

1 Samuel 31:1-13

Saul's Last Tragic Moments

1 Samuel 31:1-2 - "Now the Philistines fought against Israel: and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell down slain in mount Gilboa. And the Philistines followed hard upon Saul and upon his sons; and the Philistines slew Jonathan, and Abinadab, and Malchishua, Saul's sons."

"followed hard upon" - this merely means that the two groups clashed. Although most of the Israelis fled, Saul and his sons did not, and engaged the enemy, according to the rabbis. But without the aid of God, Israel was not strong enough to defeat the Philistine host.

A Midrash relates that Israel suffers defeat when it ranks are riddled with informers and slanderers and rumor mongers, and that this was the case in Saul's time. (If we relate that to our spiritual warfare, it's a warning against gossiping and denigrating and "devouring" one another instead of building up one another in the faith).

The appearance of Samuel to the witch at Endor had prophesied the death of Saul's sons - "To-morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me" - and this as the fulfillment.

Saul's other son, Ish-bosheth, was not there, possibly remaining at home because of sickness or for the management of public affairs.

A Midrash says that although Saul had determined to die in battle in order to join Samuel in paradise, he had a moment of indecision once on the battlefield. Saul's son Abinadab convinced him that entering the Garden of Eden together was worth the sacrifice. Therefore Abiniadab earlier was named Ishvi (dedicated) in **1 Samuel 14:48** because he convinced his father to dedicate his heart to repentance in order to enter the World to Come.

For Saul himself, his early noble qualities of courage and modesty had degenerated into pride and rebelliousness against God. His bravery in battle turned into fear when he realized God had stripped him of the kingdom. As Samuel told him, "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry." Saul's self-will and arrogance were augmented by the evil spirit that came upon him, leading to murderous rage, jealousy and the unreasonable pursuit of David.

1 Samuel 31:3 - "And the battle went sore against Saul, and the archers hit him; and he was sore wounded of the archers."

The Hebrew can also mean Saul was "sore afraid" rather than "sore wounded." The Targum says "he was afraid." He felt that he would soon be wounded by the archers, allowing them to capture him and then torture him and humiliate him or possibly blind him as the Philistines has previously done to Samson.

1 Samuel 31:4-6 - "Then said Saul unto his armorbearer, Draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me. But his armorbearer would not; for he was sore afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword, and fell upon it. And when his armorbearer saw that Saul was dead, he fell likewise upon his sword, and died with him. So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armorbearer, and all his men, that same day together."

The rabbis propose that this was Doeg the Edomite, who had been promoted to armorbearer after slaying the priests of Nob.

A Question

There is a controversy about whether Saul actually killed himself. In the next chapter, Saul's death is attributed to an Amalekite, who says Saul asked him to kill him, and presents David with Saul's crown and bracelet. Some see the Amalekite's story as made up, to excuse his stealing the crown and bracelet and to curry favor with David. Josephus sees Saul's suicide as patriotic devotion and says that Saul's sword did not pierce through his armor when he fell on it, or that it wounded but did not kill him, and that the Amalekite finished the job for him as he reported to David.

There was wide disagreement over whether Saul's suicide was justified, or if his death by the hand of either his armor bearer or the Amalekite should have been punished. Some said it was acceptable to avoid torture, to keep God's name from being tarnished or to avoid being forced to sin.

The rabbis note the irony that both Saul and his armor bearer Doeg fell by the same sword that Doeg had used to murder the priests of Nob.

A Midrash lists five sins for which Saul deserved death: authorizing the slaughter of the priests of Nob, having mercy on Agag, not harkening to Samuel's command to wait for him, inquiring of the witch of Endor and not inquiring of the Urim and Thummim in the war with the Philistines.

So Saul's reign as king was ended. The New Testament says Saul reigned for 40 years (**Acts 13:21**). Josephus says he reigned eighteen years during the life of Samuel, and after his death for 22 years.

1 Samuel 31:7 - "And when the men of Israel that were on the other side of the valley, and they that were on the other side Jordan, saw that the men of Israel fled, and that Saul and his sons were dead, they forsook the cities, and fled; and the Philistines came and dwelt in them."

This was a complete rout of Israel. The cities in this area were abandoned and the Philistines took them over.

This took place in the Valley of Jezebel, which had been the scene of the great victory by Gideon against the Amalekites and Median (**Judges 6:3**). It is mentioned by the

prophet Hosea as a place of future judgment for backsliding Israel:

- **Hosea 1:5** - "And it shall come to pass at that day, that I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel."

The eschatological Battle of Meggido (Armageddon) between God and the forces of evil also is said to take place in one end of this valley (**Revelation 16:16, Revelation 19:11–20**). Since the Bronze Age, the valley has been a trade crossroads and the scene of 34 major battles throughout history.

Desecration of Saul's Body

1 Samuel 31:8–9 - "And it came to pass on the morrow, when the Philistines came to strip the slain, that they found Saul and his three sons fallen in mount Gilboa. And they cut off his head, and stripped off his armor, and sent into the land of the Philistines round about, to publish it in the house of their idols, and among the people."

Saul's severed head was hung up in the temple of Dagon, according to **1 Chronicles 10:10**.

1 Samuel 31:10 - "And they put his armor in the house of Ashtaroth: and they fastened his body to the wall of Bethshan."

Bethshan was a town given to the tribe of Manasseh, but they could not drive out the inhabitants, so it was always in the possession of others (**Joshua 17:11**).

Josephus (Antiqu. I. 6. c. 14. I. 8.) says the Philistines “crucified” Saul's body there; as they also did to the bodies of his sons, as appears from **1 Samuel 31:12**.

The Men of Jabeshgilead

The men of Jabeshgilead remembered how Saul had rescued them out of the hands of Nahash the Ammonite (**1 Samuel 11:1**) who had threatened to pluck out one eye from each of them. So they took action to recover Saul's body.

1 Samuel 31:12 - "All the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Bethshan, and came to Jabesh, and burnt them there."

Cremation was not a typical customary practice in Israel.

The Targum says "they burnt over them, as they burn over their kings there." Perhaps this was because the bodies were putrid and infectious. A similar event seems to be referred to in **2 Chronicles 16:14** - "So in the forty-first year of his reign, Asa died and rested with his fathers. And they buried him in his own sepulchres, which he had made for himself in the city of David, and laid him in the bed which was filled with sweet odors and divers kinds of spices prepared by the apothecaries' art: and they made a very

great burning for him."

1 Samuel 31;13 - "And they took their bones, and buried them under a tree at Jabesh, and fasted seven days."

Usually, bodies are interred in tombs, and then a year later the bones are gathered and placed in a "bone box" in the family crypt, to make room for others. Here the bodies were burned and the bones immediately gathered and interred. This was probably also to keep the Philistines from recapturing the bodies.

They fasted seven days (i.e. every day until evening), probably in memory of the seven days Nahash the Ammonite gave them for their relief, in which time Saul came and saved them, **1 Samuel 11:3**.

Saul's other sons also met a violent end. Ish-bosheth was assassinated in his sleep (**2 Samuel 4:6-7**) and two other sons were hanged by the Gibeonites (**2 Samuel 21:8-9**).

But this is not the last word on Saul.

David - in the next chapter - writes (in the Spirit of Christ and His mercy and grace) a touching lament that speaks of Saul's early noble qualities of character and doesn't mention his fall into rebellion and pride (**2 Samuel 1:19-27**) - "The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places: how are the mighty fallen!"

David eventually re-interred the bones of Saul and Jonathan in the tomb of Saul's father Kish (**2 Samuel 21:14**)

The arc of Saul's story shows how even good and modest people can be corrupted by choosing their own way. Pride is so close at hand that it is always the easy choice. Only by constantly letting go of ourselves and saying "Not my will, but Thine" can we escape Saul's fate. But his story also shows that God's mercy follows us all the days of our lives. By embracing God's Attribute of Justice on ourselves, as Saul did in the end, we can enter Paradise.

By accepting God's judgment on him delivered through the apparition of Samuel, Saul voluntarily entered the battle knowing he would be killed with his sons. The rabbis equated this with repentance and viewed it as an instance of self-sacrifice. As the Midrash explains, death serves to atone for sin.

Because of Christ's death on the cross, when we accept our own death, our sin is forgiven and we can step into His life eternal.

The Three of Rebuke

The story of Saul's life is directly applicable to this season of the Jewish calendar. Technically we are "between the straits" leading up to the Fast of Ab. During this time, the readings are called the "Three of Rebuke." - **Jeremiah 1:1-2:3, Jeremiah 2:4-2:28**

- 3:4, and Isaiah 1:1-27.

Let's look at Isaiah chapter 1.

The message of Isaiah is that the nation of Israel followed Saul in rebellion "which is as the sin of witchcraft." And he describes the result of that.

Isaiah 1:2 says, "I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me."

The purpose of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon was to "purge away thy dross."

The dross is the worthless dregs, or mineral waste, in particular scum formed on the surface of molten metal.

But the final outcome Isaiah foresaw as a blessing if they would repent:

- Isaiah 1:26-27 - "And I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning: afterward thou shalt be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed with judgment, and her converts with righteousness."

This, and the warning of Saul's fall - as well as Saul's possible repentance as described by the rabbis - are something we need to take to heart as we approach the Fast of Ab.