

CHAPTER 3

The First King: Saul

SAMUEL survived the débâcle, and indeed was able to rally his people to drive the Philistines back, as 1 Samuel 7 records. But it is evident that he himself was not the man to lead troops into battle. He managed to instil fresh hope and courage in his countrymen, and he was able to win the support of the non-Israelite population; but all this was but a postponement of the problem, not a solution to it. The Philistines remained a constant menace, and waited patiently for their opportunity. As Samuel aged, no obvious successor to him was apparent, and the tribal elders became very anxious, and with good reason, for the Philistines began again to encroach on the hill country and to install garrisons there. If Israel was to survive, some drastic step seemed necessary.

That Saul became the first king of a united Israel is a matter of historical fact; but the circumstances in which this took place are involved, and have been much debated. A casual reading of the biblical data leaves one with the impression that, viewed politically, Saul's reign was a success (at the beginning, at any rate), but a disaster from the religious point of view. We may well believe that the matter was more complex than this, however. Political motives, religious motives, and indeed personal feelings, must all be taken into account. It used to be fashionable to over-simplify the issues, arguing that the passages in 1 Samuel 8-12 which are hostile to the monarchy were late and unhistorical; but it is significant that two of the most important recent works on the history of Israel¹ recognize fully that opposing viewpoints were represented in ancient Israel.

1. M. Noth, *The History of Israel*² (London, 1960); J. Bright, *A History of Israel*² (London, 1972). In his recent discussion of the topic, A. D. H. Mayes finds little reliable historical information in the relevant chapters except for 1 Samuel 11. This viewpoint is based more on literary than historical arguments, and does not seem to be demanded by the evidence, cf. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, *Israelite and Judaeen History* (OTL: London, 1977), pp. 324f.

“Monarchy”, remarks Professor Bright, “was an institution totally foreign to Israel’s tradition”.² For 200 years Israel had existed without kings, even though most of her neighbours had long ago adopted the system of monarchy, and those Israelites of a conservative outlook will have felt that the election of a king would be an unwarranted and unhappy innovation. Israel was a brotherhood, and this revealed itself by sturdy independence of mind in every village and in every tribe. A centralized government and administration might have far from beneficial effects for the ordinary citizen, and it would certainly take a great deal of power out of the hands of local elders. On the tribal level, there was good reason to fear that a powerful tribe like Ephraim might become the aristocracy round the king, and assert its supremacy over smaller tribes.

Political inertia, then, will have said, “Let well alone”. But there were powerful factors working in the opposite direction; first and foremost, of course, the dire necessity of keeping the Philistines at bay. Cohesion of the tribes was clearly essential, and this demanded central administration, with a strong hand controlling it. It was finally a deputation of tribal elders who demanded a king; evidently they were willing to submerge their personal feelings and submit to a king — better to submit to an Israelite king than to a Philistine overlord.

A second factor was the example of Israel’s neighbours. The Canaanite system of government was the city-state pattern, with a king at the head of each. Just as Canaanite culture attracted many Israelites, so too Canaanite methods of administration appealed to some. Israel’s judges had some of them gained great prestige through the victories they achieved, and others had no doubt found their judicial positions a good basis for acquiring power, and several of them had been virtually monarchs, in a limited area. Gideon’s family has already been mentioned in this connection; Jephthah had demanded a permanent position as “head” in Gilead as the price for his leadership in battle (Judges 11:9ff.); and one of the “minor” judges, Jair, seems to have held a position of more than ordinary eminence (Judges 10:3f.). It was therefore not an entirely novel request that the elders put to Samuel: “Appoint us a king to govern us, like other nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). At the same time, it must be remembered that the Canaanite kings did not wield authority over a very wide area; each city had its own king. So the demand for a king over all Israel was certainly novel in the scope it envisaged. But even for this there had been something of a precedent, in the attempt of Abimelech to impose his authority over a group of cities; he started as king of Shechem (Judges 9:6), but later he transferred his capital

2. J. Bright, *op cit.*, p. 182.

elsewhere, and installed an officer, Zebul, as ruler of Shechem (9:28ff.).

It may well be that Abimelech's very endeavour to become king on a rather more grandiose scale had led to his unpopularity. But a more recent precedent, again to a limited extent only, was to hand, in the person of Samuel himself. He exercised authority as a judge over a considerable area for many years: after the fall of Shiloh we find him active in Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpah and his native Ramah (1 Samuel 7:15ff.). He claimed no kingly prerogatives, to be sure, but it is evident that the elders of Israel were afraid that his authority might descend to his sons, whom they had good cause to mistrust; he had already made them judges in Beersheba (8:1ff.).

So much for political considerations; but strong religious feelings were held too. Since the days of Moses, the Israelites had always viewed their God as their King: the Song of the Sea ends with the words, "The LORD will reign for ever and ever" (Exodus 15:18); Gideon's reply to the suggestion that he become king in Israel was, "I will not rule over you . . . the LORD will rule over you" (Judges 8:23). To many a devout Israelite it will have seemed deliberate apostasy to seek to set a man in the place of God. On the other hand, it became evident that God's seal of approval was upon Saul; "the spirit of God suddenly took possession of him" (1 Samuel 10:10), and those who were cynical about Saul's capabilities are dismissed as "scoundrels" (10:27). Thus in the religious sphere too, there were conflicting opinions about the project.

The general biblical perspective is not that a king as such was a breach of the divinely appointed order — there was no religious objection to David's kingship. But kings had to prove themselves worthy; and in the eyes of the Old Testament writers this is where Saul ultimately failed. The Israelites' demand for a king, however, was not based on Saul's virtuosity, but on their unwillingness to accept the human leadership God provided for them from time to time by placing his spirit on one man and another. Their demand for a king was therefore against God's wishes, and was thus a token of their rejection of his own sovereignty over them. Their request was nevertheless granted, but it could bring them little permanent pleasure.

A practical result of the accession of Saul was the divorcing of political leadership from religious leadership. Samuel retained the voice of authority in the latter sphere; all was well so long as Samuel and Saul agreed, but that happy state of affairs did not long continue.

Saul's reign began auspiciously enough. He was a man of outstanding physique and handsome appearance; without any seeking the crown on his part, it was freely offered to him, while Samuel, who might well have shown jealousy at losing his own

position as national leader, gave him full support; and finally he found in himself fresh and unsuspected capabilities, as he experienced the visitation of the spirit of God. A ceremony at Mizpah, in his home territory of Benjamin, showed him that he had both divine and national support. Apart from his own winning appearance, there were two factors which no doubt influenced the Israelites to make him king, in spite of any previous reluctance; firstly, there was the fact that his tribe was small and insignificant, so that there was no danger that Benjamin would ever lord it over the other tribes; and secondly, the unequivocal support Samuel gave Saul must have surprised and impressed many.

Meanwhile, what were the Philistines doing? It may seem surprising that they should have stood by and permitted this significant, and for them ominous, change in Israelite administration. One can only think that they were unable to hinder it. They were only just beginning to move back into the hill country, and the nature of the terrain prevented them from achieving the control they could have wished. The mountainous area west of the Jordan is dissected by numerous valleys, rendering swift military movement difficult; and in such country, the local inhabitants, with their intimate knowledge of the terrain, always have a big advantage over invaders, however skilled.

Mizpah lay at the summit of an isolated hill some eight miles north of Jerusalem. It is possible to visualize what happened: Mizpah, on a secure hill-top, was far enough away from the Philistines to enable a representative group of the Israelites to carry out the ceremony of making Saul king without fear of interference; but immediately afterwards Saul speedily dispersed his subjects to their own homes, he himself returning quietly to his native Gibeah, only a few miles from Mizpah. The time was not yet ripe for confronting the Philistines in battle. For the moment therefore, both towards the enemy and towards those Israelites who refused to accept him as king, "he held his peace" (1 Samuel 10:27, RSV). We next find him quietly farming, which can have done nothing to reassure those Israelites who were sceptical about him; after all, a tall frame, a handsome appearance, and an ability to prophesy in trance-like fashion, do not necessarily make one an able leader in battle.

But an opportunity for swift and effective action soon presented itself, and Saul immediately showed his mettle. A city of northern Transjordan called Jabesh-gilead was suddenly besieged by the Ammonites, who were obviously completely confident of success. The city itself was too small to be able to drive them off, and the Ammonites must have felt morally certain that in view of the severe pressure on the Israelites west of the Jordan, the city would get no help from more powerful tribes. But Nahash, the Ammonite king,

made two mistakes: he overlooked the fact that the city he was attacking had a long standing friendship with the tribe of Benjamin, and he failed to reckon with Saul. Issuing truly royal commands, Saul rapidly mustered an army on the western side of the river, and from there descended on the Ammonites, who were overwhelmed and put to flight.

Jabesh-gilead was no great distance from the Philistine-held fortress city of Beth-shan, which lies at the south-east end of the Plain of Jezreel, where the Plain runs into the Jordan Valley. It is probable that the speed with which Saul acted prevented any possibility of the Philistines' intervening at Jabesh-gilead; but apart from that consideration, it must be remembered that between Beth-shan and Jabesh-gilead lay the river Jordan, the most natural geographical boundary in Palestine. "The Jordan depression", Dr. J. M. Houston has written, "is unique among the features of physical geography. Formed as a result of a rift valley, it is the lowest depression on earth".³ On either side of this deep valley rise lofty mountain ridges, all the way from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. The actual floor of the valley is arid and desolate, but next to it, on either side, is the well-named "jungle of Jordan" (*cf.* Jeremiah 12:5, RSV). Through this formidable valley the river itself winds about almost incredibly; its actual length is more than twice the distance as the crow flies between Galilee and the Dead Sea. It is therefore understandable that the Philistines, capable soldiers that they were, saw the dangers of crossing the Jordan before they fully controlled the territory west of it. We have already seen how both Moabites and Midianites came to grief as a result of venturing across the river.

The victory over Ammon not only raised the morale of all Israel, but also gave Saul such prestige that the whole nation rallied behind him; those who had stood aloof were now silenced or won over. A fresh ceremony, almost spontaneous, took place to ratify Saul's royal position. It occurred at Gilgal, a Benjaminite city very close to the Jordan, a site well away from Philistine territory, and at the same time conveniently near to Transjordanian soil — it is highly probable that the Gileadites had been particularly slow to recognize Saul as king, in view of their security from the Philistine threat.

And now the moment could no longer be delayed; Saul must take action against the major foe. He divided the tribal forces into two parts, himself leading one of them, his son Jonathan the other. It was Jonathan, a man of remarkable enterprise and daring, who struck the first blow, by killing the Philistine prefect at Geba, only three miles from his father's home and capital, Gibeah.⁴ 1 Samuel

3. J. M. Houston, "Jordan", in *NBD*, pp.654ff.

4. It is not certain whether Jonathan killed a prefect or defeated a garrison (*cf.* 1 Samuel 13:3, RSV). Nor is it certain whether the scene of the incident was Geba or Gibeah itself.

13:4 relates that in consequence "the name of Israel stank among the Philistines", and we can well believe it. Electing a king and killing a Philistine officer were scarcely marks of submission. The Philistines responded by bringing up the full might of their army and occupying Michmash, a strategic Benjaminite city to the north of the Israelite forces, and cutting the route into Benjamin from Ephraim. The sight of the well-equipped Philistine army, and the knowledge that reinforcements from the northern tribes could not get through to them, thoroughly dismayed Saul's meagre force, so "they hid themselves in caves and holes among the rocks, in pits and cisterns. Some of them crossed the Jordan into the district of Gad and Gilead". Saul held firm at Gilgal, but "all the people at his back were in alarm" (1 Samuel 13:6f.).

In such frightening circumstances, Saul felt desperately in need of God's blessing on the forthcoming battle, and he waited a full week and more for Samuel to come and offer sacrifices appropriate to the occasion. As Samuel still delayed, Saul grew impatient; we can sympathize with his feeling, but in fact the delay was all to the good, for had he marched into battle with a small, ill-equipped and demoralized army, he would surely have been cut to pieces. At last, Saul took it upon himself to offer sacrifice, and had scarcely done so when a very irate Samuel arrived on the scene; and so the first breach between the two leaders of Israel took place. Meanwhile Jonathan, almost single-handed, had altered the situation completely. Entirely unaccompanied except for his armour-bearer, he showed himself to the Philistine garrison at Michmash, who naturally assumed that he was but one of an Israelite force, and went out to engage them in battle. But Jonathan skilfully chose a narrow point on a steep ascent, and he and his batman were able with ease to kill off their attackers one by one. This simple ruse was sufficient to defeat a whole garrison! Still under the impression that they were being attacked by a body of troops, the Philistines suddenly realized how many men they were losing, and panicked. As they started to take to their heels and even to fight each other, Saul arrived on the scene with his small army, and the panic became a rout. Those Israelites who had previously deserted speedily found their lost courage, and joined gleefully in the pursuit. As for those Israelites who had been traitors to date, throwing in their lot with the Philistines, they too saw which way the wind was blowing, and changed sides without delay.

So the Philistines were bundled out of the hills, defeated not so much by force of arms as by Jonathan's intimate knowledge of the hill country (not to mention his personal daring). Saul knew how to turn a situation to good account, and he never let up the pursuit until the army were driven back to the coastal plain. They for their part did not give up so easily, and for the rest of his reign Saul was

obliged to fight them constantly. However, they were unable to reoccupy the hill country so long as he reigned, which gave Saul full independence and freedom of movement.

Nor were the Ammonites the only group to attack the Israelites on other frontiers. In Transjordan, the Moabites and the Aramaeans put pressure on Reuben and eastern Manasseh respectively, and in the south Judah and Simeon were harassed by Edomites and Amalekites. But at last Israel was able to take a united stand against such enemies, and we read that Saul dealt effectively with all these raids and inroads, one after another. Saul probably reached the pinnacle of success and prestige with his early defeat of the Philistines, but these frequent campaigns were sufficient to maintain his prestige throughout his reign. It must not be forgotten how dependent Saul was on the loyalty of his subjects; there was no precedent in Israel for royal position, and one sound defeat might well have cost him his throne. The excavations at Gibeah have shown that Saul's court was not one of oriental luxury by any means, but rather of almost rustic simplicity; nevertheless, the maintenance of armies throughout his reign will have entailed the financial support and forced service of all the tribes, which would not be calculated to make any administrator popular. Inter-tribal jealousies, and the desire for independence, were always near the surface.

For these various reasons it is evident that Saul's position was none too secure, and of this fact he must have been keenly aware. But at the beginning he did not have to rely on prestige alone, for he had the full support of Samuel. The first encounter with the Philistines had weakened this bond, as we have seen; and the Amalekite campaign was to create a permanent breach between the two men, knocking the prop of religious support from under Saul. The Amalekites were an ancient foe of Israel, and one that was viewed as particularly treacherous (cf. Deuteronomy 25:17ff.); the command was therefore that none who were captured should be spared. A sacred vow to this effect was made. Yet Saul, purely for his own pleasure and advantage, took it upon himself to break this solemn oath. This was the second occasion on which Saul had flagrantly disobeyed the divine command given him through Samuel, and his actions made it clear that there was another king in Israel besides Yahweh. The judges had all been subservient to the spirit of Yahweh, which had dominated their actions; the king was an autocrat, already proving the maxim that power corrupts.

Samuel did not mince his words. He advised Saul outright that just as he had rejected God's commands, so God had rejected him; as far as God was concerned, Saul was no longer king. Saul was genuinely distressed by this pronouncement, as well he might be, but the aged prophet was adamant. The two men parted; "and

Samuel never saw Saul again to his dying day” (1 Samuel 15:35). In his personal life too, Saul lost touch with God; never again did he find himself possessed by God’s spirit. All that he had left were his natural skill and experience, together with the fickle loyalties of his subjects. It is easy to understand why he became subject to fits of depression which grew more and more severe, till in the end he was not a rational man, but appeared morose, irritable, and suspicious of all around him.

We first meet the youthful David as a shepherd boy on his father’s farm at Bethlehem, a city of Judah only about ten miles south of Saul’s city, Gibeah. Samuel anointed the lad to be Saul’s successor as king over Israel. We may take it for granted that Saul knew nothing of this episode. He first met David as a harpist; when it became apparent that music soothed Saul’s fits of depression, David was recommended to the king as a skilled performer, and soon entered the royal service in this capacity. But if David’s harp had a soothing effect on Saul, David himself was soon to have a very different effect on the king. The hands that could charm music from the strings of a harp soon proved their skill with a very different instrument, one of a lethal kind.

Every reader who ever attended a Sunday school knows all about David and Goliath,⁵ but it may be worthwhile to note one or two of the background details of the story. The scene of the duel was in the foothills of western Judah, where they rise from the coastal plain of the Shephelah; the Philistines marched in force into these hills, and the Israelite army was obliged to counter the threat, and block the passes leading up into the mountains. But the Philistines had no intention of attempting a pitched battle, and they resorted to a method of warfare common in the ancient (and mediaeval) world, but far removed from the total warfare of our own day; the battle was to be settled by a single combat of a selected champion from each side. The victorious champion in such duels won great prestige for his side; the element of prestige is very clear in the account of David’s encounter with Goliath (1 Samuel 17), both in the insulted reaction of the giant Philistine to the youthful and inexperienced aspect of David, and in the discomfiture and flight of the Philistines once their hitherto invincible champion was dead. Once again, they returned to their home on the plain in a hurry.

Saul had been hard put to find an Israelite champion, and he had held out two glittering prizes to any volunteer — marriage to the king’s daughter, and permanent freedom of taxes for his family (17:25). Little did he imagine that his youthful court harpist would be the man to claim them. It is not surprising that he instituted fresh

5. For problems connected with the biblical narrative, cf. D. F. Payne in *NBCR*, p. 318.

enquiries about David's family and antecedents; one likes to know as much as possible about one's future in-laws, and as the king's son-in-law David would be an influential figure in Israel. Nor was David's victory in single combat a flash in the pan; Saul put him fully to test, and was so impressed by his ability that he gave him a high-ranking military position. And David did all that could be asked of him, going on from success to success.

From the point of view of the welfare of Israel, David's arrival on the scene was opportune, and the populace was duly grateful to him. But from Saul's personal point of view, David's growing reputation was a threat to his own position, which was, as we have seen, based to a considerable extent on prestige. Saul's reputation against the Philistines was not forgotten, but the women in the streets made it clear who was the man of the moment: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." Comparisons are odious, runs the saying — and Saul would have agreed heartily.

David's reputation might have been more tolerable to Saul if the younger man had had less charm of character. If David had been a boor, or conceited, Saul would have had less reason to fear him, for no opposition group of any consequence would be likely to grow round an unpopular figure, however great his military reputation. But the fact was that David had an unusually winsome and attractive personality; all Israel loved him, including members of Saul's own family. Jonathan might well have hated David as a potential rival, yet the friendship between the two is proverbial. Indeed, in his more rational moments Saul himself was won over.

One can have a certain sympathy with Saul's feelings; the defection of Samuel must have been a bitter blow, and the rise of this influential and to Saul enigmatic figure must have seemed the last straw. One wonders if it ever came to Saul's notice that Samuel had anointed David as the next king of Israel; he may at least have suspected that Samuel supported David. Be that as it may, one can see that Saul had good reason to view David as a potential rival; but on the other hand, David never gave him the slightest cause to question his loyalty. Even when Saul was openly seeking to kill him, David could not bring himself to lay a hand on Saul when the opportunity presented itself, for the king was Yahweh's anointed.

Before long Saul's dark suspicions got the better of him, and David was obliged to flee from the court to save his life. His first move was to go to Samuel in Ramah for sanctuary, pursued by Saul; David's very contact with Samuel may have confirmed the suspicions of the king. From Ramah David wandered from place to place in the south of Palestine, and presently made his headquarters at Adullam, in the hills of Judah, not so very far from Philistine territory (only twelve miles or so from the city of Gath). It was here that David's supporters increased one hundredfold; till now he had

with him only two or three servants, but when he left Adullam he commanded 400 men.

A number of those who joined David were his own kinsfolk, but the majority of the 400 consisted of "men in any kind of distress or in debt or with a grievance" (1 Samuel 22:2). This sounds very much like the motley crew who had constituted Jephthah's band, described in Judges 11:3 as "idle fellows". But we are not to suppose that all David's men were typical malcontents, social misfits who rebel on principle against established law and order, though of course some of them may have been. The group who joined David at the cave of Adullam were welded into a highly efficient military unit, which later formed the nucleus of the royal troops when David became king, and to whose loyalty and skill David was to owe a great deal. Men of such calibre cannot have been totally irresponsible citizens. There is every probability that a good many of David's men had a legitimate grievance against Saul or against his administration. It would be surprising if the king, in his deteriorating mental condition, had not offended some of his subjects. A number of biblical passages suggest that there were occasions when Saul would brook no argument from anybody, but acted with despotic forcefulness. We know from 2 Samuel 21:1f. that, for some reason, he slaughtered some of the Gibeonites, a non-Israelite group whose cities were incorporated in Benjamin and who were in close treaty relationship with Israel; years after the death of Saul, this act of his had been neither forgotten nor forgiven.

Another clue to the reasons for Saul's unpopularity in some quarters may be found in the phrase "in debt"; debtors may have no-one but themselves to blame, but on the other hand they may be a symptom of something wrong with the economic structure, or the administration of justice, of the state concerned. It may therefore be significant that no few debtors were to be found among David's supporters.

There was one man at the cave of Adullam whose motives for joining David are transparent. This was Abiathar the priest, who afterwards officiated, with Zadok, at the sanctuary in Jerusalem. When David had left Samuel in Ramah, and fled south towards the wilderness of Judah, he had been granted temporary shelter by the priesthood of a city called Nob. The priests had acted in innocence, intending no disloyalty to Saul; but for all that, Saul descended upon them and slaughtered not only the priests but the ordinary citizens of Nob. Abiathar, however, managed to escape, and got away safely to David's camp. There is reason to believe that Nob had functioned as the chief sanctuary after the abandonment of Shiloh; one can imagine the horror felt by all devout, God-fearing Israelites at Saul's wanton brutality there.

If Abiathar and the debtors in David's camp are any guide to the

situation, we may conclude that faults in Saul's judiciary system and his heedlessness of religious proprieties may have caused a good deal of the discontentment of his subjects. It is apparent that by now there was a complete breach between the king and the custodians of the religious welfare of Israel. The political administration and the religious organization stood opposed, or at least out of harmony; and very probably the administration of law fell between the two. The law was primarily a religious function, stemming as it did from Israel's covenant with God; the first laws had been the stipulations or obligations of the Sinai covenant, and the written law was always deposited in the sanctuary, just as the Ten Commandments had been placed in the ark of the covenant. During the Judges period, the wilderness ideal of a single sanctuary was lost (with not altogether happy consequences for Israel's faith), but law was still administered in the tribal sanctuaries. Samuel himself, we read, "went on circuit to Bethel and Gilgal and Mizpah; he dispensed justice at all these places, returning always to Ramah. That was his home and the place from which he governed Israel" (1 Samuel 7:16f.).

When Israel took to itself a king, inevitably some changes must have taken place in the legal system; if nothing else occurred, the king certainly became the highest court of appeal. It would be very interesting to know what exactly Samuel put in writing when he "explained to the people the nature of a king, and made a written record of it on a scroll which he deposited before the LORD" (1 Samuel 10:25).⁶ If David himself, who had the happiest relations with the religious authorities during his reign, was not altogether successful in his administration of legal affairs,⁷ then it is certain that this aspect of Saul's governmental machinery was less than satisfactory.

In the light of these considerations, the details of 1 Chronicles 12:1-22 become more plausible than many biblical scholars will allow. The Chronicler relates that the trickle of men who joined David at Adullam became a flood before Saul's reign was over: "from day to day men came in to help David, until he had gathered an immense army" (1 Chronicles 12:22). We may well believe that the dissatisfaction with Saul's regime increased as his reign progressed. Saul's own tribe, Benjamin, remained loyal for the most part — as the Chronicler concedes (12:29) — but he claims that even some of them went over to David. This detail seems the more probable when we remember that both Gibeon and Nob were in Benjamin.

6. The late Professor Robertson suggested that the law-code promulgated thus by Samuel was the Book of Deuteronomy. Cf. E. Robertson, *The Old Testament Problem*, (Manchester, 1950).

7. See below, pp. 51f.

David no doubt drew much encouragement from the support he received at Adullam, but the numerical strength of his friends brought its own problems. In the first place, a lone fugitive can often secrete himself completely, especially in the barren wilderness of the southern hills of Judah; but an army of 400 men cannot easily be hidden. Furthermore, a band of able-bodied men 400 strong needs both an occupation and a livelihood; it was scarcely possible to settle to till a fertile valley when Saul was organizing a systematic and thorough search of the whole area. However, before these problems became acute, an unexpected opportunity presented itself; still menacing the foothills of Judah, the Philistines attacked a certain city called Keilah, a short distance south of Adullam. After some brief hesitation, David and his men marched to relieve Keilah, and were able to drive the Philistines off. This exploit provided David's troops with food and shelter for the time being, and incidentally served to maintain David's reputation as the champion of Israel against the Philistines; but inevitably the news of David's movements got to Saul's ears, and the royal armies descended upon Keilah. David's band of men narrowly escaped, and afterwards found themselves obliged to keep to the more barren areas. The southeastern hills of Judah have always been remote and sparsely populated (it was hereabouts that the Dead Sea Scrolls lay undiscovered for almost 2000 years), and here the fugitives had plenty of space in which to hide themselves; but they were forced to approach farms and towns for supplies, and so gave away their position time and time again. It was equally unfortunate that they had little to offer in return for provisions, and began to give the impression that they were preying on the local farmers. Nabal (1 Samuel 25) was in all probability not the only farmer to rebuff David's men.

Eventually, after one or two narrow escapes from Saul, David realized that there was no future for himself and his guerrilla band (now 600 strong) within the confines of Saul's kingdom, and he determined on a bold step. He, who had done so much to hinder the Philistines in the past, now marched into their territory and offered his services to the king of Gath, Achish! The Philistines might well have cut them to pieces, but Achish had a better plan. While Saul had been obsessed with his pursuit of David, he had had little time to organize an anti-Philistine campaign with his previous efficiency; this state of affairs well suited Achish, and he thought he might perpetuate it by installing David and his men on the very borders of Judah, where he still might draw Saul's fire, so to speak. As it happened, Saul wrote David off as soon as the latter went to Gath, but Achish was not to know that, for David maintained the pretence that he and his men were harassing the border towns of Judah. In point of fact, they were attacking the Amalekites and other semi-nomadic tribes of the northern Negeb.

During the sixteen months that David was at Ziklag (the city given them by Achish), he was able to weld his band into a formidable fighting force. We may hazard the guess that this period also gave him the opportunity to observe the Philistines' military organization, and perhaps get possession of some Philistine weapons too. At any rate, he was later to prove a far more effective general against the Philistines than Saul ever was, and Saul was no mean soldier. It is doubtful if the Israelite army was ever particularly well armed and equipped before David's reign; most of their iron weapons will have been booty taken when the Philistines were worsted in battle.⁸

And now the sands of time had run out for Saul. The Philistines determined to put their full military strength into the field, and challenge Saul to the pitched battle they themselves had avoided for so long. Even David's army was pressed into service, for by now Achish trusted him implicitly. The Philistine forces marched north, making no attempt to fight their way into the hills of Judah or Ephraim, and came into the Plain of Jezreel. Their intention, presumably, was to cut off Saul from his northern tribal territories. Beth-shan, the Philistine outpost at the eastern end of the Plain, lies not five miles from the Jordan, and the Philistine army could quickly have reached the river, occupied the Jordan valley up to the Sea of Galilee, and truncated Saul's kingdom at one blow. This manoeuvre forced Saul to leave the mountains, and fight them on level ground of their own choosing; he must block their advance across the Plain of Jezreel. So the Israelite armies made their headquarters at the city of Jezreel itself, blocking the approach to Beth-shan and there awaited the Philistine assault.

The Philistines paused to review their troops at Aphek, before making their way through the pass of Megiddo. It now transpired that the other Philistine leaders did not share Achish's faith in David's men, and insisted that they be sent back to Ziklag; after all, if the Philistines were to suffer a slight set-back in the battle, these men of doubtful loyalties might change sides and turn a retreat into a rout. David protested vigorously — did he perhaps hope he would find some opportunity of turning the tide of battle against the Philistines? — but to no avail, and he turned back to Ziklag, anxiously waiting for news from the battlefield.

The result of the battle was no surprise. On level ground the Israelite army was no match at all for the Philistines, and was soon dispersed in headlong flight. They tried to head for home, south into the Gilboa range of hills, and it was there that most of them were overtaken and killed. Here Saul was so badly wounded that his capture was certain, and he took his own life rather than suffer such

8. Cf. 1 Samuel 21:8f.

humiliation. Jonathan was another who died in battle. Next day the victors found their bodies, and the bodies of two more of Saul's sons; and proceeded to display them on the walls of the city of Beth-shan. It was the final humiliation that their corpses should remain unburied.

But while the remnant of the Israelite army fled in terror, one group of Israelites acted with presence of mind, courage, and a proper sense of gratitude. A few miles away, the other side of the Jordan, lay the city of Jabesh-gilead, which Saul had rescued from the Ammonites at the start of his reign. The citizens organised a party to creep up to the walls of Beth-shan during the hours of darkness and rescue the royal bodies. And so Israel's first king was interred at Jabesh-gilead, while all Israel mourned. It was left to David to put it into words:

“How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!”