

## 2 Samuel 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     2 Samuel chapter 23. Now these are the last words of David. The oracle of David the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel.

The spirit of the Lord speaks by me, his word is on my tongue, the God of Israel has spoken, the rock of Israel has said to me. When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth. For does not my house stand so with God?

For he has made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and secure. For will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire? But worthless men are all like thorns that are thrown away. For they cannot be taken with the hand. But the man who touches them arms himself with iron and the shaft of a spear, and they are utterly consumed with fire.

These are the names of the mighty men whom David had. Joseph Bathshebeth, a Tekemonite. He was the chief of the three. He wielded his spear against eight hundred whom he killed at one time. And next to him among the three mighty men was Eliezer, the son of Dodo, son of Ahohai. He was with David when they defied the Philistines who were gathered there for battle, and the men of Israel withdrew. He rose and struck down the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand clung to the sword. And the Lord brought about a great victory that day, and the men returned after him only to strip the slain. And next to him was Shammah, the son of Agi the Herarite. The Philistines gathered together at Lehi, where there was a plot of ground full of lentils, and the men fled from the Philistines. But he took his stand in the midst of the plot, and defended it, and struck down the Philistines. And the Lord worked a great victory. And three of the thirty chief men went down and came about harvest time to David at the cave of Adullam, when a band of

Philistines was encamped in the valley of Rephaim. David was then in the stronghold, and the garrison of the Philistines was then at Bethlehem. And David said longingly, Oh that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate. Then the three mighty men broke through the camp of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate, and carried and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it. He poured it out to the Lord, and said, Far be it from me, O Lord, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives? Therefore he would not drink it. These things the three mighty men did.

[ 2 : 4 7 ]     Now Abishai the brother of Joab, the son of Zehoiach, was chief of the thirty, and he wielded his spear against three hundred men and killed them, and won a name beside the three. He was the most renowned of the thirty, and became their commander, but he did not attain to the three. And Ben-Aniah the son of Jehoiada was a valiant man of Kabziol, a doer of great deeds. He struck down three ariels of Moab.

He also went down and struck down a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen. And he struck down an Egyptian, a handsome man. The Egyptian had a spear in his hand, but Ben-Aniah went down to him with a staff and snatched the spear out of the Egyptian's hand, and killed him with his own spear. These things did Ben-Aniah the son of Jehoiada, and won a name beside the three mighty men. He was renowned among the thirty, but he did not attain to the three, and David set him over his bodyguard. Asahel the brother of Joab was one of the thirty, Elhanan the son of Dodo of Bethlehem, Shammah of Herod, Eliqah of Herod, Helaz the Paltite, Ira the son of Ikesh of Tekoa, Abiezer of Anathoth, Babunai the Hushethite, Zalmon the Yehohite, Mahari of Netopha, Heleb the son of Beanna of Netopha, Ittai the son of Ribai of Gibeah of the people of Benjamin, Ben-Aniah of Pirathon, Hidai of the

Brooks of Geash, Ebi-Albon the Arbathite, Asmabeth of Behurim, Eliabah the Shealbanite, the sons of Jashen, Jonathan, Shammah the Hararite, Ahayam the son of Shara the Hararite, Eliphelet the son of Ahazbi of Meaca, Eliam the son of Ahithophel the Gailanite, Hezro of Carmel, Paari the Arbite, Igul the son of Nathan of Zobah, Ben-I the Gadite, Zelech the Ammonite, Nahari of Beiroth, the armor bearer of Joab the son of Zerariah, Ira the Ithrite, Gareb the Ithrite, Uriah the Hittite, 37 in all.

These words are the last will of David, like the blessing of Jacob or the words of Moses at the end of the book of Deuteronomy. They are his last official declaration, the words that he intends to pass down before he departs, perhaps his final publicly delivered words. They are not his literal last words however, as he gives final instructions to Solomon on his deathbed in 1 Kings chapter 2 verses 1 to 9. Along with the psalm of the preceding chapter, the first seven verses of this chapter constitute the central part of the concluding section of the books of Samuel, but now starting to move back out. Like the psalm, it can be seen as a fulfillment of themes that were first introduced at the beginning of 1 Samuel in the prayer of Hannah. It should be read with the psalm as a summing up of grand themes of David's reign, as a reflection upon its meaning and its significance. It connects to the psalm in its discussion of the character of the anointed one. The final verse of the psalm concerns David as the anointed and the first verse of the oracle speaks of David as the anointed yet again.

The anointed was also an important element of the other great poetic parts of the book of Samuel, the prayer of Hannah and the lament over Saul and Jonathan. However, while the psalm of chapter 22 chiefly concerns the early life of David and his deliverance from the hand of Saul and his enemies, the oracle is spoken in the context of his imminent death and casts its gaze into the future. Saul and his house were the prominent antagonists in the first half of this concluding section of Samuel.

[ 6 : 25 ] In chapters 21 and 22. Now, however, attention is more focused upon the reign of David and the legacy of his house. Behind this oracle we should see 2 Samuel chapter 7 and the covenant that the Lord made with David and his house. David delivers his words as an oracle. Such a designation suggests that this is a more explicitly prophetic word, not just of David's own composition. Hannah's prayer also has a prophetic character, especially in its conclusion. The main reference to oracles prior to this is found in the book of Numbers, in the oracles of Balaam. The form in which David introduces his oracle should remind us of the form of Balaam's oracles. Numbers chapter 24 verses 3 to 4 reads, And in verses 15 to 16 of that chapter, The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, the oracle of him who hears the words of God and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty falling down with his eyes uncovered. David's reads as follows,

The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel. In contrast to Balaam, who is the man who falls down, David is the man who is raised on high. He is the anointed of God, and either the sweet psalmist or the favourite or delight of the songs of Israel, the man that the people love to sing about. Whichever it is, David is a man of song, a man who sings and a man about whom songs are sung. He is a romantic figure, a figure who brings and expresses delight. After his self-characterisation, he introduces the core of the oracle with a statement of how the word of the Lord has come to him for this prophecy. His words are words spoken more directly by the Holy Spirit, rather than words like the words of his psalms that are composed by David himself under the inspiration of the Spirit. The content of the oracle itself concerns faithful rule. To a limited extent, it characterises David himself to the extent that he was a wise king and a man after God's own heart. However, having read 2 Samuel to this point, it is clear that David didn't live up to this description. Rather, the description seems to make both a more general statement about a wise ruler, and as an oracle, should probably be taken as a prophetic anticipation of the Davidic king who would one day exemplify such virtues of rule. Just rule is rule in the fear of God. This is a recurring theme in the wisdom literature, which is the literature of kings.

Job chapter 28 verse 28, And he said to man, Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding. Psalm 111 verse 10, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. All those who practice it have a good understanding. Proverbs chapter 1 verse 7, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Ecclesiastes chapter 12 verse 13, The end of the matter all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. Rule that takes its starting point in such fear of God will be teachable and receptive to the ways of wisdom. It will be attentive to the Lord's instruction concerning good and evil. Such a king will be marked by humility, not having his heart lifted up above his brothers, but ministering to them as the servant of the Lord. The effect of such a king upon his people is described using imagery from nature. He is like the dawning morning light. He is like the sun on a morning without clouds. He is also like the rain that gives life and growth to the thirsty earth.

The just judgments of the king bring such light to his land, removing the darkness of intrigue and corruption and making things plain. In such a society people have confidence to act, knowing that the ground that they are walking on is not unclear and potentially treacherous. In the dimness or darkness of societies without such a king, one never truly knows where you stand or where justice lies. Such a king is also like the rain who blesses his people with what they need to grow. Without just judgments, a land becomes parched and does not prosper. Things wither. However, the judgments of a wise and good king are like rain and dew upon the land. The relationship between the king and his people is like the relationship between the heavens, the sun and the clouds, and the earth beneath. Similar language is employed in Proverbs chapter 16 verse 15. In the light of a king's face there is life, and his favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. The image of the king as the light of the dawn might make us think of the description of Christ's advent as the sunrise in the prophecy of Zechariah the father of John the Baptist and elsewhere in the New Testament. Christ is the one who brings the light of dawn, and in this light his people have illumination that dispels shadows and darkness and enables them to act with confidence and joy. In the person of Christ we see David's oracle concerning the just king truly realised.

[ 11 : 47 ] In verse 5 David speaks of the relationship in which his house stands to the Lord. The Lord has blessed him with a sure covenant, one which he himself has established and will fulfil, one that will endure even through the punishment that fell upon David's house following his sin concerning Bathsheba and Uriah. God is not going to cast his promise or David aside, but will bring about all that he has intended for him. Whether they are the conclusion of the oracle or words reflecting further upon its meaning, verses 6 to 7 contrast the worthless men, the men or the sons of Belial, with the wise and just king. In contrast to the good king, they are to be destroyed.

Like David's blessed house, their end is determined by the Lord. Such men of Belial are difficult to handle, they are like thorns. To deal with them you need to arm yourself with weapons. There have been several such sons of Belial in the story of the books of Samuel. They are juxtaposed with the righteous king. Their ultimate fate is to be consumed with fire, according to some translations fire on the throne. This suggests that the worthless men to which David is referring are wicked rulers.

The next section concerns the mighty men of David and some of their heroic exploits. David was not a solitary hero, but was surrounded by brave and skilled warriors. There are two key groups mentioned, the 3 and the 30, two sets of elite warriors. The three are composed of Eliezer and Shammah, and perhaps, depending on how we read it, Joseph Bashibeth. Like David himself, these men are mighty men.

The exploits of Eliezer and Shammah, which are described, were both achieved against the Philistines. In both cases, their bravery was the means by which the Lord brought about a great victory.

The next group is the 30. There are at least 33 men listed in the group, possibly more depending on how many sons Jason had. We might assume that the 30 was a set number of men or a rank, like the 12 in the New Testament. And when members of the group died or retired, someone else would be appointed to take their place. A story of the 30's heroics is told, presumably an event that occurred either when David was still on the run from Saul, or possibly very early on in his reign. This is because the Philistines are in control of Bethlehem, which, considering it was so far inside Israel's territory, suggests a level of regional dominance that the Philistines lost very early on in David's reign.

[ 14 : 15 ] The Philistines were controlling David's own hometown, which must have been very distressing for him. He expressed his desire to drink water from the well by the Bethlehem gate. The point of the request wasn't so much David's thirst, as his desire to enjoy the refreshment of gaining control of that which the Philistines had stolen from him and his people. Three of the 30 went and broke through the Philistine lines to get him some water, and brought it back to him so that he could drink it. Rather than drinking the water that was brought to him by such devotion, David pours out the water before the Lord, devoting the sacrificial dedication of his men to the Lord's service, rather than to his own. The fact that this account is recorded here suggests that it is designed to characterize both the dedication of David's men more generally, along with David's appropriate attitude to their dedication. Abishai, the brother of Joab and the son of Zeruiah, and Benaniah, the son of Jehoiada, are both listed separately. Abishai's victory over the 300 men is mentioned here, similar to Josheb-Bashibeth's victory over the 800. These victories were almost certainly not in single combat, but were victories achieved by them and the men that they led.

Three of Benaniah, the son of Jehoiada's great deeds, are recounted here. Benaniah became the leader of David's bodyguard, the Cherethites and the Pelethites, and in 1 Kings chapter 2 was placed over the entire army at the beginning of the reign of Solomon, in the place of the wicked Joab.

The chapter ends by listing the 30. The presence of the name of Asahel, who was killed while David was still the king of only Judah, suggests that the 30 existed for a significant period of time, and that the members of the group that are listed might span many different periods of its existence, and that some might not have overlapped at all. The group was most likely formed while David was still an outlaw. Elhanan was also mentioned a couple of chapters earlier, as one of the men who killed a giant. Apart from Asahel, whose death at the hands of Abner occasioned many problems for David's early reign, perhaps the most important names are those of Eliam and Uriah the Hittite. Eliam was the father of Bathsheba, as we saw in 2 Samuel chapter 11 verse 3. Here we also discover that Eliam's father, and hence Bathsheba's grandfather, was Ahithophel, who supported Absalom's coup, perhaps on account of David's treatment of his granddaughter and grandson-in-law. Uriah was Bathsheba's husband. When we consider the heroism and the profound dedication of the 30 to David, the actions of David towards Bathsheba and Uriah are seen to be so much more wicked, we might also recognise the degree to which David's lust led him to compromise personal bonds of loyalty that had been the backbone of his support. Sin leads men into the profoundest of folly. Concluding the list with Uriah's name is a sobering note to end upon.

A question to consider. How is the good king like the lord himself?