

IN RESPONSE – CHRIST, DAVID, AND MARK 2:23-28, PART ONE

by Dennis Prutow

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Christ presented Himself as the Son of God. He often incurred the wrath of the Pharisees. One of Christ's methods was to either quote the Old Testament or refer to the Old Testament to make His case. We look at one such incident as Mark records it in his gospel.

And it happened that He was passing through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain. The Pharisees were saying to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?" Jesus said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 23-28).

Christ and His disciples, walking through certain fields, took some grain to eat. As we see later, the crowds constantly converged on Jesus and the disciples so that the little ministry band was hardly able to eat. "He came home, and the crowd gathered again, to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal" (Mark 3:20). "There were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat" (Mark 6:31).

On one hand, the work of harvest ceased on the Sabbath. "You shall work six days, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during plowing time and harvest you shall rest" (Exodus 34:21). Christ never violated the precepts of the Law. He was "tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). He was "holy, innocent, [and] undefiled" (Hebrews 7:26). This is the solemn and inspired judgment of Scripture. Christ and His disciples did not *harvest grain* except in the most legalistic and punctilious interpretation of such an action. On the other hand, the Law of God, specifically

authorized plucking the heads of grain in a field as the disciples were doing. "When you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain" (Deuteronomy 23:25). There is no Sabbath exception appended.

Yet the Pharisees accuse Jesus of "doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath." The pedantic approach of the Pharisees calls the plucking of grain harvesting and therefore a violation of the Law. "[T]he rabbis [had] drawn up a catalogue of thirty-nine principle works, subsequently subdivided into six minor categories under each of these thirty-nine, all of which were forbidden on the Sabbath."¹ Based on this, the Pharisees accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath.

Jesus counters with a Sabbath story from the Old Testament. The reference is to the account in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. To properly understand Jesus and the reaction of the Pharisees, we shall look at this narrative, some of the background to it, and then return to Jesus' use of it.

"Then David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest; and Ahimelech came trembling to meet David and said to him, 'Why are you alone and no one with you?'" (1 Samuel 21:1). Here is the scene. Saul disobeyed to God's explicit directions in the battle against Amalek (1 Samuel 15:1-9). Samuel pronounced God's judgment. "The Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:26). "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to your neighbor, who is better than you" (1 Samuel 15:28).

Under the direction of God, Samuel went to Bethlehem and to anoint David as king. "Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward" (1 Samuel 16:13). Samuel also went to Bethlehem to offer a sacrifice. He invited Jesse and his family. It may very well be that the ceremony was public.

¹ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 105.

However, as the next chapter shows, neither Jesse nor his brothers appeared to understand the specific purpose of the anointing (1 Samuel 17). At this point too, "the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul" (1 Samuel 16:14).

After David defeated Goliath, he and Jonathan became fast friends. "Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his armor, including his sword and his bow and his belt" (1 Samuel 18:4). Jonathan was heir to the throne. The robe "was a long outer garment worn by people of rank or special status."² It was the robe of a prince. The gift of armor was also, "coming from the heir apparent, a public mark of honor."³ Jonathan's love for David was such that he freely recognized David, through this garb, as a prince in Israel. So it was that, in God's providence, Jonathan entered into a covenant with David, "that David's way [to the throne] might be the clearer when his rival [for the throne] was his friend."⁴

David became a public figure. "Saul set him over the men of war. And it was pleasing in the sight of all the people and also in the sight of Saul's servants" (1 Samuel 18:5). When the armies returned from war, women sang, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7).

Saul then turned against David in jealousy and dread. "David was prospering in all his ways for the Lord was with him. When Saul saw that he was prospering greatly, he dreaded him. But all Israel and Judah loved David, and he went out and came in before them" (1 Samuel 18:14-16). So great was the enmity Saul had for David that "Saul told Jonathan his son and all his servants to put David to death" (1 Samuel 19:1).

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² S. Goldman, *Samuel* (New York: The Soncino Press, 1987), 12. See also 110.

³ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴ *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 2:379.

IN RESPONSE – CHRIST, DAVID, AND MARK 2:23-28, PART TWO

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David became a fugitive. Fleeing from Saul, he went to the high priest. Ahimelech “inquired of the Lord for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine” (1 Samuel 22:10). David needed a word from God. He needed supplies. And He needed weapons.

Although the rightful heir to the throne of Israel, “David shows, in this time of hard trial and waiting, passive resignation to God’s will and complete abnegation of his own will, and although he is sure of his calling to be king of Israel, he takes no steps at all to realize his calling by his own efforts against Saul.”¹

In addition to this, David came to Ahimelech as he did “that he might be a type of Christ, who being anointed to the kingdom, humbled himself, and was therefore highly exalted. But the example of the suffering of Jesus was a copy without a blot, that of David was not so....”²

David came to Nob and to the high priest there as a public figure, as general and commander in the armies of Israel, as heir apparent, as a type of Christ, and as a man well known and loved by the people.

Finally, we note a seeming discrepancy with the text in Mark. Christ indicates David went to Abiathar rather than Ahimelech (Mark 2:26). Abiathar is a son of Ahimelech. He fled to David when Saul killed all the priests at Nob in retaliation for their help of David (1 Samuel 22:20). Abiathar served David as high priest (1 Samuel 23:9).

“The father, Ahimelech, and the son, Abiathar, were both present when David came to Nob, and both gave the bread to David. Soon afterward the father was killed; the son became high priest and recorded the facts.”³ Taking Mark and Samuel together, it seems clear Abiathar “was definitely alive and active when David entered the court of the house of God. The action took place ‘in his time.’”⁴ We interpret the words of Jesus as “in the

time of Abiathar *who became* the high priest.”

Since David was so well known and respected, it is little wonder that Ahimelech sensed something was amiss when David appeared unattended. “Ahimelech came trembling to meet David and said to him, ‘Why are you alone and no one with you?’”

David said to Ahimelech the priest, “The king has commissioned me with a matter and has said to me, ‘Let no one know anything about the matter on which I am sending you and with which I have commissioned you; and I have directed the young men to a certain place.’ Now therefore, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found” (1 Samuel 21:2-3).

“Here David does not behave like himself. He told Ahimelech a gross untruth, that Saul had ordered him business to dispatch, that his attendants were dismissed to such a place, and that he was charged to observe secrecy and therefore durst not communicate it, no, not to the priest himself. This was all false.”⁵ What was David’s motive? Did he want to give Ahimelech what we call plausible deniability? If David lied, Ahimelech, when questioned by Saul, would not have to lie. At the same time, “David would not confess to him that he was fleeing from Saul, because he was evidently afraid that the high priest would not give him any assistance, lest he should draw down the wrath of the king.”⁶

The whole affair compromised Ahimelech. As already mentioned, Saul slew the priests. Abiathar fled. David realized he was at fault and said to Abiathar, “I have brought about the death of every person in your father’s household” (1 Samuel 22:22).

We now come to the part of the story central to our present inquiry. “The priest answered David and said, ‘There is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread; if only the young men

have kept themselves from women’” (1 Samuel 18:4). “David had asked for five loaves, because he had spoken of several attendants, and probably wanted to make provision for two or three days.”⁷ Mark 2:25 speaks of David “and his companions.” Ahimelech had no bread except that which was *consecrated*.

Leviticus 24:5-9 describes this bread. Then you shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it; two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake. You shall set them in two rows, six to a row, on the pure gold table before the Lord. You shall put pure frankincense on each row that it may be a memorial portion for the bread, even an offering by fire to the Lord. Every Sabbath day he shall set it in order before the Lord continually; it is an everlasting covenant for the sons of Israel. It shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place; for it is most holy to him from the Lord’s offerings by fire, his portion forever.

Note several things. The golden table was located on the north side of the holy place opposite the lampstand. As the priest entered the holy place, the table was on his right, the lampstand on his left, and he faced the altar of incense that was before the veil concealing the most holy place. God commanded the priests to place twelve fresh loaves or cakes of bread on this table each Sabbath. God also commanded the priests to eat the bread that was replaced. They and they alone were to eat it in the holy place.

The indication is that it was the Sabbath when David arrived at the tabernacle. Hot bread had just been placed on the golden table in the holy place and the week old bread had just been removed. “There was no bread there but the bread of the Presence which was removed from before the Lord, in order to put hot bread in its place when it was taken away. (1 Samuel 21:1-6). This is the connection with the situation in the gospel of Mark.

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¹ John Peter Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, Philip Schaff, trans., 12 vol. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 3:275.

² Matthew Henry, 2:394.

³ Hendriksen, 107.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Henry, 2:395.

⁶ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Books of Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 217.

⁷ *Ibid.*

IN RESPONSE – CHRIST, DAVID, AND MARK 2:23-28, PART THREE

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Ahimelech appears to ignore the stipulation the priests alone are to eat the bread. He lays out another requirement. “There is consecrated bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women” (1 Samuel 21:4). Ahimelech refers to Leviticus 15:18.

“David answered the priest and said to him, ‘Surely women have been kept from us as previously when I set out and the vessels of the young men were holy, though it was an ordinary journey; how much more then today will their vessels be holy?’” (1 Samuel 21:5). David assures Ahimelech that both he and his men meet the requirement of legal purity and may therefore eat the consecrated bread.

Ahimelech complies with David’s request. “So the priest gave him consecrated bread; for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence which was removed from before the Lord, in order to put hot bread in its place when it was taken away” (1 Samuel 21:1-6).

In Ahimelech’s view, the principle of the legal prescription of Levitical purity was satisfied, inasmuch as the circumstances—namely the lack of ordinary bread, the haste which the alleged important commission of the king required, the duty in aiding in the execution as much as possible, and the pious behavior of David in inquiring the Lord’s will at the holy place—seemed to justify a deviation from the rule concerning the eating of the show-bread.¹

“But the show-bread could be eaten only by priests, and it is therefore strange that Ahimelech’s scruples should refer only to David’s possible uncleanness and not to the fact that he was not a priest.”² “[T]he priest here seems to be over-nice, not to say superstitious.”³

In addition, was this a case of necessity? Keil and Delitzsch remark, “If they were clean at any rate in this respect, he would in such a case of necessity depart from the Levitical law concerning the eating of the show bread, for the sake of observing the higher commandment of

love to a neighbor.”⁴ The Jewish expositor Goldman adds, “Those Rabbinic commentators who hold that Ahimelech gave David the show-bread quote the Talmudic explanation of the apparent breach of the law of Leviticus xxiv. 9, viz. That the preservation of life overrides almost all other commandments in the Torah.”⁵ Matthew Henry agrees. “David pleads that he and those that were with him, in this case of necessity, might lawfully eat of the hallowed bread....”⁶ Lange takes the same tact. “The duty of self preservation justified David in eating the show bread, to which, according to the letter of the law he was not entitled; neighborly love required Ahimelech to deviate from the outer prescription in order to help the needy fugitive.”⁷

Jesus speaks of David’s need. “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry...” (Mark 2:25). Calvin says, “If necessity absolved David from blame, it absolves others as well.”⁸

But was it necessity alone that governed the case? Was it not also the fact that David, as heir apparent to the throne, appeared before Ahimelech seeking aid? Once he received the requested aid, David fled to “Achish king of Gath. But the servants of Achish said to him, ‘Is this not David king of the land?’” (1 Samuel 21:10-11). This was perhaps “the natural exaggeration of popular rumor.”⁹ David’s exploits, the slaying of Goliath, the reaction of the people, preceded him.

Perhaps the impression is deeper. “Nay, is this not he that (if our intelligence from the land of Israel be true) is, or is to be *king of the land*?”¹⁰ If the Philistines held this view, what of Ahimelech? At the very least, David was, in the eyes of Ahimelech, no common person. There

was certainly some deference shown to David because of his position in the kingdom. It seems inevitable this would be the case. Necessity played a roll. David’s position as a national hero and popular leader certainly also played into Ahimelech’s thinking.

Returning to Mark, Jesus responds to the the Pharisees. “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions became hungry; how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he also gave it to those who were with him?” (Mark 2:25-26).

“The relevancy of the case here cited is enhanced by the probability that David’s desecration of the show-bread was itself committed on the Sabbath, as the loaves appear to be just renewed (1 Sam. 21, 6).”¹¹ Hendriksen ties the two accounts together as follows. “The point is this: if David had a right to ignore *divinely ordained ceremonial provision* when necessity demanded this, then would not David’s exalted Antitype, namely, Jesus, God’s anointed in a far more eminent sense, have a right, under similar conditions of need, to set aside *a totally unwarranted, man-made sabbath regulation*?”¹² In hindsight, we see David went to Nob as a more prominent figure than the high priest may have known or understood. David stood before him as anointed king and type of Messiah. The Pharisees had the benefit of this hindsight. When Jesus referred to David’s Sabbath visit to the tabernacle and his eating the show-bread, the Pharisees would have had an immediate and instinctive response. “But that was David. He was the anointed king. He was the precursor of Messiah.” If this was indeed the case, it was surely the response that Jesus sought in order to make His point.

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¹ Lange, 272.

² Goldman, 130.

³ Henry, 395.

⁴ Keil and Delitzsch, 218.

⁵ Goldman, 131.

⁶ Henry.

⁷ Lange, 276.

⁸ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, A. W. Morrison, trans., D. W. and T. F. Torrance, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 2:29.

⁹ Goldman, 132.

¹⁰ Henry, 396.

¹¹ J. A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 53.

¹² Hendriksen, 106. Italics his.

IN RESPONSE – CHRIST, DAVID, AND MARK 2:23-28, PART FOUR

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Christ provoked the Pharisees in pointing to David's violation of the ceremonial law by eating the show-bread. My conjecture is the implicit and unspoken response of the Pharisees to Jesus is simple and direct, "Well, *that* was David." This seems to be a logical response. The implied response of Jesus is also simple, "Exactly." Expanding the thought slightly, we have the following. Jesus elicits the story of David in His defense. The Pharisees respond, "But that was David. Do you not realize he was the anointed king of Israel and a type of the promised Messiah?" Jesus replies, "Exactly. Do you not make the connection between David and the Son of Man?"

In other words, by reaching back to remind the Pharisees of David, Jesus is setting Himself forth as their King. This reference to David is another step by Jesus in the purposeful manifestation of Himself as both God and King. Christ gave the example of David to show the similarity of the need in each case *and* to show the similarity He bore with David. "He showed that there was biblical evidence for the law of need taking precedence over the law of ceremonial, and *that* in the case of no less a personage than David."¹ The two conclusions Jesus draws from His interchange with the Pharisees apply these two reasons.

"Jesus said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath'" (Mark 2:27).

God never designed it to be an *imposition* upon us, and therefore we must not make it so to ourselves. *Man was not made for the Sabbath*, for he was made before the Sabbath was instituted. Man was made *for God*, and for his honor and service, and he must rather die than deny him; but he was *not made for the Sabbath*, so as to be tied up by the law of it, from that which is necessary to the support of life.²

God meant the Sabbath to be a benefit not a burden. "The Sabbath was instituted to

be a blessing for man: to keep him healthy, to render him holy, so that he might calmly meditate on the works of his Maker, might 'delight himself in Jehovah' (Isa. 58:13, 14), and look forward with joyful anticipation to the sabbath rest that remains for the people of God (Heb. 4:9)."³

We find rest and rejuvenation, both physical and spiritual, in our observance of the Sabbath. "If the holy rest commanded on the seventh day might lawfully be broken for the sake of saving life or even mitigating its distresses, how much more must such emergencies dispense with an extravagant and uncommanded abstinence from active labour."⁴ The Westminster Shorter Catechism leads us in this direction. "The sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God's worship, *except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy.*"⁵ Jesus exemplifies the point. This is a proximate conclusion. "Even this principle, that the sabbath was made for man, the Pharisees might endure, but the Lord goes further."⁶

He gives His ultimate conclusion or climax⁷ in Mark 2:28, "So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." If Christ is the greater son of David, the anointed King, if He is that divine person who comes on the clouds of heaven, the Son of Man (Daniel 7:13), He is the LORD. He is God. He is the One who instituted the Sabbath. He is therefore Lord of the Sabbath. "So, therefore, for this reason, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."⁸ "He regarded the sabbath as His by right."⁹ It was His by right of creation and institution.

³ Hendriksen, 108.

⁴ Alexander, 54.

⁵ Answer 60. Italics added.

⁶ Cole, 74.

⁷ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures of the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), 1:273

⁸ F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 221.

⁹ Cole.

We therefore see that Christ used the incident with David, the high priest, and the show-bread not only to defend himself from the false charges of the Pharisees but also to present and declare Himself as Messiah, LORD, and King. "This early statement of Jesus' lordship, and its use of the term *Son of Man* as his official title, is a good specimen of the way in which he tacitly assumed his Messianic character under this title...."¹⁰

This is what so infuriated the Pharisees and invited the indictment of blasphemy. Jesus said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). What was the response? "He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7). Christ presented Himself as God, the One who forgives sins. The confession in Mark 2:23-28 is the same.

Christ explains His use of parables in a similar way. When asked why He speaks in parables, He responded to the disciples, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables, so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN" (Mark 4:11-12). Christ takes upon His lips the very words of the One who sits on the throne (Isaiah 6:9-10). He speaks the words of God as the explanation for his own actions. This is another tacit presentation of Himself as LORD and King.

How does Christ use the Scriptures of the Old Testament? He often uses them, not only to argue a case or defend Himself from false charges, but to testify to His own deity. This is a methodology worthy of study. It provides us guidance in the interpretation of Scripture. This is a methodology worthy of emulation in that it also provides us guidance in preaching Christ from the Old Testament.

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¹⁰ Ezra P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), 50.

¹ Alan Cole, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 73. Italics mine.

² Henry, 5:463.