

How would you reconcile Samuel going up to a high place (see 1 Samuel 9:12 –13; 10:13) with the commands elsewhere not to worship on high places?

The question, as I understand it, is that in later parts of Scripture certainly, God forbids the use of high places. Israel was not to worship on any old high place, or under any old green tree, lest Israel go into idolatry like the other nations among whom they lived. They were to bring a sacrifice to the place where God should choose to set his name there. Against that background we simply read here that Samuel went up to a 'high place'. It seems to have been normal practice at this time. Solomon eventually went up to a high place, and so forth and so on. The historian records it. He doesn't make any comment for good or ill; he just says it happened. The question is therefore, how would you reconcile that with the commands elsewhere not to worship on high places? If it had been Ahab worshipping on high places, I suspect you would have added, 'Well dear me, that's Ahab, but look what wife he has and her religious influence on him.' But when you find people like Samuel going up to a high place, it does beg the question, doesn't it?

I don't know if what I have to say is the full and final answer, but I shall make this remark. At the beginning of Samuel the tabernacle is in Shiloh and the ark is there, and a man like Elkanah is found going up to the tabernacle regularly at the set feasts of the Lord, as was his duty. But the story is telling that eventually the ark was lost to the Philistines, and when it came back it did not appear to go back to the tabernacle at Shiloh, but was in a private house (1 Samuel 7:1–2). That in itself would have caused great problems, wouldn't it? Was there any sense in going up to the tabernacle at Shiloh, when the ark of the Lord wasn't there anyway? How did you perform the rituals of the Day of Atonement if the ark wasn't in the tabernacle, and all such like things? And if the ark wasn't in the tabernacle, that tabernacle was desolate indeed, for it lacked the whole thing for which the tabernacle was built. And therefore, in that state of disorder, it isn't perhaps surprising to find Israel going up to various high places here and there.

The patriarchs, of course, hadn't been under the rule relating to the tabernacle. They had made an altar wherever they pitched their tents for the time being. The rule against going up to high places, as I remember it, was specifically to stop Israel engaging in idolatry in such situations, and copying the Canaanites. Abraham had been in no danger of doing any such thing, but the Israelites would have been. Now, when the tabernacle itself was dismembered and almost unusable because of the absence of the ark, then I daresay that quite serious and godly people who were in no danger of idolatry were reduced to the habit of going up to high places. Samuel did anyway.

If you come right on to the time of David, he brought the ark to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6). I don't think you read that he brought the tabernacle to Jerusalem. And he put the ark in a tent in Jerusalem. That was highly unusual, so to speak. I almost said

'irregular', though it was a very important stage in the establishment of David's dynasty.

Solomon, in his early days, went up to the high place of Gibeon because there was an altar there (1 Kings 3:3). It was only when at last the temple was built, it seems to me, that things returned to normality, as they should have been. If you ask me what were God's people supposed to do in a time of such confusion, when the ark was not in the tabernacle but in somebody's private house, and the tabernacle was virtually unusable, I don't know that I have any answer. The time was long. I should hope they did their best, as they could, before the Lord, within the circumstances.

Comments on 'high places' in 2 Samuel 1:19 and verse 25

The poem here talks about Jonathan's 'high places'. Is it talking about his religious high places, or is it talking about the high places of Israel? Jonathan was slain on the sides of Mount Gilboa. Is it now merely talking geographically, of where he was killed? Or, thirdly, is it using it metaphorically? Jonathan was a great warrior, he was one of the leading single combat heroes in Israel in a day when single combat heroes were in fashion, and therefore these high places might be used metaphorically of the military field where he had once so much renown and had been famous in Israel. He at last came to grief. He died, not in his bed, because he died ingloriously on the military high places where hitherto he had wrought so many victories. I don't know. It could be all of the above, I suppose.

My first line of approach, I think, was to say, 'Well, where was Jonathan slain?' It might carry an undertone that Jonathan had engaged in unworthy religious practices, and they were the undoing of him. But if you say that I think you would need to point to some particular, and there is no known reference of Jonathan engaging in any nefarious, idolatrous practices, at least not any known to me.

David Gooding

Classification: Biblical interpretation: Tabernacle

Topics: tabernacle, worship

Scriptures: 1 Samuel; 7:1-2; 9:12-13; 10:13; 2 Samuel 1:19, 25; 6; 1 Kings 3:3

Copyright

David Gooding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

Copyright © The Myrtlefield Trust, 2021

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the English Revised Version (1885), the King James Version, or are Dr Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

This text is from a transcript of a talk by David Gooding, entitled '[The Problems of Becoming and Being a King](#)'.

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce this document in its entirety, or in unaltered excerpts, for personal and church use only as long as you do not charge a fee. You must not reproduce it on any Internet site. Permission must be obtained if you wish to reproduce it in any other context, translate it, or publish it in any format.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust
PO Box 2216
Belfast, N Ireland
BT1 9YR

w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

Myrtlefield catalogue no: sam.004/sc

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.