

SO FELL THE HOUSE OF SAUL

Saul and Jonathan's Death at Mount Gilboa

David, who had faithfully served Saul as one of his field commanders, had been forced into exile and aligned himself with Israel's enemies, the Philistines (1 Sam 27:1–4). He had earned the trust of Achish son of Maoach, the ruler of Gath and become an integral part of his forces (1 Sam 27:12). Meanwhile, it seems that Saul was slowly descending into the insanity that seems to have threatened him for most of his reign. The Philistine forces were planning a campaign in the Jezreel Valley in the north, but they refused to allow David to participate in the campaigns against Saul, because they still believed his allegiance was to Saul (1 Sam 29: 3–5). Returning to Ziklag (a town on the border of the Philistine and Israelite territories), where he had established his home, David found that Amalekite raiders had come up and burned the city, capturing his two wives (1 Sam 30:4–5). David fell on the raiders, retook everything that they had carried away. They had raided the borders of Judah as well, and he returned to the Judahites all they had lost, winning their allegiances.

During the ensuing battle, Saul and his forces were roundly defeated. He and his three oldest sons (**Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua**) were killed in the battle and their bodies desecrated (1 Sam 31:1–13). Had David been there, it is likely he would have seen that Saul was spared, and certainly he would have tried to protect Jonathan, who was his closest friend. Instead, the decapitated bodies of Saul and his sons were exposed on the walls of Beth-shan for seven days until the warriors of the town of Jabesh-Gilead raided Beth-shan, took their bodies down and carried them back to Jabesh. There they burned the bodies and buried Saul and his sons's bones.

It took three days for the news to arrive in Ziklag, and David received it with a mixture of grief and rage. When the messenger claimed to have killed Saul, David had him put to death. Then, he composed a lament for Saul and Jonathan. After traveling to the Judahite city of Hebron, David was anointed king of the house of Judah, and his first act was to extend his thanks to the men of Jabesh-Gilead.

David's Consolidation of Power

Meanwhile, Saul's uncle **Abner**, who had been the commander of Saul's armies installed Saul's remaining son **Ishbosheth** as king of the remaining Israelite lands. It appears that Abner may have had plans to rule through the forty-year-old Ishbosheth (2 Sam 3:6–11), and when Ishbosheth challenged him, Abner attempted to switch sides and support David. Abner attempted to get into David's good graces by persuading a number of tribal elders to support David, but David's cousin **Joab**, who was commander of David's armies, knew Abner was not to be trusted. Abner had killed Joab's brother Asahel, and Joab and his remaining brother Abishai ambushed the older man and killed him (2 Sam 3:26–31).

Hearing about Abner's death, Ishbosheth feared the worst. He began to unravel, like his father had before him. Two of his captains assassinated him while he was sleeping, beheaded him and carried the head to David

as a trophy. Outraged by their actions, David had the two assassins executed and dismembered, their bodies displayed in Hebron as a warning to those who would attack the remaining members of the House of Saul (2 Sam 4:1–12). There were at least seven more illegitimate sons of Saul who survived this period, all of whom were later handed over to the Gibeonites and executed because of one of Saul's unjust acts (2 Sam 21:1–14).

The last member of Saul's house was Jonathan's crippled son **Mephibosheth**, who was only five years old when Saul and Jonathan died (2 Sam 4:4). Once he had consolidated his power, captured Jerusalem as his new capital, and pushed the Philistines back, David summoned this young man to his palace (2 Sam 9:1–13). Mephibosheth was five years old when Jonathan died, but by the time he was brought into David's household, he had a young son (2 Sam 9:12). This means Mephibosheth must have been around twenty years of age. David spent seven years in Hebron, and we can assume it was probably another seven or eight years before he summoned Mephibosheth to Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:4–5).

David assumed power at the age of thirty. He appears to have devoted the half of his reign to the process of consolidating and securing the kingdom. He and Joab dealt with the threat of Saul's house, then they dealt with the Philistines on his western border (2 Sam 5:17–25), the Arameans and Moabites to his north and east (2 Sam 8:1–12), and the Edomites to his south (2 Sam 8:13). He also pacified the local Canaanite tribes through both conquest (2 Sam 10:6–12) and adjudicating past injustices (2 Sam 21:1–10). Joab and Abishai then conducted a massive campaign against the Ammonites in the Transjordan (2 Sam 10:1–19). He established Jerusalem as his capital, and he brought the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant there (2 Sam 6:1–7:29).

David's Final Years

It was probably around his twentieth year that David made the fatal mistake of remaining in his palace while the armies went to war. While Joab led the armies against the Ammonites, David discovered **Bathsheba**, the young wife of one of his warriors, a Hittite named **Uriah**. He seduced her, and when she revealed she was pregnant, he eventually had Joab put Uriah in the front lines of the battle to be killed (2 Sam 11:1–27). The prophet **Nathan** condemned David, who repented, but he was punished with the loss of four of his sons. These tragedies mark the remainder of his reign, and the Book of Samuel records no military victories after the Ammonites.

First, the infant born to Bathsheba died (2 Sam 12:15–23). Then his second son Absalom killed David's oldest son Amnon in retaliation for the rape of Absalom's sister Tamar (2 Sam 13:1–33). Absalom eventually raised a rebellion against David, and Joab killed him while Absalom was helpless and trapped (2 Sam 18:1–18). Finally, his third oldest son Adonijah attempted to seize the throne in David's last year, and **Solomon**, David's appointed successor, had to have him executed (1 Kgs 2:19–25).

David died after reigning for forty years, which meant he had lived to be seventy years of age. His youngest son, Solomon, succeeded him as king of Judah and Israel. It is likely, given the way that Solomon is presented in 1 Kings 1–2, that Solomon was perhaps under the age of twenty and possibly even younger when he took the throne. Solomon finished what his father started, building both a magnificent temple and an expansive personal palace in Jerusalem. Although Solomon's son **Rehoboam** allowed the northern tribes to break off and form their own Hebrew kingdom (usually just called Israel), David's successors reigned over Jerusalem and Judah until 586 BC, a dynasty spanning four hundred years. This was an extraordinarily long time for a single family to rule a kingdom.