

CHAPTER 1

Israel's United Monarchy

The Biblical Story

Before we begin our critical, scientific inquiry into the history of Saul, David, and Solomon, let us run through the main elements of the biblical story itself.

THE TIME OF THE JUDGES: BEFORE THERE WERE KINGS

As the Bible tells it, before the rise of the monarchy, the tribes of Israel are scattered in many small villages throughout the highlands, without central leadership. Nevertheless, when Israelite tribes are pressed by their enemies, charismatic leaders from different tribes, known as *shofetim*, “chieftains” or “judges,” rise to the task, leading the Israelites in battle against their foes.

Thus, when the Moabite king Eglon attacks Israel, Ehud from the tribe of Benjamin assassinates him. Gideon, from the tribe of Manasseh, fights off Midianite raiders, while Jephthah, from the Gilead, leads the Israelites in battle against the Ammonites.

Each battle account generally mentions a tribe or so specifically, implying that the bulk of the fighting is carried out by the locals facing down a threat. The most extreme example of the limited scope of the battle is Samson from the coastal tribe of Dan, who fights a private war against the Philistines with no Israelite combatants other than himself.

The war against the Canaanite city of Hazor and its powerful general, Sisera, is atypical since the nominal leader of Israel in this account is Deborah from the tribe of Ephraim, which is far south of Hazor. Moreover, in the song of Deborah (Judges 5), she mentions multiple tribes – though not all twelve – that assist in the campaign. Even so, the leader of the battle is Barak from the northern tribe of Naphtali, and the narrative in

Judges 4 singles out this tribe and that of Zebulun, also northern, as the main combatants.

Leadership in this period emerged on an ad hoc basis, with charismatic leaders from varying tribes appearing and disappearing over time. Moreover, the book of Judges references two separate civil wars emerging from inner tribal conflicts, and in its final chapters, laments, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit."

SAMUEL AND THE RISE OF THE MONARCHY

Israel's final "judge" is an Ephraimite prophet named Samuel, the first-born of Hannah – the (until then) barren wife of an Ephraimite man called Elkanah – who devotes him to the shrine in Shiloh. There he grows up under the tutelage of the priest Eli, who serves as Israel's judge. Eli's sons are killed in battle with the Philistines, and soon after, Eli himself dies and Samuel takes the reins.

When Samuel himself reaches old age, he wishes to transmit the "judgeship" to his sons, but the elders of Israel reject them as corrupt. Instead, the Israelites want Samuel to appoint a king, like other groups have, to rule over them and lead them in battles; the Israelites were hard-pressed by the Philistines both before and after the time of Samuel.

God tells Samuel that, while the request is offensive, Samuel should comply. Samuel warns the Israelites of the dangers they face as a consequence of the powers a king will have over them. The Israelites insist, and Samuel capitulates. The chosen king is Saul son of Kish from the tribe of Benjamin in southern Samaria, just north of Jerusalem.

THE REIGN OF SAUL

Saul's first challenge is when Nahash ("Snake" in Hebrew), the king of Ammon, besieges the Israelite town of Jabesh-gilead – located in the Gilead in northern Transjordan – cruelly insisting that each man gouge out his right eye. The people of Jabesh-gilead send messengers all over Israel to see if anyone can come to their rescue.

As Saul returns from plowing his field, he hears the story and is so outraged that he slices the yoke of his oxen into pieces and sends each to

a different tribe of Israel with the message “this is what will happen to your cattle” if you don’t come and fight the Ammonites. Saul musters the troops and they roundly defeat Nahash’s army in battle. The people are jubilant, and they follow this victory up with a public ceremony in Gilgal, in which Samuel crowns Saul.

The baton is now turned over to Saul, who begins his reign with a war against the Philistines, Israel’s main foe. By this time, the Philistines have taken control over the highlands – part of their success is credited to their monopoly over smithing, leaving the Israelites with hardly any weapons – and have even established garrisons in the Benjaminite tribal area at the heart of the Israelite territory. Saul’s son, Jonathan, strikes the first blow against the enemy in Geba. In a feat of heroics, Jonathan and his arms-bearer defeat a Philistine garrison on their own, after which Saul leads the troops into battle and the Philistines retreat in a panic.

Saul next turns his attention to another enemy of Israel, the Amalekites, whose city Samuel commands him to utterly destroy. After warning his Kenite allies to leave the city, Saul carries out the attack as commanded, captures the city, and chases down the Amalekites to the border of Egypt.

While militarily Saul is quite successful, not all is well between him and Samuel. Twice Saul violates Samuel’s commands – once in Gilgal when Saul did not wait for Samuel and made a sacrifice on his own, and again when Saul spared the Amalekite king and allowed his men to take some animals as spoil. As a result of these sins, Samuel declares that Saul will not establish a dynasty and that God will give the throne to someone else. Subsequently, the spirit of God leaves Saul, and for the rest of his life, Saul suffers from periodic bouts of paranoid depression, which leads to the hiring of a young musician named David to play music to soothe Saul’s spirit.

When war next breaks out between Israel and the Philistines, it is in the territory of Judah to the south. Saul encamps in the Valley of Elah. A colossal man from the Philistine encampment named Goliath comes forward and challenges a champion from among the Israelites to fight him in single combat, but there are no takers.

This happens day after day until one day, David comes from his home in Bethlehem to bring provisions to his older brothers serving on the front lines. He hears Goliath’s taunt and announces that if no one else is willing,

he will fight the huge warrior himself with nothing but his regular clothing and a slingshot, as he has no weapon or armor. Seeing David, Goliath mocks the Israelites for sending a boy to do a man's job, but David slingshots Goliath in the head and kills him. After this, a battle takes place, and the Philistines are routed and flee to their home territory.

Impressed by David's bravery, Saul appoints him chief of his warriors, and Jonathan is so enamored with David that he gives him his cloak, sword, bow, and belt, and makes a friendship pact with him. David is a profound success as a warrior, and when the army returns from battle, women sing "Saul has killed his thousands and David his tens of thousands."

From here onward, Saul develops a paranoid hatred for David, who, unbeknownst to Saul, has already been anointed by Samuel as Israel's future king. Once, Saul throws a spear at David but misses, after which Saul decides on a subtler method. His daughter Michal loves David, and Saul promises her to him in marriage in exchange for 100 Philistine foreskins. Saul's hope is that David will get himself killed, but instead, David more than succeeds and marries Michal, to Saul's chagrin.

Next, Saul has his men surround David's home. Realizing her husband is in danger, Michal places a household idol with a net of goat's hair on its head in David's bed and covers it with a blanket while David escapes out a window and runs away to Samuel in Ramah. Ultimately, Jonathan warns David that Saul is not going to stop trying to kill him, and David flees south.

On his way, David stops at Nob, a city of priests, for provisions. When Saul eventually hears of this, he flies into a fit of rage, accusing his men of conspiring against him, and slaughters everyone in the town. The high priest's son, Abiathar, escapes the carnage, and runs away to David with the ephod oracle.

Meanwhile, David heads to Philistine Gath for refuge, but is soon recognized as one of the Philistines' mortal enemies. Always quick on his feet, David pretends to be a crazy person, scratching the walls and drooling, and King Achish throws him out, quipping that his quota of crazies has already been filled.

With no place to go, David makes his base in a cave near Adullam, where the Judean highlands and lowlands meet. Others who are in dire straits and wish to live outside of society join him. Thus, David is quickly

transformed into the leader of a band of outlaws who offers protection – real and what appears to be Mafia-style – to Judah’s shepherds.

At one point, David hears that the Philistines have besieged the nearby town of Keilah. He goes to Keilah and assists the people of the town. Realizing that the people will inevitably turn him over to the king, he leaves the town and heads for the wilderness. There, Saul pursues him time and again, continually helped by locals who report sightings of David’s band.

Thinking that it would only be a matter of time before Saul catches up with him, David (again) goes to King Achish of Gath and pledges loyalty as a vassal. Achish grants David the city of Ziklag to rule and David promises to give Achish a cut of the booty whenever he raids. While David pretends to be raiding Israelite villages in Judah, in practice, he limits his raids to non-Israelite clans such as the Amalekites and Geshurites.

Meanwhile, Saul prepares for a major battle with these same Philistines in the Jezreel Valley. David accompanies Achish into war against Saul, but when the Philistine officers object, saying David cannot be trusted to fight his own people, Achish sends him back to Ziklag, where he battles Amalekite raiders.

The Philistines win the Jezreel Valley battle, and Saul’s last stand is upon Mount Gilboa on the valley’s southern border. Finding himself alone and his sons already dead, Saul falls on his sword to avoid becoming a living trophy, and his arms-bearer does the same. When the Philistines find Saul and Jonathan’s bodies, they impale them on the walls of Beth-Shean. Late at night, the men of Jabesh-gilead, whom Saul had saved years before, sneak their bodies down, cremate them, and bury their bones.

As should be clear from this summary, the biblical account of Saul is chock-full of personal details about his life, battles, family, and personality, but very sparse on concrete information. When describing Saul’s inner circle, other than listing the names of his wives and children, the text names only one official, his general, Abner, who was also his first cousin. We don’t even know how long Saul ruled, as the verse that summarizes this information is textually corrupt (1 Samuel 13:1).¹

¹ The verse says that he was one year old when he came to power and that his reign lasted two years. This is obviously a scribal error.

We are on a little better footing when it comes to the geographical scope of Saul's kingdom. Although he is the king of all twelve tribes of Israel, in practice, the region under his direct control is more circumscribed. Saul rules from the territory of Benjamin but also controls the territory of Judah, and we read about his forays into the Shephelah, the Judean Desert, and the Negev. Northward, his practical control apparently ends at the northern edge of the Samarian highlands, where he is defeated by the Philistines. In the Transjordan, he is described as winning a decisive battle as far north as Jabesh-gilead.

THE REIGN OF DAVID

David is in the town of Ziklag when he hears about the death of Saul from an Amalekite battlefield scavenger. The man tells David that he, the Amalekite, dealt Saul the final blow at the king's own behest, and then presents David with Saul's crown and armband. David has him executed on the spot for killing the LORD's anointed, and he then composes a lamentation for Saul and Jonathan, the famous "how have the mighty fallen?!"

Even so, David interprets Saul's death as the awaited sign for him to take his rightful place as successor. Thus, David heads to the city of Hebron in Judah and is crowned king over the Israelites in that region, whence he rules for seven years. The rest of Israel, however, including Saul's general, Abner, support Ish-boshet (aka Ish-baal),² a surviving son of Saul.

Ish-boshet makes his capital in Mahanaim in northern Transjordan, but he is overall unsuccessful and soon loses even Abner's support. Abner tells David that he is ready to support him instead, to which David responds that Abner had better make sure to bring Michal along with him – she had been given to a man named Palti while David was an outlaw – and Abner complies. David's commander, Joab, however, cannot accept this rapprochement and, pretending to greet Abner, stabs him in the heart.

Soon after this, Ish-boshet is assassinated, leaving David as the de facto king of all Israel. Later, David impales many of Saul's (remaining) descendants to appease God's anger with Saul for having faithlessly

² Ish-boshet is a way for the biblical author to avoid using the name of a foreign deity (Baal) while denigrating both the god's name and the biblical character.

slaughtered Gibeonites, though he makes a pact with Mephiboshet, Jonathan's disabled son, offering him lifetime support.

David's first move as the king of all Israel is to conquer the Jebusite town of Jerusalem, which stands at the border between Judah (David's tribe) and the northern tribes. Jerusalem becomes his permanent capital, whence he rules for an additional thirty-three years.

After conquering the city, David builds himself a palace with cedar-wood, using carpenters sent to him by King Hiram of Tyre. David then decides to bring the Ark of the LORD into his new capital from its current home in Kiryat-yearim. He even contemplates building a temple, but Nathan the prophet tells him that this will be the job of his progeny.

Once David is established in Jerusalem, the Philistines attack, but David defeats them again and again. From this point on, the book of Samuel makes no further references to confrontations with the Philistines, implying that David finally neutralized Israel's most powerful foe. This success ushers in a long sequence of expansion wars.

David conquers Edom (in southern Transjordan) and stations garrisons there. He conquers Moab, just north of Edom, killing many of the males and making the rest vassal subjects. He then continues north, defeats the king of Zobah (in modern-day Syria), conquers Damascus, and makes a peace treaty with Toi, the king of Hamath.

Another major war begins in the east when Nahash, the king of Ammon, dies, and David sends official messengers to offer condolences to his son, Hanun. Suspicious of David's motives, the local officials convince the new king to humiliate the Israelite emissaries by cutting off parts of their beards and garments. Realizing that this would provoke David, the Ammonites prepare themselves by making an alliance with the Aramean kingdoms of Beth-Rechob, Zobah, Maacah, and Tov.

David of course takes the humiliation of his emissaries as an act of war and attacks Ammon's capital, Rabbah (modern-day Amman). Ammon's Aramean allies flee, and the Ammonites lock themselves in their city. David then leads his army against the Arameans, who surrender and become Israel's vassals. The Ammonite capital itself requires a protracted siege, and David heads home, leaving Joab to manage it.

It is during this siege that David, standing on the roof of his palace, sees Bathsheba bathing and has her brought to him. When Bathsheba

finds that she is pregnant, David tries to hide the affair, first by sending her husband, Uriah the Hittite, home to sleep with his wife, which he refuses to do, and then by having Joab make sure that Uriah dies in battle, after which David marries Bathsheba. The prophet Nathan tells David that he will suffer for this sin, and the baby born from the affair dies. This is followed by a cascade of tragedies.

David's eldest son, Amnon, finds himself attracted to his half sister Tamar and rapes her. Two years later, Absalom – Tamar's full brother – murders Amnon in retaliation. Absalom then escapes to the realm of his maternal grandfather, the king of Geshur, a small Aramean kingdom on Israel's northern border, and remains there for three years. After his return, he carries out a coup against his father, forcing David to flee.

David's army remains loyal, including a brigade of men led by Ittai the Gittite (i.e., from Philistine Gath). Thanks to spies David leaves in Jerusalem, he has time to escape to Mahanaim in the Transjordan, gather his allies, including Shobi, the king of Ammon, and get his troops ready for a confrontation. Absalom eventually arrives with his Judahite general, Amasa, but despite the large size of his army, it is no match for David's hardened veterans. Against David's orders, Joab kills Absalom and stabs Amasa in the heart.

As David is heading home, a fight breaks out between the Judahites and the Israelites, leading a man named Sheba ben Bichri to declare that Israel is done with David and that the Israelites should all return to their cities, which they do. Joab pursues Sheba as far north as Abel Beth-maachah, where a local woman has the rebel's head lobbed over the wall to avoid a siege.

All in all, the biblical David is a charismatic ruler who, in the course of his forty years of rule, creates a vast kingdom, subduing most of his neighbors. He rules over a large territory stretching from the Negev and Edom in the south, to parts of Syria in the north, including most of both the Cisjordan and the Transjordan.

The Bible tells us little about David's trade relations or building activities, other than the palace he builds in Jerusalem with the help of Tyrian artisans. Instead, the stories focus mostly on his military might, along with court politics and intrigues.

Unlike his predecessor, however, David has an administration extending beyond just immediate family and one general. 2 Samuel 8:16–18 mentions:

Joab son of Zeruiah over the (regular) army,³ Benaiah son of Jehoiada over the Kerethites and Pelethites (apparently battalions of foreign mercenaries), Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud as recorder, Zadok son of Ahitub and Ahimelek son of Abiathar as priests, Seraiah as secretary, and David's sons as priests (a similar, though not identical list appears in 2 Samuel 20:23–26).

THE REIGN OF SOLOMON

When David is upon his deathbed, his eldest surviving son, Adonijah, holds a feast with Joab and Abiathar the priest in attendance and declares himself heir to the throne. Back in the palace, however, Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan convince David – truly or falsely – that he had promised Bathsheba that her son Solomon would be heir. David agrees to this and Solomon is crowned that very day with the further support of the general Benaiah, the priest Zadok, and, of course, Nathan.

David dies soon after, and Solomon, following his father's advice, has Joab killed, as well as a Benjaminite man named Shimei, who had cursed David during his retreat from Absalom. Solomon also banishes Abiathar and, after Adonijah expresses interest in marrying one of David's former concubines (Abishag), Solomon has him killed as well.

Solomon then goes to the worship site in Gibeon. That night, God comes to him in a dream and asks what he wishes. When Solomon requests wisdom, God grants it together with wealth and success.

Solomon becomes famous for his wisdom, his proverbs, and his vast knowledge of nature, including animals, fish, and trees. People from all over the world, including the Queen of Sheba, come to Jerusalem to hear his wisdom and to see his immense wealth.

Like his father, Solomon rules for forty years, but, unlike his father's reign, his reign is depicted as one of peace accompanied by great prosperity, extensive international trade, and widespread construction. No territorial expansion is attributed to him. Instead, over time, the territory he controls shrinks.

³ According to 1 Chronicles 2:15–16, Joab's mother, Zeruiah, was David's sister, making Joab and Abishai David's nephews. This would make Joab's appointment as general similar in nature to Saul's appointment of Abner, his first cousin, as general. Still, the book of Samuel never mentions this family connection.

Notably, the description of Solomon's reign includes much less personal information and court intrigue and far more technical details of his rule, his administration, and especially his building activities. His most extensive building projects are, naturally, in Jerusalem. In addition to city walls, Solomon builds a temple using imported cedar, gold trimmings, artistic tapestries, carvings, and other expensive touches. This takes him seven years. At the same time, he builds a much larger palace, which takes him thirteen years, and this too has elaborate features, including a huge, pillared house of cedar.

To accomplish these feats, Solomon makes use of Phoenician artisans from Tyre and imports cedar, which, according to 2 Chronicles 2:15, was brought by sea to the area of Jaffa and from there by land to Jerusalem. The expense is so great that Solomon needs to pay Tyre's King Hiram by gifting him a host of Israelite cities in the western Galilee.

Solomon also builds up other cities throughout the country such as Megiddo, Gezer, Hazor, Beth-horon, Tamar (Tadmor), and the Red Sea port city of Etzion geber. Some of these cities serve as administrative centers, others for tax collection, and yet others for trade, greatly increasing both Solomon's wealth and his fame. The trade is conducted in cooperation with the Tyrians, the renowned merchants and masters of the seas.

Solomon controls his kingdom and finances his activities through a sophisticated administration. 1 Kings 4:2–6 mentions the following ministers: Azariah son of Zadok, the priest; Elihoreph and Ahijah sons of Shisha, secretaries; Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud, recorder; Benaiah son of Jehoiada, commander of the army; Zadok and Abiathar, priests; Azariah son of Nathan, in charge of the district governors; Zabud son of Nathan – a priest and adviser to the king; Ahishar, palace administrator; and Adoniram son of Abda, in charge of forced labor.

A certain amount of continuity with David's court can be seen, as some positions already existed under David and some of the officials (or their fathers) even served under him, but there are also developments: The list is both longer, including more officials, and it is also more "unified." For example, we now have only one military commander. Moreover, the position of Azariah son of Nathan is classically bureaucratic, as he oversees twelve district governors (1 Kings 4:7–19), each, in turn, administering part of the country, extending well beyond the original territories of the Israelite

tribes. These twelve districts perform *corvée* labor to support the palace for a month out of the year, maintaining the king's large administration, lavish lifestyle, and constant building projects.

Solomon also marries scores of women, including the pharaoh's daughter, for whom he builds a separate palace. Some of these women have worship sites for their foreign gods. This angers Israel's God, YHWH, who rains political havoc down on Solomon, which characterizes his later years on the crown. First, Hadad of Edom rebels against Solomon. Next, Rezon the Aramean rebels against Solomon's ally, Hadadezer king of Zobah, and as part of his rebellion, Rezon takes Damascus away from Israel and becomes an enemy of Solomon.

Most significantly, God sends the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh to tell an Ephraimite man named Jeroboam that God is tearing away the kingdom from Solomon's family and giving it to him (Jeroboam), leaving the "house of David" with only Judah to rule. Hearing of this, Solomon comes after Jeroboam, who escapes to Egypt.

DIVISION: THE END OF THE UNITED MONARCHY

Solomon's death brings with it the end of a glorious era. The people of Israel ask Solomon's son, Rehoboam, to go easier on them than Solomon did with the *corvée*-labor burden. After consulting with his advisers, Rehoboam finds himself on the side of the young hotheads and famously responds "my little finger is thicker than my father's loins . . . he flogged you with whips, but I will flog you with scorpions" (1 Kings 12:10–15).

The northerners declare that they have no portion in the house of Jesse (David's father), and they secede. They call for Jeroboam, whom they declare the first king of the northern polity of Israel, and Rehoboam is left with only Judah. Rehoboam's attempt to gather an army fails, partly because Pharaoh Shishak invades Jerusalem, and Rehoboam must pay Egypt an exorbitant fee to leave.

In the end, Rehoboam has neither the support, loyalty, nor talent to bring the northern tribes back into his kingdom. From then until the destruction of Israel (ca. 722/720 BCE), the two kingdoms live on as politically distinct entities, and the "United" Monarchy is never to return.