New American Commentary[1]

(3) David Receives Assistance from the King of Moab *22:1–5*

22:1 Leaving Gath, David went ten miles east to the cave of Adullam in Judahite territory. David's "brothers and his father's household" (v. 1) learned of his return to their region and left their home in Bethlehem to join him there. No doubt they were motivated to do this not because of their great love of David but because of their fear of reprisals by Saul.

22:2 In addition to his family, "about four hundred" (v. 2) individuals who lived on the ragged edge of society came to David's outpost in the Israelite frontier lands. Included among this group were "all who were in distress or in debt or discontented." Those who for various reasons had failed to integrate into the fabric of society may have thought to find in David a leader who could understand them and who would help them create a society insulated from those from whom they were alienated. Alternatively, they may have thought David would help them get revenge on the society they had left. At this point David and his band have some of the characteristics of the group centered around Jephthah, another Israelite who was forced to leave Israelite society, only to return later as its leader (cf. Judg 11:3).

22:3–5 David and his group did not long remain in Judah but instead "went to Mizpah in Moab" (v. 3), an otherwise unknown site somewhere east of the Dead Sea. Mizpah, whose name literally means "watchtower," was apparently the fortified city of residence at the time for "the king of Moab." In a personal audience with the Moabite king, David requested that his father and mother be granted sanctuary in Moab until David learned "what God will do" for him.

The king granted David's request, perhaps for two reasons: first, because he was honoring the ancient practice of providing sanctuary for adversaries of enemies (cf. 1 Sam 27:4–5; 1 Kgs 11:17–18; 12:2; 2 Kgs 25:26) and second, because David had a Moabite great-grandmother (cf. Ruth 4:13–17). The provision of protection for David's family lasted "as long as David was in the stronghold" (Hb. *meṣûdâ*). No consensus exists among scholars about the location of the stronghold; options include a site in Moab (perhaps Mizpah itself), modern Masada just west of the Dead Sea, and the cave of Adullam. The comment by Gad in v. 5 suggests that David and his men resided in a Moabite fortress.

However, the stay was only temporary because the prophet Gad admonished David to depart for Judah. The command is stated as a categorical prohibition, using a clause structure parallel to that employed in the Ten Commandments (cf. Exod 20:4–5, 12–17). The reason for the strong wording is simple: the Torah prohibited the establishment of friendly treaties with Moabites (cf. Deut 23:2–6). As a true prophet of the Lord, Gad's duty was to help others understand and heed the Torah. If David established such a treaty with the king of Moab, he would violate the Torah and so risk bringing judgment on himself and all who were with him.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORD*search* CROSS e-book, 224-236.

Understanding Gad's admonition to possess divine authority, David obediently "left and went to the forest of Hereth," an unidentified area west of the Dead Sea. Apparently, David's family and followers also accompanied him to that location. The forest location would have provided excellent protection against large, organized forces that Saul might bring against them. In obeying the Torah—even though it meant leaving a stronghold built by human hands, David would find himself in a far safer stronghold, Yahweh himself (cf. 2 Sam 23:14; Pss 18:2 [Hb. v. 3]; 31:3 [Hb. v. 4]; 144:2).

The prophet Gad, first mentioned here, appears to have been a member of David's band of followers. Gad later informed David of punishment for a violation of the Lord's will (cf. 2 Sam 24:11–14) and also produced archived records of David's life (1 Chr 29:29), which suggests the prophet had a long tenure of service to David.

(4) Saul Slaughters the Lord's Priests at Nob *22:6–19*

22:6–10 Saul, who had previously issued an order to all those in his service to kill David (cf. 19:1), received a report "that David and his men had been discovered" (v. 6). At the time he was conducting royal business outdoors in a time-honored manner (cf. Judg 4:5). The geographically prominent location (a hilltop), the presence of Saul's throne under a type of tree associated with the worship of Yahweh (cf. Gen 21:33), and the spear in the king's hand all lent authority and dignity to the conduct of royal affairs at that site.

Mention of David's name caused Saul to launch into a half-crazed tirade against "all his officials standing around him." Saul addressed his officials as "men of Benjamin" (v. 7), indicating that he had given positions of highest authority in his government only to kinsmen. Appealing to their tribal loyalty as well as to their greed, he suggested that they had much to lose if "the son of Jesse"—a Judahite—became king in Saul's place. Through the use of two rhetorical questions he indicated that a nonfamily member would not grant them such favors as he had done.

This being the case, Saul expressed consternation with the fact that his family members had not been more supportive of his efforts to dispose of this supposed threat to his kingship. Their inaction amounted to a massive conspiracy against the crown, and proof of this lay in the fact that no one had informed Saul that his own son Jonathan had made "a covenant with the son of Jesse" (v. 8; cf. 18:3). Their silence proved to him that none of them was concerned about him.

In his rage Saul's distorted thinking took a peculiar turn as he accused his own son of being the ringleader of the anti-Saul conspiracy. As Saul now envisioned it, David was not actually Saul's primary enemy—he was merely a pawn in a regicidal scheme hatched by Jonathan! Apparently Saul considered it plausible that Jonathan had hired David as a hit man in a plan to become king in his father's stead (cf. 2 Kgs 19:37). Such distorted thinking may help to explain why Saul attempted to murder Jonathan only days before (cf. 20:33).

Saul not only was distorted in his perception of Jonathan's actions, but he misunderstood David's as well; he thought David was at that moment lying "in wait," seeking to kill him at the first opportunity.

Saul's Israelite officials remained silent during and after the king's diatribe. The awkward silence was finally broken when a foreigner, "Doeg the Edomite, who was standing with Saul's officials" (v. 9), came forward with some information regarding David's visit to Nob. In addition to previously known aspects of David's interaction with Ahimelech—the fact that he "gave him provisions and the sword of Goliath" (v. 10)—Doeg also revealed that "Ahimelech inquired of the LORD for him."

This new information gives rise to two very different conclusions. First, it suggests that David was deeply committed to submitting to and receiving help from the Lord during his time of trouble. Second, from Saul's perspective it indicated that Ahimelech was using the unique powers of his office to give aid to an enemy of the king—anyone might supply David with food and a weapon, but only an Aaronic priest could inquire of the Lord.

22:11–15 Saul's perverted mind concluded from Doeg's report that the conspiracy against him was far larger than previously imagined. Now it was not just a son and a son-in-law out to kill him; hundreds of people, including the entire priestly establishment at Nob, were marshaled against him! In an effort to quash the revolt and deprive it of divine assistance, Saul "sent for the priest Ahimelech son of Ahitub and his father's whole family" (v. 11).

Obediently, the adult males of the priestly family made the hour-long trip west northwest to Gibeah, "to the king." Not knowing the nature of the king's request, perhaps these Ithamarites (cf. 1 Chr 24:6), relatives of the Elide family, imagined that they would once again be permitted to care for the ark of the covenant. But the king's first words spoken to Ahimelech dashed whatever hopes they might have held.

In the formal setting of the royal court, Saul held a trial in which he was the prosecutor and the family of Ahitub, represented by Ahimelech, were the defendants. Refusing to mention the name of his new adversary in conversation, Saul addressed Ahimelech as "son of Ahitub" (v. 12). He then named additional co-conspirators, suggesting that the priests had "conspired against" him. As Saul interpreted the events at Nob, Ahimelech's actions, supported by the other priests, had strengthened David's hand so that he "has rebelled" and now "lies in wait for" (v. 13) the king.

Stunned by the king's insane accusations, Ahimelech gave a four-pronged response. First, he provided a fivefold defense of David: far from being Saul's enemy, David was (1) "your servant," (2) "loyal," (3) "the king's son-in-law," (4) "captain of your bodyguard," and (5) "highly respected in your household" (v. 14). Second, Ahimelech characterized his priestly actions toward David as routine. Although it was true that he "inquired of God for" David, this "was not the first time" (v. 15). Third, the priest affirmed his loyalty to Saul, calling himself "your servant." Finally, Ahimelech declared his non-involvement in any plot against Saul: he "knows nothing at all about this whole affair."

22:16–19 Unfazed by Ahimelech's rebuttal, Saul found the entire family of Ahitub guilty and pronounced sentence against them. Using the stern language of the Torah in pronouncing the punishment (cf. Gen 2:17; 20:7), Saul declared "dying you shall die" (v. 16; NIV, "you shall surely die"). This judgment applied to the "whole family."

Immediately the king ordered them executed. The men who received this command were presumably Saul's bodyguards, who only days before had been under David's command (v. 14). David had previously stated that these men were careful to observe cleanliness regulations (21:5), implying that they were devout followers of the Lord. Not surprisingly, therefore, Saul's attendants "were not willing to raise a hand to strike the priests of the LORD."

Perhaps one other reason for their disobedience to a direct order from the king was their rejection of the premise on which the death sentence was based. According to Saul, the priestly family of Ahitub had to die "because they too have sided with David" in a plot against the king. Saul's attendants loved and respected David (16:18; 18:5, 22, 30), and they knew him to be devoted to the king's welfare. There was no conspiracy against the king, so the priests had no reason to die.

This is now the second recorded instance where those under Saul's leadership refused to carry out a foolish royal order (cf. 14:44–45). It reinforces the Israelite understanding that earthly kings possessed finite powers and that Israelites must "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Understanding the Israelites' reluctance to kill Yahwistic priests and the limits of power the Israelites had imposed on the royal office, Saul turned to a non-Israelite to "turn and strike down the priests" (v. 18). As an Edomite, Doeg had no compunctions about fulfilling the order; accordingly "he killed eighty-five men who wore the linen ephod," that is, duly authorized leaders in the worship of Yahweh. Perhaps, as Hertzberg suggests, Doeg used this event to get revenge on the priests of Nob for the detention he faced at the sanctuary earlier (cf. 21:7).

The slaughter did not end there, however. Apparently with Saul's approval (cf. v. 21), Doeg also slaughtered the inhabitants of Nob, including men, women, children, and livestock (v. 19). This kind of mass execution, elsewhere termed ḥerem, was authorized in the Torah only for use against non-Yahwistic peoples living in Canaan who would otherwise teach the Israelites to sin against the Lord (cf. Deut 20:17–18). The perpetration of this act against a city of Aaronic priests—those who taught Israelites to avoid sinning against Yahweh—was an unspeakable crime. Saul's stunning inversion of the revealed will of the Lord in this instance is consistent with the text's portrayal of Saul as a king "such as all the other nations have" (8:5).

Doeg's actions constitute the second time in 1 Samuel that Aaronic/Ithamarite priests were killed by foreigners as the result of Israelite sin (cf. 4:10–11). There is an essential difference between the two situations, however. On the earlier occasion it was the wickedness of the priests that caused their death, whereas in the latter it was the wickedness of the priest's king.

(5) David Rescues Yahweh's Priest Abiathar *22:20–23*

Providentially, one of the Aaronic priests, "Abiathar, a son of Ahimelech son of Ahitub escaped" (v. 20). Now a fugitive from Saul, Abiathar found it expedient to abandon Israelite society and "join David" at Keilah (cf. 23:6) in the territory of Judah. When he arrived at David's camp, he told him "that Saul had killed the priests of the LORD" (v. 21). The report was accurate, for even though Saul did not actually wield the sword, it was his mandate that brought about the slaughter.

Without mentioning Saul's role in the tragedy, David acknowledged that he himself was significantly "responsible for the death of" (v. 22) Abiathar's clan. He was accountable, not because of anything he had done, but because of something he had not done; David failed to kill Doeg although he had reasonable suspicions that he would inform Saul about David's activities in Nob. David's admission of homicidal negligence could not bring the dead back to life, but it could motivate him to give special consideration to the lone survivor of the massacre. Accordingly, David asked Abiathar to "stay with" him, assuring the priest that he would "be safe with" David. Abiathar accepted the offer (cf. 23:6).

(6) David Rescues Keilah from the Philistines *23:1–6*

23:1–4 Less than three miles south of the cave of Adullam was the fortified city of Keilah (Khirbet Qila). A walled city located in the agriculturally productive Shephelah region of Judah, Keilah represented a desirable prize for the Philistines. It was only about twelve miles east southeast of Gath and was relatively isolated from other Israelite cities. These details, in combination with the time of year—early summer, either during barley or wheat harvest—meant that Keilah was an attractive and vulnerable target for Philistine plunderers.

David, who was presumably with his troops in the forest of Hereth (cf. 22:5) at the time of the Philistine attack, was informed of the events at Keilah. In the tradition of previous Spirit-anointed deliverers, David responded to the news with a desire to lead his fellow Israelites in battle against the enemy.

Before going into battle, Israelites would normally await a confirmation that the Lord would give the enemy into their hands (cf. Judg 1:2; 3:28; 4:14; 7:15; 1 Sam 14:12). In keeping with this tradition, David formally "inquired of the LORD" (v. 2), and received word that he should "attack the Philistines and save Keilah." The method David used to discern God's will is unknown; perhaps he was acting as a prophet (cf. 2 Sam 23:2; Acts 4:25). According to v. 6 David did not have the ephod until Abiathar met him at Keilah. Whatever method David used, it did not seem to be satisfactory to David's men; they were unconvinced by the words of David's supposed revelation. The command to go "against the Philistine forces" (v. 3), an army with superior armaments and greater numbers, did not seem divinely inspired. In fact, David's troops were even "afraid" of doing battle with the comparatively weaker Israelite army under Saul's command—how much more so the Philistines. The men's concerns caused David to go before the Lord "once again" (v. 4). As before, the Lord responded favorably to David's request, promising him success.

23:5–6 Armed with that confirmatory word, "David and his men went into battle. Exactly as promised, the Israelites defeated the Philistines and captured the Philistines' "livestock" as booty. The captured Philistine livestock may have been flocks brought to the region of Keilah to consume the Israelites' pasture lands and grain fields; alternatively, they may have been beasts of burden the Philistines intended to use to carry off Israelite possessions.

While David was at Keilah, a large number of individuals joined his ranks (cf. v. 13). Of those who came to him there, none was more important to him than "Abiathar son of Ahimelech" (v. 6). Abiathar's presence in David's camp was especially important because he had "brought the ephod." Abiathar's ephod was presumably like the cultic garment mentioned in the Torah (cf. Exod 28:6–35) that had attached to it a pouch containing the revelatory Urim and Thummim. Thus with Abiathar's arrival David now had acquired access to the only revelatory device sanctioned by the Torah (cf. Num 27:21). The deficiencies and questions that plagued David's previous efforts to know God's will (cf. vv. 2–4) were dealt with in a convincing way.

(7) David Escapes from Saul in the Arabah *23:7–29*

23:7–13 From his information-gathering network Saul learned that David was at Keilah (v. 7). Saul took this as a divinely engineered circumstance that would enable him to capture David. Accordingly, "Saul called up all the people" (v. 8; NIV, "his forces") to attack Keilah and seize David. Reports of this massive conscription order came to David, who immediately sought the Lord's will by means of the ephod.

As portrayed by the biblical writer, the central event in the Keilah episode of vv. 7–13a is David's pursuit of divine counsel by means of the ephod; 48 of the 103 Hebrew words in this section (47 percent) are used to depict this one seemingly minor incident. The author used the ephod-based interchange between David and the Lord to achieve several results relevant to the themes and theological intents of the book. First, the incident demonstrated David's reliance on the Lord; though David was Israel's greatest military hero, he would make no military move without divine approval.

Second, the success David experienced in communicating with the Lord demonstrated the vitality of his relationship with the God of Israel. Third, the short narrative heightened the contrast between David and Saul; Saul would repeatedly fail to establish a link with the Lord, while David would have easy and extended dialogue with him. Finally, it demonstrated the effectiveness of the Torah-prescribed means of receiving divine counsel.

Presumably Keilah's residents had heard what Saul had done to Nob's citizens (cf. 22:18–19) and feared he would do the same to them if they were perceived to be supporting David. Certainly David wished to avoid inflicting harm on his group or on the people of the city. Consequently, he and his men left quickly before Saul could set out against him there. David's course of action produced the intended effect: Saul "did not go" to Keilah and destroy it. At the time of his retreat from the city, David's band numbered "about six hundred"— a 50-percent increase from the time when he was at Adullam (cf. 22:2).

23:14–18 Having saved Keilah through his timely departure, David now needed to act in such a way as to protect his followers. The strategy he chose involved three key elements; first, frequent relocation— he "kept moving from place to place"; second, preference for remote frontier areas such as "the Desert of Ziph" (v. 14), some sixteen miles south of Bethlehem; and third, residing in easily defensible locations—"the desert strongholds" of the central mountain regions. Although "Saul searched" for David and his men "day after day," God worked through David's plan to keep the group safe.

One of the locations in which David and his men stayed was "Horesh in the Desert of Ziph" (v. 15), an otherwise unknown location. While there, David "learned that Saul had come out to take his life." Jonathan was as well informed about David's location as his father (cf. 20:2). Unencumbered by the limitations of traveling with a large armed force, Jonathan was able to get "to David at Horesh" (v. 16) before his father could. His purpose was as noble as his commitment to David; he "strengthened his hand in God" (NIV, "helped him find strength in God").

Jonathan encouraged his friend by reminding him of the trustworthy promise the Lord had made to him earlier—"you will be king over Israel" (v. 17), and then by suggesting some implications of this divine promise. Because the Lord was overseeing David's rise to kingship, David had no need to "be afraid." Because the Lord was with David, Saul would not "lay a hand on" him. Because it was the Lord's decision to install David in the nation's highest political office, David was not revolting against the Saulide dynasty as Saul had charged; thus it would be possible for David to fulfill the divine plan and maintain harmonious relations with the Saulides. Jonathan could "be second" to David in the new order. The Lord's plans for David were not hidden (cf. 2 Sam 5:2), nor were they the product of David's imagination: even Saul knew them.

During this final recorded meeting, David and Jonathan confirmed and extended commitments they had made to each other on previous occasions (cf. 18:3–4; 20:14–16). Afterward "Jonathan went home," apparently choosing not to join—or being barred from joining (cf. 20:30)—his father's militia in the task of tracking down David. For his part, "David remained at Horesh."

23:19–20 Both David and Saul had intelligence-gathering networks that included people from opposing tribes. David had received crucial information regarding Saul's activities and intentions from Jonathan, a Benjamite (cf. 20:35–39); here Saul received valuable information about David from "the Ziphites" (v. 19), who were Judahites associated with the family of Caleb (cf. 1 Chr 2:42). Not waiting for Saul to threaten them with destruction, the Ziphites took the initiative and "went up to Saul at Gibeah" to inform the king of David's whereabouts. The information they provided was quite detailed, specifying even the exact hill.

That the Ziphites would provide this information to remove the threat of destruction by Saul's forces is understandable. But the enthusiastic support they offered Saul is less so; they virtually begged Saul to come down (lit., "for every desire of your soul, O king, you must come down!"). Furthermore, they voluntarily committed themselves to hand David "over to the king." David's noble reaction to this betrayal by fellow tribesmen is recorded in Psalm 54. The tone of this psalm reflects the words of encouragement given him by Jonathan. It also suggests that David would not use this situation as a justification for personally avenging the traitors; he would leave vengeance to God (cf. Ps 54:2; also Deut 32:35).

23:21–25 Saul responded to the Ziphites' offer in a manner that is, from a spiritual standpoint, predictably inappropriate. The Ziphites had just betrayed the Lord's anointed, yet Saul stated they were "blessed to Yahweh" (v. 21; NIV, "the LORD bless you") because of this act in Saul's behalf.

Then Saul asked the Ziphites to "go and probe again" (v. 22; NIV, "go and make further preparation") into David's situation and then return to him (v. 23). Saul especially had need of three vital pieces of information: first, he needed to know "where David usually goes"; this would be useful in determining possible locations for attacking David during his routine activities. Second, he needed to know "who has seen him," that is, what individuals and/or groups had been cooperating with him and supplying him with necessities for survival. No doubt Saul would be displeased to learn that his own son was among those who had assisted David in the desert. Finally, he needed to know "about all the hiding places he uses" (v. 23). This information would be vital in case Saul wished to make a predawn raid on David's camp, as he had done previously against the Philistines (cf. 11:11).

Once Saul had received this valuable data from the Ziphites, he would use it to track David "down among all the clans of Judah." The king needed help in acquiring this information because David "is very crafty" (*'ārôm ya'rîm*). The verb phrase expressing Saul's perception of David creates an ironic wordplay with the narrator's description of Saul, who was said to be *'ārōm*, "naked," in 19:24. David's "craftiness" permitted him to remain hidden from view; Saul's caused him to be shamefully exposed to all.

Obediently the Ziphites left Gibeah ahead of Saul (v. 24). Shortly thereafter Saul and his men began their pernicious game of cat-and-mouse. Meanwhile, David and his men had moved about five miles south of Ziph to an area near the wealthy Nabal's city of residence (cf. 25:2). Then when David learned of Saul's southward movements, "he went down to the rock" in the Maon wilderness, apparently a natural formation particularly desirable for defensive purposes. Guided by intelligence reports from the Ziphites, Saul responded to David's movements by leading the royal troops "into the Desert of Maon."

23:26–29 The confrontation almost came to a head when Saul and his men arrived at David's desert mountain sanctuary and began scaling "one side of the mountain" (v. 26). A deadly battle pitting Israelite against Israelite seemed inevitable, and yet it probably was David's to win. After all, he was Israel's greatest military leader, and he and his troops held the high ground in the battlefield of their own choosing. Nevertheless, David had no desire to risk killing Yahweh's anointed king (cf. 1 Sam 24:10; 26:9, 11, 23; 2 Sam 1:14–16). Consequently, David had his troops abandon their advantageous site and begin a militarily foolish but theologically wise retreat, "hurrying to get away from Saul."

"Saul and his forces were closing in on David and his men to capture them" when a providential and urgent report arrived, indicating that "the Philistines are raiding the land." Obedient to the royal mandate given him by the Israelite elders (cf. 8:20), Saul reluctantly and temporarily abandoned his personal vendetta. National interests were given precedence over personal ones, and the fight with David was set aside for another day.

In recognition of this remarkable prevention of a bloody civil war, the rock outcropping on which these events occurred came to be known as "the Promontory of the Parting" (NIV, "Sela Hammahlekoth"). Following this narrow escape, David and his men traveled east to the rugged hills west of the Dead Sea "and lived in the strongholds of En Gedi" (= "The Spring of the Young Goat"; v. 29; Hb. 24:1). In this area David and his men had isolation, protection, and, because of the En Gedi spring, an adequate supply of fresh water.