

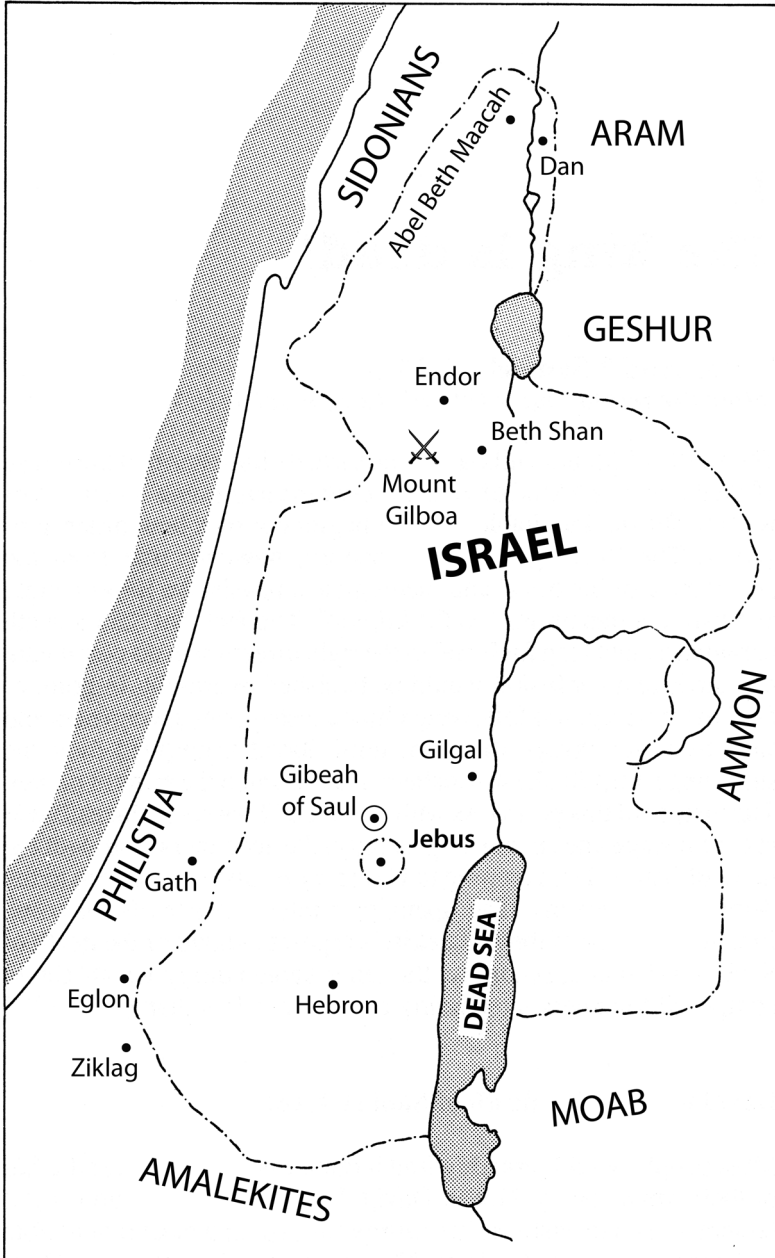
# 1

## The king is dead!

*Please read 2 Samuel 1:1–27*

*‘How the mighty have fallen!’ (2 Samuel 1:19).*

**T**he Battle of Mount Gilboa and the virtual elimination of the house of Saul come as a kind of Hebrew *Gotterdammerung*—an end of waiting for the inevitable and the beginning of a new order altogether. The ‘turning-points’ of history, however true from the perspective of historical and theological analysis, are never simple and painless transitions ‘on the ground’. The fact that Saul’s death heralded a giant leap for Israel in the right direction in no way meant that strife and confusion would be banished overnight. In point of fact, the interregnum following Gilboa lasted over seven years and saw civil war ravage the land, until David triumphed over the surviving son of Saul, Ish-Bosheth, and assumed the reins of power. The history of this period, as with the rest of 2 Samuel, places David at centre stage and so, not surprisingly, the account begins with the news of Saul’s death coming to David’s ears and



Map 1: The kingdom of Saul c. 1025 BC

his reaction to the demise of his enemy. The opening chapter consists of two parts: first, the account of the Amalekite's report to David of the death of Saul (1:1-16) and, secondly, the remarkable eulogy which David composed to lament the passing of Saul and Jonathan (1:17-27).

**David hears of the death of Saul [1:1-16]**

Most people would probably find it quite easy to gloat over the fall of their worst enemy. Not so David. His response is to mourn and lament—and to enshrine his sorrow for ever in a most remarkable and generous-spirited eulogy. The reason for this, observes D. F. Payne, lies in the reality that 'David was not Saul's enemy, not even in his private thoughts.'<sup>1</sup> This points up the simple fact that it takes two to make a fight. However much Saul was an enemy in his actions towards David, David was under no obligation to think or act with enmity towards Saul. It is a measure of the genuine godliness of David that he grieved over Saul's attitude to him and never once raised his hand against Saul. This is essential to any understanding of David's reaction to the news of Saul's death.

***Report from the battle: Saul and Jonathan are dead! (1:1-10)***

This passage is heavy with ironies. David's defeat of the Amalekites—really little more than a tribal skirmish—is in the spotlight, while the mighty battle in the north is marked only by the words 'after the death of Saul' (1:1). The messenger from Gilboa is an Amalekite—from the very tribe which had just felt the sharp edge of David's punitive expedition from Ziklag. Furthermore, Saul's death had been predicted by Samuel in his posthumous appearance at Endor on the night before the battle and the reason given was that Saul had not obeyed the Lord in carrying out his 'fierce wrath against the Amalekites' (1 Samuel 28:18).

'On the third day' after David's return from the pursuit of the

Amalekites, a young man in the traditional garb of mourning—‘his clothes torn and with dust on his head’ (1:2; cf. 1 Samuel 4:12)—arrived at the camp. He had escaped, he said, from the Israelite camp, having witnessed Israel’s defeat and the death of Saul and Jonathan. How did he know that Saul and Jonathan were dead, asked David. The Amalekite’s explanation (1:6–10) was that he ‘happened to be’ on the battlefield and came on Saul, all alone and wounded, ‘leaning on his spear’ with the Philistines ‘almost upon him’. Spotting the young Amalekite, Saul called out to him and he asked, ‘What can I do?’ David must have smelt a rat, for he then interjected a question as to who his informant was and discovered him to be an Amalekite—a fact that could only have confirmed his suspicion that all was not quite as it seemed (1:8). Why must this be so? Simply because David knew Saul, the Israelite army and the nature of battle. Young Amalekites did not serve in the Israelite armies. Kings did not stand about alone on battlefields ready to enlist the aid of wandering Amalekites who ‘happened to be’ there. Even allowing that strange things can happen in the heat of a battle, David would have been gripped by the improbability of the story. But the Amalekite continued: Saul had asked him to kill him and the young man duly obliged, pausing only to remove the crown and armband so that he could take them to David. He had told his story. He could now only wait for David’s response.

The explanation is so obviously a cock-and-bull story concocted by the Amalekite to ingratiate himself with David, who he surely believed was likely to be the next king of Israel. Apart from his claim that the king was dead and that he had removed his crown and armband, all other details in 1:6–10 are self-serving fiction.<sup>2</sup> They are completely contradicted by the earlier matter-of-fact historical account of Saul’s death in 1 Samuel 31, which is surely, as A. W. Pink observes, ‘God’s description of Saul’s death,’ while ‘2 Samuel 1 gives man’s

fabrication.<sup>3</sup> David, of course, was hearing the news for the first time—and not the final version of the divinely inspired chronicler. In the account David heard, the Amalekite ‘happened to be’ on Mount Gilboa and happened to be the last able-bodied man around Saul, as the Philistine chariots happened to be closing in on him! After allegedly killing Saul, at the king’s request, he then happened to be able to remove the crown and armlet from his body, in full view of the advancing Philistines, and escape in one piece to tell the tale! There was something wrong here. Things did not quite fit, even if the crown proved Saul’s death and Israel’s defeat. And it seems clear enough from David’s question (1:8) and his subsequent actions (1:13-16) that he, while apparently taking at face value the young man’s claim that he killed Saul, was not at all satisfied either by his rendition of the facts or his motives in coming to Ziklag.

One of the minor curiosities of modern Old Testament exegesis is the number of commentators who give credence to the Amalekite’s account and see its reconciliation with 1 Samuel 31 as a problem. Some see it as a ‘variant reading’—i.e., two contradictory accounts of events we may never be able to resolve with certainty. Others see them as complementary accounts which can be harmonized, thereby arriving at a workable theory about what happened. These views, it seems to me, arise from an underlying assumption that the entire account (1 Samuel 31 and 2 Samuel 1) cannot be regarded as a unitary, accurate and, not least, divinely inspired and infallible record of actual events, but rather are a collage of traditions, oral and written, cobbled together by editors, whose intentions are not readily discernible on the face of the text. The idea that someone can read this passage and discern that the Amalekite was a lying opportunist (2 Samuel 1), while the Lord’s historian was setting down the facts (1 Samuel 31), seems to have been ruled out by these interpreters as even a possibility! Yet this is quite clearly

the natural reading of the passage, for when the text is read for what it is—the inspired and infallible Word of God—questions of ‘variant traditions’ and speculations as to who is telling the truth (the Amalekite or the Spirit-led chronicler) do not arise. The text itself and its contextual relationship to the historical and theological connections of the whole history of God’s dealings with his people (and the other nations of the region, including the Amalekites) does not suggest any problem. The quotations of the Amalekite are to be interpreted in the light of the historical framework set down by the chronicler under the inspiration of God. No one can possibly ascribe divinely inspired accuracy to the story of the Amalekite as if he were uttering sober history as well. The very thought that his tale is an equally valid historical source, which can be used as a basis for modifying or denying the accuracy of the sober historical record of Saul’s death in 1 Samuel 31, rests on a practical denial of divine inspiration. As an accurately recorded part of the Word of God, the Amalekite’s story does, of course, shed its own peculiar light on the proceedings. It shows us how opportunists work. More significantly still, it demonstrates the truly princely godliness of David as he responds to the death of Saul. It shows that his attitude to Saul in death, as in life, was one of genuine love for his person and reverence for his office. It shows also that above all he loved the Lord and law of the Lord.

***Response to the news: mourning until evening (1:11–12)***

No doubt the Amalekite expected David to rejoice that Saul was gone forever. David’s response, however, was to mourn for ‘Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the Lord and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword’. For the rest of that day, the outlaws of Ziklag grieved over the humiliation of the Lord’s people at the hands of their enemies. The political advantage of the Gilboa defeat did not diminish their sorrow.

***Rewarded opportunism: the execution of the Amalekite (1:13-16)***

The mourning over, David turned to the Amalekite messenger, who no doubt felt he had a reward coming his way. David asked two questions. The first was to ask him from whence he came. The young man claimed to be ‘the son of an alien, an Amalekite’ (1:13). An ‘alien’ was a foreigner resident in Israel, one who had certain privileges in the nation and who might well have been a believer. Whether this was true of the Amalekite, or just another part of his cover-story, we shall never know.<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to say that if this were true, it implied that he must have been acquainted with the contours of Israelite religion and society—in this specific instance, the status and role of the king as the Lord’s anointed. He would have been aware of the particular honour with which the king’s person and office were to be held by the people. Hence David’s second question probed the ground for his subsequent condemnation as a murderer: ‘Why were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the Lord’s anointed?’ (1:14). This Amalekite was without excuse. It was not good enough to plead that Saul commanded it, or that it was suicide or even euthanasia. Still less could the man simply admit he murdered Saul to help David up onto his throne! He was trapped—condemned out of his own mouth! To confess to killing Saul was to admit to killing the man the Lord had anointed—the man whose death was in the hand of the Lord. The Amalekite ‘had been guilty of murder and treason, and had usurped the prerogative of God himself’—something which David had refused to do, when he had been presented with the opportunity.<sup>5</sup>

David therefore ordered the Amalekite’s execution (1:15-16). He was condemned by the witness of his own mouth and that of Saul’s crown and armlet. For all we know, David may have wondered whether the Amalekite was a mercenary soldier who did play a part in Saul’s death or merely a battlefield looter who

took the crown and saw his chance for glory. But even if David suspected he was a liar and an opportunist, he was still obliged in all justice to act on the evidence. The man who so pointedly spared the life of Saul when he had it in his power to kill him could not permit a self-confessed regicide to go free, far less be rewarded and thus leave the implication that David not only approved of the regicide, but perhaps even arranged for it to take place. So perished the Amalekite.

### **David's eulogy—the lament of the bow [1:17–27]**

'David took up [a] lament concerning Saul and his son Jonathan' (1:17). The *Qina*, or lament, was a chanted poem sung in mourning for someone who had died, or even prophetically in the prospect of death or destruction (cf. 2 Chronicles 35:25; Jeremiah 9:17; Ezekiel 2:10).<sup>6</sup> David composed this 'lament of the bow' as a memorial of the house of Saul which would celebrate their positive role in the national life of Israel, particularly their military prowess—hence the mention of 'the bow'. It was to be taught to the 'men of Judah' and was written in 'the Book of Jameshar', which is mentioned in Joshua 10:13 and is thought to have been an anthology—added to over the years—of 'poems commemorating great events in national life'.<sup>7</sup>

The lament is a great surge of anguish which, like a mighty sigh, gradually fades into silent sadness. The structure appears to be as follows:

- I. Theme: how the mighty have fallen! (1:19)
- II. Sorrow for the loss of mighty leaders (1:20–24)
- III. Sorrow for the loss of a dear friend (1:25–26)
- IV. Theme reiterated (1:27)

### ***Theme: how the mighty have fallen! (1:19)***

David was greatly wronged by Saul, but never once in Scripture is there any record of him speaking abusively about the king. He practises the ancient adage: *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* ('Of



the dead, say nothing but what is good'). Saul and Jonathan are described as the 'glory' of Israel and 'the mighty' who have fallen on the 'heights' of Gilboa. Saul's faults are laid aside and his status as the warrior-king, who had unified and defended Israel through a long reign by his military prowess, is lifted up before the sorrowing nation. Whatever the defects of Saul's rule, it had many advantages and blessings, which would be swept away now that he was no longer there and Israel was exposed before the Philistine armies.

***Sorrow for the loss of mighty leaders (1:20–24)***

The disaster of Gilboa should be mourned on several counts. The loss of mighty leaders could only have profound and humiliating consequences for God's people.

1. 'Tell it not in Gath ...' (1:20). The celebration of the Philistines underlines the disgrace of the Lord's people and casts a shadow over the cause of God and his truth. When the failures of God's men and women are displayed before the world, the resultant shame calls for the deepest mourning. The triumph of God's enemies is the antithesis of redemption.

2. 'O mountains of Gilboa, may you have neither dew nor rain ...' (1:21–22). The very land of Israel—the site of the battle—must remember and mourn the terrible loss of her dead heroes. Saul and Jonathan died in defence of the land which God had given to his people as their inheritance. There 'the shield of the mighty was defiled'—that is to say, it did not protect its bearer—but the weapons wielded by Jonathan and Saul did not 'turn back' or 'return unsatisfied'. The blood of the enemy mingled with that of the heroes.

3. 'Saul and Jonathan—in life they were loved and gracious ...' (1:23). The lives of father and son were intertwined in life and in death. Their relationship with one another is in view.

David forbears to address the problems in his own relationship with the late king. This is no cover-up. Neither is it a historian's analysis of the man, his faith and his reign. It is a generous recognition of both the Saul who fought the wars of the Lord and the Jonathan who was loyal to him until his last breath.

4. 'O daughters of Israel, weep for Saul ...' (1:24). The reference to fine clothing indicates the fruits of the strong rule of Saul. He had been able, for the most part, to achieve the peace of Israel within secure frontiers—something which had largely eluded the fragmented nation of the period of the judges. Now they were at the mercy of the Philistines and so the women of Israel must weep, as surely as the daughters of the Philistines would be glad.

***Sorrow for the loss of a dear friend (1:25–26)***

David testifies to his personal loss in the death of Jonathan, his closest friend. Saul's name is conspicuously absent. The love he experienced from his friend, that was 'more wonderful than that of women', is not indicative of a homosexual relationship, as modern defenders of that perversion like to imagine.<sup>8</sup> This is that rich bond of affection and of covenant brotherhood which men share and which can indeed be 'wonderful'. The language is, of course, poetic and cannot be interpreted in a manner prejudicial to the biblical teaching on marriage and the love that is to exist between husband and wife. David speaks here of the camaraderie of youth and war, of the brotherhood of adventure and the risk of death, of the confidence of men in one another when their lives depend on the faithfulness and courage of the other. This is a joy that is as ineffable as it is thoroughly masculine.

***The theme reiterated: how the mighty have fallen! (1:27)***

The lament ends as it began, with the difference perhaps that the final words, 'The weapons of war have perished,' leave us in

the mud and carnage of the deserted battlefield to contemplate the aching loss which war inevitably carries in its train. There is nothing of the romanticized classical heroism so beloved of the Victorian era, when schoolboys were steeped in the glorification of patriotic death from the Latin classroom (where Horace taught them: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*—‘It is sweet and honourable to die for your country’) to the sports field (in which the poet Sir Henry Newbolt saw a model for fighting Britain’s foreign wars!).<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the Bible never glorifies war or death, far less sees it as a kind of serious version of sport. Death is an enemy. Life is glory. When David says, ‘Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights,’ he is not extolling glorious death, he is grieving for the waste of glorious life! Death and defeat are always humiliations. Humbling, not exultation, is the appropriate emotion. David begins his march to Israel’s newly vacated throne in the deepest sorrow over the disaster that has come upon the Lord’s people, but with a rising faith in the Lord who, in wrath as in mercy, does all things well for his believing people.