

1 Samuel 23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Samuel chapter 23 Now they told David, Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah, and are robbing the threshing floors. Therefore David inquired of the Lord, Shall I go and attack these Philistines?

And the Lord said to David, Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah. But David's men said to him, Behold, we are afraid here in Judah. How much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?

Then David inquired of the Lord again, and the Lord answered him, Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines into your hand. And David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines, and brought away their livestock, and struck them with a great blow.

So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah. When Abiathar the son of Ahimelech had fled to David to Keilah, he had come down with an ephod in his hand. Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah.

And Saul said, God has given him into my hand, for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars. And Saul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Keilah to besiege David and his men.

[1 : 0 7] David knew that Saul was plotting harm against him, and he said to Abiathar the priest, Bring the ephod here. Then David said, O Lord, the God of Israel, your servant has surely heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah to destroy the city on my account.

Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O Lord, the God of Israel, please tell your servant. And the Lord said, He will come down.

Then David said, Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul? And the Lord said, They will surrender you. Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go.

When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition. And David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand.

David saw that Saul had come out to seek his life. David was in the wilderness of Ziph at Horesh. And Jonathan, Saul's son, rose and went to David at Horesh, and strengthened his hand in God.

[2 : 1 6] And he said to him, Do not fear, for the hand of Saul my father shall not find you. You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you. Saul my father also knows this. And the two of them made a covenant before the Lord.

David remained at Horesh, and Jonathan went home. Then the Ziphites went up to Saul at Gibeah, saying, Is not David hiding among us in the strongholds at Horesh, on the hill of Hekailah, which is south of Jashimon?

Now come down, O king, according to all your heart's desire to come down, and our part shall be to surrender him into the king's hand. And Saul said, May you be blessed by the Lord, for you have had compassion on me.

Go, make yet more sure, know and see the place where his foot is, and who has seen him there, for it is told me that he is very cunning. See therefore and take note of all the lurking places where he hides, and come back to me with sure information.

Then I will go with you. And if he is in the land, I will search him out among all the thousands of Judah. And they arose and went to Ziph ahead of Saul. Now David and his men were in the wilderness of Maon, in the Araba, to the south of Jashimon.

[3 : 22] And Saul and his men went to seek him. And David was told, so he went down to the rock and lived in the wilderness of Maon. And when Saul heard that, he pursued after David in the wilderness of Maon.

Saul went on one side of the mountain, and David and his men on the other side of the mountain. And David was hurrying to get away from Saul. As Saul and his men were closing in on David and his men to capture them, a messenger came to Saul, saying, Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land.

So Saul returned from pursuing after David and went against the Philistines. Therefore that place was called the Rock of Escape. And David went up from there and lived in the strongholds of Engedi.

In 1 Samuel chapter 23, we see David playing the part of a judge, similar to the judges in the Book of Judges, in a number of respects. He begins by delivering the city of Keala.

Keala is a city in Judah, in David's own tribal region. The Philistines are fighting against it and robbing the threshing floors. We saw a similar situation in the Book of Judges in the story of Gideon, where he had to thresh in secret in order to avoid the Midianites.

[4 : 33] David inquires of the Lord whether he should go down or not, and the Lord instructs him to go down to attack the Philistines and to save Keala. David here is taking on something of the mantle of the king.

Saul's not coming to the aid of the city, and so he's going to do the job. He's going to act on behalf of his own region. In delivering the city, and in seeking the counsel of the Lord from the prophet, David is very much behaving as the king would behave, in ways that show up the absence of Saul.

Abiathar had brought an ephod to David. The ephod that we have described in the Book of Exodus is a garment with a pouch, which contains the Urim and the Thummim.

There's a parallel between this garment and the Ark of the Covenant, and it's used for inquiring of the Lord. Why is it in Abiathar's hand? That isn't entirely clear. Gideon, we may remember, after he's asked to become a king, refuses but also constructs an ephod for himself, and causes Israel to sin with it.

Perhaps there were different forms that the ephod could take. The ephod was related to the Ark of the Covenant in certain ways, and taking the ephod into battle, and seeking counsel with it, was perhaps akin to taking the Ark of the Covenant into battle, or at least seeking the advice of the Lord within it.

[5 : 49] The Ark of the Covenant contained the two tablets of stone. The ephod contained the two stones of the Urim and the Thummim. It seems that the Urim and the Thummim gave yes and no answers, and sometimes maybe answers.

There has been much speculation about what was exactly involved here. Maybe there were two stones that were rolled, and they had one colour on one side, another colour on another, and if they both came up with one colour, it was a yes answer, while if they both came up with another colour, it was a no answer, and if they both came up with different colours, it was a refusal of God to give counsel on that matter.

What exactly it was, we can only speculate. However, the important thing to notice here, is that this story depends a lot upon different sources. Saul has his sources, but David is directly informed by the Lord, as he seeks the Lord's counsel.

Saul never seems to do that. Saul relies upon traitors as his informants, perhaps people who are acting out of fear, whereas David is guided by the Lord. Saul discovers that David has come to Keilah, and believes that he can trap him there.

This might remind us of the story of Samson in the city of Gaza. Lightheart remarks upon the repeated use of the word hand in these chapters. The hand stands for power. David has things given into his hand, but things slip out of Saul's hand.

[7:10] Saul grips the spear in his hand, while David has the lyre in his hand, and later has his hand filled with bread and with Goliath's sword. Similar to the Judahites, who tried to bind Samson in chapter 15 of the book of Judges, the men of Keilah, given the chance, would have bound the man who had saved them, their own tribesman David, and would have delivered him into the hands of his enemy, a man who wanted to kill him.

David had defended Keilah from the Philistines, but now Saul is going to attack Keilah on account of David. The willingness of the Judahites to give up David, as they were willing to give up Samson, should be noted.

Saul had 600 men back in Gibeah in chapter 13, and now David appears as a new Saul, as he has 600 people with him. This should probably be connected to the end of Judges again, when there are only 600 left of Benjamin.

We might also think of Gideon's 300. At this point, Jonathan comes out to meet David. Jonathan's able to find David, unlike his father, and Jonathan makes a covenant with David, declaring that he will inherit the throne, and that Jonathan will be second to him.

Jonathan willingly gives up his birthright to David. And we should think here again of the story of Esau and Jacob. There have been numerous themes of the story of Esau and Jacob in the background of these stories to this point, and there will be many more to come.

[8 : 31] And in Jonathan, we should recognise a positive version of Esau, someone who willingly surrenders his birthright to the son who should have it. The Ziphites now proactively try to betray David.

Once again, David's own countrymen turn against him and seek to hand him over to his enemy. And this is a much closer call. The Lord ultimately saves David only by bringing in an attack of the Philistines, so that Saul has to call off his pursuit just as he is about to capture David.

A question to consider. What are some of the parallels that we have seen between David and specific judges to this point in the narrative?

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