

## **Power Demonstrated in Weakness: Human Agents in Divine Warfare and Contemporary Ministry**

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Church leaders ministering in America today are overwhelmed with advice on techniques that promise to be effective for growing large and powerful churches and ministries. As has been chronicled in the pages of this journal, along with a number of other publications, this is one of the great perils of contemporary ministry—the triumph of technique and human manipulation over long-term faithfulness in ministry and commitment to pastoral care in local communities.

This evangelical addiction to the tools and techniques of the age is in direct contrast to the prominent theme in Scripture of power in weakness—the strength and might of God in Christ is seen most clearly when the human agents of God’s salvation are in positions of weakness and helplessness. Paul’s ministry is a clear example of this pattern, but it is also seen throughout the Old Testament in instances where the Lord provides salvation for Israel as the Divine Warrior. This article will provide a narrative reading of a number of these divine warfare texts to elucidate this theme. Such a reading brings to light the devices by which the human protagonist is portrayed as utterly lacking in credentials, or is depicted as weak or inadequate for the task, clearing space so that the Lord may be seen to be the sole provider of deliverance and salvation.

Grasping this theme provides both rebuke and hope for contemporary ministers and church leaders. These texts are a warning that the glory of the Lord is at stake, and that we must be careful that our modes and methods of ministry do not enhance the reputations or display the glory of humans at the expense of God in Christ. But this theme also provides great hope, reminding us that the results of ministry are not up to us, but fruitfulness in ministry and the blessing of our efforts is the sovereign prerogative of our gracious God (Jn 3:8). We hope to demonstrate that Scripture provides relief from the high—and misguided—expectations so often placed upon us, by ourselves, our parishioners, and by the “success” stories commonly promulgated by those trying to sell the latest ministry model.

As noted above, each of these narratives is composed in such a way as to heighten the odds stacked against Yahweh. The situation is seen to be desperate, and the available human agents are portrayed as inadequate and ill-equipped for the task. These are perfect settings for Yahweh to appear as the Divine Warrior, waging war to vindicate His name and provide salvation for His people.

### **Judges 6:1-7:22: Gideon**

The Book of Judges narrates the struggle of Israel with idolatry, which is seen as infidelity to the Lord. This struggle follows a pattern of apostasy/punishment/cry for help/deliverance.<sup>1</sup> The Gideon narrative, in Judges 6-8, is the third of six episodes that depict this cycle, and that provide the framework for the book. The character of each successive judge becomes progressively worse, and with the Gideon narrative, this downward progression intensifies. Though the entire narrative takes up the three chapters, the present analysis will involve only 6:1-7:22. The Gideon narrative powerfully exhibits the theme of the Divine Warrior triumphing against overwhelming odds.

The narrative is composed in terms that serve to remind readers of the call of Moses, and the defeat of Egypt by Yahweh at the Red Sea.<sup>2</sup> Like Moses, Gideon is called by Yahweh when he is hiding from the enemy, working for his father, who is the head of a clan and appears to be the priest of a pagan deity (Moses was working for his father-in-law, Jethro, when the angel appeared to him, Exod 3:1). Yahweh speaks the same word of authorization to Moses and to Gideon (“I have sent you,” Exod 3:12; Judg 6:14). Both Moses and Gideon protest that they are inadequate for the task, and both are given the same assurance of Yahweh’s assistance, (“Surely, I am with you,” Exod 3:12; Judg 6:16), along with a “sign” for reassurance (Exod 3:12; Judg 6:17). In both cases, the commissioning is accompanied by fire—or a fire theophany—which induces fear in

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<sup>1</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, “The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges,” *CBQ* 52 (1990), 411-12.

<sup>2</sup> Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1980), 94; Lillian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (JSOTSS 68; Sheffield: Almond, 1988), 51.

both Moses and Gideon (Exod 3:6; Judg 6:22).<sup>3</sup> Finally, just as in the defeat of Egypt at the Red Sea, so here, Yahweh is the sole combatant.<sup>4</sup>

As the narrative begins, the oppression that Israel is experiencing at the hand of Midian is depicted as far more critical than any previous situation.<sup>5</sup> They are being forced to hide in “caves” and “dens” (6:2). The Midianites also come from time to time and ravage the land, stripping it bare (vv. 3-5). The situation is particularly perilous in that the raiding appears to be irrational. The raiders are driven by blind lust, having no method to their madness—they don’t leave their victims with enough to guarantee them a future source of plunder. Thus the reference to the destruction done by locusts (v. 5).<sup>6</sup>

After a prophet from Yahweh delivers a message of condemnation to “the sons of Israel” (vv. 8-10), the angel of Yahweh appears to Gideon.<sup>7</sup> Yahweh addresses him as “mighty warrior,” and tells him “Yahweh is with you” (v. 12). Gideon’s deficient character and lack of fitness to be a representative of Yahweh is seen in his failure to grasp with whom he is speaking and what is spoken to him. He sarcastically responds by asking why they are abandoned by Yahweh, if Yahweh is truly “with us” (v. 13).<sup>8</sup> Yahweh then tells Gideon to “go in this your strength” and to deliver Israel from Midian, and that Yahweh has sent him (v. 14). Gideon balks at this and offers arguments for his own inadequacy for the task. While it is often assumed that Gideon is being humble here, his words actually are a bit hypocritical, in light of his demonstration of military and diplomatic skill in the ensuing conflict as well as the resources that are at his disposal.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading* (JSOTSS 46; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 148. Richter identifies five essential elements of the call paradigm as (1) the noting of affliction, (2) the commission, (3) the objection, (4) the promise of strength, and (5) the sign (Wolfgang Richter, *Die sogenannten vorprophetischen Berufungsberichte* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970], 138-39).

<sup>4</sup> Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East* (BZAW 177; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 177.

<sup>5</sup> Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1981), 111-12; James D. Martin, *The Book of Judges* (Cambridge: University Press, 1975), 80.

<sup>7</sup> The angel of Yahweh is Yahweh himself (Soggin, *Judges*, 114; Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* [New York: Seabury, 1980], 171).

<sup>8</sup> Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 53. The narrative may presuppose knowledge of the reaction—a quite opposite one—of Joshua to the appearance of the angel of Yahweh (Josh 5:13-15) (Robert G. Boling, *Judges* [AB 6a; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975], 130).

<sup>9</sup> Though the text emphasizes the fear of Gideon, he is a man of resources and resourcefulness. He has a power base of men to work with (6:27), as well as the means to summon a huge fighting force (7:1-3). This obviously takes diplomatic skill, which he also demonstrates in 8:1-3, settling an internal dispute. His

Yahweh reassures Gideon, and after the sign of the consumed offering (v. 21), Gideon appears to be convinced (vv. 22-24).<sup>10</sup>

Yahweh then tells Gideon to pull down the altar of Baal, which belongs to his father. Gideon's name means "hacker," or "hewer," which only serves to heighten the irony of the situation—because he is afraid he takes down the altar at night (v. 27).<sup>11</sup> In the morning, the men of the town find out what Gideon has done and seek to put him to death (vv. 28-30). Joash, Gideon's father, intervenes with great skill and tells them that Baal ought to be able to take his own revenge. This should have appeared as an absurd consideration, since the will of a deity typically is carried out by humans, but the men are pacified, and Baal does not take revenge on Gideon.<sup>12</sup>

The narrative now focuses in a bit more on Gideon's lack of qualifications and inadequacy to be the human agent of the salvation of the Lord. Just when the story begins to gain momentum, with the mention that the spirit of Yahweh "clothes" Gideon,<sup>13</sup> and just when action is expected, the narrative flow comes to a screeching halt because of Gideon's fear.<sup>14</sup> After Yahweh demonstrates his power through the tests with the fleece, Gideon again appears satisfied (vv. 36-40). The abrupt halt here is meant to leave readers with the sense that Gideon's character (or, lack of it) is the obstacle to the deliverance by Yahweh.

Gideon summons 32,000 men to fight against Midian (7:1-3), though Yahweh protests that this great number will obscure the fact that he alone will grant the victory to Israel (v. 2). It must be absolutely unambiguous that Yahweh the Divine Warrior fights

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military skill is shown in 7:23-25 as he calls up reserves to cut off the enemy's escape route (Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 149-50).

<sup>10</sup> A key tension throughout the narrative from 6:33-7:18, is that between the promise of Yahweh and the fear of Gideon. Gideon hears that Yahweh has given (יָרַד) Midian into the hands of Israel six times (6:36; 7:2, 7, 9, 14, 15). At the center of this narrative section are two important occurrences of "fear" (7:3, 10), as well as the place-name "the spring of Kharod" ("fear, trembling") (J. Paul Tanner, "The Gideon Narrative as the Focal Point of Judges," *BSac* 149 [1992], 158).

<sup>11</sup> Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 54.

<sup>12</sup> Soggin, *Judges*, 127.

<sup>13</sup> This expression appears to have the same force as those which indicate the spirit of Yahweh "coming upon" a person. There is little connection between this phenomenon and the moral character of the person involved. If there is any relation at all, it is that of the unfitness of the person to accomplish the purposes of Yahweh unaided (Tanner, "The Gideon Narrative," 158; Daniel I. Block, "The Period of the Judges: Religious Disintegration under Tribal Rule," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration* [ed. A. Gileadi; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988], 52).

<sup>14</sup> Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 55.

for Israel and alone grants victory.<sup>15</sup> Klein detects an implicit warning to Gideon from Yahweh here. Since Israel and the judge have a singular identity, the judge—i.e., Gideon—is not to think that by his skill he has defeated the enemy.<sup>16</sup> Because of this, a test is devised to pare down the number of soldiers (vv. 3-7).<sup>17</sup> With just these 300 men, Yahweh will “deliver” Israel and “give” Midian into their hands (v. 7).

In vv. 9-14, Yahweh gives to Gideon a final reassurance that he has indeed given Midian “into your hands” (v. 9). If Gideon is afraid, Yahweh tells him to take his servant Purah with him and to go at night to listen to what the Midianites are saying. They hear a man relate a dream to his friend, after which his friend gives him the interpretation. It can mean nothing other than that Yahweh has given Midian into the hand of Gideon (v. 14). Strengthened by this, Gideon returns and tells his men that Yahweh “has given the army of Midian into your hands” (v. 15).

Gideon then devises a plan to induce panic into the army of Midian. He gives to each of the men a trumpet and a torch inside a pitcher. At his signal, they each dash the pitcher and blow the trumpet, shouting, “a sword for Yahweh and for Gideon!” (v. 20). As each man stands at the edge of the camp, Yahweh creates the fatal confusion characteristic of holy war, setting “each man’s sword against his fellow” (v. 22).<sup>18</sup>

The Gideon narrative emphasizes that—just as with Egypt at the Red Sea—it is Yahweh alone who defeated Midian through holy war (6:16; 7:2, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15).<sup>19</sup> The overwhelming odds that Israel faced call attention to the decisive power of Yahweh, the Divine Warrior. Not only was the fighting force of Israel ridiculously small compared to Midian,<sup>20</sup> but the army of Israel did nothing other than to stand and blow the trumpets while Yahweh waged holy war.

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<sup>15</sup> Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior*, 93-94; Martin, *The Book of Judges*, 93; Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 150.

<sup>16</sup> Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 56.

<sup>17</sup> Klein suggests that the test sorted out those who abandoned themselves to the satisfaction of their physical desires like animals (*The Triumph of Irony*, 56). Soggin, however, sees the test as completely random, devised solely as a means for Yahweh to choose who he wanted to go fight for him (*Judges*, 137).

<sup>18</sup> Klein, *The Triumph of Irony*, 57.

<sup>19</sup> Exum, “The Centre Cannot Hold,” 418; Kang, *Divine War*, 177.

<sup>20</sup> 300 men compared to the camp of Midian, which was “as numerous as locusts; and camels without number, as numerous as sand on the seashore” (7:12)

Further, the narrative emphasizes Gideon's lack of credentials and fitness to be the agent of the salvation of Yahweh. Even though he has resources at his disposal, he lacks character and trust in Yahweh. He regards the Lord lightly, thinking it no small thing to challenge the word of Yahweh, and failing to bow down in worship at His appearance. According to this narrative, Yahweh goes to great pains to emphasize that deliverance and salvation are by his hand alone, though he may choose to use agents with questionable character, lacking in faith and fitness for the task.

### **The Ark of Yahweh in Captivity: 1 Samuel 5**

The narrative in 1 Samuel 5 tells the story of the sojourn of the ark of Yahweh through Philistia after it had been captured in the Philistines' defeat of Israel. While the Philistines had intended to keep the ark of the God of Israel as a symbol of their mastery of Israel on the battlefield, the narrative presents Yahweh as the primary actor in the story, so that the captivity of the ark becomes more of a victory tour of Yahweh as he terrorizes the Philistines after defeating their god Dagon. This is an extreme case of Yahweh seeing to it that His glory is not overshadowed by any human protagonist, in that the ark is completely alone in this episode.

Several devices in the narrative highlight the overwhelming odds that Yahweh faces. This episode follows directly on the double defeat of Israel at the hands of Philistia, the second more devastating than the first. The Philistines had proven themselves a much more powerful military force than the peasant army of Israel. The assumption by the Philistines was that the earthly result served to demonstrate the reality on the cosmic level—Philistia had defeated Israel because of the superior power of Dagon and the gods of Philistia over Yahweh, the God of Israel. The present tour of the ark of the Lord through Philistia is designed to correct this assumption.

The narrative begins with the Philistines manipulating the ark of Yahweh with full control of the situation. They "took" (*lqhw*) the ark of God and "brought" (*wyb'hw*) it to Ashdod. The second verse begins with nearly identical wording (repeating the two

Hebrew verbs), emphasizing that they had the initiative.<sup>21</sup> They had just conquered the Israelites and they were handling the visible symbol of the presence of the God of Israel in a triumphal manner.

In v. 2b, the Philistines set the ark of the God of Israel next to Dagon in the “house of Dagon,” his temple. The ark was a proud trophy of the defeat of Israel—and Israel’s God—and the placement symbolized the subjection of Yahweh to Dagon.<sup>22</sup> The narrative emphasizes the position of weakness in which the ark is placed—it sits in subjection to Dagon in the temple of the supposedly victorious god. Not only is the ark in enemy territory, it is in the very heart of enemy territory, unaccompanied by any army or fighting force.

The narrative takes a sudden and surprising turn in v. 3. When the inhabitants of Ashdod awoke the next morning and went into the house of Dagon, they found him in the position of worship before Yahweh—he had “fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of Yahweh.”<sup>23</sup> The ark of Yahweh had been situated in the temple of Dagon to symbolize the latter’s superiority, but the Philistines are shocked to find Dagon recognizing the sovereign power of Yahweh.<sup>24</sup> Just as the Philistines were able to manipulate the ark in the previous verses, they now find themselves having to manipulate their own deity, needing to “take” (*lqh*) him and “set” (*šwb*) him back in his position.<sup>25</sup>

As v. 3 ends, the narrative gives no clue as to what had happened, and the reader is left to wonder. The following days’ events remove all doubt. The Philistines rise early the next morning to find that Dagon has not only fallen again before the ark of Yahweh in

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<sup>21</sup> J. P. Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire (1 Sam. 1-12)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993), 252-53; Lyle M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1-12* (BLS 10; Sheffield: Almond, 1985), 190.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 35; Robert P. Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), 98; John Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1971), 75.

<sup>23</sup> The narrative betrays a polemical edge in that the statue is not referred to as “the image of Dagon,” but as Dagon himself. From the narrator’s point of view Dagon and the image are one and the same—it is Dagon himself lying prostrate before Yahweh, the God of Israel (Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 254).

<sup>24</sup> Brueggeman, *First and Second Samuel*, 36; Wolfgang Zwickel, “Dagons Abgeschlagener Kopf (1 Samuel V 3-4),” *VT* 44 (1994), 239.

<sup>25</sup> Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 253.

worship, but he has been utterly defeated by Yahweh.<sup>26</sup> His head and his hands have been “cut off” and his hands are lying upon the threshold, leaving only the trunk of the statue.<sup>27</sup> Removing any notion of chance, the passive form of the verb points to the action of Yahweh against Dagon.<sup>28</sup> In what amounts to a contest of the gods, Yahweh vindicates his superior power, declaring that even the house of Dagon is his sovereign territory.<sup>29</sup>

The next two episodes in the narrative focus on the warfare that Yahweh as the Divine Warrior wages against the Philistines themselves. The first people to feel his destructive power are the inhabitants of Ashdod. The narrative states that the “hand of Yahweh was heavy” upon the Ashdodites, visiting them with destruction and striking them with the plague (v. 6).<sup>30</sup> The “hand of Yahweh” stands in stark contrast to the impotent “hands” of Dagon, which were cut off, signifying defeat by Yahweh. The word for “heavy” (*kbd*) is closely related to the word for “glory” (*kbwd*), indicating that Yahweh was wreaking destruction in order to show his power to the Philistines.<sup>31</sup>

The Philistines appear to be learning this lesson about the God of Israel, as indicated by their conference in v. 7. They note the causal connection between the plague and the ark of Yahweh, stating that “the ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is heavy on us and on Dagon our god” (v. 7). According to the narrative, the Philistines begin to grasp the “weight” of the God of Israel, that he has mastery over them and their god, Dagon. Whereas they were in complete control in vv. 1-2, manipulating the ark with apparent impunity, they are now wondering if perhaps they are the ones being manipulated, and they realize that the ark “must not remain with

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<sup>26</sup> Ralph W. Klein, *I Samuel* (WBC 10; Waco: Word, 1988), 49; H. W. Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1964), 54.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon, *I & 2 Samuel*, 99.

<sup>28</sup> Fokkelman also notes that the Hebrew verb translated “cut off” usually indicates punishment or execution (*Vow and Desire*, 255).

<sup>29</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *I Samuel* (AB 8; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 125; Antony F. Campbell, “Yahweh and the Ark: A Case Study in Narrative,” *JBL* 98 (1979), 31.

<sup>30</sup> The plague is one of the most common weapons in divine warfare. Yahweh demonstrated his power against Egypt via the plague (Exod 9:15-16). Also, in poetic descriptions of theophanies of Yahweh the Divine Warrior, plague plays a major role (cf. Hab 3:5) (McCarter, *I Samuel*, 126; Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis*, 193).

<sup>31</sup> Mary J. Evans, *I and 2 Samuel* (NIBC; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 32.

us.”<sup>32</sup> The situation is resolved by the Philistine leaders, when they decide that the ark will be transported to Gath (v. 8).

The pattern in vv. 6-8 is repeated in vv. 9-11. The “hand of Yahweh” moved against Gath with both “a very great panic” and with plague.<sup>33</sup> The leaders of Gath had no need to call for a consultation, choosing to send it immediately to Ekron (v. 10). The people of Ekron respond immediately with panic, objecting to the ark being brought into their city. When the leaders of the Philistines are called together, in v. 11, they resolve to send the ark back to Israel, so that they will be spared plague and death.

The last four lines of the narrative sum up the devastation that Yahweh brought about in Philistia during his tour of conquest. There had been deadly confusion due to the “hand of Yahweh” and its being “heavy” in that place. The men were either stricken by the plague or were killed, causing a great cry of despair (v. 12).

According to the narrative, Yahweh was vindicating his power in his triumphant sojourn through Philistia. He was making known his “glory” to the Philistines, demonstrating that even though Israel had been utterly defeated by them, this was not due to the inferiority of Yahweh to Dagon. Far from it, Yahweh is sovereign and even Dagon acknowledges his superiority. This narrative is remarkable in that it involved the triumph of the Divine Warrior with no human agent at all! Yahweh’s supremacy is clearly seen in his triumphs in Philistia despite the complete vulnerability of the ark.

### **1 Samuel 17: David and Goliath**

The narrative in 1 Samuel 17 presents another example of the Divine Warrior triumphing in an impossible situation. The composer emphasizes this theme not only by heightening the contrast between David and Goliath, but by embodying in the combatants the identities of both their respective nations as well as the gods of those nations. In this way, the narrative underscores Yahweh as the Divine Warrior vindicating his superior power by overcoming overwhelming odds.

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<sup>32</sup> Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 256, 261.

<sup>33</sup> Panic is just as common a weapon utilized in divine warfare as the plague (Klein, *1 Samuel*, 51; Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 100).

The opening sequence notes the desperate situation that Israel faces. Israel and the Philistines are at a standoff and the Philistines have put forth their “champion,” offering to have the war decided by representative combat.<sup>34</sup> The narrative describes Goliath at length, noting his enormous size, his experience in combat, and his impressive equipment (vv. 4-8). He embodies the strength and power of the Philistine army, and the overwhelming threat which they pose to the army of Israel.<sup>35</sup>

The stakes for the army of Israel are high. For forty days Goliath has been taunting the army of Israel, attempting to shame them into taking up his challenge (v. 16).<sup>36</sup> If any “man” can defeat Goliath, then the Philistines will become the servants of Israel.<sup>37</sup> But if Goliath triumphs, then Israel will become the servants of the Philistines, to “serve” them (v. 9).<sup>38</sup> Though it appears that Saul would have been the obvious one to answer the challenge, he and his army have responded only with fear. The scene closes with a note of intense desperation and utter hopelessness—the men are “dismayed” and “greatly afraid” (v. 11).

The next episode in the narrative introduces David (vv. 12-19). The lengthy description of David and his activities emphasize not only his youth and lack of stature, but also the great disparity between the might of the Philistines and the weakness of Israel. David is introduced as a “son of Jesse” (v. 12), who is noted as being old “among men”—a category to which, the narrative indicates, David does not belong.<sup>39</sup> David is the youngest of Jesse’s sons (v. 14), not old enough to join the army of Israel, though it

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<sup>34</sup> Representative combat was common in the ANE, and appears in the OT. It was a way for armies to preserve both soldiers and equipment (Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 83).

<sup>35</sup> Mark K. George, “Constructing Identity in 1 Samuel 17,” *BibInt* 7 (1999), 396.

<sup>36</sup> Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 155.

<sup>37</sup> The appearance of “man” throughout the narrative is significant in that it is used alongside references to David as a “youth,” “son of Jesse,” and other appellations which emphasize David’s unsuitability to face Goliath (Klein, *1 Samuel*, 177).

<sup>38</sup> The addition of this phrase “and to serve us” to the proposition regarding Israel is highly significant, most likely indicating theological service. Throughout the historical narratives of the OT, Israel was constantly called upon to decide whom it will “serve”—Yahweh, or foreign gods (e.g., Exod 4:23; 23:33; Deut 6:13; Josh 23:7; 24:15; Judg 2:19; 1 Sam 7:3; 8:8; 12:10, 14, 24; 22:10). In this conflict, if Goliath were to defeat the representative of Israel, this would have indicated that Yahweh was subservient to the gods of the Philistines. If this were so, then logically, for Israel to continue to serve Yahweh would have meant service to Dagon and the Philistine gods (George, “Constructing Identity,” 398).

<sup>39</sup> Klein, *1 Samuel*, 177.

appears to be not much more than a volunteer fighting force (v. 13).<sup>40</sup> He is an errand-boy, sent to bring supplies and food to his brothers at the front—among the “men of Israel” (v. 19)—and to inquire about their welfare (v. 17-19).

The episode in vv. 20-30 is a turning point in the story. The contrast between David and Goliath is intensified, but David introduces a new concept into the narrative—Yahweh the Divine Warrior, the God of the armies of Israel. As David is carrying out the request of his father, he hears the taunt of “the man” Goliath (v. 23), from whom “all the men of Israel” flee in fear (v. 24).<sup>41</sup> Within vv. 24-28, the word “man” is repeated nine times, while David is never referred to as a man. In contrast, David’s brother Eliab rebukes him for asking what Saul will give “the man” who defeats Goliath, since David is a mere boy. From anger over the shame cast on the army by Goliath, Eliab lashes out at David, noting his lowly position as shepherd over “those few sheep” (v. 28). He charges David with neglect and with evil motives, wanting only to see the action of combat.

Instead of being sidetracked by Eliab’s rebuke, David, in a highly symbolic act, “turned away from him” and continued to inquire about what would be done for “the man” who took on Goliath.<sup>42</sup> David’s question emphasizes that the shame that has been put upon the armies of Israel extends to Yahweh (v. 26).<sup>43</sup> He notes that the one who kills Goliath will “remove” the “reproach” from Israel, from the armies of “the living God.”<sup>44</sup> He then begins to return the insult to Goliath, referring to him first as “this Philistine” and then as “this uncircumcised Philistine.”<sup>45</sup> The narrative emphasizes that David—the boy—responds with faith in Yahweh and sees only the shame cast upon Israel and upon Yahweh. In contrast to this, the men of Israel see only the size and power of Goliath and respond with fear.

The following scene in the narrative (v. 31-40) completes the transition initiated with the previous episode. Saul hears about David’s inquiries and David is taken to Saul

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<sup>40</sup> Breuggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 128.

<sup>41</sup> The fearsome sight of the Philistine champion and the intimidation of the Israelite army is emphasized by the play on the words “saw” (*r’h*) and “fear” (*yr’*) (Klein, *I Samuel*, 177).

<sup>42</sup> J. P. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates (I Sam. 13-31 & II Sam. I)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 165.

<sup>43</sup> George, “Constructing Identity,” 402.

<sup>44</sup> Reference to Yahweh as the “living God” is a polemical reference to the Israelite understanding that the gods of the nations are nothing but dead idols (Breuggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 128).

<sup>45</sup> George, “Constructing Identity,” 402.

(v. 31). David tells Saul—in the form of a prophetic oracle—to “let no man’s heart fail on account of” Goliath, for David is willing to fight him (v. 32).<sup>46</sup> In response, Saul points out the great contrast between Goliath and David. David is “not able” (cf. v. 9, Goliath asks for a man “able to fight me”) to face him, because he is merely a “youth,” while Goliath has been a warrior from his “youth” (v. 33). In David’s ensuing speech to Saul, he again insults Goliath, comparing him to one of the beasts he killed while tending his sheep and shows that his sole concern is for the reproach which has been cast upon Israel, and upon Yahweh, the “living God” (v. 36). David expresses unwavering faith that Yahweh will deliver Goliath into his hand just as he previously delivered him from danger (v. 38).

The already stark contrast between David and Goliath is emphasized further as Saul offers David his armor. Because David has not practiced or trained in using Saul’s armor, he takes it off.<sup>47</sup> Now David is completely vulnerable, just as Goliath is apparently invulnerable, and David now has no sword or spear, whereas Goliath has these very weapons. David now leaves to face Goliath, armed only with a stick and his sling and the stones he has picked up from a stream (vv. 39-40).

As the actual conflict begins, Goliath is insulted that a “youth” (cf. v. 33) has been sent to fight him. Further underscoring the great disparity between the combatants, he notes that he is only a youth, that he is beardless, and that his face is still smooth—not rough like a seasoned fighter. The speeches uttered by Goliath and David in this episode cast the conflict into explicitly *theological* terms—this is to be a battle between Yahweh and the gods of the Philistines. Goliath curses David by his gods (v. 43), and David’s

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<sup>46</sup> Moshe Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels* (trans. Phyllis Hackett; Hamavidil: Revivim, 1985), 116.

<sup>47</sup> In v. 39 David takes the armor off and tells Saul that he cannot use these things “because I am not used to them,” raising the question of what he is “used to.” This points back to David’s recounting of the deliverance of Yahweh from previous dangers. He has become accustomed to the deliverance of Yahweh, rather than depending upon manipulation or resorting to human devices to rescue from danger. This may raise the further theological question of the relationship between human skillfulness and God’s operation in human affairs. My friend Steve Watkins, a former Navy SEAL and weapons expert, and currently a pastor in Kentucky, points out that David would have been highly skilled in the use of the slingshot, an extremely lethal weapon in the ancient world, having had time to practice while tending sheep. It may indeed have been the case that he had attained the level of skill and accuracy as that mentioned in Judg 20:16 (“each one could sling a stone at a hair and not miss”). I would just note, however, that in this particular context, the narrative downplays the human qualifications and skills in order that Yahweh may be clearly seen as the one through whom salvation is provided.

response delivers the main point of the narrative. David states that though Goliath is heavily armed with sword and spear and javelin, David is armed with the name of “Yahweh of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel”—the Divine Warrior, who has been challenged by Goliath (v. 45). He pledges to strike down Goliath and to “remove” (cf. v. 26) his head (in order to “remove” the reproach) in order to vindicate Yahweh the Divine Warrior, whose standing had been called into question by Goliath and the threat of the Philistines (vv. 46b-47).<sup>48</sup>

The description of the conflict is relatively brief. As Goliath lumbers forward, David unleashes one of his stones, hitting Goliath in the head. Goliath “falls down with his face to the ground” just as Dagon did when the Philistines brought the ark of the covenant into Dagon’s temple (1 Sam 5). Whereas Goliath had threatened that Israel would “serve” the Philistines and their gods, Goliath is forced into the position of worship before Yahweh.<sup>49</sup> The narrative notes in v. 50 that there was no sword in David’s hand, stressing that not only was it Yahweh who provided victory, but that the manner in which he did so highlighted Yahweh’s sovereign power as Divine Warrior. David rushes over to cut off Goliath’s head and the army of Israel chases after the Philistines as they flee.

Several devices stress the theme of the Divine Warrior overcoming impossible odds in the present narrative. The great disparity between David—in his unsuitability for combat—and Goliath the seasoned “champion” is constantly stressed and even intensified as the narrative proceeds. Further, the words of David throughout the narrative note that Yahweh has been reproached by Goliath’s insults and that his power and ability have been cast in doubt. Therefore, it is up to Yahweh to act and to do so in such a way as to clearly demonstrate his sovereign power. The narrative sets the stage in such a way that the odds are overwhelmingly against David, thus making Yahweh’s triumph all the more impressive.

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<sup>48</sup> This vindication had both a universal (“that all the earth may know”), and a local (“all of this assembly”) aspect.

<sup>49</sup> George, “Constructing Identity,” 407.

## Elijah and the Prophets of Baal: 1 Kings 18

The confrontation between Elijah, the prophet of Yahweh, and the prophets of Baal is another example of Yahweh vindicating his status as supreme over all gods in the face of insurmountable obstacles. The contest in the narrative is between Yahweh and Baal—a contest between the deities to determine who is the true god of Israel. According to the narrative, the people of Israel are torn between the two options, they cannot make a choice between following Yahweh or Baal (v. 21).

Elijah confronts Ahab and orders him to gather the people of Israel and the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel (vv. 19-20).<sup>50</sup> He challenges Israel to overcome their indecision<sup>51</sup> and to make a choice—“if Yahweh is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him” (v. 21). The people fail to give Elijah an “answer,”<sup>52</sup> so Elijah sets up a contest between Yahweh and Baal in order to demonstrate who is supreme. Both Elijah and the prophets of Baal will prepare a sacrifice, and the deity who brings down fire upon the sacrifice will be declared the one true God of Israel (vv. 22-24).

Particularly striking in the contest which takes up vv. 20-40 is the symmetry of the narration.<sup>53</sup> Elijah twice addresses the assembly of Israel (vv. 21, 22-24), and twice he speaks to the prophets of Baal (vv. 25, 27). At the start of the episode, Elijah “came near”<sup>54</sup> to the people, and after the defeat of Baal, the people “came near” to him (v. 30). He offers the people two equal choices regarding following Yahweh or Baal, and then he orders the bulls to be equally prepared. Against the backdrop of these formal symmetries, a number of important features in the narrative are striking—the stacking of

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<sup>50</sup> Ahab’s unquestioning compliance with Elijah’s order is typical of his responses to strong personalities like Elijah and Jezebel (Paul J. Kissling, *Reliable Characters in the Primary History: Profiles of Moses, Joshua, Elijah and Elisha* (JSOTSS 224; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 98).

<sup>51</sup> The Hebrew phrase may be rendered “limping upon two crutches” and pictures a person hobbling along, unable to walk normally (Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings* [WBC 12; Waco: Word, 1985], 228).

<sup>52</sup> The word “answer” plays an important role in this narrative. The people do not “answer” Elijah’s challenge (v. 21), so Elijah proposes a contest consisting of two sacrifices with the explanation, “the god that answers by fire, he is god” (v. 24). The people then “answer” that “the word is good” (v. 24). When the prophets call on Baal, twice there is no “answer” (vv. 26, 29). Elijah then prays to Yahweh, “answer me, Yahweh, answer me” (v. 37) (DeVries, *1 Kings*, 226).

<sup>53</sup> Robert Cohn, “The Literary Logic of 1 Kings 17-19,” *JBL* 101 (1982), 340.

<sup>54</sup> The phrase “came near” often introduces a scene or episode in which a controversy is engaged or a decision is demanded (e.g., Gen 18:23; 27:21; 45:4; Josh 14:6) (DeVries, *1 Kings*, 228).

the deck in favor of the prophets of Baal, the different approaches of the two sides to their respective deities, and the stunning victory of Yahweh.

Elijah is the only prophet of Yahweh, while there are 450 prophets of Baal (v. 22). The Hebrew in v. 22 is emphatic, since not only is the normal word order reversed, but the “alone” is added.<sup>55</sup> In vv. 23-24, Elijah continues to stress this disparity in numbers, emphatically referring to his being alone three more times.

Elijah then gives the prophets of Baal first choice of the two bulls brought out for the contest, giving them the opportunity to select the better of the two, or at least one more likely to make Baal answer (v. 25).<sup>56</sup> He also tells them to go first, allowing them to seize the initiative, and giving them the opportunity to take as much time as they needed.<sup>57</sup> Further, the very nature of the contest would seem to favor Baal, since he was the god of fertility, thunder, and lightning.

The manner in which the prophets of Baal go about summoning Baal to action stands in stark contrast to Elijah. They “called” out to Baal to “answer” throughout the entire day, from morning until noon, and continuing until the time for the evening sacrifice (vv. 26, 29).<sup>58</sup> In v. 28, their efforts become more desperate as continue to “cry” and now begin to gash themselves, perhaps as a substitute for human sacrifice.<sup>59</sup>

The narrative notes the futility with which the prophets of Baal summoned their god with the emphatic conclusion in vv. 26, 29—”but there was no voice, and no one answered and no one paid attention.”<sup>60</sup> Noting their increasing desperation because of the silence of Baal, the narrative employs the term *psḥ* to refer to their “leaping” around the altar—the same term that referred to Israel’s “hobbling/limping” between two

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<sup>55</sup> Burke O. Long, *I Kings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 192.

<sup>56</sup> Alan J. Hauser, “Yahweh Versus Death—The Real Struggle in 1 Kings 17-19,” in *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis* (ed. A. J. Hauser; BLS 19; Sheffield: Almond, 1990), 39.

<sup>57</sup> Kissling, *Reliable Characters*, 98.

<sup>58</sup> DeVries, *I Kings*, 229.

<sup>59</sup> J. Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (London: SCM, 1977), 399. The difference in the two approaches is emphasized by parallel Hebrew phrases: the prophets of Baal cut themselves “according to their custom” (v. 28), while Elijah constructs the altar “according to the number” (v. 31) of the tribes of Israel (Russell Gregory, “Irony and the Unmasking of Elijah,” in *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis* (ed. A. J. Hauser; BLS 19; Sheffield: Almond, 1990), 122).

<sup>60</sup> In both vv. 26 and 29 the negative particle is repeated in order to make the conclusion more drawn out and emphatic. The mention in the narrative that “there was no voice (*qwl*)” also stands out in light of the frequent use of *qr*’ “to call” in vv. 24-26 (Hauser, “Yahweh Versus Death,” 42).

opinions in v. 21.<sup>61</sup> The prophets' frantic and mad activity contrasts starkly with the complete inactivity of Baal.<sup>62</sup>

Intensifying the focus on Baal's impotence, Elijah begins to taunt the prophets of Baal (v. 27). He tells them to "call out" (*qr'*) with a loud voice, which is especially cruel, since this was the initial charge of the contest, and is the very thing which for three hours has elicited no response.<sup>63</sup> He mockingly assumes the position of an encourager, assuring them that "surely he is a god." Emphasis is placed on the word "god" by reversing the normal word order, so that the narrative has Elijah strongly asserting Baal's deity in the face of Baal's inability to answer the pleas of the prophets.<sup>64</sup>

Elijah's taunts take a crude turn—perhaps drawing laughter from the children and others gathered in the assembly—as he suggests that perhaps Baal is answering the call of nature.<sup>65</sup> He even suggests that Baal may be on a long journey or even asleep and in need of being awoken.<sup>66</sup>

After it becomes all too obvious that Baal is not going to answer the prophets' call, Elijah proceeds to gather the people to himself. As the focus of the narrative turns to Elijah, the action slows as he methodically and carefully repairs the ruined altar—in stark contrast to the mad behavior of the prophets of Baal. After he prepares the sacrifice, Elijah orders that it be doused with water (v. 33). In order to stretch the already long odds, Elijah orders this done twice more (vv. 34-35).<sup>67</sup>

Elijah then prays to Yahweh asking him to vindicate his status as the God of Israel (vv. 36-37). In contrast to the complete silence of Baal, and the long wait of the

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<sup>61</sup> Hauser, "Yahweh Versus Death," 42.

<sup>62</sup> The Hebrew term *nb'* ("rave") is a verb used to denote extremely unreasonable actions, even madness (Gwilym H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings* [2 vols; NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984], 2:320).

<sup>63</sup> Hauser, "Yahweh Versus Death," 43.

<sup>64</sup> Hauser, "Yahweh Versus Death," 43.

<sup>65</sup> The Hebrew phrase indicates that Elijah's taunt was along these lines (DeVries, *1 Kings*, 229). Rendsburg argues that the phrase is a hendiadys, and renders it quite explicitly as "he may be defecating/urinating" (Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Mock of Baal in 1 Kings 18:27," *CBQ* 50 [1988], 416).

<sup>66</sup> On the relation of Baal's being asleep being an indication of death, see Hauser, "Yahweh Versus Death," 44-45. According to Jacobson, a parallel is found in the Mesopotamian epic, the *Atrahasis*. The god Enlil is enraged because he is kept awake by the noise of mankind. In contrast, Baal does not awake even when the priests of Baal spend the day making as much noise as possible to rouse him (Howard Jacobson, "Elijah's Sleeping Baal," *Bib* 79 [1998], 413).

<sup>67</sup> Kissling, *Reliable Characters*, 98.

prophets of Baal, the “answer” of Yahweh is immediate. The fire from Yahweh “fell” upon the sacrifice and completely consumed the altar. Stressing the completeness of the “answer” of Yahweh, the narrative goes to lengths describing all that the fire consumed (v. 38). In response to the fire falling from heaven, the people “fall” and finally answer “Yahweh, he is God, Yahweh, he is God” (v. 39).

In this contest between the gods, Yahweh demonstrates his superiority over Baal and vindicates his status as the God of Israel. Despite overwhelming advantages, Baal demonstrates complete impotence, while Yahweh answers immediately and with power in the face of impossible odds. While the imagery of divine warfare is implicit in the narrative, the motif of Yahweh overcoming insuperable obstacles in order to demonstrate his power is evident in the story.<sup>68</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In each of these situations, the already desperate situation facing Israel is intensified in that the human protagonist is seen to have no capacity to provide deliverance. These narratives stress that God alone provides salvation and that He is adamant that the means by which deliverance comes must clearly point to the glory of the Lord. The manner in which these narratives are constructed has important implications for ministry, calling us to view with suspicion the faith so often placed in technique and the promise of the latest program. In the two narratives where the human protagonist is portrayed positively (David and Elijah), they demonstrate unwavering and clear-eyed faith in Yahweh in the midst of the lack of faith and apostasy of Israel. If our churches are to experience the blessing of the Lord, church leaders must determine to exalt the glory of God in Christ, being careful not to stand in the way by going after so many of the techniques offered by the contemporary ministry marketing machine.

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<sup>68</sup> Divine warfare motifs appear in this narrative via theophanic elements such as “fire” and “voice” (Martin Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting From Heaven: God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* [OBO 169; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999], 84-99).