

David's eating of the shewbread

An examination of apparent contradictions (1)

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The three-part article "In the grain fields on the sabbath" (Mar.-May 2008) drew lessons from the occasion when the disciples of Jesus ate of the corn as they walked through the fields on the sabbath, and were criticised by the Pharisees for breaking the Law. In reply Jesus cites the incident recorded in 1 Samuel 21, regarding David's partaking of the shewbread, as justification for his disciples' action, but what he says presents several apparent discrepancies with the Old Testament record. This two-part article considers these apparent discrepancies and brings out a deeper meaning to his citation of the incident.

THE DISCIPLES were eating grain in the fields, rubbing the heads in their hands to separate the grain from the chaff. Jesus was questioned by the Pharisees, "why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful?". Jesus' reply is quite challenging: "Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungred, he, and they that were with him? How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him?" (Mk. 2:23-26).

"Have ye never read . . . ?". The question is put forcefully, and the hearers were surely made to feel a little silly in their ignorance. Yet 2,000 years later the same question still challenges us, How well do *we* know the Scriptures? Would we have chosen Jesus' example to justify our position? If we were asked to pinpoint a time in Israel's history when the Law was bent or altered because of a greater good, what would we have chosen? Hezekiah's Passover, recorded in 2 Chronicles 30, springs to mind.

So why would Jesus refer his listeners to an event in which David's behaviour leaves something to be desired, in three respects:

1 He lied in saying he was on confidential business for the king (1 Sam. 21:2);

2 He fled to Gath to take refuge with the Philistines and got himself into great difficulties (vv. 10-15);

3 He bypassed the ephod for the sword (v. 9)?

How does this incident provide justification for the disciples' breaking the sabbath? Is it relevant to the disciples' predicament? We might think, if we did not know better, that Jesus was justifying one wrong act by highlighting another. Why then did Jesus make reference to David's experience?

Apparent mistakes

It seems strange, in view of his criticism of the Pharisees' lack of attention to the Scriptures, that our Lord should seemingly make mistakes in at least three key areas when commenting on this incident:

1 He says that David "went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest" (Mk. 2:26). Yet 1 Samuel 21:1 says that David came to see Ahimelech the priest, Abiathar's father.

2 He says that David "entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread" (Mt. 12:4). Close reading of 1 Samuel 21 clearly suggests that David did *not* eat the bread in the house. We read that he came alone (v. 1). Enough bread was given to supply a small company, as suggested by the priest's requirement that the "young men" "appointed . . . to such and such a place" be clean (vv. 2-4). That David should be alone, and yet take enough to feed his missing companions, suggests that he did not eat it there with the priests.

3 The third anomaly concerns the fact that Jesus ascribes companions to David, when it would appear that he was really alone. 1 Samuel 20 tells us that David had just spent three days in hiding. When Jonathan met up with his friend,

he did so in the strictest of secrecy, and we are told in verse 39 that “only Jonathan and David knew the matter”. It was Jonathan’s warning which prompted David’s flight to Nob, and so when he arrives alone, this is just what we would expect. The absence of friends agrees with the urgency of David’s situation, his previous solitude, and his hasty departure.

What then do we make of this? Why does Jesus urge careful Bible reading while making comments seemingly at odds with the record? Why does he even refer to this incident in the first place? What relevance does it have to his situation? How do we harmonise the Scriptural record?

A number of approaches have been taken. Some take the view that what we see here are technical errors that have crept into the record; that typographical or transcription errors have corrupted what was once a straightforward commentary by Christ.

Others say that Jesus was right; he knew extra details through his possession of the Holy Spirit. He had access to information which is lacking to us today. And so, although we cannot prove it through consulting the Old Testament, David must have had companions ‘because Jesus said so’.

Both views present serious problems. If we admit errors in the text without having manuscripts to back our claims, then we set a dangerous precedent. We are receiving the Bible on our own terms, rather than allowing it to be our guide. Any difficulty or problem is sidestepped, and we miss the lesson which God has intended. The second possibility, which simply attributes Jesus’ understanding to the Holy Spirit, makes a mockery of the question posed by Jesus. Why question the Pharisee’s attention to the Scriptures if the answers were unattainable through careful reading?

So we ask, Why does Jesus say what he does, and how can it be sustained by Scriptural analysis? In seeking answers to these questions, it is possible to be straitjacketed by an insistence on literal truth, forgetting that Christ often answers in spiritual terms, where the emphasis lies; not in literalism, but in the strength of the analogy which is being made. A case in point is his insistence on John the Baptist being Elijah, “if ye will receive it” (Mt. 11:14).

And so the suggestion is that in each of these differences the variation from the Scriptural record is intentional. Jesus is making a point; each

anomaly represents a powerful statement, where the emphasis is on the spiritual rather than the literal. While the Pharisees were looking at issues from a superficial, legalistic point of view, Christ was teaching them to look beyond the outward action to the motive and intention.

Let’s examine the discrepancies in a little more detail.

Abiathar

Firstly, then, why did Jesus say in Mark 2:26 that David “went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread”, whilst 1 Samuel 21:1 states that he came to “Ahimelech the priest”. Why the difference?

One explanation is that Ahimelech was also called Abiathar and Abiathar was also called Ahimelech (see 2 Samuel 8:17 and 1 Chronicles 18:16), and, as the names are used interchangeably, Jesus could rightly refer to the father as Abiathar. This is a rather confusing explanation, and one which does not explain *why* Jesus altered the name from what it is in 1 Samuel 21. In any case, the names may not have been interchangeable; Abiathar, the son of the murdered Ahimelech, could have had a son who was named after his grandfather.

Brother Harry Whittaker puts forward the view that Jesus mentions Abiathar rather than Ahimelech because Abiathar was the one who left the tabernacle service to follow David, and Christ’s disciples had made that same choice. Just as Abiathar fulfilled the high priest’s function away from the tabernacle, ministering to the anointed king, so the disciples filled a similar role.¹ The idea has merit, for in Matthew 12:5 Jesus compares the actions of the disciples to the work of the priests.

But perhaps we could add to this idea, asking, Why focus on Abiathar? What happened to Ahimelech? The query, once asked, supplies the answer. It was this very incident in 1 Samuel 21 which brought about Ahimelech’s murder at the hand of Doeg the Edomite soon after. Yes, Ahimelech was the high priest when David approached him asking for bread. But not for long. His act of generosity to a man in need occasioned the death of both himself and his family. The self-righteous, legalistic Doeg, “detained before the LORD” (v. 7), had no quibble about destroying God’s anointed.

1. *Studies in the Gospels*, p. 150.

When Jesus therefore mentioned Abiathar the high priest, he was not making a historical observation, but a very pointed commentary on the actions of the Pharisees. They, like Saul, sought the life of God's anointed. Their attack on the disciples was motivated by revenge and envy. The disciples were hungry because they had shown their allegiance to Christ. This was not some chance snack on the part of the disciples. Their hunger was borne out of persecution, in which hospitality had been actively discouraged.² Their loyalty had come at a price. Those who choose God's Son are, in turn, rejected by the world.

The reference to Abiathar serves to highlight the circumstances of his accession to high priest. It was a situation which strongly parallels that of the disciples in the grain fields. Through it, Jesus reveals the true motive of the Pharisees, and helps to reveal the extent of the oppression and suffering which his disciples endured.

"They that were with him"

All three Gospels record that Jesus referred to "they that were with" David (Mt. 12:3; Mk. 2:25; Lk. 6:3) as being involved with him in eating the shewbread. The companions alluded to were not the priests in the tabernacle, for Luke and Matthew both explicitly state that it was "not lawful" for David's companions to eat and it was lawful for the priests to eat it. Who then were David's companions? Indeed, can it be proved that he had any?

We note that, immediately before coming to Nob, David had been hiding in the field for three days (1 Sam. 20:19). Such was the secrecy surrounding David's concealment that Jonathan used a prearranged signal to communicate his message. We can be quite certain that David was alone, as the incident with the arrows indicates. We read in verse 39, "But the lad knew not any thing: *only Jonathan and David knew the matter*".

David was still alone when he arrived at Nob: "Why art thou *alone*, and *no man with thee?*", Ahimelech exclaimed (21:1). David's answer, whilst seeking to allay the priest's fears concerning his unusual lack of attendants, still supports Ahimelech's observation. He was alone. His claim to have had companions hidden was simply just not true. Lest we should balk at David telling an untruth in this instance, his opening claim removes all doubt: "The king hath commanded me a business, and hath said unto me, Let no man know any thing of the business whereabout I send thee, and what I have commanded thee: and I have

appointed my servants to such and such a place" (v. 2). We know for a certainty that Saul had not sent David on urgent, secret business. He sought his life, not his help. David was alone, not because he was on a secret assignment for the king, but because he was fleeing for his life.

The events that follow also suggest that David was alone. He fled to Achish king of Gath, where he was recognised as a killer of Philistines. In order to escape the unwanted scrutiny of the king of Gath, David feigned madness, scrabbling at the doors, letting his spittle run down his beard. We would question the effectiveness of David's ruse if he was accompanied by a retinue of servants. Would he have been introduced to Achish with the company of his companions? The weight of evidence indicates that David was alone.

"He entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread"

Did David eat the shewbread in the tabernacle, as Jesus said (Mt. 12:4)? We cannot answer this for certain, but we do know that he obtained the bread for his journey. When Doeg told Saul that Ahimelech "gave [David] victuals" (1 Sam. 22:10), he used a word which almost always is used to describe *provisions for a journey*. Ahimelech wanted an assurance from David that his companions were clean before giving him the supplies. This again suggests that David took the bread with him rather than eating it in the tabernacle.

But perhaps the strongest indication that David took the bread on his journey to Gath can be observed by examining what the shewbread actually consisted of. Before looking into the subject, I had always envisaged the shewbread to consist of small round loaves. The details given in the Law indicate otherwise:

- In Leviticus 24:5 we learn that each of the twelve loaves contained "two tenth deals" of fine flour.
- A tenth deal means a tenth of an ephah.
- In Exodus 16:36 we read that "an omer is the tenth part of an ephah".
- From Exodus 16:16 we learn that one man's daily ration of manna consisted of an omer.
- Each shewbread loaf, then, could supply an individual with two days' food.
- Commentators vary, suggesting between four and eight litres of flour for each loaf of shewbread.

2. See "[Hungry disciples](#)", Apr. 2008, p. 62, in my earlier study, referred to at [the beginning of this article](#).

Even if we take the most conservative of suggestions, we have a very big loaf (our ordinary leavened loaf which we might buy at a supermarket typically contains about one litre of flour). Five loaves (1 Sam. 21:3), then, would provide enough bread for at least a ten-day journey. David had to have taken this bread with him when he left the tabernacle. It was simply not possible for him to have eaten the food by himself on that day.

We are left, then, in a quandary. All the evidence suggests that David was alone, and that he did not eat the bread in the house of God. Why then does the New Testament suggest otherwise? What point was our Lord making when he made his observation? How was it that his assertion went unchallenged by the Pharisees? These are the questions we will suggest answers for in Part 2 of this article.

[\(To be concluded\)](#)