

Death of Saul and his sons

Notes for 14 Sep

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Read: [1 Samuel 31:1-13](#)

So here we are, at the end of Act One of the story of David. The story of Saul and his family is over. The demise predicted back in chapters [13:14](#) and [15:26](#) has happened. The strangely specific prediction from the Samuel 'stand-in' at Endor...

What's more, the Lord will hand you and the army of Israel over to the Philistines tomorrow, and you and your sons will be here with me. The Lord will bring down the entire army of Israel in defeat.

...has come to pass.

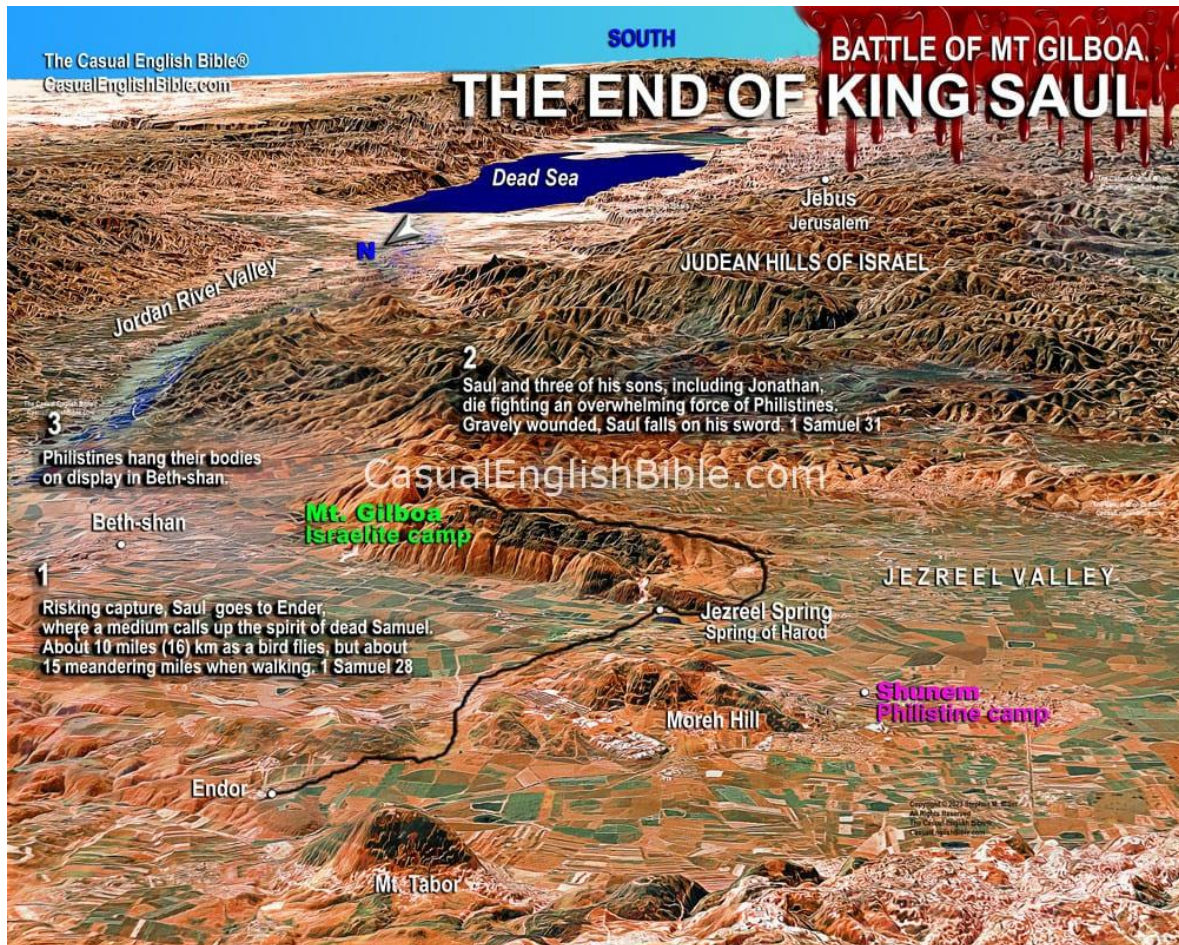
The author of Samuel, who is clearly on the side of David, has the decency to relay the events of Saul's death in a neutral, even poetic way. More on that later...

The events of the last few chapters now come to a head. Chapter 29 saw David sent home by the Philistines who didn't want him and his troops swelling their ranks. The unfortunate interlude with the Amalekites (ch 30) has happened and David is safely out of the way - and has nothing to do with this final act of regicide.

- Do you think David was specifically excluded, by God, from this last battle with Saul?
- Do you think David considered himself an Israelite anymore? His allegiance was to the same God as the God of Israel, but do you think David felt any allegiance to the *people* of that nation?

(continued)

This rather graphic map (from [The Casual English Bible](#)) shows the geography of the events of this chapter.



The events

The chapter is very matter of fact. There's little embellishment. The author states the facts and moves on.

- v1-3: The Philistines attack. Three of Saul's sons are killed - Jonathan (the same Jonathan from earlier chapters; his death is recorded here almost as an afterthought), Abinadab and Malkishua. Saul is wounded, by an archer's arrow.
- v4-5: Saul asks his armour-bearer to kill him, before he can be caught and tortured. The armour-bearer refuses - he was 'afraid'. So, Saul kills himself. The armour-bearer does likewise.
- v6: This is the end. Brueggemann writes

The narrator draws a summary that is majestic in its terseness: "Thus Saul died, and his three sons, and his armour-bearer, and all his men, on the same day together". The sentence must be spoken slowly. There must be a pause with each phrase to grasp the massiveness of the death, its finality, and its majesty. Saul could not live. Early on, it was destined that he would die a failure. The narrator, so devoted to David, does not cheat Saul out of a compelling death.

Try reading v6 as Brueggemann suggests. How does it make you feel?

- Was it a sad death?
 - An ignominious end?
 - An honourable death?
 - A pathetic death?
 - An indifferent death?
- v7: The end of the King means the end of the battle. The Philistines move in.
 - v8-10: Not only have the Philistines won, but their God has won, too. They 'proclaimed the good news of Saul's death in their pagan temple'. We are told of the brutal treatment meted out to Saul's body.
 - v11-13: To the people of Jabesh-gilead Saul was a hero ([see chapter 11:1-15](#)). The people come, possibly at some personal risk, and rescue Saul's body. They are not afraid to be identified with the fallen king. They rescue the memory of Saul from mockery and dismissal. They remember his fidelity and the way he changed their life and their future, and they respond in kind.

This is the end of the book of 1st Samuel. Whilst it can be argued (probably correctly) that chapters 1 to 4 of 2nd Samuel are a continuation of the literary unit beginning in 1st Samuel 16, let us take this ending to pause and take stock.

Where have we been, what have we seen and what have we learned?

Discuss!