

King Saul's Death

Commentary for August 1, 2014 — And the Aftermath on Israel and Judah

This month's article is the beginning of a series on the history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Under King Saul all the tribes were loosely confederated into occasional unity when various crises arose. The "[August 2014 Newsletter](#)" will explain more about this new series. Upon the death of King Saul and his eldest son Jonathan, Saul's heir apparent,¹ David composed a song of lament which praises the two dead men:

"Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions."

• **2 Samuel 1:23**

"Eagles" is the plural of the Hebrew root *neshar*. Considering all 26 uses, "vulture" is a better translation.² These birds have excellent and seemingly amazing eyesight, and are fast fliers, as the passage says. Eagles gather whenever they sight and smell dead, dying, or weak prey (see Job 39:27–30). The seeming weakness of vultures (compared to a predatory eagle, like the bald or golden eagle in the Americas), is offset with David's statement that Saul and Jonathan were "**stronger than lions.**" Even strong lions die.

Lions in the promised land are first mentioned during the time of Samson (Judges 14:5), later during the time of David (1 Samuel 17:34–37; 2 Samuel 23:20), and years later when a lion attacked a disobedient prophet of God (1 Kings 13:23–28) and another man, during the reign of King Ahab of Judah (1 Kings 20:36). These lions lived in the lush Jordan River valley area and east of the Jordan. They were driven out of the underbrush when the river flooded in spring, as when lions attacked people brought by Assyria to settle in the land of Samaria, the northern Israelite kingdom (2 Kings 17:25–26).

"In the Holy Land the lion must have been formerly common, judging from the familiarity and frequency with which it is mentioned, as well as from actual reference to its places of abode, both in the names of places and in various passages: 'He shall come up like a lion from the swelling of the Jordan' (Jeremiah 49:19), the meaning being that in time of floods his lair would be uninhabitable; and again, 'A voice of the roaring of young lions; for the pride of Jordan (the cane-brake) is spoiled' (Zechariah 11:3)."

• **Henry Hart, *Animals*, p. 146**³

All the things King Saul strove for in his 40 years of being King of Israel, his fears of being

¹ Jonathan was to be heir only in Saul's hopes. God determined that David would succeed Saul.

² In Micah 1:16 eagles (*neshirim*) are described as "bald," meaning without feathers on their heads. This is a characteristic of a vulture in Palestine. (The bald eagle in the Americas only appears to be bald because of its white head.)

³ Henry Chichester Hart, *The Animals Mentioned in the Bible* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1888), p. 146.

supplanted by David, the fears for the death of his dynasty as well as his own life — all these hopes and fears perished with the death of Saul, and the deaths of Saul's son Jonathan, plus two other sons, and the devastating defeat of the army of Israel.

With the death of King Saul and the destruction of the possible dynasty begun by Saul, Israel saw the death of a lion among men. The tribes of Israel needed another lion to replace the fallen king. David, chosen and anointed by God, was another lion among men. Yet David was every bit as vicious as a lion. Note how God considers him.

“But the word of YHWH came to me, saying, You have shed blood abundantly, and have made great wars: you shall not build an house unto my name, because you have shed much blood upon the earth in my sight.”

• **1 Chronicles 22:8**

“But God said unto me, ‘You shall not build an house for my name, [why?] because you have been a man of war, and have shed blood. Howbeit [or, nevertheless] YHWH God of Israel chose me ... to be king over Israel ... he liked me to make me king over all Israel.”

• **1 Chronicles 28:3–4**

With Saul dead, David began his rise to power supported by God. This reminds me of an epigram: “How odd of God / to choose the Jews.” Similarly, how odd of God to choose a man like David, “**a man of war**” who “**shed blood abundantly**” and “**made great wars.**” Not only did David “**shed much blood upon the earth in my sight,**” but he did these things in the sight of God! Still, David says God “**chose me**” and “**liked me.**”

Is God a monster because of the kings He selects as rulers? Irrational men like Saul? Bloody men like David? God is not a monster, but it seems so at times. We need to gain more knowledge of God as presented through the histories of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah:

“That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.”

• **Ephesians 1:17**

“That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ.”

• **Colossians 2:2**

Enjoy the article “Israel and Judah: 1. Saul and David,” and remember the words of the *qohleth*, the preacher, author of Ecclesiastes: “... **for a living dog is better than a dead lion**” (Ecclesiastes 9:4). Why is a living dog better than a dead lion?

“For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them [meaning the dead] is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever [*olam*, for the age] in any thing that is done under the sun.”

• **Ecclesiastes 9:5–6**

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