

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 7, Year B (track one)

First Reading

1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49 (Optional verses in italics, omitted verses indented)

Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle.

And they were gathered at Socoh, which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephes-dammim. And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered, and encamped in the Valley of Elah, and drew up in line of battle against the Philistines. And the Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them.

And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. And he had bronze armor on his legs, and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron. And his shield-bearer went before him. He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us." And the Philistine said, "I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man, that we may fight together." When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years. The three oldest sons of Jesse had followed Saul to the battle. And the names of his three sons who went to the battle were Eliab the firstborn, and next to him Abinadab, and the third Shammah. David was the youngest. The three eldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at Bethlehem. For forty days the Philistine came forward and took his stand, morning and evening.

And Jesse said to David his son, "Take for your brothers an ephah of this parched grain, and these ten loaves, and carry them quickly to the camp to your brothers.

Also take these ten cheeses to the commander of their thousand. See if your brothers are well, and bring some token from them.”

Now Saul and they and all the men of Israel were in the Valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. And David rose early in the morning and left the sheep with a keeper and took the provisions and went, as Jesse had commanded him. And he came to the encampment as the host was going out to the battle line, shouting the war cry. And Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. And David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage and ran to the ranks and went and greeted his brothers. As he talked with them, behold, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him.

All the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him and were much afraid. And the men of Israel said, “Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel. And the king will enrich the man who kills him with great riches and will give him his daughter and make his father’s house free in Israel.” And David said to the men who stood by him, “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” And the people answered him in the same way, “So shall it be done to the man who kills him.”

Now Eliab his eldest brother heard when he spoke to the men. And Eliab’s anger was kindled against David, and he said, “Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle.” And David said, “What have I done now? Was it not but a word?” And he turned away from him toward another, and spoke in the same way, and the people answered him again as before.

When the words that David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul, and he sent for him.

And David said to Saul, “Let no man’s heart fail because of him. Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth.” But David said to Saul, “Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has struck down both lions and

bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.” And David said, “The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “Go, and the LORD be with you!”

Then Saul clothed David with his armor. He put a helmet of bronze on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail, and David strapped his sword over his armor. And he tried in vain to go, for he had not tested them. Then David said to Saul, “I cannot go with these, for I have not tested them.” So David put them off. Then he took his staff in his hand and chose five smooth stones from the brook and put them in his shepherd’s pouch. His sling was in his hand, and he approached the Philistine.

And the Philistine moved forward and came near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. And when the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was but a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. And the Philistine said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, “Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field.” Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give you into our hand.”

When the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. And David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone and slung it and struck the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground. (ESV)

Or,

1 Samuel 17:57-18:5, 10-16 (omitted verses in italics)

And as soon as David returned from the striking down of the Philistine, Abner took him, and brought him before Saul with the head of the Philistine in his hand. And Saul said to him, “Whose son are you, young man?” And David answered, “I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite.”

As soon as he had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. And Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. And David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him, so that Saul set him over the men of war. And this was good in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of Saul's servants.

As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they celebrated,

*“Saul has struck down his thousands,
and David his ten thousands.”*

And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?” And Saul eyed David from that day on.

The next day a harmful spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand. And Saul hurled the spear, for he thought, “I will pin David to the wall.” But David evaded him twice.

Saul was afraid of David because the LORD was with him but had departed from Saul. So Saul removed him from his presence and made him a commander of a thousand. And he went out and came in before the people. And David had success in all his undertakings, for the LORD was with him. And when Saul saw that he had great success, he stood in fearful awe of him. But all Israel and Judah loved David, for he went out and came in before them. (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 6:1–13

Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says,

“In a favorable time I listened to you,

and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 4:35–41

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

(David and Goliath)

I was surprised to learn two things about our passage from 1 Samuel 17 this week as I studied for this Divergence. The first is that there are two substantially different versions of the story, one considerably longer than the other. The Hebrew version, the Masoretic Text, is the longer, and the shorter text is found in the Septuagint. Most of the

verses missing in the Septuagint are those that are in italics or indented in the version above, which accounts for them being set as “optional” or being omitted for our reading this Sunday. A *lot* has been written trying to sort out which is the original version with no clear conclusions. I did find a recent paper that suggests that one manuscript fragment that predates the Septuagint appears to include the longer text, but it (the manuscript) is so degraded that a firm conclusion was beyond the author.

Personally, I find the omission of the verses above impoverishes the story by leaving out the background explaining David’s presence at the battle line and his relationship with his brothers. But it cannot be denied that the story flows a bit more smoothly without all of that. In the longer story, David is still a shepherd living at home. In the shorter he appears to be Saul’s armor bearer. I myself will opt for the longer, as I think it fits better with the second thing I learned about this story.

That second thing is that the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 is probably dependent in some sense on an older, similar story from the ancient Near East. Maybe two of them.

For a long time scholars had held that this story was derived from the stories of single combat in the Iliad by Homer. This kind of relationships between texts, with an earlier one (the *hypotext*) giving shape to a later one (the *hypertext*) is called in literary analysis “intertextuality.” It doesn’t mean that the writer of the later text sat down to copy the former one with just a few changes, but rather that the author of the latter text knew and appropriated one story and allowed that knowledge to give shape to his own writing. It can fairly be said that this is true of almost all writing, that everything draws its shape from something that came before, even what I’m writing now.

But a careful study of the relationship between the Iliad and the story of David and Goliath demonstrates that the link is very weak and indeed unlikely. Instead, the text that appears to have the strongest intertextual link to our reading this week is the Assyrian story of Gilgamesh and his battle against Humbaba. It is much more likely that the author of 1 Samuel 17 knew Gilgamesh than the Iliad, and the similarities are much stronger in the case of Gilgamesh.

I won’t go into the similarities here, but if you’d like to read about them, [here’s a link to the 2011 article](#). I won’t go into the similarities because it is the differences that are important to me. You see, it doesn’t matter to me that the author of 1 Samuel used another story to help form his story of David and Goliath. What matters to me is that he told the story very differently so as to communicate something important about God and David.

Gilgamesh conquers Humbaba by his own strength and skill, and while the same might be said of David, David wouldn't say it of himself. He attributes his victory, over Goliath as well as the bear and the lion before him, to God. This is part of the reason I opt for the longer version, too, because the author of 1 Samuel was clearly anti-monarchical, and the verses omitted in the Septuagint are those that set David apart as a king very much unlike Gilgamesh or Saul. Gilgamesh may not have been a giant like Humbaba, but he is still described as being enormously strong and trained in combat. David is a shepherd, trained only in keeping safe his sheep. By setting David over against Saul in this way, the author of 1 Samuel seems to me to set David apart, unlike the "king like that of other nations" the people had required of Samuel.

This all raises for me another intriguing question. Does the use of the Gilgamesh epic by the author of 1 Samuel suggest that his intended readers/hearers also had some knowledge of the story? If they did, it would mean that the differences would have much more impact. They would take note of those differences and nod, "Ah, yes, the greatest king of all was so different!"

If they didn't it would suggest that the story was simply designed to evoke a similar awe of David while setting him over against Saul more than Gilgamesh. (Try typing that name ten times fast!) Because the Gilgamesh epic would only have been known in Akkadian, and few would have known that language, I think this second option is the more likely.

Or,

(Saul and David)

Our text from chapter 18 of 1 Samuel (with the ending verses of ch 17 to give narrative context) begins the narrative of David's rise to power in the court of Saul. Read alone, they seem two disjointed stories, but read as a part of all of chapter 18, they gain meaning through their context.

The reading begins with the sudden introduction of Jonathan whose love for David is such that he takes off his armor and weapons and gives them to David. This is less about Jonathan and David than it is about David and Saul, whose figurative "son" David becomes when he accepts the gift from Jonathan. All three of Saul's children play roles in this chapter, not just Jonathan.

Then come the omitted verses. If I were still in active ministry, I'd have these verses read aloud on Sunday morning. Without them the coming of the "evil spirit" on Saul lacks context. Saul's jealousy is the opportunity through which the evil spirit finds a foothold

in him, I think. The song to which he reacts isn't nearly as objectionable as it reads in the English translation. The word translated "tens of thousands" doesn't actually mean that, it just means "many." Many more than thousands, yes, but it is indeterminate. Saul is given his proper place in the song. He appears first, but David is credited with "many" thousands, and Saul immediately jumps from that to fearing the loss of his throne.

Saul's failures continue to mount. He tries to get David out of the public eye by assigning him as captain of a "thousand." (A relatively small army.) Instead, David's successes win him even greater love from the people. Later in the chapter Saul will try to bind David to him (through marriage to one Merab) in a way that will bring him into constant conflict with the Philistines and bring about his death. (A strange foreshadowing of David's plot against Uriah.) David declines, and Saul accepts, but then insists that he marry Michal, and David agrees, but Saul sets the bride-price at something that will surely be his death, one hundred Philistine foreskins. David, of course, brings back two hundred.

In the midst of all this, Saul recognizes that "YHWH is with him." (David)

I recite all this so that we can see more clearly that neither of our stories from this week's reading should be read alone. They are part of a much larger program, the replacement of Saul as king with David. David enters Saul's family as more of a son than Jonathan had been, and Saul's jealousy leads him to make one wrong move after another, each one only making things worse for himself. David will not become king for some time, but by the end of this chapter he has supplanted Saul in the hearts and minds of the people.

I'd like to address one verse that still troubles me. God "sends a harmful (or evil) spirit" upon Saul. I keep asking myself, "Why would God do that?"

My answer (and it should be taken with a handful of salt) is this.

YHWH has long since rejected Saul as king over the Israelites. The same failure to act faithfully that caused Saul's fall is manifest in Saul's jealousy. God hastens what has already been determined through this "harmful" spirit.

I don't know any Hebrew really, but I went and looked at the way the word translated "evil" or "harmful" is translated elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. It's the word used for the tree of the knowledge of "good and evil" in Genesis. It's also the word translated "vanity" in Ecclesiastes. Sometimes it means "evil" other times "useless," and several other things in between.

This spirit seems to be one that simply permits Saul to act on his worst impulses, impulses that aren't much different than ones he's already shown. I don't think it *causes* Saul's deterioration, but it allows it.

My final take is that God doesn't accelerate Saul's fall with this spirit, but instead allows Saul to "hit bottom" in the way that many of us need to so that we can finally re-order our lives. And yes, I do think God allows us to hit bottom for our own good sometimes. I've certainly been there.

Second Reading

Our reading this week from 2 Corinthians continues Paul's defense of his apostolate by describing both the hardships he has taken on actively and those he has suffered passively for the sake of the congregation in Corinth. Having established in last week's passage that such hardships are not indicators of God's disfavor, but his imitation of Christ on their behalf, he enumerates them even more forcibly here and begins to mix in those qualities of his ministry that are not negative in appearance at all, "...purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left..." (Paul, ever the master of the run on sentence!)

It is unfortunate for our deeper study of 2 Corinthians that our lectionary skips over the next small section of the letter (6:14-7:1) which appears to change course so completely that it is part of the reason many scholars have maintained it must have been inserted from another letter. Perhaps another time we'll have an opportunity to talk about how it really fits into Paul's argument, but it just doesn't fit this week.

Paul's argument from appearance to reality in the latter verses of our reading make explicit what he's been leading up to all along. What his readers *see* in him, what is the source of his opponents' criticism, is not the truth at all. Who he is in Christ is all that is true.

Let's keep in mind the "missional" objective that I talked about last week, too. It isn't only that Paul seeks to be seen as authoritative in the eyes of the Corinthians. That authority has a purpose, to shape that community into a vessel that lives and preaches the Gospel to the rest of the world. Paul isn't concerned about what they think of him for his own sake but for theirs and more, for the sake of those to whom they'll bring the Gospel.

Gospel Text

This story in Mark of the stilling of the storm is one that is part of a pair. The other stilling is in chapter 6 (where he walks on the water). This is a trait of Mark's Gospel that some have scholars have commented on, his propensity for using paired stories. Another example would be the twin feedings of great multitudes (4000 in one and 5000 in the other). I should note here that Matthew also shares two feeding stories.

Something can be gained from looking at both stories and seeing how they differ. It will help us understand why Mark included them both and what he wants us to gain from each.

In the second story, the emphasis is on prayer. That story is linked to its chiasmic partner (the exorcism of the young boy with the demon) by the theme of prayer. Jesus prays before he sets out onto the water, and he tells the disciples that the demon possessing the boy can only be cast out by prayer.

This stilling of a storm is focused on Jesus' identity. We are still in the early stages of Jesus' career, and the question of just who He is dominates the story. "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" This echoes exclamations from chapter 1, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." and that of the scribes in chapter 2, "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

This is contrasted with the exclamations of the demons, who *know* who He is, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are - the Holy One of God." And, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me."

Our story this week draws us, Mark's readers into a confidence with him. We know what those around Jesus fail to perceive, that Jesus is the Son of the Most High God. It casts the disciples in a decidedly unfavorable light. They continue to fail to understand until Peter blurts out his confession in chapter 8, "You are the Christ." Even then Peter fails to grasp what he's saying, because when Jesus begins to explain what being "the Christ" entails, Peter upbraids him, and he has to be called down by Jesus.

This all seems intentional on Mark's part. By letting us in on a secret the disciples continue to fail to see, Mark conveys importance on each hearer of his Gospel. To his readers has been given the secret of the Kingdom of God. They are important. They are insiders. They are chosen. They (we) see what even the disciples did not.

I find it helpful at this point to bring into the conversation the insights I picked up last week, reading about Paul's "missional" objectives. It must also be true that Mark had the

same objectives. That is, Mark wasn't building up his readers/hearers as some "insider" group that was insulated from the world, but so that they would become what he had become, evangelists for the sake of others. This is clearly demonstrated by the behavior of those whom Jesus commanded to silence after their healings, but who ran and told everyone what had happened to them. To be given the secret is to be unable to keep it to oneself. That is the mark of a true disciple. It is the mark demonstrated by the young man in the tomb at the end of the Gospel, who points the way to Jesus. For Mark, it is the characteristic of any true disciple.