

## **Discernment in 1 Samuel 14—Urim, Thummim and the Voice of the People**

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*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness.... II Timothy 3:16*

Over fifty years ago, on a Christmas Eve, our father gave mother a new Bible. I can still see that dark red cloth bound Revised Standard Version. For rest of the winter, Momma read from what was then a brand new translation. I remember bed time, my brothers and sisters wearing matching flannel pj's and Momma's open Bible. (Please understand this was before decent TV signals to Northern Minnesota, and in our house parents really did read to their children.) We heard bits of Judges, Ruth, and then, First and Second Samuel straight through. These are tales of harps and shepherds, giants and kings, broken men and powerful women, Hannah, Samuel, Saul, Jonathan, David, Abigail, Bathsheba, Absalom and Nathan. The good and the bad, heroes and sinners, and all the rest were laid out for this child. It was wonderful! That was a long time ago, but I still come back to those stories today.

The church body of which I am a member, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, might benefit from an examination of I Samuel 14. The story here tells how the armies of Israel under the leadership of King Saul and his son Jonathan defeat the Philistines at the pass of Michmash. To read this chapter is to enter a world very different from ours. We're given this strange combination of political, religious, cultic, and deeply superstitious forces. The story is just odd! But it is well told and sometimes used as a lesson for those learning Hebrew. Today it might serve as a parable or cautionary tale for our church. For it speaks of the limits of cultic or constitutional forces and the ability of a people to discern the workings and mystery of the Spirit and will of God in spite of their leadership.

If you're a little intrigued by what I'm writing here, please open a Bible to I Samuel 14:1-46 and read about the battles at Michmash, Jonathan's victory, Saul's rash vow, a taste of honey, and all the rest. What follows might take some time to sort through. Please forgive me rambling on like this. Thank you.

As we unpack the story, a review of the cast of characters can be helpful. On the far side of the pass at Michmash are the armies of the Philistines, which also contain elements of "Hebrews" in their service (14:21). Collaboration with so-called "enemies" is nothing new, and a reading of Biblical military history will show how most armies were a mixed lot. For example, at Jericho the Hebrew children were aided by Rahab (Joshua 2) and for a time even David was in the service of the Philistine King Achish of Gath, Goliath's home town (I Samuel 27).

On the near side of the pass are the pitiful remnants of Israel's army. Chapter 13 tells how the Philistines had pressed so hard on Israel that many hid in caves, holes, rocks and cisterns. Saul is camped under a pomegranate tree with his son Jonathan and about 600 troops. Still, the cultic and religious heart of ancient Israel is with Saul. The ark of God travels with the troops, as does

Ahijah, a great-grandson of Eli, who serves as priest wearing the ephod. Understanding what is meant by "ephod" can be a bit confusing. In Exodus 25, 28 and 29 it is described as part of the priest's vestments, a linen garment over which the sacred breastplate was worn. II Samuel 6 has David dancing before the ark girded with an ephod, which seems to have been a type of loin cloth. Other sources describe the ephod as a piece of molten metal, almost an idol of sorts (Judges 18). The ephod is linked to the Urim and Thummim, objects used for cleromancy, that is, the casting of lots for purposes of divination. Either the lots were cast in front of the ephod, or the Urim and Thummim were placed inside the ephod, maybe shaken a bit and then drawn out for an answer to the day's question(s). For Saul and his army Israel's God is with them, active and responding to vital questions. They believe God empowers and leads the people with various signs as well as through the ministry of the priest, the ark, the ephod and the Urim and Thummim.

To inquire of God in I Samuel 14 sometimes involves the casting of sacred lots. To our ears this sounds primitive, superstitious and maybe silly. But please be reminded how, as Dr. Don Juel often said, "The veneer of civilization runs pretty thin." For example, in the last election the tiny Minnesota city I call home was unable to choose a mayor. Two write-in candidates received the same number of votes. The city's attorney was contacted and law books were reviewed. The general consensus was that in case of a tie the office is to be filled by lots cast between the candidates. They flipped a coin, and all knew the will of the people. Proverbs 16:33 summarizes Biblical images of the lottery, "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the Lord." Saul was chosen king by means of lost donkeys, an encounter with the prophet Samuel, receiving charismatic gifts, and finally, a lottery (I Samuel 9 and 10). (But even then, his leadership was not recognized until he rose up against the Ammonites.) Saul's inquiry of God as the priest uses the ephod is a fascinating cultural oddity. However, what makes it really interesting—and maybe important for all of us—is how the community around Saul receives and discerns the voice of God, even as it comes from the lot.

The battle at Michmash begins as Jonathan and his armor bearer approach the Philistine line through the pass. Jonathan makes this move without the approval of his father. But by faith he says the fight is always in the Lord's hands and that God will provide a sign through the Philistines. When they see the two Hebrews, the Philistines will either call for them to come to their camp or order them to stay put, as they come up to meet them. If the Philistines invite the pair to their camp, Jonathan understands it as a sign that God gives him victory. His armor bearer goes along with Jonathan and simply says, "Do all that your mind inclines you to; behold, I am with you, as is your mind so is mine." (I Samuel 14:7). Jonathan's armor bearer sets the tone for the army's response to their leadership's charismatic interpretation of the God's will. They enter the Philistine camp and the battle is on.

At first Saul is reluctant to join the fight. He calls roll, asking who has left the camp. Only two are missing, Jonathan and his armor bearer. Saul then calls for the ark and the priest, presumably to consult the ephod. But when he sees the confusion in the Philistine camp, and feels the earth quake, he tells the priest to "withdraw your hand," and he leads his troops. The Hebrews in the Philistine camp rise up against their masters and join Saul, as well. All of them follow Saul's oath that they not eat anything until sunset. They don't question their leadership.

But as you remember from the story, Jonathan has not heard of his father's oath, and as they pursue the Philistines through the woods, the troops come across colonies of honeybees. Saul's son takes a stick, dips it in a honeycomb, eats and is refreshed. At that point, Jonathan hears of the oath, and says, "My father has troubled the land....How much better if the people had eaten freely; for the slaughter of the Philistines has not been great" (I Samuel 14:29-30). The troops, however, continue to follow Saul's order until the end of the day. When night comes they are very hungry, slaughter the Philistines' cattle, but fail to follow cultic butchering practices. They eat bloody meat, are ritually unclean and thereby not fit for further military service. (Please see Leviticus 7: 26, Joshua 3, II Samuel 12 and many other references. In ancient Israel troops were placed under cultic discipline as they entered the battle.) When he hears of this Saul is enraged. The king builds an altar and taxes his troops by ordering them to kill their own cattle according to the proper form. Again, the army obeys. But there comes a breaking point.

The next morning Saul gets ready to continue battle. However, the priest says they should first inquire of the God. The lot is cast, but God gives them no answer. Saul gathers the army's leadership and demands to know who broke his oath, and led them into sin, so that God abandoned them. Whoever caused this mess must die. Ahijah the priest uses the ephod and the sacred lot. In a scene which echoes the lottery of his own election as king ( I Samuel 10), Saul calls for a division of Israel and says if the guilt is in his own family, "give Urim," but if the guilt is in Israel, "give Thummim." Of course, the lot eventually falls to Jonathan who then confessed how the day before he had a taste of honey. Saul makes another oath saying surely his son will die (I Samuel 14:44). Only now do the people refuse to follow. The troops rise against Saul and say, "As the Lord lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground" (I Samuel 11: 45). Jonathan is ransomed. The battle at Michmash is over and the Philistines return to their place. Saul's army has exercised their own measure of discernment and refused to follow a decision even if it was made using all the proper constitutional and cultic procedures. No one hearing the story thinks Saul and the priest were right and the people wrong.

What has this to do with you and me? As I said out the outset, it is something of a parable or at the very least a cautionary tale for our church. At the heart of the story is a call to recognize the limits of even the best constitutions, spiritual disciplines, cultic rites and good intentions. Church leadership needs to be painfully aware of these limits. To be sure, some three thousand years separate us from the events at Michmash. The drawing of Urim and Thummim, a ritual slaughter of cattle on a stone altar, the spray of the blood, a night sky filled with smoke and the incantations of the priest as the lot is cast are far removed from our experience. But in the same way, our church's political and cultic rites would make no sense to Saul.

Our local, synodical and churchwide gatherings have the best in terms of organization, the application of technologies, and the food isn't bad. No one goes hungry. The air surrounding our assemblies can also crackle with spiritual intensity. Folks tell how the use of carefully selected voting members, electronic voting machines, prayerful silence at each vote and all the rest are gifts from God so that we might find direction and discern the movings of the Spirit. But our assemblies betray a rigid constitutionalism—a trust in systems and procedures—which is as shallow as Saul's use of the lot. For more than 20 years the ELCA has clung to an interesting,

albeit somewhat unproven, threefold definition of the church. The church gathers in congregations, synods and national assemblies. Voting members for churchwide assemblies are chosen through a strict formula which marks the divisions between clergy and lay, male and female, skin color, and beginning in 2011, age. Churchwide assemblies have the last word on any question, including the ability to adopt new rules of order. Unlike some other Protestant denominations, such as the Methodists and Presbyterians, the ELCA has no system of checks and balances whereby decisions made at national gatherings are brought before more local bodies for ratification. The ELCA's constitutional system, like Saul's use of the ephod, claims to be the vehicle of profound charismatic revelation. The Spirit is said to speak through the proper preparation and actions of the assembly. But as history has shown us, if the desired results are not forthcoming the charge is made someone stifled the Spirit—so the issue is brought up again.

I Samuel 14 reminds us that just because you follow the right form it doesn't mean the Spirit is captive. You can't put that bird in a cage! In fear, trembling and with no small amount of rage Saul gathered his troops and ordered the priest to draw sacred lots. He was looking for revelation, seeking some discernment into the mystery behind his troops' sin. Saul is deeply troubled and there is a desperation in his efforts at discernment. The prophet Samuel and you and I, the readers of the book, know Saul's cause is lost for God has rejected him.

It's important to also note how Saul seems incapable of making a confession of faith. Saul stands in sharp contrast to I and II Samuel's presentation of his son, Jonathan, and later of David. They tend to face hard times with a measure of confidence, trusting salvation is in the Lord's hand. (See: I Samuel 14:6, 17:37 and 46, II Samuel 12:22 and many others.) Their confession of faith provides the mooring for all their methods of inquiry. In the absence of a confession of faith Saul is but a dabbler in discernment. As the story works out, he seeks clarity from the Lord through one effort at discernment after another; charismatic revelations, liturgical mysteries, blatant legal/constitutional manipulations, and eventually a medium who offers communications with the dead. I Samuel 27:6 summarizes his broken position, "And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets." However, the main point for us is not Saul's failure, but the people's response.

Saul's methods of inquiry at Michmash were deeply entrenched within the liturgical and cultic traditions of Israel. But the troops rejected the results. Israel exercised a discernment of its own. They refused to allow Saul to follow the example of Jephthah who darkens victory with a rash vow and the slaughter of his daughter (Judges 11). The people's rejection to the lot can be understood as a confession of faith. Their faith will not be bound, even by sacred lots. Instead, they remember Jonathan's victory, and in so doing recall how even the king's son is a child of the promise. Here is a lesson that ought to haunt our church. For the heart of Lutheran witness has always been its confessions, not our constitutions! Constitutions, conventions, assemblies, synods and the all the rest are painfully limited spiritual instruments. Like Saul we run the risk of appearing silly, shallow and spiritually abandoned when the people exercise their own discernment, cling to their confession of faith, defy the system and walk away.