

1 Samuel Chapter 31

Verses 2-13

See 2 Samuel 1:4-12; 1 Chronicles 10:1-12.

1 Samuel 31:1 "Now the Philistines fought against Israel: and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell down slain in mount Gilboa."

“Mount Gilboa”:

“Gilboa” was a chain of mountains in the territory of Issachar that was rising from the eastern edge of the plain of Esdraelon, the southern edge of the valley of Jezreel, to a height of 1,696 feet above sea level.

On the east, it plunges abruptly 2,000 feet below to the Jordan.

In this range was the mountain of Gilboa and the hill of Moreh.

Both of them guard the eastern pass from the plain of Esdraelon into the valley of Jezreel, the main access from the coastal plain to the Jordan Valley.

On Gilboa Saul encamped against the Philistines (28:4); and later, Jonathan and two other sons died there when the Philistines defeated Israel (verses 1, 8; 2 Samuel 1:6, 21; 21:12; and also see 1 Chronicles. 10:1, 8).

Apparently from this same height Gideon descended to rout the Midianites who were encamped in the valley of Jezreel (Judges 6:33), near the hill of Moreh.

Jebel Fukua, about three miles southeast of Jezreel, represents the location today.

Formerly the site of the Israel camp, it was turned into the sight of the Israeli massacre.

Saul and his sons lost their lives on Mt. Gilboa (see note on 28:4).

This chapter occurs just after the happenings of chapter 28.

We find in this, that the final judgment on Saul happens.

The LORD had told him long before the death of Samuel, that the kingdom would be wrenched out of his hand and given to David.

This is the fulfillment of that.

For the purposes of the LORD, the Philistines prevail in this battle.

Most of the 3,000 men with Saul are killed.

1 Samuel 31:2 "And the Philistines followed hard upon Saul and upon his sons; and the Philistines slew Jonathan, and Abinadab, and Melchi-shua, Saul's sons."

“Jonathan, and Abinadab, and Melchi-shua”:

Three of the 4 sons of Saul were killed the same day in battle.

The fourth son, Eshbaal, would later be referred to as Ish-bosheth, meaning “man of shame,” was an appropriate designation in light of his apparent absence from the battle field (compare this with 2 Samuel 2:8).

Jonathan, Ishvi and Melchi-shua were named as Saul’s sons in 14:49, but Jonathan, Abinadab and Melchi-shua are named here; Ishvi and Abinadab are thus one and the same (First Chronicles 8:33 and 9:39 are the only verses naming all 4 sons).

Jonathan, David's friend, is among the sons of Saul who were slain.

The Philistines would not spare the sons of Saul, for fear they might rise up against them again.

1 Samuel 14:49 "Now the sons of Saul were Jonathan, and Ishui, and Melchi-shua: and the names of his two daughters [were these]; the name of the firstborn Merab, and the name of the younger Michal:"

Abinadab is the same as Ishui.

Verses 3-6

The text plainly records that Saul died.

For a parallel account, see 1 Chron. Chapter 10.

Accordingly, the suggested contradiction in details (in 2 Sam. 1:9-10), must be viewed as a fabricated tale told by an Amalekite to gain David’s favor (see the note on 2 Sam. 1:6-10, 15-16).

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

Pressed heavy upon him; he was the butt of the Philistines, they aimed at his person and life.

"And the archers hit him":

Or "found him"; the place where he was, and directed their arrows at him.

"And he was sore wounded of the archers":

Or rather "he was afraid" of them, as the Targum, for as yet he was not wounded.

And so the Syriac and Arabic versions render and are the sense Kimchi and Ben Melech give of the word.

He was not afraid of death, as Abarbanel observes, he chose to die; but he was afraid he should be hit by the archers in such a way that he should not die immediately, and should be taken alive and ill-used.

The Philistines, especially the Cherethites, were famous for archery (see Zeph. 2:5).

Saul had known before this battle started, that he would lose his life.

He was a brave soldier with tremendous pride.

The fact that he was wounded was worse to him than being killed outright.

Verses 4-5:

This is one of two accounts of Saul's death (the other is in 2 Sam. 1:9-10).

This account is the divine record of Saul's death.

Second Samuel 1, reports the fabricated story of the Amalekite who found Saul already dead and tried to exploit Saul's death to ingratiate himself to the new king.

1 Samuel 31:4 "Then said Saul unto his armor-bearer, Draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me. But his armor-bearer would not; for he was sore afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword, and fell upon it."

"These uncircumcised":

A common term of derision used among Israelites to designate non-Israelites.

Circumcision was given as the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (in Genesis 17:10-14; and see note on 14:6).

"Abuse me":

Having engaged in several battles against the Philistines, Saul had succeeded in provoking their hatred and resentment.

As the king, Saul had certainly received especially cruel treatment from the hands of his enemies, who would have likely made sport of him and tortured him before his death.

“Saul took a sword, and fell upon it”:

Though Saul’s suicide is considered by some to be an act of heroism; Saul should have found his strength and courage in God as David did (in 23:16 and 30:6), to fight to the end or to surrender.

Saul’s suicide is the ultimate expression of his faithlessness towards God at this ending moment of his life.

Saul knew that the Philistines would not let him live.

He was afraid they would torture him, before they actually killed him, so he asks his armor-bearer to kill him.

Saul did not want these uncircumcised Philistines to be able to brag that they had killed him.

The Philistines were known for their cruelty.

One example was when they poked out the eyes of Samson.

Saul did not want to be humiliated like this.

His armor-bearer was afraid to kill Saul.

He had probably, taken an oath to protect him.

Saul actually committed suicide.

He fell upon his own sword.

An Amalekite passing by said he helped him finish the act.

1 Samuel 31:5 "And when his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he fell likewise upon his sword, and died with him."

Not by his own hands, and not by the hands of the Amalekites, which the armor-bearer would scarcely have suffered.

"He fell likewise upon his sword, and died with him":

Some think that Saul, and his armor-bearer, died by the same sword, which had belonged to the armor-bearer.

And if he was Doeg the Edomite, they fell probably by the same sword with which the priests of the LORD were murdered at Nob (1 Sam. 22:18).

And it is observed by an historian, that the murderers of Julius Caesar slew themselves with the same dagger they destroyed him.

The humiliation of allowing his master to die was more than the armor-bearer could take.

He could not face that ridicule, so he killed himself as Saul had.

He fell on his sword and killed himself.

1 Samuel 31:6 "So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, that same day together."

"All his men":

The question is whether "all" was used in a qualified sense or in an absolute sense.

In consideration of the context, the meaning was most likely intended to be qualified, as it was not absolute.

It is not necessary to conclude that every single one of Saul's 3,000 men died that day and that none escaped.

Where such a meaning is intended, the text usually provides more reinforcement, as (in Joshua 8:22), where the author specifically states, "and they slew them until no one was left of those who survived or escaped."

In fact, Abner the general of Saul's army survived (2 Sam. 2:8).

"All" here means those who were personally assigned to Saul's special guard (31:7).

We are not told the details of how Jonathan and the other brothers died.

We may assume they were killed in battle.

In fact, all of Saul's men, who protected Saul, died in this battle.

This may not mean that all 3,000 died, because Abner and Ishbosheth lived.

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."

The valley of Jezreel (of which see notes on Hosea 1:5).

"And they that were on the other side Jordan":

Or rather "on that side"; for the phrase will bear to be rendered either way, and so may mean that side of Jordan on which the battle was fought.

For as for the other side, or meaning beyond it, the Israelites there could not be in such fear of the Philistines.

Nor do we ever read of their inhabiting any cities there; though as the phrase is used of the valley, as well as of the river, it may be rendered "about the valley, and about Jordan", and so describes such that dwelt near to each of them.

"Saw that the men of Israel fled, and that Saul and his sons were dead":

That is, had information and intelligence of those facts, for it is not to be supposed they saw them with their eyes.

"They forsook, the cities, and fled":

Fearing they should be put to the sword, or carried captive.

"And the Philistines came and dwelt them":

Having nothing more to do than to come and take possession.

These are not speaking of the three thousand men that were with Saul as soldiers.

These are the men who stayed at home and raised the crops and tended the sheep.

They are no longer protected by the army, and they know the Philistines will overrun their cities, so they flee and give them to them.

They want to save their lives.

The Philistines just moved right in and inhabited the vacated cities.

1 Samuel 31:8 "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."

This was the day after the battle, which perhaps was fought till night came on.

"When the Philistines came to strip the slain":

Of their clothes, and take from them whatever was valuable, as their booty.

"That they found Saul and his sons fallen in Mount Gilboa":

To which they had betaken themselves, when the battle went against them in the valley; of which see (1 Sam. 28:4).

The Philistines took all of the swords and everything else of value, from the bodies of the slain.

This is how they found the bodies of Saul and his sons.

1 Samuel 31:9 "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."

"Cut of his head":

There is a parallelism between the death of Saul and the death of Goliath.

The giant, who was the champion of the Philistines had his head cut off by David, and the Philistines fled (17:51).

The Philistines had taken revenge and done likewise to the giant champion of Israel; King Saul, who was "taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward" (10:23).

The cutting off of his head possibly, is in revenge for David cutting off the head of Goliath and taking it back to show.

This would indicate the total destruction of Saul.

His armor, displayed in the house of their false gods, would be a constant reminder that they had defeated Saul with the help of their false gods.

They are not aware that it was with God's help, they defeated Saul.

This was God's way of punishing Saul.

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

Mounting the "armor" of Saul and his sons "in the temple" of their false gods was one way the philistines credited their god with this military victory.

"Ashtaroth":

These were the fertility goddesses of the Canaanites, to whom the Philistines gave homage by placing the weapons of their defeated foe in the temple of Ashtaroth.

As the sword of Goliath was put in the house of the LORD behind the ephod (1 Sam. 21:9), so were the weapons of Saul were taken by the Philistines and put in the temple of Ashtaroth.

Military victory was attributed to the gods, since the belief was that military encounters were battles between the deities of rival nations. (See the note on Judges 2:11-15).

“Beth-shan”:

Located in the Jordan Valley about 16 miles south of the Sea of Galilee.

Ashtaroth was the false goddess of these people, along with Baal, the male false god.

This is saying they nailed his body to the wall in the temple of this false goddess.

This was another form of humiliation of these Israelites.

It appears, from the following verses, that they nailed the bodies of Saul's sons there too.

Verses 11-13

“Saul” had once delivered the cities of “Jabesh-gilead” from danger (11:1-11).

Accordingly, some of their heroic warriors recovered the “body” of their champion, “Saul,” together with those of his “sons” (compare 1 Chron. 10:11-12).

Subsequently, David retrieved their remains and buried them in their ancestral burial grounds (see 2 Sam. 21:12-14).

Cremation was at times a sign of shame (Lev. 20:14; 21:9), or public judgment (Joshua 7:25).

Perhaps the burning was done to mutilate the “bodies” (verse 9).

(First Chronicles 10:13-14), asserts that Saul’s death was God’s judgment on him.

Burning “bodies” was not part of Israelite custom, so it is likely that these men were trying to prevent further dishonor to Saul and his sons.

The Philistines had quite possibly mutilated the corpses.

David later reburied their “bones” (2 Sam. 21:12-14).

1 Samuel 31:11 “And when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard of that which the Philistines had done to Saul;”

“Jabesh-gilead”:

Located east of the Jordan, its people stayed out of the war against Benjamin and suffered severe consequences as a result (Judges Chapter 21).

The men of Jabesh-gilead showed kindness and respect to Saul, a Benjamite, by rescuing his body from the wall of Beth-shan because Saul and his sons had saved Jabesh-gilead from the Ammonites (11:9-12), just after he had been chosen as king of Israel.

By this act, they honored Saul for his faithfulness to them.

The inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead remembered the brave deeds that Saul had done for his people.

It seems they made a brave surprise raid on the temple of the false goddess Ashtaroth and took Saul's, and his son's bodies, down from the wall.

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 Beth-shan, and came to Jabesh, and burnt them there."

“Bodies ... burnt”:

In light of Saul's head having been cut off and the mutilation that had taken place, it is thought that the citizens of Jabesh-gilead burned his body to hide the damage.

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

“Bones ... buried”:

It was considered disrespectful not to bury the dead.

Abraham went to great lengths to bury Sarah (Gen. 23:4-15), and Jacob made Joseph swear that he would not bury him in Egypt (Gen. 47:29-30).

“Fasted seven days”:

In relation to death, fasting was often associated with mourning in the Hebrew culture.

It was a sign of respect, seriousness and grief.

First Samuel began with the ark of the Covenant being captured by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4:11), and in the end Israel's king had been killed by them.

2 Samuel will recount how God vindicated His honor by David's defeating the Philistines (2 Sam. 5:17-25), establishing an uncontested kingdom (1 Kings 2:12), and safely bringing the ark to Jerusalem, the city of God (2 Sam. 6:16-19).

These men could not allow these people to degrade the bodies of Saul and his sons.

It would not only be a disgrace to Saul and his family, but all Israel.

They took their bodies down at night, while the city was asleep.

They burned the bodies in Jabesh.

Had they not burned them up, the Philistines might have been able to find them, and desecrate their bodies further.

This is the only instance of cremation in the Bible by Hebrews.

1 Samuel Chapter 31 Questions

1. How did the battle go between the Philistines and Saul's men?
2. What is this chapter telling of?
3. How many men were with Saul?
4. What happened to them?
5. Who were Saul's sons, that died in this battle?
6. Abinadab is the same as _____.
7. What did the Philistines do to Saul?
8. What was worse than being killed to Saul?
9. Who did Saul ask to kill him?
10. Did he do what Saul said?
11. How did Saul die?
12. Why would his armor-bearer not kill him?
13. After he saw Saul was dead, what did the armor-bearer do?
14. What may we assume about the deaths of Saul's sons?

15. When the Israelites in the cities heard what had happened, what did they do?
16. When did the Philistines find Saul's body?
17. What did they do to Saul, to defame him?
18. What did they do with Saul's body?
19. Who was Ashtaroth?
20. Who did they nail to the wall, besides Saul?
21. Who comes to retrieve their bodies?
22. When did they come for their bodies?
23. What did they do with the bodies?
24. Why did they do this?
25. This is the _____ instance of cremation by the Hebrews in the Bible.