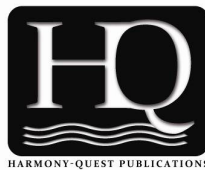


Saul: The First King

The Covenant and the Scrolls
Book Two

Steven Liebowitz, Ed.D.



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www.HarmonyQuestPublications.com

sliebowitz@aol.com

305-595-2338

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Dedication

To my wonderful wife, Tanya, without whose support this book would never have been written and Myra Brown without whom this book would never have been published.

A Note from the Author

This is a work of historical fiction, based on biblical, scholarly and archeological data. Some characters as well as names for places and things are made up to support the story and are not intended to be correct, accurate or factual. The relevant Old Testament portions are Judges, First Samuel and Second Samuel.

The book's inspiration came from a trip to Israel six years ago. My wife and I visited the tel at Meggiddo. A tel is an archeological term for a site that has numerous civilizations one on top of the other. The one at Megiddo had 35 civilizations going back perhaps 5,000 years! Struck by the multitude of civilizations represented there about which I knew nothing, I resolved to learn more at least about my own Jewish heritage. This book represents some of what I have learned.

One of my favorite references was given to me by my brother, Sandy-Joe Liebowitz: Chronicles News of the Past Volume 1 in the Days of the Bible (From Abraham to Ezra, 1726-444 BCE), (Reubeni Foundation, 1968). The book is actually printed on newsprint broad sheets to add authenticity, and describes biblical events as a modern contemporary newspaper would.

Characters, Places and Terms in Order of Appearance

Joel the Danite – Saul’s life-long friend (chaver) from the tribe of Dan

The Shephelah - heartland of ancient Israel, a strategic place west of the Judean mountains and foothills that controlled access to both. Most of it occupied by the Philistines, almost cutting the country that Barak and Devorah had united in half.

Barak - famous general in the time of Devorah, 150 years before Saul’s time.

Devorah - strong spiritual leader, prophetess and the one and only woman to be a Judge (semi-judicial leadership role) over ancient Israel.

Gibeah - small strategic hamlet three miles west of Jerusalem

Benjamin - Saul’s tribe

Ephod – a household idol

Samuel - Renowned prophet and Judge at the time of Saul’s anointing

Necromancers – magicians able to raise the dead to ask them questions about the future. Banned since the time of Moses, but still very popular in Saul’s time.

Kish – Saul’s father an elder in the Tribe of Benjamin

Janina – Saul’s mother

Abadantha (Dantha) – Saul’s sister

God of the Scrolls (Scrolls – written laws, Ten Commandments) (Yahweh) – Traditional view of God as Zeus, as score keeper, punisher and rewarder

God of the Covenant (the original promise or covenant of mutual love between God and humanity) – Non-traditional view of God in which God is a not chief score-keeper and punisher, and is instead a loving power available to all.

Simcha and Abija – Samuel’s wicked sons

Ahinoam – Saul’s wife

Saul’s sons: Jonathan, Ish-Boshet, Abindab, and Malchishua

Saul’s daughters: Michal, and Merab

Zulph – Samuel’s hometown

Captain Hafiz – Philistine soldier

King Nahash of Ammon – Saul’s first war challenge

Jabesh - town besieged by King Nahash and rescued by Saul

Abner – Saul’s cousin and General-in-Chief

Dathan - Ammonite warrior captured at Jabesh but recruited by Abner to serve in the Army

Shasheesha – Ammonite priestess captured at Jabesh, wife of Dathan, who uses her feminine wiles and skills as a priestess of Astarte to enslave Jonathan.

Michmash – Battle between Saul and Philistines that Saul almost losses, but is saved by Michal and Jonathan

Amalekites – Perennial enemies of the Hebrews going back to Moses’ time

David – shepherd boy anointed by Samuel as King on Yahweh’s order while Saul is still King

Goliath – giant Philistine warrior, a distant cousin of David's

Valley of Elah – place where David and Goliath meet

Rizpah – Saul's Egyptian concubine

Nob - site of Yahweh's temple

Abimelech – High Priest at Nob

Doeg - the Edomite, observes David and Abimelech at Nob

Gareth – one of David's lieutenants

Keilah – a small city that welcomed David at first, then turned against him

Gath – a large and powerful Philistine City-State

King Achish – ruler of Gath

Uriah the Hittite – one of David's lieutenants

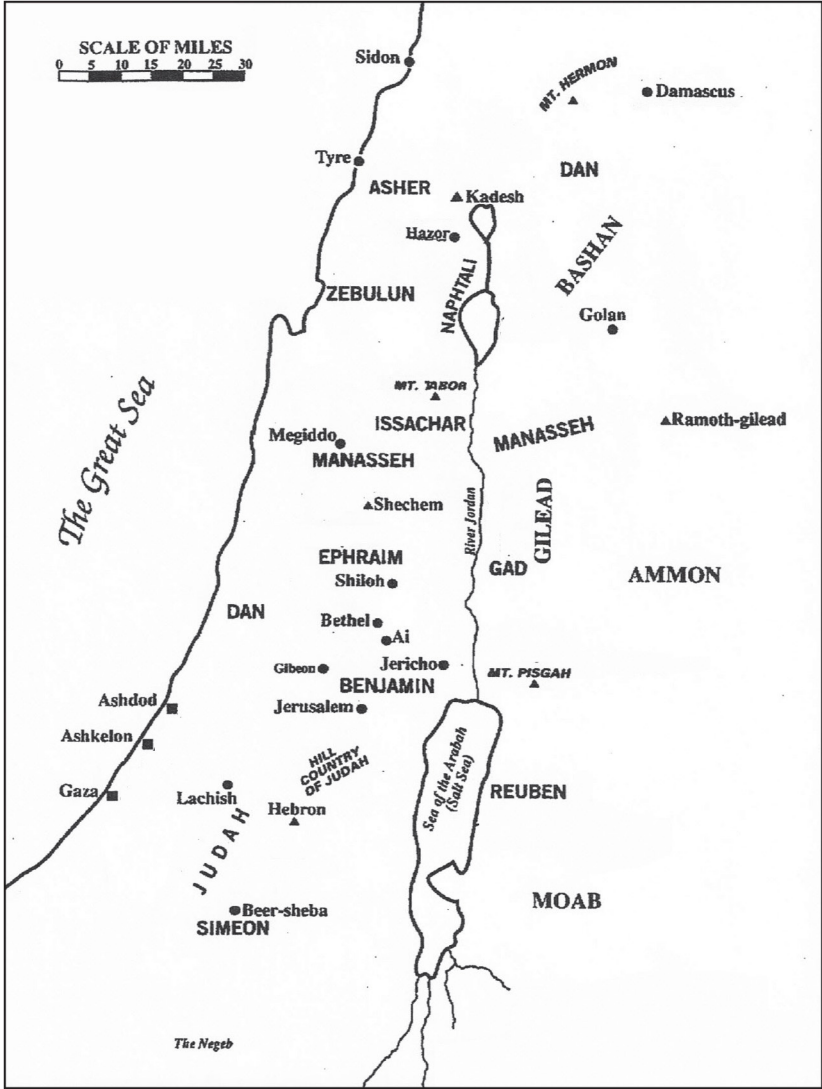
Nabal – rich farmer and land owner

Abigail – Nabal's wife who eventually marries David

En-gedi - oasis on western shore of the Dead Sea where David and Saul meet in a cave

Endor – the place Saul meets the necromancer witch

Mt Gilboa – location of Saul's final battle



Prologue

Saul stood mute and emotionless as the dry desert air surrounding him. “Can this be correct, Prophet? It does not feel right to me.”

Samuel stepped forward and gripped the young man’s shoulders with both hands. “It is natural to have doubt, Saul. But, it is true. The Lord God Yahweh himself has commanded that you become King of Israel.” He stared into Saul’s face and saw the stirring of realization there. “Fear not. You will not remain as you are. The power of the Lord God Yahweh will transform you.”

Saul pulled in a long breath. “I am not sure, Prophet.”

“Have you no faith?” Samuel’s voice was deep and hoarse with anger. “It is not for you to decide; it has been decided. You shall be King! Yahweh, the Lord your God, the God of the Scrolls, shall transform you, make you capable, give all you need.”

But Yahweh, the God of the Scrolls, did not make Saul either capable nor give him all he needed, and unable to surrender to the God within him, the God of the Covenant, Saul was conflicted, twisted and struggled to the end of his days.

Chapter One

Joel the Danite ran rapidly across the stretch of open desert towards the spear shaft. “Perhaps there’s still an iron head on it, Saul,” he shouted. Saul was ten cubits behind his friend, panting hard. Joel was a much better runner and spearman, and Saul was bothered by his friend’s skill. He didn’t like being second best.

They were in the Shephelah, the heartland of Israel, a strategic place west of the Judean mountains and foothills that controlled access to both. Now the Philistines occupied most of it, almost cutting the country that Barak and Devorah had united in half. Almost. For reasons only known to them, the Philistines were content to establish a stronghold in Gibeah, three miles from Jerusalem, in easy striking distance of it and the western and southern slopes on northern Judah and Benjamin.

Saul wondered about the strategic folly of this. The Philistines with their hollow square were the military masters. “If I was in their place,” Saul thought, “I’d have taken Jerusalem and linked up with the Moabites in the east.” This state of affairs was embarrassing and painful, actually physically painful for Saul, sometimes filling his skull near to bursting when he thought of it. Once again, Israel was weak and without self esteem.

Joel pulled the spear from the sand as Saul trotted up to him. It did indeed have an iron tip. That was another thing; as in the time of Barak and Devorah, Israel’s enemies again had a monopoly on iron ore and smithing. The Philistines with their strangle hold on

the ports, prevented the importation of ore, and with their lock on smithing, made it rare for an Israelite to learn the skill.

“We Danites will make good use of this,” Joel said, hefting the weapon. “It has a fine balance.”

Saul held out his hand. Joel handed him the spear. Saul hefted it then threw it a distance of fifty cubits.

“Good throw, Saul!”

“Thank you,” Saul said, looking bashfully at his friend as they walked to retrieve the spear. “You could have done better.”

“Perhaps, but that takes nothing from your throw; it was a good one. Nothing to be ashamed of; look there,” Joel pointed.

“Looks like a sword,” Saul said as they walked toward a long object lying on the ground. It was a sword, but a bronze one, unlikely to withstand more than two or three blows of an iron sword. Saul dropped it, looking around, his eyes wide. “This field is littered with ancient weapons,” he said voice filled with wonder.

“Indeed,” Joel agreed. “It is said that Samson deposited the Gates of Gaza around here and Rehoboam and Jehoash fought here with their armies.”

“The Philistines knew well what they were doing to fortify Gibeah,” Saul said. “Someday, we too will fight here.”

“You forget, we Danites are already fighting the Philistines here,” Joel scowled. “While you and the other heroes of Benjamin do nothing, and the sons of Judah,” Joel spat in contempt.

“Benjamin is the smallest of the tribes,” Saul said, defensively.

Joel patted his shoulder, “But the fiercest. That is why you are here with me now, chaver.”

“Thank you, my good friend. But you are right,” Saul said. “We must have a king; the tribes must be united! We will never beat the Philistines disunited as we are.”

“I agree, Saul. I do believe that most of the elders of the tribes wish to have a king for the very reasons you speak of, but it is Samuel who resists the idea.”

“Samuel,” Saul spat the name out. “Who is he to resist the will of the people? All in the name of his god; a god no one has seen and who

has done nothing for his so-called chosen people. Chosen for what, I ask you? Misery? Rape? Powerlessness?”

“Be careful, Saul, you blaspheme.”

Saul had worked himself up. “Blaspheme? Blaspheme? May this god strike me down if I blaspheme!” He stretched his arms out wide and looked up to heaven, his big 6’5” frame bent back like a bow. When nothing happened, he turned to Joel. “See, this so-called god has done nothing against me.”

Joel smiled at him. “That does not mean that God does not exist or is powerless. It may simply mean he has other uses for you.”

Saul looked startled, almost stunned. That is what his mother and sister kept telling him! Strange to hear it from a warrior like Joel, a friend he respected so.

“Maybe you should be still and listen for Its small voice within you,” Joel said, patting Saul’s shoulder. “Come; let us go to the stream in the grove and sit quietly.”

Though Saul was normally too agitated to sit quietly, when he was able to still the raging inside of him, he felt not only refreshed, but clearer and stronger, too. “I did not truly mean to blaspheme; you know that, don’t you Joel?” Saul looked intensely at his friend as they crossed the last of the dunes to the shade of the grove. Joel dipped his head in agreement and tousled Saul’s reddish hair playfully. Saul pushed him away, gently. “Samuel might also be a force for unification, might he not? After all, he could just as easily change his mind and hear God encouraging unity.”

“You are right,” Joel said, dropping down next to Saul. “It’s difficult to know what the future will bring, isn’t it chaver?”

“Yes. At times I am desperate to know, *must* know.” Saul took a deep breath and exhaled expansively. “But in moments like these, when I feel the Covenant, I am content to let be what will be.”

Joel touched Saul’s broad shoulder. “Indeed, I love you when you’re like this, but it is very rare. So rare, that I would say it is not the real you. In fact, wasn’t it just last month that we went to Kenin, the necromancer, in search of a husband for your sister?”

Saul frowned. He had a healthy respect for necromancers and their familiars in the land of the dead, but felt that they were somehow

unclean. Still, necromancers were everywhere and very popular, every town and village had at least one and everyone consulted them about everything. His own father, Kish, kept two on his estates. Still, his mother, Janina, and sister, Abadantha, would have nothing to do with them, saying that whatever it was that spoke through the necromancers, it was not God. God needed no intermediary to connect with his people. On this subject as with most issues Saul was torn between two points of view. When things were under control, as they were now, he tended to favor the inner knowing advocated by his mother and sister. When things were difficult and beyond his control, he was ready to grasp at anything that promised concrete, rapid results.

Now he smiled, thinking of how upset Dantha would be if she knew he'd consulted a necromancer in search of a husband for her. Their mother would be upset, too. Although not Kish's first wife, Janina was the favorite of his five, and knew she did not have to worry about a good bride price, or finding a suitable husband for Abadantha. Similarly, though Saul was not the first-born, his size, skill with weapons and honest humility made him Kish's favorite, also.

As Saul looked with soft eyes into the face of his friend, his mind overlaid Joel's face with Dantha's. His sister meant as much to him as his friend, maybe more. Both had a positive influence on him; both made him feel accepted and loved and both gave him good counsel. And although the tingle of forbidden lust floated just below the surface of both relationships, Saul felt it most strongly in Dantha's presence.

Joel slapped him gently on the cheek. "Where are you, chaver, my friend? You're looking right through me."

Saul tapped him right back and looked off to the wind-blown sand and rough rocks on the horizon. He sighed, gratefully. "Indeed," he reflected, "I need do nothing but remain quietly on my father's estates, work my portion, and live a gentle prosperous life, honoring both the Covenant and the God of the Scrolls." Ah, there was another choice. But really, did one have to choose? Couldn't one do as he did, as so many seemingly did, honoring each in its place?

Not according to Dantha and indeed, not according to his own heart. Honoring the God of the Scrolls was easier in many physical and habitual ways; one didn't have to think too deeply, just do the rituals. But the god of the Covenant, who was with him now, ah, that was a true experience of God! To have that experience, though, he had to let go of his needs, drives and ambitions, to be empty, and as the ancient wisdom said, come naked unto your god and with empty hands. One needed a great deal of trust and faith for that. More than Saul thought he had.

Saul was not the only one who wrestled with the two aspects of the one living God. Ever since Deborah's time, people had struggled to make use of the two contradictory aspects of the one God. The traditional and most familiar aspect was Yahweh, God of the Scrolls, the fierce, demanding and punishing God. The God who intervened in human affairs, parted the Red Sea and killed the first born of Egypt.

The newer less traditional aspect was the God of the Covenant. Actively promulgated by Deborah, the God of the Covenant did not intervene in human affairs, was not fierce, nor punishing. The God of the Covenant was neither male nor female, though from force of habit most people thought of It as male. It demanded no sacrifices nor worship rituals, and was always present and guiding in the hearts of its people. Because It was all internal and informal without the external trappings of worship such as temples, priests, Sabbaths and ritual, most people found the God of the Covenant not only too difficult to worship, but too difficult to even comprehend.

"My, you're deep in thought, Saul," Joel said softly, almost tenderly.

"I was thinking about our going to the necromancer for Dantha, and how I dislike consulting them, but can't seem to help myself."

Joel snickered. "Good of you to think about your sister. Oh, so generous, but what about a mate of your own?"

"Maybe that's a way of avoiding my situation," Saul observed with uncharacteristic insight.

Joel clapped his hands. "Yes! You *are* deep today, chaver."

Saul smiled wryly. "Kish has asked me again. He wants

grandchildren from me. He says I am getting older, as if twenty-five is too, old. Besides, I have many children already.”

“Yes,” Joel slapped his shoulder. “That you do! You are a wonder with women, Saul, tender and dominant all at once. They adore that. But none of those children are officially Kish’s grandchildren.”

“Do I detect a note of jealousy?” Saul wondered. There was no need; there was no one like Joel in Saul’s life. “Officially? What does that matter? These rules and rituals,” Saul sputtered. “They are all Kish’s grandchildren, aren’t they? In the sight of God?”

“True; but they can inherit nothing from Kish,” Joel soothed, “and you can give them nothing, legally. You favor Ahinoam, the daughter of Ahimaag, don’t you? We’ve spent enough time with them.”

Saul dipped his head in agreement. “I do. She is lovely and no doubt I will marry her.” He stood, looked about him and raised his arms. “But also, deep inside, Joel, I feel the call for something more than a peaceful life on my father’s estates with Ahinoam.”

Joel stared at him skeptically.

“No. This is more than simple restlessness. I am called though I don’t want to be.” Saul put his hands to his head. “Ah, it does pain me, chaver. My head aches so; my heart does, too. How shall it all end?”

Joel gently lowered Saul’s hands and hugged him tightly. “I do not know.” He stepped back and looked deeply into Saul’s tortured eyes. His friend’s face had become almost as red as his hair and the normally tight fair skin across his features was as taught as a mask. “A moment ago, when you were not concerned about choosing, you were at peace. Let the God of the Covenant decide for you, chaver. Give it over. He loves you; allow Him to show you. Stop struggling; you are in His way!”

“Yes,” Saul said, filling his lungs with the dry desert air. The throbbing in his temples dissipated and he looked around. “Look there, chaver!” He pointed at an object glinting in the sun. “Let’s go see what it is!”

It was a well-preserved, large Philistine iron battle shield with a coiled serpent emblazoned on its face. “Look at all this iron, Saul!” Joel marveled.

Saul shook his head in disbelief. “This is the first time I’ve seen one of these up close, or touched one. Imagine the wealth that can produce such weapons!”

“Indeed,” Joel said, “and enough for thirty or forty thousand soldiers! Plus, their double-edged, curved swords, knives, spear tips and arrowheads. Wealth indeed! Is it any wonder my people here in Dan are so demoralized?”

“I understand, chaver. But must they be servants in the Philistine army?”

Joel blushed. “They are conscripted, chaver,” he said, looking down. “They have no choice. They nearly took me.”

Saul hugged his friend. “Agreed. I am grateful they did not take you. But must those taken also adopt the pagan worship and bow down before idols?”

Joel smiled a salacious, sensual smile. “Those pagan rituals are most exciting and sensual. Much more moving than ours. Have you been to one?”

Saul had, with Dantha, but said nothing.

“They are hard to resist, chaver, and oh, so readily available. It’s a wonder more of our people have not converted.”

Saul nodded; it was true. The pagan worship *was* very enticing, even hypnotic.

“Of course,” Joel continued, “you know the story of how Yael, Devorah’s lieutenant, was seduced by a priestess of Astarte?” Before Saul could say anything, Joel rushed on. “Certainly you remember the story. I think I first heard it when you told it to me after Janina told it to you on your Bar Mitzvah day. Did your mother tell it to Dantha too, on her Bat Mitzvah day?”

Saul nodded, eyes growing distant. “No doubt she did,” he thought. “But I told her first.” He could still see his eight-year-old sister’s eyes widening in shock and embarrassment, and how she’d touched herself, there. “Poor Janina,” Saul thought. “If she’d only known what an inspiration those stories would be, perhaps she wouldn’t have told them.” It had been only a few months later, shortly after Dantha’s eleventh birthday, that Saul and his sister had snuck into Astarte’s temple in Gibeah.

They had come to town innocently enough, with one of Kish's caravan's, bringing grain, dates, and fowl to sell. He and his sister managed to slip away from the busy caravan master undetected. They knew exactly where the temple was, having passed it numerous times on previous visits to Gibeah. But this day, they approached its trellised courtyards with thudding hearts and a mixture of fear and excitement.

It was three o'clock and the afternoon worship was commencing. People were streaming into the outer court. Saul and Dantha fell in with the crowd. The music of lyres, flutes, and tambourines drifted sensually, rhythmically, on the soft dry air. Strong, arousing incense entwined the music and drifted around them filling their lungs. It became darker as they moved into the heavily curtained inner court, and as they entered the walled-in sanctuary through the biggest doors they'd ever seen, the light came from rows of crackling high-mounted torches. At the far end of the huge room, on a raised dais, high above the prostrate worshippers, surrounded by smoldering braziers, sat the Goddess.

The press of people coming in behind Saul and Dantha pushed them forward. As they neared the Goddess's idol, they were forced to bow down and prostrate themselves, as everyone else was doing, or else draw attention to themselves. They hesitated, feeling thrills of fear and guilt run through them then sank to their knees and prostrated themselves. The act of obeisance, of submitting to this powerful, foreign deity, combined with the sensual music and incense was erotic and sexy. As they joined in the chanting, praising the great Goddess, and swayed and bent themselves in rhythmic kow-tows, they grew more aroused.

They felt their hearts and minds open. Their fear and resistance fell away. For the next hour, as priests and priestesses performed rituals and their bodies joined the hundreds of others writhing in sensual devotion, Saul and Dantha felt something inside them shift. They would always be Hebrews, but they had been changed. A new place within had been opened and revealed to them; a place that could not be denied, one that they would have to nurture from time to time with rituals similar to Astarte's.

It was one thing to be in a temple among a multitude bowing down and worshipping in naked sensual abandon and quite another for just the two of them to worship that way. Without the erotic music, incense and gauze-shrouded idol it was awkward. But stirred by the powerful memories and their desire to return to the place that had been opened and revealed to them, they persisted. As was their habit with these rites, Abadantha led the way.

In a small grassy clearing at the center of a dark grove of eucalyptus trees in a far corner of Kish's estate, shielded by the thick trunks and foliage, Abadantha began to sway hypnotically as she removed her robe. The flesh of her body shone alabaster in the shafts of sunlight. Saul watched and became entranced. She was so sensual; the way she caressed and thrust her pert breasts and hard nipples, ran her hands along the lascivious swell of her hips, pressed on the downy softness of her vagina; then twirling and leaning forward, offered him the voluptuous fleshiness of her buttocks and the dark, suggestive valley between them.

"You want to worship me, don't you?" she asked him.

"Oh, yes!" he whispered, his voice hoarse with desire.

"I am like the Goddess Astarte to you."

"Yes. You are the Goddess and I must worship you."

"Then kneel down, that you may worship *Me* properly."

Saul knelt before his sister. She swayed closer to him, put her fingers deep into her vagina, took them out dripping and smeared her sexual juices on his nose and mouth. He inhaled deeply, becoming more entranced. She held her sticky fingers to his mouth. He licked them off, savoring their taste and smell.

"This is the taste and smell of our sacred bond, our ritual of worship. As you taste and smell and bow down before *Me* you know yourself to be *My slave worshiper*. You are most fulfilled and at peace when you devote yourself to *Me* and *My worship*." Abadantha stroked her brother's hair. "You know that I love you and honor you and it pleases *Me* when you return *My* affection and devote yourself to *Me* as *My slave worshiper*. Know that in return for your devotion I, as your Goddess, will only bless and nurture and sustain you. This ritual

shall be our private, secret rite of adoration and devotion forever. It will always only bring you peace, clarity and strength.”

She touched his engorged penis beneath his robe. “Get naked and spill your seed on *My* bare feet, slave.” Moaning and writhing, Saul obeyed. “Lick your seed from my precious feet.” Saul obeyed. “When you have finished and licked *My* feet clean, you will be consecrated to *My* worship forever, even beyond death.”

Saul blinked, returned to the present and hefted the shield. It was heavy. He handed it to Joel. “It takes a strong, fit, and well-trained man to use this.”

Joel nodded.

“But the Philistines I have seen do not seem so fit.”

Joel looked at him.

“I think the Philistines, especially their nobles, are losing their stomach for fighting.”

Joel smiled, slowly, Saul’s insight dawning on him. “It is so, chaver. The conscripts I have talked with say there are fewer and fewer Philistines in the ranks, while more Danites, Moabites, and Amalekites are being allowed to bear arms. The Philistines are becoming dependent on mercenaries.”

“Still,” Saul said, looking around, searching for more iron, “their battle formations, tactics, armament, and chariots are unsurpassed.” Saul kicked a rock. “That square formation, with men in heavy armor and shields carrying two spears who become the outer wall, with lightly armed archers on the inside, is a rock in battle.” He looked up at a windblown sky of effortless azure, with high wisps of cirrus, totally removed from human beings and their talk of war. “My cousin Abner told me of a recent battle with three hollow squares,” Saul looked at his friend. “The Benjaminites hurled themselves at the squares, wave after wave and didn’t bend them. Most of Abner’s troops never even got to use their swords, but were cut down by spears and arrows ten cubits from the outer wall of soldiers.”

Joel shook his head sadly, knowingly. “We cannot fight them on their terms.” Saul nodded. “But we have our own ways and our own strengths.”