

1 Samuel 22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Samuel chapter 22 And he left them with the king of Moab, and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold.

Then the prophet Gad said to David, Do not remain in the stronghold. Depart and go into the land of Judah. So David departed and went into the forest of Hereth. Now Saul heard that David was discovered, and the men who were with him.

Saul was sitting at Gibeah under the tamarisk tree on the height with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing about him. And Saul said to his servants who stood about him, Hear now, people of Benjamin, will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards? Will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, that all of you have conspired against me? No one discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me to lie in wait as at this day.

Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who stood by the servants of Saul, I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, and he inquired of the Lord for him, and gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine.

[1 : 36] Then the king sent to summon Ahimelech the priest, the son of Ahitub, and all his father's house, the priests who were at Nob, and all of them came to the king. And Saul said, Hear now, son of Ahitub.

And he answered, Here I am, my lord. And Saul said to him, Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, in that you have given him bread and a sword, and have inquired of God for him, so that he has risen against me to lie in wait as at this day?

Then Ahimelech answered the king, And who among all your servants is so faithful as David, who is the king's son-in-law and captain over your bodyguard, and honoured in your house? Is today the first time that I have inquired of God for him?

No, let not the king impute anything to his servant, or to all the house of my father, for your servant has known nothing of all this, much or little. And the king said, You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's house.

And the king said to the guard who stood about him, Turn and kill the priests of the Lord, because their hand also is with David. And they knew that he fled, and did not disclose it to me. But the servants of the king would not put out their hand to strike the priests of the Lord.

[2 : 44] Then the king said to Doeg, You turn and strike the priests. And Doeg the Edomite turned and struck down the priests, and he killed on that day eighty-five persons who wore the linen ephod.

And Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword, both man and woman, child and infant, ox, donkey and sheep, he put to the sword. But one of the sons of Ahimelech, the son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David.

And Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the Lord. And David said to Abiathar, I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul, I have occasioned the death of all the persons of your father's house.

Stay with me, do not be afraid, for he who seeks my life seeks your life. With me you shall be in safekeeping. David begins 1 Samuel chapter 22 by departing from Gath and King Achish.

It was not a safe place for him to remain, given his history with the Philistines. He escapes to the cave of Adullam, where he spends some time. His brothers and his family join him there, knowing that their lives would be in danger on account of their association with him.

[3 : 49] A great many others also rally to him, people who were in distress, people who were in debt, and people who were bitter and disaffected in various ways. This is reminiscent of Jephthah in Judges chapter 11 verses 1 to 3.

Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior, but he was the son of the prostitute. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. And Gilead's wife also bore him sons. And when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah out and said to him, You shall not have an inheritance in our father's house, for you are the son of another woman.

Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. And worthless fellows collected around Jephthah and went out with him. David, like Jephthah, is surrounded by disaffected persons, and this is a very dangerous position to be in.

No doubt many of these men would be spoiling for a revolution. David isn't an outright rebellion against Saul. However, he is without lords, and will function as a sort of regional warlord in some ways.

He is surrounded by 400 men. James Jordan suggests that this represents people from the four corners of the land coming to David. It should be observed that this is a relatively substantial force.

[4 : 56] Saul himself only had 600 men with him back in chapter 13 verse 15, when he had the standoff against the Philistines at the Pass of Michmash. We might also think of the 400 men that were with Esau in Genesis chapter 32 and 33.

Later, David's association with 400 men will be in a decisively Esau-like action. And so the presence of 400 men around David here should probably make us think back to the story of Esau and Jacob.

This is another way in which David has some Esau characteristics. David is described as ruddy in chapters 16 and 17, the only other character apart from Esau in scripture to be described in that way.

Such associations with Esau are not proof that David is a bad guy, but they do represent some ambivalent characteristics. Some characteristics of David that can go either direction, that can be very good under certain circumstances, or might be turned to evil.

David goes up then to Moab. He brings his father and mother to the king of Moab and puts them in his care. The fact that David is dealing with other kings at this point of the region is once again a sign that he is assuming something of a royal status.

[6 : 03] He was described as the king of the land by the Philistines in the previous chapter, and now he's dealing with the king of Moab. We should recall that Jesse's grandmother was a Moabitess, so perhaps there is some enduring connection between David's family and the Moabites, a connection established through Ruth.

David is instructed by the prophet Gad to go to Judah. David has a prophet of the Lord in his party, as Peter Lighthouse observes. This is David again starting to act like a king, with a prophet as a royal advisor.

Judah becomes David's base. Judah is David's tribal region, where he would have the greatest base of loyalty. At times like this, the fault lines in Israel start to present themselves. We've seen some of these before, the northern tribes led by the house of Joseph, and the southern tribes led by the houses of Benjamin and later Judah, the Transjordanian tribes, and the tribes in the land.

If the Israelite project is to fail, one has a pretty good sense of the fracture lines upon which it would fall apart. Saul is now described sitting under the tamarisk tree.

Trees are often associated with rule, and he has his spear in his hand. Such a recurring detail of characterisation is not incidental or unimportant. Saul's relationship to his spear associates him with Goliath, but it also illustrates his paranoid relationship with power.

[7 : 22] He grips tightly onto his spear and can't let it go. Saul is surrounded by his servants, and he speaks to them as people of Benjamin. Saul's court clearly isn't a place of equal opportunity for Israelites.

Rather, it is filled with his relatives and fellow Benjaminites. This is fairly typical of monarchies and governments in very tribal societies. The king is seldom merely an individual in partially ruling the whole people, but he represents a royal house and a tribe that is particularly enriched by his reign. His family, friends, relatives and tribespeople will receive cushy sinecures and be privileged in many ways. Saul appeals to this base self-interest of those surrounding him, making clear that they have been greatly advantaged by his favouritism and nepotism, but they wouldn't enjoy such

privileges under a Davidic monarchy.

Saul's question to his followers, Here now, people of Benjamin, will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards? Will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds? should recall one of Samuel's warnings concerning the king in chapter 8 verses 14-15. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants.

[8 : 38] Once again, 1 Samuel is revealing dynamics of the operations of power that we should all recognise how government can so often rest upon cynical self-interest over the concerns of justice.

One can also well imagine how such a dynamic among rulers would excite grievances in the wider population who saw their property heavily taxed or taken in order to enrich Benjaminites.

Saul is paranoid and he's self-pitying. He thinks that everyone is conspiring against him, everyone is out to get him. Rather than exercising charisma and natural authority, he sullenly berates those around him, wondering aloud why no one feels sorry for him.

His lack of a healthy form of authority means that he has to appeal to his servants' lower self-serving instincts. It also relates to his mistrustful and paranoid tendencies, which means that he depends very heavily upon people of his own tribe whose self-serving interests most naturally align with his own.

We should also notice the ways that Saul has increasingly become fixated on the kingdom as his personal power. His speech to the Benjaminites reveals just how narrowly self-focused Saul has become.

[9 : 48] No one discloses to me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse. None of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me to lie in wait as at this day.

Leaders may be subject to all sorts of unreasonable treatment, but leaders who are so self-focused, self-pitying, and take everything personally are very dangerous. Saul has lost sight of the bigger picture.

He now sees the nation as there to serve him, rather than of himself as a minister of God to the nation. We should again remember the significance of the shifting pronouns in Samuel's warning about the king.

The people want a king to fight their battles, but they fail to appreciate that they would end up fighting his personal battles, being the servants of the bloated ego of the king. The servants of Saul seem to have failed him.

They have not informed him about the situation. However, there is one who assists him, Doeg, the Edomite. The fact that Saul is assisted by an Edomite perhaps highlights the fact that Saul is taking on the character of the original Edom, Esau, who sought to kill his brother Jacob.

[10 : 52] As we read on in the story, David's Jacob character will become quite pronounced. However, David is also, as we have already seen in this chapter, someone with subtle associations with Esau.

Ahimelech, when challenged about the assistance that he gave to David, rightly defended David as a faithful and loyal servant of the king. Ahimelech speaks of David in a way that brings to light some of the irrationality of Saul's hatred of him.

David is not someone who has sought to rebel against Saul. He is Saul's own son-in-law and loyal servant. He is honoured among Saul's servants for his exceptional service. Saul himself has raised him up to high office.

It is Saul's fear, paranoia, envy and anger that has made David appear to be his enemy. Yet even now, David is still not returning the animosity. Ahimelech has been given a misleading story by David so that he might have plausible deniability.

Ahimelech could justifiably have protested that he believed that David was on a mission from Saul, as David had told him. However, this did not protect him. Saul commands his servants to strike down the priests.

[11 : 57] And once again, the servants of Saul don't fulfil his command, don't come to his side. Yet, once again, Doeg the Edomite does. Doeg, presumably with his band of men, not unlikely a group of Edomites themselves, killed the priests.

And not just the priests, but all of their families and animals. As James Jordan remarks, he is enacting the ban upon the priests, the utter judgment that applied to the Canaanites. Saul, who was judged for his failure to perform the ban upon the Amalekites, now performs the ban upon the servants of the Lord.

This is a sort of exact inversion of the holy warfare of the conquest. And the fact that Saul enacts this on the basis of mere suspicion of disloyalty to himself reveals the idolatrous character that his kingdom has assumed.

He is claiming the people for himself, rather than acting as their guardian for the sake of the Lord. As Jordan observes again, on a number of occasions the Edomites or the Amalekites are the ones who prey upon the Israelites when they are at their weakest.

The Edomites are the scavengers that accompany the Babylonians when they destroy Jerusalem. They are condemned for this in Psalm 137 and in the prophecy of Obadiah. The Idymians, another name for the Edomites, do a similar thing when the Romans destroy Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70.

[13:14] They massacre the priests when the zealots let them into the city. Saul failed to judge the Amalekites, descendants of Edom, and now the Edomites slaughters the servants of the Lord.

Saul is not just fighting against David here, but he has taken up arms against the Lord himself. In Doeg, he has also chosen the sort of servant that he wants around him. Saul has lost the ability to rule by godly authority.

His servants no longer obey his commands on the basis of their natural justice, or on the basis of his appropriate command. Rather, he needs to initiate a reign of terror, enacting the ban upon his enemies because he can't reign by other means.

He is a man of fear and can only rule by fear. When Abiathar flees to David, David recognises that he inadvertently brought death upon Abiathar's household. This massacre of the priests, we should consider, is a fulfilment in part of the judgment upon Eli and his household in chapter 2 verses 30 to 33.

Therefore the Lord, the God of Israel, declares, I promised that your house and the house of your father should go in and out before me forever. But now the Lord declares, Far be it from me.

[14:24] For those who honour me I will honour, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days are coming when I will cut off your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not be an old man in your house.

Then in distress you will look with envious eye on all the prosperity that shall be bestowed on Israel, and there shall not be an old man in your house forever. The only one of you whom I shall not cut off from my altar shall be spared to weep his eyes out, to grieve his heart, and all the descendants of your house shall die by the sword of men.

Abiathar himself will be cut off from the altar in chapter 2 of 1 Kings. However, although this is a fulfilment of God's judgment upon Eli, Saul has also driven the priesthood into the hands of David.

It is David in this chapter who is consulting a prophet, who is accompanied by a priest, who is a magnet for followers, who is dealing with the surrounding kings. Saul is hemorrhaging support.

He is unable to command the obedience of his servants. He is driven to a reign of terror, and he cuts himself off from priest and prophet, initiating a holy war against the Lord. In 2 Samuel chapter 21, we discover that Saul had struck down the Gibeonites.

[15:36] As the Gibeonites were servants of the house of God, chopping wood and carrying water, Lighthart suggests that it is likely that that happened at this point too. A question to consider.

The main characters in this chapter, David, Saul and Doeg, all have subtle or not so subtle associations with Esau. How might these associations highlight features of the contradictory character of Esau, and help us to think more deeply about the comparisons and contrasts between the characters in Esau, and between each of them and the others?