

1 Samuel 29: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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The story of 1 Samuel chapter 29 occurred a few days before the story of the woman of Endor. In chapter 28, the Philistines have encamped at Shunem. However, in chapter 29, they are still mustering at Aphek, 30 miles north of Gath, before moving on to Shunem 40 miles further to fight against the Israelites. Saul was told by Samuel that he would die the next day when he visited the woman of Endor, which further supports the idea that chapter 29 records events from a few days beforehand. The presence of Aphek in the narrative recalls the loss of Israel in battle there near the beginning of 1 Samuel, when the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines. Just as Samuel's first prophecy confirmed the earlier prophecy that Eli's two sons would die on the same day, so Samuel's last prophecy was much the same concerning the death of Saul and his sons. This was a prophecy delivered after his death.

I believe that we should regard the appearance of Samuel in the preceding chapter as a genuine appearance, albeit not one summoned by the woman of Endor, who was greatly surprised by it. Near the beginning of 1 Samuel, there is a battle with the Philistines, associated with Aphek, where the leader of Israel and his sons perish.

Eli dies when he hears the news of the capture of the Ark and he falls off his chair. There is another such battle at the end of the book, with Saul and his sons perishing on this occasion. The ordering of the material probably heightens the literary contrast between David and Saul at this juncture. Peter Lightheart raises the possibility that David's defeat for the Amalekites in chapter 30 may actually have been simultaneous with Saul's defeat by the Philistines in chapter 31.

Achish trusts David. David is gifted at deception. David has to this point been playing a very dangerous game in pretending to Achish that he was fighting against Israel when he was really fighting against other enemies.

[3 : 5 3] He was cunning, but he seemed to require divine intervention at this juncture if he wasn't to blow his cover. His language here is probably intentionally ambiguous. For instance, he speaks of fighting against the enemies of my lord the king. Which lord the king?

He had, we should remember, already deceived Achish and his men back in chapter 21 when he feigned madness before Achish. We might also here remember the way that the patriarchs engaged in deception to disguise the fact that their wives were really their wives and to save their lives from godless kings who might kill them and take their wives if they thought that they were their husbands rather than their brothers.

In Genesis chapter 12 and 20, God had to intervene to deliver Abraham and Sarah from situations that exceeded their capacity for cunning escape. Here David finds himself in a very tight spot where the lord needs to provide him with a way of escape, lest he either find himself having to go into battle against Israel or is distrusted and destroyed by Achish.

We should also consider the possibility that Achish has some trust in the lord and is a god fearer. The Philistines had experienced the power of the lord in a number of situations in the preceding chapters of this book and perhaps some of them were open to belief in him. Achish has had close interactions with David and has been very impressed by him. Achish swears in the name of the lord in verse 6 and describes David as like an angel of god later on. Perhaps god is also protecting David from having to fight against a god-fearing Philistine.

The Philistine commanders rightly feared what would happen if David turned on them in the battle. David had already enjoyed a reputation as a heroic Israelite warrior. The best way to rehabilitate his tarnished image would be to turn on the Philistines in the midst of the battle as a fifth column. Mercenaries could always be very dangerous to have around, their loyalties were shallow and they could betray their masters if the tide of battle turned against them. We see an example of this back in 1st Samuel chapter 14 verse 21. 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. As Peter Lightheart observes, there is an interesting contrast between Achish and Saul in their relationship to David. David is loyal to Saul throughout, yet Saul treats him as a traitor. Whereas he betrays the Philistines, yet Achish defends him in the very strongest of terms. Saul once made David his bodyguard before trying to destroy him. Now Achish has made David his bodyguard for life in chapter 28, even while David's loyalties are not with him. The protest of the Philistine commanders gives David a welcome reprieve from having to fight the Israelites without raising Achish's suspicions. It also saves David from a situation where he would be forced to betray Achish more directly. There are a number of occasions when David needs to be saved by the Lord from situations beyond his control, from rash judgments or from traps. For instance, had David actually joined the

[6 : 53] Philistines in attacking Israel here, his hope of being king of Israel in the future would have been over. On occasions like this, it is very important to consider the Psalms as part of the story. David is, during these times, constantly praying to the Lord to deliver him from his enemies, to protect him from evil and to guard his way. Sometimes God acts to deliver David from a sin that he is giving into, as when he stirs up Abigail to intercept David before he attacks Nabal. Sometimes God acts to deliver David from an enemy he can't easily escape, such as when he raises up a Philistine attack, just as Saul is about to capture David. Sometimes he provides David with a way of escape from a situation where David seems cornered, as he does here. These sorts of deliverances can seem just a bit too convenient if we don't pay enough attention to the hand of the Lord within events, and the way that David constantly seeks God's protection and deliverance. David isn't just being lucky.

David is also able to put judgment into the hand of the Lord. The Lord is raising up Achish and the Philistines against Saul. David doesn't have to fight for vengeance, and to get what he believes is due to him, as the Lord will ultimately achieve the victory for him. In the last couple of verses, there are three references to David leaving early in the morning. Jordan suggests the possibility that there is some allusion to the Passover here.

Saul has had a false Passover in the preceding chapter, with the midnight meal of unleavened bread, in association with the declaration of the death of the firstborn, the king of Israel, Saul himself, while David here experiences a deliverance that is sealed in a departure in the early morning. A question to consider. What lessons can we learn about the relationship between prayerful dependence on the Lord and living faithfully and wisely in the story of David?