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Q&A#155 Why Does Saul Ask About David's Father's Identity After David Killed Goliath?

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Today's question: "Why does Saul ask about David's origins after the battle with Goliath? It seems from the previous account of David as Saul's musician he should have known this. I find the common conservative suggestion (that Saul knew David but couldn't remember his father's name) and the common liberal suggestion (that two accounts were clumsily interwoven) both dissatisfying."

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, why does Saul ask about David's origins after the battle with Goliath? It seems from the previous account of David as Saul's musician, he should have known this. I find the common conservative suggestion, that Saul knew David but couldn't remember his father's name, and the common liberal suggestion, that two accounts were clumsily interwoven, both dissatisfying.

Now, I might be even more dissatisfying because I think there are elements of truth to both of these explanations, although I lean towards the conservative one. Let me explain. We first see David introduced to Saul, and Jesse as well, at the end of chapter 16.

I'll read the passage in question. Saul said to his servants, provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me. One of the young men answered, behold, I have seen a son of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the Lord is with him.

Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, send me David your son, who is with the sheep. And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread and the skin of wine, a young goat, and sent them by David his son to Saul. And David came to Saul and entered his service, and Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor bearer.

And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight. And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him.

And at the very end of chapter 17, David and his father are reintroduced to Saul, or at least his father. Verse 55 of chapter 17. As soon as Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, Abner, whose son is this youth? And Abner said, as your soul lives, O king, I do not know.

And the king said, inquire whose son the boy is. And as soon as David returned from the striking down of the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul with the head of the Philistine in his hand. And Saul said to him, whose son are you, young man? And David answered, I am the son of your servant, Jesse the Bethlehemite.

Now it seems strange that Saul would ask of David who his father was. If he'd already had dealings with his father at the end of the previous chapter, they already seemed to be acquainted. There are other further details within this chapter that do seem odd and seem to be at some degree of tension, or at least sit awkwardly with the previous chapter.

So the fact that David is reintroduced to us in verse 12. Now David was the son of, literally, David was the son of this and Ephraimite of Bethlehem and Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul, the man was already old and advanced in years.

The three oldest sons of Jesse had followed Saul to the battle. Now it does provide some sort of answer to the question that would immediately come to the mind of the reader. Well, isn't David working with Saul at this point? If he's working with Saul, what's he doing with his father's house, looking after the flock? Well, it immediately gives us an

answer to that.

David was the youngest. The three oldest eldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at Bethlehem. So David is in Saul's service, but he's going back and forth and he's doing his father's work at the same time.

So that resolves one of the initial questions that the reader might have. And so the text here is brought into line with what we've just read, but there still are odd features. Why would we reintroduce, have a reintroduction to David at this point? It does seem as if there are maybe two texts here, two different texts that have been brought together, and this is one point where we can see them being sewn together.

The fact that it's the son of this and Ephraimite suggests that it's drawing your attention back to, okay, it's the same guy. It's the guy we've just been introduced to and he's reintroduced, but this is not some different guy that's coming across our path. It's the same guy that we've just had introduced in the previous chapter.

Now, one question that people would have is why would he be that interested in his father, the identity of the father? Is the identity of his father really saying that this is David's son of Jesse, that that is David's identity? Why would his father's identity be of significance to him? Well, it's of significance because the reward concerns the father's house. The father's house will be made free in Israel, freed from taxation, and the king's daughter will marry the person who wins the victory. And so this house is of interest.

The father's identity suddenly becomes a matter of interest to Saul in a way it wouldn't have been beforehand. What was the interest of Jesse to Saul beforehand? He was informed of the existence of David and told it was a son of Jesse. He didn't necessarily know Jesse.

The only significance of Jesse was that he was the one to contact if he wanted this guy who was skilled for playing a musical instrument. And then when he's brought, there's a later dealing with Jesse, or Jesse sends gifts, and then there's later dealings with Jesse as messengers are sent back to say can he remain in the service. So there are dealings with Jesse at those points.

But it's quite possible that Saul would not remember his identity. But now, after David has won this victory and Jesse is supposed to be reaping part of the benefits, his identity matters. And so where Saul might just have seen Jesse as a guy that he forgot, he's probably dealing with thousands of different families in Israel and persons within Israel, and he doesn't keep all of these people in his mind.

David is a figure that's becoming closer to him, but he's not necessarily paying attention to all of David's family connections. He's maybe not someone who's aware of all the family connections within his court. And so it's not surprising that he might want to just

remind himself of the identity of the son of, remind himself of the identity of David's father.

But there are other issues here. I mean, those two passages don't fit very neatly together. They seem to be awkward and sitting side by side, not least the reintroduction.

So I wouldn't be surprised if we have different sources that have been brought together into a single text here. Now, why not reorganize them and reorder them so that the material is in a different order and we don't have that reintroduction? Well, I think as we look back in the previous chapter, it may be that we're dealing with some things that are out of temporal sequence. And so David is brought into the house of Saul as the spirit of God is removed from Saul and he's troubled with an evil spirit.

David, who is anointed with this spirit, comes into Saul's house and gives him a relief. Now, David comes, note, with the signs of the kingdom. He comes with a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat.

And he plays a musical instrument and a new spirit comes upon Saul and he's relieved of the evil spirit that's troubling him. Now, think back to chapter 10 and the signs that happened to Saul when he came into the kingdom, or the confirmation that he was going to be the king. First of all, messengers saying that the donkeys of his father had been found.

Second, a mess or encountering people with goats, bread, skin of wine. And then third, prophets and a new spirit coming upon him. And so this spirit coming upon him and the prophets playing musical instruments and prophesying, this very much connects with David.

David's one who has the spirit of God and he comes with the signs of the kingdom. And this passage is dealing with that juxtaposition of the two characters. David has the signs of the kingdom.

David is the one who's marked out. And yet, his reception of the spirit is matched by the departure of the spirit from Saul, king of Israel. And so it's exploring that.

It's exploring the way that David enters into the service of Saul and becomes closer to him and how Saul is refreshed as the spirit is removed from him. Now this is a narrative dealing with particular themes, a particular section of the narrative that's juxtaposing the two characters. And the next chapter is doing a slightly different sort of thing.

I would not be surprised if chapter 17, the events of it, fall between verse 21 and verse 22 of chapter 16. So Saul has already taken David into his service and David is playing the musical instruments for him and things like that. And there is some connection between the two.

But David has not yet become the armor bearer. He's not really become known to Saul yet at a full level. He's working with him on a regular basis.

And now, after the events of chapter 17, after that closer connection between them, it's at that point that Saul sends messengers back to Jesse and says, can he remain with me? And so I think it can help to understand the literary purpose of the way these things are structured. You have different sorts of texts. One is just recounting events that have occurred.

And chapter 17 is a more scenic account. It's setting the scene and you're seeing this picture and these events playing out. Now these texts are not in conflict with each other.

I think there are different sources quite probably that have been compiled together into a single text. And there are scenes to be seen, but they're not tensions and antagonisms between the two. And if this fits between those two verses, I think it helps to explain part of what's going on and answer some of the puzzles that we might have in chapter 17.

It might also explain what some of the events that prompted the actions of Saul at the end of chapter 16, where he's contacting Jesse and he's wanting David to remain in his service and he makes David his armour bearer. It would make sense of those things. If David is someone who's performed these great feats, if his house has won this new status in Israel, now Saul wants him in his service.

He wants this guy close to him. He's a gifted man. He's a man who can play this musical instrument, not just as a servant in the house, but now he can become this close guy to him.

His right-hand man is the armour bearer, the one who's assisting him on the battlefield. And so I think there are ways of putting these things together. I think there are also ways in which the texts are connected to each other.

We already see that David is moving to and from the service of Saul in chapter 17. We also see that there are ways that David is described that match the way he's described in chapter 16. In chapter 16 and chapter 17, in both chapters, he's described as ruddy and handsome.

A young man who's ruddy and handsome. These are not descriptions that we have of him elsewhere, at least not the ruddiness. And so I think there are ways to fit these together.

Understanding the literary purpose of having these things out of strict sequence, but connected to each other. That chapter 16, the end of chapter 16, is dealing with certain themes and it's important to follow through those themes to the conclusion of that. And then chapter 17 is a scenic account of a particular event that fits most neatly after that body of material.

That is more unified section dealing with the movement of the spirit from Saul to David and David coming with the signs of the kingdom and David getting into Saul's court. That can be harmonised for chapter 17, but for literary purposes I think there is a disjunction in the chronology here. And I hope that helps to explain it to some degree.

That's my theory and it fits somewhere between the liberal and the conservative account. If you have any questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and other videos like it, please first of all tell your friends and get other people interested.

You can also support me using my Patreon account, my PayPal account, or by buying books for me using my Amazon wishlist. And I'll give the links to all of those below. Also, in the last couple of days I've mentioned my desire to start a project with the readings and reflections upon the readings from the Book of Common Prayer, the new ACNA version.

If you would like to support that, please get in contact with me using the contact form on my blog. And if you have any resources, any skills that would help to make this project a reality, I would also like to produce a read-through of the morning prayers and with a group, a few groups, and then have this produced into a website. I've mentioned this within my previous two videos.

Please consider getting involved. This is something I'm very excited about. I'd love to make it possible.

Tomorrow I begin with my series on the Book of Thank you very much for listening. See you then. God bless.