

אשבעל מלך ישראל

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In the Book of Samuel we read:

ויהי איש מבן ימין (מבנימין), ושמו קיש בן-אביאל בן-צרור בן-בכורת בן-אפיח-בן-איש ימיני: גבור חיל.

ולו-היה בן ושמו שאול, בחור וטוב, ואין איש מבני ישראל טוב ממנו;

“Now there was a man of Benjamin, whose name was Kish, the son of Abiel, the son of Zeror, the son of Becorath, the son of Aphiah, the son of a Benjamite, a mighty man of valor.

And he had a son, whose name was Saul, young and goodly, and there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he” (1 Sam 9:1).

Five chapters later we read about Saul:

ושם שר-צבאו אבנר, בן-נר דוד שאול.
וקיש אבי-שאול ונר אבי-אבנר, בן-אביאל.

“And the name of the captain of his host was Abner, the son of Ner, Saul's uncle.

And Kish was the father of Saul, and Ner the father of Abner, the son of Abiel” (1 Sam 14:50-51).

The English translation believed that these verses tell us that Ner was the uncle of Saul, and also a son of Abiel. We already were told that Kish was a son of Abiel (1 Sam 9:1) and therefore, in verse 1 Sam 14:51 the words **בן-אביאל** - “**the son of Abiel**” are probably a letter-deletion error of: **בני-אביאל** - “**sons of Abiel.**” This understanding suggests that Abner was a first cousin of Soul.

However, these unfortunate wording in the Book of Samuel led the Chronicler to mistakenly believe that Abner (and not Ner) was the uncle of Soul. To accommodate this belief the Chronicler had to change this family’s tree to:

ונר הוליד את-קיש, וקיש הוליד את-שאול

“**And Ner begot Kish; and Kish begot Saul**” (1 Ch 8:33; see also; 1 Ch 9:39).

Therefore, according to the Chronicler Abner could be the son of Ner and at the same time Soul’s uncle. However, to achieve this goal the name Abiel (who, as told by the writer of the Book of Samuel, was the father of Kish and Ner) had to be omitted from the Chronicler’s account.

Unlike Joab - the captain of the army of King David, who commanded David’s force in all his king’s major battles, Avner is not mentioned in any of the battles conducted by King Soul. It appears that he was not near his king even in the battle of Gilboa where:

וימת שאול ושלשת בניו ונשא כליו גם כל-אנשיו, ביום ההוא-יחדו.

“**So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, that same day together**” (1 Sam 31:6).

The absence of Abner from the tragic battle at Gilboa, is just one of several oddities related to this event.

We also read:

וידבקו פלשתים את-שאול ואת-בניו; ויכו פלשתים את-יהונתן ואת-אבינדב ואת-מלכישוע-בני שאול.

“**And the Philistines followed hard upon Saul and upon his sons; and the Philistines slew Jonathan, and Abinadab, and Malchishua, the sons of Saul**” (1 Sam 31:2).

Yet previously we read in this book: **ויהיו בני שאול, יונתן וישוי ומלכישוע** - “**Now the sons of Saul were Jonathan, and Ishvi, and Malchishua**” (1 Sam 14:49).

It is not explained how Soul’s second son **ישוי** - “**Ishvi**” is now named **אבינדב** - “**Abinadab.**” It is somewhat odd that **אבינדב** - “**Abinadab**” happened to be also the name of the second son of David’s father **ישׂי** - “**Jesse**” (1 Sam 16:8; 17:13; 1 Ch 2:13).

Although it is said that the Philistines took some unspecified deserted Israelite towns (1 Sam 31:7), we may wonder why now, after winning such a decisive battle, they did not continue their initiative and took over all the lands of Israel.

Furthermore, previously we read that when David asked Achish the King of Gath for a shelter, Achish agreed because:

ויאמן אכיש בדוד לאמר: הבאש הבאיש בעמו בישראל, והיה לי לעבד עולם.

“And Achish believed David, saying: He had made his people Israel utterly to abhor him; therefore he shall be my servant forever” (1 Sam 27:12).

Now, after the death of Soul and his sons we are told:

ויהי אחרי-כן וישאל דוד ביהוה לאמר האעלה באחת ערי יהודה, ויאמר יהוה אליו, עלה; ויאמר דוד אנה אעלה, ויאמר חברנה.

“And it came to pass after this, that David inquired of YHWH, saying: Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah? And YHWH said to him: Go up. And David said: Whither shall I go up?’ And He said: to Hebron” (2 Sam 2:1).

ויבאו אנשי יהודה, וימשחו-שם את-דוד למלך על-בית יהודה;

“And the men of Judah came, and they there anointed David king over the house of Judah” (2 Sam 2:4).

It is quite amazing that David - Achish's “servant forever” does not need to get permission from his patron about the relocation to Hebron, and that the people of Judah would choose someone that was utterly abhorred by his people, as their king.

We also read that after the death of King Soul and his three sons:

**ויהי אחרי מות שאול, ודוד שב מהכות את-העמלק; וישב דוד בצקלג ימים שנים.
ויהי ביום השלישי, והנה איש בא מן-המחנה מעם שאול, ובגדיו קרעים ואדמה על-ראשו;
ויהי בבאו אל-דוד ויפל ארצה וישתחו.
ויאמר לו דוד, אי מזה תבוא; ויאמר אליו, ממחנה ישראל נמלטתי.
ויאמר אליו דוד מה-היה הדבר, הגד-נא לי; ויאמר אשר-נס העם מן-המלחמה, וגם-הרבה
נפל מן-העם וימתו, וגם שאול ויהונתן בנו מתו.**

“And it came to pass after the death of Saul, when David was returned from the slaughter of the Amalekites, and David had abode two days in Ziklag;

It came even to pass on the third day, that, behold, a man came out of the camp from Saul with his clothes rent, and earth upon his head; and so it was, when he came to David, that he fell to the earth, and prostrated himself.

And David said to him: From whence come you?’ And he said to him: Out of the camp of Israel am I escaped.

And David said to him: How went the matter? I pray you, tell me. And he answered: The people are fled from the battle, and many of the people also are fallen and dead; and Saul and Jonathan his son are dead also” (2 Sam 1:1-4).

We would expect that this man, who was bringing the news about the outcome of this critical battle, as well as Soul's crown and bracelet, would go to the late king's capital - Gibeah. Yet we are told that oddly this person who was an Amalekite (2 Sam 1:8) chose to come to David who just returned from thoroughly smiting some Amalekites (1 Sam 30:13-17), and was now again under the hospitality/control of the Philistines.

We read that the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead collected the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth-shan and buried them under a tree in Jabesh (1 Sam 31:11-13). It is unexplainable how Abner, the captain of King Soul's army, and his first cousin was not involved in the

retrieval of the King's body or made any effort to transfer it to their fathers' burial place in the Land of Benjamin. Many years later, it would be King David himself that will bring the remains of Soul and Jonathan to their final resting place in the Land of Benjamin (2 Sam 21:12-14).

Now we read:

ואבנר בן-נר, שר-צבא אשר לשאול-לקח את-איש בשת בן-שאול, ויעברוהו מחנים. וימלכו אל-הגלעד, ואל-האשורי, ואל-יזרעאל; ועל-אפרים, ועל-בנימן, ועל-ישראל כלה. בן-ארבעים שנה איש-בשת בן-שאול במלכו על-ישראל, ושנים שנים מלך; אך בית יהודה, היו אחרי דוד.

“Now Abner the son of Ner, captain of Saul's host, had taken Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim; And he made him king over Gilead, and over the Ashurites, and over Jezreel, and over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, and over all Israel Ish-bosheth Saul's son was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David” (2 Sam 2:8-9).

Until this moment this forty year old fourth son of King Soul has never been mentioned. Furthermore, while it is not clear whether Soul's second son name was “Ishvi” or “Abinadab” the writer of the book of Samuel indicated that Soul had only three sons, and that they all perished with him in Gilboa.

It seems that the name **איש בשת** - “Ish-bosheth” also surprised the Chronicler who tried to ameliorate this situation by writing:

ושאול הוליד את-יהונתן ואת-מלכישוע, ואת-אבינדב, ואת-אשבעל.
“And Saul begot Jonathan, and Malchi-shua, and Abinadab, and Eshbaal” (1 Ch 8:33; see also 1 Ch 9:39).

Although the name **אשבעל** - “Eshbaal” appears only in the Book of Chronicles (the Greeks wrote: *Asabal* and *Isbaal*), the writer of this book (or a late scribe) could have assumed that the reader of the Bible would be aware of the fact that he repeatedly equated **בעל** - “baal” with **בשת** (*bosheth*) meaning: “shame.” By this device, the Chronicler could “confirm” that **איש בשת** - “Ish-bosheth” was a son of Soul.

It seems that the Greek translator also felt uncomfortable with the name **איש בשת** - “Ish-bosheth” allegedly the son of Soul. From the Book of Samuel he could have learned that in addition to **מפיבשת** - “Mephibosheth” son of Jonathan (2 Sam 4:4), there was also another “Mephibosheth” son of Rizpah - Soul's concubine (2 Sam 19:25), who therefore must have been a son of Soul. On two occasions where we find the unspecified name **בן-שאול** - “Saul's son” (2 Sam 4:1, 2), the Greeks translated it to: “Saoul's son Memphibosthe.” Furthermore, in seven out of the eleven times that the name **איש בשת** - “Ish-bosheth” appear in the Hebrew version of the Book of Samuel, the Greeks translated this Hebrew name to the similarly sounding: “Memphibosthe.”

If **איש בשת** - “Ish-bosheth” was indeed the son of King Soul it appears unlikely that he would be “taken” by Abner and “brought over” to Mahanaim. If he was the son of the late king, we would expect this forty year old man to determine (maybe after consultation with Abner) about

the location of his capital city. Furthermore, if he was a true inheritor of King Soul, he would have been the rightful claimant to the throne and would not need the help of Abner “to make him” the next king of Israel.

However, it is also possible that after the death of King Soul and his sons, Abner was worried that the kingdom of Israel may disintegrate, and to prevent such an outcome he brought an unknown figure and made him the new king of Israel.

While we hear about David’s lamentation over Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17-27) we do not hear that he “sent by the hand of his servants to comfort” Ish-bosheth “concerning his father” (as he later did for Hanun the son of the late Nahash, king of the children of Ammon; 2 Sam 10:1-2). It is not unlikely that David, who was very familiar with Soul and his family, knew that Ish-bosheth was not a son of Soul and therefore there was no need to comfort him.

When David sent messengers to the men of Jabesh-gilead he said to them:

ועתה תחזקנה ידיכם והיו לבני-חיל-כי-מת אדניכם שאול; וגם-אתי משחו בית-יהודה למלך-עליהם.

“Now therefore let your hands be strong, and be ye valiant; for Saul your lord is dead, and also the house of Judah have anointed me king over them” (2 Sam 2:7).

It seems that David was enticing the men of Jabesh-gilead to accept him as their king without even mentioning the existence of the supposed natural inheritor of the throne of Israel - Ish-bosheth.

We are told:

ותהי המלחמה ארכה בין בית שאול, ובין בית דוד; ודוד הלך וחזק, ובית שאול הלכים ודלים.
“Now there was long war between the house of Saul and the house of David; and David waxed stronger and stronger, but the house of Saul waxed weaker and weaker” (2 Sam 3:1; see also: 2 Sam 3:6).

If this statement is accurate then we would expect that the border between the Land of Israel and the Land of Judah would be well defined. Yet we hear:

ויצא אבנר בן-נר ועבדי איש-בשת בן-שאול, ממחנים גבעונה.
ויואב בן-צרויה ועבדי דוד יצאו, ויפגשום על-ברכת גבעון יחדו; וישבו אלה על-הברכה מזה, ואלה על-הברכה מזה.

“And Abner the son of Ner, and the servants of Ish-bosheth the son of Saul, went out from Mahanaim to Gibeon.

And Joab the son of Zeruiah, and the servants of David, went out; and they met together by the pool of Gibeon, and sat down, the one on the one side of the pool, and the other on the other side of the pool” (2 Sam 2:12-13).

Although it is not stated here from where Joab and his men “went out” the Greek translator of these verses wrote that they “went out of Chebron.” Yet the more important questions here are not from where Joab and his men came, but how could they cross the border between the Land of Judah and the Land of Israel, and get, without being molested, to Gibeon, a town in the Land of Benjamin. If Abner was the captain of the Israelite army, why did not he inquire about the

mission of this tour of Joab - the captain of David's army, and his men, or why Abner did not order his men to attack this expedition of a hostile kingdom?



James J. Tissot, 'The Valiant of Gibeon' (1896-1902), gouache on board, The Jewish Museum, New York

For unknown reason Abner now suggests to Joab that twelve youngsters from each of their respective camps would participate in a gladiator-like match (2 Sam 2:14). This brutal contest then continued in what had been described as: **ותהי המלחמה קשה עד-מאד, ביום ההוא** - **“And the battle was very sore that day”** (2 Sam 2:17). While Abner lost three hundred and sixty men, Joab lost only twenty, among them his brother Asahel (2 Sam 2:30-31).

As apparently there were no witnesses to the pursuit of Abner by Asahel, the question whether Abner willfully or not killed Asahel will never be answered, but it is also not known how Joab concluded after the battle that it was Abner himself that killed his brother (2 Sam 2:18-24).

We are told that after the battle Asahel's body was carried away and buried **“in the sepulcher of his father, which was in Beth-lehem”** (2 Sam 2:32). On the other hand we do not hear that the retreating men of Abner even attended to their wounded fellows (which must have been many in addition to their 360 dead men).

We read that sometime later:

ולשאול פלגש ושמה רצפה בת-איה; ויאמר אל-אבנר, מדוע באתה אל-פילגש אבי. ויחר לאבנר מאד על-דברי איש-בשת, ויאמר הראש כלב אנכי אשר ליהודה, היום אעשה-חסד עם-בית שאול אביך אל-אחיו ואל-מרעהו, ולא המציתך ביד-דוד; ותפקד עלי עון האשה היום.

“Now Saul had a concubine, whose name was Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah; and [Ish-bosheth] said to Abner: Wherefore had you gone in to my father's concubine?

Then was Abner very wroth for the words of Ish-bosheth, and said: Am I a dog's head that belongs to Judah? This day do I show kindness to the house of Saul your father, to his brethren, and to his friends, and have not delivered you into the hand of David, and yet you charge me this day with a fault concerning this woman” (2 Sam 3:7-8).

The Greek translator believed that Abner was accused here by “Memphibosthe” and not by Ish-bosheth, but it is more than likely that the Greek translator erred here.

Although we are told that Abner was “very wroth”, his statement: “**Am I a dog's head that belongs to Judah?**” appears very odd. It seems that the Greek translator shared this opinion and he chose not to include the words “**that belongs to Judah?**” in his translation.

Even if Abner was indeed “very wroth” and had some momentary treasonous thoughts it is very hard to believe that he dared to utter them and tell Ish-bosheth the following:

כה-יעשה אלהים לאבנר, וכה יסיף לו: כי כאשר נשבע יהוה לדוד-כי-כן אעשה-לו. להעביר הממלכה מבית שאול; ולהקים את-כסא דוד על-ישראל ועל-יהודה-מזן ועד-באר שבע.

"God do so to Abner, and more also, if, as *YHWH* had sworn to David, I do not even so to him;

To transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul, and to set up the throne of David over Israel and over Judah, from Dan even to Beer-sheba” (2 Sam 3:9-10).

Furthermore, these words appear as sheer propaganda, as Abner was not privy to what God did or did not promised David.

Now we read:

וישלח אבנר מלאכים אל-דוד תחתו לאמר, למי-ארץ: לאמר, כרתה בריתך אתי, והנה ידי עמך להסב אליך את-כל-ישראל.

“And Abner sent messengers to David straightway, saying: Whose is the land?’ saying also: 'Make you league with me, and, behold, my hand shall be with you, to bring over all Israel to you” (2 Sam 3:12).

It is possible that Abner had legitimate objective reasons for wanting to replace the rule of Ish-bosheth with that of David’s, but the writer of the Book of Samuel does not appear to know them.

However, the writer of the Book of Samuel tells us that at unknown date:

ושני אנשים שרי-גדודים היו בן-שאול שם האחד בענה ושם השני רכב, בני רמון הבארתי-מבני בנימן: כי גם-בארות תחשב על-בנימן.

ויברחו הבארתיים גתימה; ויהיו-שם גרים עד היום הזה.

“And Saul's son had two men that were captains of bands; the name of the one was Baanah, and the name of the other Rechab, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, of the children of Benjamin; for Beeroth also is reckoned to Benjamin;

And the Beerothites fled to Gittaim, and have been sojourners there until this day” (2 Sam 4:2-3).

Although we are not told why these captains fled to Gittaim (or to Gath), this information suggests that Ish-bosheth’s regime may indeed had some serious problems.

Yet if Ish-bosheth was the son of Saul and therefore a legitimate king of Israel it is not even clear how Abner could have promised David that he will deliver the land to him. It is also not know what Abner expected to get from preforming his part of this deal, and what would be then the fate of Ish-bosheth.

It is possible that David suspected that Avner was just bragging about his importance in Ish-bosheth's kingdom, and to test Abner's credence he asked him to first deliver to him in person Michal - Saul's daughter (2 Sam 3:13). To make this mission even harder:

וישלח דוד מלאכים, אל-איש-בשת בן-שאול לאמר: תנה את-אשתי את-מיכל, אשר ארשתי לי במאה ערלות פלשתים.

“And David sent messengers to Ish-bosheth Saul's son, saying: Deliver me my wife Michal, whom I betrothed to me for a hundred foreskins of the Philistines” (2 Sam 3:14).

If David expected to augment Ish-bosheth objection to such a move and thus make Abner's mission harder, he seriously erred, because he apparently was not aware of the fact that Ish-bosheth was mortally afraid of the king of Judah. Now we hear that Ish-bosheth himself would order the delivery of Michal to King David (2 Sam 3:15-16).



Illustration of Abner (in green) taking Michal away from Paltiel. From the Morgan picture Bible of Louis IX. Produced ca. 1250.

Now we read about Abner:

ודבר-אבנר היה עם-זקני ישראל לאמר: גם-תמול, גם-שלשם הייתם מבקשים את-דוד למלך עליכם. ועתה עשו: כי יהוה אמר אל-דוד לאמר, ביד דוד עבדי הושיע את-עמי ישראל מיד פלשתים, ומיד כל-איביהם. וידבר גם-אבנר באזני בנימין;

“And Abner had communication with the elders of Israel, saying: In times past you sought for David to be king over you;

Now then do it; for *JHWH* had spoken of David, saying: By the hand of My servant David I will save My people Israel out of the hand of the Philistines, and out of the hand of all their enemies.

And Abner also spoke in the ears of Benjamin” (2 Sam 3:17-19).

If the elders of Israel had ever asked David to be their King, this information was not known to the writer of the Book of Samuel. We should also notice that we do not hear here the elders of Israel or the Benjaminites responding to Abner’s call for rebellion against Ish-bosheth.

If Abner indeed sent such a message to the elders of Israel that means that he already cast the dice and was openly rebelling against his king. Now we read that in spite of the fact that the Israelites did not answer his call:

וילך גם-אבנר לדבר באזני דוד בחברון, את כל-אשר-טוב בעיני ישראל, ובעיני כל-בית בנימן.

ויבא אבנר אל-דוד חברון, ואתו עשרים אנשים; ויעש דוד לאבנר ולאנשים אשר-אתו, משתה.

ויאמר אבנר אל-דוד אקומה ואלכה ואקבצה אל-אדני המלך את-כל-ישראל, וכרתו אתך ברית, ומלכת בכל אשר-תאווה נפשך;

“And Abner went also to speak in the ears of David in Hebron all that seemed good to Israel, and to the whole house of Benjamin.

So Abner came to David to Hebron, and twenty men with him. And David made Abner and the men that were with him a feast.

And Abner said to David: I will arise and go, and will gather all Israel to my lord the king, that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may reign over all that your soul desires” (2 Sam 3:19-21).

It seems that as Abner openly rebelled against Ish-bosheth, he became totally dependent on David, and he goes to Hebron to report to David that the elders of Israel and Benjamin considered his plan favorably. Yet he had to admit that currently they were not fully committed to this plan and farther persuasion was needed. We should also notice that David does not ask Abner about his plans in regard to Ish-bosheth. Now Abner has no choice and although King David did not yet made a covenant with him, he leaves Hebron to complete his mission.

We may never know whether, as promise to David, Abner would have completed successfully his mission, and what were his plans regarding Ish-bosheth, because as he left Hebron:

ויואב ואבישי אחיו, הרגו לאבנר: על אשר המית את-עשהאל אחיהם בגבעון-במלחמה.

“So Joab and Abishai his brother slew Abner, because he had killed their brother Asahel at Gibeon in the battle” (2 Sam 3:30).

It is unlikely that by now Ish-bosheth would not have known that Abner betrayed him, yet we read:

וישמע בן-שאול כי מת אבנר בחברון וירפו ידיו; וכל-ישראל נבהלו.

“When Saul's son heard that Abner was dead in Hebron his hands became feeble, and all the Israelites were affrighted” (2 Sam 4:1).

We may wonder why Ish-bosheth became feeble on hearing about Abner's death. On the contrary he should have been jovial that this traitor was killed without the need of himself getting involved. However it is possible that Ish-bosheth was stunned not by the death of Abner but by his betrayal. If the captain of his army deserted him, on whom he could now rely on?

Obviously the realization that their king was now utterly shocked caused panic among the Israelites.



The death of Ish-bosheth. From the Morgan picture Bible of Louis IX. Produced ca. 1250

These upheavals in the Land of Israel apparently convinced the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah that it was prime time for an assassination attempt against Ish-bosheth:

ויבאו כחם היום אל-בית איש בשת; והוא שכב את משכב הצהרים.

“And [they] came about the heat of the day to the house of Ish-bosheth, as he took his rest at noon” (2 Sam 4:5).

ויבאו הבית, והוא-שכב על-מטתו בחדר משכבו, ויכהו וימתהו, ויסירו את-ראשו;

“Now when they came into the house, as he lay on his bed in his bed-chamber, they smote him, and slew him, and beheaded him” (2 Sam 4:7).

ויבאו כל-זקני ישראל אל-המלך חברונה, ויכרת להם המלך דוד ברית בחברון לפני יהוה; וימשחו את-דוד למלך על-ישראל.

“So all the elders of Israel came to the king to Hebron; and king David made a covenant with them in Hebron before *YHWH*; and they anointed David king over Israel” (2 Sam 5:3).

In honor of the first three kings of Israel the Postal service of Israel issued in 1960 a series of three stamps. Illustrated by Asher Kalderon, these stamps portray the graphic images of Saul, David and Solomon.

In spite of the disregard by the Israeli Postal Service, **אשבעל** - "Eshbaal" better known as: **איש בשת** - "Ish-bosheth" was the second King of the independent Land of Israel. We were not informed about any wicked action taken by this king and even David referred to him as: **איש צדיק** - "a righteous person" (2 Sam 4:11), a designation that was accredited to very few (if any) of the later kings of Israel or Judah.

The issue of whether he was or was not the son of Saul, does not justify the general lack of recognition in **אשבעל** - "Eshbaal" who reigned over Israel for two years (2 Sam 2:10).