

Saul

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From the Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia

Saul -The son of Kish of the tribe of Benjamin, the first king of Israel.

Since the days of Moses God had governed Israel through the priests and judges specially endowed with power and ability. When Samuel, last of the judges, became old, the people demanded a king that they might be like the nations around them. Their demand was a repudiation both of God and of a walk by faith. They desired to imitate the nations not simply in government but in spirit, depending on their own might and power rather than on Yahweh (I Sam 8). In acceding to their request God provided the Israelites with exactly the kind of king they desired. Saul was a man of courage and strength, a man of great ability as an administrator and a warrior. He was natural man at his best, but he had a fatal flaw. Saul acted not in the power and wisdom of the Lord but in dependence on his own judgment and strength; this led to eventual disaster.

Saul's first appearance is as a young country-man from the city of Gibeah. In searching for his father's straying asses, he encountered Samuel, who anointed him and prophesied that he would be king of Israel (I Sam 9:1-10:16). Later, Samuel called the tribes together at Mizpeh to cast lots in the ancient manner. The lot fell upon Saul, and Samuel presented him as the king God had chosen (I Sam 10:17-25).

Very shortly Saul was put to the test; Nahash, king of Ammon, besieged Jabesh-gilead, and the city sent for help. Saul proved himself a king indeed; he gathered an army and, surprising Nahash, destroyed the Ammonites. After the battle all Israel acknowledged Saul as their king and held a great celebration at Gilgal (I Sam 11). For a description of Saul's rustic palace-citadel which he built in his home town, *see* Gibeah.

Saul spent his entire reign defending Israel against the encroachments of the surrounding nations (I

Sam 14:47-48, 52). Yet at the end of his life, Israel was more harassed by her enemies, especially the Philistines, than she had been at the beginning.

Scripture mentions only the critical events of Saul's reign which determined the course of his career. His first great failure occurred at the beginning of war against the Philistines (I Sam 13). His son Jonathan provoked the war by a daring raid against the Philistine garrison at Geba. As the Philistine armies gathered, Saul tried to rally his people too. But fear caused the Israelites to desert, until Saul was left with only a handful at his headquarters in Gilgal. Impatient because Samuel delayed in coming to seek God's favor, Saul performed a perfunctory sacrifice and was ready to start his campaign when Samuel finally appeared. Samuel pronounced God's judgment: "Thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God...now thy kingdom shall not continue" (I Sam 13:13-14). Although the ensuing battle was a success, primarily because of the boldness of Jonathan near Michmash, no lasting peace resulted from it.

Saul was evidently a stern disciplinarian of others, if not of himself. During the rout of the Philistines Jonathan unknowingly disobeyed the king's orders by eating. Saul would have executed his own son had it not been for the intercession of his army (I Sam 14:24-45).

Saul's first great failure was one of usurping the priestly office; his second was outright disobedience (I Sam 15). Commanded by God to destroy all the Amalekites, Saul won a crushing victory, then failed to carry out fully God's instructions by sparing Agag the king and the best of the animals. Samuel again came as God's spokesman of judgment. The prophet brushed aside Saul's excuses that he had saved the spoil because of pressure by the people and that he intended to sacrifice it all to the Lord: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice.... Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king" (I Sam 15:22-23). Samuel's next act was to anoint Saul's successor. David (I Sam 16).

The rest of Saul's reign is tragic. The king drifted farther and farther from God, becoming ever more despondent and fearful. There is little question that he was mentally ill. He became progressively worse, subject to periods of blackest depression (I Sam 16:14; 19:9); yet he refused to humble himself before God. He realized that God must have provided a successor and became jealous of any rival. David, Israel's hero after the defeat of Goliath, was the special object of his enmity and fear. Saul sought to kill David, pursued him as an outlaw, and eventually drove him from the kingdom though he was now his son-in-law (I Sam 18–20). Because the high priest Ahimelech had aided David, Saul had the whole priestly family at Nob slaughtered (I Sam 21–22). Although David twice spared Saul's life, the king failed to recognize in this the warning of God and continued on his way to final destruction (I Sam 24, 26).

Saul's reign ended as it began, in battle; but what a difference! The young king went forth to victory; the old king, discredited and rejected, went out to death and defeat. In desperation before his last battle Saul sought help in witchcraft, though in

better days he had driven such practices from the kingdom (I Sam 28). On the eve of the battle he appealed to the witch of Endor for some word of hope. But Samuel, dead for many years, appeared to pronounce Saul's doom: "Tomorrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me" (I Sam 28:19).

The next day Saul met the Philistines on the slopes of Mount Gilboa, and there he and his sons died. Wounded and unwilling to be captured and tortured by the enemy, Saul fell upon his own sword. The Philistines hung his body on the wall of Bethshan. The men of Jabesh-gilead rescued it, repaying by their brave act the ruler whose first kingly act had been to rescue them (I Sam 31).

David, who had never lost his love for the king, grieved over this man who might have been so great and fell so far short, and chanted a lament: "Your beauty, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How have the mighty fallen!.... Saul and Jonathan, beloved and pleasant in their life, and in their death they were not parted; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul" (II Sam 1:19, 23–24, NASB).