

Adam Clarke:

Introduction

A battle in Mount Gilboa between Israel and the Philistines; in which the former are defeated, and Saul's three sons slain, 1 Samuel 31:1, 1 Samuel 31:2. Saul, being mortally wounded, and afraid to fall alive into the hands of the Philistines, desires his armor-bearer to despatch him; which he refusing, Saul falls on his sword, and his armor-bearer does the same, 1 Samuel 31:3-6. The Israelites on the other side of the valley forsake their cities, and the Philistines come and dwell in them, 1 Samuel 31:7. The Philistines, finding Saul and his three sons among the slain, strip them of their armor, which they put in the house of Ashtaroth, cut off their heads, send the news to all the houses of their idols, and fasten the bodies of Saul and his three sons to the walls of Beth-shan, 1 Samuel 31:8-10. Valiant men of Jabesh-gilead go by night, and take away the bodies; burn them at Jabesh; bury their bones under a tree; and fast seven days, 1 Samuel 31:11-13.

Verse 1

Now the Philistines fought - This is the continuation of the account given in 1 Samuel 29:1-11.

The men of Israel fled - It seems as if they were thrown into confusion at the first onset, and turned their backs upon their enemies.

Verse 2

Followed hard upon Saul and upon his sons - They, seeing the discomfiture of their troops, were determined to sell their lives as dear as possible, and therefore maintained the battle till the three brothers were slain.

Verse 3

He was sore wounded of the archers - It is likely that Saul's sons were slain by the archers, and that Saul was now mortally wounded by the same. Houbigant translates, The archers rushed upon him, from whom he received a grievous wound. He farther remarks that had not Saul been grievously wounded, and beyond hope of recovery, he would not have wished his armor-bearer to despatch him; as he might have continued still to fight, or have made his escape from this most disastrous battle. Some of the versions render it, He Feared the archers greatly; but this is by no means likely.

Verse 4

Draw thy sword, and thrust me through - Dr. Delaney has some good observations on this part of the subject: "Saul and his armor-bearer died by the same sword. That his armor-bearer died by his own sword is out of all doubt; the text expressly tells us so; and that Saul perished by the same sword is sufficiently evident. Draw Thy sword, says he to him, and thrust me through; which, when he refused, Saul, says the text, took The sword, (חֶבֶל הַחֶרֶב) (eth hachereb), the very sword), and fell upon it. What sword? Not his own, for then the text would have said so; but, in the plain natural grammatical construction, the sword before mentioned must be the sword now referred to, that is, his armor-bearer's, 1 Chronicles 10:4, 1 Chronicles 10:5. Now it is the established tradition of all the Jewish nation that this armor-bearer was Doeg, and I see no reason why it should be discredited; and if so, then Saul and his executioner both fell by that weapon with which they had before massacred the priests of God. So Brutus and Cassius killed themselves with the same swords with which they stabbed Caesar; and Calippus was stabbed with the same sword with which he stabbed Dio."

Verse 6

And all his men - Probably meaning those of his troops which were his life or body guards: as to the bulk of the army, it fled at the commencement of the battle, 1 Samuel 31:1.

Verse 7

The men of Israel that were on the other side of the valley - They appear to have been panic-struck, and therefore fled as far as they could out of the reach of the Philistines. As the Philistines possessed Beth-shan, situated near to Jordan, the people on the other side of that river, fearing for their safety, fled also.

Verse 8

On the morrow - It is very likely that the battle and pursuit continued till the night, so that there was no time till the next day to strip and plunder the slain.

Verse 9

And they cut off his head - It is possible that they cut off the heads of his three sons likewise; for although only his head is said to be cut off, and his body only to be fastened to the walls of Beth-shan, yet we find that the

men of Jabesh-gilead found both his body and the bodies of his three sons, fastened to the walls, 1 Samuel 31:12.

Perhaps they only took off Saul's head, which they sent about to their temples as a trophy of their victory, when they sent the news of the defeat of the Israelites through all their coasts, and at last placed it in the temple of Dagon, 1 Chronicles 10:10.

Verse 10

They put his armor in the house of Ashtaroth - As David had done in placing the sword of Goliath in the tabernacle. We have already seen that it was common for the conquerors to consecrate armor and spoils taken in war, to those who were the objects of religious worship.

They fastened his body to the wall - Probably by means of iron hooks; but it is said, 2 Samuel 21:12, that these bodies were fastened in the Street of Beth-shan. This may mean that the place where they were fastened to the wall was the main street or entrance into the city.

Verse 11

When the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard - This act of the men of Jabesh-gilead was an act of gratitude due to Saul, who, at the very commencement of his reign, rescued them from Nahash, king of the Ammonites, (see 1 Samuel 11:1, etc.), and by his timely succours saved them from the deepest degradation and the most oppressive tyranny. This heroic act, with the seven days' fast, showed that they retained a due sense of their obligation to this unfortunate monarch.

Verse 12

And burnt them there - It has been denied that the Hebrews burnt the bodies of the dead, but that they buried them in the earth, or embalmed them, and often burnt spices around them, etc. These no doubt were the common forms of sepulture, but neither of these could be conveniently practiced in the present case. They could not have buried them about Beth-shan without being discovered; and as to embalming, that was most likely out of all question, as doubtless the bodies were now too putrid to bear it. They therefore burnt them, because there was no other way of disposing of them at that time so as to do them honor; and the bones and ashes they collected, and buried under a tree or in a grove at Jabesh.

Verse 13

And fasted seven days - To testify their sincere regret for his unfortunate death, and the public calamity that had fallen upon the land.

Thus ends the troublesome, and I had almost said the useless, reign of Saul. A king was chosen in opposition to the will of the Most High; and the government of God in effect rejected, to make way for this king.

Saul was at first a very humble young man, and conducted himself with great propriety; but his elevation made him proud, and he soon became tyrannical in his private conduct and in his political measures. His natural temper was not good; he was peevish, fretful, and often outrageous; and these bad dispositions, unchecked by proper application to the grace of God, became every day more headstrong and dangerous. Through their violence he seems at times to have been wholly carried away and deranged; and this derangement appears to have been occasionally greatly exacerbated by diabolical influences. This led him to take his friends for his foes; so that in his paroxysms he strove to imbrue his hands in their blood, and more than once attempted to assassinate his own son; and most causelessly and inhumanly ordered the innocent priests of the Lord at Nob to be murdered. This was the worst act in his whole life.

Saul was but ill qualified for a proper discharge of the regal functions. The reader will remember that he was chosen rather as a general of the armies than as civil governor. The administration of the affairs of the state was left chiefly to Samuel, and Saul led forth the armies to battle.

As a general he gave proof of considerable capacity; he was courageous, prompt, decisive, and persevering; and, except in the last unfortunate battle in which he lost his life, generally led his troops to victory.

Saul was a weak man, and very capricious; this is amply proved by his unreasonable jealousy against David, and his continual suspicion that all were leagued against him. It is also evident, in his foolish adjuration relative to the matter of the honey (see 1 Samuel 14:24-30, 1 Samuel 14:38-44) in which, to save his rash and nonsensical oath, he would have sacrificed Jonathan his son!

The question, "Was Saul a good king?" has already in effect been answered. He was on the whole a good man, as far as we know, in private life; but he was a bad king; for he endeavored to reign independently of the Jewish constitution; he in effect assumed the sacerdotal office and functions, and thus even changed what was essential to that constitution. He not only offered sacrifices which belonged to the priests alone; but in the most positive manner went opposite to the orders of that God whose vicegerent he was.

Of his conduct in visiting the woman at En-dor I have already given my opinion, and to this I must refer. His

desperate circumstances imposed on the weakness of his mind; and he did in that instance an act which, in his jurisprudential capacity, he had disapproved by the edict which banished all witches, etc., from Israel. Yet in this act he only wished to avail himself of the counsel and advice of his friend Samuel.

To the question, "Was not Saul a self-murderer?" I scruple not to answer, "No." He was to all appearance mortally wounded, when he begged his armor-bearer to extinguish the remaining spark of life; and he was afraid that the Philistines might abuse his body, if they found him alive; and we can scarcely say how much of indignity is implied in this word; and his falling on his sword was a fit of desperation, which doubtless was the issue of a mind greatly agitated, and full of distraction. A few minutes longer, and his life would in all probability have ebbed out; but though this wound accelerated his death, yet it could not be properly the cause of it, as he was mortally wounded before, and did it on the conviction that he could not survive.

Taking Saul's state and circumstances together, I believe there is not a coroner's inquest in this nation that would not have brought in a verdict of derangement; while the pious and the humane would everywhere have consoled themselves with the hope that God had extended mercy to his soul.

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Ended this examination August 13, 1827. - A.C.