



David's Lament: How the Mighty Have Fallen! (2 Sam 1-2)

Notes: Week One

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other. This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

6. David Responds to Tragedy in the House of Saul

In this section David spontaneously displays his loyalty, respect, and admiration for his fallen king. David learns of Saul's death from an Amalekite—perhaps a shiftless deserter from the armies of his own countrymen—who brags that he delivered the deathblow to Israel's king and produces convincing evidence to support his claim.

Consistent with his policy of respecting the royal messianic office, David kills the Amalekite. Grief stricken, David then utters the most stirring tribute to fallen companions recorded in the Bible. The words stand as a monument to David's solidarity with Israel's first dynastic family and demonstrate why he was such a fitting choice to be Israel's next king.

Table 4: Order of Events ([1 Sam 30](#) to [2 Sam 1:2](#))

Day	Reference	Event
(Before)	28:4a	Philistines assemble for war
	29:1a	Philistines gather forces at Aphek
	28:4d	Saul gathers Israelites for war
	28:4e	Israelites set up camp at Gilboa
	29:1b	Israelites camp at Jezreel
1	29:2	Philistine rulers march from Aphek, with David in formation
	29:3	Philistine rulers exclude David from Philistine force
2	29:10–11	David and men leave in early morning after first day's march with the Philistines
4	28:4b	Philistines come [to Shunem]
	28:4c	Philistines set up camp at Shunem
	28:5	Saul sees Philistines, becomes terrified

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 294-304.

	28:7	Saul seeks but fails to receive guidance from Yahweh
	28:8	Saul goes to medium in Endor at night; speaks with Samuel, learns of his impending death
	28:25	Saul returns from Endor to Gilboa at night
	30:1	David and his men reach Ziklag at end of a three-day march; discover Ziklag destroyed
	30:7–8	David seeks guidance from Yahweh using Abiathar and the ephod
	30:17	David and his men conduct dusk raid on Amalekites
5	30:17	David fights Amalekites till evening, recovers plunder and family
	31:1–6	Philistines rout Israel
	31:2–6	Philistines kill Saul and sons
6	31:8	Philistines cut off Saul’s head, strip him of his armor
	31:10	Philistines fasten Saulides’ bodies to Beth Shan wall
	31:11–12	Jabesh Gileadite men remove Saulides’ bodies
	30:26	David and his men return to Ziklag
	2 Sam 1:1	David returns from defeating the Amalekites
7–8	2 Sam 1:1	David and his men stay in Ziklag two days
	30:26–31	David sends gifts to elders of Judah
9	2 Sam 1:2	Amalekite informs David of Saul’s death

(1) David Executes Saul’s Killer [1:1–16](#)

[1:1–4](#) Saul, the first all-Israelite king, was dead. He died battling the Philistines on Mount Gilboa at the very time David was doing battle against the Amalekites. Telling the stories of Saul and David more-or-less simultaneously in one book required an artful interlacing of the narratives. The events of [2 Samuel 1](#) should be linked to [1 Sam 30:31](#); [1:1](#) actually resumes the time line of [30:26](#), with the events of [30:27–31](#) apparently occurring simultaneously with the events of [2 Sam 1:1b–27](#). The table on p. 285 suggests the order of events in this section of 1, 2 Samuel.

On David’s third day back in Ziklag, no doubt as David and his men were busy putting their households in order following the Amalekite destruction of their settlement, “a man arrived from Saul’s camp” (v. [2](#)). David must have realized immediately that the man was bearing bad news, for he was displaying the customary outward signs of grief, “clothes torn and with dust on his head” (cf. [1 Sam 4:12](#); [2 Sam 13:31](#); [Job 2:12](#)). David could tell from the foreign messenger’s appearance that one of the armies had suffered a tragic defeat. But because he did not know the messenger, it was impossible to discern from mere appearances which side had lost—perhaps it was Achish and the Philistines who had been slaughtered.

Before providing verbal details of his news, the messenger “came to David,” falling “to the ground to pay him honor” (v. [2](#)). David then began his meeting with the unnamed stranger by inquiring from where he had come. The man indicated that he had “escaped from the Israelite camp” (v. [3](#)). News from the northern battlefield was particularly important to David since it would contain information regarding people, whether Israelites or Philistines, who were playing key roles in shaping his life. Quite naturally, therefore, David asked to know “what happened” (v. [4](#)).

What the messenger described was indeed a military rout—the entire Israelite army fleeing from battle, with many injured and dead. Worst of all, King Saul and the primary heir to the throne, “his son Jonathan,” were dead.

[1:5–10](#) The messenger’s claims—if true—were so serious and tragic that David refused to accept them at face value; instead he probed into the credibility of the messenger’s information source.

The messenger stated that the report had come from his own eyewitness experience; he confirmed it with three different forms of evidence: the report of a personal sighting, the report of a conversation with the king, and a token from the king’s own person. Two visual details were mentioned, the first of which was a sighting of the king. Mention of Saul in connection with his spear certainly lent an air of credibility to the young man’s claim, since Saul and his spear were inseparable (cf. [1 Sam 13:22](#); [18:10–11](#); [19:9–10](#); [20:3](#); [22:6](#); [26:7–22](#)). Second, the graphic details of “chariots and riders almost upon him” must have increased the believability of the claim as well, since David would have been well aware of the Philistine armaments sent to the northern battlefield.

The report of a private conversation with Saul by the messenger also provided evidence of credible information from the messenger. Saul had inquired about the identity of the young man and ordered the Amalekite to “stand over” him and “kill” him (v. [9](#)), for although the king was “in the throes of death,” his “soul was still in” him (NIV, “I’m still alive”). Obediently, the young foreigner followed the king’s orders and thus became the first foreigner to kill an anointed Israelite (cf. [1 Sam 22:18](#)). The Amalekite implied he acted out of compassion, knowing that “after [Saul] had fallen he could not survive.”

The ironies of this event are not lost on the reader. Saul had lost his kingship because he had failed to kill an Amalekite king (cf. [1 Sam 15:9, 26](#)); now an Amalekite that Saul had failed to eliminate would kill this Israelite king. Saul had been ordered to kill the Amalekites—now he ordered an Amalekite to kill him.

The Amalekite’s third and most convincing form of evidence pointing to the death of Saul was material: the young man presented David “the crown” (Hb., *nēzer*; v. [10](#)) that had been on Saul’s head and the “band” (Hb., *’eš’ādâ*) “on his arm.” The presence of these personal tokens of royalty in the hands of a foreigner removed all doubt concerning Saul’s death and provided compelling evidence of a personal encounter between the messenger and Saul.

In spite of the evidence presented by the Amalekite, contradictions—or at least tensions—do seem to exist between the account of Saul’s death in [1 Sam 31:4–5](#) and the one presented in vv. [8–10](#). Was the Amalekite lying? Was he merely an opportunistic thief who robbed battlefield corpses before the Philistines could strip them? Had he accidentally stumbled across Saul’s corpse and imagined he could trade the jewelry and information for a great reward? Or are there multiple and incompatible sources that have been awkwardly bound together by a redactor? Many scholars assume the Amalekite concocted the story; others, especially commentators writing around the beginning of the twentieth century, accept it as truthful.

On the other hand, the writer gives no indication that David questioned the veracity of the Amalekite's account; on the contrary, he acted on the assumption that the words were true. Furthermore, the foreigner's description of Saul with his spear seems to be that of an eyewitness. Finally, the Amalekite's story best accounts for the fact that the Philistines did not gain possession of Saul's crown or armlet. Thus, vv. [6–10](#) are most reasonably understood as a truthful retelling of [1 Sam 31:4–5](#), with the inclusion of additional details regarding the final moments of Saul's life. The reader can conclude that Saul inflicted on himself a blow that, given sufficient passage of time, would have killed him; however, his death was hastened by the Amalekites' efforts.

This narrative account not only provides interesting historical data but also clears David of any suspicions that may have been aroused by his possession of Saul's royal jewelry. David acquired them not by participating in the battle against Saul but by executing Saul's killer.

[1:11–16](#) When David learned that his most determined enemy was dead, he did not rejoice. Instead, he and his men expressed profound grief in response to the news. The anguish was not only for Saul's death but also for the royal family and because the defeat at Gilboa was indeed a national tragedy.

In the midst of his grief, however, David did not fail to perform his duty to obey the Torah, which prescribed the death of all Amalekites (cf. [15:18–19](#); [Exod 17:15–16](#); [Deut 25:17–19](#)). Before acting against the messenger, David confirmed the man's nationality: he was indeed “the son of an alien, an Amalekite” (v. [13](#)). David had just conducted a holy war campaign against the Amalekites in fulfillment of Torah commands. Now when he learned that a member of the Amalekite nation had also played a direct role in the death of Israel's king—“the LORD's anointed” (v. [14](#))—David did not hesitate to execute judgment on him. Destroying the Lord's anointed was tantamount to rejecting the Lord, since it represented the ultimate rejection of his designated leader.

No doubt the Amalekite expected David to reward him. However, instead of crowning him with honor, David decreed that “your blood be on your head” (v. [16](#)), that is, that the Amalekite bear full responsibility for participating in Saul's untimely death. Since he “killed the LORD's anointed,” David ordered one of his men to “strike him down” (v. [15](#)). The logic was that of the *lex talionis*; as the man had done, so it would be done to him (cf. [Exod 21:23–25](#); [Lev 24:19–21](#); [Deut 19:21](#)). The unnamed soldier obeyed David's command, with the result that the Amalekite “died.”

(2) David Laments Devastation in the House of Saul [1:17–27](#)

Having the unambiguous tokens of Saul's death—the royal crown and armlet (cf. v. [10](#))—in his possession, David was overwhelmed by the reality of the royal family's destruction. Yet as in the case of the author of Lamentations, David's agony works catalytically. His pain creates one of the most sensitive and moving expressions of mourning ever penned or uttered. Gordon praises the passage as “one of the finest specimens of Hebrew poetry in the Old Testament.” David's words not only express his personal grief, but that of all Israel as well.

[1:17–18](#) David's “lament” (Hb., *qînâ*), entitled “Bow” (v. [2](#); cf. also v. [22](#)), was for both “Saul and his son Jonathan” (v. [17](#)). Though its meter deviates from the unbalanced three-plus-two meter traditionally associated with Hebrew dirge poetry, its content places it directly in this category.

David “ordered that the men of Judah be taught this lament” (v. [2](#)), perhaps because of its subject matter, since it paid tribute to Israel’s first royal family and dealt with the larger and ever-relevant issue of loved ones dying in war. David’s decision had the effect of bringing this composition into the canon of literature that defined ancient Israelite society. This piece of oral and written literature played the valuable roles of preserving the memory of a crucial event in Israelite history while reinforcing the office of kingship through its portrayal of the king as the agent through whom prosperity was brought to Israel.

The poem was preserved not only here but also in “the Book of Jashar” (cf. [Josh 10:13](#)). This piece of literature, literally entitled “the Scroll of the Righteous,” is no longer extant; it is believed to have been a work that “dealt with the heroic exploits of the Israelites.”

[1:19–20](#) The mournful tribute to Saul and Jonathan began with a powerful image taken from nature: “The gazelle, O Israel, on your high places has been struck dead” (NIV, “Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights”; v. [19](#)). The image of a majestic buck, master of the rugged hills of Israel, lying dead in a place of prominence and seeming protection, vividly reflects the tragic reality of Saul’s death. With the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, it was the case that “the mighty have fallen.”

Adding to the power of David’s poetry is the use of double entendre: the same word translated here as “the gazelle” (Hb. *šēbī*) also can mean “the glory.” With a single word David praised the Saulide dynasty twice.

Though the fact of Saul’s death must have been delightful to the Philistines, David issued a poetic warning to the returning Philistine soldiers whom David must have observed passing by Ziklag on their way to nearby Philistine settlements: “Tell it not in Gath” and do not “proclaim it in the streets of Ashkelon” (v. [20](#)). Doing so would only pour salt in wounded Israelite souls, since it would inevitably cause “the daughters of the uncircumcised” to “rejoice” (cf. [Exod 15:20–21](#); [Judg 11:34](#); [1 Sam 18:6–7](#)).

[1:21](#) Having addressed the Philistines, David now speaks to the “mountains of Gilboa.” The grammar of v. [21a](#) is artfully contorted and mirrors the wrenching of David’s soul in this hour of grief; the Hebrew literally reads, “Mountains of—in the Gilboa, No dew and no rain upon you, and fields of offerings.” The terse constructions and absence of any verb in v. [21a](#) suggest that David was reduced to gasping utterances during this tragic moment.

David called for the mountains of Gilboa to be denied life-giving liquid because it was on them that Saul’s life fluids were poured out. Yet David did not yet mention Saul’s death directly; instead he referred to a desecration of the anointed “Shield of the mighty ones.” His use of “shield” (*māgēn*) is cleverly ambiguous, since the term may refer either to a benevolent being (cf. [Gen 15:1](#)) or a piece of defensive weaponry. Both an anointed man (cf. [1:14](#)) and an anointed (Hb., *māšīḥ*; NIV, “rubbed with oil”) weapon fell on Gilboa, and the mountain would never be the same again. Indeed, the only references to Gilboa in Scripture are in connection with the death of Saul (cf. [1 Sam 28:4](#); [31:1–8](#); [2 Sam 1:6](#); [21:12](#); [1 Chr 10:1, 8](#)).

[1:22–24](#) Before directly mentioning the battlefield deaths of Saul and Jonathan, David first recounted their honorable distinctions. Both Jonathan and Saul were renowned for their battlefield prowess. “The bow of Jonathan” (v. [22](#))—metonymous for Jonathan himself—had once saved David’s life (cf. [1 Sam 20:36–39](#)) but was also responsible for pouring out “the blood of the slain” and felling “the flesh of the mighty” (cf. [1 Sam 14:13–14](#)). “The sword of Saul” likewise “did not return unsatisfied.” Jonathan and Saul were further praised by David as individuals who possessed not only skill but also speed and strength in battle: “they were swifter than eagles” and “stronger than lions” (v. [23](#)).

The success of “Saul and Jonathan” off the battlefield was also impressive; in society they “were loved and endeared” (v. [23](#); NIV, “gracious”). They were both men of character, who possessed a sense of loyalty and faithfulness to the nation and each other to the extent that even “in death” *pro patria* “they were not parted.”

Though the Philistine daughters were to remain silent (v. [20](#)), the “daughters of Israel” by contrast were to “weep for Saul” (v. [24](#)). They were to mourn the loss of the one who “clothed you in scarlet and finery, who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold.” Saul should not be thought of as having personally distributed such manifestations of wealth as clothing colored with imported dyes and brooches of worked gold; but his military successes provided a stable society that permitted the Israelites to acquire wealth through agriculture, trade, and conquest.

[1:25–26](#) David returns to the mournful thesis of the lament, first expressed in v. [19](#), as he grieves that “the mighty have fallen in battle” (v. [25](#)). The reuse of the phrase here, with its expansion through the addition of the phrase “in battle,” suggests that vv. [25–26](#) are the thematic center of the poem. Among the dead was David’s soul mate “Jonathan,” who “lies slain on your heights.” The mention of his best friend’s death elicits the most personal expression of grief found in the poem. In v. [26](#) it is David, not the daughters of Jerusalem, who weeps. David has lost his “brother,” a kindred spirit who was “very dear to” him.

With the death of Jonathan, David lost his most trusted confidant and companion. Jonathan’s affirmations of support (cf. [1 Sam 18:3–4](#); [19:1–7](#); [20:1–42](#); [23:16–18](#)) had come at key moments in David’s life and were deeply appreciated. To David, Jonathan’s “love ... was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women.” David’s very personal expression of emotion here should not be taken as evidence of a homosexual liaison with Jonathan; rather, it is a manifestation of the parameters of social relations that existed in ancient Israelite society. Marriages in ancient Israel took place primarily for the benefit of the tribe—to increase the size and strength of the social group through procreation (cf. [Gen 1:28](#)) and to increase its prosperity through the establishment of advantageous formal ties with other families (cf. [Gen 34:21–23](#)). A man’s wife was his partner in procreation and parenting, but not necessarily his best friend, confidant, or social peer. For David, Jonathan was the peer, friend, and confidant that no wife could ever have been in that society; and his untimely death left a gaping hole in David’s soul.

[1:27](#) The elegy ends chiasmatically, repeating the phrase that had marked its beginning (v. [19](#)) and thematic peak (v. [25](#)). It hauntingly reminds us of the painful outcome of war, any war—through it “the mighty have fallen.” The reference to “the weapons of war” that “have perished” metonymically refers to the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (cf. v. [22](#)).

Section IV Outline

IV. DAVID REIGNS AS KING ([2:1–20:26](#))

1. The Judahites Anoint David King at Hebron ([2:1–4a](#))
2. David Wins Supporters of the House of Saul ([2:4b–7](#))
3. The House of Saul Relinquishes Its Claim on Israel's Throne ([2:8–4:12](#))
 1. Abner Establishes Ish-Bosheth as King over Israel ([2:8–11](#))
 2. Conflict Erupts between the Houses of Saul and David ([2:12–3:1](#))
 3. David Builds His Family in Hebron ([3:2–5](#))
 4. Abner Switches His Loyalty to David ([3:6–21](#))
 5. Joab Murders Abner ([3:22–27](#))
 6. David Proves His Innocence in Abner's Death ([3:28–39](#))
 7. Recab and Baanah Murder Ish-Bosheth ([4:1–7](#))
 8. David Executes Ish-Bosheth's Murderers ([4:8–12](#))
4. All the Tribes of Israel Anoint David King at Hebron ([5:1–5](#))
5. The Lord Blesses David ([5:6–10:19](#))
 1. David Conquers Jerusalem ([5:6–8](#))
 2. The Lord Blesses David as King in Jerusalem ([5:9–16](#))
 3. David Defeats the Philistines Twice ([5:17–25](#))
 4. David Brings the Ark of God to Jerusalem ([6:1–23](#))
 5. David Desires to Build a Temple for the Lord ([7:1–3](#))
 6. The Lord Makes Eternal Promises to the House of David ([7:4–17](#))
 7. David Praises the Lord ([7:18–29](#))
 8. The Lord Gives David Victory Over All His Enemies ([8:1–14](#))
 9. David Establishes a Righteous and Just Administration ([8:15–18](#))
 10. David Fulfills His Commitment to Jonathan ([9:1–13](#))
 11. David Conquers an Ammonite-led Coalition ([10:1–19](#))
6. The Lord Judges David ([11:1–20:26](#))
 1. David Does Evil in the Lord's Sight ([11:1–27](#))
 2. Nathan Announces the Lord's Judgment and Forgiveness ([12:1–14](#))
 3. The Lord Expresses Judgment and Forgiveness ([12:15–25](#))
 4. David Defeats and Subdues the Ammonites ([12:26–31](#))
 5. Amnon Rapes Tamar ([13:1–22](#))
 6. Absalom Murders Amnon, Then Flees to Geshur ([13:23–39](#))
 7. David Is Reconciled with Absalom ([14:1–33](#))
 8. Absalom Leads a Treasonous Revolt against David ([15:1–12](#))
 9. David Goes into Exile beyond the Jordan River ([15:13–17:29](#))
 10. David's Forces Quell Absalom's Revolt ([18:1–19:8](#))
 11. David Returns to Jerusalem ([19:9–43](#))
 12. Sheba Revolts Unsuccessfully against David ([20:1–22](#))
 13. Aside: David's Key Administrative Officials ([20:23–26](#))

IV. David Reigns as King²

This section stands as the narrative peak of 1, 2 Samuel and one of the thematic centers of the Former Prophets. Here David, the most significant character in the Former Prophets—the human character who serves as the subject of more clauses than any other in the Old Testament—climbs to the pinnacle of his career and then tumbles from that lofty height through a complicated series of events initiated by his own sin. In the process David, the man after the Lord’s heart, fulfills major Torah prophecies regarding the rise of the tribe of Judah to rulership over Israel (cf. [Gen 49:10](#)), the determination of the place where the Lord would put his Name for his dwelling ([Deut 12:5](#)), the acquisition of territories promised to Israel since the days of Abraham ([Gen 12:7](#); [15:18–21](#); [17:8](#)), and the destruction of Moab, Edom, and Amalek ([Num 24:17–21](#)).

At the same time, the life of David is transformed by the writer into a metaphor for the nation of Israel. His conquest of the land; a period of rich blessing, desolation, and exile caused by sin; and return to the land following a time spent east of the Promised Land all make the portrayal of this period of his life a tableau depicting the Lord’s blessings, judgments, and restorative mercy. This portion of 2 Samuel is not only a historically accurate and detailed account of David’s rise and fall, but also a profound object lesson in Torah theology and a metaphor of hope for later Israel.

1. The Judahites Anoint David King at Hebron

[2:1–3](#) After an appropriate expression of grief for his former father-in-law and his best friend, David consulted the Lord for guidance in his own life. Saul’s death had removed the only obvious roadblock to David’s return to Israelite territory, but David needed divine guidance to affirm or overrule his intentions. Furthermore, if it was the Lord’s will for David to return, he needed a confirmation of the timing and location of a repatriation. Thus, it was appropriate that David’s first act following the mourning period for the house of Saul was “not recruitment, strategy, or public relations” but rather “to inquire of Yahweh.” Based on David’s previous practice (cf. [1 Sam 23:9–12](#); [30:7–8](#)), it is likely that he “inquired of the Lord” with the assistance of Abiathar and the ephod.

David first asked if it was appropriate to “go up to one of the towns of Judah” (v. [1](#)), the tribal territory of his ancestors and the location of the Israelites most likely to support him in his efforts to claim Saul’s throne. The Lord confirmed that it was appropriate to “go up” at that time.

The site chosen by the Lord for David to reestablish his Israelite residency was Hebron, the city termed by J. G. Baldwin as “the most distinguished of Judah’s cities.” Three factors favored David’s settlement in this city; it was the largest city of refuge in the region (cf. [Josh 21:13](#)); it was a Calebite city ([Josh 14:14](#); [15:13](#)), and it was a city set aside for the Aaronic priesthood ([Josh 21:13](#)). As a city of refuge, Hebron was specifically set aside as a haven for one who had been falsely accused of murder—and there were no doubt those in Israel who believed David played a role in Saul’s death. The size of the city seems to have been crucial as well because many people accompanied David in his return to Israel. Among these were David’s two wives as well as the six hundred soldiers and their families. Perhaps the fact that David had married the widow of a Calebite ([1 Sam 25:3](#)) made his acceptance easier in Hebron as well. In addition the presence and status of Abiathar, an Aaronic priest, within David’s group must have increased the readiness of the inhabitants of Hebron to accept him.

David’s sizable group, which may have numbered more than a thousand, appears to have overwhelmed the city of Hebron itself. As a result, many in the returning group had to settle in “the cities of Hebron” (NIV, “its towns”), that is, the unwallled villages in the immediate vicinity.

2. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "IV. David Reigns as King".

[2:4a](#) After David was planted back in Israel, the Lord’s previously revealed plan for David to shepherd his people began to blossom. Included among the group who came to anoint David may have been some who had witnessed David’s original anointing by Samuel (cf. [1 Sam 16:5–13](#)). Though some Judahites had previously opposed David (cf. [1 Sam 23:19–24](#); [26:1](#)), no hint of tribal opposition was present at this time.

David’s support, however, was limited; only those Israelites who had the closest blood ties to him were present at his anointing in Hebron. Although he no doubt enjoyed the support of at least some of the Levites (David had gained a reputation as a protector of priestly interests; cf. [1 Sam 22:20–23](#)), David was not recognized as king of all Israel at this time.

2. David Woos Supporters of the House of Saul

David understood that the Lord had selected him to be the leader of all Israel and took prudent steps to make that happen. He began as his predecessor did, by making a contact with Jabesh Gilead.

[2:4b–6](#) David, the newly anointed king of Judah, heard about the brave actions of the Jabesh Gileadites, “who had buried Saul” (v. [4](#)) and his three slain sons (cf. [1 Sam 31:11–13](#)). The men of Gilead had been motivated by their respect and appreciation for the slain king (cf. [1 Sam 11:1–11](#)). David was impressed by this courageous act, for it mirrored his own respect for the royal family. Accordingly, “he sent messengers to the men of Jabesh Gilead” affirming them with the message (lit.), “Blessed are you to Yahweh.” Their burial of Saul was an act of loving loyalty (*hesed*, NIV “kindness”). In return he assured them of the Lord’s *hesed* and *’emet* (“faithfulness”) as well as his own. David’s kind words sent to them by his personal emissary must have relieved the concerns of some, for David was reputed to be an enemy of Saul and therefore a potential adversary of the Gileadites.

[2:7](#) Having reached out to these loyal supporters of Saul’s regime, David encouraged them to “be strong and brave” (lit., “strengthen your hands and become men of power/virtue”). He urged them to accept the fact that Saul their “master [was] dead” and move beyond their grief. Though the one who had brought them deliverance and protection was gone, the Lord had raised up another to take Saul’s place. The “house of Judah” had already anointed David “king over them,” and David would gladly be Jabesh Gilead’s king as well.

3. The House of Saul Relinquishes Its Claim on Israel’s Throne

According to this crucial section, active opposition to David’s bid for kingship over all Israel temporarily coalesced around Saul’s surviving son, Ish-Bosheth. Empowered by Saul’s cousin Abner, Ish-Bosheth made a bid to rule the territories formerly under the control of his father. Unfortunately for the house of Saul, King Ish-Bosheth proved to be essentially inert and decidedly incompetent: though he reigned two years, the writer depicts him performing only three acts—wrongly accusing Abner of misconduct, giving his sister back to David, and lying on his bed.

David extended his rule over all Israel with the assistance of a Benjamite, Ish-Bosheth’s rebuffed general Abner. Abner negotiated privately with David, reunited David with his Saulide wife Michal, and then acted as an intermediary between the Judahite king and key groups in the north; thus David was poised to take control of tribal territories that had previously proved resistant. The untimely and violent deaths of Abner and Ish-Bosheth complicated the process, but David’s skillful handling of these crises kept the process of his rise to power on track. As a result David experienced the fulfillment of the Lord’s promise to make him king of all Israel; the shepherd of Jesse’s flock to become the shepherd of the Lord’s flock Israel.

(1) Abner Establishes Ish-Bosheth as King Over Israel [2:8–11](#)

[2:8–9](#) In an effort to revitalize the Saulide dynasty and thus to retain his position as Israel’s most powerful military leader, Abner had taken Ish-Bosheth, Saul’s only surviving son, to Mahanaim to anoint him as king. Abner was Saul’s cousin ([1 Sam 14:50](#)) and apparently his closest confidant ([1 Sam 20:25](#); [26:7](#)), so it was appropriate that he act loyally in behalf of his cousin/commander/friend. Mahanaim, a site whose remains have not yet been identified with certainty, was a Levitical city assigned to the Merarites (cf. [Josh 21:38](#)) east of the Jordan in the territory of Gad and had been associated with the patriarch Jacob (cf. [Gen 32:2](#)). Since it was east of the Jordan, it had likely escaped the ravages of the Philistines and thus provided relative safety and stability for reestablishing the monarchy in Israel.

Because of recent defeats at the hands of the Philistines as well as David’s influence in Judah, the Israelite territories over which Ish-Bosheth’s grip was most secure were relatively limited: “Gilead” (v. [9](#)), the territory east of the Sea of Galilee; “the Ashuri,” probably a reference to the tribal territory of Asher; “Jezreel,” the region recently oppressed by the Philistines ([1 Sam 29:1, 11](#)); and of course “Benjamin,” Ish-Bosheth’s and Abner’s tribal homeland. However, Ish-Bosheth’s claim of authority extended over “all Israel.”

[2:10–11](#) At the age of forty Ish-Bosheth would have been qualified to have fought in the fateful battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa with his father and three brothers (cf. [1 Sam 31](#); [Num 1:36](#)). Perhaps he had been purposely exempted, however, in order to assure a direct heir to the throne in case of a battlefield catastrophe like the one that actually occurred.

Ish-Bosheth laid claim to Israel’s throne “two years” before he was murdered. These two years may correspond to the sixth and seventh years of David’s reign at Hebron. Two textual reasons support this contention: first, David was said to have ruled over only the house of Judah while he lived in Hebron (v. [11](#); [5:4](#)); and second, [5:1–9](#) suggests that David moved his capital city to Jerusalem almost immediately after being anointed as king over all Israel.

If the tribes of Israel apart from Judah were in fact without a king for more than five years, this would suggest that the Philistines controlled the region completely enough during that time to prevent the rise of any Israelite to the throne. In this scenario Abner, as the leading military figure in the northern tribes, would have functioned as the de facto head of state. Yet instead of installing himself as king, he—nobly—put a direct descendant of Saul on the throne when he sensed Israel’s situation had sufficiently improved.

Ish-Bosheth’s kingship was not recognized in the territory of Judah because they “followed David.” After all, David was one of their own and had made the southern Judahite town of Hebron his capital city. In fact, Hebron remained David’s royal city for “seven years and six months” (v. [11](#)), apparently the amount of time it took for David to gain undisputed control of all Israel as well as to conquer Jerusalem.

(2) Conflict Erupts Between the Houses of Saul and David [2:12–3:1](#)

[2:12–13](#) At some unknown point during the last two years of David’s reign in Hebron, “Abner son of Ner, together with the men of Ish-Bosheth son of Saul, left Mahanaim and went to Gibeon” (v. [12](#)). The reason for Abner’s expedition to Benjamite territory is not stated, but it seems probable that he was returning for one or more of four purposes: to have a war counsel with David’s representatives, to enlist further pro-Saulide military support from the men of Benjamin (cf. v. [25](#)), to establish a site back in Benjamite territory from which Ish-Bosheth could rule, and/or to mount an attack against David’s forces

who were establishing a presence in that area. Regardless of which option represents reality, it is clear that Abner expected hostilities to break out, for he had hundreds of armed troops in readiness nearby.

David's nephew "Joab son of Zeruiah" (v. [13](#)) learned of Abner's troop movements and led "David's men" some twenty-three miles north to "the pool of Gibeon," a hand-carved reservoir thirty-seven feet in diameter and eighty-two feet deep, to confront Abner and his soldiers. Gibeon, like David's capital city of Hebron, was a city set aside for Aaronic priests (cf. [Josh 21:17](#); [1 Chr 6:60](#)); following the destruction of Shiloh and Samuel's death, it also was recognized as the central Yahwistic shrine (cf. [1 Chr 16:39](#); [1 Kgs 3:4](#)). Perhaps David's forces advanced into Gibeon to defend the Aaronic priests from another possible attack from Saulide forces desiring to punish the priests for their apparent support of David.

Initially, a standoff resulted at the pool as Joab refused to allow Saul's forces to advance farther; "one group sat down on one side of the pool and one group on the other side."

[2:14–16](#) The impasse was finally broken as Abner challenged Joab to have their forces engage in a deadly contest involving "hand to hand" (v. [14](#)) fighting. When Joab agreed, a representative force from both sides was chosen—"twelve men for Benjamin," and "twelve men for David" (v. [15](#)).

The contest ended almost as quickly as it had begun. Without the aid of bows, spears, lances, or slings, each soldier could rely only on his hands and "sword" (Hb. *hereb*; NIV, "dagger"). Advancing directly to confront his opponent, each man grabbed "his opponent by the head" (v. [16](#)), then thrust his weapon "into his opponent's side," apparently producing a fatal wound. Sadly, all twenty-four men "fell together" in the indecisive contest.

The event was highly unusual in Israelite society; with the possible exception of the confrontation between David and Goliath ([1 Samuel 17](#)), no parallel to this contest exists in recorded Israelite history. Nor was this extraordinary event forgotten; the site in Gibeon where it occurred was given the memorial name "Helkath Hazzurim"—literally, "the field of the hostilities."

[2:17–23](#) Far from preventing a greater shedding of blood, the contest in Gibeon only heightened the tensions between the opposing forces. Immediately afterward a "very fierce" (v. [17](#)) battle broke out that resulted in a resounding defeat for Ish-Bosheth's forces.

Three of David's nephews, "Joab, Abishai, and Asahel" (v. [18](#); cf. [1 Chr 2:16](#)), played key roles in the events of this day. Asahel, who was a valiant soldier (cf. [23:24](#)) and reputed to be "as fleet-footed [lit., "as light in his feet"] as a wild gazelle," pursued Abner in an effort to destroy the individual most responsible for sustaining Ish-Bosheth's claim to Israel's throne. So focused was he in his efforts to kill Ish-Bosheth's general that he turned "neither to the right nor to the left as he pursued him" (v. [19](#)).

Both men entered the battle without benefit of chariot or riding animal; however, Abner was carrying weapons, whereas Asahel apparently was only lightly armed. Although Abner was much better armed than Asahel, he attempted to avoid a direct confrontation with him. Perhaps he did this so that he would be free to focus his attention on directing the troops; but when he learned that it was Asahel who was tracking him down, Abner had a second reason to evade a showdown—killing Asahel would irreparably damage his relationship with his respected peer (and adversary), Asahel's "brother Joab" (v. [22](#)).

In an effort to level the playing field for the inevitable showdown, Abner encouraged Asahel first to "take on one of the young men and strip him of his weapons" (v. [21](#)). However, Asahel "refused to give up his pursuit" (v. [23](#)). Instead, he chased Abner with even more determination and presently came within a few feet of overtaking him.

Compelled at last to use force to defend himself, Abner “thrust the butt”—that is, the blunt, nonaggressive side—“of his spear into Asahel’s stomach.” Though the action probably was intended only to knock the wind out of his opponent, Asahel’s charge was so energetic and Abner’s thrust so powerful that “the spear came out through his back.” Consequently, Asahel “died on the spot.” The gruesome sight of one of David’s most honored soldiers slain in such a freakish manner caused “every man” to stop “when he came to the place where Asahel had fallen.”

2:24–28 Asahel’s heroic brothers “Joab and Abishai” then took up the task left unfinished by their brother and “pursued Abner” (v. [24](#)) until sunset. Their chase led them eastward “to the hill of Ammah.” On that promontory they encountered forces from Benjamin, who had “rallied behind Abner” (v. [25](#)) and taken a stand with him there on that easily defended site.

From his militarily advantageous position on the hilltop, “Abner called out to Joab” (v. [26](#)). His message of reason encouraged Joab to consider the long-term consequences of pursuing the conflict against Abner and the supporters of Ish-Bosheth—it would “end in bitterness.” After all, by hunting down the Benjamites they were in fact “pursuing their brothers.” In a previous generation other Israelites had attacked and almost wiped out the Benjamites, but they had come to regret it (cf. [Judg 21:2–3](#)). Barring a change, the present situation would turn out the same way.

However, Joab took Abner’s words to heart. Though he had intended to have his troops continue “the pursuit of their brothers until morning” (v. [27](#)), he ordered “a halt” (v. [28](#)) to the attack, and fighting was suspended.

2:29–32 Abner took advantage of the temporary cessation in hostilities as well as the cover of darkness to regroup his forces far away from Joab. Bringing his troops eastward down to “the Jordan,” Abner and his men made an exceptional nocturnal crossing of the river and then proceeded along “the whole Bithron”—perhaps an alternate designation for the Jabbok ravine—until they arrived back in Mahanaim.

Joab likewise withdrew from the battlefield, traveling approximately thirty miles to Hebron (cf. v. [32](#)) during the night. Back in the safety of the city, Joab mustered “all his men” (v. [30](#)) and took a casualty count. Excluding Asahel, “nineteen of David’s men were found missing” (v. [30](#)); most of those had died in the initial standoff at the pool of Gibeon (cf. v. [16](#)). If David’s standing army at this time was still approximately six hundred men (cf. [1 Sam 23:13](#); [27:2](#); [30:9](#)), this would have represented a loss of about three percent of his forces.

The writer indicates that David’s troops had inflicted heavy casualties on the Benjamite forces in the course of the conflict—“three hundred and sixty” (v. [31](#)) of Abner’s men died that day. This suggests that when the fighting began in earnest, 348 Benjamites were killed compared with only seven of Joab’s men—a rout by anyone’s standards.

Before retreating from Benjamite territory, Joab’s men retrieved his brother Asahel’s corpse from the battlefield and returned it to Bethlehem, the ancestral home of the clan of his grandfather Jesse. There Asahel was buried “in his [grand?]father’s tomb” (v. [32](#)).

3:1 Though the previous incident was the only one detailed in the ongoing conflict, many more took place, for “the war between the house of Saul and the house of David lasted a long time.” Nevertheless, the incident characterized the general course of the hostilities because throughout the two-year conflict “David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker.” As characterized by the writer, the conflict was fundamentally between two families vying for undisputed control over one nation, not two nations at war with each other.