



Saul's Last Stand: O Sinnerman, Where you gonna run to? (1 Sam 31)

Notes: Week Eighteen

New American Commentary¹

(2) The Philistines Devastate Israel and the House of Saul [31:1-13](#)

[31:1-6](#) This section resumes the narrative story line of [28:25](#). As in chap. 28, the events are set in the area of Jezreel, Saul and the Philistine army are central in the action, and the time is only hours after Saul's meal with the medium. In accordance with Samuel's prediction (cf. [28:19](#)), the Philistines defeated Israel. They pursued Saul's army as they made a hasty retreat up to their base camp, "and many" Israelites "fell slain on Mount Gilboa" ([31:1](#)).

Not content merely to push the Israelites back, the Philistines wanted to bring an end to the dynastic family that had caused them so much trouble over the past forty years (cf. [Acts 13:21](#)). Now at last they scored a dramatic success: Saul's three oldest sons all died at the hands of the Philistines, and Saul himself was overtaken by "the archers" (v. 3), who "wounded him critically."

Saul knew that his time to die had come. The Philistines were quickly advancing from the position where the fatal arrow had been launched, and they would overrun the king's position in only minutes. Saul was keenly aware of the ancient Near Eastern customs regarding the treatment of mortally wounded enemy soldiers on the battlefield—including the mutilation or removal of genitalia (cf. [18:27](#)) and decapitation (cf. [17:51](#)). Wishing to deny "these uncircumcised fellows" (v. 4) the opportunity to "abuse" him and subject him to a torture-execution, Saul ordered his armor-bearer to deliver a swift and merciful death blow with his sword. In this way Saul was acting like the tragic character Abimelech (cf. [Judg 9:54](#)), the original wicked Israelite "king" (cf. [Judg 9:6](#)). However, the assistant "was terrified and would not do it," perhaps because he feared the consequences of harming the Lord's anointed (cf. [26:9-11](#)). Consequently, "Saul took his own sword and fell on it," thus becoming like the tragic figure Eli, who also "fell" at his death. In a tragic show of solidarity with his king, Saul's armor-bearer followed his example and took his own life ([31:5](#)).

Samuel's haunting words ([28:19](#)), less than twenty-four hours old, were resoundingly echoed in v. 6: "Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day" (v. 6).

[31:7-10](#) Israelites living in the Jezreel valley area, as well as those in the nearby Transjordan territory of Manasseh soon learned of the crushing Israelite defeat. Realizing that their blanket of military protection disappeared when "the Israelite army had fled" and that the king and all his designated successors had been slaughtered, "they abandoned their towns and fled." Rather than defending their lives and possessions against the rampaging Philistine army, they wisely opted to become war refugees.

The next day "the Philistines came and occupied" the abandoned towns of Issachar and Manasseh in order to profit as fully as possible from their military success. No doubt the victorious army looted the hastily abandoned Israelite homes and villages as long as they remained in the area.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 280-283 .

Part of the looting process involved returning to the battlefield the day after the battle “to strip the dead” (v. [8](#)). In the process they came across the corpses of “Saul and his three sons” on Mount Gilboa. The bodies of the royal family members being left overnight on the battlefield suggests the magnitude of the Israelite defeat; efforts usually were made to remove such prominent individuals before the enemy could get them (cf. [1 Kgs 22:34–38](#); [2 Kgs 23:30](#)).

When the Philistines discovered Saul’s remains, “they cut off his head and stripped off his armor” as war prizes. The armor was later placed “in the temple of the Ashtoreths” (v. [10](#)), probably as a thank offering to a protectress deity or perhaps in fulfillment of a vow. The naked, decapitated bodies of Saul and his three sons were then sent a few miles east to Beth Shan, a former Israelite village in the Jezreel valley area, where they were fastened “to the wall.”

At the same time, the Philistines sent messengers to proclaim the news in the temple of their idols and among their people” (v. [9](#)) that they had won a major victory over the Israelites, decimated Israel’s dynastic family, and gained control of the most strategic portion of the Via Maris in Palestine.

[31:11–13](#) Though most of the Israelites in the region reacted to the Philistine victory with fear and flight, “the people of Jabesh Gilead” (v. [11](#)) did not, perhaps because theirs was a walled city (cf. [11:1](#)). When news of the disgraceful treatment of the royal family’s bodies reached Jabesh, “all their valiant men journeyed through the night to Beth Shan” (v. [12](#)). The trek was difficult and dangerous, especially at night, since Beth Shan was about fifteen miles away and one had to ford the Jordan River and enter Philistine-held territory to get there.

However, the squadron succeeded in their efforts. Once at Beth Shan, the men managed to retrieve the bodies of the royal family and to transport them “to Jabesh.” There they “burned”—but did not actually incinerate—the bodies on a funeral pyre until the fleshy portions had been consumed. Afterward they removed the bones of the four men from the fire for burial (v. [13](#)). The final association of Saul with a tamarisk was possibly a symbolic gesture, made out of consideration for the fact that he had previously conducted royal proceedings under this type of tree (cf. [22:6](#)). Out of respect for their fallen leaders the people of Jabesh then “fasted seven days.”

Though the efforts of the citizens of Jabesh Gilead were considerable and apparently exceeded those of any other Israelite city, they were thoroughly appropriate. After all, the city had once been rescued from humiliation at the hands of foreigners by Saul’s efforts on their behalf (cf. [11:1–11](#)). In addition, Saul may have had genealogical ties with individuals within Jabesh Gilead (cf. [Judg 21:10–12](#); [2 Sam 21:12–14](#)). David would later commend the Gileadites for their heroic act of loyalty to Saul (cf. [2 Sam 2:5–7](#)).

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31:1-13. These verses constitute the closing chapter of Saul's reign as the first king of Israel. Saul had been commissioned to save the Israelites from the hand of the Philistines (9:16) but ironically had died at their hand. Between the Philistine victory over Israel before Saul became king (1 Sam. 4:1-11) and Israel's retreat and slaughter on Mount Gilboa, battle intermittent warfare continued throughout Saul's reign.

The events in [chs. 30-31](#) are simultaneous. Providentially, David was far removed from this Philistine-Israel battle and engaged in reclaiming the loss in the Amalekite raid of Ziklag, while Saul found himself in a losing conflict with the Philistines on Mount Gilboa. In this conclusion to Saul's reign, God is not mentioned.

31:1-7. Although the Israelites under Saul at times had routed the Philistines (cf. [14:20-23](#); [17:51-54](#)), in this battle they slaughtered many Israelites. They closed in on Saul and his sons, killing three of them, including Jonathan, who should have been the heir apparent to the throne of Israel. In the fierce fighting around Saul, he was critically wounded. In fear of humiliation by the Philistines, Saul instructed his armor bearer to kill him, but he refused—either not wanting to touch the Lord's anointed or being repelled by the horror of killing his master. (He may have been aware of the fact that David once was Saul's armor bearer, and in subsequent years, he had refused to kill Saul when he had the opportunity.) In desperation, Saul fell on his own sword. So did his armor bearer when he saw that Saul had killed himself. In one day, Saul, his troops and his three sons died on the battlefield. When the Israelites in the Jezreel Valley realized this tragic loss, they fled for safety as they abandoned their towns and cities to the Philistines.

31:8-13. What Saul had feared ("these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me") became a reality after he had committed suicide. The next day the Philistines found the bodies of Saul and his sons, and, in a brutal act of revenge, they decapitated Israel's king, placed his armor on display in the temple of their goddess Ashtoreth, hung up his head in the temple of Dagon ([1 Chr. 10:10](#)) and fastened his body to the Beth-shan wall. Messengers were sent to announce the good news of this victory to the Philistine people and in their pagan temples. It is rather ironic that 1 Samuel begins with a focus on "the house of the Lord at Shiloh" ([1:24](#)), but ends with the tragic proclamation of Saul's death in the pagan temples of Philistia.

Beth-Shan, located about fifteen miles south-southwest of the Sea of Galilee at the junction of the Jezreel and Jordan valleys, was already an Egyptian fortified outpost in the fifteenth century under control of Thutmose III. A statue of Rameses III found there dates to the twelfth century. Under Joshua, Beth-Shan was allotted to Manasseh but was too formidable to conquer ([Josh. 17:11, 16](#); [Judg. 1:27](#)). During Saul's reign, Beth-Shan was under Philistine control, but David conquered it, and under Solomon it is listed as a city in the fifth administrative district ([1 Ki. 4:12](#)). Two temples have been uncovered dating to the eleventh century, one dedicated to the god Resheph and the other to the goddess Antit. These may have been the temples of Dagon and Ashteroth in which the Philistines displayed Saul's head and armor.

The people of Jabesh-Gilead, who had been rescued by Saul in his first military action ([11:1-11](#)), expressed their gratitude by retrieving the bodies of Saul and his sons, giving them an honorable burial. They traveled by night, probably to avoid detection, to Beth-Shan, twelve miles northwest from Jabesh at great personal risk. Removing the bodies from the wall, they took them to Jabesh where they burned them and buried the remains under a tamarisk tree and fasted seven days.

2. *The Complete Biblical Library – Samuel*, (Springfield, IL: World Library Press, Inc., 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 31".