

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 476

1 Samuel 27

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Episode Summary

David flees to the land of the Philistines in fear of Saul. He lies to the Philistine king, Achish, and tells him that he is no longer a loyal Israelite. Achish believes David and gives him a place to live in Ziklag. David and his men live in Ziklag for a year and four months, during which time they raid the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites. Achish is pleased with David's service and believes that he can trust him. However, David is only pretending to be loyal to the Philistines. He is actually planning to return to Israel and claim the throne.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 476:1 Samuel 27. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and she's the scholar, Dr. Denise Flanders. Hey, Denise! Thank you so much for leading our Bible study today.

DF: Yeah, thank you very much for having me. I'm honored to be here.

TS: Well, it turns out we have a mutual friend in common: Dr. Carmen Imes! How do you know Carmen?

DF: Yeah, so Carmen and I met at Gordon Conwell when we were doing our seminary degrees—our master's degrees. Fortunately, she came into my life and we've stayed in touch and have been friends ever since then.

TS: I hear you're writing a 1 and 2 Samuel commentary as we speak!

DF: Yeah, so I'm writing the commentary volume on 1 and 2 Samuel for *The Bible in God's World* series, which is being published by Cascade. I think the first volume by John Goldengay just came out. He did Ecclesiastes, but the volumes should be coming out this year and over the next five years or so. Mine will be out in 2026, hopefully.

TS: Well, we were talking a little before the show started and you're also writing another book. Can you tell us about that as well?

DF: Yeah, so I'm also working on my own volume on interpreting biblical numbers. Not the book of Numbers, but actual numerals—numbers in the Bible. My dissertation was on numbers in Joshua through 2 Kings, but it's pretty esoteric (a little heavy), so I'm writing a more accessible version of it that will be published with Baker in 2025, I think.

TS: That sounds like a great book. I love numbers in the Bible. That's fascinating. The only thing I hate is the fact that we've got to wait so long for those books to come out [DS laughs]. That's ridiculous how long it takes for that to come out. Maybe you shouldn't have told us [laughing], but please keep us updated because we're definitely going to have you come back on and talk about that book for sure.

Well, I guess we need to back up just a little bit because we got ahead of ourselves. Can you give us a little bit of a more formal introduction, besides being the Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies at Taylor University?

DF: Yeah, so I've been at Taylor teaching undergraduates Biblical Literature courses since 2019. So I live in Indiana. I've got four kids that keep me really busy, so I kind of jump back and forth between their ball games and activities and then my own work and research and teaching, and so it's a full, good life. [laughs]

TS: And you also got your Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East studies at Fuller Theological Seminary?

DF: Yep, that's right. So I did my Ph.D. at Fuller, and before that, like I mentioned, I was with Carmen at Gordon Conwell. I did a Master's in Biblical Studies and Christian Thought, which is kind of like a theology (MAT) degree. But I just found a real deep love for the Old Testament and I was really drawn to it, so that's what I focused on in my doctoral work.

TS: Yes, we definitely love the Old Testament here at the Naked Bible Podcast. I'm just curious why you chose 1 and 2 Samuel to write about. Did they assign that to you, or did you just get lucky [laughs], or how does that work?

DF: Ummm... [laughs] Extremely lucky, because I was delighted to be asked to write on those two books! I think they're some of the best books in the Old Testament. But my dissertation, like I mentioned, was on numbers in Joshua through 2 Kings, so I wrote a lot about troop and casualty numbers (the really grand figures of men of who died and fought in different battles), so I talked a lot about the book of Samuel, and David and Saul, and the wars and things that occurred there. And so I think they needed that volume written, and so I just had a little bit of expertise on those books within the wider context of the Former Prophets. So yeah, I think they're the best books I could be writing on. I'm pretty excited.

TS: Well, this is perfect timing, then, since you're right in the middle of writing 1 Samuel. It works out great!

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DF: [laughs] Yeah, it was kind of funny. I'm on chapter 15, as far as my work on the commentary. So I've written up through 1 Samuel 15, so I had to sort of jump ahead to prepare to talk about 1 Samuel 27. But it kind of works out because there are some connections there between chapter 15 (which I was in before I looked at this)... So it's just kind of neat to see everything kind of... There are so many key words and connections the author is making and you see those when you really dig into it.

TS: Well, I am super thrilled that you're here today to lead our Bible study on 1 Samuel chapter 27. Without further ado, it's all yours!

DF: Okay, sounds good.

We are talking about 1 Samuel 27 today, but the chapter actually begins a new section, which kind of runs through the end of 1 Samuel and maybe into 2 Samuel 1. So I want to give a little bit of a reminder of our literary and background contexts before we get into it because it's going to be pretty relevant when we're actually looking at the text.

Just briefly (you guys will remember), 1 Samuel 16-26 (the ten chapters before this) was a series of episodes describing David's private anointing as king by Samuel, how David came to become one of Saul's warriors, how he gained the favor of those around him, and then how Saul began to want him dead and his obsessive pursuit of David to kill him. So David fled from Saul and he traveled around various parts of Judah to evade Saul. So in the chapter that immediately precedes the one we're looking at today (1 Samuel 26), Saul had taken his troops to find David in the wilderness and David took one of his men (Abishai) into Saul's camp. But David refused to harm Saul because Saul was, as he says, "Yahweh's anointed." And David expressed his confidence that Yahweh would ultimately protect him from Saul. So we know David then stole Saul's spear while his troops were sound asleep, which led to this interaction between the two of them in which Saul acknowledged that he himself had sinned by trying to take David's life. And so David returns the spear and he declares that he trusts in Yahweh to protect his life.

Now of this event in 1 Samuel 26, Bruce Birch (who has a great commentary in the New Interpreter's Bible) says:

David has refrained from the temptation to violence as a means to power, but it was trust in the Lord's ability to bring David's future in God's own way that enabled David to refuse violence as a means to his own future.

So this incident and David's words about Yahweh there are especially relevant background to consider when we read what follows in chapter 27, because we find a very different mode of operation of David. So David does commit violence in chapter 27, and Yahweh (or God) is not mentioned in the entire chapter. And that's just something to alert the reader to so we can be thinking about what it might mean for how we interpret this narrative.

As I said, 1 Samuel 27 begins a new section of the story, wherein each episode builds upon the previous one but where the scenes are rotating from what's going on with David to what's going on with Saul. So it's somewhat like a modern novel, where each chapter presents a different character's perspective or describes events as they happen to a particular character. And it rotates back and forth. (I love this kind of book.) But all the while, it's building suspense and it's working together to shape the overall story.

So 1 Samuel 27 is going to tell us how David realizes he can't evade Saul forever in Judah, so he flees to the Philistines and works for Achish, the Philistine king in Gath. And this is going to end with a cliffhanger. Namely, Achish is going to tell David, "Okay, we're going to fight your people now and you're going to be my right-hand man." So to go ahead and give away the end of the scene now, it's an ancient version of "to be continued." The reader is going to get to the end of the chapter (really it's two verses into chapter 28) and go, "Uh oh, how is he going to get out of this?" But the narrator leaves the reader hanging. And in 1 Samuel 28, the narrator switches perspectives using what's called an "interchange" and shifts the reader to see what Saul is doing during that time, which is his visit to Endor. Someone else will talk about that next week.

With that context in mind, let's go ahead and get into the text. I'm reading from my own translation, but I'll reference a few others where mine kind of differs from published versions like the NIV. So let's look at verse 1:

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David said in his heart, "Now I shall be swept away one day by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will despair from seeking me any more within all the border of Israel and I will escape from his hand."

I'm going to pause there just to point out the chapter here starts (and it's actually going to end) with a character's interior thoughts. So we start here finding out what David is thinking and we're going to end with Achish's thoughts. There's a contrast there because David's thoughts are essentially correct but Achish's thoughts are faulty, as we'll see soon. So David's thought when he says, literally in Hebrew, "to his heart" is that his only chance at life is to leave the country. Otherwise, he'll be swept away by Saul's hand. And that word "swept away" in Hebrew is not a common word. It appears two other times in the book of Samuel. Some scholars think this is an intentional nod to those earlier verses. The first

one of interest is in 1 Samuel 12, which is Samuel's speech to Israel about how the Israelites should act once they have a king. And Samuel says in 12:24-25:

"Only fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart, for consider what great things he has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king."

And then the second time the word is used, it occurred in David's theologically rich speech that I mentioned at the beginning, when he insists on not taking Saul's life (in chapter 26) when he had the chance, because he believed Yahweh would act to eliminate Saul on his behalf. So David said in 26:10-11,

"As Yahweh lives, surely Yahweh will strike him or his day will come or he will die, or he will go down into battle and be swept away. Yahweh forbid that I should put my hand against Yahweh's anointed."

So as scholars like Robert Polzin and Keith Bodner (who also has an excellent commentary on 1 Samuel, by the way) point out,

The use of this particular word shows that David is trying to avoid the fate of Saul, that is, of being swept away. But also, the use of the word connects to a larger theme in the books of Samuel, that there is a close connection between the fate of the king and the fate of his people.

I just wanted to point that out because the word "swept away" is usually just translated "perish," like in the NRSV or "be destroyed." That's what the NIV and CEB do. And those are absolutely good translations. They convey the meaning well; they just don't highlight that connection with those two other passages.

Now returning to this whole idea, though, that David needs to leave the country to save his life... On one hand, we've seen that, yes, Saul is in fact intent on killing him so it makes sense that he needs to take more drastic measures and go somewhere he thinks Saul would not venture. But at the same time, this feels like a very odd and risky decision, right? In chapter 26, David was confident that he should not kill Saul himself, that Yahweh would take care of Saul, and that Yahweh would protect David. But here there's no mention of Yahweh. There's just a strategic and calculated decision. And it's risky because the Philistines are Israel's worst enemy at the time. And the last time David tried escaping down there (in chapter 21), he ended up fearing for his life and immediately getting out of town. So whatever the case, we'll see in verse 4 that David's intuition is correct because he thinks Saul will stop seeking him when he moves to Philistia and, in fact, the text says yes, Saul did not seek him anymore.

Let me read verses 2-4 and then makes some comments on those. It says:

So David arose and crossed over, he and 600 men who were with him, to Achish, son of Maach, king of Gath. David settled with Achish in Gath, he and his men and each man's household, and David with his two wives, Ahinoam, the Jezreelite, and Abigail, the wife of Nabal, the Carmelite. When Saul was told that David had fled to Gath, he did not seek him anymore.

This is actually the second time David fled to Achish in Gath, and the first time it didn't stick [laughs]. Listeners know this, but Gath is one of the five main cities of Philistia in the Old Testament, along with Gaza, Ashkalon, Ekron, and Ashdod. And all of those are mentioned in the book of Samuel. In chapter 21, Gath was briefly mentioned. David had fled there when he was escaping Saul. But Achish's men actually recognized him as the one of whom the Israelite women sang, "Saul has killed his thousands, David his tens of thousands," and so they were suspicious of him. So in the story, David feigned madness and escaped.

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This time around, how David was able to successfully enter Gath and win Achish's trust initially and settle there with his 600 men is not explained. The narrator just jumps over that. It's clearly not the focus of the story that's being told. The point of the story is to describe the predicament David will be in once he has joined Achish's forces and demonstrated a loyalty to him (a deceptive loyalty, but in Achish's eyes, a true one).

The 600 men who were mentioned as being with David are mentioned multiple times in the overarching narrative... They seem to be regularly divided into three smaller companies of 200 men each. So sometimes 200 men will stay with the baggage and 400 will pursue—that sort of thing. We read about that in chapter 25 and 30.

In verse 3, the text makes clear that they're not just passing through, but they're actually settling there in Gath, at least temporarily, because their families are with them, too. Specifically, it notes that David's two wives are with him—Ahinoam, the Jezreelite, and Abigail, Nabal's wife, the Carmelite. We read about David taking Abigail as a wife in 1 Samuel 25 after Nabal was killed. So she's actually better called "Nabal's widow," but the Hebrew word there is just "woman" or "wife." And then Ahinoam was mentioned as being David's other wife in that story, but there's no recorded narrative of their meeting or marriage. Now at this point, David had also married Saul's daughter, Michal, but Saul had given her to another man (to Palti, son of Laish). We know that according to chapter 25.

So Ahinoam's identity is somewhat of a mystery. Many people have pointed out that the only other Ahinoam we know of in scripture was actually Saul's wife. Her name was also Ahinoam. 1 Samuel 14:50 calls Saul's wife "Ahinoam, daughter of Ahimaaz." There are a few scholars (this is a minority view) like Jon Levenson

and Baruch Halpern who have argued that this is actually the same woman—that David married Saul's wife, Ahinoam, even while Saul was still alive. They point out not just that the women have the same name, but that there are other scriptures that may subtly insinuate this. So for example, in 1 Samuel 20:30 Saul calls Jonathan, "You son of a perverse and rebellious woman," which would be a reference to Ahinoam. And in 2 Samuel 12:8, Nathan reports Yahweh's words of condemnation to David after the Bathsheba and Uriah incident, which include the fact that (and this is Yahweh speaking),

"I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your bosom and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if that had been too little, I would have added as much more."

So despite these comments and this viewpoint, the majority of commentators just don't think it's feasible or possible that David would have married Saul's wife while he was still alive. So perhaps it's just coincidental that these women shared a name.

Okay, so we'll move to verses 5 and 6. It reads:

David said to Achish, "If I have found favor in your eyes, let a place be given to me among one of the outlying towns, that I may dwell there. Why should your servant dwell in the royal city with you?" So on that day, Achish gave him Ziklag. Therefore, Ziklag has belonged to the kings of Judah to this day.

What's implied in this request is that David is suggesting that he and his men are an unnecessary burden on Achish and the royal resources in Gath, and they can alleviate that burden by moving to an outlying town. So the Hebrew word really is "a town of the field" or "a town of the country." And this seems reasonable, right? If there are 600 men with David, then that's more than 1,000 people when their families are included. So Achish gives David the city of Ziklag. We're not sure about the location. It's not certain, but some scholars have suggested it be identified with a location about 25 miles southwest of Gath near the border of Judah. But whatever the case, Ziklag must have been remote enough that Achish wasn't going to know everything that was happening there. And ostensibly, since Achish agrees to give David this city, he must think this is a good idea. There must be something in it for him. In addition to alleviating a strain on resources in Gath, Achish might think he will expand his influence by stationing troops in this city, maybe making it easier for them to go on raids into different areas.

Now, notice this comment in verse 6 that sits outside the narrative as sort of a parenthetical statement. This type of comment occurs pretty regularly in the books of Joshua through 2 Kings, where the narrator states that something is the

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case "to this day." In this case, Ziklag is said to belong to the kings of Judah to this day. The remark is the narrator speaking outside of the narration proper to address the current audience. It's sort of like if I was telling a story today to my daughter about something my grandmother did in the past (say about how she received a necklace as a gift from my grandfather) and I say, "Oh, and by the way, that necklace is still in a jewelry box at home to this day." And these comments are intriguing and frustrating for scholars because we want to know when this person is talking. In other words, what day is being referred to in that expression—"to this day?" Well, most would agree that we don't know precisely, but there are sometimes indications given in the text. For example, here when it says "Ziklag belongs to the kings of Judah to this day," that refers to a time when Judah was a separate entity from Israel and had its own kings. Initially, David had what we refer to as a "united monarchy" over all Israel. And after his son, Solomon's reign in the day of Rehoboam, it became a divided monarchy, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. So saying a town belongs to Judah specifically suggests a time later after this division, so in the 9th century B.C. or probably later. One reason I think it's important to point out this kind of statement (even for those who aren't too concerned for when exactly this narrative was written) is that many of us students of the Bible kind of naturally default to reading biblical narratives as if they're like a live-stream of the characters' lives, or as if the writing represents the entries of the main character's journal, as if David was jotting down everything that was happening to him as he went and that's what 1 and 2 Samuel is—his moment-by-moment recording of his story. And maybe David kept a journal. I kind of like the idea of that [laughs]. But that's not what the books of Samuel are. This is a story that has been crafted to tell the story of certain events. That doesn't mean it's not factual and credible, but it does mean it's great literature and so it has lots of narrative elements that the reader needs to pay attention to in order to understand more fully what the narrator is communicating. There's a shape and a structure—a literary artistry—and as the reader, we're invited to pick, up on that.

Okay, so let's look at 7. Verse 7 reads:

The number of days that David dwelled in the country of the Philistines was a year and four months.

So we're explicitly told how long David was in the land of the Philistines and it's not a short amount of time. Like I mentioned earlier, I'm writing a book on numbers in the Bible, so whenever I see a number in a narrative like this, I pay attention and get kind of curious about it. It's interesting how this length of time was later translated and interpreted. The Hebrew text says David was in Philistia a year and four months, but the word it uses for year is not *shanah*, it's the word *yamim*, which is the plural form of the word "day." *Yom* is a day, so *yamim* is "days." But here it almost certainly doesn't mean "days" generically, like "some days and four months" since the time period is introduced by saying, "the number

of days was..." So that suggests that we're about to learn the specific time period that he was there. The interesting thing is that the Septuagint (the Greek translation) omits the word there for year and says David was just in Philistia for four months. And Josephus (who was a first century Jewish interpreter and commentator of the Hebrew Bible) says that David was there for 20 days and four months. I don't know if he interpreted the word *yamim* as "some days" and figured it had to be less than a month, so less than 30 days, and he wagered it was 20. (I'm just speculating there.) In any case, these other versions of the text decrease the amount of time David spent with the Philistines. And that change could have been inadvertent or accidental, but it's also possible that it did not look good for David to spend so much time in Philistia with the sworn enemy of Israel and that there was a desire on the part of the interpreters to minimize that time.

Verses 8 and 9 read:

David and his men went up and raided the Geshurites and the Gerezites and the Amalekites, for they were the inhabitants of the land from long ago, on the way to Shur from the land of Egypt. Whenever David would strike the land, he would not leave a man or woman alive. And he would take sheep and cattle and donkeys and camels and clothing and come back to Achish.

25:00 So from David's position in Ziklag, we'll see shortly that he was geographically situated such that he could have gone out from there to raid towns of Judah, but our narrator tells us that David is actually making raids in the areas to the southwest—towards Egypt. The Geshurites are mentioned elsewhere. Joshua 13 describes the land in Syria-Palestine and then the land in Canaan that the Israelites under Joshua were meant to take. Joshua 13:13 says:

Yet the Israelites did not drive out the Geshurites or the Maacathites, but Geshur and Maacath live within Israel to this day.

Interestingly, this is not the last we will hear of the Geshurites, either. Despite David's raids on the Geshurites, the reader later discovers that David marries Maacah, the daughter of king Talmi of Geshur. And his third son, who is born by Maacah, is Absalom. That's in 2 Samuel 3. In fact, after Absalom kills his brother, Amnon (2 Samuel 13), he flees to Geshur, his mother's homeland, and stays there for three years. We read about that in 2 Samuel 13:37.

The other people group, the Gerezites, are not mentioned elsewhere. But we should recognize the name Amalek. The Amalekites have been long-time antagonists of Israel. According to Deuteronomy 25:17, when Israel was journeying out of Egypt, the Amalekites attacked Israel when they were faint and weary, especially targeting the weak stragglers who were bringing up the rear.

But more recently and relevantly in our text, 1 Samuel 15 told the story of God's command to Saul to utterly destroy the Amalekites and not leave anyone alive, and Saul's failure to follow Yahweh's command there. And that failure led to Saul's final and emphatic rejection by Yahweh as his king.

Now we find David fighting this people and specifically not leaving any human alive. At first, when it says David left no one alive in the towns of Geshur and Amalek, one might think he is enacting the instructions that were given earlier to Israel to utterly destroy these cities—and specifically with Amalek, that he is obeying a word of God that Saul failed to keep. Yet that idea is not without problems, because when God earlier commanded Israel and Saul to engage with these places, they were commanded to do so with a specific word and in a specific way. In Hebrew, the word is *herem*. It is often translated, "to put to the ban" or "to utterly destroy." The concept is connected to devoting something wholly or entirely to God. Susan Nidich calls it "making something God's portion" and John Walton calls it "making something unavailable for human use." When a city is under *herem*, nothing is available for human use, meaning Israelites cannot take spoils for themselves, including animals. If we read this as the command God gave to Saul, he very specifically told Saul to put to death all animals. And he provided a list: sheep, cattle, donkeys, and camels. In fact, the main issue that Samuel insists... He's talking to Samuel and he insists, "I obeyed the command of the Lord." And Samuel says, "What, then, is this bleating of sheep in my ears and the sound of cattle that I hear?"

So David is very clearly not enacting the *herem*. He's taking every human life, yes, but he's not devoting animals to God. Rather, he's taking all the animals—essentially all the same animals that Saul was commanded to destroy (sheep, oxen, camels, and donkeys, along with the garments or clothes as spoil) and he's bringing them to Achish, ostensibly for Achish to take his share. Furthermore, the narrator is about to reveal David's motivation for engaging in these battles to the reader. Remember, this chapter is heavy on the character's interior mindset. And in his mind, this is not about fulfilling the *herem* that had earlier been left undone. It's to trick Achish into trusting David and to ensure that no one ever let Achish in on David's ploy. So let's look at verses 10-12 now. It reads:

When Achish said, "Against whom did you make a raid today?" David would say, "Against the southern plain of Judah" or "against the southern plain of the Jerahmeelites" or "against the southern plain of the Kenites." David did not leave a man or woman alive to bring word to Gath, thinking, otherwise they might inform on us, saying, "This is what David did." So this was his custom all the days that he dwelled in the land of the Philistines. And Achish trusted David, thinking, "He has made himself so odious among his own people in Israel that he will be my servant forever."

So whenever David brings spoils to Achish, Achish is asking him, "Where did you get this from? Who did you raid today?" And David answers deceitfully. He's leading Achish to believe that David is raiding David's own people in the Negev or the southland. (I translated it "southern plain of Judah.")

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So in addition to Judah, David mentions also raiding the Kenites. And that was a group that was loyal to Israel, and their mention is another thing from this chapter that evokes that narrative of Saul and the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15 as well. Because when Saul was told to wipe out the Amalekites for their unfaithfulness to Israel, Saul first goes to the Kenites (who lived among the Amalekites) and he warns them as to what's about to happen and tells them to flee because they showed loyalty and faithfulness (or *hesed*) to the Israelites, and so they don't deserve to die. So they were a group allied to Israel. Caleb was actually a Kenite and was sometimes also referred to as a "Kenezite."

And some think that this raiding may have been done in the area of Hebron, which was a city given to Caleb as an inheritance, according to Joshua 14:14. And here in verse 11 is where the narrator reveals David's motivation for killing the entire populations of the other places. It's because he's concerned that if he allows anyone to live, that they will come and tell Achish what he is doing. But if everyone in this town is dead, then no one can come and report to Achish that David is actually not destroying towns of Judah. We should ask, "Why is it important that Achish think that David is raiding Judahite settlements?" Well, because it makes Achish confident that David has fully switched sides. There's a story earlier in Samuel (in chapter 14) where Jonathan and Saul are battling the Philistines and it notes that once it became clear that the Israelites were actually going to win the battle (that Yahweh was fighting on their side), it says in verse 21:

Now the Hebrews who previously had been with the Philistines and had gone up with them into the camp turned and joined the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan.

So in that earlier case, some Israelites had joined the Philistine army but then they decided, "Okay, no." They're going to go back and fight for their homeland. But David is making Achish think that he could never go back to Judah because they absolutely would not have him back, that he has truly fully aligned himself with the Philistines and become an enemy of Judah. Achish thinks he has become... let's see, I translated it "so odious" to his people. The NIV translation says, "He has become so obnoxious." The NRSV translates it, "He has become utterly abhorrent to them." And that's the right idea. But the Hebrew word has to do with actually being a foul smell, so literally "to stink." And so the ESV is probably the best or the most literal translation when it says, "He made himself an utter stench to his people"

Earlier we noted 1 Samuel 21 and David's brief encounter with Achish, when he uses deception to escape him. Now what we have is this second time David has succeeded in deceiving Achish. He's convincing him that he's raiding his own people, which leads Achish to this very faulty conclusion that David is sort of wrapped around his finger. And we noticed that this chapter opened with David's interior monologue—that he had to escape to the Philistines so that Saul wouldn't seek to kill him anymore. And that was confirmed to be true; Saul quit seeking him when he went to Philistia. And now David's deceptive practice leads to the chapter's conclusion, where Achish misguidedly thinks that David has made himself too odious among his own people to ever be accepted back by them. Yet while David's inner thoughts proved true, Achish's proved drastically incorrect. But even though the chapter ends there, this section of narrative actually includes the first two verses of chapter 28, which introduce the major problem that this survival strategy creates for David, which is that David's deception actually worked too well [laughs]. So these two verses conclude our chapter and leave the reader to anticipate what's going to happen in the next scene. So we'll briefly look at these as well. 1 Samuel 28:1-2 says:

And it happened in that day that the Philistines gathered their forces for war to fight against Israel. Achish said to David, "You surely know that you will go out with me in the army, you and your men. And David said to Achish, "Thus you shall see what your servant can do." Achish said to David, "Thus I will appoint you my bodyguard for life."

Or literally in Hebrew it says, not bodyguard, but "the one who guards my head." So on one hand, David's ruse with Achish kept him alive over a year (16 months), but now it has put him in a very sticky situation. Achish trusts him too much so David now has to go with Achish and be by his side to fight his own people. In that situation, David will not be able to maintain the duplicity anymore because being that close to Achish, he won't be able to act against him without Achish knowing about it. And this is the cliffhanger that I mentioned earlier. The point of this story is to get the reader to this place—to really feel this predicament and wonder, "What's the way out of this? How is this all going to play out? How is David going to keep from harming his own people and harming Saul as the king who leads those people into battle if he's fighting for the other side?"

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Now, if we zoom out of it and consider not just the verse-by-verse about what's going on here but the entire scene, a question many readers of this story are probably wondering about is, "What exactly are we to think of all of this? How should we appraise David's duplicitousness—his willingness to slaughter towns full of people and then lie about which towns he was conquering in order to cultivate a false image of himself as a fully trustworthy deserter of Israel? Well, on one hand we might rightly observe that there are certain times in the Bible when deception is deemed acceptable. When one party is oppressing another

party, the oppressed party does not owe the one victimizing them the truth. So for example, the midwives in Exodus 2 don't owe the truth to Pharaoh, who was trying to commit mass genocide and get them to help him. God actually blesses them when they deceive Pharaoh because they act out of the fear of God.

Maybe that's the takeaway here—that David doesn't owe Achish, whose people are fighting his own, the truth. Maybe it's David's faith in God that leads him to believe God will protect him even in the land of the Philistines. And that's a possible reading of the story that some interpreters take. Yet on the other hand (as many have noted), unlike the midwives in Exodus, David's actions here are not said to be motivated by fear of God. In contrast to chapter 26, God isn't mentioned at all in this chapter. In chapter 26, David seemed to trust God and that trust kept him from committing violence. But in chapter 27, David seems to take matters into his own hands and there are real costs to that. David Firth (who has another great commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel) writes:

The narrator might admire David's skill and guile to some degree, but it's that same skill by which David has gotten himself into a position from which only God can extricate him.

So I think acknowledging that this story may not paint a praiseworthy picture of David (or of anyone, for that matter)... It can feel uncomfortable to modern readers because many of us are so used to looking for a hero and a villain in a story. Especially in Old Testament stories, we want to find out, "Who is the good person? Who is the role model?" And then we want to emulate them. And yet often the characters in the Bible are a lot more like us. That is, they're human. They sometimes live faithfully, sometimes unfaithfully, and they're finite people living in broken worlds where a person's options are genuinely limited. My understanding is that this narrative in 1 Samuel 27 (like much biblical narrative) invites us into the complex world in which these characters live so that we can reflect on how to navigate the complex world in which we live today.

I wanted to end by sharing a longer quote from Bruce Birch's commentary on Samuel because I just don't think I can say it better. It's really good. But Birch says that overall in this reflection on 1 Samuel 27:

This is a report that revels in David's shrewd manipulation of enemies and justifies what might otherwise be a questionable time of service with the Philistines. There is no need to import artificial theological comment into the chapter. David is God's future for Israel, but he is no saint. The narrative does not flinch from this reality. We know God's hand is with David, but in this moment, it is hidden. We are left with a story that reflects the brutal realities of the time and a David who seeks to survive within the framework of those realities. In this story, David

cannot wait for more favorable options, but must choose boldly for his own survival and the lives of his company. We are asked simply to attend to the story of these events in confidence that the reality of God's purposes behind every story has not changed. In a similar fashion, people of faith in every generation are asked to attend to the story of their own lives and trust that God is the reality that moves history. Even when the hand of God seems hidden and the brutal realities that are a part of human experience seem remote from God's purposes, it is in facing harsh circumstances that are so often a part of human experience that we avoid a naive, romantic view of God's purposes in the world and how we effectively serve those purposes. We, like David, may also be asked to act boldly in circumstances that do not give us ideal options or absolute moral clarity.

40:00

So that was Bruce Birch's take on the book, and I just really like that. So I'll end with that today!

TS: And here I thought chapter 27 was going to be short and quick. It's amazing how much there is to ponder in such a short chapter!

DF: There are only 12-14 verses (if you include that bit of 28) and yeah, it's very rich. There's a lot there to think about.

TS: Now that I have you, I wanted ask you, is there a number through your research that you have found that is fascinating to you, or something interesting you can share with us?

DF: Yeah. Well, I mean, I don't know if there's one single number, but something that has been dancing around in my mind a lot lately is [laughs] you know the phrase (of course everyone knows the phrase) "Saul has killed his thousands, David his tens of thousands?" I've been thinking about that because Saul's thousands (or the number of people that he's killed) are never actually enumerated in the Old Testament. We learn that Saul kills this many people, destroys a lot of people, but it's always very generic. There are no numbers associated with his casualties. But then with David, there are numbers associated with his casualties. So I'm really interested in that. It occurs later, like in 2 Samuel 8 and 10 we learn that he killed 20,000 of this people and that people (or whatever). But something to know with numbers is that often what's enumerated is important. There's a reason that the author attaches numbers to a certain thing and doesn't care to quantify other things. I mean, it's just interesting that what's being communicated here is that David is a competent warrior—a big part of who he is, his character. And we know this just from reading the book. It has to do with his military prowess or capability. But when you pay close attention to numbers, you even see that come through in the fact that we never learn Saul's numerical casualties, but with David we do. But yet in Josephus... I just have been reading a lot of Josephus lately, and he actually does provide numbers for those that Saul kills. And they're actually even higher numbers than

the people that David kills! And so that's just fascinating, too. Like, what is Josephus doing there when he will enumerate Saul's casualties, whereas the Bible doesn't do that? So in his interpretation, he's doing something very subtly with numbers, and that sort of thing is captivating to me [laughs].

TS: Perfect. Well, we're going to keep track of your book when it comes out and have you back on to talk about those numbers. And one more time I want to thank Dr. Denise Flanders so much for coming on the Naked Bible Podcast and helping us with 1 Samuel 27. And I want to thank everybody else for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God bless.