

David and Achish: the minority report (Part I)

David's escape to Philistia in I Samuel 27 & 29 is one of the more perplexing episodes in David's life. We can certainly understand his desperation as Saul continues to pursue David despite his having spared Saul's life twice. But surely, we think, David had no cause to flee to Philistia, or worse, to serve these sworn enemies of Israel, going so far as to line up in the Philistine order of battle on the way to attack Israel (I Samuel 28:1-2; 29:1-2).

Indeed, the majority report is that these sixteen months in Philistia mark a grave backsliding on the part of David, a low point in his walk of faith. The general idea is that David is a flawed hero, and the Bible honestly reports his failures as well as his triumphs. This then is considered one of his great failures. The fact that the Bible honestly records the sins of its greatest heroes is certainly true. The question is whether the episode in Chapters 27 & 29 constitutes one of these failures. In the contemporary Reformed world at least, it appears to be beyond question. Take, for example, this list of sermon titles on I Samuel 27 found on mongergism.org (some preached by heroes of mine):

- ~ Crossing the Line
- ~ Backsliding again!
- ~ The eclipse of faith
- ~ David's Lapse into Unbelief
- ~ The Frailty of the Man
- ~ Faltering Faith & a Flight to Philistia
- ~ Lying Your Way Out of Trouble

If this majority report is correct, then the lessons for us are obvious: namely, don't backslide. Trust God to protect you and do not resort to your own wisdom. Don't lie for selfish and fearful reasons. Well, obviously, these are all excellent admonitions. The question is whether they can be found in this text.

Rather, I argue for a minority report: that David was doing what he could to serve God in desperate circumstances. And in doing so, he continues to act as a type of Christ. In this story then, David is the king in exile with nowhere to lay his head. He is an alien king, a stranger to his own land – one already inaugurated as king, but whose kingship is not yet fully consummated. In this, he models the ministry of Christ, who also lived among us as an alien and exile, rejected by His own, and received by Gentiles.

Of course, this is not to argue that David was sinless in these chapters. But it does argue that we should read this text in a different way than as a warning against backsliding. Instead, I believe that it serves more as a positive example for us of man exercising faith in desperate times, and a pointer to great David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I believe this minority reading of the text is correct for at least five reasons. Perhaps no one of these reasons is sufficient of itself to overturn the majority report, but taken together, I think they make a strong case that David was faithfully serving God throughout his time in Philistia. Here then are five reasons for this minority viewpoint:

1) The literary structure of I Samuel 21-29. There appears to be a clear structure to chapters 21-29 consisting of three literary triads, lining up approximately as follows:

- 21 David flees to the Philistines and tricks them
- 22 Saul sins by slaughtering the priests
- 23 David “rescued” by the Philistines who attack Saul

- 24 David spares Saul’s life
- 25 Abigail spares David from sinning
- 26 David spares Saul’s life

- 27 David flees to the Philistines and tricks them
- 28 Saul sins by consulting a medium
- 29 David “rescued” by the Philistines who attack Saul

At the very least, it is remarkable that David twice flees to the Philistines and tricks them both times. This is followed by the Philistines attacking Saul, which in effect serves to rescue David from Saul both times. Even more remarkable is how both of these episodes are interrupted by chapters 22 and 28, each describing Saul’s great sins and forfeiture of his kingly duty. In this, it is important to note that chapter 28 is out of chronological order, which does not occur until the night before Saul’s death. The author of I Samuel deliberately interrupts David’s story with this example of Saul’s faithlessness as king.

The purpose of this structure then appears obvious: to provide a contrast between Saul, the faithless king, and David, Israel’s true king since I Samuel 16. This is reinforced by the middle segment, chapters 24-26. This section serves as the climax of this period in David’s life, his great training to be a king of mercy through the sparing of Saul’s life, not once, but twice. But note that in between these two tests David passes so handily, he at first fails another similar test. In chapter 25, David is offended by a man named Nabal, and responds by strapping on his sword with the intent of killing him and every man in his household. David is becoming a tyrant like Saul, who just a few chapters earlier slaughtered the priests at Nob.

The difference is that God spoke to David through Abigail the Wise, and David listened to her in great humility and repentance. And so in the end, David passes this test as well and thus becomes a king of mercy rather than of vengeance. This is the great climax of David’s training as king in I Samuel. It would seem strange then that the second trip to Philistia amounts to a backsliding of faith, given the parallel to the earlier account in

chapters 21-23. Is it spiritually possible? Yes. But I think the structure, along with the following arguments, suggests otherwise. The author is contrasting David with Saul in chapters 27-29, not comparing them as equally backslidden.

2) Psalm 56 may have been written during this episode. This is probably the weakest of the arguments, but still helps to set the tone of this period in David's life. The title to Psalm 56 reads in part: *A Mikhtam of David when the Philistines seized him in Gath*. Now, this may well have occurred in David's first venture in Philistia recorded in I Samuel 21. He is not actually seized in either account, so the word here may mean he was there against his will, forced there by Saul's relentless pursuit. But if the argument about I Samuel's structure above is correct, then both accounts serve as parallels with each other, describing David's desperate plight. And both Psalm 56 and Psalm 34 bear this out. They are the poems of a man in distress, not a man cunning against his own people and surrendered to worldliness.

3) The text nowhere states David's actions as sinful. This may be the most compelling argument. It is true that narrative portions of Scripture do not always point out the obvious and that some sins speak for themselves. But is that the case here?

It is not as though the author of I-II Samuel is hesitant to point out David's sins. In fact, David himself is not shy about confessing them! Just read Psalm 32 or 51. Already in I Samuel, David has already admitted at least two great sins. One instance is in chapter 25 as mentioned above, when he was too ready to use the sword. The other is his failure to use the sword to protect the priests at Nob from Saul's slaughter (I Samuel 22:22). And of course, there is the great sin with Bathsheba of II Samuel 11-12. In all these cases, once confronted with his failure, David quickly repents and admits his sins.

But nowhere does David or the narrator indicate that what David did in Philistia was wrong. And since he is arguably the ultimate Type of Christ in the Old Testament, David should be given the benefit of the doubt as a man after God's own heart (I Samuel 13:14), unless the text indicates otherwise.

4) It would undermine David's quest to be recognized as king. Practically, if David did indeed plan to betray Israel, it is hard to imagine how he ever would ascend to the throne in Jerusalem. Imagine if Benedict Arnold returned from England to run against George Washington for president in 1792. It is unthinkable. So then, how could David win Israel over if in fact he became known as a traitor? No, David's actions show what his true motives were, as we will see below.

5) Most importantly, the results of David's venture reveal his true motives. Here we come to the heart of the argument. If David was faithfully following the LORD as best he could in this period of his life, one would expect to see good fruit. And that is exactly what the text goes out of its way to describe. Thus, a natural reading of this text should

tell us that these good results are most likely a confirmation of David's essentially good motives in his flight to Philistia. Of course, it is possible these good results come about despite David's motives (cf. Romans 8:28) but in that case, one would expect the narrator to explain that clearly, as Joseph does in Genesis 50:20, for instance.

What are the results of David's flight that appear to reveal his true motives? At least five surface in the text. We will take those up in Part II.

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David and Achish: the minority report (Part II)

In part I, we began to argue that when David flees to Philistia in I Samuel 27 & 29, he is not backsliding in faith, but rather doing what he can to faithfully serve God in difficult circumstances. We argued this for five different reasons:

- 1) The literary structure of I Samuel 21-29 shows David growing in godliness, not backsliding, except his confessed sin in chapter 25.
- 2) Psalm 56, a Psalm of distress, may well have been written in this period.
- 3) The text nowhere describes David's actions as sinful.
- 4) Practically, treachery to Israel would have undermined his ascension to the throne.
- 5) Most importantly, the results of David's venture are positive, and thus reveal his true motives.

We turn now to the positive fruit that the text indicates results from this episode in David's life. And once again, we find five.

1) David ends Israel's civil war. We read in I Samuel 27:4 that Saul no longer pursued David. Indeed, the last word Saul exchanges with David is when he gives him his blessing in 26:25, sincerely or not. But it is David's flight to Philistia that leads to peace in Israel. As he could not in godliness either fight or kill Saul, David had no other option but to flee. And that brings unity, of a sort, to God's people. In this, David reflects the mind of Christ, who prayed that His people may be one, as He and the Father are one (John 17:21). A true King, such as David, always seeks the peace of God's people, even

at great personal sacrifice. In this, David demonstrates the wisdom that is from above, reaping a harvest of righteousness and peace by his flight (James 3:13-18).

2) David repossesses part of the Promised Land without any bloodshed. The narrator reveals this remarkable fact in I Samuel 27: 6: “So Achish gave (David) Ziklag that day; therefore Ziklag has belonged to the kings of Judah to this day.” David wanted to live away from the Philistine regional capital of Gath in order to remain elusive, as we will see below. But as a practical result, he ends up annexing part of Philistia back for Israel. So the Kingdom of God (which at this era of redemptive history maintained actual borders) expands into Philistia, all without any blood being shed. This is part of David’s deceptive strategy to do what he could to defeat the Philistines even though he had only six hundred men at his command. It also is a foreshadow and type of Christ who now expands His Kingdom throughout the world through the ministry of the Church, all without bloodshed, a Kingdom of grace without earthly borders (cf. Matthew 28:18-20).

3) David continues to fight Israel’s Holy War as their King in exile. In 27:8ff, we read of David’s raids against the Geshurites, the Girzites and the Amelekites. We do not know much about the first two groups, other than that the text tells us that they “were inhabitants of the land from ancient times.” But we know that the Amelekites were to be the subjects of Israel’s holy war, and were to have been wiped out in the initial conquest. This is not the place to go into the details and propriety of holy war in the Old Testament, but David appears to be engaging in a form of it. He does indeed take plunder, which is forbidden in holy war, cf. Deuteronomy 20, but he appears to do so in order to trick Achish into thinking that David’s raids were actually against the people of Israel.

What then of David’s lying to Achish? In my judgment, this is a lawful use of wartime deception, a way to remain within Philistia while yet carrying out his duties as Israel’s king. There is no clear parallel today since the Church is never to use the sword, but a rough equivalent may be the propriety of a German Christian lying to local Nazi officials about Jews hidden in her basement.

The point is that David is continuing to act as Israel’s true king by defending them, even in exile. Most kings who go into exile do so in great luxury, and only to protect their own hides. Not so David. David continues to risk his life by conducting a holy war against the original inhabitants of the Promised Land. These are hardly the actions of a rebel or backslider, but of a man devoted to his God, in season and out of season.

4) David evangelizes the Philistines. This may be one of the most unexpected results, and yet one clearly hinted at in the text. In I Samuel 29:6, while defending David against the (probably accurate) fears of the other Philistine lords, Achish says to David: “As the LORD (Yahweh) lives, you have been upright, and your going out and your coming in with me in the army are pleasing in my sight.” Commentators consider it significant that Achish the Philistine uses the covenantal name of God, though most think he retains his

polytheism in doing so. (He is after all, on his way to attack Israel.) Nonetheless, David's venture into Philistia made the name of God known in pagan lands.

Likewise, Achish's wording is striking when he describes David as "an angel of God" to him in verse 9. Achish describes David as bringing him a message from God. Whether successful or not, and notwithstanding the fact that Jew and Philistine were still primarily enemies, here we have a brief foreshadow of the Gospel going to all nations. After all, it is in the Old Testament in which we read that "everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved" (Joel 2:32). Jonah was sent to Ninevah, Israel's greatest enemy at that time. Why shouldn't David proclaim God's mercy to the Philistines, even as he recognizes that he must in part deceive them as Israel's earthly enemies? It is a complicated situation to be sure, but Achish's wording in I Samuel 29 is intriguing to say the least. One result from David's flight is that Yahweh's name is proclaimed among the Gentiles.

5) David plans to wreak havoc in the Philistine rear as they march against Israel. It seems clear that David intended to do just what the Philistine lords feared – to stab them in the back in the middle of battle against Israel. Such feats are not unknown in history, such as what occurred at the Battle of Leipzig when many of Napoleon's German allies changed sides in the middle of battle, joining the multi-national army arrayed against him.

There appear to be three main reasons to think this was David's plan. First, the Philistine lords clearly state that is what they believe will happen. Second, the inconceivable idea that David would actually fight with the Philistines against Israel, whose king he is. Third, David gives ambiguous and almost humorous answers to Achish concerning his plans. In 28:2, David merely says to Achish, "You will see what your servant can do." In 29:8, David says, "may I not go fight against the enemies of my lord the king?," without ever specifying exactly who his lord and king were.

For all these reasons, I am convinced that David intended to attempt the dangerous tactic of handing victory to Israel by turning against the Philistines in the middle of the battle, and then somehow from there escaping Saul's clutch after victory was attained. If that seems unlikely, keep in mind that David had been walking this kind of razor's edge for years as Israel's inaugurated but not yet consummated king. In any case, the text tells us that in God's providence, David is spared such a dangerous tactic, because the Philistines refuse to bring him along.

And then we know the rest of the story. It is this battle that brings about the end of Saul's life and reign. God's time for Saul's end and David's ascension had finally come. And so the lessons for us are indeed to trust God's providential care in times of plenty and in times of want. To serve Him in season and out of season. To seek the peace of Jerusalem, God's people. And to do our small part to see God's Kingdom spread to all

peoples, even our enemies. I find this to be a far more satisfying, encouraging and faithful reading of I Samuel 27 & 29 than the more common approach to this text. David is an example of faith, and a type of Christ, our ultimate King in exile.

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