

# Introduction

“The task of the ancient historian, of any historian, is in the end to recognise and reconstruct the cacophonous constructions of historical realities, the competing and merely alternative narratives, the possible alternative narratives that were or in some cases might have been pertinent to the historical agents, the human beings, involved in historical transactions. It is the historian’s burden to elect his or her narrative that includes, privileges, excludes, or repudiates elements of all those agents’ voices.” (Baruch Halpern. 2001)

Around the time I was beginning this book, an article by an Israeli academic was published. It claimed that Goliath, the infamous nine-foot Philistine, suffered from a condition known as *giantism*.<sup>1</sup> If true, he would have exhibited an assortment of physical handicaps, such as ‘shambling gait,’ back pain, and most particularly, myopia. The significance of this hypothesis is that the man from Gath may have been far less ferocious than previously believed, and young David’s slingshot victory over him was considerably less significant than legend would have it. To put it bluntly, the son of Jesse may have been not so much a hero as a persecutor of the disabled.

The publication, the subsequent broadcasts and the tenet of that report is symptomatic of the reasons why I felt compelled to write *Saul: The Forgotten Messiah*. What on the surface seems to be an amusing observation, casting doubt upon the relative heroism of David, fails to take account of a far more serious and damning probability.

This book is a discussion of that probability and its many inferences with regard to the characters in the First Book of Samuel and the alleged roles they played in laying the foundation of messianic tradition.

As will become clear, David’s reputation is inversely related to that of Saul. Therefore, as my revised account of David and his early career brings

him down to earth, it raises his predecessor from relative inconsequentiality to a pinnacle of significance. A true picture of the anointing and reign of King Saul, which I have tried to present in these pages, reveals the uniqueness of his messianic credentials. Moreover, it will be shown that the betrayal of the one true Messiah was perpetrated not at Golgotha but over a thousand years earlier, on the slopes of Mount Gilboa.

### **A Gift from ‘Gob’**

When I was a boy, most Saturday mornings I was to be found sitting, standing, and dutifully bowing by the side of my grandfather, my *zaida*, in our local *shul* (synagogue). I was a moderately observant child from a North London suburb who had a reasonable grasp of the orthodox liturgy. Nevertheless, the only part of going to shul that I ever enjoyed was returning home after three hours of boredom.

Over the years, I developed a survival strategy for dealing with the tedium; namely, reading the *Tanakh*.

*Tanakh* is the Hebrew word for what non-Jews refer to as the Old Testament, while for Jews, of course, it represents the one and only testament. It was within the pages of my *zaida*’s *Tanakh* that I discovered redemption from boredom. Each week, I would read an episode from one of the more action-filled books such as Joshua or Judges. I particularly enjoyed Judges, with its rambling account of Israel’s violent and protracted settlement within the land of Canaan. It was epic stuff, strewn with battles and scenes of covenant, and packed with heroes such as Deborah and Gideon. Chaotic perhaps, probably inaccurate, and as for the ‘signs and wonders,’ they were just good fun. Historicity was not an issue to a young boy, who felt that these sagas were reaching out to him across three millennia. It seemed to me that these pages were an attempt to describe the genesis of my people. We had been born in blood and glory, out of the union of faith and passion. Here was the whole weighty record, with a tenuous thread to me and my imagined offspring.

But while Judges thrilled my young spirit, it was from the pages of the books of Samuel that I received the gift of wonder. Whereas the former seemed obscure and remote in style, the latter was crisp and sharply defined. It was in Samuel that I sensed the beginnings of a concrete history. Moreover, with its often-sublime blend of fable, myth and history, I found it eminently readable. Thus it was that, while engrossed in the pages of the second book of Samuel, I came upon verse 21:19:

And there was another battle in Gob<sup>2</sup> against the Philistines, where Elhanan the son of Jaare-Oregim, a Bethlehemite, slew *the brother of* Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weavers beam.

Funnily enough, if it had not been for the fact that the phrase ‘*brother of*’ was printed in italics, I might have merely skimmed over the verse without a backward glance. But those italics caught my eye. I knew that in traditional translations of the Bible such as the King James Version, and that which I had before me that morning in Shul, italics were used for one of two reasons. The more common was to show conjunctions and suchlike that had been inserted to improve the flow of the language. The other was to indicate that words had been added to *make sense* of a passage that would otherwise be obscure.

Although my Hebrew was rudimentary, it was proficient enough to allow for direct comparison between the English translation and the original Hebrew, which appeared side-by-side in the Tanakh. Thus, it was a simple matter to check on any curiosities.

The ‘brother of Goliath’ verse struck me as especially odd for two reasons. First, I had never heard that the terrible Philistine had a brother, and second, I was left puzzled by the fact that the brother was unnamed. Failure to mention people’s names is very rare in the Bible, and especially so within passages such as the one in question – a list of heroic Israelite champions and the enemies they had vanquished in the service of King David.

My eyes quickly darted across to the right-hand side of the page, to the classical Hebrew printed in neat columns. To my amazement, I could find no mention of a brother. The reason the English translation had omitted to name Goliath’s brother was that the Hebrew text mentioned no such person. The Hebrew was clear; except for the name of Elhanan’s father Jarre-oregim,<sup>3</sup> it consisted of particularly familiar words and phrases – ‘brother of’ not being amongst them.

Reading about Elhanan and Goliath was like suddenly discovering that the Garden of Eden had been inhabited by Adam and Esther. Shocked, I naturally turned to my learned zaida for an explanation, and was aghast when he told me he didn’t have one.

From that instant, I was a deeply perplexed little boy.

Dozens of questions spun around in my head – the foremost of which were: Who on earth was Elhanan? Why had no one ever pointed him out to me? How had he killed Goliath – with a slingshot or a spear? If Elhanan killed Goliath, why had the deed been claimed for David?

However, by far the most disturbing implication for me to digest was the possibility that David had not killed Goliath.

What was I to make of it? For the whole of my short life, I had been taught to regard David as the ultimate Jewish hero, the standard against which all other heroes were to be measured. Every revered national

leader from Judas Maccabaeus to Moshe Dayan had been compared to David. In times of adversity, Jews have constantly sought and found solace and encouragement in the tales of his epic deeds, none of which is evoked more often than his vanquishing of the giant Goliath, wielder of the weaver's beam.

Over the following days, I became obsessed. I spent every spare minute reading and rereading any book I could find on the subject. With my return to boarding school – Carmel College – a week or two later, I enjoyed access to one of the finest and most comprehensive libraries of Judaica and bible studies in the world. There I discovered dozens of theories, concerning 'early versions' and 'late versions,' this tradition versus that tradition, this possible error and that probable mistranslation. I emerged more confused than ever.

I sensed early on however, that part of the problem lay in the common perception of David himself. Only the most pious regard the biblical personalities prior to the Samuel narrative as more than semi-mythological. Similarly, all but the most 'minimalist' biblical historians fail to regard David as an historical character. This being the case, why had he, or those who came after him, invented the story of his slaying Goliath? And even more perplexing, having gone to all that trouble, why then allow the competing Elhanan episode to slip through the net?

If somebody has been telling lies to make David look good, might they also have been trying to make his famous *bête noire*, King Saul, look bad?

There is nothing new in the suggestion that David did not kill Goliath and that he was, in all probability, a usurper<sup>4</sup> – many of whose psalms are exquisite manifestations of his obsessive need for self-justification. Neither is there anything original in the recognition that David was a far from perfect personality; indeed, his litany of misdeeds is well documented in the second book of Samuel (e.g. 2 Sam. 11; 24 / 8:17). What may be less appreciated, however, is that a probing examination of the young (and supposedly heroic and saintly) David is capable of casting a new and revealing light on the life and personality of King Saul.

The first objective of this work is to bring these facts to the attention of a wider audience, who may never have heard of Elhanan. The second aim is to reveal the extent to which David's campaign of messianic self-promotion was driven by guilt and his consequent need for self-vindication. The third and central thesis of this work arises out of the first two and is meant to reveal a truer picture of Saul.

The story of Elhanan provided me with stark evidence of why the biblical text should never be taken at face value, and if a single anomaly

could tell me this, surely it would be worthwhile examining as many other problems in the text as possible. As long as one remained objective and level-headed, a new plateau of understanding might be reached. My main problem from the outset, however, was my distinct subjectivity. Certainly, in common with many others, I had always sympathized with Saul because of the harsh treatment meted out to him by Samuel. Yet David remained my ultimate biblical hero.

Part of the reason it took so long for this project to come to fruition was an innate reluctance to accept what my research had suggested to me. Nevertheless, the radically simple act of looking at what was in front of my face eventually convinced me that I had stumbled on a history of Saul and David truer than the one I had inherited. I hope many of my readers will arrive at the same conclusion.

This book will demonstrate:

- how the only person with a genuine claim to the title ‘king-messiah’ was traduced by the biblical chroniclers and consigned to an almost forgettable role in the national and spiritual history of the Jews;
- how he was betrayed by David, a prince of Judah;
- how he was pierced with arrows and then dispatched by a sword on the slopes of Gilboa;
- how pagan warriors mutilated his body before nailing it to the walls of the city of Bet-shean;<sup>5</sup> how it was rescued by his adoring subjects and lovingly interred;
- how his remains were later raised and moved to lie with those of his family;
- and finally, how his own usurper resurrected and immortalized his spirit by writing an exquisite lament.

Furthermore, this book will show that, by the time of his death, David had succeeded in weaving a mythology for his entire rise to power. He created not only a fantastical tale, but also a fabulous alter ego in the form of the wonder-boy warrior and ‘beloved of God’ who, moreover, enjoyed a son/father relationship with the deity. David established – if not to his own inner satisfaction, at least to the satisfaction of every subsequent generation of Jews and Christians his messianic credentials.

For Jews and Christians of the past two millennia, the term *messiah* has denoted a unique agent, or expression of God, whose role is to redeem the universe and usher in an era of peace. Jews have longed for his coming, and Christians have yearned for his return. However, the ancient Israelite notion of royal Messiahship was of a very different, and humbler, order – exemplified by Saul, the virtuous and courageous first King of Israel. The

elevation of the term to its current status can be traced to Saul's usurper, David, whose vaulting ambition led him to falsely claim royal-messianic importance. Both Judaism and Christianity have been grievously led astray by this fabulist's brilliant propaganda.

### The Meaning of 'Meshiach'

The word *messiah* is widely taken to refer exclusively to Jesus Christ. Yet *messiah* is simply the anglicised form of the Hebrew word *meshiach*, meaning *anointed one* or *the anointed* – nothing more and nothing less.

In the time of King Saul of Israel, anointing was a common practice associated with many religious and secular appointments. It was a form of certification of office. The more senior the appointment, the more venerated the certificate. This is not to diminish the importance of the rite, but merely to point out its pluralistic nature.<sup>6</sup>

The exact constituents of the anointing liquid have always been a mystery to scholars.<sup>7</sup> Everything from olive oil and bitumen to semen and the juices of a menstruating woman have been suggested, not to mention exotic recipes which include all of the above and many other rare ingredients. In his highly controversial, not to mention courageous, masterwork *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, John Allegro discussed the origins and symbolism of the anointing rite and produced convincing evidence of its deeply sexual connotations.<sup>8</sup> (Whatever the fluid was, it seems to have been intended not to wash away easily, but rather to leave a stain and an aroma that would serve as a lasting mark of office.) However, this is a subject beyond the scope of the present work. The ceremony itself is only of passing interest. What matters here is that regardless of the actual nature of the anointing, the ritual became the symbolic key to the gates of power.

Theories also abound over the number of anointings a person would undergo for a given task. For instance, it may be that in the case of a military commander, he (or she, in the case of Deborah) was anointed before every battle, just as the Spartans would ritually comb olive oil through their hair on the eve of combat.<sup>9</sup> (We shall learn how this multiplicity of anointings led to confusion over the length and nature of the reign of King Saul.)

Thus, we find ourselves presented with a rite that, from a purely historical perspective and for all its sanctity, was far from unique. Anointing was simply a form of sacred confirmation in a world where everything – from high cultic ritual to the act of defecation, was regarded as a manifestation of the divine.

In this regard, as we shall soon see, the importance of the second and

third anointings of Saul lay not in the acts themselves but in the particular levels of certification they conferred.

In his first elevation, to the rank of ruler, (*nagid*) he had merely joined a long list of past and current officials, including judges and princes. It was only when he was crowned king of Israel that Saul received an anointing which was novel, by virtue of his becoming the first Israelite monarch. His subsequent success in uniting, and for a while securing, the kingdom added to the status implicit in his special anointing by investing him with the qualities of supreme *redeemer* and, more important from a retrospective point of view, *saviour king*. Nevertheless, in this context, it must be stressed, that the messianic element itself was not of special significance in the person of Saul (in later generations, Israelite scribes attributed the title to gentile rulers such as Cyrus the Great – Is. 45:1) but rather the level he attained by being anointed.

For the Israelite nation, the other main novelty, which sprang from the anointing of Saul was the royal-dynastic constituent.

We know from the story of Gideon and Abimelech in the Book of Judges (Jg. 8:22; 9:2) that for several generations prior to the events recorded in the first book of Samuel, there had been some degree of acceptance or expectation of hereditary succession. In 1 Samuel, the stories of Eli and his heirs and of Samuel and his two sons indicate that this trend had become firmly established. Thus, it must be the case that when the people asked Samuel to anoint a king, they were also opting for royal-dynastic rule. Moreover, if the 'House of Saul' represented the first Israelite royal dynasty, its overthrow by David resulted, paradoxically, in the consolidation of the royal-hereditary concept.

### **The Seed of Jesse**

At this point, it is important to say a little about the long, complex, not to say mysterious, development of the Judeo-Christian *meshiach* tradition.

During the previous two thousand years, from a time before the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem until the gates of Auschwitz, wherever and whenever things became desperate for the Israelite people, they would pray and hope for messianic deliverance.

The Kingdom of Judah's distinct historical survival, the Kingdom of Israel's disappearance, and a Davidic literary legacy combined to ensure that the people looked in anticipation towards redemption – primarily from the seed of Jesse. With the passage of time, a suffering people increasingly regarded David the giant-slayer – saviour and Lord's anointed – as a larger-than-life hero and a potent symbol of hope.



Faith in the 'House of David' became so entrenched that whenever an alleged messiah sought to establish his credentials, he announced his lineage as going back to Jesse. This has been an imperative from the time of Jesus and his disciples (Matt. 1:1-17; 15:21-28; 20:29-34 etc; Luke. 3:23-38) to the present day. If the theory presented in this book is correct, David was a false king-messiah, a traitor, and usurper of the 'true king-messiah'. The implications are sweeping, for all his supposed 'royal-messianic' descendants, however sincere, have to be false by association. Neither Jewish nor Christian beliefs can easily withstand such a blow.

### Competing Messiahs

For millennia, Jewish mystics have brooded over the subject of the *meshiach*. From the earliest times, there has existed a puzzling competitor to the exclusively Davidic tradition: a belief that the saviour would emanate from the 'House of Joseph' or be '*Messiah, son of Joseph*'.<sup>10</sup> With typical pious tenacity, Jews and early Christians found ways of resolving this contradiction in accordance with the peculiar requirements of their own faiths. Jews decided that the 'Josephic Messiah' would come shortly before the 'Davidic Messiah,' as a sort of prologue to the crucial event.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the Christian mythmakers, for whom that event had already occurred, installed a Josephic father/stepfather for the Davidic Christ. Even Jesus' Aramaic name, *Yeshua*, echoes that of the ancient Ephraimite/Josephite spiritual and national leader Joshua, or *Yehoshua* (in Hebrew) – 'God the saviour' or 'God is the saviour'.

These already murky waters are muddled further by the discovery in 1948 of an ancient but apparently distinct *dual messiah* tradition propagated by the Essene sect of Qumran.

According to this inter-Temple-period belief, it seems there were to be two concurrent messiahs of equal importance, one a priest and the other a king (1 QS. 9:1). There are many theories to explain the source for the Essene-tradition, from the exotic pairing of Pharaoh Akhenaten and his high priest Meryre to the relationship of David and his personally appointed high-priest, Zadok.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, scholars of the Jesus-as-Essene persuasion see in the John the Baptist/Christ duality a direct manifestation of the Qumran belief.<sup>13</sup> In this construction, they allude to John's priestly credentials as the son of Zacharias and his role as baptiser/anointer of Jesus, as the legitimate descendent of the house of David (Luke. 1; 5: 3).

Nevertheless, this book will show that the source for the Essene tradition (and all other Jewish and Christian messianic partnerships) is to be found in the original Israelite priest/king relationship of Samuel and Saul.



The roots of the tradition of a Messiah from the House of Joseph is probably a legacy from the time when the tribes of Israel – led by the ‘sons of Joseph,’ Manasseh and Ephraim – threw off the yoke of Judah and anointed their own king in the person of Jeroboam from the tribe of Manasseh. The rival messianic traditions of David and Joseph persisted and evolved throughout the following centuries. The original Saulide king-messiah went the way of his tribe, Benjamin, which was gradually absorbed, into both the larger tribes of Judah and (the Josephic) Ephraim. Thus, paradoxically, the one genuine royal messianic line was totally forgotten. The confusion over messianic constructs has resulted in a multitude of conflicting traditions – from messiah partnerships to double messiahs, priest-kings to priests *and* kings, one single event to a succession of events, and various permutations of the above.

Nevertheless, the concept of a kingly saviour derives explicitly from Saul. The priestly anointer – with his own special, if subordinate, messianic credentials, is neither Elijah (the favoured candidate of Jews), nor John the Baptist (the ‘herald of Christ’), but Samuel. The confusion arose as a direct result of a deceit perpetrated by an ambitious and vainglorious tyrant by the name of David.

It is the tenacity of the Saulide spirit, that survives within the pages of the charming and picturesque first book of Samuel, which prompted the hypothesis presented in these pages. Its editorially chaotic style reflects successive attempts – some more deliberate than others – to erase the imprint of Saul. But the original intent is discernible to the alert eye. The experience is like perceiving what appears to be a pure white garment, then noticing that it contains a barely visible thread of blue. Once the eye becomes aware of the thread, it is impossible to ignore. Finally, one may realize that the faint blue thread holds the entire garment together.