

# HOW DID GOLIATH DIE?

James-Michael Smith

[www.jmsmith.org](http://www.jmsmith.org)

Many of us are taught as a child that Goliath died when the stone from David's sling struck him in the forehead. Some modern translations seem to read this way as well. However, the original Hebrew text of 1 Samuel 17:49-51 makes clear the fact that Goliath was actually killed by his own sword at the hands of David after David had literally made him bow down to the God of Israel! In the Hebrew Bible, to die by one's own weapon was an especially humiliating or tragic death.

## LITERAL HEBREW:

And he reached David the hand of him into the bag and he took from there a stone and he slung and he struck the Philistine on the forehead/greave of him and she sank the stone into the forehead/greave of him and he fell on the face of him to the ground. 50 So he triumphed David over the Philistine with the sling and with the stone and he struck down the Philistine and he killed him. And a sword not in the hand of David 51 and he ran David and he stood over the Philistine and he took hold of the sword of him and he drew her from the scabbard of her *and he killed him* and he cut off with her the head of him.

## NIV

Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead and he fell facedown on the ground. 50 So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him. 51 David ran and stood over him. He took hold of the Philistine's sword and drew it from the scabbard. *After* he killed him, he cut off his head with the sword.

## NRSV

David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground. 50 So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, striking down the Philistine and killing him; there was no sword in David's hand. 51 Then David ran and stood over the Philistine; he grasped his sword, drew it out of its sheath, **and** killed him; **then** he cut off his head with it.

## ESV

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.

[50] So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him. There was no sword in the hand of David. [51] Then David ran and stood over the Philistine and took his sword and drew it out of its sheath **and** killed him **and** cut off his head with it.

Of the above English translations, the ESV comes closest to the Hebrew wording without conveying an incorrect timeline of events.

An additional translation issue involves the word for the bronze "greaves" Goliath was wearing on his legs. The Hebrew word translated as "greave" (shin guard) appears only once in the Hebrew Bible—in the description of Goliath at the beginning of the chapter:

**"...on his legs he wore bronze greaves [Heb. 'mitschath' מִצְחָת], and a bronze javelin was slung on his back." (1 Sam 17:6)**

According to some Hebrew scholars, the word 'mitschath' is a plural form of the word 'metsach' [מִצָּח] which means "forehead." This means that it is possible that the "forehead" upon which the stone struck Goliath and into which it "sank" in v.49, was one of the "foreheads" of bronze he was wearing on his legs! This might also make better sense of the passage in numerous ways as well:

- Sling stones found from the Ancient Near East were usually the size of baseballs or softballs and were often used for knocking down walls of an enemy city or fortress. Such a stone would definitely dent a piece of armor on the leg and leave it looking like it "sunk" into it—whereas the results on a human forehead would be much worse.
- The text implies that it was the stone hitting Goliath's "forehead" that caused him to fall "facedown." If the stone knocked his leg/s out from under him, this would be the normal outcome—whereas if it struck him on the literal forehead it would likely knock him backwards rather than forward facedown.

Either translation of 'mitschath/metsach' makes sense in the story, as reflected in the proposed translation below:

***49 Then David reached his hand into the bag, took out a stone and slung it. When he struck the Philistine on his forehead/greave, the stone sank into his forehead/greave so that he fell on his face to the ground. 50 So David triumphed over the Philistine with the sling and with the stone. He struck down the Philistine and he killed him. (Now there was not a sword in David's hand 51 so he ran David and he stood over the Philistine, took hold of his sword, drew it from its scabbard and killed him. Then he cut off his head with it.)*** [alternate proposed translation]

If the 'metsach' which the stone hits is one of the 'mitschath' on Goliath's legs, the details take on a slightly more dramatic and theologically nuanced feel. The giant was killed by his own weapon only after the young shepherd made him first kneel facedown to the God of Israel—the God whom the giant had been defying for nearly 40 days!

The message of the story of David's triumph over Goliath is a tangible example of the message of Psalm 2—If we 'take a stand against the Lord's Anointed,' no matter how mighty we are, we will be humbled and you may have ultimately signed your own death warrant! (See Psalm 2)