

# ISRAEL'S BLOODGUILT - 2 SAMUEL 21:1-9

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Last Updated: 04/13/2012

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***Abstract* — This study investigates the account in 2 Samuel 21:1-9 where David acts to undo the consequences of Saul's sin that had caused a famine across the land resulting in much suffering of God's people, Israel. Saul's transgression against the Gibeonites is revealed to be the instigation behind the famine, and David decisively acts to restore peace with the Gibeonites and bring blessing and restoration back to the land of Canaan. David's concession to the Gibeonite's request is perplexing but his heart and motive for acting demonstrates his concern for God's people and for the proper restitution on behalf of the betrayal of Saul.**

***General Research Topic(s)* — 2 Samuel, History of Israel, King David, Old Testament Studies, Exegesis/Hermeneutics.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this essay is to investigate the record of the three-year famine and the "bloodguilt" of Israel in 2 Samuel 21:1-9 and how the passage compares the characters of David and Saul as distinct kings of Israel. The narrative logic of the passage will be closely tracked to understand what is being conveyed and how the parallelism between David and Saul is constructed. Then, the disparity between the characters of David and Saul will be evaluated to see what is being said about each and how their respective character relates to their personal capacity to lead God's people, Israel. Finally, the significance of this record in Christian witness will be addressed.

## II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The book of 2 Samuel, while appearing as a distinct book in modern translations, is actually a single unit in the original Hebrew text. It was divided into two separate books when translated into Greek (i.e., in the Septuagint) in the third-century B.C.E. The books of Samuel are also closely linked with the books of Kings. 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings are referred to as the "Kingdoms" in the Septuagint, but scholars assert that actually Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings constitute one large work historically covering the period from the conquest of Canaan (c. 1200 B.C.E.) to the release of King Jehoiachin from prison (c. 561 B.C.E.). Therefore, it is typically thought that this larger work could not have been completed any earlier than late sixth-century B.C.E.<sup>1</sup>

However, regarding the book of Samuel specifically, it is generally held that part of it was written at an earlier date and part at a later date. Scholars say that the final editors/redactors of Samuel likely stitched together previous material that had been recorded as well as adding their own documentation to complete the book, referring to these "stages" of Samuel as part of a primary and secondary "edition" of the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter R. Ackroyd, *The Second Book of Samuel* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 4.

Deuteronomistic history text.<sup>2</sup> Textual critics tend to view a “single-stage” theory as too simplistic and that several different hands must have been involved in producing the final text of Samuel. Scholars readily acknowledge the ambiguity and complexities involved in trying to ascertain the date of composition of Samuel (as well as the rest of the Deuteronomistic history books). Several views appear in the literature regarding the possible date of compilation for Samuel that range from sometime soon after the reign of David (c. 9<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.E.) to as late as during Israel’s exile in Babylon (c. 5<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.E.).<sup>3</sup>

The purpose and significance of the book of 2 Samuel cannot be fully understood without seeing its role in the larger scope along with 1 Samuel. The records in the book of Samuel convey the end of the judges period with the emerging monarchy of Israel, first under Saul, and then, subsequently, David and Solomon and their descendants. Major topics that are covered in 2 Samuel are: 1) David’s rise to power as the king of Judah (chs. 1-4), the unification of all Israel under David and God’s covenant with David (chs. 5-7), David’s great exploits, sins, and consequences (chs. 8-20), and more battles, the numbering of the people of Israel, and finally David’s return to God (chs. 21-24). Some see Samuel as a documentary of the court describing the shifts in the political paradigms governing Israel,<sup>4</sup> but others view Samuel as a text that reveals the radical social transformation in Israel from a cluster of tribes to a united nation.<sup>5</sup>

Many perspectives on the function and purpose of Samuel exist with no certain consensus. However, one

aspect that is generally agreed upon is the time frame encompassed in the book of Samuel. 1 and 2 Samuel are estimated to cover a span of approximately one hundred years of Israel’s history—one hundred years that might be arguably some of Israel’s most important.<sup>6</sup>

### III. LITERARY CONTEXT

Second Samuel 21:1-9 begins the final section of the book of 2 Samuel (21:1-24:25). This section is unique as it does not chronologically follow what came before it (9:1-20:26) and does not fit with what comes after (1 Kings 1-2).<sup>7</sup> Commonly referred to as an “appendix” to the book of Samuel, 2 Samuel 21-24 contains additional details that are thought to be “in part extracts from old records of the reign of David, in part of lists of David’s heroes and their exploits, and in part of poems credited to David.”<sup>8</sup>

It is thought to belong chronologically before chapter 9, since chapter 9 and 16 presuppose the material in it.<sup>9</sup> However, there is some debate about where it best fits in the rest of the narrative of Samuel. Also, there exists a symmetrical arrangement (chiastic structure, ABCC’B’A’) of the “appendix” that some scholars claim reflects back on the book of Samuel as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Henry P. Smith, *The Books of Samuel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), xii.

<sup>7</sup> Birch, *1-2 Samuel*, 1354. Brueggemann, *1-2 Samuel*, 335.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick C. Eiselen et al., eds., *Abingdon Bible Commentary* (New York: Abingdon, 1929), 409.

<sup>9</sup> Charles M. Laymon, ed., *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 179.

<sup>10</sup> “The chiastic arrangement of the text which is evident in 2 Samuel 21-24 becomes a key to the understanding of the principles of construction which underlie the book as a whole.” Herbert H. Klement, “Structure, Context, and Meaning in the Samuel Conclusion (2 Sa. 21-24),” *TynBul* 47 (1996): 369. Cp. McCarter, *2 Samuel*, 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, *2 Samuel* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1984), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce C. Birch, *First and Second Books of Samuel* (NIB; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 952.

<sup>4</sup> Ackroyd, *2 Samuel*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Int; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 1.

In broad terms, chapters 21-24 contain material related to the exploits of David that does not appear to have any “intentional or substantial connection to the preceding books of Samuel.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, 21:1-9 begins this unique last section of Samuel by pointing out a parallelism between the reign of Saul and that of David as a benchmark for the difference between these two monumental rulers and leaders of God’s people.

#### IV. EXEGESIS

At the beginning of chapter 21, David has been established as the king of Israel but Israel experiences a famine lasting three years (21:1). To uncover the cause of this devastation, David seeks an answer from the Lord, who reveals to him that the cause for the famine is an unresolved injustice by Saul against the Gibeonites. The narrative logic of the section goes on to explain that this “bloodguilt”<sup>12</sup> of Saul stems from the fact that Saul attempted to destroy the Gibeonites (who were non-Israelites, remnants of the Amorites, living in Canaan) even though the people of Israel had vowed to spare them and allow them a portion of Canaan to live in (v. 2; cf. Josh 9:3-27).<sup>13</sup>

Immediately, this section identifies a wrong doing of Saul that has now caused devastating consequences to the rest of the people of Israel. In addition, such impropriety as going back on an oath reflects very negatively upon Saul’s capacity to be Israel’s leader and God’s representative to his people. Thus, on account of King Saul’s nefarious actions, the violation of Israel’s

oath to YHWH to preserve the Gibeonites in their midst brought a period of bareness to the land of Canaan.

But, one might ask, “Why is Israel now suffering under David’s rule when it was Saul who committed the crimes?” Unfortunately, this and other implicated questions are not answered directly in the text, but as the narrative unfolds, a glimpse of the record’s purpose can be seen and understood. In essence, the facts of the narrative will demonstrate David acting to restore a vow with the Gibeonites which Saul had violated while also maintaining another vow he made with Saul’s son Jonathan.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, throughout the narrative, David is portrayed not only as acting to undo Saul’s wrong, but in the process of laundering Israel’s guilt, David displays the opposite character of Saul – he upholds his promise (i.e., his vow) and seeks to fulfill peace and honor to the people of Israel.

In order to redeem Israel from the bloodguilt of Saul, David takes it upon himself to right the wrong that has been done to the Gibeonites. He calls upon the Gibeonites, asking them what he can do to repay them for this flagrant injustice, which the Lord had revealed to him, so that they may once again “bless the heritage of the Lord” (v. 3). At this point, it is apparent that David is actively pursuing a course of absolution and propitiation on behalf of Israel in response to Saul’s crime. David’s acknowledgement of Saul’s wrongdoing exemplifies a heart of humility and understanding. While Saul had personally wronged the Gibeonites, the bigger problem was that he transgressed an oath Israel had made with YHWH. David now steps in and is attempting to find closure to the issue and reclaim Israel’s honor, integrity, and prosperity.

This narrative (vv. 1-9) seems to be directed at pointing out Saul’s disqualifications as king of Israel and David’s more suited qualifications. Saul acted out of

<sup>11</sup> Birch, *1-2 Samuel*, 1355.

<sup>12</sup> “Bloodguilt” can be defined as the guilt or responsibility incurred from unjustified killing (i.e., “when life is taken outside the legal prescriptions defined in the Hebrew Bible”). S. David Sperling, “Bloodguilt,” *ABD* 1: 764.

<sup>13</sup> Shimei’s accusation regarding the bloodguilt of the house of Saul that was on David’s hands (16:8) might find its background in the account of 21:1-9. However, there is no explicit record of Saul’s offense against the Gibeonite people.

<sup>14</sup> A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 251.

his own personal interests along the lines of Israelite chauvinism, but in contrast, David is working for the benefit of Israel and with a pretense of restitution that will ultimately profit all the parties involved. But, it turns out that the Gibeonites ask for seven sons of Saul for them to execute (v. 6). David's straight reply, "I will hand them over," can denote a steadfast resolve as well as his willing and active participation in restoring good relations with the Gibeonites and thereby healing the land of Canaan. The irony of the plot thickens as David plays a sort of protagonist inverting the failures of Saul.<sup>15</sup> Saul attempted to kill the Gibeonites living among Israel, but now to restore life to the land of Canaan and undo the bloodguilt, David hands over Saul's descendants for the Gibeonites to kill (vv. 8-9). While this might seem like an illogical trade-off, the point is the reversal of the transgression. The ones to suffer are now the people of Israel.

David not only seeks to offer retribution for the broken oath to the Gibeonites to show his goodwill toward them, he also keeps his oath to Jonathan to protect his son Mephibosheth (v. 7; cf. 1 Sam. 18:3; 20:17, 42; 23:18). Saul had failed to uphold the vow Israel made with the Gibeonites, but David sought to reclaim the vow and make amends. The parallelism between the actions of these two kings seems to be aimed at showing David's honor, trustworthiness, and integrity, while depicting Saul as a shady, self-serving, back-stabbing tyrant. Pitting David against Saul in this way likely serves to advance and solidify the image of David as Israel's rightful king – and not only rightful, but a superior king to that of Saul.

This record shows how David did what was right before the Lord and good for the people of Israel in contrast to Saul, whose actions brought death to innocent people and an agricultural calamity upon the

land resulting in God's people suffering from the food shortage. The comparison depicts how the prestige of David's house is strengthened through him doing what is right, but the prestige of Saul's house is tarnished and diminished as the repercussions for his treachery are dealt with by David.

However, some scholars do not interpret the passage in this way but view the passage as challenging the reader's conventional understanding of who David was by characterizing him as "a ruthless, self-seeking king who takes desperate measures to secure his throne."<sup>16</sup> Their reasoning is that David needed a pretext to eliminate the Saulide lineage that could oppose his reign as king and therefore found a suitable cause in the famine and the guilt of Saul's misdealings with the Gibeonites.<sup>17</sup> One question that arises if a person adopts this perspective is why does the famine then cease after David expiates the bloodguilt of Israel (vv. 1-9) and subsequently consolidates the bones of Saul's family in the land of Benjamin (vv. 10-14)? One answer could be that Saul's "bloodguilt" was meant to be a justification for what David did even though his actions were directed at securing his political reign over Israel.<sup>18</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION

Whether one views this passage as a historical record of David's character against Saul's under the pretense of Israel's expiation of guilt, or a record of David's counter-measures to ensure his success and

<sup>16</sup> Brueggemann, *1-2 Samuel*, 338.

<sup>17</sup> "Thus the story was an attempt to provide the *Davidic* interpretation of the death of the seven Saulides" (emphasis original). Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 251.

<sup>18</sup> It is highly unlikely that Saul's entire lineage consisted of the seven sons (two sons plus six grandsons) and Mephibosheth. It is more likely that the seven sons were a symbolic number representing completion. Therefore, there were likely other potential Saulide rivals that could have contended with David for the throne. Birch, *1-2 Samuel*, 1358. Ackroyd, *2 Samuel*, 198.

<sup>15</sup> Simeon Chavel, "Compositry and Creativity in 2 Samuel 21:1-14," *JBL* 122 (2003): 23-52.

security upon the throne of Israel, the narrative portrays strong distinctions between the actions and interests of the first two kings of Israel. According to the description of the narrative, David is portrayed in a protagonistic light as acting in accordance with God's will and with the best interests of God's people in mind. David's actions are then read against the backdrop of Saul's past sin that is causing devastation to the land and thus to Israel. The manner in which David undoes Saul's wrong and acts in a diametrically opposite way, supports reading the narrative in a more straightforward, historical manner that simply addresses the superiority of David as Israel king against his unsuited predecessor Saul.

But, several key theological questions are not thoroughly answered in the text, much less addressed in the slightest way at all, such as why God appears to endorse innocent killing (i.e., Saul's family) to satisfy the vengeful desires of the Gibeonites? Also, why do more people need to die in order for the land to be fruitful and bring forth sustenance for Israel? Why is prayer and supplication for the Lord's forgiveness of the "bloodguilt" not pursued but rather the people default to physical violence and homicide to rectify the penalty for the sin? These deep questions may not be answered by the immediate scope of the text and must be investigated on a larger scale of OT theology.

## VI. CHRISTIAN WITNESS

One way this passage (2 Sam 21:1-9) is relevant for Christian witness is that it illustrates how David followed after the things of the Lord. David cared about what would please the Lord and restore health to the land and God's people. When he received an answer from the Lord for the cause of the famine, he acted upon that knowledge and sought right away to purge the "bloodguilt" that was upon Israel on account of Saul. This record also demonstrates that making right what has been wrong can lead to mending of relationships and

restored blessings. While the methods by which David proceeded to correct Saul's mistake are not a paradigm to be replicated today and are still a major moral question in the text, David's zeal and active involvement in healing and restoring the blessings of the Lord to the land can be an example for Christians to desire and emulate. Regardless of the specific situation illustrated in this passage, being faithful to your promises and seeking to do what makes for peace is honorable before the Lord and the Lord will give his favor to those who honor him.

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