

2 Samuel 21. Augusta. 30 October 2011.

God willing, during the two Lord's Days I am with you, we shall be looking in the Bible Class at the closing section of the Second Book of Samuel, or, more particularly, at the first and last chapters of that section.

And, before we read the passage for this morning – 2 Samuel 21 – I want us to stand back and spend a few moments getting our bearings.

Up to chapter 10 we read of David's triumphs – political, spiritual and military – and the growth of his kingdom. In chapter 11 we read of his transgressions – I say 'transgressions' because in coveting his neighbour's wife and in committing both adultery and murder he transgressed three of the Ten Commandments. And from chapter 12 to chapter 20 we read of David's troubles – mainly in his house and family – and the decline of his kingdom.

We now reach the last major section of the book; namely chapters 21 to 24.

In one sense, I suppose you could describe this section as an appendix, with chapter 1 of the First Book of Kings picking up the life of David where 2 Samuel 20 left off.

Chapters 21 to 24 consist of six passages with a fairly obvious pattern and symmetrical structure.¹

The first and last passages² are concerned with two occasions when God visited His judgement upon the nation. In the first, God's wrath was expressed in a famine brought on by drought;³ in the second, it was expressed in a pestilence. The first was the result of a sin committed by Saul in the past, and the second of a sin committed by David in the present. The first lasted for three successive years, and the second was scheduled for three successive days.

In both narratives, following the expression of God's anger, David prayed,⁴ and, as a consequence of what God then revealed to him,⁵ David took remedial action which averted both judgements.

In each case this action involved several deaths; in the first, that of seven of Saul's descendants and in the second that of some of Araunah's oxen.

Both narratives conclude with the same expression: 'God was entreated for the land'.⁶

The second passage is concerned with impressive exploits performed by several of David's mighty men in conflicts with the Philistines,⁷ and the penultimate passage forms a longer list of David's mighty men and some of their exploits, mainly in conflicts with the Philistines.⁸

Between these two records of David's mighty men and their exploits – and at the centre of the whole section – we find two passages concerned with David's words. In chapter 22 we read 'the words' of David's 'song', and in the first seven verses of chapter 23 we read his 'last words'.

'The words' of his 'song' take the form of a historical survey of God's faithfulness and acts of deliverance in the past (together – characteristically – with David's thanksgiving and praise for these), and His 'last words' take the form of a prophetic statement expressing David's confidence in God's faithfulness to His covenant with him in the future. The first looks mainly backward, and the second looks mainly forward.

And so to our reading for this morning ... 2 Samuel chapter 21.

[Read 2 Samuel 21. 1-22 in the KJV]

Our chapter this morning has two main sections. You could say that verses 1-14 deal with an *internal* threat to God's work – posed by the sin of *a man of impressive size* from God's own nation Israel, and verses 15-22 with an *external* threat to God's work – posed this time by *men of even more impressive size* from Israel's great enemy, the Philistines. And nothing has changed since then. Ask, for example, the early church, which faced violent opposition from outside in Acts 4 followed by attacks from within in Acts 5 and 6.

Interestingly, the chapter speaks of three oaths; two oaths which had been sworn in the past in the first half of the chapter, vv. 2, 7; and one oath sworn in the present in the second half of the chapter, v. 17.⁹

Our chapter opens with a very vague and general time note, 'Then there was a famine in the days of David'. This stands in marked contrast to the far more specific 'after this' which we have met at the opening of several earlier chapters.¹⁰

In this way, the Holy Spirit keeps us from assuming that the episode about the Gibeonites followed chronologically after the events of chapter 20. It seems clear that, at this point, the Holy Spirit has rewound the video to an earlier time in David's reign – but to what point we cannot be sure.

Verse 7 certainly suggests that David had already brought Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, to Jerusalem before the famine; that is, that the events in our section come after chapter 9. And I suspect soon after.

But it seems to me that the subsequent burial of the bones of Saul and Jonathan as an act of respect suggests that this incident belongs to a relatively early part of David's reign, as does the impression that Saul's seven descendants who died were young, and probably unmarried – else, I ask, why did their wives not share Rizpah's vigil with her?

Again, I can think of no reason why God's judgement on Saul's very public sin should have been delayed until David's later years.

And it would not surprise me if these very events helped fuel the curses which Shimei levelled at David in chapter 16, 'Get out, you man of blood ... the Lord has avenged on you all the blood of the house of Saul'.¹¹

So I suspect that the incident of the famine and the Gibeonites came somewhere between chapter 9 and chapter 16 of 2 Samuel. But, in the end, as I said, we cannot be sure.

We know from scripture that lengthy famines were fairly common in the ancient world,¹² and it is hardly surprising therefore that there should be at least one severe famine during David's forty-year reign.

But in this case the famine persisted for three years, a point stressed by the vivid description, 'three years, year after year'. For three successive years, 'the days of harvest'¹³ came, but not *the fruits* of harvest. In the language of scripture, 'the heavens over their heads were brass, and the earth under them was iron'¹⁴ – for, as we would expect, the cause of the famine was the absence of any rain – a point made clear by the words of verse 10, 'until water poured on them out of heaven'.¹⁵

After three years David began to suspect that God was speaking through the prolonged famine and so he 'sought the face of the Lord', clearly seeking His counsel. We are not told how David did this. He may have gone to the Lord's sanctuary and enquired of God by means of the Urim and Thummin which were housed in the high priest's breastplate and ephod¹⁶ (a means he had used on several occasions before¹⁷). If so, this would be the last occasion of which we know when this particular method of discovering God's will was used by anybody.¹⁸

Alternatively, David may have sought, and obtained, God's explanation through one of the prophets, perhaps Nathan or Gad. For what it is worth, this was the opinion of Josephus, the Jewish historian; 'the prophets answered', he wrote, 'that God would have the Gibeonites avenged whom Saul the king was so wicked as to betray to slaughter'.¹⁹

Through whatever channel God's revelation came, David learned that it was not only in his own case that a single sin could cast a long shadow,²⁰ but that this was true also in the case of Saul. And, our section makes it clear that, just as David's sin had brought devastating consequences on *his* offspring, so Saul's sin would bring devastating consequences on *his*.²¹

The brief background note inserted at verse 2 takes us back over 400 years to the days of Joshua. At the time of Israel's conquest of the Promised Land, the Gibeonites had belonged to the original population of Canaan.²²

Although their warriors were among the finest of the Canaanites,²³ the men of Gibeon decided that 'discretion was the better part of valour'. Having heard of that which Israel – more accurately, that which Israel's God – had done, not only to Egypt and to Sihon and Og, but more latterly to Jericho and Ai ... and correctly expecting that Israel's policy was to annihilate all Canaanites,²⁴ they hit on a clever ruse to trick Joshua and Israel's rulers into entering into a peace treaty with them, which would ensure their protection and security. In a nutshell, by means of equipping a delegation with some old, tattered clothing, some old sacks and wineskins on their donkeys, some mouldy bread and provisions, and a tall story,²⁵ they palmed themselves off on Joshua as a people who had come from a far country ... much further away than some eighteen miles away, which was in fact where they lived!

Joshua and the princes were completely taken in and entered into the peace-treaty with them. Joshua, we read, 'made a covenant with them to let them *live*; and the rulers of the congregation *swore* to them'.²⁶ Note those words, 'to let them *live*' and '*swore* to them'.

When the deception was discovered, Joshua and the rulers conceded reluctantly that, because they had sworn an oath 'by the Lord God of Israel',²⁷ they dared not harm them – although the Gibeonites were made 'slaves, woodcutters and water carriers for the house of ... God'.²⁸

And for some 400 years, the Gibeonites had remained untouched in Israel. Until Saul! ... who, with his house, began a program of genocide. We know nothing of the background beyond the bald statement here that he 'sought to strike them down'²⁹ in his zeal for the children of Israel and Judah'. I guess it might have been as part of a more general attempt to clear the land of all non-Israelites – as, at one point, he had sought to rid the land of all 'mediums and spiritists'.³⁰ Indeed, who knows, he may even have been trying to make up for his failure to wipe out the Amalekites completely when earlier told to do so by God.³¹

We noted just now the words 'to let them live' and 'swore to them' from Joshua 9. Indeed, the fact that Israel had sworn on oath that the Gibeonites would be allowed to live is mentioned no less than four times in that narrative.³² And on the last occasion the rulers of the congregation are on record as having said, 'This we will do to them, and let them *live*, lest *wrath* be upon us, because of the *oath* which we swore to them'.³³

It is a pity that Saul hadn't noted that bit about 'wrath' before he included the Gibeonites in his purge! For, over against the 'let them live' of Israel's rulers, we now read of Israel's first king that 'he put the Gibeonites to *death*!'

You may have noticed that the big mistake made by Joshua and the other leaders at the time wasn't that they had not been suspicious – for they had been – but that they 'did not ask counsel from the Lord'.³⁴ Thankfully, David does not now make the same mistake.³⁵

And let us not underestimate the seriousness of Saul's sin. To swear an oath in the Lord's name – which Israel had done in Joshua 9 – and then to violate that oath was to discredit God's reputation. It was to say that He could not be depended on and that His name guaranteed nothing. In practice, it was to take His name 'in vain'.³⁶

For this reason, as Israel's leaders perceived, to fail to keep a covenant made in the Lord's name would be to incur His wrath and to bring down His judgement.³⁷ Which is, of course, exactly what happened as a result of Saul's attack on the Gibeonites. And explains why David speaks in verse 3 of making 'atonement'. This was serious stuff; God was involved – which is why Saul's seven descendants were hung up 'to the Lord'³⁸ and 'before the Lord',³⁹ and why the long awaited rain fell⁴⁰ and God heard His people's pleas for the land⁴¹ only after His wrath had been appeased.⁴²

And it is desperately important that we note that in doing this Saul acted, not as a private individual, but as Israel's king – as, in the words of the men of Gibeon, 'the chosen of the Lord'.⁴³

And here lies the clue to why David granted the men of Gibeon exactly what they asked⁴⁴ – even though, on the face of it, this ran contrary both to his own promise made to Saul earlier and indeed to God's word.

This was not only a case of avenging blood – although that did enter into it. This was a case of God's name being desecrated and that by the king, and as such the representative, of His people. For just as Israel's rulers in Joshua's days had acted as representatives of the people when they entered into the covenant with the Gibeonites, so Saul, by virtue of his office as king, acted as their representative when he broke it.

Although money paid as compensation for bloodshed was very common among many of Israel's neighbours, God's law made it clear that money was no satisfaction for murder.⁴⁵ Having therefore made it clear to David that they were not looking for any 'out of court' financial settlement – and also having pointed out that, possibly on account of their low status as a subject people, they lacked the authority to execute the death penalty themselves – they required full 'blood' compensation – life for life.

And, inasmuch as Saul himself was long dead, they demanded 'full'⁴⁶ payment and retribution in the form of the death of seven of Saul's male descendants.

As he had promised, David gave them what they asked.

It is true that he had once sworn to Saul that, when he (David) became king, he would not cut off all of Saul's descendants, nor destroy his name out of his father's house.⁴⁷ Nor had David done this when he took the throne. Nor, in that Saul's grandson Mephibosheth was now 'spared', does he do so now. And, in any case, his handing over of Saul's descendants to the Gibeonites was clearly in line with God's will for him – hence the consequent ending of the drought and the famine. This was no case – as Saul had feared – of a new monarch eliminating the whole family of the previous monarch.

We can understand why these men should be put to death and, in accordance with the law of Deuteronomy, then hung up (impaled)⁴⁸ as those who bore the curse which Saul deserved on account of his serious sin.⁴⁹

And if we wonder why, contrary to the requirements of that law, and to the actions of Joshua long before,⁵⁰ the bodies were left there long after the following night, the answer lies near to hand.

For this was no ordinary or private crime 'worthy of death'. This was viewed as a national sin, committed by *the nation* in the person of its king and official representative, and, what is more, committed against the Lord Himself, and as such requiring atonement to be made.⁵¹ Indeed, I suspect that 'the first days of harvest' were deliberately chosen as the time for the young men to die to underline the fact that they died for the specific purpose of appeasing God's wrath, which had withheld any harvest from the land for three years. Only when there was evidence that God's wrath had been appeased and the national sin forgiven – as heralded by rain from heaven – could the corpses therefore be removed.⁵²

But we are not out of the woods yet. Why, we may still wonder, should sons and grandsons be put to death for the sin of a father and a grandfather? Does this not run contrary to God's own law? Had He not said in Deuteronomy 24 that 'The fathers shall *not* be put to death for the children, *nor* shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death *for his own sin*'?⁵³

Yes, God *had* expressly forbidden Israel's judges and magistrates to slay children as payment for the crimes of their parents.⁵⁴ But this was not a case of any human judge taking action. Nor was this, I say it again, a case of any private crime. The whole nation had been bound by the treaty with the Gibeonites, and so, on account of the nation's sin – committed in the person of its king – the whole nation was involved in the guilt. This was an offence committed against God – who has the right, if He will, according, not to chapter 24, but to chapter 5 of Deuteronomy, to visit 'the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation'.⁵⁵

This is, of course, God's prerogative alone.⁵⁶

Verse 7 speaks of a second oath.⁵⁷ This time between David and Jonathan.⁵⁸ The Holy Spirit wants us to note that, if Saul was guilty of violating *one oath* which was sworn before God,⁵⁹ David – the man after God's own heart – was careful to respect and to keep *another oath* which was, as stressed here,⁶⁰ sworn before God.⁶¹ And so, over against Saul the covenant-breaker, the Holy Spirit sets David the covenant-keeper. As if to say, now Israel has a king who keeps covenant.

'The king spared Mephibosheth'. Don't you find it sad that Saul's line is here reduced to one crippled man.⁶² That a line which began with the most powerful-looking man in Israel⁶³ is now reduced to one of the weakest and least-imposing of figures?

And yet, as we discover in verse 10, Saul's house did boast at least one remarkable lady.⁶⁴

As the bodies of her two sons and Saul's five grandsons were left unburied, this lady, Rizpah, determined to watch over them, stationing herself nearby so that she could drive off both any birds of prey and any predators of earth. There had been nothing she could do to save them from an untimely death, but she was determined to do what she could to save them from the ultimate disgrace of having their flesh eaten by birds or beasts.⁶⁵

No one knows how long Rizpah's tireless vigil went on, but her action prompted David into action – to make arrangements, not only for the bones of the seven young men but of Saul and Jonathan to be given a decent burial – all of whom had been impaled following their deaths.⁶⁶

The remaining verses of our chapter, verses 15 to 22, are also concerned with death; this time that of four physically impressive Philistine characters – all born, we are told, 'to the giant (possibly, 'to Rapha' which would be a personal name) in Gath'.⁶⁷ A case, I suppose, of 'the bigger they are, the harder they fall'!⁶⁸

In the first story, one of David's nephews (his sister's son) saves David and despatches one of the formidable warriors.⁶⁹ In the last story, another of David's nephews (this time his brother's son) deals with another of them.

Sandwiched between we read of two other big Philistines slain in battles at Gob.⁷⁰

The first big man clearly posed a very real threat to David. Although his spearhead weighed only half that of Goliath's, Ishbi-benob came equipped with a 'new' weapon of some kind – possibly, a sword as assumed by many translators. The point is clearly that the newness of his weapon or piece of equipment rendered it particularly formidable. We are left in no doubt what was going through this Philistine's head when, in the thick of the battle, he spied king David exhausted. Licking his lips, as it were, he moved in for the kill. But he reckoned without David's nephew Abishai – who also knew how to handle a spear!⁷¹ In a flash, Abishai rushed to David's assistance, and in no time Ishbi-benob was horizontal – still perhaps clutching his colossal spear and still sporting his spanking new piece of military equipment.

It had been a close call for David. And his men put their feet down ... David's fighting days are over. They have no intention of letting 'the lamp of Israel' – Israel's leading light – the one man vital for the welfare of the nation – be snuffed out by some oversize Philistine!

But how would they fare in battle without David? When the Israelites had first demanded a king, it was that they would have someone to lead them into battle.⁷² And in his younger days, David had always done just that – and Israel had loved it.⁷³

But what would they do now that David was no longer able to lead them into battle? Let verses 18-20 answer.

I recall that Saul's leadership hadn't produced one man willing to take on Goliath. But David's leadership produced so many mighty men of war that they were almost queuing up to take on as many Goliath's as the Philistines could field.

We aren't given the name of the last of the four Philistine warriors. But he was certainly impressive. When someone has six fingers on each hand and half a dozen toes on each foot people tend to notice – at least those who can count.

But what strikes me most is not the man's anatomy but his attitude. Not that he was a big man (and he was a 'man of great stature') – not that he had big hands – not that he had big feet – but that he had a big mouth! 'He defied Israel'. Now you would have thought that at Gath of all places he would have known better. For this word 'defy' is the very word used repeatedly in 1 Samuel 17 to describe Goliath's outburst against Israel and Israel's God.⁷⁴

And we all know, not only where Goliath came from, but what happened to him. And here is Mr Six-digits doing the self-same thing. And he ended up much as Goliath. Whether or not, as Goliath, he lost his head, thanks to David's nephew he most certainly lost his voice!

Four big men 'born to the giant in Gath', and one of them identified as a brother of Goliath. What does that add up to? Five brothers! Hmm. I seem to recall David once lifting five smooth stones out of a brook ...

And we mustn't miss that through these very victories, God was fulfilling His word to David of long before. For back in chapter 3, Abner had reported, 'the Lord has promised David, saying, "By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel from the hand of the Philistines".⁷⁵ And what Saul's regime conspicuously failed to do, David and the men he led and trained, with the help of God, succeeded in doing. Truly, God had proved Himself true to His promise. He always does!⁷⁶

And, in closing, we remind ourselves that God is greater than our greatest foe. And that for us too ultimate victory is assured.⁷⁷

Truly, 'If God is for us, who can be against us?'⁷⁸

Footnotes

- ¹ 2 SAMUEL 21 TO 24
The Lord's wrath against His people – a famine as a result of the sin of Saul – David prayed and acted – death – God 'heard prayer for the land'. (2 Sam. 21. 1-14)
David's mighty men and their exploits. (2 Sam. 21. 15-22)
David's 'words' – his praise for the past. (2 Sam. 22. 1-51)
David's 'words' – his confidence for the future. (2 Sam. 23. 1-7)
David's mighty men and their exploits. (2 Sam. 23. 8-39)
The Lord's wrath against His people – a pestilence as a result of the sin of David – David prayed and acted – death – God 'heard prayer for the land'. (2 Sam. 24. 1-25)
- ² 2 Sam. 21. 1-14; 2 Sam. 24. 25.
³ 2 Sam. 21. 1 and 10.
⁴ 2 Sam. 21. 1; 2 Sam. 24. 17.
⁵ 2 Sam. 21. 1; 2 Sam. 24. 18.
⁶ 2 Sam. 21. 14; 2 Sam. 24. 25.
⁷ 2 Sam. 21. 15-22.
⁸ 2 Sam. 23. 8-39.
⁹ The word translated 'oath' in verse 7 is the noun of the word rendered 'sworn' in verse 2 and 'swore' in verse 17.
¹⁰ 2 Sam. 2. 1; 8. 1; 10. 1; 13. 1; 15. 1.
¹¹ 2 Sam. 16. 8.
¹² For example, Gen. 12. 10; 26. 1; 41. 54-57; Ruth 1. 1; 2 Kings 4. 38.
¹³ The expression of verse 9.
¹⁴ Deut. 28. 23.
¹⁵ No rain for three successive years reminds us of the days of Elijah, Luke 4. 25!
¹⁶ Exod. 28. 30.
¹⁷ See 1 Sam. 23. 6-11; 30. 7-8.
¹⁸ See Ezra 2. 63; Neh. 7. 65.
¹⁹ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book VII, Chapter XII, Paragraph 1.
²⁰ For even Amasa's murder in chapter 20 came about only in consequence of Absalom's rebellion; see 17. 25; 19. 13; 20. 8-10.
²¹ Who knows, perhaps as the story develops, David even envied Saul the fact that Saul had not lived to see the results of his sin in and on his family.
²² Here they are labelled 'Amorites'. More technically they were Hivites, Josh. 9. 1, 7; 11. 19. 'Amorites' was the more general name used for the Canaanites, Gen. 10. 16; 15. 16.
²³ Joshua 10. 2.
²⁴ Exod. 33. 2; 34. 11; Deut. 7. 1-2.
²⁵ They were clever men. What moved them, they say, was hearing what the Lord had done in Egypt and how he had wiped out Sihon and Og on the eastern side of the Jordan, Num. 21. 21-35. What really moved Gibeon was what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai, Josh. 9. 3. But, craftily, they don't mention Jericho or Ai to Joshua. After all, they were supposed to have travelled from some distant land, and so couldn't possibly have heard of these latest developments!
²⁶ Josh. 9. 15.
²⁷ Josh. 9. 19.
²⁸ Josh. 9. 21, 23.
²⁹ In spite of Saul's intention of destroying them to the point where none remained anywhere in Israel, v. 5, clearly, from the fact they were there to complain (and indeed continued to the days at least of Nehemiah,²⁹) the destruction had been only partial.
³⁰ 1 Sam. 28. 9. See Exod. 22. 18 and Lev. 20. 6.
³¹ 1 Sam. 15. 2-23. Although, in that case, I do note that Saul was careful to spare the Kenites for historical reasons, 1 Sam. 15. 6.
³² Josh. 9. 15, 18, 19, 20.
³³ Josh. 9. 20.
³⁴ Josh. 9. 14. Joshua had no excuse! See Num. 27. 21.
³⁵ 2 Sam. 23. 1.
³⁶ Exod. 20. 7.
³⁷ Josh. 9. 20.
³⁸ 2 Sam. 21. 6. (not, as in the ESV 'before the Lord'.
³⁹ 2 Sam. 21. 9. As Agag was put to death 'before the LORD', 1 Sam. 15. 33, so also Saul's descendants were killed and exposed 'before the Lord'.
⁴⁰ 2 Sam. 21. 10.
⁴¹ 2 Sam. 21. 14.
⁴² As on several other occasions in the Old Testament, only 'atonement' could stop God's judgement in its tracks. See Num. 17:11-12; Num. 25. 4, 13; 2 Sam. 24:25. Cf. Num. 8. 19.

⁴³ 2 Sam. 21. 6. Cf. 1 Sam. 10. 24. Although Saul was, of course, later rejected and removed by God and replaced by David, 1 Sam. 16. 1. In the ancient Near East it is common for the king to be understood as the embodiment of the state and the representative of the people. During the reign of the Hittite king Mursilis, a twenty-year plague was determined to have been the result of offenses committed by his predecessor, and attempts were made to appease and make restitution.

⁴⁴ Through the famine, God speaks for the Gibeonites. For many years they had held their peace, neither complaining to David for the wrong Saul had done them, nor disturbing the kingdom by their protests. It was not until the Lord had interposed on their behalf, and until David himself had inquired what satisfaction should be made for the grievous wrong which had been done them, that they spoke up.

⁴⁵ Num. 35. 30-33.

⁴⁶ Compare 1 Sam. 2. 5.

⁴⁷ 1 Sam. 24. 21-22. When any new regime or dynasty came to power, 'purge' was the name of the game. It was the normal practice in the ancient Near East for the king who began a new dynasty to eliminate all the descendants of the former king to prevent them from rising up, from staging a coup and from reclaiming the throne. Within the later kingdoms of Israel and Judah, Baasha, Zimri, Jehu and Queen Athaliah are notable examples of this procedure.

⁴⁸ Deut. 21. 22-23. Impalement and public display of corpses was common punishment by the Assyrians (referred to in the annals of Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal). (*The IVP Bible Background Commentary : Old Testament on Numbers 25. 4.*) Assyrian reliefs from the palace of Sennacherib in Nineveh (704–681 B.C.) depict soldiers erecting stakes holding the impaled bodies of men of Lachish.

⁴⁹ Joshua 9 informs us that Israel 'cut' a covenant (vv. 15, 16; also vv. 6, 11) with Gibeon. An animal was cut, its pieces put opposite one another, and those taking the covenant obligation upon themselves would walk between the pieces. By this they were saying, 'As this animal is cut in pieces, so may we be cut up if we do not keep this oath.' Now the Gibeonites demand that this curse be carried out. God's wrath, however, stands behind Gibeon's request as evidenced by the famine.

⁵⁰ Josh. 8. 29; 10. 27.

⁵¹ By the same token, in Numbers 25, Israel at Shittim had incurred the anger of God in the form of a plague because it had violated the Sinaitic treaty (the Decalogue) forbidding the worship of other gods. The required expiation—the impalement of the leaders—was instead satisfied by Phinehas's slaying of two brazen sinners who had brought their idolatrous rite into the sanctuary precincts. Thus, just as the impalement of Saul's sons provided the needed ransom-expiation for ending the drought, so the impalement of Israel's leaders—the original command of God (v. 4) executed through the impalement of Zimri and Cozbi—had sufficed to ransom the Israelite community at Baal-peor and thereby bring an end to the pestilence.

⁵² "As these persons were hanged by the express appointment of God for an anathema, an accursed thing, a national atonement to divine justice, they were left on the tree or gibbet till some tokens of the Lord's reconciliation were afforded by seasonable rains" (Thomas Scott).

⁵³ Deut. 24. 16.

⁵⁴ It is recognized in Deuteronomy 5. 9 that God punishes descendants for their ancestors' wrongs. This solely a divine prerogative: human authorities may not do so. Those instances where families were slain because of the sin of the father (Josh 7. 24–26; 2 Sam 21. 1–9; 2 Kings 9. 26) were cases of divine punishment rather than the actions of the civil legal system.

⁵⁵ Deut. 5. 9.

⁵⁶ Those instances where families were slain because of the sin of the father (Josh 7. 24–26; 2 Sam 21. 1–9; 2 Kings 9. 26) were cases of divine punishment rather than the actions of the civil legal system.

⁵⁷ As they did not name particular persons, only required seven sons, it was at the option of the king what sons to deliver to them, and David therefore kept back Mephibosheth, who is thus described, to distinguish him from a son of Saul's of the same name, mentioned in the following verse.

⁵⁸ 1 Sam. 20. 14-23. As a prominent member of the existing royal house, it was natural enough that Jonathan should be concerned about the future prospects for both him and his seed. For his own part, Jonathan was able to rest on the covenant between David and himself, 1 Sam. 18. 3. But Jonathan knew that the terms of their existing covenant would need to be refined and extended. The covenant into which they entered in chapter 18 had been a covenant between them as two men - between them as individuals. What Jonathan was now talking about was a covenant between two houses, between two dynasties - a covenant which extended to David's descendants and his descendants - and that in perpetuity ("for ever"), v. 15; cf. 'between me and thee for ever', v. 23, and 'between my seed and thy seed for ever', v. 42. Note the stress in 1 Samuel 21. 7 on Jonathan as being 'the son of Saul'. It has been objected that the execution of Saul's seven sons was a political crime committed to render David's throne secure. But Mephibosheth was the heir of Saul, and David protected him and Micha his son. No doubt there were some Israelites like Shimei (16. 5–8) who accused David of hatred of Saul's family. This passage, therefore, reminds the reader about David's treatment of Mephibosheth, and shows his scrupulous care for the remains of Saul and his descendants.

⁵⁹ Josh. 21. 18-19.

⁶⁰ 2 Sam. 21. 7.

⁶¹ 1 Sam. 20. 16.

⁶² 2 Sam. 4. 4; 9. 3.

⁶³ 1 Sam. 9. 2; 10. 23.

⁶⁴ The existing Hebrew text of verse 8 speaks of 'the five sons of Michal'. But inasmuch as Adriel was the husband of Merab and not Michal, we may conjecture that it originally read, 'and the five sons of the sister of Michal', just as verse 19 may well have originally read 'the brother of Goliath' – as does 1 Chron. 20. 5. 1 Sam. 16. 9 makes it clear that Saul gave Merab to Adriel. Michal was later given to Phalti/Phaltiel, 1 Sam. 25. 44; 2 Sam. 3. 15, and she subsequently bore David no children, 2 Sam. 6. 23.

We know little about Rizpah's life. Our text tells us only that she bore Saul two sons. We know that on one occasion she was the subject of gossip. Ishbosheth, one of Saul's sons by another woman, accused Abner of immorality and, by implication, of disloyalty to Ishbosheth's authority. This accusation so enraged Abner that he transferred his loyalty from Saul to David. We have no way of knowing whether there was any foundation to Ishbosheth's claim. The fact that Rizpah warded off the beasts of the field at night implies that the bodies were not suspended very high above the ground.

⁶⁵ 1 Sam. 17. 44. "Leaving corpses without burial, to be consumed by birds of prey and wild beasts, was regarded as the greatest ignominy that could befall the dead", Keil and Delitzsch, page 462. To allow the birds of the air and the wild animals to feast on the carcasses would have associated the young men with the curse reserved for those who themselves violate God's covenant: 'Your carcasses will be food to all birds of the sky and to the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away', Deut. 28. 26. Rizpah declared that her sons died, not for any sin of their own, not as stubborn and rebellious sons. 'The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be picked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures', Prov. 30. 17.

⁶⁶ What did these seven men have in common with Saul and his three sons who dies at Gilboah? They were not only all Saul's descendants, but they were also all "hung", vv. 12-13 although the word in verses 6, 9 and 13 is different to that in verse 12 (the word of Deut. 21. 23) – which in turn differs to that in 1 Sam. 31. 10. They had all been publicly hung.

⁶⁷ These were Philistines, and not one of Rephaim. Og was the last of the Rephaim, Deut. 3. 11.

David and his men effectively eliminated the Philistine threat. The later mentions of the five Philistine cities show them isolated. The Philistines appear as adversaries in the days of Hezekiah, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Uzziah and Ahaz- but they never figured again as a significant political or military force.

⁶⁸ *One of David's nephews (Abishai) kills Ishbi-Benob at an unnamed site.*

2 Sam. 21.15-17.

Sibbecai kills Saph at Gob.

2 Sam. 21. 18.

Elhanan kills Goliath's brother at Gob.

2 Sam. 21. 19.

One of David's nephews (Jonathan) kills an unnamed opponent at Gath.

2 Sam. 21. 20-21.

⁶⁹ 2 Sam. 21. 17.

⁷⁰ This military extract mentions each of these warriors by his full name: Abishai son of Zeruiah, Sibbecai the Hushathite, Elhanan son of Jari(i), and Jonathan son of Shimei, David's brother. And that is only proper, for theirs were heroic exploits undertaken at great risk against these formidable enemies.

⁷¹ 1 Chron. 11. 20.

⁷² 1 Sam. 8. 19-20.

⁷³ 1 Samuel 15. 18.

⁷⁴ 1 Sam. 17. 10, 25, 26 [twice], 36, 45.

⁷⁵ 2 Sam. 3. 18.

⁷⁶ Heb. 10. 23.

⁷⁷ Rom. 16. 20.

⁷⁸ Rom. 8. 31.