

1 Samuel 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Samuel chapter 14 One day Jonathan the son of Saul said to the young man who carried his armour, Come, let us go over to the Philistine garrison on the other side.

But he did not tell his father. Saul was staying in the outskirts of Gibeah in the pomegranate cave, at Migron. The people who were with him were about six hundred men, including Ahijah the son of Ahitub, Ichabod's brother, son of Phinehas, son of Eli, the priest of the Lord in Shiloh, wearing an ephod.

And the people did not know that Jonathan had gone. Within the passes by which Jonathan sought to go over to the Philistine garrison, there was a rocky crag on the one side and a rocky crag on the other side.

The name of the one was Boazaz, and the name of the other, Sina. The one crag rose on the north in front of Migron, and the other on the south in front of Gibeah. Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armour, Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised.

It may be that the Lord will work for us, for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few. And his armour-bearer said to him, Do all that is in your heart.

[1 : 06] Do as you wish. Behold, I am with you heart and soul. Then Jonathan said, Behold, we will cross over to the men, and we will show ourselves to them. If they say to us, Wait until we come to you, then we will stand still in our place, and we will not go up to them. But if they say, Come up to us, then we will go up, for the Lord has given them into our hand.

And this shall be the sign to us. So both of them showed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines. And the Philistines said, Look, Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden themselves.

And the men of the garrison hailed Jonathan and his armour-bearer and said, Come up to us, and we will show you a thing. And Jonathan said to his armour-bearer, Come up after me, for the Lord has given them into the hand of Israel.

Then Jonathan climbed up on his hands and feet, and his armour-bearer after him. And they fell before Jonathan, and his armour-bearer killed them after him. And that first strike, which Jonathan and his armour-bearer made, killed about twenty men, within, as it were, half a furrow's length in an acre of land.

And there was a panic in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. The garrison and even the raiders trembled. The earth quaked, and it became a very great panic. And the watchmen of Saul and Gibeah of Benjamin looked.

[2 : 21] And behold, the multitude was dispersing here and there. Then Saul said to the people who were with him, Count, and see who has gone from us. And when they had counted, behold, Jonathan and his armour-bearer were not there.

So Saul said to Ahijah, Bring the ark of God here. For the ark of God went at that time with the people of Israel. Now while Saul was talking to the priest, the tumult in the camp of the Philistines increased more and more.

So Saul said to the priest, Withdraw your hand. Then Saul and all the people who were with him rallied and went into the battle. And behold, every Philistine's sword was against his fellow, and there was very great confusion.

Now the Hebrews who had been with the Philistines before that time, and who had gone up with them into the camp, even they also turned to be with the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan. Likewise, when all the men of Israel who had hidden themselves in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines were fleeing, they too followed hard after them in the battle.

So the Lord saved Israel that day, and the battle passed beyond Beth-Avon. And the men of Israel had been hard-pressed that day, so Saul had laid an oath on the people, saying, Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening, and I am avenged on my enemies.

[3 : 36] So none of the people had tasted food. Now when all the people came to the forest, behold, there was honey on the ground. And when the people entered the forest, behold, the honey was dropping, but no one put his hand to his mouth, for the people feared the oath.

But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the people with the oath, so he put out the tip of the staff that was in his hand, and dipped it in the honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth, and his eyes became bright.

Then one of the people said, Your father strictly charged the people with an oath, saying, Cursed be the man who eats food this day. And the people were faint. Then Jonathan said, My father has troubled the land.

See how my eyes have become bright, because I tasted a little of this honey. How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies that they found. For now the defeat among the Philistines has not been great.

They struck down the Philistines that day from Michmash to Ajalon, and the people were very faint. The people pounced on the spoil and took sheep and oxen and calves, and slaughtered them on the ground.

[4 : 41] And the people ate them with the blood. Then they told Saul, Behold, the people are sinning against the Lord by eating with the blood. And he said, You have dealt treacherously. Roll a great stone to me here.

And Saul said, Disperse yourselves among the people and say to them, Let every man bring his ox or his sheep and slaughter them here and eat. And do not sin against the Lord by eating with the blood.

So every one of the people brought his ox with him that night, and they slaughtered them there. And Saul built an altar to the Lord. It was the first altar that he built to the Lord. Then Saul said, Let us go down after the Philistines by night, and plunder them until the morning light.

Let us not leave a man of them. And they said, Do whatever seems good to you. But the priest said, Let us draw near to God here. And Saul inquired of God, Shall I go down after the Philistines?

Will you give them into the hand of Israel? But he did not answer him that day. And Saul said, Come here all you leaders of the people, and know and see how this sin has arisen today.

[5 : 43] For as the Lord lives who saves Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die. But there was not a man among all the people who answered him. Then he said to all Israel, You shall be on one side, and I and Jonathan my son will be on the other side.

And the people said to Saul, Do what seems good to you. Therefore Saul said, O Lord God of Israel, Why have you not answered your servant this day? If this guilt is in me, or in Jonathan my son, O Lord God of Israel, give Urim.

But if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim. And Jonathan and Saul were taken, but the people escaped. Then Saul said, Cast the lot between me and my son Jonathan.

And Jonathan was taken. Then Saul said to Jonathan, Tell me what you have done. And Jonathan told him, I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand.

Here I am. I will die. And Saul said, God do so to me and more also. You shall surely die, Jonathan. Then the people said to Saul, Shall Jonathan die, who has worked this great salvation in Israel?

[6 : 48] Far from it. As the Lord lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day. So the people ransomed Jonathan, so that he did not die.

Then Saul went up from pursuing the Philistines, and the Philistines went to their own place. When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines.

Wherever he turned, he routed them, and he did valiantly, and struck the Amalekites, and delivered Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them. Now the sons of Saul were Jonathan, Ishvi, and Mal-Kishua, and the names of his two daughters were these.

The name of the firstborn was Merab, and the name of the younger, Michael. And the name of Saul's wife was Ahinoam, the daughter of Ahimeaz. And the name of the commander of his army was Abner the son of Ner, Saul's uncle.

Kish was the father of Saul, and Ner the father of Abner was the son of Abiel. There was hard fighting against the Philistines all the days of Saul, and when Saul saw any strong man, or any valiant man, he attached him to himself.

[7 : 59] At the beginning of 1 Samuel chapter 14, Saul and his men are in a difficult position. Most of Saul's forces have left him, many of them dispersed as Saul waited for Samuel to appear, and as they saw the size of the Philistine counter-offensive.

We might have expected a battle at the end of the previous chapter, but the Philistine raiding parties had gone out without being stopped. At the end of chapter 13, we learn that the Israelites were largely without weaponry, with only Saul and Jonathan having swords in their possession.

Saul has been denied a dynasty on account of his sin. There was no reason why Saul could not have been a great king. However, he failed badly. He allowed unaddressed weaknesses in his character to develop into flaws, which in their turn developed into destructive vices.

In this chapter, Jonathan, Saul's son, will come to the foreground. After Saul's failure, Jonathan plays the part of the saviour that Israel so desperately needs. Jonathan took the initiative in attacking the Philistine garrison at Geba in the previous chapter, and here he takes the initiative again.

Jonathan's character prepares us for David, who is to come. Jonathan shares several characteristics in common with David. Jonathan also contrasts with his father, offering a glimpse of what a faithful Saul could have achieved.

[9 : 13] In between two accounts of his father's sinful failing, Jonathan's courageous faith stands out like a beacon. The author of Samuel is a very gifted narrator, and he tells his story with care.

For instance, we should notice the way that he subtly foregrounds the father-son relationship between Saul and Jonathan from the very outset of this chapter. The father and the son will be juxtaposed throughout the story.

To understand the events of this chapter, it helps to have a sense of the topography. Geba and Michmash are Benjaminite cities within a mile or so of each other, yet they are separated by a deep wadi canyon, with steep cliffs on either side.

The Philistines are encamped at Michmash in the north, and the Israelites are at Geba in the south. There is a strategically important pass between the two sides. The Philistines and the Israelites can both see each other from where they are situated, but the enemy camp is not easily accessible.

Saul has lost most of the 2,000 men that he had at the beginning of chapter 13, along with the extra troops that he mustered at Gilgal. Now he only has 600 people with him.

[10 : 17] Saul's beleaguered forces are accompanied by a priest, Ahijah the son of Ahitub, Ichabod's brother, and the son of Phinehas, son of Eli. Perhaps this association between Saul and a descendant of Phinehas should be seen as ominous.

Jonathan proposes a daring escapade to his armour bearer. In 1 Samuel, the position of armour bearer seems to have a certain amount of honour attached with it, and isn't merely a menial role.

David will later be favoured with the position of armour bearer for Saul. If we really must, we might not be that far off the mark in thinking about the role as that of a professional weapons caddy.

Jonathan's plan is to go over to the Philistine side of the wadi canyon. It seems that rather than taking the pass where the Philistines would have expected an offensive, Jonathan plans to descend into the ravine itself, and then ascend up the other side.

This was a daring and a dangerous plan, but Jonathan proposes it, expressing his confidence in the Lord's power. The Lord is capable of saving, whether by many or by few. Jonathan has learnt the lesson from Gideon, and we'll see echoes of Gideon in this story, in taking the path that he does.

[11 : 22] Presumably Jonathan is hoping to meet with just an outpost of the garrison, rather than with the main body of the Philistine forces. Like Gideon, Jonathan proposes a sign.

If the Philistines invite them up, they will go up to them, confident the Lord has delivered them into their hands. However, if the Philistines say that they will come down, no positive sign has been given.

The Philistines, however, respond by inviting them to come up, not taking seriously the threat posed by just a couple of men. Jonathan and his armour bearer have to climb up, but when they do, they kill about 20 men of the Philistines.

This produces a panic in the Philistine camp, reminiscent of what happened at the attack of Gideon upon the Midianites. This is accompanied by a sign from the Lord, as the earth quakes.

The Philistine army is thrown into disarray, and are very fearful. Meanwhile, Saul and his men are looking out from the other side of the ravine, and they see the commotion within the Philistine camp, presuming that some of their number had been involved.

[12 : 22] They mustered the men, and it turns out that Jonathan and his armour bearer were not present. Saul then instructs Ahijah the priest to bring the Ark of God to him. The Ark of God mentioned here is referred to as the ephod in the Septuagint.

It is likely that it was the ephod that was mentioned here, and that the Ark is still at Kiriath-Jerim. It would make far more sense for Ahijah to consult the ephod than it would for him to consult the Ark, although there were parallels between the ephod and the Ark, which may be why it's referred to as the Ark here.

However, as the commotion increases within the Philistine camp, Saul instructs Ahijah not to go ahead with consulting the ephod, presumably the Urim and the Thummim. Saul then gathers his men and goes into battle, but the victory is clearly the Lord's.

Israel lacks swords and other weaponry, but the Lord sets the swords of the Philistines against each other. Israelites, who had been holed up and hiding, come out and start to join the fight, and Hebrews, who had joined the Philistines as mercenaries, start to turn against their masters.

However, in the battle, Saul makes a rash oath. He cursed the man who would eat food until it was evening, and he was avenged on his enemies. His failure to consult the Lord, his rash vow, and the fact that he speaks of his enemies rather than the Lord's enemies, all give an unflattering portrayal of Saul, especially compared to his son Jonathan.

[13 : 43] Not knowing about his father's vow, Jonathan takes some honey, which is dripping on the ground of the forest. Israel is a land flowing with milk and honey, and this is a very visible portrayal of the Lord's blessing of it.

Jonathan's eyes are enlightened as a result. He is invigorated. However, the rest of Saul's army are faint with hunger as a result of their exertion. When Jonathan is informed of his father's vow, he accuses his father of troubling the land.

He has been revived and his strength renewed by this honey, and if the rest of the people had been able to enjoy it, theirs could have been too. But as a result of Saul's vow, they will not be able to carry through the battle to a satisfactory conclusion.

They will be limited in what they can achieve. They strike down the Philistines from Michmash to Ajalon, and the people are very faint at this point. Ajalon will remind us of the lengthened day under Joshua, but now it becomes a place where the day of battle has to be cut short because of the weakness of the people.

And what's worse, when the people do get food, they eat it immediately without preparing it in the way prescribed by the law. They fail to drain it of the blood. Saul builds an altar so that they can properly, richly slaughter the animals.

[14 : 52] However, the damage has been done, and the Lord does not give him an answer when he asks to go down against the Philistines. Saul's rash vow has also created a breach between him and the people, and when he calls for the Urim and the Thummim, he is confident that it will be the people who are found to be at fault.

However, it is his own son Jonathan. The casting of lots here might recall the sin of Achan. Whereas the people were judged on that occasion as a result of the sin of a person touching the forbidden things, things forbidden by the Lord himself, here the problem is caused by Saul's own rash vow.

When Jonathan is identified as the culprit, we might be reminded of the story of Jephthah and his vow. He lost his dynasty as a result of his vow, and Saul has taken a vow of his own accord, which has now brought him to the point of being prepared to put his own son to death.

This is a rather ironic fulfilment of the judgment of Samuel in the preceding chapter. Saul is prepared to kill his son Jonathan, but the people intervene and ransom Jonathan, whether it's with an animal or money, or simply by virtue of their insistence that he should not be put to death.

It's not entirely clear. However, Saul does not come out of this incident looking good. He has ended up pitting himself against the people, and then pitting himself against his son, who is the hero of the hour.

[16 : 09] And as a result of his rash vow, the victory is not followed through. Saul leaves off pursuing the Philistines, and the Philistines go away. As a result of his failure, Saul lost the opportunity to deliver a crushing blow.

The chapter concludes with a description of Saul's victories and battles, and then also his children. Saul was a successful military leader. However, the description of the various enemies as his enemies might recall the use of that pronoun in chapter 8.

There it revealed the way that the king would be particularly governed by his own quest for glory, rather than serving the people. Three sons of Saul are mentioned here. Other sons are mentioned elsewhere, perhaps sons of a different wife.

Another possibility is that Ishvi is another name for Ish-bosheth. We will encounter his two daughters later on again in the story. A question to consider.

How many ways can you identify in this chapter that the narrator sets the character of Jonathan in direct contrast to that of Saul?