

From the Stones of David to the Tanks of Goliath

José Saramago

Translated and introduced by

George Monteiro

[Among other worthy purposes, receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998 served to increase multifold the novelist José Saramago's audience for his straightforward, bully-pulpit commentary on world affairs and problems. It was in recognition of his serious concerns for the inhumane treatment of peoples that he was invited to visit Palestine. In March 2002, he published an essay in *El País*, "De las piedras de David a los tanques de Goliath," in which he excoriated the Israeli nation—its army was then blockading the Palestinian city—for forgetting or dismissing what their people had suffered in the concentration camps. Saramago's essay, which immediately raised an international furor, has had, and continues to have, a polemical life. The English translation, published for the first time in these pages, was done shortly after Saramago's essay was published in *El País*.—G. M.]

Some authorities in biblical matters affirm that the First Book of Samuel was written either in the time of Solomon or in the period immediately following it, in any case, before the Babylonian captivity. Other scholars, no less competent, argue that not only the First but the Second Book of Samuel as well were reworked after the Babylonian exile, their composition being in obedience to that which is called for by the historical-political-religious structure

of the deuteronomist scheme, which is, successively, God's alliance with his people, the people's infidelity, God's punishment, the people's supplication, and God's forgiveness. If this venerable work of scripture dates from the time of Solomon, we can say that to date there has passed over it, in round numbers, some three thousand years. If the work of its redactors was done after the Jews returned from exile, then some five hundred years, give or take a month, can be subtracted from that number.

My preoccupation with temporal rigor has as its only purpose the putting before my reader's comprehension the idea that this famous biblical legend of the combat (which, by the way, never took place) between the small shepherd David and the Philistine giant Goliath, told to children for at least twenty-five or thirty centuries, has been told badly. Over that length of time, parties with different interests in the matter have created—with the uncritical assent of more than a hundred generations of believers, including Christians no less than Hebrews—a deceptive mystification of inequality in force separating the fair and delicate David's fragile physical complexion from the bestial Goliath's four meters of stature. Such inequality, enormous in all its appearances, was compensated for, and soon overturned in favor of the Israelite, because David was an astute little boy and Goliath but a stupid mound of flesh. So astute was David that before going out to confront the Philistine he scooped up five smooth stones from alongside a nearby brook, which he put into his bag, and so stupid was the other one that he didn't notice that David had armed himself with a pistol. But it was not a pistol, lovers of sovereign mythical truths will protest indignantly, it was simply a sling, a poor shepherd's sling, like the one that had been used since time immemorial by the slaves of Abraham who led and looked after cattle. Yes, in fact it did not look like a pistol; it had no barrel, stock or butt, no trigger, no cartridges. What it did have was two slender resilient cords tied at their ends to a small piece of flexible leather, into the pocket of which the expert hand of David placed the stone that, from a distance, was hurled, rapid and powerful as a bullet, at Goliath's head, dropping him, and putting him at the mercy of the point of his own sword, already in the fist of the dexterous slinger. It was not because he was the more astute that the Israelite succeeded in killing the Philistine, giving victory to the army of Samuel and the living God; it was simply because he carried with him a long-range weapon that he knew how to use. Historical truth, modest and not at all imaginative, contents itself with teaching us that Goliath didn't even have a chance to put his hands on David. Mythic truth, an eminent fabricator of

fantasies, has soothed us for thirty centuries with the marvelous tale of the small shepherd's triumph over the bestial giant of a warrior, to whom, finally, his heavy bronze helmet, cuirass, leggings, and shield are of no use. Such is it that we are authorized to conclude from this edifying episode as it unfolds that David, in the many battles that made him King of Judah and Jerusalem and that extended his power to the right bank of the Euphrates, never again resorted to sling or rocks.

Nor does he use them now. Over the last fifty years David has grown to such a point in strength and size that between him and the haughty Goliath it is no longer possible to see any difference; it might even be said, without insulting the obfuscating clarity of the facts, that he has turned into a new Goliath. For David, today, is Goliath, but a Goliath who has left off bearing heavy and finally ineffective weapons made of bronze. The fair David of yore crosses over occupied Palestine territory in helicopters that discharge missiles against defenseless targets; the delicate David of yore mans the world's most powerful tanks, smashing and shattering everything in their way; the lyrical David who sang songs of praise to Bath Sheba, embodied now in the gargantuan figure of that war criminal called Ariel Sharon, issues the "poetic" message that it is necessary first to smash the Palestinians before negotiating with what then will be left of them. In a word, this, since 1948, with slight variations that are merely tactical, has been Israel's political strategy. Mentally intoxicated with the messianic ideal of a Great Israel that will at last realize the expansionist dreams of the most radical Zionists; contaminated by the monstrous, rooted "certainty" that in this catastrophic and absurd world there exists one people chosen by God, to whom, therefore, it is automatically justified and authorized, in the name as well of past horrors and present fears, to take any and all actions stemming from an obsessive racism that is psychologically and pathologically exclusivist; trained and schooled in the idea that no matter what suffering they have inflicted, do inflict, or will inflict on others, particularly the Palestinians, it will still fall short of their suffering in the Holocaust, they scratch interminably at their own wounds so as to keep them forever bleeding, making it impossible for them to heal, and show them forth to the world like flags. Israel has made its own the terrible words of Deuteronomy: "To me belongeth vengeance and recompense." Israel wants us to feel blame—all of us, directly or indirectly—for the horrors of the Holocaust; Israel wants us to renounce our most elementary critical intelligence and transform ourselves docilely into an echo of its will; Israel wants us to recognize *de jure* what for

its people already exists de facto: absolute impunity. From the point of view of its people, Israel can never be brought to judgment, its people having once been tortured, gassed, and incinerated in Auschwitz. I ask myself if those Jews who died in the Nazi concentration camps, those Jews who were persecuted throughout History, those Jews who were murdered in pogroms, those Jews who rotted away in the ghettos—I ask myself if that immense multitude of unfortunates would not feel shame at the infamous acts committed by their descendants. I ask myself if their having suffered so much might not be the best reason for their ceasing to cause so much suffering to others.

David's stones have changed hands; now it's the Palestinians who throw them. Goliath is on the other side, armed and equipped as no other soldier has ever been in the history of warfare, save, of course, for his North American friend. Ah, yes, there is the horrendous killing of civilians brought about by the so-called terrorist-suicides.... Horrendous, yes, without a doubt; condemnable, yes, without a doubt; but Israel still has much to learn if it finds itself incapable of understanding the reasons that can bring human beings to transform themselves into bombs.

José Saramago (1922–2010) was the celebrated author of, among other novels, *Baltasar and Blimunda* and *Blindness*. He was the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1998). *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* 6, *On Saramago*, guest edited by Anna Klobucka, was devoted to his work.

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