

David vs. Goliath or The LORD vs. Dagon?: How David’s Exclusive Trust in the “Name” of the LORD Almighty Is a Defense Against Religious Pluralism

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Abstract: At a time when Christians face great resistance to the exclusive claim of the Christian Gospel by the pluralistic orthodoxy of Western culture, a fresh look at the Scriptures reveals that this is not a new experience for God’s people. The Bible begins and ends with an unapologetic condemnation of rival deities and their competing truth claims. The “name” of the God of the Bible, first revealed as the LORD and later unveiled as the mystery of the Lord Jesus Christ, is uniquely sacred in contrast to the names of local gods worshipped by the culture surrounding the Israelites and Christians in the pages of Scripture. Those Old and New Testament figures who stand in the “name” of the LORD Almighty should encourage Christians today in their bold proclamation that “there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

Key Words: Name, LORD, Pluralism, Exclusivism, Apologetics

It takes moral conviction, theological clarity, and courageous faith to defend the exclusive gospel of Jesus Christ when pluralism’s counterclaim that all roads lead to God is the accepted norm of Western culture. Contrarians comprise a small percentage of the population. Most people prefer to swim with

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the current in order to get along and better yet, get ahead. As a result, many Christians have succumbed to societal peer pressure and have, in turn, reduced Jesus' robust declaration that he is "the way and the truth and the life" down to a path that *our* tribe uses to get to the Father.

However, this is not a new experience for God's people. Both the Israelites and early Christians lived in polytheistic cultures hostile to the exclusivity of their sacred texts. The experience of the patriarchs in Canaan followed by their descendants' bondage in Egypt and subsequent return to the promised land was one in which they were always surrounded by people who rejected their assertion that the LORD and the LORD alone is the one true God. Moreover, the first Christians met fierce resistance and violent persecution from their Jewish kinsmen, led by Saul, when they proclaimed that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was more than a dead prophet—that he is the Lord Jesus Christ, a title putting him on equal footing with the LORD. As courageous followers of Christ, like Saul (renamed Paul after his conversion) who took the gospel across the Roman Empire, they continued to meet intense opposition from Gentiles who wholeheartedly embraced pluralism. Yet, over time many Greeks and Romans rejected polytheism and instead placed their faith in the exclusive gospel of Jesus Christ to save them.

Save? This sounds like life and death. For our pluralist friends, such language smacks of religious hyperbole. Yet, in perhaps the Bible's most famous story in 1 Samuel 17, we find this very language. When young, scrappy David approaches the mighty Goliath, he does not trust in his combat skills to win Israel a major upset victory against the heavily favored Philistine army. No, he trusts in the "*name*" of the LORD to save him and the Israelite army from death and national disgrace.

The story of David and Goliath is not in Scripture to inspire underdogs to find courage in the face of a great foe. This is not a battle of human champions. Rather, it is a supernatural battle of the gods.² David's and Goliath's dialogue in verses 43–47 confirms this. These two warriors are waging "a theological" war

² Edward E. Hindson, *The Philistines and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 33.

in the *names* of their deities.³ David confronts Goliath, not just with a sling and five stones, but with the “*name*” of the LORD against Goliath’s curses in the *names* of the gods of the Philistines. As a result, this great OT narrative should be renamed The LORD vs. Dagon instead of David vs. Goliath. In looking more closely at this story and its place in the larger narrative of 1–2 Samuel, Christians find an unlikely defense for the exclusivity of the Christian Gospel.

I. The “*Name*” of God

What is in a *name*? When it comes to God, it is everything. Both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures devote much space not just to the *names* of God, but the “*name*” that becomes synonymous with one. The Hebrew word *shem*, translated “*name*” occurs over 800 times in the OT. “[I]t originally denotes an external mark to distinguish one person or thing from others,”⁴ but over time it came to refer to “gods, men and animals.”⁵ In the Ancient Near East⁶, including Israel, “there was awareness of the significance attached to a *name*, and of the power which resided in it.”⁷ Furthermore, one’s *name*, including a deity, speaks directly to one’s character.⁸ If one is to worship a god, there is a need to know its *name* in order to properly relate to them and in turn secure their favor and assistance.⁹

Much has been made of the Torah’s use of *names* for God, principally El, Elohim and *Yahweh*. Critical scholars see this as evidence for an evolutionary development of religion from

³ Abraham Kuruvilla, “David v. Goliath (1 Samuel 17): What Is the Author *Doing* with What He Is *Saying*?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58, no. 3 (2015): 494.

⁴ H. Bietenhard, “ὄνομα κτλ,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 252.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ The Ancient Near East will be referred to as ANE for the remainder of this paper.

⁷ Bietenhard, “ὄνομα κτλ,” 253.

⁸ Jeffrey Niehaus, “The Central Sanctuary: Where and When?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 43, no 1 (1992): 23–24.

⁹ Bietenhard, “ὄνομα κτλ,” 255.

polytheism to monotheism. However, closer scrutiny reveals the opposite.¹⁰ Israel's struggle with idolatry indicates a devolutionary trajectory in their religious observance.¹¹ Yet, despite their idolatrous deviations, their unique worship demands "supernatural revelation" in order to know and understand the unique *names* of God.¹² The disclosure of these *names* as the progressive revelation of God unfolds in Scripture reveal significant changes in his dealings with humanity. As a result, these "are not names which man gives to God, but names given by God to Himself."¹³

It is true that El, a generic term for God, is found in Canaanite texts. Yet, this does not demand that the Israelites borrowed from their neighbors. Canaan's El is so different from the God of the Bible that neither culture would consider the other to be worshipping the same deity.¹⁴ The development of the Hebrew language from the Canaanite dialect shows God using their "religious terminology, such as *'ēl* and fill[ing] it with truth."¹⁵

As will be discussed, Goliath curses David by his gods, Elohim. In response, David approaches him boldly in the "*name*" of *Yahweh*. In Hebrew, Elohim is a plural noun, whereas *Yahweh* is singular. But, to conclude that Elohim implies polytheism and *Yahweh* monotheism is to misunderstand the Hebrew language. The use of Elohim is unique to the Israelites.¹⁶ "The form is plural in Hebrew to denote God's majesty."¹⁷ [W]hen speaking of pagan gods...however, it is always construed with a plural verb,

¹⁰ See Duane Garrett's critique of such approaches to the composition of the OT in *Rethinking Genesis* (Great Britain: Mentor, 2000) and Daniel Strange's excellent theology of religions, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

¹¹ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1948), 63.

¹² *Ibid.*, 64.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 371.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 370.

¹⁶ Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 65.

¹⁷ Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredericks, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 58.

whereas in a case of reference to the one true God it takes a singular verb.”¹⁸

Garrett sums up the complementary nature of these two *names*: “Elohim is what God is and Yahweh is who he is.”¹⁹ *Yahweh*’s revelation to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3 has provoked much discussion. Does this disclosure imply that Moses is ignorant of the existence of this *name*? Have he and the Israelites only known of Elohim up until now? Given their experience as slaves in Egypt for four centuries, Moses needs not only more insight into the nature of their relationship with God, he needs strong assurance from him if he is to take up the task God is calling him to. In response, God blesses Moses with revelation by giving him both the etymology and meaning of God’s *name*, which Waltke translates as “I am who I am for you.”²⁰ Clearly, God is disclosing something new to Moses. Although *Yahweh* is used in Genesis and as such indicates that the patriarchs did know him, they “did not fully experience the essential nature and power of [this] name.”²¹ The ensuing exodus will give his *name* “new significance because ... [t]he people will now see that *Yahweh* is present with them.”²²

In direct contrast to their neighbors, who possess a multiplicity of *names* for their gods, God reveals this one *name* to Israel in order that they might know him.²³ Fee notes, this “divine name ... functions as a central feature of Israel’s self-understanding ... [and] serve[s] as [their] primary identity symbol. The Israelites are ‘people of the name,’ that is, of their God, *Yahweh*.”²⁴ This insight is critical to understanding the use and development of the “*name*” of *Yahweh*, also known as the

¹⁸ Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 65.

¹⁹ Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*, 16.

²⁰ Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 366.

²¹ John D. Currid, *Exodus*, vol. 1 (Auburn, MA: Evangelical P, 2000), 137.

²² Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*, 17–18.

²³ For instance, there were 50 names for Marduk and multiple names for Egypt’s Re. See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 185.

²⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *Jesus the LORD according to Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 129.

LORD in the English Bible, over the course of the storyline of both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. The “*name*” comes to stand for *Yahweh* himself.²⁵ This is not surprising since “the name of the deity was thought to be equivalent to that deity” in the ANE.²⁶ As Merrill puts it, “the divine name [serves] as an alter ego for God.”²⁷

The Decalogue’s third commandment clarifies and codifies this by sanctifying *Yahweh*’s name. To profane God’s sacred *name* is not only forbidden among the Israelites, but punishable by death (Exod 20:7; Lev 19:12; 24:10–16). The use of *Yahweh*’s *name* cannot be manipulated by humans in order to coerce him to do their bidding.²⁸ Unlike the Canaanites, Israel is not to make any magical associations with *Yahweh*. Yet, there is power in his *name*—even if *Yahweh* is not directly named.²⁹ In fact, the *shem* is used in lieu of *Yahweh*, as if to say his revealed *name* does not require utterance. As a result, the *shem* becomes an equivalent not just for *Yahweh*, but the cultic center where Israel gathers to worship him. The tabernacle and later the temple are the place where the “*name*” dwells (Exod 20:24; Deut 12:5; 2 Sam 7:13; 1 Kgs 8:16–20). “The *shem* is thus a transcendent entity at work in the world.”³⁰ Through the progress of revelation over the course of Israel’s history, their prophets use the *shem* “as an alternative term for *Yahweh*.”³¹ The *shem* is not simply a *name* for *Yahweh*; the *shem* is *Yahweh*!

II. The “*Name*” of the LORD in 1 & 2 Samuel

In order to properly understand David’s use of the “*name*” of the LORD in the face of Goliath’s religiously laden taunts in 1 Samuel 17, one must view it in light of the larger conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines that begins in Judges

²⁵ Bietenhard, “ὄνομα κτλ.,” 257.

²⁶ Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 58.

²⁷ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, New American Commentary, vol. 4 (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 149.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Bietenhard, “ὄνομα κτλ.,” 255.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 258.

³¹ Rooker, *Ten Commandments*, 60.

and comes to dominate 1 and 2 Samuel. Although Israel faces other adversaries, the Philistines represent their biggest existential threat during the time of Samuel and Saul. David's defeat of Goliath as a young lad gives Israel a glimpse into the leadership skills he will employ to subjugate the Philistines during his reign many years in the future (2 Sam 8:1).

Historians do not know exactly when the Philistines arrive, but postulate they are part of the immigration of the "Sea People" that left the Aegean coast in the Mediterranean for the shores of Canaan.³² The Scriptures note that the Philistines are present in Canaan during the time of Abraham (Gen 21:34) and strong enough some 700 years later for the LORD to send the Israelites on a route that steers clear of them on their way to Canaan as they exit Egypt (Exod 13:17). Scholars see a linguistic link between the people of Philistia and the land now known as Palestine.³³ That the name Canaan drops out of use in favor of Palestine after 1200 BCE speaks to their growing presence and power in the region.³⁴ The Philistine's knowledge, skill, and monopoly in ironworking directly contributes to their military advantage over their neighbors, including Israel (1 Sam 13:19–22).³⁵

Politically, the Philistines should not be understood as a nation united under one king. Rather, they function as a confederacy of five independent city-states, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza, led by five individual rulers.³⁶ As seen in 1 & 2 Samuel, this pentapolis joins forces to confront and resolve internal and external threats (1 Sam 5:8; 6:16; 29:1–11).³⁷ However, their influence extends to other cities throughout the region. Until their subjugation by King David, the control of Palestinian cities goes back and forth between these two peoples as they vie for control over the Shephelah, the valley that serves

³² Hindson, *Philistines*, 14–17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁴ I'm indebted to my former seminary professor for this. See Gordon H. Lovik, "The Philistines," *Central Bible Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁶ Hindson, *Philistines*, 26, 47.

³⁷ Lovik, "The Philistines," 11.

as a buffer between the coast to the west and the mountains to the east.³⁸ The Philistines occupy the coast where the main trade route in the ANE lies and the Israelites live in and beyond the mountains to the east. As a result, possession of the Shephelah gives one access to and control of trade with the outside world. In the Philistine's hands, Israel is at their mercy.³⁹

However, the Philistine threat to Israel is also a cultural and religious one. In terms of both, the Philistines are syncretistic. Upon their arrival, they incorporate their own values from the Aegean region into the existing beliefs and customs of the Canaanites.⁴⁰ As a result, they abandon their language in favor of the Canaanite dialect, from which both the Hebrew and Aramaic languages develop.⁴¹ Thus, the Israelites and Philistines can communicate directly with one another, as evidenced by David and Goliath's epic dialogue on the battlefield. Consequently, it is not surprising that all three Philistine deities possess Semitic names: Dagon, Ashtoreth, and Baal-zebul.⁴² The religious practices associated with each of these gods is found in both Aegean and Canaanite culture. The Philistines arrive with their Aegean traditions and discovering similarities modify their nomenclature and practices to accommodate some Canaanite expressions of polytheistic worship.⁴³ Although there is overlap between the two cultures, Scripture recognizes a clear distinction between them (Judg 10:6). Since Dagon is chief in the Philistine pantheon and thus "the national god," this study will focus on this deity.⁴⁴ Moreover, this explains why the Bible references him more than any other Philistine god.

The Canaanite gods, El and Baal, and the Philistine Dagon are related to one another. According to Chisholm, "El was the

³⁸ Ibid., 10.

³⁹ Ray Vander Laan, "Shephelah," *That the World May Know*, 2021, <https://www.thattheworldmayknow.com/shephelah>.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁴¹ Lovik, "Philistines," 13.

⁴² Hindson, *Philistines*, 25.

⁴³ Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 10 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 49.

⁴⁴ Itamar Singer, "Towards The Image of Dagon the God of the Philistines," *Syria* 69 (1992): 435.

high god who ruled over the divine assembly and imparted authority to the storm god Baal.”⁴⁵ Yet, Dagon is higher than Baal in the pecking order because he is Baal’s father.⁴⁶ Like other gods, Dagon’s influence is limited not just to a particular geographic territory, but to a specific function of nature within it.⁴⁷ Specifically, Dagon is worshipped as a “weather-fertility deity responsible for [the Philistine’s] crops.”⁴⁸

Every time the Israelites and Philistines meet on the battlefield an important question arises: Which god is stronger, Dagon or the LORD?⁴⁹ The accounts in Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel are polemical in nature. In fact, a case can be made that much of the Hebrew Scriptures function as a polemic against the religious beliefs of the ANE.⁵⁰ As a result, the historical narratives of Samson, Samuel, Jonathan and David demonstrate the LORD’s “superiority to the gods of the...Philistines, as well as His exclusive right to Israel’s loyalty and worship.”⁵¹ However, Saul’s ignominious defeat on Mount Gilboa to the Philistines calls this into question. Saul’s unwillingness to duel Goliath demonstrates he is not the one to fight or speak for the LORD. Only David, a man after God’s own heart, is up to the task (1 Sam 13:14).

⁴⁵ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “Yahweh Versus the Canaanite Gods: Polemic in Judges and 1 Samuel 1-7,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164, no. 654 (2007): 174.

⁴⁶ Currid, *Against the Gods* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 134.

⁴⁷ Israel’s later conflict with Aram in 1 Kings 20:23–28 illustrates how the surrounding culture thought the gods of various peoples were limited to a particular territory or part of nature.

⁴⁸ Chisholm, *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013), 428.

⁴⁹ J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Volume IV: Vow and Desire (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1993), 269.

⁵⁰ Currid makes a strong case for this polemic in *Against the Gods*. He says the purpose of polemical theology “is to demonstrate emphatically and graphically the distinctions between the worldview of the Hebrews and the beliefs and practices of the rest of the ancient Near East” (25).

⁵¹ Chisholm, “Yahweh Versus the Canaanite Gods,” 168.

The stories of Samson and the ark of the covenant in the temple of Dagon set the stage for David's confrontation with the Philistine champion, Goliath. In both cases, the Philistines bring home captured symbols to both celebrate their victory over Israel and gloat about the LORD's humiliating loss to Dagon. As Chisholm observes, "Samson's capture ... [foreshadows] the capture of the ark."⁵² In both cases, the LORD appears to have abandoned Israel, but in reality he utilizes guerrilla warfare to defeat the Philistines with a "trojan horse."⁵³ Samson's arrest at the hands of Delilah and the ark's seizure at Ebenezer deliver a mixed message to the Israelites and Philistines (Judg 16:18–30; 1 Sam 4:1–22). The Israelites are able to do the math, especially with the ark affair. Eli's comic death and the heartbreaking response of his daughter-in-law to the news of the ark of the covenant's capture make it clear that Israel knows they have not just lost the LORD's favor, but the future of their unique covenant with him stands on shaky ground. Why? They have been seduced into worshipping other gods. Samuel confronts them after the ark is returned: "Rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines" (1 Sam 7:3).⁵⁴ Yet, the uncircumcised Philistines are ignorant of all this. As a result, they make the wrong calculation and they and their precious Dagon pay dearly for it. In the case of Samson, the return of his hair and strength enables him to destroy the temple of Dagon in Gaza. If the Philistines thought their god had delivered Samson into their hands, then what does this catastrophe communicate about Dagon and the LORD? Judges leaves readers to ponder this question, whereas 1 and 2 Samuel provides a definitive answer.

If the exodus is to Israel what July 4, 1776, is to the United States, then the loss of the ark of the covenant is their September 11, 2001. Does Israel know the ark has been taken to the temple of Dagon in Ashdod? If that is where the Philistines put Samson,

⁵² Chisholm, Commentary on Judges and Ruth, 434.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ All quotations of the Bible are from the NIV (1984) unless stated otherwise.

then they probably know where the ark is headed. What a blow to their national psyche! As Israel grieves, the LORD quietly goes to war against their enemy. The festive Philistines gleefully place the ark at the foot of Dagon's totem in the temple in Ashdod (1 Sam 5:1–3). What is meant to serve as “a trophy” becomes a source of embarrassment for Dagon when they wake up the next morning to find him lying prostrate before the ark.⁵⁵ This story makes “a theological point with a polemical edge.”⁵⁶ The LORD is not subject to Dagon; Dagon is subject to the LORD—the one true God!⁵⁷ After standing Dagon back up, they find him on the floor again the next morning (1 Sam 5:4). But this second fall “is more severe.”⁵⁸ Dagon loses his head and hands, and with it shows he does not possess the ability to think, speak, or act.⁵⁹ After securing Dagon's obeisance, the LORD declares war by cutting off his head!⁶⁰ The ensuing events are comical and illustrate the hardness of the human heart and the power of the Satanic deception that makes faith in false gods a reality. The Philistines do not repent and forsake Dagon. Instead, they put Humpty Dumpty back together again and modify their liturgy in order to venerate the threshold upon which his lifeless limbs and head are found.⁶¹ This, along with their response to the deadly plague that terrorizes all of Philistia demonstrates “the resiliency of religion” (1 Sam 5:6–12).⁶² Clearly, the LORD is not a territorial deity like the gods of Palestine. The Philistines's unanimous decision to return the ark to Israel is a tacit admission that the LORD is superior to Dagon (1 Sam 6:1–18).

In the ensuing years, Israel asks for and is granted a king by the LORD in Saul who is supposed to go out before them and lead them in battle (1 Sam 8:20). Yet, when Goliath calls out to Israel's troops to send a *man* to fight him in a winner-take-all

⁵⁵ Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 254.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁵⁸ Klein, *1 Samuel*, 50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Chisholm, “Yahweh Versus the Canaanite Gods,” 180.

⁶¹ Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 254.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 255.

battle, no one volunteers, including Saul, because they are all too scared to face the Philistine champion. The narrator devotes considerable space to his description of Goliath (1 Sam 17:4–7).⁶³ He is a formidable warrior with a large stature, extensive military resources, and plenty of experience in war.⁶⁴ But, Saul possesses all of these as well and yet clearly feels overmatched.⁶⁵ The reasons behind the LORD’s instructions for Saul’s replacement are revealed in the Valley of Elah. When Samuel concludes that Jesse’s strapping son, Eliab, is the one, God responds: “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). As a result, Jesse’s youngest son, David, is the one anointed as the next king of Israel.

The standoff between the Philistines and Israelites goes on for 40 days until David shows up with a care package from home for his older brothers and their commander. Upon hearing Goliath’s challenge, the youth is incredulous, “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (1 Sam 17:26) David concludes what King Saul and his troops do not. This is not simply the trash talk of an undefeated prize fighter—it constitutes blasphemy! The targets of Goliath’s insults are not limited to Saul and his troops. As David will note two more times in this account, Goliath has reproached “the *living* God” (vv. 36, 45). David is not unaware

⁶³ Is the writer of Samuel using typology to connect Goliath’s scale-armor to the cursed serpent of Eden who is to die of a wound to the head? (See Kuruvilla, “David v. Goliath,” 489). Or, is the writer utilizing more subtle connections to Eden and other key stories in Scripture where the character’s garments are central to the story? (See Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001], 257–258).

⁶⁴ Kuruvilla, “David v. Goliath,” 499.

⁶⁵ See J. Daniel Hays, “Reconsidering the Height of Goliath,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 4 (December 2005): 701–714. According to Hays, Goliath’s height should probably be measured at 6’9” rather than at 9’9.” He is very tall, but he should not be understood to be the height of a superhero. If the average Israelite’s height at this time is between 5’0”–5’6”, then Saul is somewhere between 6’0” to 6’6.” Goliath is surely taller than Saul, but he’s not as overmatched as some surmise.

of Israel's past dealings with the Philistines and their god, Dagon. Unlike them, Israel does not worship an idol made of wood. The God they serve is not dead like Dagon, as the ark incident in 1 Samuel 5 proves.⁶⁶ Rather, Israel worships one who is living and "actively intervenes for his people."⁶⁷ Confident of this, David volunteers to fight "the uncircumcised Philistine." His use of this ethnic epithet succeeds in both demeaning Goliath and highlighting his exclusion and protection from the covenant relationship that he and Israel enjoy with the LORD.⁶⁸

King Saul fails to grasp this. If he did, he would have fought Goliath himself. This is precisely why the LORD has rejected him as king. He alone possesses the "the supreme responsibility" to represent Israel in this duel.⁶⁹ Yet, day after day he leads them off the battlefield.⁷⁰ Saul does not possess David's theological convictions and the courageous faith that is inspired by them. His spiritual ambiguity has spawned a theological crisis among his troops. Does the LORD possess the power to defeat such a formidable foe? If not, what does this say about Israel's God and their future as a people? Kuruvilla notes, "Goliath, it seems, was sure that Dagon ... was on his side; but Israel was not entirely certain that Yahweh was on theirs."⁷¹

Consequently, the dramatic confrontation between David and Goliath in vv. 40–51 represents the peak of the 58-verse narrative of 1 Samuel 17.⁷² When the Philistine champion sees David he despises and dismisses him. He demands that a man fight him, and instead Israel sends out a boy wielding a shepherd's staff.⁷³

⁶⁶ Klein, *1 Samuel*, 178.

⁶⁷ Chisholm, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), Kindle loc. 3330.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁶⁹ Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 146.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Kuruvilla, "David v. Goliath," 495.

⁷² Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 643.

⁷³ Hindson, *Philistines*, 158. My wife, Lori, observed that perhaps this scene is what inspired J. R. R. Tolkien's confrontation between Eowyn and the Lord of the Nazgul! He knows no man can defeat him, but because he doesn't expect to fight a woman, he lets his guard down and is ceremoniously defeated.

In response, Goliath taunts David and curses him by his gods. Yet, none are worthy of a *name*! The narrator deems their identity as insignificant in comparison to the God of Israel. The Philistine's curses turn this military encounter into a theological struggle. David's response reveals his "secret weapon." It is not the sling, but something much more powerful—the "*name*" of the LORD Almighty (v. 45).⁷⁴ Having rejected Saul's offer to use his armor and sword, David demonstrates where the source of "true strength" comes from: "faith in I AM."⁷⁵ David's decision shows that Saul and Goliath look to a false source for their power—physical might. Having been the first to reference the LORD in this narrative (v. 36), David now expounds on the nature and significance of the God of Israel by weaponizing his *name* as David approaches his blasphemous foe. Fokkelman calls the LORD Almighty or the LORD of Hosts, *Yahweh Sabaoth* in Hebrew, "the official name of God" and notes that it makes its first appearance in Scripture in 1 Samuel.⁷⁶ David's use of the *name* suggests it has "military connotations."⁷⁷ Waltke says the *name* is in fact "I AM's war title."⁷⁸ But, how David understands this is in direct contrast with how the Israelites misunderstood the LORD *Sabaoth* when they trot out his ark of the covenant like a magical talisman in order to "tempt God to decide the outcome" (1 Sam 4:4).⁷⁹ David's invocation of the *name* of the LORD *Sabaoth* is in the spirit of Hannah's use of it in her prayer for a son, the one who anoints David king many years later (1 Sam 1:11). They both possess "a living and personal relationship ...

⁷⁴ Klein, *1 Samuel*, 180.

⁷⁵ Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 637.

⁷⁶ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Volume II: *The Crossing Fates* (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1986), 17.

⁷⁷ Klein, *1 Samuel*, 180; See Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 239–243 on the differing views on the meaning of "Jehovah of Hosts" in the OT. He argues that the "hosts" are angelic because of the name's tie to the Ark of the Covenant and the cherubim that adorn it. However, he concedes that when David uses the name in 1 Samuel 17:45 the "hosts" refer to the army of Israel in some sense.

⁷⁸ Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 373.

⁷⁹ Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, 203.

with God [who] has the power to write history.”⁸⁰ David and Hannah believe God is immanent and thus will act on their behalf in a tangible and dramatic way. As a result, the LORD *Sabaoth* blesses both of them, but humiliates the Israelites with the loss of the ark when they take his *name* in vain. The sacredness of the LORD and his *name* is what motivates David to fight Goliath. David’s initial response to the Philistine’s taunts is to accuse him of defying the Israelite army (1 Sam 17:26, 36). However, when he confronts Goliath face-to-face, David sees things more clearly—the Philistine is reproaching God himself (v. 45).⁸¹ To taunt the LORD’s anointed and his army is to taunt the LORD. For David, there is no distinction between the LORD and his *name*.⁸²

David’s speeches, in 1 Samuel 17 “provide the key” to understanding this story.⁸³ Each time David speaks his clarity and confidence increases. For David, Goliath stands in opposition to the army of Israel, but more importantly to the warrior God who fights for them. Furthermore, the Philistine and the army he represents are not pitiable followers of a false god, but arrogant blasphemers of the one true God. The Philistines are not content to live and let live. They are aggressors who have always resisted Israel’s presence in Canaan. Moreover, they have subjugated and humiliated them by refusing them access to weaponry. For Saul and his troops, this is an insurmountable obstacle to meeting the Philistine on the battlefield. Yet David is not deterred. His final speech and the only one directed to Goliath are the climax of this story (vv. 45–47). In fact, the Philistine’s defeat, though dramatic, is anticlimactic in comparison to David’s passionate defense and bold proclamation of the uniqueness of the God of Israel.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 36.

⁸¹ Kuruvilla, “David v. Goliath,” 502.

⁸² Bietenhard, “ὄνομα κτλ.,” 280. David’s use of the *name* shows that this “is not just [an] utterance or invocation of the name of Yahweh but is ... a parallelism to Yahweh Himself.”

⁸³ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 65.

Having told Saul privately the LORD will deliver him from the Philistine (v. 37), he now goes public on the battlefield. The *name* of the LORD that he cites as his defense is “the main point” of all that David has to say to Goliath and all those gathered there, Philistine and Israelite alike.⁸⁴ Yes, David has made provisions for an offensive assault with his sling and five stones. But, as Fokkelman observes, “David is not so stupid as to give away his battle plan.”⁸⁵ Nonetheless, “the one Name” will serve as David’s ultimate weapon that will “withstand all the weapons of the Philistine.”⁸⁶ Goliath curses in the *name* of his anonymous gods, but David comes against him in the *name* of the LORD *Sabaoth*, the God of the army of Israel, that he dares to defy. The Philistine champion’s ensuing defeat will prove to those gathered there that Israel worships a unique God. Goliath will involuntarily fall prostrate to the one true God just as the false god Dagon collapsed in obeisance to the LORD in Dagon’s own temple. When David cuts off Goliath’s head, he actually decapitates Dagon ... *again*.⁸⁷ However, David’s true audience is global. David wants the whole world to know Israel trusts in the one God who alone can save. David’s speech sounds more like a preacher at a missions conference than he does a soldier in the theatre of war.⁸⁸ Yet David should be understood as a missionary who believes unapologetically that salvation comes exclusively through Israel’s God, the LORD.⁸⁹ David’s deliverance from

⁸⁴ Fokkelman, *Crossing Fates*, 174.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Chisholm, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Kindle loc. 3280–3281.

⁸⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 132.

⁸⁹ David exalts the “*name*” to a global audience in the next to last verse of his hymn of thanksgiving near the end of *1-2 Samuel*. He says, “I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations; I will sing praises to your *name* (2 Sam 22:50).” See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Volume III: Throne and City* (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1990), 353–355 to see how the narrator’s use of the “Rock” metaphor in both Hannah’s and David’s poems form an inclusio for the entire book.

Goliath and his god Dagon shows that the LORD and the LORD alone saves.

III. The “*Name*” of the Lord Jesus Christ

Jesus’ two questions to his disciples, “Who do the crowds say I am?” and “Who do you say I am?”, are identity questions (Luke 9:18–22). Both the crowds and disciples are fully immersed in Jewish culture and think in Jewish categories. As people immersed in the Jewish Scriptures, they know their God’s name: Yahweh or the LORD in English. In posing these queries, Jesus is polling his disciples and initiating a dialogue that invites a preliminary conclusion. The crowds believe Jesus is a prophet, but Peter concludes he is more—the Christ or the long awaited Messianic King. Yet, Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion shows that the Jewish religious establishment rejects Peter’s confession and concludes he is a blasphemer (Mark 14:61–65).⁹⁰ Why? No human can or should claim equality with God.⁹¹ Yet the early Christians, who are almost exclusively Jews, proclaim in the weeks following Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection to their fellow Jews in their temple, where the Name of Yahweh dwells, that Jesus of Nazareth is both “Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:14–36). After hearing this, the Jewish audience asks, “What shall we do?” (v. 37). Peter responds by telling them they need to repent and be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ” (v. 38). As the early church begins preaching the gospel, they too place great significance on the “name.” Yet, what is this name and who is it identified with? Early in Peter’s sermon, he quotes Joel 2:32: “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (v. 21). The OT prophet’s invitation is for people to call on Yahweh, but Peter applies this to the name of Jesus.

However, how can Jesus’ *name* be linked with *Yahweh*? When Saul of Tarsus hears the early church saying such things,

⁹⁰ The religious leaders’ reaction to Jesus’ answer gets to the heart of Jesus’ identity. His admission that he is indeed the Messiah would provoke a negative response. But it’s his reference to Daniel 7:13–14 that sends them into apoplectic fit. Here, Jesus hints that he is more than the Christ; he is divine—thus the charge of blasphemy.

⁹¹ Darrell Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 596.

he is enraged and makes it his mission to arrest all who call on the Lord Jesus’ “*name*” (Acts 9:14). Yet, the Lord Jesus apprehends Saul on the Damascus road and chooses him “to carry [his] *name*” before Jews and Gentiles (v. 15). As a result, Saul will suffer immensely for Jesus’ “*name*” (v. 16). What can explain this dramatic reversal in Saul’s thinking and theology? Saul sees someone and hears a message from the same one that Peter and the disciples already have. He comes to the same conclusion they do about Jesus of Nazareth: he is both Lord and Christ. As witnesses to the risen Jesus and ascended Lord seated at the right hand of the Father, both Peter and Saul/Paul, apply OT texts addressing *Yahweh* to Jesus. Their frequent use of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT, certainly makes their case easier.⁹² The LXX’s choice to translate the Hebrew *Yahweh* (LORD) as *kyrios* (lord) “was of great importance for the early Christian Church, because the Church referred statements made by [Y]ahweh or statements about him to her Kyrios, Jesus Christ.”⁹³

The fact that these unabashed monotheists call Jesus of Nazareth by the title *Lord* reserved only for *Yahweh* is highly significant to understanding the use of the “*name*” of God in the NT.⁹⁴ The Apostle Paul, the former Pharisee, applies such language to one of his people’s most sacred texts, the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4, so that it “embrace[s] both Father and Son” in 1 Corinthians 8:6.⁹⁵ For Paul, there is a “twofold reality of [his] high Christology—his view of Christ as the preexistent Son and the exalted one who is given the ‘name’ Lord—combined with his vigorously held monotheism.”⁹⁶ If today’s Christians, who are predominantly Gentile, fail to recognize this, they will not understand why Jews reject the claim that Jesus is the Christ and the only way to the Father. Judaism’s and Christianity’s views of

⁹² I. Howard Marshall, “Acts,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 542.

⁹³ von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 187.

⁹⁴ Fee, *Jesus the LORD according to Paul the Apostle*, 3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

Jesus are incompatible. Therefore, if *we* Christians want to convince Jews that they need to place their exclusive trust in the *name* of the Lord Jesus Christ, then *we* need to learn more about this *name*.

For starters, *Jesus* is our Lord's given and earthly *name* (Matt 1:21). It "expresses His humanity ... and also His divine mission."⁹⁷ Thus, he is known as Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph (John 1:45). Although the *name* Jesus does not communicate that he is divine, it does nonetheless send an important signal. Jesus, rendered Joshua in Greek, means "*Yahweh* is salvation."⁹⁸ However, what the angel says to Joseph next clarifies that this Jesus will be the one that *Yahweh* uses to *save* his people, Israel, from their sins.⁹⁹ Furthermore, Matthew's assigning of *Isaiah's Immanuel* to Jesus communicates that in him Israel will experience God's presence.¹⁰⁰ As a result, a debate rages about Jesus' identity throughout his ministry. His cryptic use of the title Son of Man and his insistence on secrecy from those who conclude he is Israel's *Christ* contribute to the confusion among the crowds (Mark 2:1–12; Matt 9:30; 16:20). Clearly, Jesus and Israel understand the mission of the Christ differently from one another. It is not until after his death, burial, and resurrection that the disciples come to understand and share with others how Jesus is the Christ and what it means for every Jew and Gentile (Luke 24:19–21, 44–48).

Space does not allow for an exhaustive study on how the early church comes to the conclusion from witnessing the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth that the *name* of the *Yahweh* applies to the Lord and Christ of the OT prophecies. However, two important NT passages that address the *name* will now receive consideration.

The Apostle Paul's majestic Christology is on full display in Philippians 2:5–11. As with all his epistles, pastoral matters are

⁹⁷ Bietenhard, "ὄνομα κτλ," 272.

⁹⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 3.

⁹⁹ Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 308.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

his primary concern. Readers learn his theology as he applies it to the issues facing the churches and individuals, to whom he writes.¹⁰¹ “With the imitation of Christ as Paul’s goal, he tells Christ’s story.”¹⁰² For Paul, Jesus’ life does not begin on earth when he is born to Joseph and Mary. His identity should not be limited to that of a mere mortal. Yet, humans can learn from Jesus’ example. Thus, Paul begins “with his prior existence,” in which Jesus, being “in very nature God,” debases himself by taking on human flesh.¹⁰³ As a result, Jesus shows himself to be Israel’s Lord and Christ after rising from the dead. Therefore, the Father, whom Paul always refers to as God, exalts Jesus by placing him at his right hand and bestows upon him “the name that is above every name” (v. 9).¹⁰⁴

The question remains: What *name* does the Father give to him? Is it *Jesus*, *Christ*, *Lord* or a combination of two or all three of them, or others not listed here?¹⁰⁵ According to Fee, there are only two options: Jesus or Lord.¹⁰⁶ O’Brien, asserts that the *name* here should not be identified with “a proper name.”¹⁰⁷ Therefore, the *name* the Father bestows here is not *Jesus* despite its mention in verse 11. Rather, God gives Jesus “his own name, [*kurios*] (“Lord”), in its most sublime sense ... that is, “Yahweh.”¹⁰⁸ The Apostle Paul’s words here reflect Isaiah 45:18–25, “one of the most powerful OT affirmations of the uniqueness of [the] God

¹⁰¹ Fee, *Jesus the LORD according to Paul the Apostle*, 64.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹⁰⁵ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 237.

¹⁰⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 221.

¹⁰⁷ O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 237.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 238; Fee goes into extensive detail about this in *Jesus the LORD according to Paul the Apostle*. He writes, “The risen Christ is not Yahweh himself.... Rather, the preexistent *Son of God* returns by way of his resurrection to receive the honor of having bestowed on him the *substitute name* for God [*Adonai*], which for Paul then becomes a title for Christ as “Lord” [*Kyrios*]—and this “name” is now used by Paul exclusively for Christ and never for God the Father” (*Paul’s Letter*, 130).

of Israel in the context of his redeeming work.”¹⁰⁹ In doing so, he ties the universal submission of humanity to *Yahweh* in Isaiah to Jesus (Isa 45:23; Phil 2:10). *Yahweh’s* message, recorded by Isaiah, is one of exclusivity: “there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (vv. 21–22). This message sounds very similar to David when he confronts Goliath after listening to his curses uttered in the *name* of his Philistine gods. The fact that Paul ties this passage to Jesus signals that he is now the one to whom such exclusive language applies.

However, this is not unique to Paul. Peter speaks similarly in the earliest days of the church. In fact, Peter and the authorities of the temple, where the *Name* dwells, have an extended dialogue about the “*name*” in Acts 4.¹¹⁰ They ask Peter and John, “by what power or *name*” do you heal? (v. 7). In other words, the leadership demands the identity of the authority empowering their message and actions. As the stewards of *Yahweh’s* temple and law, they know they have not granted them the authorization to speak in his *name*.¹¹¹ If it is not *Yahweh*, then who exactly stands behind this irrefutable miraculous activity? Is this some form of magic or sorcery?¹¹² No, Peter answers that they healed or more precisely saved, *sesotai*, this man crippled from birth “by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth” (v. 10). Like Paul and David, Peter links saving, in this case deliverance from physical infirmity, to the *name* of God. But now the Savior is identified as Jesus. Having already connected the substitute name for God,

¹⁰⁹ Moisés Silva, “Philippians,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 837.

¹¹⁰ “The theme of the name of Jesus is frequent in Acts (3:6, 16; 4:10, 12, 17-18, 30; 5:28, 40-41; 8:12; 9:16, 21, 27, 28; 15:26; 16:18; 19:13, 17; 21:13; 22:16; 26:9)” (Bock, *Acts* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 190). Interestingly, “the name,” *onoma*, is used synonymously for *Jesus* in Acts 5:41 like “the name,” *shem*, is used synonymously for *Yahweh* in the OT.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Adonai, to Jesus when preaching in the temple courts, Peter “makes clear that the name one is to call on belongs to Jesus.”¹¹³

This represents an existential crisis for the religious authorities. If Jesus, whom they crucified, is in fact the Lord raised from the dead, will they now call on his *name*? Can they continue to call on *Yahweh* while still rejecting *Jesus*? Peter gives them no such wiggle room. He boldly proclaims to them: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Peter’s message is an exclusive one. The road that leads to *Yahweh* now goes through *Jesus—the hope and fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures*.

IV. Conclusion

Peter’s message, like David’s to Goliath, is a hard sell and his audience reads from the same Scriptures.¹¹⁴ Ironically, the Jewish leaders are more like Goliath than the David they revere. They too reject the *name* that Peter and David trust in to save them. Although Peter is referencing different texts in his sermon in Acts 2, he’s quoting the same author in David to make the case that Jesus is both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:25–28, 34–35).¹¹⁵ Does Peter believe all roads lead to God? He stands in front of his Jewish brethren and tells them in rejecting Jesus they are headed on a path that will not lead them to their beloved *Yahweh*. Later, Paul takes this same message to the Gentiles who wholeheartedly embrace polytheism. The Bible is clear that there is only One road to God. The *name* that one trusts in makes all the difference in determining whether one arrives at the right destination. If one is asking God to save them, one must call him by the right *name*.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹¹⁴ I am making a Christotelic connection to David. I’m indebted to my theological and homiletical mentor and uncle, Dr. Doug Finkbeiner of Lancaster Bible College, for pointing me in this direction. See Randal E. Pelton, *Preaching with Accuracy* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014) for an overview of Christotelic preaching.

¹¹⁵ The Christ as the Jewish Messiah is David’s descendent and heir (2 Sam 7:11–16; Matt 1:1).

May *we* 21st century Western Christians share young David's theological convictions. May they inspire the courageous faith *we* need today to defend God's *name* against the assaults of our pluralist friends and foes. May *we*, like Peter, boldly proclaim the exclusive gospel of Jesus Christ to all those who desperately need saving. May *we*, like Paul, embrace this gospel's inclusivity by offering Jesus' message of reconciliation to everyone. There may only be one road to God, but every human being is invited to take it.