

David the King

There are times when you are in just the right place, and times when you would rather be many hundreds of miles away from where you actually are. I make my living by being in just the right place at the right time, and as I am a wealthy man, I would say that I mainly manage it. I need to know when a good potter has just made a large batch of pots, and needs to sell them on. I need to know when a smith has just completed an intricate piece of jewellery for which there is no local market. I know just when the olive harvest has been picked and the oil is newly pressed and at its finest, and I am very good at knowing where to find the best wines, and persuading the farmers to sell them to me at a price which is good for them, and will make me a very decent profit.



When you run a string of camels up and down the land of the Israelites and into the neighbouring countries and cities to trade, the thing you want most are good roads clear of thieves, and peaceful cities and villages that have nothing better to do than trade with each other using me as their intermediary; for a price of course. What you do not want are quarrelsome kings who keep raising armies and taking skilled men off the land to fight for them. Then when they are finished they have to return to their own homes, with only their skill with weapons to feed them on their way. Of course I travel with armed guards, and most of the time there are sufficient of us to be intimidating to small bands of wandering armed men, but we have been attacked a few times over the years.

The biggest mistake these Israelites ever made was asking their prophet Samuel to appoint a king over them. I have heard many times from different people that he was really reluctant to do so for as long as he thought he could get away with it. Then after consulting their God, he anointed Saul bar Kish as King over Israel.

For many years it seemed that Saul was doing a good job. He and his band of followers based themselves at Gibeah, his home town, and from there sallied out to keep the other local kings out of Israel. He was very successful, particularly at keeping the Philistines at bay, but then he seemed to get too confident and cocksure, and began to think that he could fight battles without the help of his god. When this happened he began to lose battles, and it looked as if the Israelites were going to become no more than the slaves of the Philistine King.

Things looked really bad when the Philistine army arrived on the border of Israel. They sat there for days facing the considerably smaller army of Israelites. Saul knew that he could not join in battle as he was considerably outnumbered. Then the Philistines tried a new tactic to get Saul to fight. Each morning and evening they sent out their champion, a huge man called Goliath of Gath, and he challenged the champion of the Israelite army to come and fight him. The victor would take the spoils, and enslave the enemy army. Well, the Israelites had no one even remotely good enough to face Goliath, and they just had to stand there twice a day and take the taunts and jeers of the Philistine army.

Then one day a young man, David bar Jesse came to bring food to his brothers who were in the army. He heard to challenge, and according to the story as I was told it, looked around wondering why no one would go out and fight this man. He then told his brothers that if no one else would fight Goliath, he would. His brothers just laughed at him, but eventually they were persuaded that he was serious. Even though they were worried what their father would say about letting his youngest son fight what would be a losing battle, they felt they had to take him to see Saul.

Saul must have been impressed by David, for he agreed to allow him to meet the challenge that evening. He even dressed him in his own best body protection, which was exceedingly large for him, and lent him his sword and shield. David couldn't even lift the sword above his head, so the story goes. He politely thanked Saul, put them all away, and went off to the river bank to collect a few stones.

I wish I had been there when this young lad walked out of the ranks of Israelite soldiers, dressed in the clothes of a simple shepherd and challenged this giant of a man to battle. How Goliath in his padded clothing, with his huge sword and spear must have laughed himself silly as he advanced towards what he must have thought was certain victory. Then so the story goes, David calmly fitted one of the stones in the slingshot which he used to keep wild beasts away from his flock of sheep, whirled it around his head and let it fly, hitting Goliath right between the eyes felling him like a cut tree. David then ran forwards, picked up Goliath's sword, and inexpertly cut off his head.

Everyone watched this in absolute astonishment, but then when David held up Goliath's head to show the two armies, it seemed to galvanise the Israelites, and they picked up their weapons and charged the Philistines. It was a complete rout. The Philistines just turned and fled in complete confusion. Many were killed that day, and those that returned to their own cities told tales of a boy possessed by his god who had won a miraculous battle with just a sling and a river pebble.

That was the first time I heard of David. Saul was very reluctant to let such a brave and resourceful young man out of his sight, but David wanted to return to his sheep. It turned out that David also had other skills learnt while he whiled away the hours minding sheep, one of which was that he was a skilled musician. As the years passed

and Saul became more irascible, it turned out that David's music was the only thing that could quieten his mind. It cost David to play for him, for he was known to throw things at him, including a spear. David eventually had to leave Saul's household because Saul had become so insanely jealous of him. His time in the household brought him two things though, the unbreakable friendship of Saul's son Jonathan and eventually the hand of Saul's younger daughter Michal in marriage.

As the reign of King Saul progressed, my life as a trader became increasingly difficult as Saul picked quarrels not only with neighbouring tribes like the Amekelites, but also with David, who was now having to live as an outlaw constantly running from Saul. Time and again he demonstrated to Saul that he did not want to harm him, but Saul was beyond reason by now, and kept persueing him.

Then came the battle of Gilboa. The Philistines had decided to make use of Saul's inattention to his own borders, and brought an army as far as Mount Gilboa. There was a huge battle and the Philistines killed the three of Saul's sons who were fighting with him. When Saul heard, he knew that the battle was lost, so he asked one of his shield bearers to kill him, but he refused. So, the story goes that Saul fell on his own sword, and died. The Philistines were not magnanimous in victory. They found the bodies of Saul and his three sons, decapitated them and hung their heads on the city walls of Beth-shan.

Saul's youngest son Ish-bosheth took over running the kingdom, but he was a man who was crippled. Although a very able administrator, he could not lead his people into battle, so they became restless under his leadership, until at last a call went out for the council of the elders to meet at Hebron to discuss the situation. I heard about the call, and as any large gathering of people is a good opportunity for me to sell my wares, I travelled as fast as I could to Hebron to be there in time for the council.

I arrived just in time to hear the conclusion of the discussions, which was that the council of the people had asked David to become their King. What I had not known before, although it appeared that many of the elders did, was that David had long ago been anointed as Saul's successor, before he had ever come to court to play for Saul and before he had killed Goliath. Even then, their God had already declared Saul unfit to be the king over his people, and had Samuel the prophet anoint David, while he was still a boy minding sheep in the fields for his father. He was to be, in due course, the King to replace Saul. It was many years later, after learning the art of Kingship while in Saul's court, after learning the art of war fighting the Philistines, learning the skills of survival while avoiding Saul when he wanted to kill him, that David finally came into his kingship, on that day at Hebron, when I was at the right place at the right time, to see the man who would become Israel's greatest King proclaimed by the people as King of the Israelites.