

III. SAMUEL & SAUL

I SAMUEL 7-15

²From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel turned to follow YHWH.

³Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to YHWH with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to YHWH, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."

⁴So Israel put away the Baals and the Astartes, and they served YHWH only.

⁵Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel at Mizpah, and I will pray to YHWH for you." ⁶So they gathered at Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before YHWH. They fasted that day, and said, "We have sinned against YHWH." And Samuel judged the people of Israel at Mizpah.

⁷When the Philistines heard that the people of Israel had gathered at Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the people of Israel heard of it they were afraid of the Philistines. ⁸The people of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry out to YHWH our God for us, and pray that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines." ⁹So Samuel took a sucking lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to YHWH; Samuel cried out to YHWH for Israel, and YHWH answered him. ¹⁰As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel; but YHWH thundered with a mighty voice that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion; and they were routed before Israel. ¹¹And the men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as beyond Beth-car.

The ark stayed at Kiriath-jearim till David came to relocate it in Jerusalem (see 2Samuel 6).

The call to turn to YHWH 'with all your heart' is a call frequently found in the writings of the Deuteronomists (see Deuteronomy 4:29; 6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 13:3; 26:16; 30:2, 6, 10 and Joshua 22:5).

The 'Baals' are the local Canaanite gods, and the 'Astartes' are the female consorts of the gods.

Acting in his role as 'judge', Samuel summons all Israel to the sanctuary at Mizpah (see Judges 20-21). He also exercises his priestly and prophetic role of intercession (see Jeremiah 15:1).

In response to the people's fasting and acknowledgment of sin, and the sacrifice and prayer offered by Samuel, YHWH intervenes to put the Philistines to flight. The action of the people is secondary.

The location of Beth-car (verse 11) is unknown.

‘Jeshanah’ (meaning ‘crag’) and Ebenezer (meaning, ‘stone of help’; see earlier 1 Samuel 4:1; 5:1) were in the vicinity of Mizpah. Verse 12 is etiological; that is, an ancient story is attached to a well-known place at the time of writing to explain why the location is named in a certain way. YHWH’s victory at Ebenezer more than compensates for the earlier victory there of the Philistines (4:1 - 5:1). YHWH restored to Israel the Philistine towns of Ekron and Gath, towns that are adjacent to Israelite territory (see map page 44).

Reference is made to the three sanctuaries, Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpah, in the southern area of Ephraim-Benjamin. ‘Gilgal’ appears to mean ‘circle of stones’. Reference here appears to be to a place near the other towns mentioned (see also 2 Kings 2:1-2), rather than to the Gilgal that is just north of Jericho (see Joshua 4:19).

The purpose of chapter seven is to demonstrate that Israel did not need kings to achieve security. They needed leaders who were responsive to YHWH: leaders like Samuel. This is more likely to come from the Deuteronomists in exile, after the complete collapse of kingship with the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem, than from earlier members of the Deuteronomic School at the time of Josiah.



¹²Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer; for he said, “Thus far YHWH has helped us.”

¹³So the Philistines were subdued and did not again enter the territory of Israel; the hand of YHWH was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. ¹⁴The towns that the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron to Gath; and Israel recovered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. There was peace also between Israel and the Amorites.

¹⁵Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life.

¹⁶He went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all these places. ¹⁷Then he would come back to Ramah, for his home was there; he administered justice there to Israel, and built there an altar to YHWH.

Israel wants a king

¹When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. ²The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba.

³Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.

⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, ⁵and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations."

⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to YHWH,

⁷and YHWH said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.

⁸Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; but you must solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."

Samuel appoints his two sons as 'judges' in Beer-sheba, the southernmost sanctuary of Judah. They pervert justice by taking bribes, something explicitly denounced in the Torah (see Deuteronomy 16:19; see also Amos 5:7, 10-12). A father, even Samuel, cannot hand on the position of judge. A judge must be raised up by YHWH.

It was during the final years of the ministry of Samuel that the institution of kingship arose in Israel. Looking back over the experience of kingship the Deuteronomists judged it to be, with notable exceptions, a failure and a key reason for the collapse of the northern kingdom and the destruction of Judah.

Samuel is portrayed as being displeased with the people's request (verse 6). In rejecting Samuel, the people are rejecting YHWH (verse 7; see Gideon's response to the offer of kingship, Judges 8:23). Chapter seven has made it perfectly clear that relying on YHWH works for Israel. Like Adam in the garden, the people want to be independent of God (see Genesis 3:5).

The hand of the Deuteronomists is obvious in verse 8.

Samuel is instructed to warn the people of the consequences of having a king (verse 9). They want a king 'like other nations' (verse 5; see Deuteronomy 17:14), so that is what they will get.

The judges were raised up by God. The institution of the monarchy brought with it its own dynamic. Even when the king was a good man, there is no guarantee that those who inherit the kingship from him would inherit his goodness (as we have just seen in the case of Samuel's sons). If the people really want a king they will have to expect the kind of behaviour outlined in this passage (an expectation borne out by the history of kingship in the northern and southern kingdoms). Compare the statement on kingship in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 (quoted on page 56).

There is a similarity between the language here and the Deuteronomic account of the last of the Ten Commandments:

You shall you covet your neighbour's wife. Nor shall you desire your neighbour's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

– Deuteronomy 5:21

In 1 Kings 10-11 we see Solomon doing much of what Samuel is describing here. The most telling statement is found in verse 17: 'you will be his slaves'. The people want to be 'like other nations'. But they are special, and they were founded by a God who brought them out of slavery. What are they doing, wanting to go back!

The experience of the rule of kings bears out the truth expressed in verse 18. God did not intervene to rescue his people from the consequences of their choice.

¹⁰So Samuel reported all the words of YHWH to the people who were asking him for a king.

¹¹He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹²and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties. Some will plough his fields and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you will be his slaves.

¹⁸When this happens you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but YHWH will not answer you."

‘Set a king over them’

¹⁹But the people refused to listen to Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

²¹When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of YHWH. ²²YHWH said to Samuel, “Listen to their voice and set a king over them.” Samuel then said to the people of Israel, “Each of you return home.”

In spite of the warning the people make their choice. They want someone who will govern them and ‘fight our battles’.

We might reflect here on the statutes concerning the king found in the the Book of Deuteronomy:

When you have come into the land that YHWH your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,” you may indeed set over you a king whom YHWH your God will choose. One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community.

Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since YHWH has said to you, “You must never return that way again.” And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.

When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear YHWH his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.

– Deuteronomy 17:14-20

We are introduced here to Saul, who will be the first king of Israel.

The map below shows a likely location for ‘Shalishah’ and ‘Shaalim’ (verse 4). This is the only time these towns are mentioned in the Bible. ‘Zuph’ (verse 5) is probably the district in which Ramah is located (see 1Samuel 1:1). “This town” (verse 6) appears to be Ramah (see 7:7).

This passage includes three titles for those who were deemed to be inspired by God and to mediate God’s word to the people:

- ‘man of God’ [אִישׁ־לִּהְיִים, ’iš ‘lōhîm, verses 6,7,8,10; see 2:27].
- ‘seer’ [רֹאֶה, rō’eh, verse 9].
- ‘prophet’ [נָבִי, nābî’, verse 9; see 3:20].



¹There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish son of Abiel son of Zerer son of Becorath son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a powerful man. ²He had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else.

³Now donkeys of Kish, Saul’s father, had strayed. So Kish said to his son Saul, “Take one of the servants with you; go and look for the donkeys.” ⁴He passed through the hill country of Ephraim and passed through the land of Shalishah, but they did not find them. And they passed through the land of Shaalim, but they were not there. Then he passed through the land of Benjamin, but they did not find them. ⁵When they came to the land of Zuph, Saul said to the servant who was with him, “Let us turn back, or my father will stop worrying about the donkeys and worry about us.”

⁶But the servant said to him, “There is a man of God in this town; he is a man held in honour. Whatever he says always comes true. Let us go there now; perhaps he will tell us about the journey on which we have set out.” ⁷Then Saul replied to the boy, “But if we go, what can we bring the man? For the bread in our sacks is gone, and there is no present to bring to the man of God. What have we?” ⁸The boy answered Saul again, “Here, I have with me a quarter shekel of silver; I will give it to the man of God, to tell us our way.” ⁹(Formerly in Israel, anyone who went to inquire of God would say, “Come, let us go to the seer”; for the one who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer.) ¹⁰Saul said to the boy, “Good; come, let us go.” So they went to the town where the man of God was.

¹¹As they went up the hill to the town, they met some girls coming out to draw water, and said to them, "Is the seer here?" ¹²They answered, "Yes, there he is just ahead of you. Hurry; he has come just now to the town, because the people have a sacrifice today at the shrine. ¹³As soon as you enter the town, you will find him, before he goes up to the shrine to eat. For the people will not eat until he comes, since he must bless the sacrifice; afterward those eat who are invited. Now go up, for you will meet him immediately." ¹⁴So they went up to the town. As they were entering the town, they saw Samuel coming out toward them on his way up to the shrine.

¹⁵Now the day before Saul came, YHWH had revealed to Samuel: ¹⁶"Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him as the one designated to become the ruler over my people Israel. He will save my people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have seen the suffering of my people, because their outcry has come to me."

¹⁷When Samuel saw Saul, YHWH told him, "Here is the man of whom I spoke to you. He it is who shall rule over my people." ¹⁸Then Saul approached Samuel inside the gate, and said, "Tell me, please, where is the house of the seer?" ¹⁹Samuel answered Saul, "I am the seer; go up before me to the shrine, for today you shall eat with me, and in the morning I will let you go and will tell you all that is on your mind. ²⁰As for your donkeys that were lost three days ago, give no further thought to them, for they have been found. And on whom is all Israel's desire fixed, if not on you and on all your ancestral house?"

'Shrine' in this passage translates 'high place'. There is no indication of any negative judgment here. The abolition of high places was one of the central features in Josiah's reform, and the Deuteronomists regularly speak against them (see 2Kings 23:8-9, 19-20). The fact that there is no hint of criticism in this passage indicates either that the Deuteronomist editors are faithfully reproducing an already existing text, or that they acknowledge that at the time of Samuel, when there was no temple, God accepted the custom.

YHWH has prepared Samuel to expect the one who will be king. Samuel is to 'anoint him to be the designated ruler [נָאֲגִיד, nāgīd] over my people Israel' (verse 16). The rest of verse 16 echoes the call of Moses:

I have observed the misery of my people ... I have heard their cry ... Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.

– Exodus 3:7-8

Verse 21 reminds us of the teaching of Saint Paul, who recognises that God chooses what is weak (see 1Corinthians 1:27) so that it will be clear that the power comes from God (see 2Corinthians 4:7).

Samuel gives Saul a place of special honour in the hall where those offering a communion sacrifice shared in the offering.

Samuel is careful to ensure that there are no witnesses.

²¹Saul answered, "I am only a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel, and my family is the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin. Why then have you spoken to me in this way?"

²²Then Samuel took Saul and his servant and brought them into the hall, and gave them a place at the head of those who had been invited, of whom there were about thirty.

²³And Samuel said to the cook, "Bring the portion I gave you, the one I asked you to put aside." ²⁴The cook took up the thigh and what went with it and set them before Saul. Samuel said, "See, what was kept is set before you. Eat; for it is set before you at the appointed time, so that you might eat with the guests." So Saul ate with Samuel that day.

²⁵When they came down from the shrine into the town, a bed was spread for Saul on the roof, and he lay down to sleep. ²⁶Then at the break of dawn Samuel called to Saul upon the roof, "Get up, so that I may send you on your way." Saul got up, and both he and Samuel went out into the street. ²⁷As they were going down to the outskirts of the town, Samuel said to Saul, "Tell the servant to go on before us, and when he has passed on, stop here yourself for a while, that I may make known to you the word of God."

¹Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him; he said, "YHWH has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of YHWH and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around. Now this shall be the sign to you that YHWH has anointed you ruler over his heritage: ²When you depart from me today you will meet two men by Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin; they will say to you, 'The donkeys that you went to seek are found, and now your father has stopped worrying about them and is worrying about you, saying: What shall I do about my son?' ³Then you shall go on from there further and come to the oak of Tabor; three men going up to God at Bethel will meet you there, one carrying three kids, another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a skin of wine. ⁴They will greet you and give you two loaves of bread, which you are to accept from them. ⁵After that you will come to Gibeath-elohim, at the place where the Philistine garrison is; there, as you come to the town, you will meet a band of prophets coming down from the shrine with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre playing in front of them; they will be in a prophetic frenzy. ⁶Then the spirit of YHWH will possess you, and you will be in a prophetic frenzy along with them and be turned into a different person. ⁷Now when these signs meet you, do whatever you see fit to do, for God is with you. ⁸You will go down to Gilgal ahead of me; then I will come down to you to present burnt offerings and offer sacrifices of well-being. Seven days you will wait, until I come to you and show you what you will do."

Through Samuel's action it is YHWH who designates Saul as the one to be 'ruler over his people Israel' (verse 1). The Hebrew for 'anoint' is **מָשַׁח** (*māšaḥ*, whence the word 'messiah'; see 9:16).

Rachel's tomb (verse 2) was originally on the border between Benjamin and Ephraim, near Ramah (see Jeremiah 31:15).

The 'oak of Tabor' (verse 3) should perhaps read 'the oak of Deborah' (see Genesis 35:8). In any case it must be near Ramah and Bethel (see map page 34).

The gift of the loaves links back to 9:7.

'Gibeath-elohim' (verse 5) appears to be the cultic name for a shrine in or near Gibeah (see verse 10). 'Gibeah' means 'hill'. A number of sites are so called.

It was customary for shrines to have 'a band of prophets' who were identified by their music which carried them away in a trance, thought to be brought on by God's spirit.

Samuel assured Saul: 'God is with you' (verse 7). The 'Gilgal' mentioned here is probably the Gilgal of 7:16

The text focuses on the fulfilment of the last of the three signs listed by Samuel. God, we are told ‘gave Samuel another heart’ (verse 9; see verse 6), and he is swept up into a frenzy with the band of prophets (see 1Samuel 19:18-24).

Verse 12 witnesses to the existence of a popular saying/proverb [מָשָׁל, māšāl] used when a person is found acting out of character. The Deuteronomists trace it back to this scene (see also 1Samuel 19:19-24). The mention of ‘father’ seems to imply that not only is Saul among the prophets, he is acting as their leader.

The secret between Samuel and Saul (see 9:27) is not disclosed.

In 9:1 – 10:16 we hear no criticism of kingship. What we do have is evidence that the person who is to rule must be chosen by God through the medium of the prophet. This is a typically northern prophetic view, for in Judah kingship was dynastic. This section appears to have originated in the context of northern prophets with whom the early Deuteronomists had a close liaison.

⁹As he turned away to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart; and all these signs came to pass that same day. ¹⁰When they were going from there to Gibeah, a band of prophets met him; and the spirit of God possessed him, and he fell into a prophetic frenzy along with them. ¹¹When all who knew him before saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said to one another, “What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?”

¹²A man of the place answered, “And who is their father?” Therefore it became a proverb, “Is Saul too among the prophets?”

¹³When his prophetic frenzy had ended, he went home. ¹⁴Saul’s uncle said to him and to the servant, “Where did you go?” And he replied, “To seek the donkeys; and when we saw they were not to be found, we went to Samuel.” ¹⁵Saul’s uncle said, “Tell me what Samuel said to you.” ¹⁶Saul said to his uncle, “He told us that the donkeys had been found.” But about the matter of the kingship, of which Samuel had spoken, he told him nothing.

Saul is acclaimed as king

¹⁷Samuel summoned the people to YHWH at Mizpah ¹⁸and said to them, “Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, ‘I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you.’ ¹⁹But today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses; and you have said, ‘No! Set a king over us.’ Now therefore present yourselves before YHWH by your tribes and by your clans.”

²⁰Then Samuel brought all the tribes of Israel near, and the tribe of Benjamin was taken by lot. ²¹He brought the tribe of Benjamin near by its families, and the family of the Matrites was taken by lot. Finally he brought the family of the Matrites near man by man, and Saul the son of Kish was taken by lot. But when they sought him, he could not be found.

²²So they inquired again of YHWH, “Did the man come here?” and YHWH said, “See, he has hidden himself among the baggage.”

²³Then they ran and brought him from there. When he took his stand among the people, he was head and shoulders taller than any of them.

²⁴Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see the one whom YHWH has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.” And all the people shouted, “Long live the king!”

Mizpah, just north of Ramah was an early sanctuary site (see Judges 20:1; 1Samuel 7). Samuel summons the whole community [מִצְפָּה, hā‘ām]. As in chapter 8 Samuel sees their wanting a king as a rejection of YHWH. It is YHWH who is their Saviour, not the king (verses 18-19; see 8:6-7, 19).

The casting of lots (verses 20-21) was a process intended to bypass human decision, trusting that God would control the outcome (compare Joshua 7:16-18). In context the giving of a king is intended as a punishment. They get what they demand, and will have to suffer the consequences of their rejection of YHWH,

The lot falls on Saul, but he is pictured as hiding. This is presumably to highlight the fact that he was not putting himself forward. The outcome is entirely God’s will. Once again his stature is mentioned (verse 23; see 9:2). The people respond with the acclamation ‘Long live the king’ (verse 24).



The ‘rights and duties of the kingship’ (verse 25) may point back to Samuel’s earlier statement in 8:11ff. If so, when Samuel’s dire warnings of the way kingship will work out (something the Deuteronomists have witnessed), the book will testify against the people who rejected YHWH by asking for a king. In anointing Saul as king, Samuel is following YHWH’s instructions (see 8:7-9, 22). When things go wrong, however, the people will have only themselves to blame.

The Deuteronomists speak of the rights and duties of the king in the Book of Deuteronomy (see page 56).

²⁵Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship; and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before YHWH. Then Samuel sent all the people back to their homes.

²⁶Saul also went to his home at Gibeah, and with him went warriors whose hearts God had touched.

²⁷But some worthless fellows said, “How can this man save us?” They despised him and brought him no present. But he held his peace.

Saul summons the tribes

^{10:27b}**Nahash, the king of Ammon, had been oppressing the people of Gad and Reuben, gouging out their right eye and allowing Israel no deliverer. No Israelite who were across the Jordan remained whose right eye Nahash had not gouged out. However, seven thousand men had escaped from the Ammonites and entered Jabesh-gilead.** ^{11:1}**About a month later, Nahash went up and besieged Jabesh-gilead; and all the men of Jabesh said to Nahash, "Make a treaty with us, and we will serve you."** ²**But Nahash the Ammonite said to them, "On this condition I will make a treaty with you, namely that I gouge out everyone's right eye, and thus put disgrace upon all Israel."** ³**The elders of Jabesh said to him, "Give us seven days' respite that we may send messengers through all the territory of Israel. Then, if there is no one to save us, we will give ourselves up to you."** ⁴**When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul, they reported the matter in the hearing of the people; and all the people wept aloud.** ⁵**Now Saul was coming from the field behind the oxen; and when he asked, "What is the matter with the people, that they are weeping?" So they told him the message from the inhabitants of Jabesh.** ⁶**And the spirit of God came upon Saul in power when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled.** ⁷**He took a yoke of oxen, and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by messengers, saying, "Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!" Then the dread of YHWH fell upon the people, and they came out as one.**

Verse 27 is supplied from a manuscript found in Qumran. Gad and Reuben are two tribes on the east of the Jordan. Gilead is the region east of the river Jordan stretching from the Yarmuk river south to below the Jabbok. The kingdom of Ammon is south of the Jabbok river (see Deuteronomy 3:16) and east of Gilead (just off the map below). In Judges 11 we find an account of an earlier war started by the Ammonites during the time of Jephthah. In Judges 21 we are told of an earlier destruction of Jabesh-gilead.

Nahash (a word that means 'snake') ridicules their request for a 'treaty' [בְּרִית, b^orît].

Messengers hurry off to Gibeah to request help. Saul, with accompanying threats, summons support from 'throughout the territory of Israel' (verse 7).



For ‘thousand’ read contingent (see 4:10).

Verse 10 has a double meaning. To the Ammonites it could sound like the promise of a surrender. Bolstered by the news from across the river, it has another meaning for the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead, who are just playing for time.

Saul’s attack takes place in the early hours of the morning and the Ammonites are routed.

The editors have included here a legend from the stories attached to Saul, the first king. This passage lacks any critical judgment of kingship or of Saul. In fact, his victory demonstrates that YHWH is with Saul.

Now that Saul has proved his leadership qualities, ‘all the people’ formally acclaim him king.

⁸When he mustered them at Bezek, those from Israel were three hundred thousand, and those from Judah thirty thousand. ⁹He said to the messengers who had come, “Thus shall you say to the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead: ‘Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you shall have deliverance.’” When the messengers came and told the inhabitants of Jabesh, they rejoiced. ¹⁰So the inhabitants of Jabesh said, “Tomorrow we will come out to you, and you may do to us whatever seems good to you.”

¹¹The next day Saul put the people in three companies. At the morning watch they came into the camp and cut down the Ammonites until the heat of the day; and those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.

¹²The people said to Samuel, “Who is it that said, ‘Shall Saul reign over us?’ Give them to us so that we may put them to death.” ¹³But Saul said, “No one shall be put to death this day, for today YHWH has brought deliverance to Israel.” ¹⁴Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship.” ¹⁵So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before YHWH in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before YHWH, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.

The saving deeds of YHWH

¹Samuel said to all Israel, “I have listened to you in all that you have said to me, and have set a king over you. ²See, it is the king who leads you now; I am old and gray, but my sons are with you. I have led you from my youth until this day.

³Here I am; testify against me before YHWH and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me and I will restore it to you.”

⁴They said, “You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from the hand of anyone.” ⁵He said to them, “YHWH is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.” And they said, “He is witness.” ⁶Samuel said to the people, “YHWH is witness, who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your ancestors up out of the land of Egypt.

⁷Now therefore take your stand, so that I may enter into judgment with you before YHWH, and I will declare to you all the saving deeds of YHWH that he performed for you and for your ancestors.

⁸When Jacob went into Egypt and the Egyptians oppressed them, then your ancestors cried to YHWH and YHWH sent Moses and Aaron, who brought forth your ancestors out of Egypt, and settled them in this place. ⁹But they forgot YHWH their God; and he sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of King Jabin of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab; and they fought against them.

Samuel’s opening words link back to 8:22 where he was instructed by YHWH to listen to the people and grant their request for a king. He led them once and, in contrast to a king (see 8:10-18) he has never taken anything from them. This sets the tone for the rest of chapter 12 which is critical of their wanting a king.

As he draws to the end of his life, Samuel, the last of the judges raised up by YHWH, is making the point that he has served them well. They didn’t need a king. Their king, YHWH, has always acted for them.

Samuel reminds them of YHWH’s faithfulness to them throughout their history. The real audience for this sermon are the exiles in Babylon, who know how they were let down by their kings. The sermon is composed by the Deuteronomists. We might compare this to the sermon preached by Joshua (Joshua 23-24), and Solomon (1Kings 8:12-61). See also Judges 2:6 – 3:6.

Attention is drawn to the people’s infidelity (verse 9). For the story of Jabin of Hazor and Sisera see Judges 4-5. On the Philistines see Judges 3:31; 13-16. On Moab see Judges 3:12-30.

On the worship of ‘the Baals and Astartes’ (verse 10) see 1 Samuel 7 (also Judges 2:13, 10:6).

The story of Jerubbaal (Gideon) is found in Judges 6-8. On Barak see Judges 4-5. On Samson, see Judges 13-16.

Once again the wanting of a king is portrayed as a rejection of YHWH. Looking back over the destruction of Jerusalem, the Deuteronomists saw the monarchy, not as a blessing, but as a failure to believe that YHWH would care for them and deliver them.

The thunder and rain, unseasonable at the time of the wheat harvest, is portrayed as a sign that God is willing to respond to the prayer of his prophet. The point, once again, is that they didn’t need a king and were wrong not to trust YHWH by wanting to set up their own security.

¹⁰Then they cried to YHWH, and said, ‘We have sinned, because we have forsaken YHWH, and have served the Baals and the Astartes; but now rescue us out of the hand of our enemies, and we will serve you.’ ¹¹And YHWH sent Jerubbaal and Barak, and Jephthah, and Samson, and rescued you out of the hand of your enemies on every side; and you lived in safety. ¹²But when you saw that King Nahash of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, ‘No, but a king shall reign over us,’ though YHWH your God was your king. ¹³See, here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, YHWH has set a king over you.

¹⁴If you will fear YHWH and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of YHWH, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow YHWH your God, it will be well; ¹⁵but if you will not heed the voice of YHWH, but rebel against the commandment of YHWH, then the hand of YHWH will be against you and your king.

¹⁶Now therefore take your stand and see this great thing that YHWH will do before your eyes. ¹⁷Is it not the wheat harvest today? I will call upon YHWH, that he may send thunder and rain; and you shall know and see that the wickedness that you have done in the sight of YHWH is great in demanding a king for yourselves.” ¹⁸So Samuel called upon YHWH, and YHWH sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared YHWH and Samuel.

Serve YHWH with all your heart

¹⁹All the people said to Samuel, "Pray to YHWH your God for your servants, so that we may not die; for we have added to all our sins the evil of demanding a king for ourselves." ²⁰And Samuel said to the people, "Do not be afraid; you have done all this evil, yet do not turn aside from following YHWH, but serve YHWH with all your heart; ²¹and do not turn aside after useless things that cannot profit or save, for they are useless. ²²For YHWH will not cast away his people, for his great name's sake, because it has pleased YHWH to make you a people for himself.

²³Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against YHWH by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way. ²⁴Only fear YHWH, and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you. ²⁵But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king."

The people acknowledge their sin in wanting a king.

Samuel tells them to focus now on following YHWH's will and serving YHWH 'with all your heart'(verse 20).

He assures them that, even though they have been unfaithful, YHWH will never be unfaithful to his commitment to the people he has chosen as his own. We are reminded of Paul's words:

The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

– Romans 11:29

Samuel, too, will be faithful to the commission given him as a prophet. He will continue to intercede for them. This final speech of Samuel points forward to the role of the prophets under the monarchy: to intercede and to instruct.

The Deuteronomists are composing this text in exile, when the king has been 'swept away'. They see this is proof that the people have acted wickedly (verse 25).

Verse 1 is in the form that the Deuteronomists will use to introduce the subsequent kings of Israel (see, for example 1Kings 14:21). It lacks a specific number for Saul's age, and for the length of his reign. Presumably this is because the tradition did not include it. The Septuagint simply omitted the verse.

Chapter 13 introduces us to the military uprising of Israel against the Philistines who were the dominant power in the region. 'Michmash' is just north of Geba (Gibeah; see map page 62). For the first time we hear of Jonathan (verse 2), whom we are later told is Saul's son (verse 16).

Stirred by the defeat of their garrison at Geba, the Philistines mustered a much bigger force against the 'Hebrews' (so called in verse 3; see 4:6,9). 'Thousand' is to be understood as a military contingent (see 4:10).

'Gilgal' (verse 4) could refer to the town in the hill country (see 10:8; 11:14-15), or perhaps to the more famous shrine in the Jordan valley (see Joshua 4:19).

Numbers in epic scenes are indications of significance and power, not historical record.

'Beth-aven' (house of wickedness) is a term used by Hosea (4:15; 5:8; 10:5) to replace Bethel (house of God).

The Israelites flee before the Philistine threat (verses 6-7).

¹Saul was ... years old when he began to reign; and he reigned ... years over Israel.

²Saul chose three thousand out of Israel; two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and the hill country of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin; the rest of the people he sent home to their tents.

³Jonathan defeated the garrison of the Philistines that was at Geba; and the Philistines heard of it. And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, "Let the Hebrews hear!"

⁴When all Israel heard that Saul had defeated the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become odious to the Philistines, the army rallied behind Saul at Gilgal.

⁵The Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, three thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude; they came up and encamped at Michmash, to the east of Beth-aven. ⁶When the Israelites saw that they were in distress (for the troops were hard pressed), the people hid themselves in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns.

⁷Some Hebrews crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul was still at Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.

⁸He waited seven days, the time stipulated by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people began to slip away from Saul.

⁹So Saul said, "Bring the burnt offering here to me, and the communion offerings." And he offered the burnt offering.

¹⁰As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, Samuel arrived; and Saul went out to meet him and salute him. ¹¹Samuel said, "What have you done?" Saul replied, "When I saw that the people were slipping away from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines were mustering at Michmash, ¹²I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down upon me at Gilgal, and I have not entreated the favour of YHWH'; so I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering."

¹³Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of YHWH your God, which he commanded you. YHWH would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, ¹⁴but now your kingdom will not continue; YHWH has sought out a man after his own heart; and YHWH has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what YHWH commanded you."

It is typical of the mentality seen throughout the writings of the Deuteronomists to work from the assumption that it is ultimately God who controls what happens in history. Since Saul and his 'house' were later abandoned by God, a reason had to be found which kept YHWH's justice intact. This is the first of a number of sins committed by Saul that account for YHWH choosing to replace him by another. We find out later that it is David. The case against Saul here is anything but compelling. Saul's action appears appropriate. However, he didn't follow Samuel's instructions, which means that he did not obey YHWH.

Matters will develop in the following chapters (see chapter 15 for a doublet of this scene).

The effect of this story is to put the reader on the look out for Saul's faults as king and for the one who will replace him. Underlying the whole scene is the idea that leadership is something determined by God. Saul is rejected. He did not abide by the conditions of his appointment with YHWH's prophet, so he forfeits his appointment as king.

A deep valley separates Geba (Gibeah) to the south, and Michmash to the north (see also 13:2,5). The approximate locations for the other towns mentioned in the scene are shown in the map below.

Zeboim (verse 18) borders on Philistia. The Philistines could not be opposed on level ground because they could work iron – something that the Israelites at this stage could not do. They were able to forge chariot wheels. The memory of this is found in this scene. As is often the case the memory of battles is preserved in the oral tradition.

A shekel (verse 21) is about 12 grams.



15And Samuel left and went on his way from Gilgal. The rest of the people followed Saul to join the army; they went up from Gilgal toward Gibeah of Benjamin. Saul counted the people who were present with him, about six hundred men.

16Saul, his son Jonathan, and the people who were present with them stayed in Geba of Benjamin; but the Philistines encamped at Michmash.

17Raiders would come out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies; one company would take the Ophrah road towards the land of Shual, **18**another company would take the road heading toward Beth-horon, and another company turned toward the mountain that looks down upon the valley of Zeboim toward the wilderness.

19Now there was no smith to be found throughout all the land of Israel; for the Philistines said, "The Hebrews must not make swords or spears for themselves"; **20**so all the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen their ploughshare, mattocks, axes, or sickles; **21**The charge was two-thirds of a shekel for the ploughshares and for the mattocks, and one-third of a shekel for sharpening the axes and for setting the goads.

22So on the day of the battle neither sword nor spear was to be found in the possession of any of the people with Saul and Jonathan; only Saul and his son Jonathan had them.

23Now a garrison of the Philistines had gone out to the pass of Michmash.

¹Jonathan son of Saul said to the servant who carried his armour, "Come, let us go over to the Philistine garrison on the other side." But he did not tell his father.

²Saul was staying in the outskirts of Gibeah under the pomegranate tree that is at the threshing-floor; and with him were about six hundred men, ³along with Ahijah son of Ahitub, Ikabod's brother, son of Phinehas son of Eli, the priest of YHWH in Shiloh, wearing an ephod. Now the people did not know that Jonathan had gone.

⁴In the pass which Jonathan planned to cross to reach the Philistine garrison, there were rocky crags, one on each side. One of them was Bozez, and the other Seneh. ⁵One crag rose on the north in front of Michmash, and the other on the south in front of Geba.

⁶Jonathan said to the servant who carried his armour, "Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that YHWH will act for us; for nothing can hinder YHWH from saving by many or by few." ⁷His armour-bearer said to him, "Do all that your mind inclines to. I am with you; as your mind is, so is mine." ⁸Then Jonathan said, "Now we will cross over to those men and will show ourselves to them. ⁹If they say to us, 'Wait until we come to you,' then we will stand still in our place, and we will not go up to them. ¹⁰But if they say, 'Come up to us,' then we will go up; for YHWH has given them into our hand. That will be the sign for us."

It was Saul's son, Jonathan, who 'defeated the garrison of the Philistines that was at Geba' (13:3). Here we have a daring plan to attack the Philistines who were camped on the north side of the valley.

Among Saul's troops is Ahijah, nephew of Eli's grandson, Ikabod (see 4:21). The fact that he is 'wearing an ephod' identifies him as a priest (see 2:28 where the young Samuel is described in the same way). For a description of an ephod see Exodus 28. It appears to have been an apron-like garment. Attached to it was a breast piece containing the Urim and Thummim, which were used to divine the will of YHWH (see 30:7-8).

Jonathan's plan is humanly impossible, which helps underline the miraculous nature of his success.

The Philistines did not practise circumcision (verse 6).

Confident in the impossibility of Jonathan and his armour-bearer being able to climb up the precipice, the Philistines mockingly invite them to cross over the ravine. Not only do the two men succeed in crossing, the terrain itself enables them to achieve a surprise attack.

¹¹When the two of them showed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines, the Philistines said, "Look, Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden themselves." ¹²The men of the garrison hailed Jonathan and his armour-bearer, saying, "Come up to us, and we will show you something." Jonathan said to his armour-bearer, "Come up after me; for YHWH has given them into the hand of Israel."

¹³Then Jonathan climbed up on his hands and feet, with his armour-bearer following after him. The Philistines fell before Jonathan, and his armour-bearer, coming after him, killed them.

¹⁴In that first slaughter Jonathan and his armour-bearer killed about twenty men within an area about half a furrow long in an acre of land. ¹⁵There was a panic in the camp, in the field, and among all the people; the garrison and even the raiders trembled; the earth quaked; and it became a very great panic.

¹⁶Saul's lookouts in Gibeah of Benjamin were watching as the multitude was surging back and forth.

¹⁷Then Saul said to the troops that were with him, "Call the roll and see who has gone from us." When they had called the roll, Jonathan and his armour-bearer were not there. ¹⁸Saul said to Ahijah, "Bring the ephod." (For it was he who was wearing the ephod at that time in Israel.) ¹⁹While Saul was talking to the priest, the tumult in the camp of the Philistines increased more and more; and Saul said to the priest, "Withdraw your hand." ²⁰Then Saul and all the people who were with him rallied and went into the battle; and every sword was against the other, so that there was very great confusion.

Saul calls for the ephod (following the Septuagint; the Hebrew has 'ark') so as to discern the will of YHWH. However he does not wait for the results of the inquiry, but decides to act on his own initiative (verse 19). This yet another indication of his self-reliance, and failure to wait on YHWH.

²¹Now the Hebrews who previously had been with the Philistines and had gone up with them into the camp turned and joined the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan. ²²Likewise, when all the Israelites who had gone into hiding in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines were fleeing, they too followed closely after them in the battle. ²³So YHWH gave Israel the victory that day.

The battle passed beyond Beth-aven, and the troops with Saul numbered altogether about ten thousand men. The battle spread out over the hill country of Ephraim.

²⁴Now Saul committed a very rash act on that day. He had laid an oath on the troops, saying, "Cursed be anyone who eats food before it is evening and I have been avenged on my enemies." So none of the troops tasted food. ²⁵The troops came upon a honeycomb; and there was honey on the ground. ²⁶but they did not put their hands to their mouths, for they feared the oath. ²⁷But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the troops with the oath; so he extended the staff that was in his hand, and dipped the tip of it in the honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his eyes brightened. ²⁸Then one of the soldiers said, "Your father put the troops under oath, saying, 'Cursed be anyone who eats food this day.'" ²⁹Then Jonathan said, "My father has troubled the land; see how my eyes have brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. ³⁰How much better if today the troops had eaten freely of the spoil taken from their enemies; for then the slaughter among the Philistines would have been greater."

The 'Hebrews' (called such by the Philistines because of their language) take the occasion to rise up against their Philistine overlords. It is YHWH (verse 23), who gives victory to this poorly armed people, vastly outnumbered by the Philistines.

Beth-aven (see 13:5).

Saul's purpose in demanding his troops take an oath to fast is to turn the battle into a holy war, consecrating it to YHWH. Adding a realistic touch the text sees this as folly, for it weakened the troops and lessened the victory. The effect of this story is, once again, to put Saul in a bad light and to focus rather on his son, Jonathan.

Aijalon is 30ks west of Geba, as the mountain slopes give way to the plain. The impression given is that the hill country is cleared of the Philistines.

With the end of the period bound by their vow the soldiers indulge in a feast, ignoring regulations of the cult. The blood should have been separated out (see Deuteronomy 12:16).

Saul puts a stop to this by erecting an altar to offer proper sacrifice (see 6:14).

Saul's idea is the correct one from a military perspective. The interference of the priest, alerts us to the fact that, though Saul is trying to do what YHWH wants, YHWH does not want to extend Saul's success.

YHWH's silence demands an explanation.

³¹After they had struck down the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon, the troops were very faint; ³²so the troops flew upon the spoil, and took sheep and oxen and calves, and slaughtered them on the ground; and the troops ate them with the blood. ³³Then it was reported to Saul, "Look, the troops are sinning against YHWH by eating with the blood." And he said, "You have dealt treacherously; roll a large stone before me here." ³⁴Saul said, "Disperse yourselves among the troops, and say to them, 'Let all bring their oxen or their sheep, and slaughter them here, and eat; and do not sin against YHWH by eating with the blood.'" So all of the troops brought their oxen with them that night, and slaughtered them there. (³⁵And Saul built an altar to YHWH; it was the first altar that he built to YHWH.)

³⁶Then Saul said, "Let us go down after the Philistines by night and despoil them until the morning light; let us not leave one of them." They said, "Do whatever seems good to you." But the priest said, "Let us approach God here." ³⁷So Saul inquired of God, "Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into the hand of Israel?" But he did not answer him that day. ³⁸Saul said, "Come here, all you leaders of the people; and let us find out how this sin has arisen today. ³⁹For as YHWH lives who saves Israel, even if it is in my son Jonathan, he shall surely die!" But there was no one among all the people who answered him. ⁴⁰He said to all Israel, "You shall be on one side, and I and my son Jonathan will be on the other side." The people said to Saul, "Do what seems good to you."

⁴¹Then Saul said, "YHWH God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant today? If this guilt is in me or in my son Jonathan, YHWH God of Israel, give Urim; but if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim." And Jonathan and Saul were indicated by the lot, but the people were cleared. ⁴²Then Saul said, "Cast the lot between me and my son Jonathan." And Jonathan was taken. ⁴³Then Saul said to Jonathan, "Tell me what you have done." Jonathan told him, "I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand; here I am, I will die." ⁴⁴Saul said, "God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan!"

⁴⁵Then the people said to Saul, "Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great victory in Israel? Far from it! As YHWH lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground; for he has worked with God today." So the people rescued Jonathan, and he did not die.

⁴⁶Then Saul withdrew from pursuing the Philistines; and the Philistines went to their own place.

⁴⁷When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side

against Moab,
against the Ammonites,
against Edom,
against the king of Zobah,
and against the Philistines;

wherever he turned he routed them.

⁴⁸He did valiantly,
and struck down the Amalekites,
and rescued Israel out of the hands of those
who plundered them.

Once again the priestly ephod comes into play. If the Urim (the word begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet) is picked God's response is 'guilty'. If the Thummim (the word begins with the last letter of the alphabet) is picked God's response is innocent. The lot falls on Jonathan, who tasted honey during the period when the army was committed to fast. We already know that Jonathan acted without knowledge of the oath.

We have here a conflict of principles. On the one hand we have the expectation of divine displeasure at the failure to honour an oath. On the other we have evidence of divine approval of Jonathan by his 'accomplishing this great victory' (verse 45). The people carry the day, a further indication of the weakness of Saul's authority.

The hill country has been cleared, but the Philistines are not pursued and remain a threat.

Verses 47-48 offer a summary of the wars waged by Saul to the east (Zoah, Ammon, Moab and Edom - see map opposite); to the south against the Amalekites, and to the west against the Philistines.

Ishyo is 'Ishbaal' (1Chronicles 8:33) = 'Ishbosheth' (2Samuel 2:8). Michal will become David's wife (see chapters 18-19). Saul's cousin, Abner (verse 51), will play an important part in the story till he is assassinated (see 2Samuel 3:25).

⁴⁹Now the sons of Saul were Jonathan, Ishyo, and Malchishua; and the names of his two daughters were these: the name of the firstborn was Merab, and the name of the younger, Michal. ⁵⁰The name of Saul's wife was Ahinoam daughter of Ahimaaz.

And the name of the commander of his army was Abner son of Ner, Saul's uncle;

(⁵¹Kish was the father of Saul, and Ner the father of Abner was the son of Abiel.)

⁵²There was hard fighting against the Philistines all the days of Saul; and when Saul saw any strong or valiant warrior, he took him into his service.



Saul spares Agag and the best animals

¹Samuel said to Saul, "It was I whom YHWH sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to what I have to say. ²Thus says YHWH of hosts, 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. ³Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

⁴So Saul summoned the people, and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand foot soldiers, and ten thousand soldiers of Judah. ⁵Saul came to the city of the Amalekites and lay in wait in the wadi.

⁶Saul said to the Qenites, "Go! Leave! Withdraw from among the Amalekites, or I will destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt." So the Qenites withdrew from the Amalekites.

⁷Saul defeated the Amalekites, from wadi as far as Shur, on the eastern border of Egypt. ⁸He took King Agag of the Amalekites alive, but utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. ⁹Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed.

Samuel relays to Saul YHWH's will to destroy the Amalekites, who were the chief enemy of the Israelites during their journey in the wilderness (see Deuteronomy 25:17-19). We recall the following from Exodus:

YHWH will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.

– Exodus 17:16

The Amalekites are to be utterly destroyed. This dreadful notion is frequent in the writings of the Deuteronomists (see Deuteronomy 3:6; 7:2; 13:16; 20:17; 31:5). It portrays YHWH as a ruthless warrior God, determined to destroy those who oppose his chosen people. However, the notion arose later as a discouragement against waging war to promote personal gain, since all the spoils of war had to be offered up to YHWH. It also witnesses to the Deuteronomic warning against compromise with local tribes who worshipped pagan gods. It was a way of insisting on the importance of religious purity, rather than a record of God's will.

'Telaim'(verse 4) is possibly 'Telem', a settlement in the South (the Negeb) allotted to Judah (see Joshua 15:24). The 'Qenites'(verse 6), were a pastoral community occupying the wilderness south and east of Beersheba in the Negeb in southern Judah. Because of their links with Moses (see Judges 4:11), they were considered as friends by the Israelites. Moses' father-in-law was a Qenite (see Judges 1:16).

'Shur' is mentioned in Genesis 25:18 as the region in which the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar, settled.

'Agag'(see Numbers 24:7, 23) features also in the story of Esther. The arch enemy of the Jews, Haman, is called an 'Agagite'(Esther 3:1).

Saul is portrayed as taking spoils of war, thus failing to obey YHWH's will as conveyed by Samuel.

Here is another reason to account for the fact that Saul's kingship was not passed on to his son. YHWH rejects Saul for his failure to obey.

'Carmel' (verse 12) refers, not to the more famous Carmel on the coast of the Mediterranean in northern Israel, but to a town in the southern Judean wilderness. It will be mentioned again as the home of Abigail the wife of David, formerly married to Nabal (1Samuel 27:3; 30:5; 2Samuel 23:35; 1 Chronicles 11:37).

In verse 13 we are following the Septuagint. Saul's intention to offer sacrifice to YHWH (verse 15) does not excuse his failure to obey.

On verse 17 see 9:21.

¹⁰The word of YHWH came to Samuel:

¹¹"I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands." Samuel was angry; and he cried out to YHWH all night.

¹²Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul, and Samuel was told, "Saul went to Carmel, where he set up a monument for himself, and on returning he passed on down to Gilgal." ¹³When Samuel came to Saul, he had just offered up as burnt offerings to YHWH the first parts of the booty he had taken from Amalek, and when Samuel drew near him, Saul said to him, "May you be blessed by YHWH; I have carried out the command of YHWH." ¹⁴But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?"

¹⁵Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the cattle, to sacrifice to YHWH your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed."

¹⁶Then Samuel said to Saul, "Stop! I will tell you what YHWH said to me last night." He replied, "Speak." ¹⁷Samuel said, "Though you were little in your own eyes, did you not become head of the tribes of Israel? YHWH anointed you king over Israel. ¹⁸And YHWH sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go, utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' ¹⁹Why then did you not obey the voice of YHWH? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do what was evil in the sight of YHWH?" ²⁰Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of YHWH, I have gone on the mission on which YHWH sent me, I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites.

²¹But from the spoil the people took sheep and cattle, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to YHWH your God at Gilgal."

Obedience is more important than sacrifice

²²And Samuel said, "Has YHWH as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of YHWH? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.

²³For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of YHWH, he has also rejected you from being king."

²⁴Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of YHWH and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. ²⁵Now therefore, I pray, pardon my sin, and return with me, so that I may worship YHWH."

²⁶Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of YHWH, and YHWH has rejected you from being king over Israel." ²⁷As Samuel turned to go away, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. ²⁸And Samuel said to him, "YHWH has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this very day, and has given it to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you". (²⁹Yes, and the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind.) ³⁰Then Saul said, "I have sinned; yet honour me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, so that I may worship YHWH your God." ³¹So Samuel turned back after Saul; and Saul worshipped YHWH.

³²Then Samuel said, "Bring Agag king of the Amalekites here to me." And Agag came to him haltingly. Agag said, "Would death have been as bitter as this?" ³³But Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so your mother shall be childless among women." And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before YHWH in Gilgal. ³⁴Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah.

³⁵Samuel never saw Saul again before he died; He grieved over Saul, that YHWH had repented of making Saul king over Israel.

Samuel's judgment makes it clear that doing the will of God is more basic than any cultic action, however piously intended.

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

– Hosea 6:6

On the same topic see Isaiah 66:2-4. 'Idolatry' (verse 23) translates תִּרְפִּים [t'rapim']. These were Canaanite household gods (see also 1Samuel 19:13).

Saul acknowledges his sin and asks forgiveness (verses 24-26). YHWH who chose Saul (10:24), now rejects him (verse 23).

For the second time we have a reference to someone who is to replace Saul as king (verse 28; see 13:14). The compromise (verses 30-31) explains why Saul continued to be king till his death.

We come to the end of the account of Saul's rise to power and his fall (chapters 9-15). The Deuteronomists have edited an earlier prophet version of ancient legends attached to the figure of Israel's first king, and have used it to help understand the destruction of Jerusalem. They hold the kings largely responsible, because, like Saul, they tried to be self-reliant, and they failed to listen to YHWH's will mediated to them through the prophets.