

# Battle with the Philistines

Notes for 13 Apr

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Read: [1 Samuel 13:1-22](#)

Frequently I find it hard to follow the Old Testament stories, and our study this week is one of those occasions. Yes, I can read and understand what happened. But what eludes me at times is the *why* question...

Let's do a quick scan of this week's texts:

- Saul raises an army of 3,000 fighters. 1,000 go with Jonathan to Gibeah, with the remainder staying with Saul at Micmash.
- Jonathan defeats the Philistines at Geba and rejoins Saul at Gilgal.
- The Philistines have "mustered a mighty army of 3,000 chariots, 6,000 charioteers, and as many warriors as the grains of sand on the seashore! "
- Saul's army takes fright, and some troops hide, or escape into Gad and Gilead.
- Saul waits 7 days for Samuel to arrive, during which he "realized that his troops were rapidly slipping away".
- Saul decides to offer the burnt and peace offerings.
- Samuel arrives just as the burnt offering is concluded. He is not happy.
- Samuel tells Saul that his days are numbered.
- Samuel leaves, and Saul rounds up the remainder of the army, a mere 600 men.
- The Philistines seem to have a monopoly on ironwork, as a result no-one, apart from Saul and Jonathan, has a sword or spear.
- Things aren't looking good.
- ...and we leave the rest of the story for Jim to pick up next week. A cliffhanger ending...

## Discussion

It would seem that the purpose of the early Israelite kings was to fight the Philistines. Which was no easy task. We start this week with Saul's first attempt to do just that. He'd been upheld by Samuel as king in chapter 11 and now, following Samuel's farewell address in chapter 12, it's time to take up arms.

Verses 1-7 tell us that the Philistines are the clear favourites. Jumping forward to vv19-22 (where we have a rather odd diversion into the economics of metal weaponry) we can see some obvious problems. The Philistines have got 3000 chariots and too many troops to count. Saul's army are "trembling" (v7).

- Compare the attitude of the troops in vv6-7, with the attitude of the people in 11:14, post the defeat of the Ammonites - Saul's first battle as king. What's gone wrong?
- Some commentators state that the Israelite army was a 'volunteer militia', as opposed to whatever passed for a professional army in those days. Might their reaction be a perfectly reasonable response to the shock and awe of the Philistines?

Morale is low and, presumably to raise the spirits of his disheartened troops, Saul decides to ask for the Lord's blessing by offering sacrifices (v8-9). He'd waited a week for Samuel, *as Samuel had instructed*, and now goes ahead in the absence of the prophet.

- Was this a reasonable thing to do? I confess to not understanding the 'rules' of who is allowed to do what under what circumstances. Brueggemann contends that 9:13 would indicate that Saul's role was to be a judge and a warrior and that priestly duties were reserved for someone else. I'm not sure I would read that into 9:13. What do you think?

Immediately after Saul has finished the offering, Samuel arrives (v10). Saul is not uneasy about his actions, rather he simply explains what he did given that Samuel had not shown up and the troops needed leadership. But Samuel is not happy. Not happy at all.

Brueggemann (p98) writes "it almost appears as a setup, in which Samuel is testing to see how far he can keep Saul under his control and subordinate to his priestly authority. Samuel found that there are limits beyond which Saul will not submit. Saul is not prepared endlessly to risk his army out of deference to Samuel. This finding did not please Samuel." Samuel clearly thinks that a great wrong has been done.

- What do you think of Brueggemann's analysis?
- Is it fair for Samuel to be so angry?

Traditionally we tend to think of Saul as being somehow weak, or deficient in some way. And we think of Samuel as being the wise old man of God. In Brueggemann's decidedly contrary take, Samuel is being almost petulant. Saul explains his seemingly perfectly reasonable actions (vv11-12) and Samuel just shoots him down.

Saul's defence of his actions are laid out. "He acted for pragmatic reasons, because the troops were scattering (v11). He acted because he did not want to begin battle without a proper religious gesture (v12). Above all, the time limit on Samuel's arrival had elapsed (v11). These appear to be compelling and valid reasons for his act, which was hardly precipitous. And besides, 'I forced myself' (v12). Saul did not offer the sacrifice greedily, eagerly, aggressively, or to pre-empt the power of the old priesthood. Saul could hardly be more deferential." (Brueggemann p99)

Samuel immediately gives his verdict - "Foolish!" (v13)

- Is Samuel being reasonable?
- What's the offence that Saul has committed (v13)? Is it an important offence? What commandment has been broken?
- v13 is a bold statement that had Saul keep the command (what command?) then "the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever". What does that mean?
- That statement was made *after* Saul had failed. Is that not too late?
- After all is said and done, what exactly was God's promise to Saul, given just a few chapters back?

Verse 14 seems to be a direct reference to David.

- Has Samuel already given up on Saul?
- Had he given up even before this battle was joined? Somewhere back in the previous chapter?

I find it difficult to know what to make of this story. Brueggemann's view is that Samuel (or the author of the book at least) is being unfair to Saul. Samuel makes a number of 'the Lord said...' statements that are very harsh on Saul and that seem difficult to square with the facts of the events as laid out.

Let me conclude with Brueggemann's conclusion. "In the end we may expect to grieve for Saul, who was outdone by forces to which he had no access. Even the powerful are helpless in the face of God's inscrutable holiness. The narrative, however, does not linger long to grieve Saul. It has other, more pressing business."