

Bible Workshop

Developing Bible study skills



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1. Introduction

THIS SERIES of short articles is designed to demonstrate, by working through some simple pieces of Bible exposition, that Bible study is not just for the academic. It is hoped that any who read these short expositions will realise, if they have not done so already, that rewarding Bible study is within the grasp of us all.

All that will be required to develop your own studies along similar lines will be a Bible, ideally with marginal cross-references; a good concordance or computerised Bible such as the Online Bible; a good Bible atlas; a pen and notebook. You will bring to the task an inquisitive, questioning mind. These 'tools' will be complemented by a prayerful and humble mind which expects that the Father will grant understanding (Ps. 119:18) to the one who "trembleth" at His word (Isa. 66:2).

We will come to realise as we progress that Bible study is not confined to the preparing of talks. It is a pursuit that one should "delight" in (Ps. 1:2).

This series of simple studies will systematically, with worked examples,

- 1 show that Bible study is not difficult or the preserve of the intellectual
- 2 show the need to give careful attention to the text
- 3 highlight the importance of context
- 4 demonstrate the value of comparing Scripture with Scripture
- 5 investigate the value of 'inspired commentaries'
- 6 indicate the value of following up quotations
- 7 show the value of building up a picture from various scriptures
- 8 reveal the value of knowing Biblical geography
- 9 highlight the value of recording and preserving information found

When embarking upon your own original study you will not know which aspect of study you will use. This will depend on the topic under consideration. One should always have an open mind to all the possibilities and be willing to explore all options that come to mind.

Above all, the clear objective in all your studies should be that you "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

You are encouraged to work through each study as it appears, to think about the questions that are asked and to try to work out, Scripturally, your answers before reading to the end of the article. In this way, by exercising your mind on the topics, you will develop your own approach to Bible study.

There is no 'right' way either to do Bible study or make notes to remind you of what you have learnt. You will develop your own approach to both these aspects of study. The studies that follow use techniques that I have learnt from others and that have worked for me over many years.

2. The death of Saul

Read 1 Samuel 31

THIS STUDY is designed to highlight the following aspects of Bible study from the list above:

- 1 that Bible study is not difficult or the preserve of the intellectual
- 2 the need to give careful attention to the text
- 8 the value of knowing Biblical geography
- 9 the value of recording and preserving information found

🔗 You will need:
Bible
Bible Atlas
Concordance

The Biblical record informs us: "Now the Philistines fought against Israel: and the men of Israel fled from before the Philistines, and fell down slain in mount Gilboa" (1 Sam. 31:1). The Philistines "put [Saul's] armour in the house of Ashtaroth: and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan" (v. 10). We learn also that "all the valiant men [from Jabesh-gilead] arose, and went all night, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan, and came to Jabesh, and burnt them there" (v. 12).

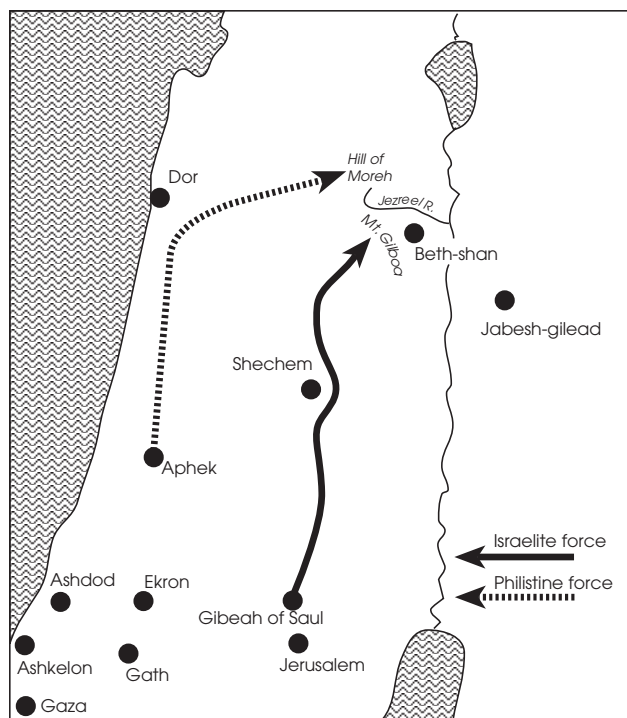
The issues we wish to investigate are:

- the locations of Mount Gilboa, Beth-shan and Jabesh-gilead
- the distance between Philistine territory on the one hand and Mount Gilboa and Beth-shan on the other, and the terrain between these places
- the distance and terrain between Beth-shan and Jabesh-gilead
- whether we can learn anything about the extent of Saul's kingdom at the time of his death
- why the men of Jabesh-gilead recovered the bodies of Saul and his sons.

Where it happened

On reading the account of the death of Saul we realise that there are a number of pieces of geographical information given in the text. The first task is to become familiar with the location of the places named. A Bible atlas will provide that information, and the outline map above shows the locations of Beth-shan, Mount Gilboa, Jabesh-gilead, and Aphek, where the Philistines initially assembled (1 Sam. 29:1).

Mount Gilboa is in the Jezreel valley, close by where the Jezreel River enters the Jordan. Beth-shan is a few miles south of the southern end of the Sea of Galilee, by the Jezreel River and close by Mount Gilboa. Jabesh-gilead is across the River Jordan to the southeast of Beth-shan. The journey from Jabesh-gilead to Beth-shan would be quite difficult as there would be the need to drop right down into the Jordan valley and then up the other side.



Beth-shan is about five miles from Mount Gilboa, whilst Jabesh-gilead is about thirty miles from Beth-shan. All these places are some distance from the area that we would normally consider to be Philistine territory. It is roughly fifty miles from Ashkelon to Dor along the coast, and then a further twenty-five miles from the coast at Dor to Mount Gilboa.

A look at a relief map of the land of Israel will show us that there is a coastal plain from the land of the Philistines up to Dor and then a valley running eastwards to join the Jezreel valley. As the Philistines had chariots (1 Sam. 13:5) it is easy to understand how and why they were able to travel up the coastal plain and right into the heart of the land of Israel.


The geographical data we have to hand provides us with a vital piece of information about the extent and location of Saul's kingdom. As the Philistines were in control of the whole of the coastal plain and the Jezreel valley, we have to conclude that Saul's kingdom was confined to the hill country down the central part of the land of Israel.

The information we have picked up from 1 Samuel 13:5 provides the explanation, in human terms, for the Philistines' control of the coastal plain; chariots are not much use in the mountains. The truth of this can be seen from the


comment regarding the time of the Judges: "And the LORD was with Judah; and he drove out the inhabitants of the mountain; but could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron" (Judg. 1:19).

Jabesh-gilead and Saul

We are now left with the question, Why did the men of Jabesh-gilead recover the bodies of Saul and his sons? A review of the map will show us that the men of Jabesh-gilead actually went into occupied territory, thus risking their lives, to recover the bodies. Furthermore, the journey was not the easiest, due to the terrain. Posing the question in a slightly different form, we ask, Is there any information about Jabesh-gilead having an association with Saul which would provide an explanation for their actions?


 **Look up Jabesh-gilead in a concordance or computerised Bible**

A quick search in a concordance or a computerised Bible shows that 'Jabesh-gilead' occurs only twelve times in Scripture. Three of these occurrences are to do with the life of Saul (1 Sam. 11:1,9; 31:11). Now is a good time to read 1 Samuel 11 in full to remind ourselves of the details of the record, in particular the mention of Jabesh-gilead.

 **Read 1 Samuel 11**

A review of 1 Samuel 11 shows that Saul delivered the men of Jabesh-gilead from the Ammonites at the beginning of his reign. This may provide the reason for their bravery. However, we should not restrict our analysis to this limited time period. Having made this link, we ask, Is there any relevant mention of Jabesh-gilead before the time of Saul?

The only occurrences of this place name before the days of Saul are to be found in Judges 21:8,9, 10,12 and 14. We should not disregard these references simply because we cannot see a link with Saul. As they are all in the same passage it will be easy to review them all and see if there is any pattern which might give us a further clue about the men of Jabesh-gilead and Saul. Now is a good time to read the whole of Judges 21. Take particular note of the place Jabesh-gilead in relation to the involvement of the tribe of Benjamin in the events recorded.

 **Read Judges 21**


The chapter recounts the way in which the men of Benjamin, early in the time of the Judges, took wives from the daughters of the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead after the tribe of Benjamin had been decimated over the matter of the Levite's concubine. Is this relevant to the life and times of Saul?

The answer is, most probably, Yes. Given the nature of the relationship between the men of Benjamin and the maidens who lived in Jabesh-gilead, it is most probable that Saul's ancestry would be able to be traced to a family in Jabesh-gilead.

So we can see that there are two probable reasons why the men of Jabesh-gilead would risk their lives travelling all night to recover Saul's body. First, Saul had delivered them from the Ammonites, and second, Saul's ancestry doubtless went back to Jabesh-gilead. We might conclude that Saul's willingness to call all Israel to defend the men of Jabesh-gilead (1 Sam. 11) was due in part to his family links with that town.

Conclusions

We have seen in this short study that our discoveries have come simply from reflecting on the text of Scripture and looking for related passages. We have not needed any special skills other than an ability to ask questions and to look at maps. The benefits have come from a careful and thoughtful reading of the Bible text, and nothing else.

 **Record your findings**

Having made these discoveries about the death of Saul, it is probable that we will not remember them. It will be valuable therefore to note our findings in some way. We must develop our own methods of recording our findings rather than use a method prescribed by others. Our method must fulfil some basic criteria:

- it must be easy to implement
- it must be easily understood
- the notes that we make must be readily accessible and not easily lost.

A method that works is to highlight marginal references and underline words. If the link is not found in the marginal references it is wise to write a note in the Bible margin clearly. Your Bible is the best place to note your discoveries, as then they will always be readily to hand when you read.