

David and Goliath
Sally Altschuler and Sven Nordqvist

Translated by Caroline Waight

“Clear off, go away, I hate you,” shouted the red-headed shepherd boy, throwing out his arms to look bigger. He wasn’t actually very big.

He’d been sitting peacefully on a hilltop in the shadow of an olive tree, playing his flute, when he caught sight of three hyenas loping among the hills towards his flock of sheep and goats.

He knew the hyenas came from the desert, and that they were bound to be very hungry. At any rate, they ignored his shouts. If he couldn’t chase the hyenas away, he’d have to gather the flock and drive them to safety, closer to the village. He didn’t always manage to bring them all with him. Sometimes the hyenas, a bear or on rare occasions a lion would grab a lamb or a goat that couldn’t keep up with the flock. Then his father got angry and told him off, because the animals were the most valuable things he owned.

Every time the ferocious predators approached he tried to hit them with stones, using his sling. They were the kind of stones that hit very hard, but it was hard to aim properly. He’d never actually hit a hyena, but he tried anyway, over and over.

Finding a big stone of the right size, he put it in his sling.

Now the flock had noticed the hyenas too. They stopped grazing and moved away from the danger. The boy could see that the hyenas had picked out a sheep, one that was limping slightly. If he didn’t do something, those lousy hyenas would take the sheep, and he’d be in hot water with his dad, but if he didn’t watch out, they might take him instead. A single hyena wasn’t much worse than a dog, but three hungry hyenas were dangerous.

He started running towards the predators, swinging the sling around his head. They didn’t look especially afraid of the tiny person storming towards them – they only had eyes for the lame sheep, which was already dying of fright. So was the boy. When he reached the sheep he stopped short, gasping, and swung the sling faster and faster. He was aiming for the one at the front.

The stone whistled through the air, faster than his eyes could follow it. The hyena didn’t see it either, until it was hit. It leapt up into the air with a howl, rolled over backwards and lay still. The other two stopped and stared at it uncertainly. The boy gave a yell of enthusiasm, and with renewed courage he ran towards the hyenas.

“Go away! Get back into the desert,” he screamed.

The two hyenas wanted none of it. They fled. The boy paused to pick up a new stone. The third hyena was twitching. It got to its feet, staggering, and lurched after the escaping hyenas. The boy swung his sling again.

“To teach you a lesson.”

The second stone hit the ground some way away from the fleeing hyenas, but it didn’t dampen the boy’s glee. The predators vanished behind a hill in the direction of the desert. He turned towards the lame sheep.

“Did you see that? I hit it. I hit that disgusting hyena. I saved you.”

The sheep had already forgotten the hyenas. It was munching on a tuft of grass.

The boy went back to the olive tree on top of the hill. He wished someone had witnessed his victory. He had just sat down and started playing his flute when he heard someone calling a little way away.

“David! David, where are you?”

He recognised his father’s voice at once.

“I’m here, on the hill,” he replied, and ran to meet his dad.

If only his dad had arrived a few minutes earlier – he’d have seen that crack shot. Well, at least David could tell him.

“There was a pack of hyenas, but I chased them off with my sling. I hit them and knocked them clear off their feet.”

“Oh, right,” said his dad.

“It was a huge pack, at least ten, I think. But you’d better believe they scarpered once they’d had a taste of my sling.”

“Oh, right,” said his dad. “But you need to take this food to your brothers. They’re fighting the Philistines in the Valley of Elah.”

“I think there was probably a bear, too,” said David. “I hit it right between the eyes.”

“Oh, right. You need to set off straight away.”

David was not at all keen to take the food to his three brothers in the king’s army, which was fighting the Philistines. He had heard a lot about how nasty the Philistines were.

“Can’t you send someone else? I need to look after the animals. I can chase the wild animals away with my sling. I hit them right between the eyes.”

“If you’re so good with your sling, then you’re exactly the right person to send into battle.”

It was settled. David went to the Valley of Elah with the food for his brothers, his flute and his sling.

He reached the king’s army that night, just before darkness fell. The brothers were pleased to receive the food, but as they lay down to sleep in their tent, David could tell they were worried. Next morning, he understood why.

Their camp was on one side of the valley. On the other side, the Philistines had set up theirs. When the sun had risen a little way into the sky, something happened in the Philistines’ camp. A man carrying a very big shield came out onto the plain between the two armies. The shield was so large and heavy that the man could hardly carry it. Behind him walked a giant man. He wore shiny armour and was swinging an absolutely massive sword threateningly.

The shield-bearer struck the big shield with a mallet. The clang echoed across the whole valley.

“This is the giant, Goliath,” he shouted. “Come out and fight him, you wimps. If one of you defeats Goliath, we’ll go home, and you’ll have won. If Goliath wins, you will be our slaves. But of course you won’t dare, a bunch of chickens like you.”

The shield-bearer struck the shield again and repeated the whole rigmarole. The giant behind him said nothing. He just glowered.

“They do that every single morning,” said David’s eldest brother, Eliab.

“Won’t anybody fight him?” asked David.

His big brother stared at him. “Are you completely daft? Look at him. He’s at least five times bigger than you.”

Goliath was certainly pretty big.

“Yeah, he is, but I saw off seven bears that wanted to take our sheep, only the other day.”

Eliab laughed loudly. “Yeah, right.”

David took out his sling. “I sorted them out with this.

Eliab called for the other two brothers.

“Did you hear that? Our red-headed little brother says he wants to fight Goliath because he’s just defeated seven bears.”

“David’s always been nuts, but I didn’t realise he was *this* nuts,” said the second-oldest.

“Yeah, you go and fight Goliath,” laughed the third-oldest.

Needless to say, David very much did not want to do that. Mostly he just wanted to go home. As soon as possible.

“I’m afraid I need to get back. Someone needs to look after the sheep. There could be wild animals or anything.”

He set off straightaway. The last thing he heard was his brothers laughing loudly at him. “Yeah, you run home to your mummy. Cowardy, cowardy custard.”

Sometimes it’s better to just keep your mouth shut, he thought, as he started the journey home.

When he’d been walking for a while, a thick fog came rolling down from the mountainside, so he couldn’t see which way was forward and which way was back. It had been easy to find his way on the outward journey, but now he had no idea in which direction he should walk. As the fog grew denser, David grew more and more afraid. Imagine if he never found his way home again. He filled his pocket with stones.

He kept thinking he heard funny sounds. Was that a hyena howling? He’d heard there were robbers in the valley, too. And now there was something grunting in the mist, and it was definitely coming closer. He stopped and listened. His hands shaking, he put a stone into the sling.

Squinting, he tried to see through the fog. Slowly, a shadow stepped forth. David gasped. It was a bear. But it wasn’t just a bear. It was a huge, utterly colossal bear, the kind that definitely loved eating red-headed boys. David almost forgot to breathe. He knew bears could run very fast, so there was no point trying to run away from it.

“If ... if you come any closer you’ll get a stone in the eye,” he shouted, and started swinging the sling.

Either the bear didn’t understand, or it didn’t care. It was approaching step by step.

“It’s so close now that I can’t miss,” he muttered.

But he could. The stone whizzed past the bear’s large head. Its tongue was lolling out of its big maw.

David stretched out his arms towards the monster. “Look how skinny I am. I’d be no use to you.”

The bear didn’t care. It opened its jaws and roared. When it was only a few steps from David, it reared up onto its hind legs. Then it was even bigger and even more frightening. David screamed with terror.

At that moment the bear paused, its jaws open, saliva dripping from its pointed teeth. It blinked a couple of times, went down onto all fours, shuffled and took a couple of steps backwards. Perhaps there was hope after all. David quickly put a stone into the sling and swung it.

“Get out of here, before things get really bad for you,” he yelled.

David could scarcely believe it, but the bear turned around and vanished into the fog. David hurled the stone after it.

“Ha, my roar scared it away. What a cowardly, cowardly custard.”

Suddenly David felt very big and strong.

But it only lasted a moment, until he felt a tap on his shoulder.

“Hello,” said a deep voice.

David’s arms and legs jerked and he tried to run, but a big hand held him still.

“Wait.”

David’s legs were trembling beneath him as he turned around. He tilted back his head. It was a long way up to the head of the very big man – he was even bigger than the bear.

“What’s your name?” asked the big man.

“D . . . David.”

“My name is Goliath.”

“Goliath!” whimpered David. “So you’re the bloodthirsty giant, the one who comes out screaming and shouting every morning?”

“I’m not the one screaming and shouting. That’s the shield-bearer. I don’t make a peep. I just stand there.”

David took a little step back to get a better look at the giant.

“Gosh, you’re big,” he gasped. “But not quite as gigantic as when I saw you this morning.”

“It’s the armour. It’s much too big and very, very heavy. I hate it. I wish I could be rid of all that stuff.”

“I bet.”

“So when the fog came, I left without anyone seeing.”

David considered this.

“So it was you the bear was afraid of, not me.”

Goliath nodded.

“Probably, yes.”

“I wish I could scare bears away too.”

“What bears?”

“The ones trying to get our sheep. And the hyenas. I look after my dad’s sheep.”

“I’d much rather look after sheep,” said Goliath.

“Well, then you can come home with me. We can look after the sheep together. And I can teach you to play the flute.”

Goliath smiled. It sounded good to him.

“I think the fog is lifting,” he said, and they walked home to David’s.

“I’ve made a friend who wants to help me look after the sheep,” David told his dad.

“He’s big.”

“Good day, sir. My name is Goliath.”

“Yes, you are big,” said David’s dad.

On the plain in the Valley of Elah, the shield-bearer stepped out of the fog and began to shout, but then he realised there was no Goliath behind him. Ashamed, he retreated.

And if the two armies haven’t long since gone home, they’re still in their camps on either side of the valley, but nobody goes around shouting every morning.