

# CHAPTER 21

## INTRODUCTION TO FIRST SAMUEL 21

This chapter relates that David went to Nob, and pretending he was on secret business for the king, got shewbread, and the sword of Goliath, from Ahimelech the priest, (<sup><020></sup>1 Samuel 21:1-9); and that passing from thence to Gath, where he was known, through fear feigned himself mad, and so escaped from thence, (<sup><021></sup>1 Samuel 21:10-15).

**Ver. 1.** *Then came David to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest,* etc.] The high priest, as Abarbinel rightly calls him; he was the brother of Ahijah, the son of Ahitub, who being dead he succeeded him; though some say <sup>f428</sup> he was the same; (see <sup><014></sup>1 Samuel 14:3 22:9); who was now at Nob, the tabernacle being there, whither probably it was removed by Saul, and where and at Gibeon, according to the Jews <sup>f429</sup>, it continued fifty seven years; as in the times of Joshua it was in Shiloh, in the tribe of Ephraim, of which tribe he was; and in the times of David it was placed in the tribe of Judah, to which he belonged; so in the times of Saul it was in Nob, a city of his tribe, twelve miles from Gibeah, according to Bunting <sup>f430</sup>; for that it was in the tribe of Benjamin appears by its being mentioned along with Anathoth, (<sup><013></sup>Nehemiah 11:32); and according to Jarchi and Kimchi <sup>f431</sup> it was near Jerusalem, and so near that it might be seen from thence; some say they are the same <sup>f432</sup>; Jerom <sup>f433</sup> speaks of it as near Diospolis or Lydda. David, before he departed further off, was willing to see the tabernacle once more, and there worship his God, and inquire of him by the high priest, as he did, (<sup><020></sup>1 Samuel 22:10); to direct him what way he should take, and that he would prosper and succeed him in it, grant him his presence, and keep him in safety:

*and Ahimelech was afraid at the meeting of David;* hearing that he was come or coming, he went out to meet him, but when he saw him alone he trembled; especially if he had heard of his having fallen under the displeasure of Saul, and that he now fled from him, therefore he might fear that he should fall into disgrace and danger should he entertain him:

*and he said unto him, why [art] thou alone, and no man with thee?* he might well wonder at it, and put such a question, seeing he was so great a man, both in the court and camp, and the king's son in law; he might therefore reasonably suspect something more than ordinary was the case, and which occasioned his fears.

**Ver. 2.** *And David said unto Ahimelech the priest,* etc.] In reply to his question, and to account for such an appearance he made without an equipage:

*the king hath commanded me a business, and hath said unto me, let no man know anything of the business thereabout I send thee, and what I have commanded thee;* he pretended he was upon a secret expedition, by the order of Saul, which none were to know of, no, not his own servants, and that was the reason why he came to him alone; which was a downright lie, and was aggravated by its being told only for the sake of getting a little food; and especially told to an high priest, and at the tabernacle of God, and when he was come to inquire of the Lord there; and was attended with a dreadful consequence, the slaughter of the Lord's priests there, which afterwards lay heavy on David's mind, (<sup>1022</sup>1 Samuel 22:22); and is the very sin he is thought to refer to in (<sup>1038</sup>Psalm 119:28,29). This shows the weakness of the best of men, when left to themselves; David who as much hated lying as any man did, fell into it himself:

*and I have appointed [my] servants to such and such a place;* to such a place, of such an one, not naming place nor person, that they might not be known; so the Targum calls it a place hidden and kept; and that David had some servants, though not now with him, who ate of the shewbread, appears from (<sup>1038</sup>Matthew 12:3); whom Jonathan might send after him, to a place agreed on and appointed between them; so that this might be true.

**Ver. 3.** *Now therefore what is under thine hand?* etc.] Meaning, what food had he in his house?

*give [me] five [loaves of] bread in mine hand;* to take with him, for him and his servants in such a place:

*or what there is present;* or to be found <sup>f434</sup> in the tabernacle; if not five loaves, two, or three, or four, or what food soever he had by him.

**Ver. 4.** *And the priest answered David, and said, [there is] no common bread under mine hand,* etc.] In the tabernacle, though he might have such

in his own house; which was common for any man to eat of, even such as were not priests; but he had none there, and David was in haste to be gone because of Doeg, and could not stay till such was fetched:

*but there is hallowed bread*; such as was devoted to sacred use. Kimchi's father thinks this was the bread of the thank offering, to which Ben Gersom inclines; otherwise the Jewish writers in general understand it of the shewbread; and it is clear it was that from (<sup><B216></sup>1 Samuel 21:6) and from what our Lord says, (<sup><A124></sup>Matthew 12:4). Now this the priest had under his hand, being just taken off of the shewbread table, and was the perquisite of the priests; and which, though it was not lawful for any but priests to eat of, yet in this case of necessity he seemed willing to give it to David and his men, on this condition: if the young men have kept themselves at least from women; from their wives or others, and from any pollution by them, in any way or manner; but as this was also only of a ceremonial kind, it might as well have been dispensed with, had this been the case, as the other.

**Ver. 5.** *And David answered the priest, and said unto him*, etc.] In reply to the case of the young men his servants, and of himself too, who also was intended by the priest, though out of reverence to him not mentioned:

*of a truth women [have been] kept from us these three days since I came out*; reckoning either from the time he fled from Saul at Naioth, or from the time he left Jonathan, during which time both he and his men could have no converse with women, and receive no pollution by them; and this was the time which according to the law was required for the sanctifying of persons in this way, (<sup><D295></sup>Exodus 19:15);

*and the vessels of the young men are holy*; their garments, as Kimchi, not being defiled with any ceremonial uncleanness, as by the touch of any unclean person: or what instruments soever they were provided with for their journey; or rather their bodies; (see <sup><A107></sup>2 Corinthians 4:7 <sup><S104></sup>1 Thessalonians 4:4); and with respect to the priest's saying that the bread he had was hallowed or sacred, and so not for common use, David replies,

*and [the bread] is in a manner common*; inasmuch as it was taken off of the shewbread table, and was now common to the priest and his family, though not to others, yet in case of necessity through hunger might be allowed to strangers:

*yea, though it were sanctified this day in the vessel*; even though it had been set but that day on the shewbread table, and so became holy to the

Lord; and yet even in such a case and circumstances as David and his men were in, it might be taken from thence and eaten of; for, as Abendana observes, nothing stands in the way of preservation of life, but idolatry, adultery, and murder; everything else may be done for the sake of that but them: or as in the margin of our Bibles, “especially when there is this day other sanctified bread”; that is, since other bread is this day put upon the shewbread table, in the room of that which has been taken away, whereby it is become holy to the, Lord; then that which is removed may be eaten, and be allowed to us in our circumstances. It seems by this that this was the sabbath day; for on that day the removal of the shewbread loaves was made, (<sup>408</sup>Leviticus 24:8); and R. Isaiah says, that it was at the going out of the sabbath that David came there; and which still makes it a more appropriate case, as produced by our Lord to justify his disciples in plucking ears of corn on the sabbath day, (<sup>411</sup>Matthew 12:1-4).

**Ver. 6.** *So the priest gave him hallowed [bread]*, etc.] Being satisfied with the account he gave of himself, and his young men, and of the lawfulness of it in case of necessity, acts of mercy being to be preferred to ritual services. Whether he gave him five loaves, as he desired, is not said; but the reason of his giving him such sort of bread is observed,

*for there was no bread there*; in the tabernacle, whatever might be in the house of the priest:

*but the shewbread that was taken from before the Lord*; from off of the shewbread table; and it seems to have been just taken off, it being sabbath day, and not as yet carried to the house of the priest, and divided among the other priests as usual; and which was then removed, to put hot bread, in the day that it was taken away; that is, new bread, twelve fresh cakes; for when the twelve, that had stood a week on the shewbread table were removed, twelve more were immediately put in their room, and it seems by this they were put hot there; but here arises a difficulty, how they could be put hot there, when it was not lawful to bake on a sabbath day. About this the Jews are divided; some say they were baked on the sabbath day, but the greater part say that baking did not drive away the sabbath, or it was lawful on the sabbath day; but others say that they were baked on the evening of the sabbath, and kept in the oven until the time of their being set upon the table<sup>f435</sup>; and, as Abarbinel observes, the mouth of the oven might be stopped up till that time to keep in the heat; but others say<sup>f436</sup> this heat was

miraculous, or that a miracle was wrought for the sake of it; which is not probable.

**Ver. 7.** *Now a certain man of the servants of Saul [was] there that day,* etc.] When David came to Nob, and asked bread of the priest, and had it, which this man was an eyewitness of, (<sup><1371></sup>1 Samuel 22:9,10);

*detained before the Lord;* either because it was sabbath day, and so he might not travel, at least no more than two thousand cubits; or by some vow of his, which he was obliged to stay and perform; or on account of some impurity he had contracted, which he came to be cleansed from; or this detention was voluntary, in order to offer sacrifice to the Lord, or pray unto him, or to study the law of God in the tabernacle, pretending to be a very religious man:

*and his name [was] Doeg, an Edomite,* being by birth an Idumean, but a proselyte to the Jewish religion; or he was of the seed of Israel, but because he had dwelt in Edom, he was called an Edomite, as Kimchi thinks; just as Uriah is called for a like reason the Hittite:

*the chiefest of the herdmen that [belonged] to Saul;* Saul had his herds and men to look after them, and this man was set over them all, to see that they faithfully discharged their trust. The same officer the Romans called the praefect, or master of the cattle <sup>f437</sup>; (see Gill on “<sup><1372></sup>1 Chronicles 27:29”), and (see Gill on “<sup><1373></sup>1 Chronicles 27:31”); though this man was not only over the king’s cattle, but over those that kept them; and was in the same office as Phorbas was, under Laius king of Thebes <sup>f438</sup>, and Melanthius in Homer <sup>f439</sup>, and Faustulus to Amulius <sup>f440</sup>; but Abarbanel is of opinion that this is to be understood not of the keepers of herds and flocks, but of the shepherds or rulers of the people; and that this man was set over all the other magistrates and rulers of the people, hence said to be “set over the servants of Saul”, (<sup><1374></sup>1 Samuel 22:9); and so Jarchi calls him “Ab Beth Din”, or father of the sanhedrim, or great court of judicature; who was detained in the tabernacle to learn the law there, that he might be the better qualified for his office; but Kimchi interprets it as we do, the chief of the keepers of the herd, and both the Septuagint and Josephus <sup>f441</sup> say that he fed the king’s mules.

**Ver. 8.** *And David said unto Ahimelech,* etc.] After he had given him some of the loaves of the shewbread:

*and is there not here under thine hand spear or sword?* any weapon, meaning in the tabernacle, and in his keeping, and at his disposal; he knew the sword of Goliath was there, and perhaps had a principal view to it, and put this question in order to get that in his possession:

*for I have neither brought my sword nor my weapons with me;* neither his sword, nor any part of his armour, but was come quite naked and unarmed and, as he pretended,

*because the king's business required haste;* still continuing his lie; whereas the true reason was, he was let down in haste by his wife through a window of his house, and could not stay to take his armour with him; and had lain hid for some time, and passed incognito from place to place, and without armour, that he might be the less known and observed, and least suspected; though it may seem strange that Jonathan had not provided him with a sword.

**Ver. 9.** *And the priest said, the sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom thou slewest in the valley of Elah,* etc.] (see <sup><097D></sup>1 Samuel 17:2,51);

*behold, it [is here] wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod;* the garment of the high priest, in which were the Urim and Thummim, and the breastplate, or the linen vestments of the priests; (see <sup><022B></sup>1 Samuel 22:18); which were laid up in a chamber for their use; and behind them the sword of Goliath was wrapped up in a linen cloth, and reserved as a monument of the goodness of God to Israel, and the salvation of them wrought by the hands of David, who slew Goliath with this his own sword, and brought it with him. The Targum understands this word, rendered “behind”, not of the place where the sword was, but of the time when the priest said this, and paraphrases the words,

“after he had inquired for him by the ephod;”

(see <sup><022D></sup>1 Samuel 22:10);

*if thou wilt take that, take [it];* as if he should say, it is not mine to give thee, but thou mayest take it if thou pleasest; none has a better right to it; it is what thou tookest from the Philistine, and may take it again for thy use if thou art so inclined; and thou must either take this or none:

*for [there is] no other save that here;* in the tabernacle, nor even in the priest's house, nor in the city; for it was a city of priests, who did not wear swords:

*and David said, [there is] none like that, give it me;* and which, as he was capable of wielding and making use of, as it is plain he was by cutting off Goliath's head with it; so it might serve to strengthen his faith in God, as often as he looked upon it, that he would keep and preserve him, and in due time deliver him out of the hands of Saul, and all his enemies.

**Ver. 10.** *And David arose and fled that day for fear of Saul,* etc.] He had fled before for fear of him both from his own house, and from Naioth, (<sup><0918></sup>1 Samuel 19:18 20:1); but now he fled out of the land of Israel, for fear of him; or it may be the reason of his fear and flight on this day was because of Doeg the Edomite, lest he should go directly to Saul, and tell him where he was; and therefore through fear of him would not stay any longer, but the same day he came, he fled:

*and went to Achish the king of Gath;* Gath, according to Bunting<sup>f442</sup>, was twenty four miles from Nob. Achish, the king of it, is called Abimelech in the title of the thirty fourth psalm, (see <sup><0911></sup>Psalm 34:1), that name being common to the kings of the Philistines, as Pharaoh was to the kings of Egypt. It may seem strange that David should go into an enemy's country, and especially to the country of the Philistines, by whom he was mortally hated for the victories he had obtained over them, and the numbers of them he had slain; and particularly that he should go to Gath, the place of Goliath, their champion, whom he had slain, and whose sword he now had with him: but this is to be said for him, that such was the fury of Saul against him, and his resolution to slay him, that he was as safe in an enemy's country as in the land of Israel; and that if he must die, he might as well die in one place as another; and that he went particularly here, the reason might be, because all other lands were at peace with Saul, and so would have delivered him up to him, had he went elsewhere; but this people were at war with him, and he might hope not to be known by them; and if he was, that they might think it their interest, to detain such a person that was so serviceable to Saul, and so harmful to them; and being Saul's enemy, they might hope to engage him on their side against him; and besides, he might know that Achish was well disposed towards him, as he seems to be, and might like him never the worse for cutting off Goliath's head, who might not be heartily in the interest of Achish. After all, as

impolitic as this step of David's may seem to be, it is what great men have taken in their distress, to go over to their enemies, as Themistocles to the Molossians, and Alcibiades to the Lacedemonians.

**Ver. 11.** *And the servants of Achish said unto him*, etc.] Who knew who David was, and perceiving that he was respected by Achish:

*[is] not this David the king of the land?* of the land of the Philistines; so some render the words, "the king of this land"<sup>f443</sup>; which belongs unto him for his conquest of Goliath; for this was what was proposed by him, that whoever was the conqueror should possess the kingdom; and seeing it belongs to him, O Achish, why dost thou admit him to court? thou wilt be driven from the throne, and we shall be his servants, and not thine<sup>f444</sup>: but rather they mean the king of the land of Israel, having heard that he was anointed king by Samuel, and was to succeed Saul; or rather, they called him so because he led out the armies of Israel as their general, and being victorious was more respected than even Saul was; for they had heard what the women sung in their songs as follows:

*did they not sing one to another of him in dances, saying, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands?* which are the burden of their song, (<sup>Q987</sup>1 Samuel 18:7); and from whence the servants of Achish concluded, that he was in greater authority or honour, and in greater esteem than Saul their king was.

**Ver. 12.** *And David laid up these words in his heart*, etc.] Pondered upon them, and thought them over in his mind, finding that he was known, and his character also, and considered with himself what might be the consequence of this:

*and was sore afraid of Achish the king of Gath*; lest he should be set against him, and be prevailed upon by his servants to take away his life, or deliver him up into the hands of Saul.

**Ver. 13.** *And he changed his behaviour before them*, etc.] Behaved like a fool, or a madman: or changed his "taste"<sup>f445</sup>; which some understand of his reason, acted as if he was deprived of it; and others of his speech, his words and the accent of them, drawled them out, as such persons do:

*and feigned himself mad in their hands*; for in their hands he was, being taken by them, as the title of the fifty sixth psalm shows, (<sup>Q988</sup>Psalm 56:1);



and this stratagem he used to get himself out of their hands, acting the part of a madman, delirious, and out of his senses:

*and scrabbled on the doors of the gate*; as if he was writing something there, and making marks upon them:

*and let his spittle fall down upon his beard*; slavered, as idiots and madmen do; and however mean this may seem in David to act such a part, it cannot be condemned as wicked, since it was only a stratagem to deliver himself, out of an enemy's hand, and stratagems are always allowed to be used against an enemy; and such a method as this has been taken by men of the greatest sense and wit, as by Brutus <sup>f446</sup> and Solon <sup>f447</sup>; and yet, according to the Vulgate Latin and Septuagint versions, this case of his was real and not feigned; that through the surprise of being known in the court of Achish, he was seized with an epilepsy; that his countenance was changed, and his mouth distorted, as persons in such fits are; that he fell among them as one convulsed, and fell at, and dashed against the doors of the gates, and foamed at the mouth, as such persons do; (see ~~1099~~ Luke 9:39); and so in the following words the Greek version is, ye see the man is an epileptic; I do not want epileptics; but the thirty fourth and fifty sixth psalms, composed by him at this time, show that as he was of a sound mind, so in good health of body, and not subject to such fits as here represented, (see ~~1381~~ Psalm 34:1-22 56:1-13); which would have rendered him unfit for such composures.

**Ver. 14.** *Then said Achish to his servants, lo, you see the man is mad*, etc.] Which he said, as willing his servants should think so, and therefore rather the object of their pity than of their rage and malice; or as really believing he was so, which he and they might conclude not merely from these his actions, before described, which they might judge real and not feigned; but they might suppose this was truly his case, brought upon him by the ill usage of Saul, who pursuing him from place to place, and sending after him to take away his life, had really brought him to distraction; and this they might rather conclude from his coming to Gath, an enemy's country, and whose champion he had slain, and many others of them; which it might be thought no man in his senses would have done:

*wherefore [then] have ye brought him to me?* for if he was brought to be employed in his service, he seemed very unfit for it, whether in the camp, or in the court; and if to be tried and condemned as an enemy, since he was a madman, he was rather to be pitied.

**Ver. 15.** *Have I need of madmen?* etc.] Or fools, do I want them? have not I enough of them already at my court? I want wise men, and not fools and madmen. The Jews say <sup>f448</sup> that the wife and daughter of Achish were mad; that while David was playing the fool and madman without, they were acting the same part within; so that Achish had enough of that sort of diversion, if it was to be reckoned such; as it was according to the taste of some persons, who used, as in later so in earlier times, to keep fools in their houses to make them sport; but Achish had enough of that, and too much, at least needed no more:

*that ye have brought this [fellow] to play the madman in my presence?* or act the part of a fool before me:

*shall this [fellow] come into mine house?* court or palace, and have a post there; you need be in no pain about it; he is neither agreeable to me, nor fit for any; and therefore Achish drove him away as a fool or madman, instead of imprisoning him as an enemy, or taking away his life; see the title of the thirty fourth psalm, (~~3801~~ Psalm 34:1).