

4

King Saul

A Nation is Born

And the Lord said unto Samuel, “Heed their demands and appoint a king for them”. (1 Sam. 8:22)

Holy Haemorrhoids!

As mentioned in chapter 1, the Philistine victory at Aphek was a near-total disaster for the people of Israel. Not only did the Israelites forfeit all the finest agricultural land west of the Jordan, also many were reduced to virtual serfdom, with their weaponry confiscated by their new masters and their continued engagement in metallurgy proscribed. Furthermore, they suffered the indignity of having to go to Philistine smiths to sharpen their agricultural tools (1 Sam. 13:19-20).

The remnants of the army that survived in the hills under the leadership of Samuel and his new nagid, Saul, must have been totally demoralised. There would have seemed to be no immediate prospect of mounting any meaningful resistance. Judah could have made a difference, but, in common with other ‘neutrals’, they chose to wait and see. The future for the Israelites looked bleak – until something quite unexpected occurred.

Less than a year after the battle of Aphek, the ranks of the Philistines were decimated by a mysterious disaster. The Israelite text calls the destructive agents ophlim, a word that has been translated as everything from a bombardment of meteorites to a unique plague of haemorrhoids (or ‘emrods’) in the standardised versions!¹ Whatever the ophlim were, they were nasty and lethal on a massive scale. The Philistines ascribed the scourge to the presence of the Israelite Ark of God in their midst and, dreading further devastation, they hastily returned it to its original owners.

Unfortunately for those Israelites who lived nearest the Philistine homeland, the ophlim seem to have been virulently contagious – many around Bet Shemesh also died.²

Thus, the recent victors of Aphek found themselves suddenly brought low. Only their garrisons within the recently conquered Israelite hill country apparently remained unaffected. But even these outposts were weakened, for the devastation back in the Philistine homeland had virtually eliminated the possibility of their receiving relief or reinforcement in the event of an outbreak of hostilities.³

Conclusion 10

The ophlim disaster which struck the Philistine homeland provided a window of opportunity for the start of the Israelite resistance.

Samuel and his military deputy Saul must have been fully aware of this seemingly miraculous chance that had been offered to them. However, a mere seven-and-a-half months after Aphek, Israel was still militarily weak and could take only limited advantage.

By the time of the return of the Ark, Saul had managed to rally a small guerrilla force comprising about six hundred men (1 Sam. 14:2), mostly from the Rachel tribes and friendly Canaanites, organised into two groups under his command and that of Jonathan, his eldest son. Whereas formerly Saul and Samuel could do no more than irritate the Philistines with small, lightning raids on enemy supply trains linking the garrisons with their motherland, it was now possible to set their sights a little higher.

Saul's first targets were strategic. As things stood, Benjamin and southern Ephraim were separated from their brothers in the northern part of the central hill country by the Philistines garrison at the strategic Michmash pass.⁴ Before all-out war was feasible, Saul had to secure a safe corridor between the divided 'halves' of his territory. The other main enemy positions were at Gibeah, and the town of Geba.⁵

Once again, due to confused chronology, the narrative presents a muddled picture of these episodes. One moment Saul is based in Michmash, while the next moment he is attacking the very same place – now a Philistine garrison:

1 Sam. 13:2-7: Saul's long duel with the Philistines began when, as King of Israel and Judah, he formed a standing army of three thousand elite fighters, with two-thirds under his command and the rest in the charge of his eldest son and heir, Jonathan. Saul stationed himself at Michmash, and Jonathan at Gibeah in Benjamin. Jonathan began the war of liberation by overrunning the enemy garrison at Geba. Following this success, the entire army mustered once again at Gilgal for battle. The Philistine response was to reinforce their large, well-armed force at Michmash,

from where they launched attacks deeper into Israel. In the face of such an awesome foe, much of the Israelite army became dispirited and fled back into caves in the hills.

To defeat Nahash, Saul had mustered a vast army of Israel and Judah. Yet, if we are to believe the narrative, just a short while after that spectacular success and his coronation as King of All Israel, he can barely raise a platoon. This is clear evidence of more confused chronology, which is further compounded when we are informed that Saul: ‘waited seven days, the time that Samuel had stipulated. But when Samuel failed to come to Gilgal, and the people began to scatter.’ (1 Sam. 13:8).

Samuel’s original instruction for Saul to meet him at Gilgal in seven days dates back to the time of the first anointing. Yet, according to the biblical chronology, two coronations, an enormous military victory, and the beginning of the war of liberation separate the instruction from the Gilgal event. This makes no sense:

***1 Sam. 13:8-23:** Samuel’s delayed arrival to perform the pre-battle rites depressed morale even further. Saul, fearing the loss of his entire army, decided to conduct the ceremony himself. Samuel turned up just as Saul was finishing the ritual, and was incensed at Saul’s presumption. Despite the king’s pleading, the judge stormed off in a rage, claiming that by his injudicious act Saul had forfeited the kingdom and that his dynasty, which would otherwise have lasted forever, would end with him, while a man more worthy than he would take his place.*

By now, Saul’s army had dwindled to six hundred men. Unable to attack, they remained confined to Gibeah and could only watch as the enemy strengthened its hold over the king’s own territory. In addition, the strict controls on metal forging imposed by their conquerors meant that the warriors of Israel found themselves lacking in weaponry.

This is yet more evidence of the chronological chaos inherent in the text, since the shortage of Israelite military hardware was mysteriously unapparent only a short while before, in the victorious battle of Jabesh.

***1 Sam. 14:1-23:** Eventually, Jonathan and his armour bearer launched a surprise attack on Michmash – which they did not disclose to Saul – spreading panic throughout the Philistine camp. After sending the high priest Ahia and the Ark⁶ away, Saul learnt of Jonathan’s expedition and joined the fray. At the sight of their king, the Hebrews within the enemy camp turned on the Philistines. Encouraged by Jonathan’s and Saul’s example, the Israelites who had been hiding in the hills poured down upon the fleeing foe.*

Hebrews and Israelites

This is one of the relatively few mentions in the 1 Samuel narrative of ‘Hebrews’ (Heb. Ivrim) in contrast to Israelites.⁷

Many scholars see the Hebrew and Israelite distinction as a substantiation of the hypothesis that the two were separate peoples, but the conventional view is simply that the two words are interchangeable. In this instance, the former represent the Ivrim within the Philistine camp as mercenaries who turned upon their employers to assist Saul. The latter believe that the Ivrim were Israelite prisoners who, encouraged by the attack of their king, rose up against their captors. The issue depends upon what meaning one attributes to the Hebrew word *saviv*. It can mean – amongst other things – ‘turned’, as in *turned traitor*, or equally, ‘turned’, as in *turned upon* one’s captor. The other references to Ivrim contained within the Michmash episode are equally equivocal and open to scholarly speculation.

As far as this book is concerned, whether or not Hebrews and Israelites were distinct or identical is only of academic interest. That there may have been ostensible compatriots of Saul who proved less than reliable – of that we can have no doubt. Indeed, that fact lies at the core of our hypothesis.

1 Sam. 14:24-46: Saul forbade the eating of any food by his men until the battle was over, swearing a curse of death on the first warrior to disobey. Jonathan, who had not heard the edict, took some honey from a tree during a break in the fighting. On learning that he was now the object of his father’s curse, Jonathan remained unperturbed and voiced criticism of the king’s approach to the military encounter.

The victorious Israelites chased the Philistines all the way to Aijalon.⁸ The hungry and exhausted Israelites gorged themselves on the spoil, not stopping to drain the blood from the flesh. Saul put an end to this ritually unclean feasting and, by way of atonement, made a sacrifice and in God’s name set up an altar on the very spot.⁹

Because of Saul’s failure to act on his earlier curse, he was unable to obtain from the high priest’s oracles any guidance on continuing the battle. When he discovered that Jonathan was the guilty party, he was adamant in calling for his son’s execution. But the people could not contemplate the death of their beloved hero, and they made sure he was protected from harm.

At a stroke, the nagid recaptured a handful of vital strategic positions in Benjamin and Ephraim. Suddenly, the Israelites had new heroes, and most importantly, the myth of Philistine invincibility had been shattered. The spirits of the Israelites were lifted, and within a short time Saul’s

band of guerrillas had swelled into an army of about three thousand men (1 Sam. 13:2).

The capture of Michmash achieved three goals for Samuel and Saul. First, it was a severe reversal for the enemy. Second, it restored the Israelites' strategic advantage in central Israel by re-establishing a link between north and south. Third, it sent a signal to any waverers within Israel, and also to Judah, that the Israelite tribes were capable of turning the tables on a formidable – albeit weakened adversary.

Conclusion 11

Saul's first campaign was not against Ammon, but against the Philistines when he was still only a nagid.¹⁰

A Reluctant King

Samuel had might have assumed that the success of his chosen general would have cemented his own authority in the eyes of his people, but if so, his powers of seership were wanting. For instead, the Israelites, in fear for their continued existence, found in Saul a charismatic focal point for all their hopes and prayers. The desire to make him their king was heightened by the victory at Michmash. Samuel had not only presented his people with a brilliant general but, inadvertently, had given them a perfect candidate for the title of King of Israel.

If the tradition of Samuel's reluctance to take such a step is true, he had four good reasons to be hesitant:

1. Despite the general clamour, there must have been significant resistance among the princes and elders of Ephraim and Manasseh to the idea of a non-Josephite king.
2. Samuel might have been aware of the antimonarchist sentiment within the hearts of his brother priests, and especially those of the hitherto ruling House of Eli.
3. There may have been a similar lack of enthusiasm for the coronation of an Israelite king among the indigenous Canaanite population, which could have been particularly suspicious of any tampering with a confederate status quo.
4. Last but not least was the apparent, and probably genuine reluctance of Saul himself.

Therefore, for the time being at least, the will of the people was ignored and the son of Kish remained merely their faithful nagid. For about a year, Saul, together with his sons, his clan, and an ever-growing band of fearsome guerrilla troops, carried on a war of attrition against the invader. Little by little, he secured his own hill country and the towns of Benjamin

and of Ephraim. Following the battle of Michmash, he established Gibeah as the base of the resistance – the Ark of the Covenant having been brought there by its new guardians from Kiryath-jearim (2 Sam. 6:3).¹¹

The Philistines must have become ever-more perturbed, while Judah might have observed events with increasing interest and, presumably, growing admiration.

Samuel and Saul

It is most likely that by now the relationship between the judge and his general had become seriously strained. As Saul's star continued to rise, and the delineation of their respective roles began to blur, Samuel's position would have become increasingly awkward. The alleged confrontation between the two, prior to Michmash, may reflect the growing tension (1 Sam. 13:11-14). However pious Saul may have been, and whether or not he ever was 'among the prophets', his primary motivation was nationalistic and not spiritual.

Saul had witnessed the supposed invincibility of the Ark of God shattered at Aphek and as if to highlight the fact, we are informed that he refused to allow it to be carried into battle (1 Sam. 14:19). The men of Israel had to understand that they would win or lose by their own courage and their own fortune, while honouring God before battle and expressing thanks for victory was merely the custom of the day.

By contrast, Samuel was the consummate man of God, for whom everything was shaped and coloured by the fact of God's sovereignty. Thus, if the two men shared a deep sense of patriotism, they may have had widely differing views on how to satisfy its demands through service and duty.

Thus, the spiritual disposition of his general was probably of increasing concern to the prophet. The more Saul grew in stature, the more unsettled Samuel may have become. Nevertheless, so long as Saul was only his nagid, their tensions remained largely confined to points of pre-battle protocol and the like. But, as Saul's kingship approached, a deeper crisis loomed.

Conclusion 12

The joint rule of Samuel and Saul engendered an ambiguity in their respective roles and tense relations between the two leaders.¹²

Saul's victory at Mizpah¹³

Meanwhile, men flocked to Saul's banner at Gibeah, where, under Abner, they were equipped with captured weaponry and trained in its use.¹⁴ About a year after Saul's anointing as nagid, he would have felt confident enough to face a still weakened Philistine army in pitched battle.

Following their alleged falling out prior to Michmash, it seems that the nagid of Israel was assiduous in granting Samuel the leading role in the ritual of battle preparation, and thus confirming the supremacy of the judge. When a spectacular thunderstorm erupted at Mizpah, it must have seemed as though their plan was being given divine approval. 'The Lord thundered mightily against the Philistines that day. He threw them into confusion, and they were routed by Israel.' (1 Sam. 7:10)

However, once the Israelites fell upon the unsettled Philistines, it was Saul whom they saw leading them to glory, and it would have been to him that they looked for inspiration. In the event, Mizpah proved to be a bloody rout, culminating in the Israelite army chasing the Philistines all the way to Bet-car.¹⁵ The taste of victory was made all the sweeter by the location of the battle's climax. Halfway between Mizpah and Shen, near Aphek, on the very spot where the Ark had been captured the previous year, it was Samuel and his sons, and not Saul, who erected a great victory stele and named it Eben-ezer (1 Sam. 7:12).¹⁶

In little more than a year, Israel had succeeded in reversing its fortunes. If this seemed miraculous, the only question would have been over the nature of the miracle.

The Second Anointing

As things turned out, Saul and Samuel's apparent attempt to give God and his seer the credit for victory failed to persuade, if not the future compilers of the narrative, at least the army of Israel. They were well aware of the brilliance of their beloved nagid. So aware, in fact, and so joyous at their moment of liberation, that it could have come as little surprise to Samuel when once again the demand that Saul be made king rang in his ears. The irony would not have been lost on either man that what the two leaders had intended to be seen as the victory of Samuel came to result in the coronation of Saul, and this time, there could be no denying the people's wishes, so condemning Samuel to be the last judge of Israel. He at least had the gratification, however, of being the man to whom his people looked for the granting of their wish.

Josephus asserts that Saul's show of humility at his election was contrived (Jos, *Ant*: 6. 4: 5) – equivalent, perhaps, to the feigned reluctance of a newly elected Speaker in the British House of Commons to take his or her presiding seat. If so, it was certainly not a tradition continued by Saul's successors. All the same, from everything one can glean from the pages of Samuel, there is no reason to doubt that this bear of a man was terrified at the realisation that he was to be the first King of Israel. For, if in truth there was a dichotomy in the personality of the meshiach of Israel,

it was that behind the heart of a lion breathed the spirit of a vulnerable and gentle man.¹⁷

In any event, Samuel anointed Saul as king before the people of Israel (without Judah)¹⁸ at Mizpah. Thus, over three thousand years ago, and for the first time in recorded history, the cry went up:

“. . . Long live the King!” (1 Sam. 10:24).

At that very instant, a nation was born.

Conclusion 13

Saul’s anointing as King of Israel (without Judah) was a direct result of his successful war of liberation against the Philistines.¹⁹

Orthodox Sequence

1 Sam. 13: Saul recruits 3000 men to his and Jonathan’s command.

Jonathan liberates Geba – Saul calls the people to Gilgal. The Philistines respond by gathering a huge army at Michmash; The dispirited Israelites return to the hills.

Having waited for Samuel for the specified seven days, Saul, seeing his army dwindle, initiates the pre-battle sacrifice himself; Samuel arrives and admonishes Saul for disobeying God; He tells Saul his kingdom will end with him, and that the Lord had chosen another nagid.

Saul’s army dwindles to 600 men.

The Philistines send three raiding parties into the Israelite countryside.

The Philistines prohibit the Israelites from metal forging – only Saul, Jonathan, and their men have proper weapons.

1 Sam. 14: Ahiah, the great-grandson of Eli, is high priest.

Major Variants

Since the liberation of Geba historically belongs at the very beginning of Saul’s liberation war, 3,000 is probably an exaggeration. The 600 mentioned later is no doubt closer to the true size of the original guerrilla army.

The ‘seven days’ make their long-awaited reappearance. However, four key events (battle of Mizpah, coronation of Mizpah, war with Ammon, Gilgal coronation) have been artificially wedged into the historical space between Saul becoming nagid, and his launching of his offensive. A gap of seven days between Samuel’s appointment of Saul and the outbreak of hostilities is perfectly plausible.

Jonathan launches a surprise raid on Michmash, and creates havoc in Philistine camp; Ahiah and the ark are turned back from battle by Saul; Saul joins the fray with the remainder of the army; All those who had fled to hills return to the battle; the Philistines are routed;

Jonathan is spared the consequences of having violated Saul's temporary prohibition on eating.

Following his victory at Michmash, Saul wins victories over Moab, Ammon, Edom and Zobah; he has more victories over the Philistines and defeats the Amalekites.

Saul's sons are Jonathan, Ishui, and Melchi-shua; his daughters are Merab and Michal; His wife is Ahinoam. Abner, Saul's 'cousin', is made commander of levy. The war against the Philistines persists; Saul continues to recruit elite soldiers.

The sequence of wars as presented here is probably correct. The war with Ammon followed Michmash *and Mizpah*. Saul fought Moab before becoming King of All Israel.

Ishui is yet another name of Ishbaal/Ishboshet.