HAS JESUS READ WHAT DAVID DID?  
PROBING PROBLEMS IN MARK 2:25–26

I. INTRODUCTION: AN ARGUMENT HEADED NOWHERE?

While Jesus travels through the grainfields one Sabbath, Mark tells us, his disciples begin to pluck heads of grain. As if on cue, a group of Pharisees springs into action, challenging the upstart Nazarene: ‘Why are they [i.e., your disciples] doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?’ ‘Have you never read what David did,’ Jesus ripostes, ‘when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? How he entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions?’ And, furthermore, that, ‘the Sabbath was made for humanity and not humanity for the Sabbath. Therefore, the Son of Man is Lord even over the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:23–28). For most New Testament scholars, the telos of Jesus’ argument is apparent. As Eugene Boring puts it, ‘here as elsewhere in 2:1–3:6 the authority of Jesus is the root issue, and the agenda modulates from Halakah to Christology.’¹ Yet, despite broad agreement that the emphasis of this pericope lies with Jesus’ authority as the Son of Man, questions abound, particularly about the logic of Jesus’ appeal to ‘what David did’.

Beyond disagreement over whether Jesus’ appeal to ‘what David did’ operates with an implicit messianic logic—i.e., If David could do it, why not the messiah?—numerous issues with the argument itself remain unanswered.² Jesus seems to assume, for instance, that David’s

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² For a complete list of these issues, see Robert H. Gundry, Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) p. 141; John Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, The Gospel of Mark (SP 2;
actions carry halakhic weight, an inference which ‘the rabbis’—and thus, we are told, the legal experts of the day—would surely reject. If the argument ‘modulates from Halakah to Christology’, does it matter that the path to Christology, though it may be paved with good intentions, is inherently flawed? Jesus also appears to be confused about what David did and with whom he did it. Although there is some confusion in the tradition about the name of the priest whom David encountered at Nob, there is no evidence to substantiate that the priest on duty was called ‘Abiathar, the high priest’. Moreover, Jesus stakes his argument on the premise


that David’s men were ‘with him’, in spite of the fact the Deuternomistic Historian is abundantly clear that David traveled to Nob alone (1 Sam. 21:2 MT).⁵

How, then, should one account for these and other issues revolving around Jesus’ appeal to 1 Sam. 21:2–10 MT/LXX (ET 21:1–9)? While some have mounted cases for the general historicity of Mark 2:25–26, many remain unconvinced.⁶ John Meier’s conclusion is perhaps the starkest. He contends, ‘This Markan Jesus is not only an ignoramus but a completely inept debater, who foolishly challenges Scripture experts to a public contest over the proper reading of a specific text—only to prove immediately to both his disciples and his opponents how ignorant he is of the text that he himself has put forward’.⁷ That is, for Meier, Mark’s Jesus has clearly never read what David did; some other ignoramus, rather than the historical Jesus, must be responsible for Mark 2:25–26.

It is not the aim of this study to challenge Meier’s conclusion per se. Rather, I want to suggest that further attendance to the issues Meier and others have raised has the potential to sharpen our approach toward Mark’s Gospel as a literary product of Second Temple Judaism

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⁵ David arrives at Nob alone in every extant version of this account (MT; LXX; 4QSam⁶; Josephus, Ant. 6.242).


⁷ Meier, ‘Historical Jesus’, 579.
and, perhaps, to enhance our understanding of the literary and theological function of Jesus’ appeal to 1 Sam. 21. Three issues will guide my discussion: (1) Jesus’ appeal to ‘what David did’ in the context of a halakhic debate; (2) Jesus’ claim that David shared the bread of Presence with those who were ‘with him’; and (3) Jesus’ suggestion that David entered the house of God ἐπὶ Ἀβιαθάρ ἄρχερέως.

II. DAVIDIC ‘HAGGADAH’ IN SECOND TEMPLE HALAKHOT

Following the leads of David Daube and D. M. Cohn-Sherbok, a substantial number of Gospels scholars have assumed that by appealing to ‘what David did’, Jesus has simply failed to grasp the elementary distinction between halakha and haggadah. Robert Guelich thus grants, as a matter of fact, that ‘[Jesus’] argument would not be persuasive as scribal casuistry because he uses a story from a historical book, a haggadah, to make his case rather than an actual legal precept found in Scripture, a halakah’. Others attempt to exonerate Jesus of this technical faux pas. After conceding that haggadah ‘would be without force in technical debate’, William Lane insists that it would be a moot point in this particular instance, since ‘[t]he argument was of a

8 Kazen’s monograph (Scripture, Interpretation, or Authority?) makes significant strides in this direction. In contrast to the present study, however, Kazen’s is primarily a study of the historical Jesus’ attitude toward the Law. He demonstrates that the kind of argumentation one encounters in Mark 2:25–26 and parallels fits well within the developing Sabbath halakhot of the Second Temple period (esp. pp. 71–100). Yet, he does not, at least to my mind, adequately address all the issues involved in Mark 2:25–26.


10 Guelich, Mark, pp. 121–22.
popular kind designed for the Pharisees'.

Likewise, Robert Gundry avers that, ‘[a] formal rabbinic debate would have called for Jesus to make a halakic appeal to a definite command in the OT’, but goes on to stress that, ‘The informal setting of a journey through the countryside justifies his haggadic argument...’

In other words, what may have been a problem with Jesus’ argument can be cheerfully swept under the rug once we realize that country bumpkins have no time for scholastic niceties.

Yet, what Gospels scholars have long taken for granted, Dead Sea Scrolls scholars have long problematized. Indeed, as far back as 1974, Lawrence Schiffman observed that the sectarians seemed to have no issue with developing halakhot from non-Pentateuchal (i.e., ‘haggadic’) material. Further study has only strengthened Schiffman’s case. In his recent monograph, Scripture and Law in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Alex P. Jassen devotes an entire chapter to the use of non-Pentateuchal sources as material for legal prooftexts. His conclusions bear reiterating:

As prooftexts, these non-Pentateuchal passages are employed in much the same way as Pentateuchal passages are used in other sectarian literature. At times, they are identified as the explicit scriptural source. Elsewhere, the non-Pentateuchal passages are drawn upon as part of the legal hermeneutics of the sectarian law. At times, the legal conclusions are determined through the employment of wordplay with the scriptural passage. At other times, these passages play a critical role in the logical reasoning of the sectarian law.

Throughout all these texts, however, there is no hesitation to turn to a non-Pentateuchal passage as a legal

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11 Lane, Gospel, p. 117.
12 Gundry, Mark, p. 147. Ben Witherington also appears to be hedging his bets when he states, ‘Jesus appeals to an haggadic example from the life of David and his men. There is a certain appropriateness to this analogy since, according to 1 Sam. 21, David and his men were in need and on the run from Saul’ (The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001] p. 130). Likewise, Kazen claims, ‘What we find here is more of a ‘haggadic’ use of Scripture, an example story to drive home a point rather than to support a halakic ruling...’ (Scripture, p. 103, my emphasis).
prooftext. Indeed, they function in much the same way as Pentateuchal passages are employed in other sectarian legal texts.\textsuperscript{15}

Jassen’s study strongly suggests that one of the perennial problems that Gospels scholars have with Jesus’ appeal to David’s actions is based on an anachronistic imposition of rabbinic categories onto first century CE texts.

Of the many texts one could adduce to illustrate Jassen’s point, the Temple Scroll’s ‘Statutes of the King’ (11QT\textsuperscript{a} 56:12–59:21) is germane to the discussion at hand since the writer of this text, like Mark, demonstrably draws on Davidic haggadah.\textsuperscript{16} Two illustrations of this phenomenon should suffice. First, the writer mandates that the king’s foremost task is “[to appoint] as their heads chiefs of thousands, chiefs of hundreds, chiefs of fifties, and chiefs of tens in all their cities” (11QT\textsuperscript{a} LVII, 3–4).\textsuperscript{17} This

\textsuperscript{15} Jassen, Scripture, p. 245, my emphasis.


\textsuperscript{17} \涡קד\涡קד\涡קד follows Yadin, who notes, “The scribe first wrote \涡קד\涡קד, then rubbed out the \waw at the end of the word (Temple Scroll, 2:255); contrast, however, Elisha Qimron, who writes, ‘no traces of a \waw are extant on the original or on any photograph’ (The Temple Scholl: A Critical Edition with Extensive Reconstruction [Israel Exploration Society; Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1996] p. 82).
injunction, as Yigael Yadin observes, derives from 1 Sam 8:12—a text which, ironically enough, is part of Samuel’s warning to the people about the negative effects of monarchy. The writer of the ‘Statutes of the King’, however, reads 1 Sam. 8:12 in light of David’s actions in 2 Sam. 18:1, wherein the Deuteronomistic Historian informs us that ‘David mustered the men who were with him, and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds’ (וַיִּקָּדֶד דּוֹד אֹתָיו וֶשָּׁם עַל־הוֹם שְׁרֵי אֲלַפִּים וְשְׁרֵי חֲמָצִים; 2 Sam. 18:1). David’s actions in 2 Sam. 18:1 thereby transform 1 Sam. 8:12 from a warning about what future monarchs will do into an injunction for what future monarchs must do.

A similar hermeneutical shift takes place in the regulations on the distribution of plunder (11QTa 58:11–15). In this instance, the writer conflates Num. 31:27–30 with 1 Sam. 30:24–25, using the latter as precedent for the rule that Israel’s warriors, whether absent or present in battle, are entitled to an equal share in the spoils. This move takes the Deuteronomistic Historian’s comment that, ‘From that day forward he [David] made it [i.e., the law of equal distribution] a statute and an ordinance for Israel’ (1 Sam. 30:25), and turns it into a binding injunction for future monarchs. These examples are illustrative of the ways in which the writer of the ‘Statues of the King’ freely develops halakhot from Davidic ‘haggadah’ (i.e., non-Pentateuchal material).

Jesus’ appeal to ‘what David did’ in Mark 2:25–26 is of a different kind than the writer’s use of Davidic haggadah in the ‘Statutes of the King’: the former makes a direct appeal to an incident from David’s life, the latter supplements his reworked Pentateuchal halakhot with incidents from David’s life, among other things. Nonetheless, there is a certain degree of analogy in that both assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that ‘what David did’ has the potential to offer the raw materials for fresh halakha. It would seem reasonable, then, to conclude that Jesus’

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appeal to David’s actions ‘may contain an argument that would not have been out of line’ with the writer of the ‘Statutes of the King’. Whether this mode of argumentation was acceptable to Jesus’ interlocutors is difficult to say; but the evidence we have from the period suggests that such a scenario is plausible.

The preceding discussion raises two methodological issues for scholars attempting to read Mark in its first century context. First, to what extent is ‘haggadah’ a helpful term for designating a first century CE recitation of the events surrounding David’s arrival at Nob (1 Sam. 21:2–9)? Would it not be better, in this instance, for Gospels scholars simply to speak of Jesus’ appeal to ‘non-Pentateuchal material’? Second, given that a plausible case has been made that some of Jesus’ contemporaries would find his mode of argumentation acceptable, should we not admit Mark 2:25–26 into the wider pool of data that we have regarding how Second Temple Jews developed halakhot? Should we not, in other words, turn the prevailing assumption on its head? Rather than deviating from an ‘acceptable’ mode of halakhic argumentation, Jesus’ appeal to ‘what David did’ actually contributes to our understanding of what constitutes ‘acceptable’ halakhic argumentation in the first century CE.

III. THOSE WHO WERE ‘WITH’ DAVID

Jesus anchors his defense of his disciples’ (illicit) Sabbath activity on the premise that David’s retinue participated in his (permissible) breach of the law. The overall cogency of the argument thus appears to be contingent upon what Jesus means by describing David’s warriors

as ‘those who were with him’ (οἱ μετ’ ἀυτοῦ, Mark 2:25; τοῖς σὺν ἀυτῷ οὖσιν, 2:26). The nearly ubiquitous interpretation of this phrase is that Jesus has flouted the context of 1 Sam. 21:2–9, either due to ignorance of what the text actually says, or for rhetorical purposes. That is, in direct contradiction to the Deuteronomic Historian, Jesus insists that David was, in fact, not alone when he appeared before the priest at Nob.

That this is a viable interpretation is beyond question. Yet, it remains unclear precisely what such an interpretation allows us to infer about Jesus’ (and Mark’s) use of scripture. Burton Mack and Vernon Robbins capture the impression that the events in 1 Sam. 21:2–9 has left on many modern readers: ‘The complete truth is that David never meets any young men, and he never intended to meet any. In other words, David’s discussion of the young men is a ruse to get the bread. In essence, David tricked Ahimelech’. While Mack and Robbins go on to acknowledge that ‘one must read the story according to principles at work in the use of scriptural passages during the first century’, their singular attention to rhetoric could imply that the persuasiveness of Jesus’ argument depends to some extent on scriptural ignorance, as Meier has

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21 Some (e.g., Derrett, ‘Judaica’, p. 91; Casey, ‘Culture’, p. 9–10) are convinced that rabbinic traditions, which place David’s arrival at Nob on the Sabbath, were widely known in the first century CE (cf. b. Men. 95b; Yal. Shim’oni 2.130). If some form of these traditions goes back to the first-century CE, then this may suggest that the timing of David’s arrival at Nob is what attracted Jesus and/or the evangelist to 1 Sam. 21. Yet, it is striking, as Marcus notes (Mark 1–8, p. 244), that Mark appears entirely uninterested in when David’s arrival took place (see also Meier, Marginal Jew, p. 327, n. 130). Of potential significance, though beyond the purview of this study, are traditions in which David is depicted as a priest (cf. 2 Sam. 6:14–17; 8:18). If these traditions are in view, the tacit assumption may be that David has the right to partake of the sacred bread, in contradiction to Lev. 24:9, precisely because he was a priest of a different order (cf. Ps. 110:4). Curiously, Josephus’s rendition of David’s arrival at Nob fails to mention the giving of the bread of presence to David (cf. Ant. 6.243–44). This may suggest that Josephus was uncomfortable with the ancient monarch exercising a priestly prerogative, since he appears to recognize that the model of the priest-king that made its way into Israel’s royal theology is Canaanite in origin (cf. Ant. 20.226)

22 Mack and Robbins, Patterns, p. 115.
argued that it does. But this is not a sound inference given what we know about hermeneutical practices in Second Temple Judaism. Jonathan Klawans notes the commonplace phenomenon of ‘contra-scriptural halakhot’, which he defines as ‘Jewish legal rulings that fly in the face of what the Pentateuch seems to say’. Particularly apropos for our purposes is Klawans’s observation that this phenomenon ‘poses some real problems for determining in any given case whether a specific ruling violates the written Torah in such an obvious way that it would be inherently recognized as such by ancient Jews’. By extension, one might question whether scripturally literate Second Temple Jews would find anything inherently wrong with a recitation of 1 Sam. 21:2–9 that contradicted some of the details in the version now contained in our MT.

There may be reason, however, to suspect that we have simply misunderstood what Jesus (and Mark) meant by the phrase ‘with him’. The writer of the ‘Statutes of the King’, for example, frequently uses the expression ‘with him’ (עמו) to signify a group of warriors who traveled with Israel’s king:

(1) At the king’s appointment, “And he shall select for himself a thousand of them ... to be with him (עמו הַלְּדוֹאֵל) twelve thousand men of war who shall not leave him alone, lest he be seized by the hands of nations ... and they shall continuously be with him day and night (והיו עמו תמיד יומם ולילה), and they shall guard him from every act of sin” (11QTa 57:5–11)

(2) In the rules for defensive warfare, “and they shall send with him (עמו) the tenth part of the people to go out [to war] with him (עמו) against their enemies. And they shall go out with him (עמו ויצאו) and if a larger host enters the land of Israel, they shall send with him (עמו) a fifth part of the men of war. And if it is a king with chariots and horses and many men, then they shall send with him (עמו) a third part of the men of war” (11QTa 58:5–8)

(3) In the rules for offensive warfare, “And if he goes out to war against his enemies, a fifth part of the people shall go out with him (עמו)" (11QTa 58:15–16).

The writer’s insistence that the king be accompanied at all times is, of course, motivated by a robust fear of the wiles of uncurtailed monarchy. This need not give the impression, however,

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23 Mack and Robbins, Patterns, p. 115; Meier, ‘Historical Jesus’, p. 579.
that those who were ‘with’ the king were physically in his presence at all times. Rather, the writer of the ‘Statutes of the King’ uses the phrase ‘with him’ as a stereotyped expression to designate a group of warriors who are on campaign with their king.

Jesus’ description of David’s men as ‘those who were with him’ could be understood in a similar fashion. That is, he may have inferred from the Samuel narrative that, upon his return to the war camp, David shared the bread with the group of warriors on campaign ‘with him’ (οἱ μετ’ αὐτοῦ). The language of 1 Sam. 21 makes it clear that the very reason Ahimelech gave the bread to David is so that he might share it with his warriors (21:4–6). So, it seems plausible

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26 One might still object that, in 1 Sam 21:2–9, David operates as a fugitive on the run, rather than as Israel’s king. But this is not how the Deuteronomistic Historian presents it, at least not when the course of David’s life is viewed retrospectively. When the leaders of the tribes of Israel anointed David at Hebron, they said, ‘For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who lead out Israel and brought it in. YHWH said to you, “It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you shall be ruler over Israel”’ (2 Sam. 5:2; par. 1 Chron. 11:2). Israel’s leaders thereby acknowledged that David had been the de facto king of Israel for quite some time. Moreover, we have evidence that some Second Temple Jews viewed David’s fugitive years in a positive light. For example, Albert Pietersma cogently argues that the superscription of Ps. 26 LXX—‘[a psalm] of David before he was anointed’ (τὸ δαυιδ πρὸ τοῦ χρισθῆναι)—evokes the period of David’s life between ‘David’s stop-over at the tabernacle at Nob (1 Sam 21)’ and ‘his being anointed king in 2 Sam 2:4 (over Judah) and 2 Sam 5:3 (over Israel)’ (‘Exegesis and Liturgy in the Superscriptions of the Greek Psalter’, in X Congress of International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies, ed. Bernard A. Taylor [Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies 51; Atlanta: SBL, 2001] pp. 99–138, at p. 104). This suggests that the translator would read the events at Nob not as an instance of self-serving prevarication, but as an example of God’s divine protection of his messiah-designate (cf. Ps. 26:4–5 LXX). In addition, Richard Horsley and John Hanson make a plausible case that some of the so-called ‘messianic pretenders’ mentioned by Josephus took inspiration from David’s ‘fugitive’ years (Bandits, Prophets & Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus [2ed.; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999] pp. 88–134). For these figures, David’s early career may have offered something of a blue-print for how one might justifiably make a claim to the throne. Herod the Great, in fact, may have been one such figure (see Tal Ilan, ‘King David, King Herod, and Nicolaus of Damascus’, JSQ 3 [1998] pp. 195–240).

27 The apodosis ‘you/they may eat [of it]’ would seem to be implied in the MT (as also in the Peshitta and the Vulgate); ‘you [pl.] may eat of it’ (καὶ φάγεται; B and hexaplaric recension of Origen); ‘they may eat [of it]’ (καὶ φαγόνται; Lucianic recension); ‘you [pl.]
that some scripturally literate Jews may have inferred that a rendezvous between David and his men took place, even though the Deuteronomistic Historian does not narrate such an event.\textsuperscript{28}

There is one further point of intrigue that seems worthy of mention. Given the disciples’ active role in the controversy over plucking grain on the Sabbath (note the Pharisee’s question: ‘Why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath’?), it may be significant that the Deuteronomistic Historian recounts a time when David authorized his warriors to go out and do precisely what he did at Nob. While sojourning in the wilderness of Paran, YHWH’s anointed finds that he and his men are once again in need of food. To meet this demand, David charges his warriors:

‘[G]o to Nabal, and greet him in my name. Thus you shall greet him: “Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have... Therefore let my young men find favor in your sight; for we have come on a feast day. Please give whatever your hand can find (תנה־נה את אשר תמצא ידך; δὸς ἃ δῆ ὦ ἔν εἰρήν ἦ καὶ χεῖρ σου) to your servants and to your son David’’’ (1 Sam. 25:6, 8).

These instructions replicate the language of David’s request to Ahimelech: ‘Now then, what have you at hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you find’ (אספקות; 1 Sam. 21:4 MT); ‘And now if there are under your hand five loaves, give into my hand whatever you find’ (δὸς εἰς χεῖρά μου τὸ εὑρεθέν; 1 Sam. 21:4 LXX). Thus, a mere four chapters after David exercised his authority to procure the holy bread at Nob, we find an account in which he commissions his

\textsuperscript{28} Aside from Casey (‘Culture and Historicity’, p. 9), this interpretative option has received almost no consideration (pace Meier [Marginal Jew, p. 327, n. 128] Casey does not intimate that Jesus’ men were with him at Nob, but that Jesus inferred from the Samuel text that David must have met them soon thereafter). Daube’s brief deliberation and dismissal of the possibility of a later meeting between Jesus and his men is typical of the secondary literature. ‘It may be asked’, he writes, ‘whether perhaps the Rabbis of the New Testament period, or some of them, detect in I Samuel a hint at a sharing of the meal by David with a retinue: the reply by Jesus might then proceed from his understanding of the narrative. I know of no such exegesis in the sources’ (‘Responsibilities’, p. 5). On what grounds, though, does the silence of Daube’s sources (the earliest of which is the Babylonian Talmud) obviate the possibility that a first century reader would conclude that David shared the meal with his cohort?

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warriors to participate in the same authority as their leader. To be sure, David’s warriors do not break the law on this occasion. But the observation that David commissioned them with the same authority he exercised at Nob may not have been lost on a scripturally literate author such as Mark.

Participation in Jesus’ authority is a major motif of the Second Gospel. Jesus’ appointment of the Twelve in particular invites the audience to ponder more deeply the comparison between David’s warriors and those whom the Messiah calls to participate in his authority (cf. Mark 3:13–19). The expressed purpose of their appointment—‘in order that they might be with him’ (ἵνα ὅσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ, 3:14)—echoes Jesus’ description of David’s warriors (οἱ μετ’ αὐτοῦ, 2:25). In addition, the appointment of the Twelve has resonances with the mandate in the ‘Statutes of the King’ that the king’s first task is to appoint for himself twelve thousand (one thousand from each tribe) men of war to be ‘with him’ (11QTα 57:2–8). In Mark Jesus’ messianic appointment (1:10–11) is intertwined with his right to appoint the Twelve to be ‘with him’, a process that begins at the very outset of his ministry (1:16–20). Mark’s penchant for narrating exorcisms in terms of military conflict (Mark 3:24–27; 5:1–13) may suggest that the kind of authority Jesus gives his disciples (i.e., ἐξουσίαν ἐκβάλλειν τὰ δαμώνα) is intended to enhance the tacit association between the disciples and David’s warriors. Although Mark’s

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30 So too Yarbro Collins, Mark, pp. 215–16. Jacob Milgrom points out that the timing (ביום) of the king’s appointment of his warriors should be taken flexibly to mean, “as soon as he is crowed,” rather than literally, “on that day” (‘Further Studies in the Temple Scroll’, JQR 71 [1980]: pp. 89–106, at p. 100).

battle is distinctly different, the messiah and his men appear to be engaged in ‘eschatological holy war’.  

IV. WHEN ABIATHAR WAS HIGH PRIEST

Jesus’ claim that David entered the tabernacle and ate the sacred bread ἐπὶ Αβιαθάρ ἀρχιερέως (‘when Abiathar was high priest’) flies in the face every extant version of the story (the priest’s name is ‘Ahimelech’ [MT] or ‘Abimelech’ [LXX]).  

Scholars have offered a range of explanations for this curious Markan detail, and it would be superfluous to rehash them here.  

Instead, I would simply like to offer two further observations—one textual, and one literary.  

First, a textual observation. Although fragmentary, 4Q52 frags. 6–7, 14–19 alerts us to the fact that there are early versions of 1 Sam. 21:2–11 in which the priest’s name is less

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32 Marcus notes, ‘Mark’s portrayal of the inauguration of eschatological holy war against demonic foes would be topical for his community’ (Mark 1–8, p. 195).


34 The most common explanation is that ἐπὶ Αβιαθάρ ἀρχιερέως represents an error (e.g., Meir, ‘Historical Jesus’, pp. 577–78). John W. Wenham (‘Mark 2,26’, JTS 1 [1950] 156) has argued that ἐπὶ Αβιαθάρ means ‘in the section of Scripture having to do with Abiathar’ (cf. Luke 20:37). Derrett (‘Judaica’, p. 92) thinks that it means, ‘in the presence of Abiathar the High Priest’, reasoning that ‘[i]t was not Ahimelech’s actually giving of bread which was significant; it was Abiathar’s warranting, by his own adherence, the propriety of David’s behaviour at that critical period’. Marcus (Mark 1–8, p. 241) suggests that ἐπὶ Αβιαθάρ ἀρχιερέως invites the reader to look ahead in the narrative of 1 Samuel, but prudently avoids speculating about the motivation for this curious detail. Gundry (Mark, pp. 141–42), on the other hand, thinks that the historical Jesus has consciously substituted Abiathar for Ahimelech to forge a connection with the Jerusalem temple. Not unjustly, Meier has described Gundry’s hypothesis as ‘perhaps the most contorted explanation’ (Marginal Jew, p. 329, n. 135).
prominent than in the MT. Line 15 of the text reads, ‘David said to the priest’ (ויאמר דוד לכהן), a point at which 4Q52 agrees with LXX MSS (καὶ εἶπεν Δαυιδ τῷ ἱερεῖ; 1 Sam. 21:3) over and against the MT (ויאמר דוד לאחימלך הניך). The only other mention of the priest’s name come, first, in the preceding verse (cf. 1 Sam. 21:2 MT/LXX) and, second, near the end of the scene (21:9 MT/LXX). Unfortunately, 4Q52 is missing both parts: there is a lacuna in line 14, and the fragment breaks off before the equivalent of 1 Sam. 21:9 MT/LXX. There is, of course, a strong probability that 4Q52 once contained the name of the priest in line 14 as suggested by the editors of the editio princeps of 4Q52. But it is at least possible, even if far less likely, that 4Q52 bears witness to a reading that disagrees with both LXX MSS and the MT on this point.

If the version of 1 Sam. 21:2–10 that Mark knew made little mention of the priest’s name, then one can imagine a scenario in which the evangelist overlooked and then inferred the priest’s name from his knowledge of Davidic traditions. Perhaps Mark has in mind Abiathar’s flight to David after Saul slaughtered all the priests at Nob (1 Sam. 22:20–23); or perhaps the popular association of Abiathar with David has had influence. In any case—and, of course, there are other possibilities as well—the textual history of 1 Sam. 21:2–10 could be a contributing factor

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35 Frank Moore Cross, Donald W. Parry, Richard J. Saley, and Eugene Ulrich, eds., *Qumran Cave 4, XII: 1–2 Samuel* (DJD 17; Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), p. 230; for a convenient English translation of this passage, see Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Know Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999) p. 231. Comparison of 4Q52 against other recensions leads the editors of the editio princeps to conclude, ‘[t]hese data strongly support the view that the Old Greek was translated, presumably in Alexandria, from a Hebrew manuscript that was closely affiliated with the Old Palestinian text, such as that preserved in this old Samuel manuscript’ (p. 233). Although 4QSam tends to agree with the Old Greek textual tradition, it also agrees some sixty-three times with the MT against the LXX and preserves a number of unique readings which agree with neither the MT nor the LXX.

36 C. E. B. Cranfield rightly points out that, ‘there is some confusion between Ahimelech and Abiathar in the O.T. itself—cf. I Sam. xxi. 20 with II Sam. viii. 17; I Chr. xviii. 16, xxiv. 6’ (*The Gospel according to St. Mark* [CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959]) p. 116.
to the presence of the curious phrase ἐπὶ Ἀβιαθάρ ἄρχιερέως in Mark 2:26. While this is hardly a ‘solution’ to what may always remain an irreconcilable problem, it merits discussion, even if only to remind ourselves of the potential perils in assuming that Mark’s version of 1 Sam. 21:2–10 corresponds to the MT’s.

Quite apart from an explanation for the presence of ἐπὶ Ἀβιαθάρ ἄρχιερέως in Mark 2:26, one might inquire about its literary effect for scripturally informed readers of the Second Gospel. For those familiar with the early years of David’s career narrated by the Deuteronomistic Historian, the phrase ἐπὶ Ἀβιαθάρ ἄρχιερέως may have functioned along the lines of what Michael Riffaterre describes as a textual ‘signpost’. According to Riffaterre, textual signposts are:

words and phrases indicating, on the one hand, a difficulty – an obscure or incomplete utterance in the text – that only an intertext can remedy; and, on the other hand, pointing the way to where the solution must be sought. Such features, lexical or phrasal, are distinguished from their context by their dual nature. They are both the problem, when seen from the text, and the solution to that problem when their other, intertextual side is revealed.

The problematic construction—ἐπὶ Ἀβιαθάρ ἄρχιερέως—finds a potentially satisfactory solution when read in light of the wider context of 1 Samuel. That is, whether conscious or not, Jesus’ claim that David ate of the bread of Presence ἐπὶ Ἀβιαθάρ ἄρχιερέως impels the reader ahead in the narrative of 1 Samuel to Abiathar’s flight to David after Saul slaughtered all the priests at Nob (1 Sam. 22:20–23). The connection would be natural enough for an ancient reader, since the Deuternomistic Historian has directly linked 1 Sam. 22:20–23 to 1 Sam. 21:8 via the mention of ‘Doeg the Edomite’.

37 On the other hand, Richard A. Horsley proposes that Mark 2:25–26 references an oral tradition rooted in popular cultural memory, rather than a written text (Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing [Biblical Performance Criticism Series 9; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013], p. 234). If correct, such a ‘text’ would likely reflect the popular association of Abiathar with David.

For the scripturally-attuned reader of Mark, then, Abiathar’s presence with David in the Samuel narrative, evoked by the construction ἐπὶ Ἀβιαθάρ ἄρχιερέως, may have highlighted the paradox of Jesus’ life as God’s messiah-designate. The reason Abiathar travels with David from place to place is because YHWH’s anointed has yet to be enthroned as king and, indeed, because his claim to the throne is a direct affront to the current regime. Likewise, Mark’s Jesus has been ‘anointed’ by God’s Spirit (1:10–11), moves around from place to place with the Twelve and, as the reader learns in the very next passage (3:6), faces the impending threat of death from those in power. Thus, the curious phrase ἐπὶ Ἀβιαθάρ ἄρχιερέως, I suggest, encourages Mark’s readers to engage the events of 1 Sam. 21:2–10 within their wider narrative framework, and thus to grapple with the impending conflict between claims to authority by those who are currently in power, and by a new figure claiming to be God’s messiah.

V. CONCLUSION

The appeal of Mark’s Jesus to ‘what David did’ has struck many as more than a little ironic. On the one hand, Jesus presents himself as an authoritative interpreter of the Jewish scriptures, one who is prepared to face off with the legal experts of the day. On the other, his rendition of the events in 1 Sam 21:2–10 has left many wondering if Jesus was ignorant of the very scriptural text to which he summoned his interlocutors—hence, the question of this essay, ‘Has Jesus read what David did?’ The impetus for this study has been the conviction that the

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39 Bruce Chilton (‘Jesus ben David: Reflection on the Davidssohnfrage’, JSNT 14 [1982], pp. 88–112, at p. 104) notes that, ‘in Mark 3.6 the resolve of the Herodians is mentioned after, albeit not immediately after, Jesus’ appeal to the precedent of David for permitting his disciples to pluck grain on the sabbath (2.25–26)’. Moreover, an allusion to Jesus’ death and resurrection-ascension marks the very center of the first controversy cycle: ‘The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away (ἀπαρθή) from them, then they will fast on that day’ (Mark 2:20); see Joanna Dewey, ‘The Literary Structure of the Controversy Stories in Mark 2:1—3:6’, JBL 92 (1973) pp. 394–401; repr., The Oral Ethos of the Early Church: Speaking, Writing, and Gospel of Mark (Biblical Performance Criticism 8; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013) pp. 53–62, esp. p. 58.
time has long come to reexamine a number of the issues with Jesus’ halakhic argument in Mark 2:25–26. My aim has not been so much to solve ‘problems’ in Mark’s account of the grain-plucking controversy as it has been to probe the methodological assumptions informing why certain features in this account are widely deemed problematic. In so doing, it would seem that the way forward is not to continue insisting that a Jew like Jesus needs to be schooled in his own scriptures and the common hermeneutical practices for reading them, but to recognize that, more often than not, we do.