SLINGSHOTS AND GIANTS: THE DAVID AND GOLIATH NARRATIVE
AS DISCOURSE IN AMERICAN NEWS COVERAGE OF THE ISRAELI-
PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Interdisciplinary Studies

by
Karey Ann Sabol
Fall 2012
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Thesis of Karey Ann Sabol:

Slingshots and Giants: The David and Goliath Narrative as Discourse in
American News Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Farid Abdel-Nour, Chair
Department of Political Science

Rebecca Moore
Department of Religious Studies

Edward J. Blum
Department of History

October 18, 2012
Approval Date
Copyright © 2012
by
Karey Ann Sabol
All Rights Reserved
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my partner in life, Thomas, who walked with me through gardens in Haifa, swam with me in the Dead Sea, and sat beside me in our borrowed homeland of Jordan, counting the stars.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Slingshots and Giants: The David and Goliath Narrative as Discourse in American News Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
by
Karey Ann Sabol
Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies
San Diego State University, 2012

This paper presents a discourse analysis of U.S. media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, investigating the use of biblical narratives as metaphors. Examining coverage specifically at the start of the First and Second Intifadas, I analyzed articles about the conflict in the New York Times and Washington Post newspapers that contained references to the David and Goliath narrative.

Discursive theory suggests that the choice of narrative used to describe an event shapes the way the event is understood, which has implications for behavior, as well. Using discourse theory as a framework for this analysis, I examined such variables as article salience, speaker identity, how the narrative is used, and how and whether this use changes over time, concluding that the narrative is used primarily when there is a sense that an “underdog” side stands to make significant gains, and conversely, ceases to be used once that hope has been largely diminished due to changing perceptions of the actors.

U.S. media play a significant role in the way the conflict is understood by imprinting a biblical frame on the conflict, which has the effect of undermining the possibility and feasibility of political solutions and constructing a view of the conflict that is almost eternal in nature. More importantly, by analogizing real people as archetypal characters, this frame oversimplifies their political identities, decreasing the likelihood of intervention once the more complex identities of these people are observed.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABSTRACT</th>
<th>v</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 THEORETICAL BASES</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse Theory and Analysis</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Framing: Biblical Tropes</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narratives and Topoi in the Media: Oversimplification of Political Identities</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biblical Narratives in U.S. Media Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The David and Goliath Narrative</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goliath</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aftermath of the battle</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 CASE STUDIES</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Example of the Narrative: 1967</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study: The First Intifada</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saliency</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker Variables</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the Narrative is Used</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles/Characters</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent to Which the Narrative is Explained</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in the Use of the Narrative Over Time</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study: The Second Intifada</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saliency</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When the protests and other actions that were later dubbed Intifada first broke out in the streets of the West Bank and Gaza in December 1987, reporting in U.S. newspapers immediately turned to biblical metaphors to describe the scope and nature of the conflict. By the third week of this First Intifada, both the New York Times and the Washington Post contained articles that referred to the David and Goliath narrative, either directly calling one side David and the other Goliath or referring to widespread public use of the narrative in describing the conflict. The David and Goliath narrative has been long ingrained in the American psyche and is commonly used to describe any event or contest in which there appears to be gross power disparity. Yet, the use of the narrative to describe the conditions of the First (and Second) Intifadas is representative of a larger trend of talking about the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict in biblical terminology. Media reporting that uses narratives like the David and Goliath story imprints a biblical framework on the public perception of the conflict.

This study presents a discourse analysis of U.S. media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, examining coverage specifically at the start of the First and Second Intifadas and analyzing how biblical narratives play a role in the way events in the conflict are reported. A study such as this is essentially a study of the interplay among history, ideology, and narrative (Boyarin 1992), particularly as it applies to the way conflicts are presented and how those conflicts are framed. Narratives can form the basis of a discourse.

All discursive theories accept as a starting point “that our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect our world, identities and social relations but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 1). The concept of intertextuality explains that all texts are linked to other texts, and as such, helps readers make sense of the world (Wodak and Kryzanowski 2008, 9). Again, these linkages are not neutral, since not all participants in a conflict are given equal access to the discourses. When it comes to news media, certain voices are given a soapbox or considered “experts,” which can have the effect
of muting alternative voices (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002) and perspectives. Most importantly, discursive representations of reality make certain types of action relevant and others unthinkable (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). Journalists—who are given the power to decide which voice is given the soapbox and which frame (text or narrative) to draw on to give the story meaning—are news-shapers, and consequently, action-shapers (Gross and Brewer 2007; Muravchik 2003; Said 1981).

Discursive theory would suggest that the choice of narrative used to frame an event or conflict shapes the way the event or conflict is understood, and, therefore, makes certain actions possible and others unthinkable. Considering that American public opinion may influence the actions of American political leaders, and that American political pressure plays an increasingly powerful role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, studying the flow of American media coverage of the conflict seems an important task.

The First Intifada began on December 9, 1987, with a series of events perceived by the Palestinians to be attacks by Israel. A spontaneous popular uprising ensued, characterized by involvement from all strata of Palestinian society and conscious disavowal of the use of guns and knives (Cleveland 2004, 475). A key symbol of the First Intifada was the stone, typically cast by Palestinian youth. As momentum for the Intifada grew, an underground, local leadership rose up to coordinate the uprising, and it articulated a fourteen-point program of objectives that included the demand that Israel cease building settlements and recognize an independent Palestinian state. Israeli efforts to end the uprising were heavily publicized. The Second Intifada began in September 2000, immediately following Ariel Sharon’s visit to the Muslim sacred shrines at Haram al-Sharif, which Jews call the Temple Mount. The intervening years saw several major attempts to seek a viable political solution for the conflict, most notably the Oslo Peace Process, but discussions had reached an impasse by late 2000. As William Cleveland explains, the Second Intifada was different from the first in that it was characterized by a decrease in participation and grassroots organization and an increase in militarization. He notes, “[The] stones and burning tires that had characterized the first intifada were still present, but they no longer symbolized the Palestinian preference for nonviolent protest” (Cleveland 2004, 516). By 2002, the Israeli army reoccupied all the territory it had previously turned over to the Palestinian Authority during peace negotiations. By the summer of 2003, thousands had died, the Palestinian territories were experiencing
economic disaster, Yasser Arafat’s authority was largely eroded, and Israeli society and politics were heavily divided. It is within this context that this examination of biblical narratives in U.S. media coverage commences. This study does not aim to present a thorough history of the Intifadas, but rather, to analyze one motif in the news coverage of these key events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In Chapter Two, I will present the theoretical basis for this study, beginning by introducing discourse theory as an important framework for analyzing the way we talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as the implications of that talk. I then argue that the media play a significant role in framing the way the conflict is understood by employing narrative shortcuts and stock characters to describe real people and events, often oversimplifying the identities of all participants. In the second part of the chapter, I provide a brief overview of the U.S. media’s use of biblical tropes in describing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before describing the use of the David and Goliath narrative in more specific terms.

Chapter Three will present a case study of the First and Second Intifadas as examples of the discourse. I compare coverage of the two events in the New York Times and the Washington Post newspapers, selected due to their wide distribution and readership as well as the comparative political perspectives they are commonly perceived to embody (liberal vs. conservative, respectively). I present examples of articles and editorials written about the conflict within the relevant date ranges for the first year of each Intifada (December 8, 1987-December 8, 1988 and September 28, 2000-September 28, 2001). Using media coverage of the 1967 war as a basis for comparison, I discuss when and how the narrative is used. I demonstrate the following: (a) evidence of the David and Goliath biblical narrative will be found in mainstream media in both diffuse and explicit forms; (b) the narrative will be used as a tool to garner sympathy for one side in the conflict as the “underdog;” (c) the narrative is used primarily when there is a sense that the “underdog” side stands to make significant gains, and conversely, ceases to be used once that hope has been largely diminished due to changing perceptions of the actors; and furthermore, (d) no significant differences will be found in narrative usage between these “liberal” and “conservative” sources of mainstream American news.

In Chapter Four, I discuss the possible implications of the use of the David and Goliath narrative, and other such biblical tropes, in describing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
By imprints a biblical frame on the conflict, use of these narratives give the impression that it is, at essence, a religious conflict, leaving little room for modern political solutions. In addition, by analogizing real people as archetypal characters, this kind of media coverage oversimplifies their political identities, casting them as either victims or victimizers (good vs. evil) and decreasing the likelihood that the international community will respond once the more complex identities of these people are understood. I conclude that the flexibility of the narrative ensures its persistence but also limits discussion of the conflict.

As tensions between Israelis and Palestinians continue to flare, concerted effort needs to be made to remove the obstacles to peace. Discourses about the conflict can create conceptual obstacles to peace by limiting the way events, and their participants, are understood. Studies such as this one can help illuminate the presence of limiting discourses and analyze their impact, opening up the possibility of new ways of talking about and understanding the conflict.
CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL BASES

DISCOURSE THEORY AND ANALYSIS

Discourse theory is closely tied to social constructionism. Discourse theory argues that words do not just represent reality, they also shape it. Language is not merely a passive vehicle for our thoughts and emotions (Burr 1995, 7), but rather plays a more active role in creating “facts on the ground.” Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966, 39-42) articulate the classic social constructionist approach to language. Language gives meaning by typifying experiences, consolidating a variety of experiences into broad categories, like narratives and metaphors, that make them understandable to others. Language transcends the “here and now” of specific events and circumstances by connecting them to broader categories of experiences, integrating reality into a meaningful whole. It does this largely through the use of symbols, and it presents those symbols as objectively real. Those symbols become part of a society’s available stock of knowledge:

By virtue of this accumulation a social stock of knowledge is constituted, which is transmitted from generation to generation and which is available to the individual in everyday life. I live in the commonsense world of everyday life equipped with specific bodies of knowledge. What is more, I know that others share at least part of this knowledge, and they know that I know this. My interaction with others in everyday life is, therefore, constantly affected by our common participation in the available social stock of knowledge. (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 41)

Definitions of “discourse” vary widely, and many studies are done without defining which theoretical approach is being used. This study adopts the simple definition put forth by Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips (2002), that discourse is a “particular way of talking about and understanding the world” (1). Discourse analysts agree with the premises of the social constructionists (Burr 1995, 2-5):

1. Critical premise—A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge:
   
   Our access to reality is always through language; physical objects and events exist in the real world, but they only gain meaning through discourse (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 9). Common and accepted myths, narratives, and discourses need to be
deconstructed to uncover both what realities they reveal and what realities they obscure.

2. **Situational premise**—Historical and cultural specificity:

   Our ways of understanding the world are historically situated. References to specific narratives are used because they hold certain meaning for a particular community of people. In another community or culture, the same narratives may carry completely different meaning or hold no meaning at all.

3. **Foundational premise**—Knowledge is sustained by social processes:

   Knowledge is created through daily social interaction between people and includes debate about what is true and what is false (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 5). Discourse analysis is helpful in “tracing the development of present ways of understanding, of current discourses and representations of people and society, to show how current ‘truths’ have come to be constituted, how they are maintained and what power relations are carried by them. (Burr 1995, 166)

4. **Normative premise**—Knowledge and social action go together:

   There are a number of possible social constructions of reality and each one elicits a particular type of action from people (Burr 1995, 5). Jørgensen and Phillips elaborate, “Within a particular worldview, some forms of action become natural, others unthinkable. Different social understandings of the world lead to different social actions, and therefore the social construction of knowledge and truth has social consequences. (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 6)

   While all of these social constructionist premises are adopted in this study, it is this last one that reveals the importance of discourse analysis. Marcelo Dascal argues that these kinds of philosophical and linguistic analyses are essentially critical endeavors to find and resolve the conceptual difficulties that seem to present insurmountable obstacles for the solution of practical conflicts (Dascal 2003, 150). In uncovering the consequences of a discourse for particular groups, alternative ways of understanding events, people, and reality become possible, the first step in solving practical conflicts.

   Another important concept in discourse theory is **intertextuality**, the idea that all texts are connected to other texts. A discourse gains meaning because its particular representation of reality is linked to other things we already know. As Ruth Wodak and Michal Krzyzanowski point out, these links can be established in a variety of ways: “through continued reference to a topic or main actors; through reference to the same events; or by the transfer of main arguments from one text into the next” (Wodak and Krzyzanowski 2008, 3). Applied to a new situation, the reference text becomes recontextualized and a new meaning is created. In the case of U.S. media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, biblical
connections are frequently made, but as this study demonstrates, the recontextualized narratives serve to frame a particular understanding of the conflict.

Discourse analysis, then, aims to unpack the assumptions that lie behind the language we use to describe events and situations.

**MEDIA FRAMING: BIBLICAL TROPES**

Analysis of media sources reveals some of the important and dominant discourses. The major daily newspapers, in particular, not only reflect the dominant discourses of a society but also help to create them. “Dissemination to large audiences enhances the constitutive effect of discourse—its power, that is, to shape widely shared constructions of reality” (Mautner 2002, 32). Edward Said goes even further to suggest that newspapers and other media are an important tool for creating a standardized common culture (Said 1981, 49). In such a perspective, journalists are not only reporters but news-shapers. “News is not a natural phenomenon emerging from facts in real life, but socially and culturally determined. News producers are social agents in a network of social relations who reveal their own stance towards what is reported. News is not the event, but the partial, ideologically framed report of the event” (Caldas-Coulthard 2003, 274).

Journalists and newsrooms use frames—defined as certain patterns of interpretation and classification—to emphasize specific aspects of perceived reality (Scheufele 2006, 65). Frames can be seen as storytelling devices that suggest ways of understanding and interpreting the news (Gross and Brewer 2007, 122). For Erving Goffman (1974), a primary frame is one that renders “what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful,” connecting a singular event to a whole “idiom” of events within a particular social group’s framework (Goffman 1974, 21, 27, 37). Although framing is a natural human tendency, “observers actively project their frames of reference into the world immediately around them, and one fails to see their so doing only because events ordinarily confirm these projections, causing the assumptions to disappear into the smooth flow of activity” (Goffman 1974, 39). Journalists can be seen as actively projecting certain frameworks onto the events they report. If the events readers observe seem to confirm the accuracy of these frames, they refrain from challenging their meanings.
Research has demonstrated a connection between the way journalists frame political events and the way the public thinks or feels about those events (Gross and Brewer 2007). This is particularly significant because frames organize not just meaning but involvement, which Goffman describes as a psychobiological process in which an individual reader or hearer becomes at least partly unaware of the direction of his or her cognitive attention and feelings about the occurrence or event (Goffman 1974, 345-346). The normative importance of journalistic framing lies in this connection to involvement: that “different social understandings of the world lead to different social actions, and therefore the social construction of knowledge and truth has social consequences” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 6).

In the preface to Joshua Muravchik’s study of journalistic bias in U.S. reporting of the Second Intifada, Michael Stein and Fred Lafer of the Washington Center for Near East Policy comment on the impact of the way the conflict’s events were reported:

Reportage from Ramallah, Gaza, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv often sets the diplomatic agenda; grisly images of human carnage at pizzerias, cafes, outdoor markets, and refugee camps often frame the debates in the White House, the United Nations Security Council, and capitals around the world. In the Middle East, journalists are often more than just conveyors of news—they have the power to shape the news and, in so doing, determine the path of future events. (Muravchik 2003, vii)

Journalistic framing, Muravchik found, was rarely the result of bias, but more often the result of superficiality, misinformation, and lack of historical context, among other problems (Muravchik, 2003, viii). Muravchik’s study is one of the few attempts to deconstruct media coverage of the Second Intifada. However, although it was commissioned by a reputable think tank, the study claimed to use no methodology but “common sense” and listed among the challenges of accurate reportage in the Middle East that “the Palestinians repeatedly lie” (Muravchik 2003, 4-5, 115). There are obvious problems with Murachik’s study, of course, but it remains an interesting investigation of journalistic framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This present study, by contrast, does not attempt to research whether bias exists in media reporting of the intifadas but rather what kinds of narratives and frames are used to report them.
Narratives and Topoi in the Media: Oversimplification of Political Identities

News framing can include the use of topoi, including familiar stories and archetypal characters. Mark Silk describes the use of narratives and topoi in the news media as ritual, giving the impression of an endlessly repeated drama (Silk 1995, 49-51). Using simple and uncomplicated themes and stock characters, journalists build communicative shortcuts. “In classical forensic rhetoric, general conceptions of this sort were literally called commonplaces—*koinoi topoi* in Greek, *loci communes* in Latin. The orator, as part of his craft, would work up set pieces on a range of topoi that could then be dropped into a speech to amplify and strengthen the particular case he was arguing” (Silk 1995, 50). Topoi that are derived from religious sources, in particular, render the world morally comprehensible, even to a secular audience (Silk 1995, 149). Leonard Greenspoon’s tongue-in-cheek description of the use of biblical topoi in the media is fitting: “[To] put it in headline-ese, ‘BIBLE IS A GODSEND FOR REPORTERS’” (Greenspoon 2000, 50).

The world of archetypes is filled with heroes and villains, victims and perpetrators. Joseph Campbell’s classical hero is

> the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. Such a one’s visions, ideas, and inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn. (Campbell 1949, 19-20)

Todd Gitlin’s study of network TV executives reveals the general acceptance of entertainment conventions in the media. “They take the entertainment conventions for granted without knowing their histories well; their knowledge is a shallow, aphoristic lore, including a ready-made outline of the requirements of popular entertainment: Heroes should be agreeable, villains clear, ‘jeopardy’ definite, outcomes pleasing, story lines simple, climaxes frequent, jokes flagrant” (Gitlin 1983, 29). Although the news media appear to be above the entertainment designation, the use of stock characters and familiar storytelling is nevertheless pervasive.

Communicative shortcuts, however, have practical implications. In particular, the use of familiar and stock characters has the effect of oversimplifying the political identities of real people. This points to a broader theme of U.S. media reportage of conflicts and
humanitarian crises. The media have played a central role in mobilizing and motivating the international community to act to resolve humanitarian crises. Termed the “CNN effect,” media coverage of humanitarian crises has followed the formulaic fairy story of the victim-perpetrator dyad. Erica Bouris, in her in-depth study of political victimology (Bouris 2007), elaborates what this media coverage looks like:

It is no coincidence that the images we see on the nightly news are that of the starving child, the maimed grandmother, the child on his way to school riddled with gunshot fire. These images are gripping because of the tremendous way in which they juxtapose the extreme innocence of the victim with the often incomprehensible violence and evil of those who can harm children and the elderly. Such images can focus international attention and lead to policies of assistance for political victims. (Bouris 2007, 4)

While this type of framing may deliver some positive outcomes, Bouris argues that as long as we rely on the simplified representation of victim and perpetrator, we will be less likely to recognize more complex victimized individuals as victims and withhold support or intervention (Bouris 2007, 6). The portrayal of victims and perpetrators as stock characters is a trap that leads only to disillusionment, since no one can fit neatly into these oversimplified identities.

To enter the terrain of emancipation through human rights is to enter a world of uncivilized deviants, baby seals, and knights errant. There is a narrowing here—other evils and other goods receive less attention. Privileging the baby seals delegitimizes the suffering of people (and animals) who are, if anything, more typical in the complexity of their ethical and political posture, and renders the broader political culture less able to understand and engage with more ambivalent characters. (Kennedy 2004, 14)

The real complexity of situations and people is often sidelined in favor of communicative shortcuts and a story that allows for certainty. As we will see, the use of the David and Goliath narrative in media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is illustrative of this oversimplification of political identities.

**Biblical Narratives in U.S. Media Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

U.S. media coverage of the Middle East, in general, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular, has frequently employed biblical topoi and narratives. The fascination of Western and American journalists with the biblical significance of the region is not new. Lawrence Davidson (1996), in his study of U.S. media coverage (particularly the New York
of archeology in Palestine during the first decade of the British Mandate, highlights the biblical connection journalists relied on in the 1920s. For the British, archeological findings that appeared to confirm biblical associations would serve to assert Christian claims on the region and justify imperial control (Davidson 1996, 104-105). For Americans, as well, who held an age-old fascination with the Holy Land, reappropriation of Christian control of Palestine was seen as a step leading to the land’s redemption from its ills and reaffirmation of its “religio-mystical connection” with the West (Davidson 1996, 106). Davidson’s research involving 119 articles on archeology in Palestine in the *New York Times* showed that the vast majority of the articles referred to Old Testament sites. A few referred to New Testament sites and a few to Crusader-era and prehistoric sites, but not one of them referred to Muslim-era sites. Further, the articles consistently used biblical place-names to refer to locations under study, rather than the modern-day place-names. Davidson argues that these characterizations were both natural and necessary because most readers (even secular readers) were familiar with the biblical stories:

> In the newspaper reporting on the area in the 1920s, the familiar biblical Palestine was reincarnated through the incantational use of names sacred to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. In other words, Palestine was undergoing a sort of temporal transposition where, from the point of view of the American public, the biblical past was real and the Arab present was either a scandal or a void being filled by a process that released the divine, biblical past from historical suspended animation. Here scripture became the dominant reference guide. (Davidson 1996, 106)

Davidson points out that the consequences of this kind of framing were anything but theoretical, because they facilitated popular American acceptance of the British Mandate and Zionism. In the 1920s, this meant support for the general tenets of the Balfour Declaration, which sought to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine, and the subsequent immigration of large numbers of European Jews into the region.

Although scripture is no longer the dominant reference guide for most international reporting, it remains a familiar standard in reports on events in the Middle East. Most often, the biblical references in Middle East reporting derive from familiar stories in the “Old Testament” or Hebrew Scriptures. Several points must be made about the prevalence of these references.

First, all three main religious traditions in Israel and Palestine (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) consider the Hebrew Scriptures to be at least partially authoritative. One could
argue that references to these scriptures are frequently used because they form a sort of common language or stock of knowledge for all the parties involved, a “shared reference to an authoritative tradition” (Boyarin 1992, 546). However, as the name Hebrew Scriptures implies, these texts seem to give priority to the modern Jewish community living in Israel. It becomes important to ask whether such ownership of the discourse creates an uneven power relationship:

In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, naming can be a diagnostic of power; conflicts over naming reflect and are integral to contests over control and ownership. Each party tries to superimpose its name over territory, places, actions and interpretations of events. Whose nomenclature prevails derives from the ability to have one’s narration and lexicon accepted as the standard one. (Peteet 2005, 157)

However, since U.S. media coverage is written at least primarily for an American audience, we can identify two main reasons for the prevalent usage of these biblical references. Jonathan Boyarin, using the experience of the Exodus as an example, shows how narratives from the Hebrew scriptures often served as a “versatile template for the articulated self-understandings of the origins of people in Britain” (Boyarin 1992, 534). When British people migrated to the U.S., they brought those self-understandings and their Christian heritage with them. Most Americans, even today, are quite familiar with the simple biblical narratives even if they did not grow up attending church or synagogue, or reading scripture. These narratives, the David and Goliath story primary among them, have become part of the available stock of American knowledge.

More importantly, however, and perhaps more problematic, is the possibility that scriptural references are used to describe events and actors in the modern Israeli-Palestinian conflict because the biblical stories provide much of the basis of American understandings of the Middle East. Most Americans have limited direct experience with the Middle East and so rely on this available social stock of knowledge. Biblical representations of the region are specific discursive resources and are (unconsciously) naturalized as common sense. It is important to note that while these representations and narratives are applied journalistically to many actors and events (as metaphor), they become particularly salient for Americans when applied to events and actors in the region in which the biblical stories took place (and become something more than metaphor). With little knowledge of the real actors and events in the region, it becomes quite natural to associate them with the ancient actors in the biblical
texts. While references to the specific stories are used metaphorically, it is not as much of a stretch for Americans to equate the ancient Israelites of the Bible with the modern state of Israel and the ancient Philistines with the modern Palestinians.

**THE DAVID AND GOLIATH NARRATIVE**

The biblical story of David and Goliath is found in 1 Samuel 17. In 58 verses, the author describes the setting, the characters, and the battle. Biblical scholars debate the veracity of the story’s details, the larger historical and social context, and the purpose the narrative originally held for the self-identity of the Israelites. However, journalists who quote elements of the narrative as analogy rarely consider these aspects of analysis. They focus, instead, on the literal details of the characters and the storyline.

**Goliath**

The author of 1 Samuel spends considerable time describing the giant Goliath as the antagonist. He is described as large in stature and well armed in bronze, a warrior from the time of his youth. He emerges from the Philistine army as their representative champion, confidently hurling insults and challenges to the Israelite army. When Saul and the Israelites hear his threats, they are “dismayed and greatly afraid” (1 Sam. 17: 11). Goliath is not just a Philistine; he is called the Philistine, representative of all the Philistines. Interestingly, the author foreshadows Goliath’s eventual defeat for his Israelite audience by indicating that he is uncircumcised. Circumcision for the Israelites ensured covenantal protection by YHWH\(^1\). The audience would understand Goliath’s uncircumcision to be an indication of his lack of regard for YHWH and, therefore, his lack of protection. Defeat of Goliath would mean defeat of the Philistines and victory for YHWH. It is cast as a holy battle in which Goliath is representative of all that is evil and opposed to the Lord.

---

\(^1\) YHWH represents the personal name of the God of Israel as recorded in the Hebrew Bible. It is referred to as the “Tetragrammaton” (Berenbaum and Skolnik 2007).
David

David, by contrast, is portrayed in this story as the embodiment of YHWH’s protection. David is idealized as “ruddy, with a handsome appearance” (1 Sam 17: 42). He is described as young (the youngest of Jesse’s sons), too young to go to battle. Instead, he is tasked with tending the sheep until his father sends him to the front lines to check on his older brothers in battle. When he arrives, he is derided by his brother, Eliab, for leaving the sheep in the wilderness and sticking his nose into things he should not. He is summoned by Saul, and here we discover that young David is not as feeble as his brother’s comment would have us believe:

David said to Saul, “Let no man’s heart fail on account of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.” Then Saul said to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth while he has been a warrior from his youth.” But David said to Saul, “Your servant was tending his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went out after him and attacked him, and rescued it from his mouth; and when he rose up against me, I seized him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, since he has taunted the armies of the living God.” And David said, “The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “Go, and may the LORD be with you”. (1 Sam. 17: 32-27)

David is portrayed here as a brave and tough kid, full of faith and willing to be the Israelites’ representative. Saul offers his own armor to David, but David takes it off, saying that it is too big and “untested” (1 Sam 17: 39). So young David goes out to meet the giant essentially unarmed, save for a stick and 5 smooth stones. Although David’s bravery is admirable, the author is clear that the eventual victory is not a result of his own feeble efforts. David is portrayed as YHWH’s representative, covered by YHWH’s protection. Goliath is offended when David appears on the battlefield, angry that the Israelites would send such a joke of a warrior. Yet David reveals the source of his real strength:

Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted. This day the LORD will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you. And I will give the dead bodies of the army of the Philistines this day to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not
deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is the LORD’s and He will give you into our hands”. (1 Sam. 17: 45-47)

David then proceeds to kill Goliath with one strategically placed stone from a slingshot. We are given a dramatic visual of the giant falling flat on his face and dying on the spot. David then uses Goliath’s own sword to cut off his head, a swift and final victory.

**Aftermath of the battle**

When the rest of the Philistine army sees that Goliath is dead, they take off running. The Israelites pursue them, killing others along the way and plundering their camps. David, meanwhile, returns to Jerusalem with Goliath’s head, which he presents to Saul as a victor’s trophy.

**Themes**

There are several important themes in the David and Goliath narrative that are drawn upon in media sources. Most commonly, the narrative is used to represent gross power disparity between actors. Even though David boasts to Saul that he has tackled lions to rescue his sheep, the narrative plays up the difference in perceived power between David and Goliath. David is weak, young, vulnerable (as he is too small for Saul’s armor), and—perhaps most illustrative for the Israelite hearers of the narrative—a shepherd. By contrast, Goliath is a giant among men and a warrior by profession. In the media, use of the David and Goliath narrative becomes shorthand for any gross power disparity. The narrative is frequently used in sports and business reporting. For example, *NYT* legal issues journalist, Bernard Stamler, employs the David and Goliath analogy when discussing the difficulty small businesses face in policing and defending their patents against big corporations (Stamler 2006). The use of the narrative evokes the obvious power differential between the competing sides.

Secondly, the story expresses a clear dichotomy of good and evil. Goliath says to David, “Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field” (1 Sam. 17: 44). David is portrayed as brave, if not a bit impetuous, and a “servant” of Saul, willing to go against all odds to defend the Israelites. It is difficult to read the biblical narrative and not get the impression that David is a sweet, innocent, and eager youth who is morally superior to Goliath in every way. The biblical story focuses on more than just
personality, however. For the Israelites, Goliath symbolizes the possibility of being subjected to an oppressor and the loss of freedom, including the freedom to worship their god, YHWH. Victory over Goliath, then, symbolizes religious and political autonomy. In the media, the narrative is an easy and ready analogy to contrast the moral standing of two actors in a given conflict, shorthand for determining who is the good guy and who is the bad guy. An article on drug-related violence in Central America is illustrative. Speaking about the Honduran government’s attempts to protect innocent citizens against drug cartel violence, Honduran Defense Secretary, Marlon Pascua, is quoted as saying, “This is David versus Goliath… And we are David fighting the giant” (Archibald and Cave 2011). By using the narrative, the defense secretary is arguing that this is a moral battle between good (innocent civilians and the government that is trying to protect them) and evil (the drug cartels and the drug users that keep the cartels in business). By not providing an alternative perspective, the authors endorse this perspective. The use of the narrative in this way demonstrates media preference for the tidy duality of good and evil.

In addition, the David and Goliath narrative is a story of hope: the underdog can win! As such, the story holds political value for any oppressed group looking for a way out of its current situation. Media use of the narrative capitalizes on this hope. The narrative is rarely used to describe an unequal power relationship that is doomed to failure for the weaker party. In fact, the opposite is true. The narrative is mostly used when the tone of the article suggests hope for the weaker party. A recent example is a report of the media giant, Amazon.com, in a dispute with the much smaller Independent Publishers Group (I.P.G.). When Amazon dropped more than 4,000 e-books from its site because I.P.G. refused to lower its prices, the spokesperson for I.P.G. expressed the optimism of the group’s members: “They’re trying very hard to look on the bright side and make this a David and Goliath situation” (Streitfeld 2012), indicating their hope that the company would be able to sell their publications through other outlets and not have to bow to Amazon’s terms.

One additional theme is worth addressing: the story’s account of divine intervention. The biblical version of the narrative clearly depicts divine intervention. David embodies YHWH’s favor and protection, while Goliath, as an uncircumcised man, is unworthy of this same protection:
Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted. This day the LORD will deliver you up into my hands… for the battle is the LORD’S...” (1 Sam. 17: 45-47)

Unlike the other themes of the narrative, the idea of divine favor is not consistently applied in media usage of the narrative. As the American preference for secularism in the media has grown, the narrative has been adapted to no longer require references to divine intervention. Unlike many other biblical narratives, the David and Goliath story has proven its flexibility by maintaining meaning in the absence of the divine connection. In true American fashion, it has evolved, instead, to be a metaphor for personal initiative and determination.

In conclusion, it is significant to note that the biblical story of David and Goliath is one-sided. Told from the perspective of the Israelites, the reader or hearer is given only the necessary details of the Philistines. We learn much about David; we know who his father is and we even hear a squabble between David and his brother Eliab. By contrast, we know little about Goliath and his family or interests outside of war. Yet, even David seems a stock character, improbable yet heroic. In short, the characters are not portrayed as real people. Although the use of the narrative in media portrayals of conflict may be meaningful for a community of readers and may allow for journalistic shortcuts, it also runs the risk of oversimplification. Real actors are always more complex than the story would lead us to believe.

In the next chapter, I review newspaper articles from the First and Second Intifadas to present a case study of the use of biblical narratives in American media portrayals of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. As I will demonstrate, the David and Goliath narrative is used to frame the conflict, creating or adding to a discourse on the conflict and the region that is biblical in nature.
CHAPTER 3

CASE STUDIES

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilizes a case study approach to investigate whether and how biblical narratives are used by American media to describe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As such, it was important to identify appropriate cases to study. The First and Second Intifadas were selected for their recency, importance in ongoing conflict, and ease of comparison. It is generally accepted that the First Intifada began on December 9, 1987 with Palestinian demonstrations throughout the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem. The demonstrations followed a chain of events that included the death of an Israeli businessman in Gaza, the deaths of four Palestinians from the Jabalya refugee camp, and the death of a Palestinian teen who threw a Molotov cocktail at an Israeli army patrol. The beginning of the Second Intifada is more disputed, but most Palestinians agree that it began with Ariel Sharon’s visit to the Temple Mount on September 28, 2000. In both cases, the actions of the Palestinians included non-violent resistance as well as combative resistance. The specific incidents in these confrontations were of great importance to the participants on both sides, but it is critical to acknowledge that “the initial protests themselves become historically insignificant when one considers the political interpretations applied to them and their aftermath by Palestinians, Israelis, the news media, and audiences around the world” (Wolfsfeld 1993, xiii). It is the interpretation of events and incidents that illuminates a discourse.

The two Intifadas took place recently enough to be reported in widespread fashion in American media. In 1987, if somewhat less so in 2000, newspapers were still one of the main ways Americans got their news, which indicates the importance of how newspaper journalists reported the conflicts. The Intifadas were also widely considered to be significant events in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict because of the international attention they generated for the Palestinians. For the first time, a relatively high proportion of Americans came to view the Palestinians favorably and acknowledge their identity as separate from
Jordanians and other Arabs. While much of this favor diminished over the course of the Intifadas, they remain important events to study.

I elected to survey newspaper coverage during the first year of each Intifada, which spanned December 9, 1987 – December 9, 1988 and September 28, 2000 – September 28, 2001, respectively. News coverage of the Intifadas, in general, tended to be much greater during the first year of resistance activities. In addition, news coverage at the start of any conflict event tends to frame the way the conflict is talked about subsequently, so it is expected that any use of biblical narratives to describe and frame each Intifada will follow a similar pattern. Gadi Wolfsfeld agrees that “the news media were probably much more important in the early stages of the intifada, when each side was attempting to promote its own frame to the audiences. The news media became a less important arena after the first year of conflict because the story was considered much less newsworthy” (Wolfsfeld 1993, xviii).

The New York Times (NYT) and Washington Post (WP) newspapers, the two publications under study, were selected due to their wide readership across a broad spectrum of Americans. The sheer number of readers indicates the relative influence these newspapers have to frame discussion. At the same time, diverse readership ensures a modicum of accountability, as these papers experience considerable pressure to cover all perspectives and sides in a conflict. As secular, non-religious publications, one would not expect these papers to rely on biblical narratives and other scriptural references. Finally, as mainstream, national dailies go, these two publications are often considered to represent the left-of-center (NYT) and right-of-center (WP) political perspectives, making them suitable for comparison.

Articles during the first year of each conflict were selected for review based on the presence of a direct reference to the David and Goliath narrative. In addition to studying explicit references to the narrative, I also surveyed all articles about the Intifadas during the first month of each conflict to determine if the narrative was also being used in more diffuse ways. Articles were analyzed using several variables. The first variable analyzed was the degree of salience (Roeh and Nir 1993, 178-180), or the degree to which it is likely to be read and considered important. Salience was determined by a number of factors, including the placement of the article within the newspaper and on a particular page, article type,
whether the narrative occurred in the article headline or body, and other printed features used to denote importance (such as an accompanying photograph).

Secondly, I analyzed the articles for speaker variables. When the narrative is referenced, I examined who is speaking and that person’s relative power and public credibility. When it is an outside quote and not the journalist’s own use of the narrative, my analysis turned toward the tone of the article and the degree of sympathy the journalist appeared to have for the speaker’s use of the narrative.

The third variable I considered had to do with how the narrative is used. Primarily, this analysis looked at who is being equated to David and who is being equated to Goliath. In addition, I also considered whether any of the narrative’s four themes are being implied: a power differential, a moral dichotomy, hope for an underdog, and divine intervention.

Fourth, I examined the degree to which the narrative is explained in the article. It is predicted that other than denoting which side is being labeled David and which side Goliath, few articles will contain explanatory notes about the history of the narrative, where it comes from, and why it is a particularly apt analogy for this conflict. This analysis will demonstrate the degree to which knowledge of the narrative is assumed.

Finally, looking at the articles in the aggregate, I analyzed the change in the use of the narrative over time, both over the course of the first year of each conflict and between the First and Second Intifadas.

**Historical Example of the Narrative: 1967**

To anchor the discussion of news coverage during the First and Second Intifadas and provide a historical snapshot of how the narrative was used, I also looked at news coverage of the events surrounding the Six-Day War of 1967. I surveyed articles about the Middle East in both newspapers during May and June of 1967, looking for explicit references to the David and Goliath narrative. I found three relevant articles (two in the NYT and one in the WP).

In all three articles, Israel is portrayed as the David character. One NYT article, written by C. L. Sulzberger during the lead-up to war on May 24, depicts Israel as a tiny and vulnerable entity in a sea of Arab power and intended destruction, the setting of a veritable Greek tragedy:
Fact one is that the Arab states have sworn to destroy Israel, no matter how long they must wait, and, despite internecine quarrels, they are today better armed and better deployed than ever before. Fact two is that Israel, having no place to retreat, is prepared to fight desperately and without compromise. (Sulzberger 1967)

Sulzberger goes on to quote David Ben-Gurion, to whom he refers as the “hero of modern Israel” in this specific reference to the narrative:

Ben-Gurion says he cannot endorse the idea of classical Greek tragedy which sees fate unjustly controlling the destinies of man; that Israel must fight fate itself if necessary. This contemporary David already battled his Goliath, Nasser. Ben-Gurion is out of office, but his cardinal precept prevails. (Sulzberger 1967)

It is clear that Sulzberger is sympathetic to this portrayal of Israel as David and the Arabs—or at least Nasser—as Goliath. There is both a power differential and a moral aspect to this portrayal, as indicated by Sulzberger’s later use of the word Holocaust as an analogy for the current conflict.

The other two articles were written on June 11, the day following the end of the Six-Day War. James Reston’s NYT editorial celebrates the moral victory that he thinks the war represents for Americans, while cautioning readers to be wary of the continued threat:

The Israelis are now very popular in Washington. They had the courage of our convictions, and they won the war we opposed. Everybody here, however, is so pleased with the re-enactment of the David and Goliath story—which, incidentally, took place on the very spot where the little guy slew the giant—that the causes of the conflict are in danger of being lost.

…and even Israel is in danger of losing because it is now tempted to think that military power will save a small nation in the midst of a vast and hostile Arab world. (Reston 1967)

The WP article from the same day, written by Philip Geyelin and entitled “David Fights Goliath in a Desert Mirage,” accepts the narrative as a commonplace to describe the conflict. However, Geyelin offers a more critical approach. He notes,

A great many Americans see a gleaming pool of oil and a patch of green called Israel in a baking desert inhabited by hostile elements. They also see stereotypes. Israel is David and Goliath is the Arab world. Nasser is a dictator, like Mussolini, and a schemer, like Machiavelli. Russia is the puppetmaster, however ineptly the Soviets may pull their Arab strings. And those Arab leaders not responsive to Moscow’s tug are archaic figures, a little glamorous in their head-dresses and flowing robes, but oil-rich and rather decadent.

An Israeli is a sturdy, tenacious pioneer, as well as a victim of oppression and atrocity, rightly entitled to a homeland of his own. If American news media are
any test, Israelis are also bronzed, industrious and strong. They smile, and ride off to war singing songs with a pretty girl in fetching uniform…

There is some truth in any stereotype. The trouble with these is that they ignore some hard realities… (Geyelin 1967)

Geyelin goes on to deconstruct some of these stereotypes, arguing that “little David is not so small,” due to Israel’s financial, educational, and technological resources, and that the Arab Goliath is not really as unified or powerful as the imagery would have us believe. He concludes that “it might be worth some effort, in the interests of a more durable peace in the Middle East, and a greater degree of rapprochement between Israel and the Arab world, for the United States to look beyond the stereotypes…” (Geyelin 1967).

In general, coverage during the 1967 war adopted the use of the David and Goliath narrative as accepted analogy, reflecting what must have been common usage in society. In the examples studied, Israel is portrayed as David and the opposing side is portrayed as Goliath. The opposing side, in this period, seems to have an ambiguous or shifting identity: sometimes it is the Palestinian residents, sometimes the Arabs, in general, and at other times it is authority figures like Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Like the biblical narrative itself, the portrayal of Goliath is vague and indistinct, while the David character is portrayed as someone that we, as Americans in this case, can identify with. The use of the narrative in these cases depicts both a power differential and a moral component. This snapshot of American media coverage of the Six-Day War provides some context as we begin to explore the shifting identity of the David character in equivalent coverage of the First and Second Intifadas.

**Case Study: The First Intifada**

Between December 9, 1987 and December 9, 1988, fifteen articles appeared in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* that made explicit references to the David and Goliath narrative and its application to the First Intifada or the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Eight of these articles were published in the *NYT*, beginning with a front-page article by Thomas Friedman on December 25, 1987. References began to appear at approximately the same time in the *WP*, with an initial front-page article by Glenn Frankel on December 26, 1987 and seven total references over the first year. Friedman and Frankel were also the authors of articles most frequently containing explicit David and Goliath references, with
three articles each during the first year of the conflict. However, rather than introducing the narrative as a frame for the conflict, each of these initial articles alludes to an already-established public perception of the conflict as being akin to the David and Goliath story.

For example, the Frankel article quotes a senior aide to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Avi Pazner, in relaying the public perception of the conflict in the United States.

Pazner blames U.S. media coverage for framing this particular portrayal of the conflict:

In an interview, Pazner singled out television reporting for special condemnation, saying its coverage had concentrated on scenes of Israeli soldiers shooting or beating Palestinians and had virtually ignored attacks and acts of provocation by rioters that led to such scenes…

The Shamir aide contended that the coverage had helped stimulate the disturbances because cameras at the scene had incited Palestinian mobs to attack soldiers and because the footage shown in the United States and Europe had contributed to international condemnation of Israeli tactics.

“The overall impression in the United States is that one side is a Goliath, which is Israel, and the David is the Palestinians, and I think it is an absolute misrepresentation of what happened here,” he said. (Frankel 1987)

Pazner’s comments imply that although this was the first instance in which the narrative was applied to the First Intifada in the WP, its usage was potentially much more widespread in television news coverage.

Friedman’s article points to frequent use of the narrative also within Palestinian circles, though he does not specify who was using it or through what medium, “On the Palestinian side, the events are being viewed as a great public relations victory. Israel is being depicted as Goliath and the Arab Palestinian as David” (Friedman 1987).

As the first articles in their respective newspapers to explicitly reference the David and Goliath narrative in relation to the First Intifada, they set the stage for the coverage that would follow. Although the total number of explicit references were few, they point to a much more widespread practice of applying this biblical narrative.

**Salience**

The fifteen articles that contained explicit references to the narrative varied in type and placement. However, five of these references appeared on the front page of their respective publications, where most newspaper readers would be likely to see them. Another six articles appeared in the first section of each paper, generally in the World News section.
In addition, both papers frequently featured these references to the narrative in News and Analysis articles, rather than in pieces labeled ‘opinion’ or ‘editorial’. Only two of eight NYT articles were editorial pieces, compared to four of seven WP articles. Taken together, one is given the impression that this use of the narrative is both routine and endorsed by the newspapers’ management.

In no instance did these references appear in an article headline. However, many of the articles contained accompanying photographs that served to increase the likelihood that a reader would pause and read them. One article included two accompanying photographs to illustrate the article’s use of the narrative. The first photo shows a vulnerable-looking Palestinian with plain clothes, hunched shoulders and furrowed brow, clutching stones in each hand, while the second photo provides the contrast of an Israeli soldier in starched uniform with an automatic rifle slung over his shoulder (Friedman 1988a).

Salience is the degree to which something is likely to be read and considered important. The presence of the narrative on the front page, in news and analysis features, and in articles with accompanying photographs indicates that it was likely to be encountered by a wide range of readers and considered relatively influential.

**Speaker Variables**

References to the David and Goliath narrative in these newspapers were made by a variety of different speakers, including “man on the street” interviewees, political figures, historians and experts, and the articles’ own authors. Political figures represent power and a modicum of public credibility, so references to the narrative by these individuals increase the message’s salience. The narrative was used by Avi Pazner, aide to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, as well as by Yasser Arafat. Illustrating the potency of the speaker’s use of the narrative, the NYT’s Paul Delaney reports on Arafat’s speech at the opening session of an emergency meeting of foreign ministers of the Arab League in Tunis:

Mr. Arafat addressed the opening session before the foreign ministers moved behind closed doors to consider what action, if any, to take.

“We have found the weak point in the Israeli occupation,” Mr. Arafat said. “Arab blood will overcome Israel’s guns and powerful war machine. This is our power.

“But the Palestinian people need your support in order to continue,” he added. “It is David and Goliath again. A military rule says any victorious unit must be
reinforced. Since we are now victorious, we need reinforcements”. (Delaney 1988)

Friedman also uses an indirect quote referring to the David and Goliath narrative by Meron Benvenisti, former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, whom he describes as an Israeli expert on the West Bank. Political figures, historians and experts lend credibility to a particular frame. Whether a reader agrees or disagrees with the particular way the expert uses the narrative, he or she is more likely to accept that it provides an accurate framework for understanding the conflict.

Conversely, other articles make use of the “man on the street” style interviews to highlight the common perspectives of ordinary citizens. One *WP* article by Jonathan C. Randal provides this account:

> Threaded throughout a dozen conversations is also the knowledge that rocks and knives are proving effective against an American-equipped Army that prides itself on being the fourth most powerful on Earth.

> Mindful of the impact of television pictures throughout the world, one West Bank resident remarked, “Finally, we have destroyed that favorite Israeli myth of portraying themselves as David against the Arab Goliath”. (Randal 1988)

Similarly, a *NYT* article quotes a letter from an anguished, unnamed Israeli soldier mourning his own role in the conflict and demanding an explanation of “Goliath’s justification” (Kifner 1988). These unnamed speakers have little power or public credibility, but their quotes serve to reinforce the common usage of the narrative among ordinary Palestinians and Israelis.

However, more frequent than references to the narrative made by political figures, experts, or man-on-the-street interviewees were those made directly by journalists authoring the articles. In fact, in five of the fifteen articles, references to the David and Goliath narrative were part of the journalists’ own assessments of the conflict. Four of the accounts refer again to widespread use of the narrative. In these cases, the journalists all appear to be unsympathetic to the way the narrative is applied to the conflict. In a *NYT* article, Alan Cowell refers to the way Palestinians have cast their own side as David to Israel’s Goliath, but argues that the gains made by this public image are moot because the Palestinians have failed to offer any viable political initiative (Cowell 1988). Friedman’s approach is even stronger, arguing that the David and Goliath narrative does not make sense in a context where neither side clearly fits the victim-victimizer role (Friedman 1988a). Guest *WP*
editorialist and Israeli soldier, Louis Rapoport, blames both Israeli and international media for reinforcing this use of the narrative, of which he is clearly unsympathetic:

The dozen men in the reserve company I serve with, and the hundreds in our battalion, and the dozens of paratrooper, border police and other regular army units who also patrol Jabaliya, are portrayed by the Israeli and world media as part of the Goliath machine versus the little David with his puny stones. The restless refugees—people immersed in a nationalist war—are called protestors, and compared to the followers of Martin Luther King and Gandhi, or the peaceful Russian peasants who marched on the czar’s Winter Palace. We’re the Nazis, shooting out the eyes of nine-month-old babies. (Our battalion had 25 injuries, four men hospitalized, but such information is rarely mentioned in the media reports.)

The truth is that the typical Israeli soldiers are—with a few exceptions—restrained and moral men who are under frequent attack by people who openly yell “Death to the Jews,” not “We Shall Overcome,” and who punctuate their chants by throwing Molotov cocktails and pipe bombs and lethal cinderblocks from the roofs.

I saw with my own eyes (through powerful binoculars) how grown men send children to the “front,” pulling the strings from behind, quite willing to sacrifice others, knowing that the nine-month-old baby who loses an eye to a rubber bullet will make headlines around the world, and that no one will question the responsibility of the infant’s mother, or of the Palestinians who actually invite such incidents. (Rapoport 1988)

Although Rapoport is not a regular journalist for the WP, he is included here because, as guest editorialist, he is given equal billing in the newspaper’s Outlook section.

Taken together, the analysis of speaker variables in these articles highlights two key features of the use of the David and Goliath narrative during this period. First, articles which quote man-on-the-street interviewees using the narrative and articles in which the journalist challenges the way it has been applied both hint at the narrative’s widespread use. Secondly, articles which quote powerful political leaders or subject matter experts using the narrative—even to critique it—serve to enhance the visibility of the narrative and reinforce its usage.

**How the Narrative is Used**

Articles about the Intifada were analyzed to determine how the narrative is used, both in the way the David and Goliath roles are assigned and the application of the narrative’s major themes.
ROLES/CHARACTERS

Analysis of the way the narrative is cast in these articles revealed three key observations. The first observation is that every article, whether sympathetic or unsympathetic, referred to the narrative portraying the Palestinians as David and the Israelis as Goliath. Repeatedly, the articles described Palestinian youths, armed with stones, going up against Israeli soldiers with tanks and automatic weapons. Even when an explicit reference to the narrative is not made, language and imagery reinforce this story. Among the articles I analyzed from the first year of the First Intifada that did not contain explicit references to the narrative, I discovered many diffuse references, including the following quote from a United Nations relief official:

“Increasingly the younger kids are no longer afraid,” he added. “They are willing to stand in front of the Border Police and bare their chests. And when they throw a stone, they hit what they’re aiming at. Now the Israelis are shooting first”. (Kifner 1987a)

The same article goes on to quote Yehuda Litani, who is described as an Arab Affairs specialist for the Jerusalem Post:

“Already legends abound in refugee camps, universities and high schools in the territories about the lone Palestinian hero who won the battle against the whole Israeli Army”. (Kifner 1987a)

These two quotes both refer to key characteristics of the David and Goliath story without specifically citing the narrative.

Secondly, many articles identify this assignment of the David and Goliath roles as a major paradigm shift in public perceptions of the conflict. In a NYT essay, William Safire laments this shifting perception among his American audience (somewhat satirically):

Travelers returning from Israel are asked: “Isn’t it a shame the way the image of Israel is being changed on TV from David to Goliath? Isn’t the occupation of the West Bank corrupting the soul of the Israelis?” (Safire 1988)

Likewise, Friedman reports on the paradigm shift, particularly as portrayed in the media:

If television has had a distorting impact on the events in the occupied territories, it has not been so much through its lenses, but through its implicit script, argued Meron Benvenisti, an Israeli expert on the West Bank. Television was drawn to this story out of the belief that it was about David turned Goliath, historical Jewish victims turned victimizers, he said. (Friedman 1988b)
Finally, analysis of the way the narrative is used suggests a broad belief among commentators that the Palestinians are responsible for applying the David and Goliath narrative to the conflict. Frankel asserts that the Palestinians are proactive in framing the conflict this way “[because] they are underdogs trying to win in the field of world opinion what they cannot win on the ground” (Frankel 1988b). Success in communicating their message to the world through the media is described as a source of pride for the Palestinians:

They are especially proud that people abroad have been made aware of the Palestinian plight through the efforts of their young men—and not through those of a long-indifferent outside world, which they feel had written them off. (Randal 1988)

Likewise, Cowell credits the Palestinian leadership with this framing the conflict biblically, but he also criticizes it for failing to capitalize on positive world attention by putting forth a political solution to the conflict:

At the same time, however, the leadership and sponsors of the uprising—either within the occupied territories or among the various factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization—have yet to offer a political initiative to capitalize on the gains they have made in discrediting Israel and in casting themselves as David to Israel’s Goliath. The result, thus, seems to be a standoff. (Cowell 1988)

While many articles refer to the media’s culpability in reinforcing the David and Goliath narrative, most accuse the Palestinians of initiating this frame, although it is not known if this accusation is true or not.

**Themes**

In addition to these observations about how the narrative was used during the First Intifada, articles were also analyzed for alignment with the narrative’s key themes, as described in Chapter 2 of this study. In other words, it was important to determine which aspects of the David and Goliath story were being highlighted in a particular reference. During the First Intifada, articles drew heavily on the power differential, moral differential, and especially the hope for the underdog themes of the narrative. Randal’s *WP* article illustrates the power differential theme perfectly, explaining that “rocks and knives are proving effective against an American-equipped Army that prides itself on being the fourth most powerful on Earth” (Randal 1988). Frankel also reports that Yasser Arafat asked his followers to refrain from using any firearms because they “could only induce massive retaliation from the better-armed Israel Defense Forces and also deprive the Palestinians of
the David-and-Goliath image of unarmed civilian underdogs up against a powerful and sophisticated military machine” (Frankel 1988a).

Richard Cohen begins his article entitled, “An Army of Boys,” with a description of an object lesson about real weapons and plastic replicas, given by an Israeli battalion commander to his officers:

In an army camp here, the captured arsenal was brought in for display. Exhibit 1, black and in one piece, was marked “Uzi” after the famous Israeli weapon. Exhibit 2, also black, but broken into pieces, was marked “Laser Ray Gun.” Toys taken from the enemy, the rock-throwing children of Gaza… [Now] Israel is fighting The Children’s War. (Cohen 1988)

Yet, while Israel was clearly the more powerful and well-armed party, many of the authors go on to demonstrate that this was not a completely advantageous position for the Israelis. Cohen continues by arguing that a rock-throwing should not be underestimated, since it was a rock that toppled the giant, Goliath.

But once Gaza was administered with 10 percent of the soldiers it now takes, and once the enemy was an occasional terrorist. Now it is the population itself and, especially, the kids. Stones are their chief weapon, but they know how to use television too. A kid armed with a stone is a menace, but one shot because a panicky soldier can’t tell a toy gun from the real one is a catastrophe. (Cohen 1988)

One aspect of this argument is the claim that the Palestinians’ success in publicly promoting their frame of the conflict has somewhat equalized the actual power of each side. The other aspect is that many poorly-armed fighters can overwhelm one well-armed giant, a view expressed in this alternative analogy put forth by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir:

“Our situation is like the giant Gulliver entering into a confrontation with dozens of dwarfs,” Mr. Shamir, the leader of the Likud political bloc said today. “One hand and two legs are tied down, and there are accusations all the time that he is the bully against defenseless people.” (Kifner 1987b)

Many of the articles also draw on the theme of moral superiority, hinted at in Shamir’s reference to accusations about bullying a defenseless people. Some of these articles lament the fact that Israel, once lauded as the paragon of moral superiority, was now appearing to fall from grace. This can be seen in John Kifner’s article that references a letter from an anonymous Israeli soldier, who said “the hand that was educated to wave in peace’ found itself brandished at ‘a 12-year-old boy in Ramallah’ and demanded an explanation of
Goliath’s justification,” (Kifner 1988). An anonymously authored WP editorial elaborates on Israel’s apparent fall from moral grace, “Some worry that Israel is getting a bad “image,” and of course it is. But its image is among Israel’s lesser problems. The beatings are savage acts, they are wrong, and they amount to a demonstration of policy bankruptcy”. (Anonymous 1988)

However, other articles blame the Palestinians and the complicit media for advancing this perception, including this letter to the Editor written by Rabbi Yitzchok Brandriss, Director of Public Affairs for Agudath Israel of America:

The instigating Palestinians and their sponsors have devised a cunning strategy in lieu of peaceful negotiations: maneuver things in front of the camera to make Israel look like the aggressor. Throwing stones and Molotov cocktails doesn’t look bad; on the contrary, it looks glamorous when led by youth pitted against uniformed and armed soldiers—like David against Goliath—and will invite facile comparisons with scenes from South Africa. The expected outcome: Israel is bound to trip and fall before finding an “acceptable” way to handle it. (Brandriss 1988)

Still others discount this perception of Israel’s waning moral superiority altogether. Louis Rapoport, the Israeli soldier and WP guest editorialist, turns the tables by claiming that the worst atrocities he observed during his service were committed by Palestinians against their own people who collaborated with Israel by expressing their opposition to the Intifada (Rapoport 1988). Friedman discounts the perception of a moral differential by suggesting that the current events need to be viewed in the context of the larger conflict, which is essentially a tribal war:

The widespread Palestinian uprising can no longer be contained by the unseen hand of the Israeli secret service. It has required the full Israeli Army to control. And since the Army is nothing more than a cross-section of the population, this means that for the first time the whole people of Israel are, in a way, confronting the whole Palestinian population of the occupied territories.

But it is not a war between David and Goliath, with one side exclusively victims and the other exclusively victimizers. It is a war between Abraham and Ishmael2, “a shepherds’ war” as a West Bank expert, Meron Benvenisti calls it, and it has

---

2 Friedman’s characterization of the conflict bizarrely juxtaposes Abraham and Ishamael, and he includes a quote from Meron Benvenisti about it being a “shepherds’ war.” A more common juxtaposition is Isaac and Ishmael, brothers and the two sons of Abraham, who are often used to represent the modern Jewish (Isaac) and Muslim (Ishmael) offshoots of the Abrahamic faiths. No suitable explanation was found for Friedman’s version, and the author could not be reached for comment.
returned to its primordial tribal origins—a battle with clubs and stones. (Friedman 1988a)

Finally, many of the articles express the theme of hope, and, especially, hope for the underdog. After reporting on the increasing Palestinian casualties in the uprising, Kifner quotes a United Nations official, “Increasingly the younger kids are no longer afraid,” he added. “They are willing to stand in front of the Border Police and bare their chests. And when they throw a stone, they hit what they’re aiming at. Now the Israelis are shooting first” (Kifner 1987a).

Kifner goes on to express the sense of hope spreading throughout the Palestinian territories by quoting Yehuda Litani, Arab affairs specialist for the Jerusalem Post:

[The Palestinian youths] were more daring than in the past because, among other reasons, they were encouraged by the hang-glider attack,” Mr. Litani wrote. “Already legends abound in refugee camps, universities and high schools in the territories about the ‘lone Palestinian hero who won the battle against the whole Israeli Army’. (Kifner 1987a)

Yasser Arafat’s speech to the Arab League echoes this hope and sense of possible success. “‘We have found the weak point in the Israeli occupation,’ Mr. Arafat said. ‘Arab blood will overcome Israel’s guns and powerful war machine. This is our power’,” (Delaney 1988). Many of the articles report on the euphoria that spread throughout the Palestinian territories, particularly during the early days of the Intifada. In his article entitled, “Success of protests revives Palestinian hopes; Struggle against Israeli troops kindles feeling of resurgence,” Jonathan C. Randal recounts the following:

Gone, too, is that sense of helplessness engendered by Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which whatever else then-defense minister Ariel Sharon intended it to accomplish, set out to destroy the Palestinian Liberation Organization politically and prevent negotiations over the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Not since Egyptian troops crossed the Suez Canal at the start of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war has there been such a surge of pride and self-respect in the Arab world, especially now among the 1.5 million Palestinians who, since the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, have lived under Israeli occupation.

In conversation after conversation in this West Bank town and others, common Palestinians expressed their surprise and delight that, as one man said, “our lives of desperation” are over. (Randal 1988)
Since the David and Goliath story holds political value for any oppressed group, it is no surprise that the Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza, who believe they are being illegally occupied by Israel, adopted this narrative as a way to frame their own hopes. The themes of power differential, moral superiority, and hope for an underdog are all clearly represented in these articles referencing the David and Goliath narrative. The original narrative’s additional theme of divine intervention was not found. Instead of divine intervention, the narrative is used to celebrate personal initiative and determination on the part of the Palestinians.

**Extent to Which the Narrative is Explained**

Articles containing explicit references to the narrative during the First Intifada provide little explanation of the David and Goliath story or why it is being applied to this conflict. Of the fifteen articles with explicit references, only six include some explanation. The *WP* provided more contextualizing information than the *NYT* to explain the application of the narrative to the Intifada. Four of the *WP*’s seven total articles gave some context, compared with just two of the eight *NYT* articles. For example, Frankel’s *WP* editorial about press limitations tells a few details of the original David and Goliath story that help the reader understand what aspect of the narrative is being applied:

> Part of this change reflected the army’s perception that in many instances the television cameras were inciting young stone-throwers. Part of it was official anger over the fact that the Palestinians were winning the television war, that the sophisticated, heavily armed Israeli war machine looked like Goliath on screen when grappling on the streets of Gaza with youthful Davids armed with stones and slingshots. (Frankel 1988b)

Richard Cohen’s *WP* editorial also gives a little context:

> But now Israel is fighting The Children’s War. The enemy is an army of boys—fearless and fleet on sneakered feet. Its weapons are the rocks and rubble of Gaza and the West Bank. Such a rock hit Goliath on the temple, toppling him dead. It is crude but lethal, and no contemporary army has been trained to deal with it. (Cohen 1988)

Friedman’s article explains another aspect of the narrative, the victim-victimizer dyad, which he refutes. “But it is not a war between David and Goliath,” he argues, “with one side exclusively victims and the other exclusively victimizers,” (Friedman 1988a). Yet, even where context is provided, it is generally brief and superficial, without much in the way of explanatory notes or reference to the original source.
More common is the tendency to refer to the narrative without explanation, as can be seen in the following examples:

“But the Palestinian people need your support in order to continue,” [Arafat] added. “It is David and Goliath again”. (Delaney 1988)

Mindful of the impact of television pictures throughout the world, one West Bank resident remarked, “Finally, we have destroyed that favorite Israeli myth of portraying themselves as David against the Arab Goliath”. (Randal 1988)

At the same time, however, the leadership and sponsors of the uprising—either within the occupied territories or among the various factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization—have yet to capitalize on gains they have made in discrediting Israel and in casting themselves as David to Israel’s Goliath. (Cowell 1988)

In these examples, as well as the majority of the articles studied, the speaker assumes reader familiarity with the David and Goliath story, demonstrating cultural literacy.

**Change in the Use of the Narrative Over Time**

In the First Intifada, the David and Goliath narrative was used extensively during the first three months of the conflict. In fact, twelve of fifteen explicit references were published between December 24, 1987 and March 21, 1988, with two in December, four in January, one in February, and five in March. The remaining three articles were published periodically over the rest of the year, in May, June, and September, respectively. Over time, the references appeared less often in news and analysis articles and more often in editorials, giving the impression that the narrative began to lose a little of its cachet as the conflict wore on. Just three of the twelve references that were published between December-March appeared in editorials or Letters to the Editor, while all three references published after March 1988 appeared in editorials. In addition, perceptions of the appropriateness of the narrative appear to change slightly over time. Few of the authors seem sympathetic to this framing of the conflict; most seem merely to report on its regular usage. Over time, however, there is an increase in both the tendency to discount the narrative and to express a more critical version of the conflict’s moral clarity. As perceptions of the relative purity of the Palestinian side decrease, calibrated sympathy for the Israeli side increases.
**Case Study: The Second Intifada**

Almost twelve years after the start of the First Intifada a new period of demonstrations began and was later dubbed the Second Intifada. Although the start date of this uprising is disputed, September 28, 2000 to September 28, 2001 is generally accepted as the first year of the conflict. There were many fewer references to the David and Goliath narrative during the Second Intifada, with just seven explicit references over the course of the first year. Four of these references were published in the *NYT*, beginning with an article by Deborah Sontag on October 6, 2000, entitled, “In Bethlehem, new generation of teenage foes renews ritual of bloodshed.” Less than a week later, the *WP* published an opinion article by guest editorialist, Natan Sharansky, the first of just three explicit references in that newspaper (Sharansky 2000). Sontag used the most explicit references of all authors, with just two mentions.

**Salience**

The seven articles that contained explicit references to the narrative were again varied in type and placement. This time, just one article appeared on the front page: Sontag’s December 6, 2000 article in the *NYT*. Of the remaining explicit references in both publications, two appeared in News and Analysis articles, three in editorials, and one in a *New York Times Magazine* feature. Once again, the *WP* more frequently classified these articles as “opinion” (two out of three articles) than did the *NYT* (just one out of four articles). Three of the seven articles included pictures, increasing the likelihood that they would be read.

Although the Second Intifada saw fewer explicit references to the David and Goliath narrative, the presence of several additional indirect and diffuse references indicates that the narrative still had considerable traction during this period. This is well demonstrated by a photograph accompanying a *WP* article about the conflict (Sontag 2000b) that shows a Palestinian youth aiming a slingshot at a tank. The caption accompanying the picture reads, “A slingshot of ancient design,” likely referring to David’s slingshot in the biblical narrative.

A new development in this period is the emergence of human interest stories related to the Intifada as a key news genre. While human interest stories also appeared during the First Intifada, during the Second Intifada, they make up a large proportion of articles about
the conflict. In fact, three of the seven articles containing explicit references to the David and Goliath narrative were cast as profiles of individuals affected by the conflict. Sontag’s *NYT*, section A, News and Analysis article profiles both seventeen year-old Palestinian Muhammed Ibrahim and nineteen year-old Israeli Army Corporal Guy Stencil. Sontag contrasts Ibrahim in his white T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, revealing “biceps that have had a stone-throwing workout in the last week,” with the baby-faced Stencil, “who is transformed into an imposing, impassive figure when he dons his riot gear” (Sontag 2000a). Beyond citing the David and Goliath narrative explicitly, these stories allow Sontag to illustrate the imagery in a more forceful manner.

Likewise, Lee Hockstader profiles Faris Odeh, a Palestinian boy who had recently died in the conflict, in his *WP*, section A, News and Analysis article (Hockstader 2000). Hockstader describes Odeh, thus:

The poster boy for Palestinian defiance stood about 5 feet 4 inches in his socks. He might have weighed 100 pounds if he had eaten recently and well, which he rarely did. He was good at soccer, naughty at school, and before he died—shot in the neck by Israeli troops and left to bleed to death on the battlefield—he told his friends he was intent on becoming a martyr for the Palestinian cause.

Faris Odeh got his wish, and then some.

Killed last month, a few weeks shy of his 15th birthday, Faris has been immortalized posthumously by a remarkable photograph. It captured him—short, scrawny and wearing a baggy sweater—rearing back to sling a stone at an Israeli tank perhaps 15 yards away. (Hockstader 2000)

There are several pieces of this description that serve to remind the reader of the David and Goliath narrative, which is not mentioned explicitly until later in the article and is only referenced as a caption on a picture of the deceased boy. Descriptors such as “short” and “scrawny” remind us of David’s own profile in the biblical story. The fact that Odeh was wearing a baggy sweater into battle reminds us of Saul’s armor that was too big for David to wear. The famous slingshot and battlefield with a much stronger opponent also feature in this description. Only the ending of the story differs, since Faris Odeh died.

Human interest stories, such as these, serve slightly opposing purposes. They personalize and animate the narrative, further entrenching its usage as an analogy for the conflict. At the same time, however, stories of real people help break down neat stereotypes and characterizations by demonstrating the humanity and fallibility of the actors involved.
Speaker Variables

Once again, we see a variety of speakers employing the David and Goliath narrative, usually reporting on its widespread usage. Hockstader’s account of Faris Odeh’s death describes photos of the boy posted on the walls of refugee camps in the Gaza Strip and on the sides of West Bank office buildings, with the caption “the Palestinian David and the Israeli Goliath” (Hockstader 2000). Sontag also reports that, “Some Palestinian youths, like Mr. Ibrahim, are purists, and they like the idea of a David-versus-Goliath battle between the clean white stones of the Palestinians and the Israeli firearms. ‘Symbolically, our stones are more effective,’ he said” (Sontag 2000a).

Four of the seven explicit references to the narrative, however, are made directly by the articles’ own authors. In these cases, the journalists are reporting on widespread understanding of the narrative while also arguing that the way it is commonly used no longer makes sense for the conflict. This indicates another paradigm shift, which will be discussed further in the next section.

How the Narrative is Used

Analysis of the use of the narrative in articles from the Second Intifada—both in terms of the assignment of David and Goliath roles and application of the narrative’s themes— revealed similar results to the First Intifada.

Roles/Characters

As with the First Intifada, the narrative is used in this period to describe the Palestinians as David and the Israelis as Goliath. Most of the articles make the argument that this characterization is no longer an accurate analogy for the conflict, however. Rather, most of the articles reflect the Israeli perspective that the Palestinians are trying to revive the use of the David and Goliath narrative in hopes of making the same kind of gains from the Second Intifada as they did from the first, especially in terms of world opinion. Sontag’s December 6, 2000 NYT article incorporates a discussion with unnamed Israeli government officials about Arafat’s attempt to revive the narrative:

Israeli government officials believe that Mr. Arafat has deliberately used the violence as a tool to manipulate world opinion and to internationalize the conflict, seeking to break away from what he saw as the ineffectual structure of the American-brokered peace negotiations. After he lost international support by
walking away from Mr. Barak’s generous offer at Camp David, Israeli officials say, Mr. Arafat sought to regain it by turning Israel into Goliath and the Palestinians into David.

“He hoped that if he started a sort of war with us and Israel was perceived as the stronger side and he as the underdog and victim, that sympathy would be shifted to his side,” said a senior Israeli defense official. (Sontag 2000b)

Despite reported attempts to revive the narrative, these articles seem to suggest that the biblical characterization is losing favor with the media during this Second Intifada.

Most of the articles hint at the increasing complexity of the conflict and suggest that the assignment of David and Goliath roles is no longer relevant. Jim Hoagland argues that the narrative is no longer relevant because Israel is no longer seen as a “brutish Goliath.”

American public opinion in the wake of the failure of the Camp David accords assigned much of the blame to Arafat and the Palestinians for not accepting what was widely seen as a generous offer by Ehud Barak. Hoagland argues,

The Palestinians have been unable since then to explain successfully to world opinion Arafat’s refusal to grasp the opportunity Barak presented him…

It is a view that in no way works to Arafat’s favor this time. Weakness—failure—is not a useful weapon when Israel is not widely seen as a brutish Goliath intent on using force to keep its war gains. (Hoagland 2001)

Others, like guest editorialist and member of the Israeli parliament, Natan Sharansky, argue that the narrative is outdated because the Palestinians no longer fit the David profile:

Today the nations of the free world also prefer to close their eyes to the truth in the Middle East in general and the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular. While in practice the Arab states do not pose the threat of a belligerent superpower, the West’s attitude toward these authoritarian regimes is all too familiar. Some, who see Palestinian stone throwers as David to Israel’s Goliath, are again duped by the manipulations of a brutal dictator who sends children to the front lines to achieve through tragedy what he cannot achieve through diplomacy. (Sharansky 2000)

Despite this sentiment that the roles are no longer appropriate, the human interest stories serve to illustrate and reinforce the David and Goliath roles as utilized during the First Intifada. As noted previously, these stories profile individual Palestinian and Israeli youth that largely fit the David and Goliath roles, respectively. While these profiles give a more nuanced portrayal of the individuals affected by the conflict, they also provide imagery to enhance the appropriateness of the narrative by countering the view that it is simply a battle being fought by political leaders. In one poignant example, Michael Finkel follows a group
of Palestinian youth the day after their friend, fifteen year-old Ahmed Abutayeh, died near the Karni Crossing checkpoint:

This is a strange war. The rhetoric and geopolitics of the conflict—the claims of Biblical or Koranic privilege; the status of refugee rights and occupied lands and religious sovereignty—are all cast in the loftiest of ideals. And yet, on the Palestinian side at least, much of the fighting is being carried out by children. There are preteenagers and midteenagers and boys as young as 5 hurling stones at Israeli soldiers…

The day after Ahmed’s death, there were more boys at Karni crossing than ever before. At the front, in the trenches, the energy level felt wild and unfocused and adolescent; not much different, really, than an unruly middle-school recess. Here I met half a dozen boys who’d known Ahmed: I met Sameh and Muhammed and Hares and Yehya and Aymen and Rami. All of them were 13 or 14 or 15 years old, skinny and dirty and friendly. Each held a couple of rocks in his hands and juggled them idly. Protruding from back pockets, where one might expect to see combs, were wooden slingshots and denim-and-twine slings. Aymen wore silver-framed glasses that sat crooked on his nose and sported a strip of cloth tied ninja-style about his head, upon which he’d written, “Better to die a martyr than die in your sleep.” Rami’s left wrist was bandaged; he’d been hit, he said, by a rubber bullet. I commented on his bravery, and all the boys lifted their shirts or raised their pants legs to show me various scars. Each one said they’d seen people die. (Finkel 2000)

Finkel’s description of the boys reinforces the characterization of the Palestinians as young, vulnerable, and brave Davids.

**THEMES**

References to the narrative during the Second Intifada draw upon the same themes as the First Intifada, primarily the power differential, the moral dichotomy, and hope for the underdog. As with the First Intifada, the power differential is accepted as general fact. The moral dichotomy remains disputed, however, as elaborated in the discussion of changing perceptions of each sides’ role, above. What is different about this period is that the theme of hope seems to wane fairly dramatically. The human interest stories read like tragedies, stories in which everyone except the main character understands that there will be no happy ending. In his account of the boys at Karni Crossing, Finkel argues that if there is any hope for the Palestinians at all, it will be largely symbolic, with the naïve boys as the unfortunate victims of success:

The boys, so far as I could tell, were convinced that their stones would eventually disable the Israeli Army. This may one day prove correct, though probably not in
the David-versus-Goliath fashion the boys envision. What’s clear to many Palestinian leaders but not apparent to the children is that the stones, and those who throw them, are playing an almost purely symbolic role in the war. In Mecca, Muslims throw stones at a statue representing the Devil; it’s a centuries-old tradition. In Gaza, Israeli soldiers fill the Devil’s role. Stones, the Palestinian leaders know, won’t directly defeat the Israelis, but repeated images of rock-throwing youths being shot by highly trained soldiers might turn international opinion against Israel and persuade other Arab nations to join the war. (Finkel 2000)

Hoagland goes even further by arguing that hope—and global sympathy—for the Palestinians has run out. Rather than winning the image war,

Arafat today is losing by losing. He implicitly acknowledged that by grudgingly ordering his forces to cease fire against Israel last Saturday rather than risk further escalation and greater destruction.

The cease-fire, reciprocated by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon despite extreme provocation, is fragile and could be broken at any moment. But Arafat’s declaration—withheld for seven bloody months and given only under duress—is important as a political barometer, whatever its fate on the battlefield.

It reveals Arafat’s inability to rally world opinion predominantly to his side throughout this crisis, as he did in leaping from the smoldering ruins he helped create in Jordan and Lebanon. He has not been able to reap rewards from an underdog status to an Israeli government headed by the much-feared Sharon.

The lack of any significant evident swing of sympathy in European and American public opinion to the downtrodden and vulnerable Palestinians is what feels different about this crisis. It is the dog that has not been barking… (Hoagland 2001)

The main difference in the way the narrative is used in the First and Second Intifadas is this shift away from the hope for the underdog theme.

**Extent to Which the Narrative is Explained**

In contrast to the First Intifada, nearly all the articles containing explicit references to the David and Goliath narrative during this period also provide some explanation of how it is or is not a relevant analogy for this conflict. There may be several reasons for this tendency toward explanation. First, the fact that there are far fewer explicit references to the narrative during the Second Intifada may indicate its decreasing usage, in general, and therefore, may require journalists to provide more of an explanation to make it understandable to readers. Secondly, since many of the articles argue that the narrative is no longer a helpful analogy, they include information about the narrative to justify its rejection. Finally, since the Second
Intifada seemed to lack much of the optimism among the American public that the First Intifada engendered, much of the emotional acceptance of the appropriateness of the narrative may also have been lost, engendering a more critical analysis of its application. Whatever the reason, five of seven articles containing explicit references to the narrative provide some explanation of how it applies.

**Change in the Use of the Narrative Over Time**

Like the First Intifada, the use of the narrative appears to die out over time, with the majority of explicit references occurring during the first three months of the conflict (October 6-December 24, 2000). Just two of the seven references occur during the rest of that first year, in March and June. The two most striking changes in the way the narrative is applied during this period are the dwindling of the hope for the underdog theme, as described above, and a general growing impression that the conflict has become intractable. The final two articles analyzed in the first year of the conflict demonstrate this shift:

A psychological turning point has been reached: Governments and publics that previously felt the search for an Israeli-Palestinian peace had become largely a matter of tactics and timing have had their faith severely shaken, if not destroyed. Instead, the notion takes root that this conflict may after all be irreconcilable—that both sides prefer to fight on into infinity, as measured by human lives, to ceding anything to the other. The nearly eight years of contact and cooperation that the Oslo peace accords mandated changed nothing, in this view. (Hoagland 2001)

Friedman characterizes the Second Intifada as another paradigm shift in the overall Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The first shift, he argues, occurred as a result of the 1967 war:

The paradigm, the superstory, through which much of the world first looked at the Arab-Israeli conflict after the 1948 war, was David versus Goliath—a tiny Jewish state standing up against seven Arab armies seeking to destroy it. That paradigm lasted until the 1967 war, when Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, and the Golan Heights, and a new paradigm took hold: Israel as colonizer, with Israeli policies in the territories compared to South Africa under apartheid or France in Algeria. (Friedman 2001)

Friedman goes on to argue that much of the sympathy and good will that the Palestinians gained under occupation was lost after the failure of Camp David, resulting in a second paradigm shift:

The 2000-2001 Israeli-Palestinian war shifts the paradigm once again. Why? Because when Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel and the U.S. president put
forth a peace plan that, while not entirely acceptable to the Palestinians, contains for the first time all the elements of a deal that they were seeking—a Palestinian state in virtually all the West Bank and Gaza, territorial compensation for land Israel would retain for settlements, a redivided Jerusalem and restitution for the Palestinians—and the Palestinian leadership rejects this offer and the Palestinian street reacts to Ariel Sharon’s silly provocation on the Temple Mount rather than to the Clinton-Barak proposals on the table, then you have to admit that another paradigm is at work today. (Friedman 2001)

Friedman’s synopsis sums up the change in public sentiment from the First Intifada to the Second Intifada that explains the subsequent change in the use of the David and Goliath narrative. The narrative no longer seems appropriate, the argument goes, in light of changing perceptions of the two sides.

**DISCUSSION**

Analysis of U.S. media coverage during the First and Second Intifadas indicates at least partial support for this study’s hypotheses. The number of Intifada-related articles in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* containing explicit references to the David and Goliath narrative were relatively few in number. However, diffuse references to the narrative were found in a number of other Intifada-related articles, often illustrated in photographs staged to represent the David and Goliath story or descriptions of the people involved in the conflict. Moreover, most of the articles allude to the fact that the narrative had been applied to the Intifadas in a much broader context, from television reporting on the conflict to common use within the Palestinian and Israeli communities on the ground to American public perception, demonstrating cultural literacy of the narrative. Amplifying this cultural literacy is the fact that few of the articles provided any explanation of the biblical story or why it is being applied to these conflicts. All of these factors indicate widespread use of the narrative, confirming the first hypothesis.

Secondly, analysis also confirmed that the narrative would be used as a tool to garner sympathy for one side as the underdog. All references to the narrative equated the Palestinian side with the biblical narrative’s David character. It is necessary to point out that not all articles expressed sympathy for this characterization; in fact, many authors specifically outlined why they disagreed with it. However, it was clear in all cases that the narrative was originally applied in order to gain sympathy for the Palestinians. This represents a major shift
from the way the narrative was applied in the newspaper coverage of the 1967 Six-Day War, in which Israel was characterized as David and the Arabs, as Goliath.

The broad, general belief of commentators during the First and Second Intifadas—both sympathetic and unsympathetic—was that the Palestinians were responsible for framing the Intifada using the David and Goliath narrative. The articles showcased a number of quotes from a broad spectrum of Palestinians indicating this was a favorable and intentional characterization. The Palestinian strategy was described by the commentators as a public relations campaign, portraying themselves as the oppressed struggling against the oppressor in order to elicit sympathy, and hence, political support, from the international community. As Greenspoon notes, whether in business or politics, it is always smart to position oneself as the underdog (Greenspoon 2000, 52). Jamie Efaw (2006) equates the implied Palestinian strategy to the military practice of psychological operations, or PSYOP, a series of coordinated tactics that included distribution of leaflets, use of symbolism (including strategic stone-throwing), and strategic courting of the media. Specifics of Palestinian strategy, or even evidence that such a coordinated strategy existed, is beyond the scope of this study. What can be acknowledged is that whether the narrative was applied by Palestinian agitators, international supporters, or journalists, its clear intent was to gain sympathy for the Palestinian side in the conflict.

Significantly, this study found that the narrative is used primarily when there is a sense that the “underdog” side stands to make significant gains, and conversely, ceases to be used once that hope has been largely diminished due to changing perceptions of the actors. The hope theme featured prominently in the biblical David and Goliath narrative, confirming every oppressed group’s dream: the underdog can win! In the early weeks and months of the First Intifada, named thus in order to highlight the intent to “rise up” and “shake off” oppression, rather than just revolt (Efaw 2006), references to the David and Goliath narrative occurred frequently. Optimism soon gave way to discouragement and apathy, however, as time wore on and no real political solutions seemed to emerge. This became more pronounced during the Second Intifada, where use of the narrative occurred much less frequently and tapered off sooner. Some of this may be an indication of reader fatigue and normalization of the conflict over time. Use of the narrative also appears to decrease concurrently with increasing sympathy for the Israeli position and increasing perception that
the conflict had become intractable. We see this particularly during the Second Intifada, which erupted following the failure of the American-brokered Camp David Summit to reach agreement among the parties involved. American public sentiment in the wake of Camp David was that the conflict had reached an impasse, and hope had diminished. The last of the explicit references to the narrative during the first year of the Second Intifada specifically addresses this sense of diminished hope: the use of the David and Goliath narrative is no longer appropriate in an intractable conflict.

In addition to changing perceptions of the conflict, in general, we also see decreased use of the narrative due to changing perceptions of the actors. The narrative is applied sympathetically primarily when there appeared to be a clear, moral dichotomy between the actors. The moral theme is key here. At the start of the First Intifada, visual images projected to Americans on television featured uniformed Israeli soldiers and tanks and Palestinian children dying in the street. The media nurtured this political victimology, initially, and highlighted the moral dichotomy between the two sides. The David and Goliath narrative was used frequently during the same period, reifying this simplified characterization. As the situation became murkier, however, use of the narrative decreased. Over time, perceived nuances in both groups made simplified analogies inappropriate. Widespread public opinion in the U.S. following Camp David was that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak had offered unparalleled concessions. This perception, along with the news media’s human interest stories profiling the vulnerability of individual Israeli soldiers, served to make the Israelis appear less like Goliath in the Second Intifada. At the same time, increasing violence on behalf of the Palestinians and American distrust of Palestinian leadership served to make the Palestinians appear less like David. Use of the narrative decreased as the sense of moral complexity increased. Bouris’s (2007) argument that our reliance on simplified representations makes us less likely to recognize more complex victims and more likely to withhold support and intervention is applicable here. Eytan Gilboa’s study of American media and public opinion during the First Intifada confirms the outcome: while the Palestinians were able to achieve extensive and favorable media coverage initially, in the long run, the Intifada “did not change in any significant way the basic trends in American public opinion toward Israel and central Palestinian-Israeli and Arab Israeli issues” (Gilboa 1993, 93).
Finally, this study found no major differences between the two newspapers analyzed. As noted in the previous chapter, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* were selected for their wide readership, the extent to which they are considered respectable, balanced, and influential, and the perception that they represent mainstream America. Within these mainstream parameters, the *NYT* is often considered to be left-of-center, while the *WP* is often considered to be right-of center. There were minor differences in the way that each newspaper applied the David and Goliath narrative. During both Intifadas, the *NYT* featured a slightly greater number of explicit references to the narrative and provided slightly fewer explanations of the narrative and how it applies to the conflict. In addition, the *NYT* more frequently referenced the narrative in News and Analysis articles, rather than opinion pieces, which may indicate more of an implicit acceptance of the narrative among that newspaper’s journalistic and editorial staff. The differences were minor, however, and in general, the two newspapers followed similar patterns and timing in their use of the biblical narrative.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Given these findings, it is important to turn to the broader question that this study poses: does the use of the David and Goliath narrative indicate the existence of a discourse? The extent to which the narrative has been applied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict certainly fits the definition of “discourse” adopted for this study: the application of the narrative constitutes a patterned and particular way of talking about and understanding the conflict (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 1). Moreover, the paradigmatic shifts we see in how the narrative was used at different points illustrate its flexibility. Just as effortlessly as the narrative was used by American media in 1967 to describe an Israeli David surrounded by a sea of Arab Goliaths, it was applied in 1987 and 2000 to describe vulnerable Palestinians facing a well-armed Israeli giant. In all periods, the narrative’s themes of power imbalance, moral disparity, and hope for an underdog were invoked. The biblical story was used to describe and dramatize a literal conflict, imbuing it with a particular meaning. According to the critical premise of discourse theory, real events and objects only gain meaning through the language we use to talk about them (Burr 1995, 2-5; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 9).

Whatever else the narrative suggests, its use imprints a biblical frame on the conflict. The situational premise of discourse analysis asks the researcher to analyze the ways in which a discourse is historically and culturally situated (Burr 1995, 2-5). Given the region in which the modern-day conflict is taking place, biblical stories, generated from the same region, seem particularly apt. Biblical narratives likely form a common stock of knowledge for practitioners of the three main religious traditions inhabiting Israel and Palestine. In addition, American media audiences share this common knowledge and find it an easy and comfortable template for understanding modern events in the region.

As discussed in Chapter Two, this template becomes problematic when it serves to equate modern political communities with the ancient communities in the biblical stories. If, for example, the modern state of Israel is equated with the ancient Israelite community, the framework that emerges is one in which Israel, alone, possesses divine favor and rights to the
land. Little room can be found for contemporary political solutions when ancient religious frames abound. Furthermore, biblical framing reinforces the perception that the conflict is, essentially, one of religion rather than a conflict between two modern, political entities vying for the same piece of territory.

If the narrative was initially applied to the First and Second Intifada by the Palestinians, as many commentators suggested, it was also bolstered by the media. In addition to merely reporting on the use of the narrative by the Palestinians and the wider culture, newspaper journalists provided regular commentary on the appropriateness of its application. This is especially apparent in the human interest stories that described various individuals as David or Goliath and photographs that were published to illustrate the narrative. The foundational premise of discourse theory suggests that knowledge is sustained by daily social processes (Burr 1995, 2-5) and includes discussion about what is true and what is false (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 5). Even media debate on the appropriateness of the biblical narrative serves to reify its use and further ingrain it in the audience’s psyche. If this is the case, then journalists are not just transmitters of the narrative, but also act as news-shapers by emphasizing this biblical frame.

Finally, the normative premise of discourse analysis asks the researcher to examine the consequences of a discourse for particular social groups (Burr 1995, 2-5), with the understanding that “within a particular worldview, some forms of action become natural, others unthinkable” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 6). American media usage of the David and Goliath narrative to describe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has several practical implications. First, by reinforcing the perception that the conflict is really about religion, the biblical frame undermines the possibility and feasibility of political solutions. Secondly, by connecting modern, political communities to ancient biblical communities, the narrative frames a view of the conflict that is almost eternal in nature, and therefore intractable. Finally, by analogizing real people as archetypal characters, this frame oversimplifies their political identities, decreasing the likelihood of intervention once the more complex and nuanced identities of these people are observed.

This study presented a discourse analysis of U.S. media coverage of the First and Second Intifadas, investigating the use of the David and Goliath narrative. Although evidence of a discourse was found, this study was limited in its scope. The Intifadas were selected for
their relative recency, their suitability for comparison, and the widespread U.S. media coverage they elicited, but their prolonged and multifaceted nature made them difficult to examine. Future research should undertake a comparison with other periods in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, perhaps looking at the earliest occurrences of the David and Goliath narrative and other discourses invoked during that period. Evidence of the discourse in mainstream newspapers highlights cultural familiarity with the biblical frame, but it would also be interesting to compare these publications to Christian newspapers to determine whether and how the narrative is differently applied. In addition to the print media, future research should consider the role of U.S. television coverage, with its abundance of visual imagery, in reinforcing the narrative. In order to get a more comprehensive picture of U.S. media coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, future research could further anchor this study by comparing it to European or Asian media coverage of the conflict. Are other cultures as apt to apply biblical frames?

Finally, this study was limited by the David and Goliath narrative, itself. This investigation seemed to support the hypothesis that the use of the narrative is indicative of an ongoing U.S. media tendency to apply biblical frames to the conflict, but further research is needed to confirm this. The David and Goliath narrative is particularly pervasive in U.S. reporting, in general, and is used to describe many conflicts of unequal proportion. Future research should investigate the use of other biblical narratives to describe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in order to determine whether the biblical framework is, indeed, a wider trend.

The flexibility of the David and Goliath narrative is, perhaps, what has made it such a useful trope in illustrating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is a familiar and hopeful story and can be easily shifted to describe one side or the other in the conflict. However, the biblical framework it imprints limits understanding of the lived experience of the conflict, and limits the possibility of resolution. If alternative ways of understanding the events, people, and reality of the conflict become possible, they may help resolve some of the conceptual difficulties blocking the path to peace.
REFERENCES


