



David's Faith Test: Saul's Insane Jealousy (1 Sam 21) *Commentary: Week Twelve*

New American Commentary¹

4. The Lord Blesses David the Fugitive But Judges Saul

These nine chapters depict David's "wilderness experience." As Israel's wilderness experience followed an exodus from a foreign king, so David's followed an exodus from a king "such as all the other nations have." And as the wilderness for Israel preceded possession of the Promised Land, so for David it preceded possession of a promised kingdom. Furthermore, during this wilderness period David experienced events that in crucial ways paralleled those of the Israelites following their expulsion from Egypt—pursuit by the armed forces of the king they were fleeing, a hostile encounter with the Midianites, an attempted foray into Moab, and yet the Lord's protection against all human foes.

These connections between David's life and the Israelites' experiences recorded in the Torah not only magnify the story of David to one of epic proportions, but they also create the expectation that the Lord would ultimately give David the fulfillment of all the good promises made to him.

(1) The Lord's Priest at Nob Assists David [21:1-9](#)

[21:1-6](#) Nob was a city probably located atop Mount Scopus, just northeast of Jerusalem and about two miles south of David's Naioth hideout. Though not a Levitical city, the small settlement was populated by descendants of Aaron the priest (cf. [22:19](#)), who operated a Yahwistic worship center there. Members of Saul's retinue did come to the sanctuary from time to time (cf. v. [7](#)); McCarter suggests it was "the most sacred shrine of Saul's kingdom" and perhaps "a kind of official state sanctuary." But the royal son-in-law's arrival at this time elicited a troubled response. Ahimelech, who oversaw the sanctuary, "trembled" when David unexpectedly arrived alone. Perhaps Ahimelech was aware of the recent events at Naioth (cf. [19:19-24](#)), in which the lives of Yahwistic prophets were endangered by David's presence, and he feared a repetition of these events at Nob. Knowing that David was commander of the royal bodyguard ([22:14](#)), he thought it unusual for David to be "alone," that is, without the king. Accordingly, he plied David with two questions that probed into the circumstances of his visit.

David's answer may be taken as self-serving deception or as a shrewd but honest use of language. David noted first that "the king charged me with a certain matter" (v. [2](#); **Hb.** v. [3](#)). What he failed to clarify in his opening words to Ahimelech, however, was the name of the king to which he was referring. If it was King Yahweh (cf. [8:7](#); [12:12](#)), and I am inclined to believe it was since David is elsewhere recorded referring to God as king (cf. [Pss 5:2](#); [20:9](#); [24:7-10](#); [29:10](#); [68:24](#); [145:1](#)), then David was telling the truth.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 220-223.

Secrecy and solitude were essential aspects of the special mission given him by King Yahweh. Other men would join him in this undertaking, but they were to meet David later. Due to the matter's urgency and haste, David was now several miles from Gibeah and had made no provision for food. Boldly he asked Ahimelech for "five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find" (v. [3](#); **Hb.** v. [4](#)). Receiving food from others while on a journey is a time-honored tradition in the Middle East (cf. [Gen 18:3–8](#); [19:3](#); [Judg 19:20–21](#)), so David's request was not exceptional.

There was one problem associated with honoring David's request; Ahimelech did not "have any profane bread on hand" (v. [4](#); **Hb.** v. [5](#); NIV, "ordinary bread"), that is, bread that might be offered to non-Levites without any special consideration. However, he did possess "some holy bread" (NIV, "consecrated bread")—that is "bread of the Presence that had been removed from before the LORD and replaced by hot bread" (v. [6](#); **Hb.** v. [7](#); cf. [Exod 25:30](#)). This replacement of the bread may have occurred in connection with the new moon festival celebrated a day or two earlier (cf. [20:24](#), [27](#)). Under normal circumstances the Torah required that such food be consumed only by "Aaron and his sons ... in a holy place" ([Lev 24:9](#)).

Yet specific Torah laws might be set aside if higher-level considerations warranted, especially the preservation of life. As a vested Aaronic priest, Ahimelech possessed authority to interpret and apply Torah guidelines to specific cases and could do so with some latitude. Since food was necessary for life and David and his men had no food, it was consistent with Torah principles to provide David and his men the means to sustain their lives.

Ahimelech ruled that David and his men could eat bread reserved for Levites if they did so in a Levite-like way—that is, with due consideration for ritual purity laws. Levites could eat the Bread of the Presence only in the holy place and thus were required to be ritually clean. Since David and his men were supposedly on a military mission, they could not be expected to keep all the ritual cleanliness laws, especially those regarding contact with corpses ([Num 19:14–16](#)). However, it was reasonable to ask men on military missions to keep ritual cleanliness laws that related to sexual contact ([Lev 15:18](#)). That having been agreed to, David was given the consecrated bread.

David's statement that "the men's things are holy even on missions that are not holy" (v. [5](#); **Hb.** v. [6](#)) suggests that he considered Israelite warfare to be a task that should be performed only by consecrated servants of the Lord. Earlier David had been motivated to fight Goliath because the Philistine had "defied the armies of the living God" ([17:36](#)), a reason that was at least partly theological. When he entered into battle against Goliath, he did so "in the name of the LORD Almighty" ([17:45](#))—that is, with due regard to his relationship with the Lord. Apparently David transferred his personal practices to those under his command, requiring them to be in proper relationship with God during all missions.

[21:7–9](#) Earlier Saul had fought against the Edomites (cf. [14:47](#)); perhaps Doeg was a prisoner of war who had proven unusually useful to Saul. Alternatively, he may have been a mercenary. The purpose of Doeg's presence at Nob is not clearly understood by modern interpreters, but it may be related to some form of punishment or penance.

Besides food, David needed a weapon; thus, he inquired about obtaining "a spear or a sword" (v. [8](#); **Hb.** v. [9](#)). It is reasonable to assume that David asked about these items because he had deposited Goliath's weapons there earlier as a gift of dedication (cf. [Lev 27:14ff.](#)). Such gifts could be returned to the one who had given them, though a redemption payment would normally have been required. Ahimelech, who had carefully preserved David's dedicated item "wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod" (v. [9](#); **Hb.** v. [10](#)), granted David permission to reclaim it, which he did without hesitation.

(2) David is Saved from the Philistines [21:10–15](#)

[21:10–15](#) In an effort to find sanctuary “from Saul” (v. [10](#); **Hb.** v. [11](#)) and yet avoid endangering the lives of family and friends, David “went to Achish king of Gath,” some twenty-three miles west southwest of Nob.

However, David’s arrival in the city aroused suspicions among the royal servants there. Achish’s attendants were poorly informed yet ironically insightful concerning David—they mistakenly called him “the king of the land” (v. [11](#); **Hb.** v. [12](#)). At the same time, they were aware of his status as a Hebrew folk hero who was celebrated with song and dance.

Knowing what was being said about him, David realized that his life was as much at risk in the royal court of Gath as it was in the royal court of Gibeah. Consequently, he found it necessary to act with the same wisdom here that enabled him to survive in Saul’s court. For the present situation he used a different tactic: “he changed his perception in their eyes” (v. [13](#), **Hb.** v. [14](#); NIV, “he pretended to be insane in their presence”).

This was accomplished by vandalous acts against public property and demeaning acts against his own person. He abused public property in Gath by “making marks on the doors of the gate,” perhaps writing nonsensical graffiti or symbols associated with cultic curses. He also treated himself disgracefully by “letting saliva run down his beard.” The beard was an obvious and important symbol of manhood in that culture, and desecration of one’s own beard— especially with spit (cf. [Num 12:14](#); [Deut 25:9](#); [Job 17:6](#); [30:10](#))—would be an obvious indication of derangement within the context of their culture.

David’s act was certainly convincing to Achish, who pronounced the foreigner “insane” (v. [14](#); **Hb.** v. [15](#)). Thus he convinced the Philistines that he was no longer a threat to them. Payne even suggests that insanity was viewed as a divine affliction and rendered someone taboo—not to be harmed. Launching into a tirade against his courtiers, Achish questioned why they had even allowed David into the royal palace. Achish’s suggestion that there was an ample supply “of madmen” (v. [15](#); **Hb.** v. [16](#)) in Gath need not be taken literally, though people with unusual characteristics (e.g., excessive height, twenty-four digits; cf. [17:4](#); [2 Sam 21:20](#)) were certainly associated with that city.

David’s success places him in a category with Abraham and Isaac, who also outwitted a Philistine king when they sensed their lives were threatened (cf. [Gen 20:2](#); [26:7](#)). His actions also sharpened the contrast between himself and Saul. David took upon himself the trappings of insanity to hide his sanity; Saul surrounded himself with the trappings of sanity to cloak his insanity.