

# CHALLENGE OF THE CHAMPIONS

A RETELLING OF THE STORY OF DAVID AND GOLIATH

PART OF THE 'ONLY A BOY' SERIES

It was dark! As people slept, only the embers of the overnight campfires kept away the coolness of the desert air. In the early hours, quiet dozing turned into widespread mutterings as the first rays of dawn peeked over the surrounding hilltops. Boys stoked still-warm ashes. Breakfast was served as the grotty mess of food scraps and dirty cups from the previous night's meal was cleared away.

My older brothers tucked into some of the food I had brought them. They were joining hundreds of other Philistine men who had come to fight against the Israelites. The wars were always about who controlled which bit of land and this one was no different. Tents were spread all over the valley, a huge array of colours, shapes and sizes. Some of the fancy ones were owned by Army Captains or Princes from our cities. They were large and colourful, important looking. I had never seen anything quite like it and was really interested. Most of the tents belonged to ordinary people, with normal jobs like hunting, fishing and farming, men who had been drafted in to make up numbers for the war. They had brown, dark tents which were only dimly lit inside, in contrast to the startlingly bright glare of the strong summer sun. At least it was cool inside.

The Israelite camp was on the other side of the valley. They were our enemy and we hated them! Our armies had fought many battles against each other and they held lots of bad memories and grudges. I had never met any Israelites, but ever since I was a baby, I had been warned that they were awful people.

Across the scorching sandy desert floor, their camp looked very similar to ours and seemed quite peaceful most of the time. Every so often though, a scouting group would come too close and a skirmish would result, a reminder that we were at war. I could hear the noises of their donkeys and goats and the clanking of shields and swords as they practised their Hebrew-warrior 'power-swordsmanship' and other fighting techniques. Sometimes too, if the wind was blowing towards us, I could even tell what they were eating – roast lamb cooking on an open fire smelled great whichever army was cooking it. Put that way, they didn't seem all that different from us, but I had been told that they were quite strange, especially with their customs about food and cooking methods. They had rules like "You mustn't cook a young goat kid in its mother's milk" or "You mustn't make an omelette from an egg that was laid on a Saturday". "Why on earth not? Had the chickens had a particularly rough Friday night?"

At the time I was only a twelve year old boy, called Ismael bin Hamad, just too young to be drafted into the army. I was only there because mum had sent me with supplies of soft cheese, ripe fruit, olives, hummus, falafel and Babylonian-style flat bread for my brothers and father. I had stayed on for a few days as nothing dangerous was happening. A group of boys from my village had come with me, with food for their own families.

It was actually quite dangerous to travel without some kind of armed escort. Raiding parties and wild animals roamed around, not to mention the Bedouin slave traders who were not against kidnapping, if it meant they could sell you somewhere for some money. I didn't fancy either option.

It was a real adventure being there with the army – I felt quite grown up. Although I was young, I liked being with the men and looked forward to the day when I would be old enough to join them properly.

There was something quite gritty about a camp full of men. For a start there were no women in the camp, apart from the King's servants and although some things seemed harsh, most people were friendly and inclusive.

My oldest brother told me that things were quiet because there was some kind of stand-off on the battlefield. The King's officers had dreamed up the idea of a Champion's duel to settle things, rather than the whole army having to fight. Our Champion had issued a challenge but no-one had replied and so we all waited and waited.

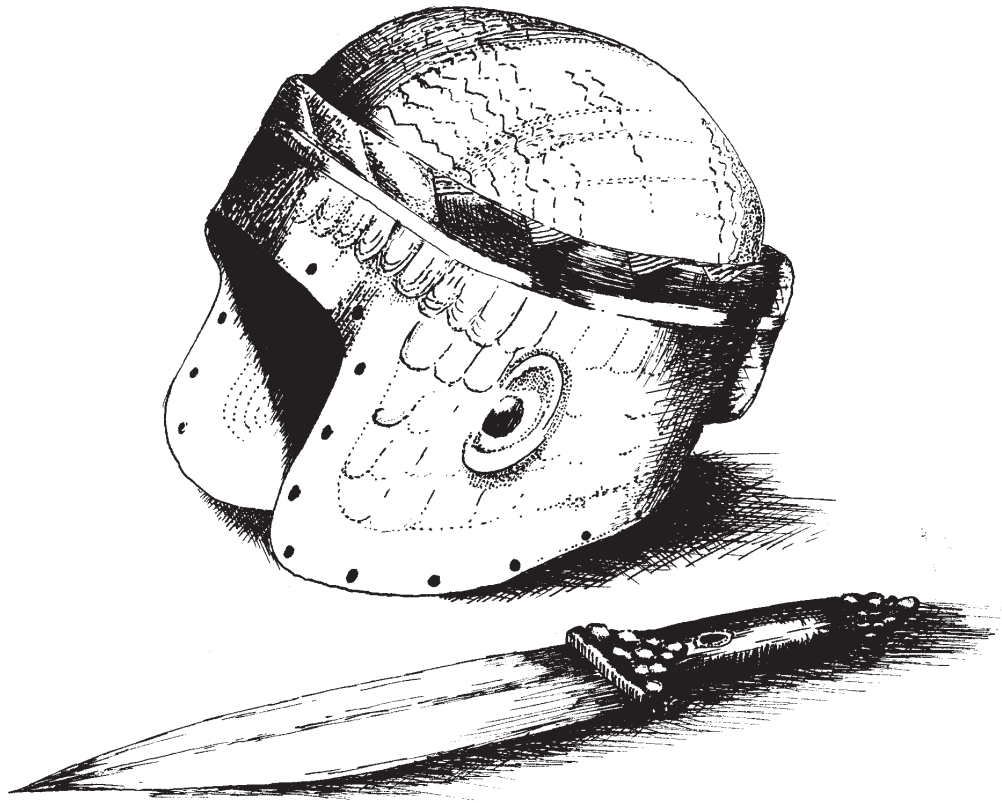
I was a bit tired because I had stayed up late last night, but was too interested in things to let it bother me. For the men, this waiting around was quite boring, but it gave me plenty of time to talk to them and to explore the camp. I was particularly glad that I'd brought my 'young adventurers' wax note-block and writing stick with me.

Some of the soldiers began to kick a ball-like thing around, made from a sheep's gut they had blown up and tied in a knot. I joined in for a while, but when it became clear they didn't really want to pass it to the 'young kid', I went off in the huff!

Our Champion was a huge battle-hardened warrior, who stood an incredible 9 feet tall. He was so frightening to look at, I wasn't surprised no-one wanted to fight him!

He was one of the legendary Sons of Rapha from the city of Gath. There were only a few of the Raphaites left – real giants, one of whom was even supposed to have six toes on each foot. 'Strange – very strange!' I wondered what their mother had fed them for breakfast? Still, I was glad they were on our side, because no-one in their right minds would want to 'meet one of them on a dark night'.

The Champion's armour bearer had to carry a shield, sword and spear - poor man! The spear alone was like a small tree trunk and the shield was nearly as big as he was. It must have been a struggle to carry the weight of it all, even though he had strong leg muscles and looked pretty fit. (In fact, he reminded me of the tough central defender that used to play for Ashkelon United a couple of years back).



Before the Champion's challenge had been given, a huge elaborate ceremony had taken place. Priests and religious men burned incense and potions, sacrificing many animals or a few small children to the gods, to ask for their blessing and protection from disaster. All sorts of chanting and dancing would have been involved.

It happened before I got to the camp, but I knew this was an important ritual in our tradition, since we would not want to do anything that would displease the gods. That might lead to crop failure, famine, illness, or losing the battle and we didn't want to risk severe punishment for not bowing down to them.

Suddenly, there was a huge commotion. A little way off, men were shouting loudly, cheering excitedly, rattling their swords and shields. Some were just using pots and pans – anything that would make a loud clattering noise.

'What was going on?'

My curiosity drove me to find a high rock from which to get a better view. From the middle of this racket, it soon became clear what all the fuss was about. The King's Champion was coming out.

His name was Goliath!

It is hard to find words to describe a battle-dressed warrior who was so scary he could stop your heartbeat, turning it into a cold stone in your chest, with just one look from his steely eyes. He was awesome! He was much taller and wider than everyone around him and by far the fiercest and scariest person I had ever seen. Even my father, who I always thought was quite big, only came up to the middle of his expansive chest, to where his ribs joined in the middle.

Goliath seemed quite pumped up, sweating a little, but obviously enjoying the admiration of everyone. The whole group was shuffling out in the direction of the battleground in the valley bottom. The heat caused the sand to shimmer, and the view across towards the Israelites was like a mirage, hazy and wobbly at the same time. In the middle of the desert, on a flat piece of land between the opposing armies, Goliath started to bang his sword and shield together loudly in an intimidating rhythmic pattern. He shouted at the Israelites and got their attention pretty fast.

With an aggressive roar, he began to insult them, calling their God puny and their king feeble. He yelled that their men were no match for ours, that they were all pathetic cowards – little boys not grown men. Our army started chanting 'Little boy! Little boy! Who's afraid of Little Boy?' poking fun at the Israelite army.

Goliath challenged them to send out the Israelite Champion to fight him. The deal was that whoever lost, that nation would become slaves to the other. Then he started to swear at them, before throwing a huge handful of dry, powdery sand into the air. (I never ever knew why he did that). By the time the dust had settled, no-one had moved a muscle in the Israelite camp. It was as though their hearts had melted like a wax candle in a hot flame – their bravery reduced to a tiny whimper. In fact, I don't even think I heard a whimper.

It reminded me of when I was bullied at school, with taunting and teasing. I knew how it felt to be frightened to do anything, wanting only to run away and avoid people, or find someone bigger to help me deal with it. If I had been an Israelite at that moment, I think I would have been pretty scared. 'Who could they turn to? Goliath was the biggest person around!'

Everyone had heard stories of famous Israelite victories of the past, but what I was seeing made me wonder how this could be true, as they were obviously scared stiff to fight Goliath. Even their king, who was the tallest in their land, was strangely silent. It seemed that their great leader was too timid to actually lead! Perhaps the stories were all inventions, or at least greatly exaggerated tales designed to strike fear into their enemies. 'Yes that must be it, I reckoned.

Faced with a giant Philistine warrior in the scorching heat of the midday desert, knowing he would have the backing of our gods, I wasn't at all surprised. 'They were scared, plain scared!'

They obviously had no stomach for a fight despite all the brave talk about their all-powerful god. That was all it amounted to – talk! ‘If he was so powerful, why didn’t they believe in him? Is it because they couldn’t see him - neither could we!’

Goliath laughed at them again, teasing. When still no-one moved, he told them that they were a bunch of wimps and their gods were no better. Everyone thought he was brilliant! I couldn’t take my eyes off him – he was a real hero. ‘One day,’ I thought, ‘I want to be just like him.’

People were chanting at the Israelites “You’re not talking any more...!”

That night, there was a very happy mood in our camp as we ate loads of food, drank wine, sang songs, and told stories, remembering the day’s events. Some of the stories were rubbish – like my Dad’s, but we all laughed anyway even though I had heard his jokes about a hundred times before.

There may still have to be a battle, but for that night, it was ‘party time’ and everyone wanted to join in the fun. The Israelites were simply weak.”

Next day started much as the day before. Again, Goliath made his way out to the battlefield to incite the Israelites. We jostled to find a good position to watch the whole charade. Being small, I was able to squeeze through to find a good ledge on the side of the dry river bed that formed part of the valley side. The warm wind was gently blowing across the desert towards us, which meant that even small sounds carried in our direction too. That was great, because it meant I could hear everything that was said.

I expected a repeat performance like the day before, but then, suddenly – ACTION!! Somewhere by a large rock near a little brook, on the far side of the valley, there was a kerfuffle – a small rumble of noise. It started quietly, then became louder and more obvious. Armoured men clanked as they shuffled sideways, making room for someone to get through. I could see quite well from my vantage-point, but I couldn’t see any battle standard, flag or spear tip rising above their heads. There were no trumpets, war-drums or anything – just this movement and the rumble, which was getting louder and more enthusiastic by the minute.

Then... ‘Stone the donkey!’

A young boy was pushed out from their front lines into the open space of the battleground. People around me gasped with surprise. A little boy! He couldn’t have been much bigger than I was at the time and was just like a small shepherd boy. He didn’t have a sword or spear or shield. In fact, he didn’t look strong enough to carry them. Carrying nothing more than a shepherd’s sling, short staff and a small cloth bag, he wore a sheepskin tunic with leather sandals on his dusty feet – hardly much protection.

'What on earth was he doing?'

'Was he absolutely potty?'

'Surely these Israelite soldiers were having a laugh, pushing him forward towards Goliath.'

I wondered if cruelty or just plain stupidity was their reason behind it. Had forty days of waiting affected their minds?' Now our side started laughing - me too!

These Israelite soldiers were complete fools. Was it fear or mischief that I could see on their faces? They didn't look too sure about what was happening.

'Was this kid supposed to be their Champion?': 'He couldn't be, surely?'

Calmly, the young boy continued walking forward, into open ground, leaving his army behind him. He looked straight at Goliath and didn't appear to be scared. Goliath was furious! His face had turned a bright red colour and his voice suddenly sounded really irritated. He had been laughing too, but now he was angry, resenting this demeaning gesture. Raised as a highly trained fighting machine, was he to be challenged by a young boy, not tall enough to reach his waist, who had boldly walked out on to the battleground with no weapons other than a shepherd's staff and a sling?

'Do you think I am a dog?' he yelled. 'Is that why you have brought me a stick?' 'Perhaps you think I'll fetch it if you throw it?'

The boy didn't react.

Our men thought this was really funny. Goliath laughed loudly too, obviously amused by his own joke. Then he tried barking too, but he was laughing too much to do it properly. When he stopped laughing, he turned to the Israelite camp and shouted at them with prophetic menace. 'Is this the best you can do? You will pay for this. When I have skinned this lad alive, I'll start on the rest of you, leaving your broken bodies for the birds.' At this our army jeered roughly, clattering our shields and spears to intimidate the Israelites, who went very quiet.

I was sure that the boy would soon start crying and run, saying 'Please sir, can I go now? The joke's over, it was my King's idea, all a mistake...' Definitely, I would have wanted to run back to my mum as fast as possible, leaving the grown ups to get on with it. Instead, he seemed quite calm and composed, as if listening to the wind and the whistle of the birds.

"What was he thinking? Did he not feel foolish being laughed at by the whole battle-field?"

I was growing more curious by the second and couldn't take my eyes off him.

'Why was he there anyway? Was he part of the army, or like me, a messenger sent to bring supplies to his family? I wondered what his mum would think if she could see him now.'

He stepped forward to the brook and picked up a few small stones, or something, tucking them into the small pouch that he wore around his waist.

Goliath smirked, proudly. 'Sticks and stones...' but by then the boy was getting closer to him. The armies watched intently. It was so quiet you could hear your own heart-beat. The tension was breath-taking. Pausing, the boy stood some 20 metres away from Goliath, studying his every movement.

'You come to me with your armour, a sword, a shield and a spear...'

His bright young voice cut through the desert air like a falcon. It was evident that he was really young because his voice hadn't broken. If he was nervous though, it didn't show. His voice could be heard strongly and plainly on both sides of the valley.

'But I come against you in the Name of the Lord of the Armies of Heaven. You have insulted and cursed His Name. He is the powerful God of Israel, the Holy One, and today he is going to help me to beat you up!'

'I am going to kill you right now and then we'll destroy the Philistine army behind you. Then you will all know that our God is the true King over all the earth. Mister, you'd better start saying your prayers!'

What had he just said?' I had never heard anything like it before.

Ridiculous! His God – the true King? What did he mean? Who had told him that? That wasn't right! He was obviously bonkers! Hundreds of questions flooded my head. 'Why would a god want to defend a small boy?' 'What could have made him so confident? 'Wasn't he scared stiff?' I would have been. Yet he seemed so sure both of himself and this unseen God he spoke of. He obviously believed that his God would help him. 'What made him think that? Our gods never even speak to us – they can't. Besides they are back in the temple. He says his God is actually with him, helping him and he is depending on Him. If his God can speak, I wonder what he has to say!'

My head was confused, but my eyes were glued to the two stationery figures facing each other in the sand. A few seconds later, Goliath charged forwards with a scream and a venomous battle-cry, swallowing up the gap between them.

'GAME ON!' I thought, as the fight exploded into life. The time for talking was over! Adrenalin surged through my veins and my heart was racing with fear for what might be the outcome.

I didn't have long to wait to find out.



Without a sound, a small, round stone flew out of the boy's sling, smacking Goliath right between the eyes.

Everyone was staring, watching, wondering - rooted where they stood.

The boy reloaded his sling and stood ready.

Goliath stood still. He had stopped moving. He wasn't closing in any more. He wasn't circling any more. He wasn't talking any more.

An eerie silence fell over the whole valley. No-one moved, few breathed. Then slowly, ever so slowly, Goliath began to lean forwards...forwards...eventually collapsing full length, headfirst in the sand with a thunderous crash. His helmet rolled off in the direction of the small brook.

It was a massive thud! It threw up dust like a mini sandstorm and for a moment it was hard to see what had happened. Instantly, the boy was on him and using Goliath's own huge sword, cut his head off, holding it up for everyone to see. The sand had turned bright red, so had the boy's arms and tunic.

It was horrible! Savage! We couldn't believe it.

All of Goliath's proud boasting lay dead in the dirt along with his body - killed stone dead by a small boy.

The resultant roar from the Israelites was deafening! Suddenly it looked like the whole valley was alive and on the move. Unfortunately, it was headed our way.

The Israelites were charging and we had to run for our lives. I nearly fell off the ledge in my haste and had to take care not to get trampled in the mad scramble that followed, as we fled the area. The rumble of horses, chariots and hundreds of fleeing feet added to the panic and in the resulting chaos, it was difficult to know in which direction you were running.

'If I survive this,' I remember thinking, 'I must think more about this God who speaks, gives confidence and who honours the trust of small boys.'

Then I ran and ran, until my heart and lungs were almost bursting, desperately avoiding fallen bodies and broken chariots.

We lost many brave soldiers and family that day, men and older boys who had been laughing and joking with us all the day before. Like me, they had trusted in Goliath, in the protection of the Philistine gods and the power of our army.

Where had that got us?

That day, my beliefs died with my own brothers – leaving in their place many questions that needed answers.

Things are different now. I was one of the lucky ones - I survived. I was separated from many of the soldiers and was soon caught. The men were executed where they stood – they didn't stand a chance.

I guess they spared me because I was only a young boy and not a fighting man. 'Funny that!' I thought, 'We had all just seen what a young boy can do.'