

1 Samuel 22:1-23

The Murder of the Priests of Nob

After the close call at the palace of Achish, David leaves Philistia and flees to southern Judah. The low hills south of the Valley of Elah (where the battle with Goliath took place) are literally burrowed by caves. One of these large caves was the Cave of Adullam, near the old royal Canaanite city of Adullam (Joshua 15:35). It has a large main chamber and many labyrinthian cave openings inside. The cave is located roughly between Bethlehem and the Philistine city of Gath.

1 Samuel 22:1 - "David therefore departed thence, and escaped to the cave Adullam: and when his brethren and all his father's house heard it, they went down thither to him."

David receives his whole family, who are now also in mortal danger from King Saul.

[David is said to have gone to the cave of Adullam to "arouse the merit" of his ancestor Judah. The hospitality of a man of Adullam mentioned in **Genesis 38** led to Judah's marriage to Shuah, from whom the whole tribe of Judah descends].

A Band of Losers

1 Samuel 22:2 - "And every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them: and there were with him about four hundred men."

The Jewish translation this band as "every man who was in distress, and every man who had a creditor, and every man of embittered spirit."

The number soon increased to six hundred (**23:13**).

"distress" = *māšôq* - under stress, oppressed, between the straits

"in debt" = *nāšā'* - in debt, pursued by a creditor

"discontented" = *mar* - bitter, like at the waters of Marah, having a grievance, discontented, unsatisfied, chaffed

Some rabbis take pains to insist that these must have all been righteous men, because "it is unlikely David would have associated with unscrupulous people."

But in fact, these were all losers, people who had failed in some way, were marginalized by society or were in need. Their common denominator was that David inspired hope in them.

These are the same kind of people Jesus is seen gathering around Himself as His

disciples. Each of us falls into one or another of those categories, too. We have found ourselves to be somehow deficient in life, flawed, or buried under some kind of stress, or trouble or oppression. We are certainly indebted by sin, and unable to pay what we owe and make it right. Our sin then makes us bitter. Jesus offers hope.

- **Matthew 11:28-30** - "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Paul acknowledges that he (and believers in general) are counted as "the offscouring of all things unto this day."

- **1 Corinthians 1:26-27** - "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;"

- **Isaiah 61:1** - "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners."

- **Luke 5:30-32** - "But the Pharisees and their scribes complained to Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Marcus Cornelius Fronto was a Roman orator in the second century who complained that Christian ranks are made up of the "dregs of society." A similar complaint was voiced by Celsus, a 2nd-century pagan Greek philosopher, who said that only "foolish and low individuals" seem to make up Christian converts. Another critic - Sossianus Hierocles - around the beginning of the fourth century, argued that Jesus was merely a gang leader, with a group of uneducated losers as his followers.

That sounds a lot like the description of David in this chapter of 1 Samuel.

The interesting fact about these losers, is that later - led by David - they become heroes.

1 Samuel 22:3-4 - "And David went thence to Mizpeh of Moab: and he said unto the king of Moab, Let my father and my mother, I pray thee, come forth, and be with you, till I know what God will do for me. And he brought them before the king of Moab: and they dwelt with him all the while that David was in the hold."

From the account of the war between Saul and Moab in **1 Samuel 14:47**, we infer that the Moabites had advanced beyond their own territory across the border, and were now

occupying the southern part of the trans-Jordan country which belonged to Israel.

This again brings up David's Moabite heritage.

He appeals to the king of Moab on the basis of his relation to Ruth the Moabitess. Placing his family under the protection of the Moabite king, David and his men retreat to a different hiding place - Mizpeh of Moab in the "Arboth (or plains) of Moab" (**Numbers 22:1; Deuteronomy 34:1, 8; Joshua 13:32**), or rather a secure position on the top of Mount Pisgah (**Numbers 23:14**) where Balaam delivered his prophecy about Israel's future.

Strangely, David's mother's name is nowhere mentioned; the Jews say her name was Natzbet, the daughter of Adal (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Bathra, fol. 91. 1.)

Side Note: What became of them? Nothing more is said of them in scripture. The Jews (Bemnidbar Rabba, sect. 14. fol. 212. 1. Tanchuma apud Jarchium in loc.) say the king of Moab later murdered his father and his mother, and his brethren, all but one, whom Nahash the Ammonite preserved; and that is the kindness David speaks of in **2 Samuel 10:2**. In **Psalms 27:10** David might be speaking of this: "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me."

News of David's flight made its way to Naioth. Samuel may have sent Gad, or possibly God revealed it to Gad the seer, and gave Gad a message for David - hiding out in Moab was not what God had in mind for David.

1 Samuel 22:5 - "And the prophet Gad said unto David, Abide not in the hold; depart, and get thee into the land of Judah. Then David departed, and came into the forest of Hareth."

In Judah's territory, Saul might be more reluctant to pursue him. Besides, appearing more openly would show the innocence of his cause, and his confidence in the Lord. Staying in Moab would look a little suspicious.

Gad afterwards became David's "seer" and spiritual adviser (**2 Samuel 24:11-19;** **1 Chronicles 21:9**) and the chronicler of his reign (**1 Chronicles 29:29**).

The news had also become known to Saul.

Saul's Reaction

1 Samuel 22:7-8 - "When Saul heard that David was discovered, and the men that were with him, (now Saul abode in Gibeah under a tree in Ramah, having his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing about him;) Then Saul said unto his servants that stood about him, Hear now, ye Benjamites; will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, and make you all captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds; That all of you have conspired against me, and there is none that sheweth me that my son hath made a league with the son of Jesse, and there is none of you that

is sorry for me, or sheweth unto me that my son hath stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day?"

Apparently Jonathan still displayed disappointment and anger with his father after Saul threw a spear at him. He possibly had been staying away from the court.

Doeg Speaks

1 Samuel 22:9-10 - "Then answered Doeg the Edomite, which was set over the servants of Saul, and said, I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. And he inquired of the LORD for him, and gave him victuals, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine."

Doeg left out the fact that the High priest and the others did not know David was fleeing or that Saul was angry with him.

The rabbis deduce that Doeg added even more slander to the story. He justified doing that by referring to Targum Jonathan's comment on **Deuteronomy 23:7**, which states that even if a Moabite converts to Judaism, "we are instructed to still maintain hatred for them."

The Slaughter of the Priests of Nob

1 Samuel 22:11-13 - "Then the king sent to call Ahimelech the priest, the son of Ahitub, and all his father's house, the priests that were in Nob: and they came all of them to the king. And Saul said, Hear now, thou son of Ahitub. And he answered, Here I am, my lord. And Saul said unto him, Why have ye conspired against me, thou and the son of Jesse, in that thou hast given him bread, and a sword, and hast inquired of God for him, that he should rise against me, to lie in wait, as at this day?"

Rashi - You made him a king (by inquiring of the Urim and Tummim for him), since we may not inquire of the Urim and Tummim for a commoner.

1 Samuel 22:14-15 - "Then Ahimelech answered the king, and said, And who is so faithful among all thy servants as David, which is the king's son in law, and goeth at thy bidding, and is honorable in thine house? Did I then begin to enquire of God for him? be it far from me: let not the king impute any thing unto his servant, nor to all the house of my father: for thy servant knew nothing of all this, less or more."

i.e. by showing respect to David as Saul's agent and son in law, he was showing respect to Saul himself. Was this the first time of inquiring of God for him? No; I have done this many a time, when he has been going upon the king's business, engaging in war with his enemies.

Saul, in a paranoid fit of rage, does not convene a trial to ascertain whether the priests have been treasonous, as would be proper. He has only by the word of Doeg. (The

rabbis imagine a real trial where Doeg argues his case at length, but this is nowhere seen in the text).

1 Samuel 22:16-17 - "And the king said, Thou shalt surely die, Ahimelech, thou, and all thy father's house. And the king said unto the footmen that stood about him, Turn, and slay the priests of the LORD; because their hand also is with David, and because they knew when he fled, and did not shew it to me. But the servants of the king would not put forth their hand to fall upon the priests of the LORD."

These servants were faithful to a higher law than just loyalty to the king. This is only possible in a kingdom like Israel which is founded on God's law. Still, since Saul was so unstable, they acted with great danger to themselves.

But the proper thing to do - after all of Saul's episodes of madness - would have been to relieve him of his kingship at this point. But they didn't have an impeachment process or the 25th Amendment to fall back on.

1 Samuel 22:18-19 - "And the king said to Doeg, Turn thou, and fall upon the priests. And Doeg the Edomite turned, and he fell upon the priests, and slew on that day fourscore and five persons that did wear a linen ephod. And Nob, the city of the priests, smote he with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen, and asses, and sheep, with the edge of the sword."

Doeg butchered the priests who were in the delegation before the king, and then he went to Nob - probably with a band of Saul's soldiers - and killed everyone there.

Doeg continued to display the type of Esau, an enemy of Jacob and thus of the Messiah, thinking only about his appetites, and acting with violence.

This is the inverted and inside-out reverse of the incident of Saul sparing Agag and keeping the sheep and cattle of the Amalekites (**1 Samuel 15**). But instead of obeying God, here Saul was ignoring justice.

Abiathar Escapes

1 Samuel 22:20-21 - "And one of the sons of Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped, and fled after David. And Abiathar shewed David that Saul had slain the LORD'S priests."

Abiathar later became High Priest during David's reign as king. He probably had been left by his father to take care of the sanctuary, and the holy things in it, when he and the rest of the priests were summoned to appear before Saul. He took the ephod, with the Urim and Thummim, and fled to David before Doeg got to Nob (**1 Samuel 23:6**).

How many were killed? Josephus says 385 died (Antiqu. l. 6. c. 12. sect. 6.) The Septuagint say 805 were slaughtered.

Side Note: The death of Ahimelech, as the great-grandson of Eli, is seen as fulfilling part of the curse on the House of Eli that none of his male descendants would live to old age (**1 Samuel 2:31-33**)

David's Remorse

1 Samuel 22:22-23 - "And David said unto Abiathar, I knew it that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul: I have occasioned the death of all the persons of thy father's house. Abide thou with me, fear not: for he that seeketh my life seeketh thy life: but with me thou shalt be in safeguard."

David in horror realizes that it was his act of going to seek aid from the priests at Nob that led to their deaths.

Because Abiathar had brought the Urim and Thummim, David knew he could consult God's will. Besides, merely the possession of the ephod and Urim and Thummim gave everyone confidence in God's protection.

Like Jesus, David offers to be a "safeguard."

Psalm 52 was written to reflect on this whole incident:

Psalm 52

Superscript: "To the chief Musician, Maschil, A Psalm of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul, and said unto him, David is come to the house of Ahimelech."

Doeg the Edomite (*Edom* = Adam) stands for our old man, and the evil inclination working in our natural mind that plots against Christ in us and tries to betray Him.

- **Psalm 52:1** - "Why boastest thou thyself in mischief, O mighty man? the goodness of God endureth continually."

Rashi - Why do you boast and brag of the evil that you do, you who are mighty in Torah? (The rabbis saw Doeg as an expert in Torah but without wisdom).

"mighty man" - as sarcasm or ridicule.

"the goodness of God endureth continually" - despite the treachery of Doeg/Pharaoh/Satan, God's plan would win out - both for David and for Messiah.

Ancient Christian commentators like Athanasius and the Venerable Bede saw Doeg as the shadow of Judas, who betrayed Christ, as well as the Little Horn of **Daniel 7:20** who had a "mouth uttering great boasts."

(See "A Commentary on the Psalms from Primitive and Mediæval Writers"

- <https://buff.ly/2oT877t>)

Doeg also is reflected in Haman the Agagite who tried to destroy the Jews in Esther's day, and King Herod (also an Edomite) who massacred the children in Bethlehem and about whom Jesus and his family were warned and escaped.

Doeg is often depicted as very learned in the Torah, but yet without wisdom. God sent the three "angels of destruction" to Doeg; the first caused him to forget his learning, the second burned his soul, and the third scattered the ashes. According to some he was slain by his own pupils when they found that he had forgotten his learning; others maintain that he was slain by David when he (Doeg) informed him of the death of Saul and of Jonathan.

- **Psalm 52:2-3** - "Thy tongue deviseth mischiefs; like a sharp razor, working deceitfully. Thou lovest evil more than good; and lying rather than to speak righteousness. Selah."

The Targum renders the word "Selah" here as "for ever"

- **Psalm 52:4** - "Thou lovest all devouring words, O thou deceitful tongue."

- **Psalm 52:5** - "God shall likewise destroy thee for ever, he shall take thee away, and pluck thee out of thy dwelling place, and root thee out of the land of the living. Selah."

The Targum again renders the word "Selah" here "for ever"

"Destroy" = *nathats* - break down - the word is used of breaking down the house in which the leprosy was (**Leviticus 14:45**); and denotes the utter extinction of Doeg's family, and the irrecoverable ruin of antichrist in **Revelation 18:21**. - *Gills Exposition*

- **Psalm 52:6-7** - "The righteous also shall see, and fear, and shall laugh at him: Lo, this is the man that made not God his strength; but trusted in the abundance of his riches, and strengthened himself in his wickedness."

- **Psalm 52:8** - "But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God: I trust in the mercy of God for ever and ever."

"forever and ever" = *olam* - eternity, the vanishing point, never-ending, the days of Messiah

Rashi - But I who am now being pursued by you, will be like an olive tree, fresh with children and grandchildren, in the house of the Holy One, blessed be He.

The Olive Tree and Olive Oil

Job compared human beings to the olive tree and noted that the olive tree did not die when cut down but sprang again to life, unlike people, who die and are gone (**Job 14:7-9**). The children of God's people are compared to the many small shoots that spring continually from the root system of the tree, ensuring the continued existence of

the fruitful family (**Psalm 128:3**). Gad says He planted Israel as a farmer would plant a beautiful olive tree (**Jeremiah 11:16-17**)

Many prophecies also described the Messiah as a branch or a shoot, probably drawing on the image of the olive tree (**Jer. 23:5, 33:15; Zech. 3:8, 6:12, Matt. 2:21-23**). Jesus is the shoot from a stump in the olive grove of Israel.

Olive oil was fuel for the Temple lampstand, and for anointing the priests and king. The Hebrew word for "anointed" is *mashiach*, from which we get our English word Messiah.

Oil was poured on the leper's head as final element of cleansing, making "atonement for him before the Lord" (**Lev. 14:15-18**). Jewish tradition indicates that the oil was a symbol of the leper coming back to life because he or she had been considered dead.

God's Spirit bestows the "oil of gladness" on those who mourn (**Isa. 61:1-6**)

- **Psalm 52:9** - "I will praise thee for ever, because thou hast done it: and I will wait on thy name; for it is good before thy saints."