One of the most critical periods in early Israelite history is that of Samuel and Saul, when Israel made the transition from a tribal society to a state. The decisive change occurred under Saul. Whereas the chieftainship of Samuel left the clans a large measure of independence in matters of both government and religion, the rule of Saul meant a break with the old order. Samuel was a chief, but Saul a king—indeed, the first king of Israel.¹

The changes occurring under Saul’s rule were first of all political. The founder of a territorial state, Saul put in place an administrative apparatus and a standing military force. By a system of grants and other privileges he succeeded in maintaining the support of several groups in which power was traditionally vested, such as the landed aristocracy who controlled the lineages.² In its religious politics too, however Saul’s rule was an innovation. The god of the head of state was promoted to the rank of national god; his temple in the capital became religious centre of the kingdom. Its priesthood, sworn to loyalty, was expected to serve the king’s best interests. They became the civil servants of a state religion.

This study will focus on the significance of Saul for the religion of Israel. A valid assessment of his influence in religious matters cannot be made, however, without paying due attention to the military and political aspects of his kingship. Since the religion promoted by Saul was closely related to his origins, the personal background of Israel’s first king must be discussed as well.


² This is what Edelman calls “decentralized patrimonialism”, using an expression coined by Max Weber (Rise of the Israelite State, pp. 35-6).
Saul's Origins

The Bible presents Saul as the son of a landed aristocrat (a gibbor hayil) from the land of Benjamin (1 Sam. ix 1-2). His home town is not mentioned in the genealogy of 1 Sam. ix 1-2. Elsewhere it is reported, however, that Saul was buried in his family tomb in Zela (2 Sam. xxi 14). This city, also known as Zela Ha-aleph (Josh. xviii 28), is currently identified with Khirbet es-Salah less than a mile from Nebi Samwil (the elevation ca. 1.5 km. south of el-Jib). Since people are generally buried on the land of their ancestors, it may be assumed that Saul's family came from the close vicinity of Gibeon; their ancestral estate was less than 5 km. to the south of the city.

Originally from Zela near Gibeon, Saul's usual place of residence is known in the biblical records as Gibeah (1 Sam. x 26; cf. xxii 6, xxiii 19, xxvi 1), also called "Gibeah-of-Saul" (1 Sam. xi 4, xv 34; 2 Sam. xxi 6; Isa. x 29). This Gibeah (= Geba) is identified as either modern Jaba (ca. 15 km. east of Gibeon) or Tell el-Fül (ca. 10 km south-east of Gibeon). Both identifications are in contradiction with some of the literary data concerning Saul. The second part of the tale of the lost asses (1 Sam. ix 1-x 16) predicts and then describes the events which occurred to Saul on the way home from Ramah-of-the-Zuphites (1 Sam. x 1-16). Three topographical points of reference are given: Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah, the oak of Tabor, and Gibeath-

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3 LXX B reads Σιλτραξ and LXX A reads Σηλαλέφ. For a discussion of the name and the site of this place see D.V. Edelman, "Zela", ABD 6 (1992), p. 1072 (with literature).


5 Blenkinsopp, pp. 7, 110, n. 28 (with literature). According to Blenkinsopp's description "Nebi Samwil lies about a mile south of el-Jib with an elevation above sea level of some 2,835 feet, more than 492 feet higher than el-Jib." The elevation "must have seemed an ideal site for religious worship" (p. 7).


8 W.F. Albright, Excavations and Results at Tell el-Fül (Gibeath of Saul) (AASOR 4; New Haven, Conn., 1922-3); id., "A New Campaign of Excavation at Gibeath of Saul", BASOR 52 (1933), pp. 6-12; Schunck (n. 4), p. 21.