88.

2. *Textual evidence for "six cubits and a span" (9'9")*. What is the evidence for the variant which reads six cubits and a span (9'9")? All of the manuscripts of the MT have this reading. However, one should keep in mind that the earliest MT manuscript evidence that we have for 1 Samuel is the Aleppo Codex, produced in AD 935. Likewise, the Leningrad Codex, the Hebrew manuscript on which BHK and BHS are based, and thus the major Hebrew text on which most of our English OT versions are based, was completed in AD 1010. Thus there is no extant Hebrew text any earlier than AD 935 that puts Goliath at six cubits and a span.

However, the variant reading "six cubits and a span" is probably much older than these MT manuscripts. Symmachus, for example, reflects the six cubits and a span height in his translation. Symmachus was a Jew who around AD 200 prepared a Greek translation of the OT for the Jewish community in Caesarea of Palestine. His goal was to produce a Greek translation that was an accurate translation of the Hebrew.⁷ The fact that he gives Goliath's height as six cubits and a span is strong evidence that this variant reading was already present in the proto-MT or *Vorlage* to the MT, that is, the Hebrew text tradition that by this time had become the standardized text of the Jews.

Likewise, Origen, in his Greek translation found in the fifth column of his Hexapla, includes the longer version of 1–2 Samuel found in the MT and also lists Goliath's height as six cubits and a span. Origen, writing in the first half of the third century AD, includes Symmachus's translation as the fourth column of the Hexapla. In cases where Origen found earlier translations such as Symmachus's to align closely with the Hebrew manuscripts to which he had access, he included these readings in his fifth column translation, usually marked with a special notation. Origen states that the purpose for the Hexapla was to assist Christian apologists in their disputes with Jews over biblical texts. He intended it to be used by scholars in scholarly discussions. However, over time the critical notations were dropped and Origen's fifth column became a popular OT used extensively in the Eastern Churches, probably something Origen himself never intended.⁸ Nonetheless, as in the case of Symmachus's translation, Origen's use of the variant "six cubits and a span" is substantial evidence that the Hebrew manuscript to which he had access reflected the proto-MT tradition and had Goliath's height as "six cubits and a span."

Jerome's fourth-century AD Latin translation (the Vulgate), which appears to follow the Hebrew proto-MT faithfully, likewise puts Goliath at six cubits and a span. The Vulgate gradually grew in popularity in the Western churches and eventually became the "received text" for the Western churches, thus codifying the 9'9" giant into Western culture.

3. *Textual evidence for "five cubits and a span" (8'3")*. Another variant reading is reflected in Codex Venetus, an eight-century AD text that normally

⁷ Jobes and Silva, *Invitation* 40–41.

⁸ *Ibid.* 48–53.

follows Origen's Hexapla. In 1 Sam 17:4, however, this codex lists Goliath's height as "five cubits and a span." This sole source, of course, is a weak witness, and probably reflects an attempt to compromise between the two other variant readings. Or perhaps this was an attempt to harmonize with 1 Chron 11:23, which mentions an Egyptian warrior that was "five cubits" (7'6"), although this explanation seems unlikely.

4. *Conclusions of external evidence.* By way of summary of the external evidence, we see that the variant reading of "six cubits and a span" is not attested by any extant Hebrew witnesses any earlier than the tenth century AD. On the other hand, the Jewish translation by Symmachus, followed by Origen's fifth column, and as appearing in Jerome's Vulgate, indicates that this variant reading was probably in the proto-MT by at least AD 200.

However, the textual evidence for the variant reading of "four cubits and a span" is significantly stronger. 4QSam^a dates to the first century BC and appears to be an excellent text, the one used by the author of Chronicles (see below) and apparently by the original translators of the LXX, the text accepted by the early church. This is the text that Josephus used in the first century AD, the one that Lucian used in his third-century AD translation, and the one that lies behind the major earliest extant Christian codex, Vaticanus.

V. INTERNAL EVIDENCE

1. *Explanation for the MT variant reading.* An important criterion for evaluating textual variant readings is to ask, "Which reading best explains the others?" Several scholars have noted that there is a plausible text-critical explanation for the MT variant reading (six cubits and a span). The reading of the MT, "six" instead of "four," may have resulted from a copyist's mistake known as parablepsis ("a looking by the side").⁹ The Hebrew word in verse 4 for cubit (אַמּוֹת) is very similar to the word in verse 7 for hundred (מֵאוֹת). Thus it is possible, and even plausible, that the scribe's eye dropped to verse 7 and picked up the six from "six hundred" and miscopied it into verse four, changing four cubits to six cubits.

On the other hand, if the MT reading is taken as original, it is difficult to come up with a plausible explanation for changing "six" to "four." Some scholars have proposed that the most plausible explanation for the two variants is to suppose that "six cubits and a span," the supposed more difficult reading, was the original one, and that a scribe changed it to "four cubits

⁹ For a discussion of parablepsis see Bruce Manning Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) 189; and Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (2d ed.; Minneapolis and Assen: Fortress Press and Royal Van Gorcum, 2001) 238–40. Scholars who note that the variant "six cubits" is probably a copyist's mistake include P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) 286, who cites Michael D. Coogan but does not provide the source; and Ronald S. Hendel, "Qumran and the Text of the Hebrew Bible," a lecture in Volume II of *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, video series (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1993).

and a span," in order to make the account believable, that is, the less difficult reading. However, while "six cubits and a span" may be unbelievable for a rationalistic modern person today, and while a modern person today might find "four cubits and a span" to be more believable, it is not at all certain that such was the case in the ancient world. There is little evidence that a Jewish scribe prior to 200 BC would feel compelled to make this account more believable by decreasing the height of Goliath. It is just as likely that the scribe would want to enhance the miraculous nature of the story and increase the height.

2. *The textual quality of MT 1-2 Samuel.* Is it plausible or even probable that a scribal error could have actually occurred in the proto-MT of 1-2 Samuel? Ulrich points out that the MT in 1-2 Samuel is a poorly preserved text with numerous copyist's errors. Even if one ignores the issue of literary additions, Ulrich argues, in 1-2 Samuel the MT has a multitude of variants that can be explained by haplography (dropping out a doubled letter) and dittography (copying a single letter twice),¹⁰ a phenomena similar to parablepsis. Likewise, Klein states that the MT text of 1 Samuel "is not in good shape" because "many letters and words have been accidentally omitted, often because of the phenomenon of homoioteleuton."¹¹ Thus somewhere in the transmission tradition of the MT of 1 Samuel there was a fairly sloppy scribe (or series of scribes) that was prone to make "wandering eye" type mistakes.¹² Thus it is at least plausible that the change from "four cubits and a span" to "six cubits and a span" came from a scribal error.

3. *The MT text of 1-2 Chronicles followed 4QSam^a/LXX.* Practically all scholars agree that the evidence from 4QSam^a implies that at the time of Christ there were two different Hebrew text traditions of 1-2 Samuel. As mentioned above, the *Vorlage* or text tradition behind the MT in 1-2 Samuel contains many more readily identifiable scribal errors that the tradition reflected in 4QSam^a/LXX. Furthermore, and of great interest to those of us who try to connect the doctrine of inspiration to our theories of composition, it should be underscored that when using 1-2 Samuel as a source, the author (compiler, editor, etc.) of 1-2 Chronicles (as reflected in the MT) used a Hebrew text from the textual tradition reflected in 4QSam^a/LXX and not the one that

¹⁰ Eugene Charles Ulrich, *The Qumran Text of Samuel and Josephus* (Harvard Semitic Monograph 19; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1978) 197.

¹¹ Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1983) xxvi.

¹² Other scholars note the poor text quality of 1 Samuel as well. Mary J. Evans states, "the Masoretic Text (MT) seems to have suffered from transmission problems in a number of instances" (*1 and 2 Samuel* [NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000] 3). James W. Flanagan writes that the Hebrew text of 1-2 Samuel is "considered one of the most disturbed in the Hebrew Bible" ("Samuel, Book of 1-2," *ABD* 5.957). Regarding the text of 1-2 Samuel, Bruce K. Waltke states, "The text preserved by the Masoretes of these books suffered more than usual from corrupting influences" ("The Textual Criticism of the Old Testament," in *EBC* 1.222).

is reflected in the MT of 1–2 Samuel.¹³ That is, frequently the MT in 1–2 Chronicles disagrees with the MT in 1–2 Samuel but agrees with the reading in 4QSam^a and/or the LXX. Hence the inspired author/editor of 1–2 Chronicles either did not have a copy of the MT tradition text of 1–2 Samuel or elected to use the text tradition reflected in 4QSam^a/LXX, presumably because he regarded it as a superior text.

4. *Goliath's armor and armaments.* The question is whether Goliath is 9'9", a huge giant towering over the tallest of people in the world today, or merely 6'9", still very large, but about the size of one of the taller tackles in the NFL. For comparative purposes let us envision the "shorter" Goliath to be about the size of Flozell Adams, the 6'7" 345 pound offensive tackle for the Dallas Cowboys.

Some commentators point to the huge size of Goliath's spear, "with a shaft like a weaver's beam" and "a point that weighed six hundred shekels" (about 15 pounds) and conclude that this huge spear size argues for a nine and a half foot-tall Goliath. Likewise, they underscore the massive weight of his armor (125–130 pounds) and conclude that the size of the armor fits better with a 9'9" giant than with a 6'9" warrior.¹⁴

However, first of all, the text does not say that Goliath's spear was as big or as long or as heavy as a weaver's beam. It just says that the "shaft" (lit. "arrow") of his spear was *as* (ִּ) a weaver's beam. Yagael Yadin points out that the comparison between Goliath's spear and a weaver's beam is not saying that the shaft of the spear was as big as a large timbered crossbeam of a loom. Rather, the narrator is describing a looped cord or rope that was attached to the spear that enabled a warrior to throw it harder and further. This looped cord looked somewhat like the cord loops of a weaver's beam; thus the analogy.¹⁵ It has nothing to do with the *size* of his spear.¹⁶ Thus it also has no bearing on the size of Goliath.

Likewise, the six hundred shekel (fifteen pounds) weight of the iron spear-head certainly would not require a ten foot-tall giant to throw it. Flozell Adams can probably throw a fifteen pound weight a long, long way. In fact,

¹³ This is noted by numerous text-critical scholars and commentators. See, for example, Ulrich, *The Qumran Text of Samuel and Josephus* 163–64; Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) 28–29; J. A. Thompson, *1, 2 Chronicles* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 22–23; Jacob M. Myer, *1 Chronicles* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965) lxxxix–xc; and Martin Hengel, *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002) 84–85.

¹⁴ For example, Bill T. Arnold writes, "The narrator's great interest in Goliath's armor supports the abnormal height recorded in the Hebrew tradition, and it is possible Goliath suffered from gigantism" (*1 & 2 Samuel* [NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003] 254).

¹⁵ Yagael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Study* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963) 10. See also Neal Bierling, *Giving Goliath His Due: New Archaeological Light on the Philistines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 149.

¹⁶ The majority of commentators follow this understanding of Goliath's spear. See Klein, *1 Samuel* 176; Robert Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996) 189; Ronald F. Youngblood, "1, 2 Samuel," in EBC 3.695; Joyce Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel* (TOTC; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1988) 126; and McCarter, *1 Samuel* 292–93.

a stout colleague of mine who is not even six feet tall competes in the Scottish sporting competition known as the Highland Games. In the caber toss event the competitors toss a wooden pole called a caber. The caber resembles a telephone pole and weighs up to 180 pounds. The men in this event would not have any trouble heaving a fifteen pound spear.

Many writers also stress the extreme weight (125–130 pounds) of the bronze coat of scale armor that Goliath wears. While this is certainly very heavy for a small untrained person, for a big man like Flozell Adams (or a 6'9" Goliath) it is not an overly burdensome weight, and it certainly does not require a ten foot-tall person to carry it. Most commentaries also make the faulty assumption that strength is directly proportional to height and that heavy armor would more likely be carried by a super-tall person. Yet there is little correlation between the height of a person and the strength of a person. Consider America's strongest man, super heavyweight champion Shane Hammon, who weighs 340 pounds but is only 5'9" tall. He is quite a bit stronger than any of the 7 feet-tall centers in the NBA. And certainly Shane Hammon is many times stronger than someone with the growth disorder known as gigantism, the medical explanation often put forward by commentators to explain Goliath's 9'9" height (see the discussion below).

In reality, 125–130 pounds is not all that heavy of a weight, and it certainly does not require a giant to carry it. Two of my former students who are now in the United States Marine Corps told me that Marines today often go into battle with over 130 pounds of gear.¹⁷ It does not require a giant to carry that much weight into battle. So the armor of Goliath does not demand a 9'9" tall warrior. In fact, the weight of the equipment described could be carried without any problem by a big, strong, well-trained 6'9" warrior. Certainly Flozell could carry it easily, and he is only 6'7".

The narrator is stressing the extensive armor of Goliath. But his point is that Goliath is extremely well armored and well armed, with an eclectic collection of the latest in weaponry and armor. Keep in mind that this story takes place during the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. Metal is still fairly scarce, especially iron. Armies at this time were not outfitted with armor *en masse*. Nor did they all have iron swords and shields. Most of Israel's army was probably armed with sticks and clubs. As far as we know, only Saul has the armor to match Goliath, a point to be discussed below.¹⁸

5. *The height of people in the ancient Near East (5'0"–5'3")*. Some have argued that if Goliath is not a huge giant, then why would the narrator even bother mentioning his height? Clearly the height description played a role

¹⁷ Besides standard equipment, food, and ammunition, some soldiers carry exceptionally heavy equipment. The MK 19 40mm machine gun weighs a total of 137.5 pounds (the gun weighs 72.5 pounds, the cradle 21 pounds, and the tripod 44 pounds). The extensive amount of ammunition needed for this gun is heavy as well, even if distributed over a three-man crew. Likewise, the M252 medium-range mortar that the Marines carry weighs 89 pounds.

¹⁸ Earlier in the story the narrator states that the Philistines controlled all blacksmithing and that only Saul and Jonathan had iron swords (1 Sam 13:19–23). By 1 Samuel 17 perhaps things had changed somewhat, but it is unlikely that they changed drastically.

in explaining why the Israelites were frightened of Goliath. However, keep in mind that in the ancient Near East people were not nearly as tall as they are in most regions of the world today. Victor Mathews states that for Semites in the ancient Near East during the patriarchal period the average male height was only 5'0".¹⁹ By the NT era, evidence from tombs and gravesites indicates that people in general were slightly taller.²⁰ So it is probably safe to say that at the time of David, the average height of people in Israel was probably somewhere between 5'0" and 5'3", but certainly no taller than 5'6". If the entire army of Israel averaged around 5'3", then a huge "Flozell Adams-size" warrior standing 6'9" (and probably weighing around 350 pounds) would still be formidable indeed.²¹

6. *Saul is afraid of Goliath's training, not his size.* As pointed out above, there is little, if any, evidence within the story that would indicate that Goliath had to be 9'9" tall. On the other hand, there are numerous events and aspects of the story that fit better with the 6'9" height. Notice, for example, that when David goes to Saul and volunteers to fight Goliath, Saul states, "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a fighting man from his youth." This is a strange response if Goliath is nearly ten feet tall. We might expect Saul to exclaim, "Good grief, man, this Philistine is ten feet tall!" Saul does not underscore Goliath's height nor his armor, but only his extensive military training—a strange response if Goliath is really 9'9" tall.

VI. THE ARGUMENT FROM NARRATIVE CRITICISM

1. *The story is about David and Saul, not David and Goliath.* Saul's response introduces us to what is perhaps the most powerful element of internal evidence—the broader literary context. First of all, if Goliath is 6'9"

¹⁹ Victor Mathews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible* (rev. ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 3.

²⁰ The now famous "crucified man" found at Giv'at ha-Mivtar (first century AD) measured just under 5'6". See Peter Connolly, *Living in the Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (Bnei Brak, Israel: Steimatzky, 1983) 51.

²¹ Arnold, 1 & 2 *Samuel* 254, in support of the 9'9" height, suggests that Goliath may have suffered from gigantism. Arnold mentions an article by D. Kellermann that argues that Goliath may have suffered a vision problem, common to gigantism ("Die Geschichte von David und Goliath im Lichte der Endokrinologie," *ZAW* 102 [1990] 344–57). Likewise, in trying to establish the plausibility of Goliath's 9'9" height, Youngblood cites the famous 8'11" height of Pershing Wadlow, who died in 1940 at the age of 22 ("1, 2 Samuel" 695). Yet these examples hardly help to establish Goliath as a huge, fearsome warrior. Wadlow, at 8'11", was extremely clumsy and slow, hardly a model for a fearsome warrior. He was not quick or agile enough to play basketball. Furthermore, one of the symptoms of gigantism is not only poor eyesight (esp. peripheral vision) but also overall physical weakness (see <http://health.yahoo.com/health/ency/adam/001174>). Was Goliath tall, skinny, clumsy, weak, and nearly blind? Hardly a formidable foe! Flozell Adams, a much more fearsome opponent, would cut Pershing Wadlow to pieces. A better modern example can perhaps be found in Andre Rene Roussimoff ("Andre the Giant") who was 7'4", weighed 500 pounds, and was agile enough to participate in professional wrestling (WWF). Andre the Giant, however, is still 2'2" shorter than the MT version of Goliath, and much closer (+7") to the LXX/4QSam^a version.

instead of 9'9", then this will affect the way we read and interpret the story. Hence there are important theological implications in following the 4QSam^a variant. But in reinterpreting 1 Samuel 17 along these lines, we will discover that this revised understanding actually fits much better into the overall literary and theological context of 1–2 Samuel,²² thus providing a strong argument from the internal evidence.

As the book of Judges ends, and as 1 Samuel begins, the theological and political situation in Israel is a total disaster. The question emerging out of the story is, "Who will deliver Israel from this disaster?" The book of Ruth, of course, introduces the future deliverer, David. Ruth is located appropriately between Judges and 1 Samuel (in the Septuagint canonical order, which our English Bibles follow), because the books of 1–2 Samuel are primarily about David, the one who will deliver Israel from the political and theological disaster of Judges.

In 1 Samuel 8, the tribes of Israel confront the prophet/judge Samuel and demand a king. Samuel tries to dissuade them, but they insist, stating, "No! We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and *to go out before us and fight our battles*" (1 Sam 8:19–20).

In 1 Samuel 9, Saul is introduced. He is described as "an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites—a head taller than any of the others" (1 Sam 9:2). Literally, the text states that from the shoulders up, Saul was taller than all the people. The implication, of course, is that his extreme size would make him competent to fulfill the role the people wanted a king to fulfill—to go out before them and fight their battles. If the average height of the men in Israel is 5'0" to 5'6", then Saul, a head taller than any of them, would have been 6'0" to 6'6". The text states clearly that he was conspicuously taller than anyone else in Israel.

Notice the strong contrast with the way David is later introduced in 1 Samuel 16. First of all God reminds Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or *his height*, for I have rejected him [Eliab, the oldest son]. The LORD does not look at the things that man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." Then when David is described in 1 Sam 16:11–12, there is no mention of his height, only that he had a "fine appearance and handsome features," and that he was tending the sheep (an important motif). Indeed, throughout the story from 1 Samuel 9 until the death of Saul in 1 Samuel 31, the main unifying feature of the narrative is the continuous contrast between Saul and David.

David is introduced as one who conscientiously cares for his father's sheep and this aspect of David's character is stressed throughout 1 Samuel 16 and 17 (1 Sam 16:11, 19; 17:15, 20, 28, 34, 40). Saul, on the other hand,

²² In my opinion, it is an exegetical mistake to pull 1 Samuel 17 out of its literary context and, using the outdated source-critical and form-critical tools of the early and mid-twentieth century, analyze the story as a "hero epic" in the context of other "hero epics" of ancient literature, especially classical Greek literature. Most recent commentators recognize this and rely much more heavily on a narrative or canonical approach, placing the story in the broader context of the David vs. Saul contrast that dominates most of 1 Samuel.

is introduced in a less than flattering manner as one who was looking for his father's lost donkeys (1 Sam 9:3–20, esp. 14–16).

Although the contrast between David and Saul runs throughout much of 1 Samuel, it reaches a focused climax in 1 Samuel 17 in the Goliath episode. Keep in mind, however, that, literarily and theologically speaking, Goliath is but a foil for the contrast between David and Saul. The story is not about "David and Goliath" as our Bibles label the episode. It is about "David and Saul," and how they differed in the way they handled the challenge and insult from Goliath.

The story drips with irony and a not-so-subtle scathing criticism of Saul. Goliath is introduced as a warrior 6'9" tall, armed with fearsome weapons and armor. He challenges the Israelites to send someone out to fight him. But remember the text in 1 Samuel 8. The Israelites had requested a king precisely for this kind of challenge—to be the one to go out and fight their battles. Furthermore, the narrator told us back in 1 Samuel 9 that Saul was a head taller than anyone else in Israel. He towers over all of the Israelites, rising very close in height to "four cubits and a span." In addition, we discover in 1 Sam 17:38–39 that Saul also has armor to match Goliath's (he is probably the only one in the Israelite army to have armor, although the text does not state this). *So Saul is the only logical choice to go and fight Goliath.* He is approximately the same height, and he is also well armed and armored. Furthermore, to fight as a champion was exactly the reason that Israel wanted him as king.

As mentioned above, in 1 Sam 17:33 Saul adds some new information as to why Goliath is dangerous. He is well trained. Perhaps this is the one area in which Saul cannot match Goliath. At least it appears to be the aspect of Goliath about which Saul is most concerned.

Note the points of contrast and the irony involved in David's part in the story. Unlike Saul, David is not big. Neither is he well armed or well armored. In fact, David refuses to use either Saul's armor or his sword. As far as being well trained, however, David informs Saul that—ironically—unlike Saul he is rather well trained and experienced at this type of challenge. David declares that when a lion or bear came and attacked *his* father's sheep, he battled against it and killed it. He then declares that the LORD who delivered him from the bear and the lion will deliver him from the Philistine.

The subtle analogy between Goliath threatening the Israelite army and the lion or bear threatening the sheep of David's father is revealing. David's declaration that he rose up and killed the dangerous threat to his father's sheep is a strong indictment on Saul, who has been cowering in fear instead of rising up and attacking the threat to his sheep (i.e. Israel).²³

David, incensed by the offense of Goliath, accepts the challenge to fight him. But keep in mind that this is not David's fight. The young man is not even part of the army! This is Saul's fight. Saul is the king who towers over

²³ The image of king as shepherd defending his flock is well attested in the literature of the ANE.

everyone else in the Israelite army.²⁴ He is the one with the best armor. Yet David is the one who accepts the challenge, armed only as a shepherd, with his staff and sling. Furthermore, as David approaches Goliath for battle, first of all he outdoes the Philistine in the opening speech exchange (trash talk) that precedes the battle, thus humiliating the offensive enemy (1 Sam 17:43–47). Then David *runs toward* Goliath to attack him (1 Sam 17:48) in contrast to Saul and the “men of Israel,” who are “greatly terrified” (1 Sam 17:11, 24) and who *run from* Goliath (1 Sam 17:24). David then smites the Philistine warrior as *the king* was supposed to do. In essence, David takes on the role of king in this battle, trading in the literal flock of sheep of his human father for the figurative flock of sheep (the Israelites) of his heavenly father, and then slaying the one who threatens the flock. No doubt David could have proclaimed himself king at this point, and the nation would have followed him. But David, unlike Saul, is a man after God’s own heart, and he waits for God to remove Saul from the throne.

Hence, the internal evidence also supports the “four cubits and a span” reading. If Goliath is 6’9”, this further highlights the fact that it was Saul’s responsibility to go out to fight him, thus underscoring the extensive contrast between the frightened king and the brave young shepherd, a contrast that characterizes most of 1 Samuel. This reading fits much better into the overall story. In addition, there are no allusions to the gigantic height of Goliath in any of the dialogues. In fact, Saul’s comments to David focus on the Philistine’s training and not his size.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, consider the following summary of the evidence.

1. The MT of 1–2 Samuel contains numerous copyists’ errors and has been shown to be a poorly transmitted text.
2. The author of 1–2 Chronicles did not use the proto-MT of 1–2 Samuel but rather a manuscript that reflects the textual tradition found in 4QSam^a and in the Septuagint.
3. The reading “four cubits and a span” is the height of Goliath found in 4QSam^a, the oldest extant Hebrew witness to this verse. This manuscript dates to the first century BC, predating the earliest MT manuscript by a thousand years.
4. The reading “four cubits and a span” is attested by Josephus in the first century AD, by the Christian Lucian recension of the third century AD, and by the major codices Vaticanus and Alexandrinus, indicating that this was very likely the original reading in the Old Greek of the original Septuagint.

²⁴ The observation that Saul, due to his size, should have been the one to fight Goliath has been made by several commentators. See, for example, Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel* 125; and Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel* 254.

5. A plausible explanation of the alternate reading is available. A scribe may have committed parablepsis and copied "six" from the phrase "six hundred" in verse 7.
6. The height "four cubits and a span" fits better with the literary context, keeping the focus of the story on the contrast between David and Saul.

Therefore, in conclusion, I suggest that we accept "four cubits and a span" as the most likely original reading. I also suggest that this reading should be reflected in our Bible translations, relegating the variant reading of "six cubits and a span" to the notes and/or the margins, and that this reading should likewise be reflected in our commentary writing, our classroom teaching, and our preaching.

Goliath was still a formidable foe. Not many of us would want to fight hand-to-hand to the death with Flozell Adams, and most of us are quite a bit taller than the average Israelite was. Saul was the only logical choice to fight Goliath, who was close to his size, but Saul shirked his responsibility out of fear, a lack of character, and a lack of trust in Yahweh. David, however, a "man after God's own heart," accepts the responsibility and bravely faces Goliath . . . a 5'3" youngster against Flozell . . . still an incredible mismatch . . . still incredible bravery . . . still remarkable faith in the God of Israel. This story is not diminished by a 6'9" Goliath—if we tell the whole story. Rather, the story is enhanced. We are called to follow the example of brave, trusting David and to avoid the example of wishy-washy, responsibility-shirking, faithless Saul.