

Home > An Enlightening Commentary into the Light of the Holy Qur'an vol. 2 > Section 33, Saul's Victory over Goliath > Explanation

Section 33, Saul's Victory over Goliath

Verse 249 in Deep

"So when Saul marched out with the troops he said: 'Verily Allah will try you by a river, whoever drinks from it he is not of me, and whoever tastes it not, he is surely of me, including the one who tastes but a single handful.' But they all drank of it, except a few of them. And when he (Saul) crossed it (the river), those who believed with him said: 'We have no power today against Goliath and his troops.' Those who knew that they would meet Allah said: 'How often a small party has overcome a numerous host by Allah's leave! And Allah is with the (steadfast) patient ones'."(2:249)

In this verse, the Qur'an announces the failure of a large group of Israelites in their test when they drank water from the prohibited stream. They did not tolerate the thirst therein. So, they were not successful in that trial.

"So when Saul marched out with the troops he said: 'Verily Allah will try you by a river, whoever drinks from it he is not of me, and whoever tastes it not, he is surely of me, including the one who tastes but a single handful.' But they all drank of it, except a few of them. And when he (Saul) crossed it (the river)..."

However, the remaining group, who succeeded in the foregoing examination, had another practical examination, too. It was a spiritual examination. When they encountered the great forces of Goliath, they said that they could not fight against that armed force.

***"... those who believed with him said:
'We have no power today against Goliath and his troop'..."***

But, those who believed in the Resurrection and meeting *Allah* in the Hereafter, said that victory is in *Allah's* hand, and it is by His leave that a small group may win a large and numerous troop. It says:

"... Those who knew that they would meet Allah said:

'How often a small party has overcome a numerous host by Allah's leave! And Allah is with the (steadfast) patient ones'."

Traditions

Traditions¹

Muhammad ibn Yahya narrated from Muhammad ibn Ahmad from Muhammad ibn Khalid and al-Husayn ibn Sa'id from an-Nar ibn Suwayd from Yahya al-Halabi from Harun ibn Kharijah from Abu Basir from Abu Ja'far (as) saying in a tradition, *inter alia*: "And Allah reports the words of Talut: '*Surely Allah will try you with a stream; whoever then drink from it, he is not of me, and whoever does not taste of it, he is surely of me.*'"

But all of them drank from it, except three hundred and thirteen men; among them were those who took a handful of water as well as those who did not drink at all. When they went out against Goliath, those who had taken handful of water said, 'We have today no power against Goliath and his forces'; and those who had not taken it said, 'How often has a small party vanquished a numerous host by *Allah's* permission, and *Allah* is with the patient ones.' " (al-Kafi)

The author ('Allamah Tabatabai) says: That there remained with Talut only three hundred and thirteen men (equal in number to the Muslim 'army' in the battle of Badr) is mentioned in numerous traditions from Shi'ah and Sunni chains.

The details that those who said: "***We have today no power...***" were those who had taken a handful of water, and those who said, "***How often a small party...***" were those who had not tasted it at all, may be inferred from the position of the exceptional clause in the verse,...

"So when they encountered Goliath and his troops, they said: 'Our Lord! Pour down upon us patience, and make our steps firm, and help us against the disbelieving people'."

In this verse, the incident of those two forces facing each other is pointed out. It says:

"So when they encountered Goliath and his troops, they said: '(Our Lord! Pour down upon us patience, and make our steps firm, and help us against the disbelieving people'."

In fact, Saul and his troops asked for three things from their Lord in their prayer, and the prayer is well graded. First, patience and perseverance was prayed for. Their second beseech from *Allah* was steadfastness in the field.

They asked Him to make their steps firm in order that they would not flee. The first invocation, indeed, had an inward aspect while the second prayer had an apparent and outward aspect; and surely the

firmness of step is one of the consequences of the spirit of patience and perseverance.

Their third prayer was that *Allah* might help them to be victorious against those infidels. That was, of course, the result or the reward of those two qualities: i.e. patience and perseverance, and being firm in the battlefield.

Bible says:

9. "And it was so, that when he (Saul) had turned his back to go from Samuel, God gave him another heart."

10. "And the spirit of God came upon him and he prophesied. 2

There is some similar incident mentioned in the Bible³ of trying the people with thirst, but that is a different incident. It was when Gideon tried his forces by the 'Well of Harod'. The trial of the people under Saul was by the river.

From this verse it becomes clear that the one who leads the people should have inspired knowledge of good and evil for his followers and be able to conduct trials of the people's faith as was Saul who directed his men not to drink more than one handful of water from the river, even though they were dying of thirst. It was only a trial that a few, who were true believers, succeeded and *Allah* helped them to win Goliath and his troops.

"Thus they routed them by Allah's leave, and David slew Goliath; and Allah gave him the kingship and wisdom and taught him of that He willed. And were Allah not to repel some people by means of other people, the earth would certainly be full of mischief; but Allah is Gracious to all (His) creatures."

It is completely certain that *Allah* will not leave such believers alone, although the number of them be small and the number of their enemy be large. That is why the verse expresses that they set out to fight against them and it was by the leave of *Allah* that they defeated the enemy. It says:

"Thus they routed them by Allah's leave..."

David, who was a very young lad, but was vigorous and brave, had attended the army of Saul to fight against the enemy. He succeeded to all Goliath.

"...and David slew Goliath..."

The young warrior threw one or two stones by means of a sling which he had with him, towards Goliath. He utilized the sling so skillfully that the stone hit just upon the head and pierced the forehead of Goliath.

So, Goliath cried loudly and fell down on the ground. At that moment, fear and terror rushed into the hearts of his troops. They began to flee. It seemed, *Allah* had decided to show his authority, here, and

by demonstrating how a king, with all that glory and abundant force could be destroyed by a lad inexperienced in fighting, and particularly with an apparently simple and worthless tool, a sling. Then it says:

"...and Allah gave him the kingship and wisdom and taught him of what He willed..."

In this verse it has not been explicitly stated that this David is the same David who was the great prophet of the Israelites and was Solomon's father, yet the above mentioned phrase of the verse indicates that this David had attained the rank of Prophethood.

At the end of the verse, the Qur'an points to a general law, thus it says:

"... And were Allah not to repel some people by means of other people, the earth would certainly be full of mischief; but Allah is Gracious to all (His) creatures."

This concluding part of the verse clearly indicates that the only, aim or object of warfare should be nothing but dispelling of mischief and the establishment of peace on earth and not at all any territorial expansion.

Explanation

4

An account of the formidable strength of the mighty forces of Goliath, is given in the Bible⁵ David slew Goliath in a single combat. The Philistines seeing Goliath killed by David all of them fled and that was the end of the battle.

Quite a similar event took place in the early days of the start of Islam. The infidels of Mecca with all the strength of the strongest of their allies with the best and the choicest and the most experienced of their warrior heroes attacked the Muslim refugees in Madina who then numbered only a few hundreds including women and children and who were practically unarmed and the enemy consisted of several full equipped battalions.

The battle is called the battle of '*Ahzab*' i.e. the battle of the Confederates. All the idolatrous tribes of Arabia had united in one body against the few hundreds of ill-equipped or practically unarmed Muslims.

The mighty host was twelve thousand strong and there could be hardly any fight at all. It was the question of life and death for Muslims and Islam including the Holy Prophet himself. The well-known giant-like warrior hero of the enemy's strength leapt across the ditch which the Muslims had dug between themselves and the enemy's forces, and coming forward challenged the Holy Prophet to send anyone to fight him in a duel or a single combat.

The Holy Prophet turned towards the small band of his men and asked them if there was anyone who

would answer 'Amr' on behalf of Islam and the Muslims. Though there were those present in the Muslim ranks who later, after the departure of the Holy Prophet prided themselves as the greatest heroes and the defenders of Islam and who also claimed to be the closest companions of the Holy Prophet during his life, but none stirred, and some of them even tried to hide their faces lest the choice of the Holy Prophet might fall upon them and they be commanded by the apostle of God to go to fight the giant like warrior standing fully equipped and well prepared to finish anyone that comes to face him.

Every time the call was sounded by the Holy Prophet to his men for a match to meet 'Amr' there was no response even from those who claimed closest companionship with him save Ali Ibne Abi Taleb, who at every time readily stood up and cried: **'Ana lahu ya Rasullullah'** (I am here for him O Prophet of God!).

But the Holy Prophet asked Ali to sit down. Thrice did the Holy Prophet call for a match from his ranks and every time none but Ali stood up. Once, some of the people gave cowardly answers acknowledging the matchless strength and the dauntless courage of the challenging hero of the enemy.

Third time when again none but Ali stood up to fight the giant-like warrior, the Holy Prophet called forth Ali, set right his dress and placed his own turban on his head and bade him go to fight in the way of the Lord, praying to God for the triumph of Islam against the total strength of the idolatrous Arabia and declared:

'Qad Barazal 'Imanu Kulleh 'ila Kufre Kulleh.'

i.e. 'Certainly proceeds the Whole of the Faith against the Whole of the Infidelity. **'Ali met Amr'**, the details of which one can have from any of the detailed Muslim history, and ultimately within a few minutes Ali brought the severed head of Amr' the challenging idolater head of the infidel's forces, and threw it before the feet of the Holy Prophet saying: **"Here is, O Prophet of God! The head of the enemy of God and Islam"**, at which the Holy Prophet (S) thanked God for the victory and declared:

**Darbatu Aliyin Youmal Khandaq
Afdalu min 'ibadatuth thaqalayn.**

i.e. **"The one stroke of Ali on the Day of the Ditch (The battle is called the Battle of the Ditch), is superior to the service (prayers) of both the worlds."** This saying of the Holy Prophet (S) is well-known to the Muslim world and is invariably recorded by all historians and the traditionists and unanimously acknowledged and accepted by the Muslim world as a whole.

As on the triumph of David against Goliath the enemy fled away, at the triumph of Ali against 'Amr' the combined forces of the Confederates of the enemy gave up the battle and left the field in chaos and confusion and the battle ended completely routed and disappointed forever.

"These are the Signs of Allah; We recite them to you (Muhammad) in truth, and verily, you are (one) of the Messengers."

This expressive verse is the last verse of *the second part* of the Holy Qur'an, the commentary of which has been discussed in the current volume.

In this verse, the Qur'an points out that these stories and incidents which were explained about, should be heeded as a warning and instructive lesson for Muslims. In particular, where the story of the death of a thousand people in one moment and then their coming back to life again by the invocation of their prophet is stated.

All of these are the effects of the Signs of *Allah*: granting the rank of leadership to an unknown young shepherd who, in the meanwhile, was wise and eligible; the victory of a small group against a large group of armed enemies; the bravery of a young lad in that fight and endowing him the position of prophethood by the Lord.

These events, mentioned in the Qur'an, are totally some indicative hints to the truthfulness of the speech and Messengership of the Prophet of Islam (S). It says:

"These are the Signs of Allah; We recite them to you (Muhammad) in truth, and verily, you are (one) of the Messengers."

Considering the contents of the previous verses, makes it clear that the elements of victory lie in the following factors:

1) A capable worthy leader; 2) truthful followers; 3) trusting in *Allah*; 4) patience and perseverance; and, 5) having a godly motive.

On the whole, the Qur'an recognizes the clash and struggle for power and authority as an important factor in the development of the terrestrial life which is supported by 22:40.

The struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest is a natural factor in the development and the progress of the creation as a whole but with the advent of Adam and the birth of the intellectual faculties and the development of inspiration in man, the natural tendencies and values gave place to the conventional moral and legal values instead of fighting for food and the material necessities, man began to struggle for right and wrong, what ought to be done and what ought not to. To stop this struggle means deterioration and reversion to animal life.

Islam advocates the sublimation of the natural tendencies and the native urge in the best conventional and the highly improved forms by decrying the false values and the evil use of the faculties.

There should be competition and struggle: for such an attainment and rank which takes one closer and nearer to *Allah*. Hence one should always be prepared to fight against the evil in his own self which would take him back to animal life; and to fight against the evil in the society and the state in which he lives. He should compete with the others in attaining whatever *is* good and godly.⁶

Explanation

7 So, this is history and its various defects which can never be glossed over or corrected. With this background, we should never compare the historical events mentioned in the Qur'an, with the narrations of the same events given in the books of history.

The Qur'an is a divine revelation, free from mistake and falsehood. How can it be judged with the help of history, the history which nobody believes to be free from lie and error?

Many historical events, as given in the Qur'an, like this very story of Talut, differ from the reports in the Bible. But why should we worry? The Bible is no better than other history books. The alterations, suppressions, additions and omissions carried out in these books are too well-known to need any description. The story of Samuel and Saul was written in the Bible by an unknown hand.

The story of Talut in the Qur'an is the true words of *Allah*.

This much about history in general; now let's see what is the Qur'an's main object in such narrations. The Qur'an is not a book of history, nor does it describe an event with all its details as a book of history purports to do.

The Qur'an is divine speech, poured into the mould of revelation, "With it *Allah* guides him who follows His pleasure into the ways of safety." That is why it does not narrate an event from the beginning to the end with all its details. It only picks out a few such points of an event as will be useful to the listener as a lesson, sermon and moral.

1. Al-Mizan, vol. 4, p. 112 (English Version), by al-'Allamah as-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba'i

2. Samuel 10: 9-10

3. Judges 7: 1-6

4. Adopted from the footnote of The Translation of the Holy Qur'an, by S. W. Mir Ahmed Ali, p. 221

5. 1. Samuel 17: 4-11

6. See the Qur'an 2: 148 and 5: 148.

7. Al-Mizan, commentary, vol. 4 p. 123 (English Version) by al-'Allamah as-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba'i

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/enlightening-commentary-light-holy-quran-vol-2/section-33-sauls-victory-over-goliath>