

Bible Study

MAGAZINE



Bible Study Magazine is now offering interactive tools to accompany print articles. Hover your cursor over notes and highlighted terms for more information.

Clash of the Manuscripts: Goliath & the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament

Michael S. Heiser

Goliath may have been killed three thousand years ago, but he's still an imposing obstacle—this time to Bible scholars. But how can a story so easily followed by children be a conundrum for scholars? It happens all the time when you study Hebrew manuscripts.

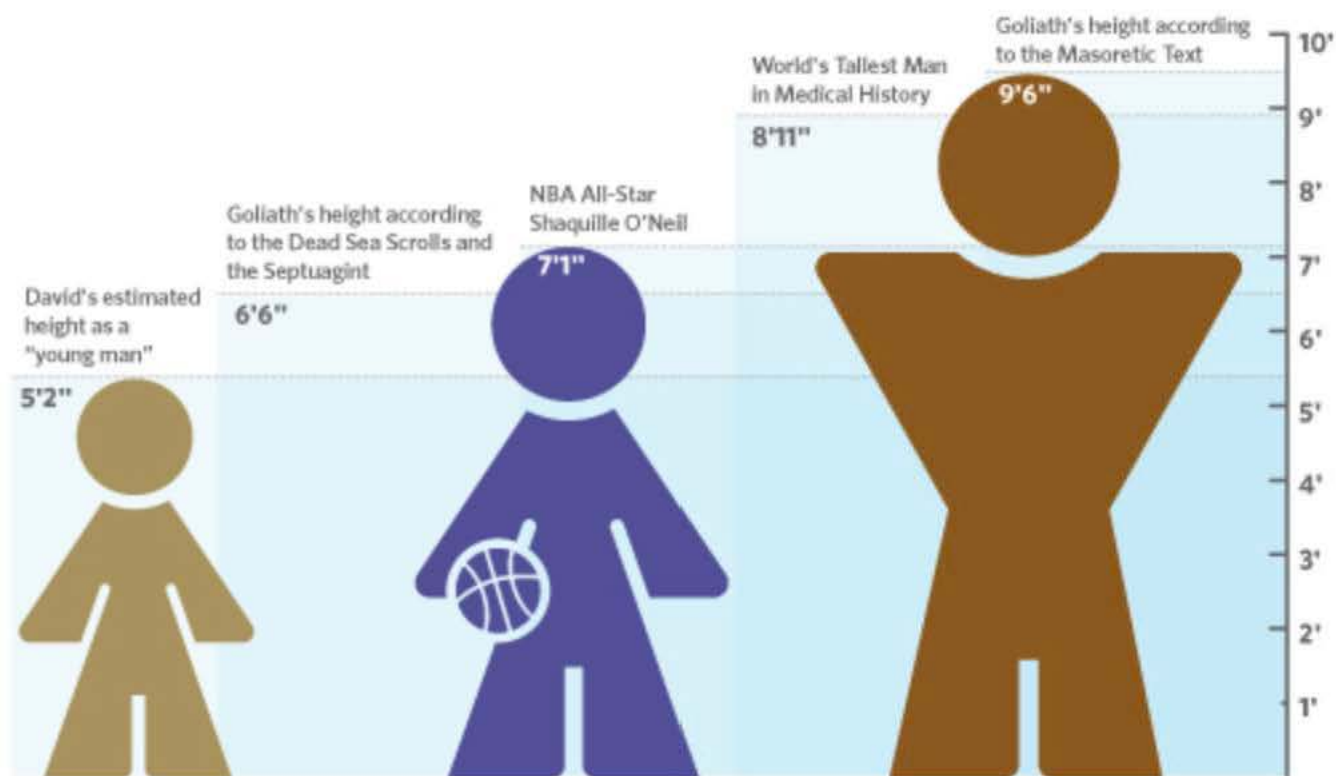
The story of David and Goliath (**1 Sam 17**) presents a number of thorny problems to textual critics, scholars who specialize in studying manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible to determine the precise reading of the original text. Let's look at two examples.

How Tall Was Goliath?

First Samuel 17:4 notes that Goliath's height was measured at "six cubits and one span," about nine feet, six inches. That measurement comes from one Hebrew manuscript tradition, known as the Masoretic text, a text that was fixed around 100 AD by the Jewish community in Israel. We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that there were other editions of the Hebrew Bible. One of those was the Hebrew text from which the Septuagint, **the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament**,¹ was translated. The Septuagint at times disagrees with the Masoretic text. The Septuagint has the height of Goliath at four cubits and one span, or about six feet, six inches. The only Hebrew text of **1 Sam 17:4** found among the Dead Sea Scrolls also reads "four," and the Jewish historian Josephus describes Goliath as, "**a man of vast bulk, for he was of four cubits and a span in tallness.**"²

The textual evidence is clearly on the side of the shorter Goliath, but that has no real importance for interpretation. Archaeologists have long noted that male human skeletal remains from the biblical period have an average height of slightly less than five and a half feet, so even the shorter Goliath was **quite a bit taller than most people the Israelites had ever seen.**³ The relatively diminutive stature of Israelites also helps us understand the comment in **1 Sam 9:2**, that "from his shoulders upward [Saul] was taller than any of the people." Saul should have been the one fighting Goliath, not David, and so the story makes clear who had God in his corner. Saul had been rejected as king; David was now Israel's champion.

A Man of Vast Bulk: Goliath's Height



Who Killed Goliath?



The second example is much trickier. **Second Samuel 21:19** records the violent death of Goliath but appears to flatly contradict the account in **1 Sam 17**, where David slays the giant:

Elhanan the son of Jaare-oregim, the Bethlehemite, struck down Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam.

Unless **David and Elhanan are the same person**,⁴ we have a pretty clear problem that needs resolution.

The key to unraveling the statement that Elhanan killed Goliath is found in **1 Chr 20:5**, which is a parallel passage to **2 Sam 21:19**:

Elhanan the son of Jair struck down Lahmi the brother of Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam.

This verse allows us to say that Elhanan killed Goliath's *brother*, not the more famous warrior defeated by David. That might erase the tension between **1 Sam 17** and **2 Sam 21:19**, but now we have a contradiction between **1 Chr 20:5** and **2 Sam 21:19**! Fortunately, there's a way out of this mess, but it's complicated. Get ready for some scribal detective work—pay close attention to the colors.

Second Samuel 21:19

וַיִּדְּ אֶלְחָנָן בֶּן־יֵעָרִי אֲרָגִים בֵּית הַלְּחָמִי אֵת גְּלִיָּת הַגִּתִּיתִי

the Gittite	Goliath	the Bethlehemite	Oregim	Jaare	son of	Elhanan	killed
8	7	5	4	3	2	1	6

וַעַץ חֲנִיתוֹ כַּמְּנוֹר אֲרָגִים:

of a weaver	like the beam	of his spear	the shaft
12	11	10	9

First Chronicles 20:5

וַיִּדְּ אֶלְחָנָן בֶּן־יֵעוֹר אֶת־לְחָמִי אַחִי גְלִיָּת הַגִּתִּיתִי

the Gittite	Goliath	brother of	Lahimi	Jaare	son of	Elhanan	killed
8	7	6	5	3	2	1	4

וַעַץ חֲנִיתוֹ כַּמְּנוֹר אֲרָגִים:

of a weaver	like the beam	of his spear	the shaft
12	11	10	9

Hebrew is read right-to-left. Follow the numbers to read the words in order.

The word in **brown** (*'oregim*), colored three times, is exactly the same. It means “weaver,” but in the first line of **2 Sam 21:19** it is awkwardly placed after the name “Jaare.” The only way to make sense of this was to make the word part of the proper name, and so we have “Jaare-Oregim” in our verse. This raises suspicions for those who work in the Hebrew text since our word in brown is never used in conjunction with a proper name anywhere else in the Bible—it is always a common noun. Further in **2 Sam 21:19** the brown word appears twice—this also doesn’t happen anywhere else in the Bible.

Taking these oddities together suggests very strongly that somewhere along the chain of copying the text of **1 Sam 17** one scribe made a mistake in **2 Sam 21:19** that caused a subsequent scribe some trouble. Most likely, we have a situation where a scribe knew he had a defective text and tried to improvise the best way he could. Explaining why this is the best approach to our problem requires reconstructing the scene of the crime. Our first step is determining if our brown word was indeed mistakenly repeated. We can test that idea by removing it to see what we get.

Second Samuel 21:19

וַיִּדְּ אֶלְחָנָן בֶּן־יֵעָרִי בֵּית הַלְּחָמִי אֵת גְּלִיָּת הַגִּתִּיתִי

the Gittite	Goliath	the Bethlehemite	Jaare	son of	Elhanan	killed
7	6	4	3	2	1	5

First Chronicles 20:5

וַיִּדְּ אֶלְחָנָן בֶּן־יֵעוֹר אֶת־לְחָמִי אַחִי גְלִיָּת הַגִּתִּיתִי

the Gittite	Goliath	brother of	Lahimi	Jaare	son of	Elhanan	killed
8	7	6	5	3	2	1	4

אֵת

Indicates the direct object of a sentence.

אַחִי

Means “brother of.”

A Man of Large Strides: Goliath's Foot Size⁶



Goliath Version 1

About 19 3/8" long

An estimate based on the Masoretic Text's record of his height.



Goliath Version 2

About 12" long

An estimate based on the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint's record of his height.



Robert Wadlow

18 1/2" long

Wadlow's shoe size —the closest comparison to the Masoretic Text's Goliath



David

About 9 3/10"

An estimate based on the Masoretic Text's record of his height.



NBA All Star Shaq

14 5/16" long

According to his NBA Profile