

# SAUL

## Background

For over 200 years after their arrival in Canaan, the Israelites had been ruled by judges, the last of whom was Samuel. The Israelites, ever struggling to gain control of their land from the Philistines, eventually came to Samuel and asked him to choose a king who would lead them in battle to rid them once and for all of the Philistine threat.

Samuel was unwilling to agree to this as he regarded the crowning of a king as a rejection of the rule of God. He warned of the many disadvantages of monarchy but the people insisted. Saul was thus anointed the first king of Israel in about 1020 BC

At first, Saul enjoyed some considerable success against Israel's enemies. That is, until the mighty Philistine champion Goliath issued his challenge which no one dared to take up and the Israelites were humiliated.

The unexpectedly good sling shot of the young shepherd boy David not only temporarily solved the Israelites' problem but also set Saul on a downward spiral of vicious jealousy, madness and corruption which eventually caused his downfall and subsequent suicide.

Handel's oratorios, *Messiah* apart, follow in the eighteenth century tradition of being essentially unstaged operas in which the audience is expected to imagine the scenes and events as the story unfolds.

## The Story

### Part I

1 Sinfonia. (Allegro - Minuet)

Scene 1 - *The Israelite camp by the Valley of Elah.*

The Israelites rejoice and praise God for David's victory over Goliath culminating in another of Handel's worthy settings of "Hallelujah!".

2	How excellent	chorus		
3	An infant rais'd		soprano	Michal
4	Along the monster atheist rode	trio		
5	The youth inspired	chorus		
6	Our fainting courage soon restored	chorus		
7	How excellent	chorus		
8	Hallelujah	chorus		

Scene 2 - *Saul's tent.*

David is presented to Saul who, impressed by the valour of the youth, commands that David should remain at court and offers him the hand of his eldest daughter Merab in marriage. Merab however is less than happy with the idea, feeling that marriage to a shepherd is not fitting for the daughter of a king; *'My soul rejects the thought with scorn'*. She is immediately scorned by Michal, another of Saul's daughters who is secretly falling in love with David; *'See, with what a scornful air'*. Jonathan, the son of Saul, is captivated by David and declares his undying friendship for the youth.

10	Behold, O King	recitative	Abner, Saul & David
11	O King, your favour	alto	David
12	O early piety	recitative	Jonathan
18	Thou, Merab, first in birth	recitative	Saul
19	My soul rejects the thought with scorn	soprano	Merab
20	See, see, with what scornful air	soprano	Michal

Scene 3 - *Outside the walls of an Israelite city.*

In the delightful chorus, *'Welcome, welcome mighty King'* the bells of the city ring out welcome the return of Saul and David following a further victory against the Philistines. Amidst the music and dancing the voices of the Israelite women are heard accrediting Saul with the slaying of thousands of the enemy, but David with tens of thousands. Saul immediately bursts into one of his not uncommon fits of venomous frenzy, *'With rage I shall burst'* admitting his growing jealousy and hatred of David. The latter, urged on by Michal, takes his harp and attempts to calm Saul's rage by the power of music which has often done the trick in the past, but this time to no avail. Saul curses David as *'A serpent in my bosom warmed'* and hurls his javelin at the boy, fortunately missing. From this point on Saul becomes ever increasingly obsessed with the destruction of David. He charges Jonathan to kill him but Jonathan, torn between filial duty and love for his friend comes down on David's side; *"No, cruel father, no."* Part I ends with a plea to God from the chorus to *"Preserve him for the Glory of Thy name"*.

21	Sinfonia		
22	Already see the daughters	recitative	Michal
23	Welcome, welcome, mighty king	chorus	
24	What do I hear?	recitative	Saul
25	David his ten thousand slew	chorus	
26	To him ten thousands	recitative	Saul
27	With rage I shall burst	bass	Saul
28	Imprudent women	recitative	Jonathan and Michal (to David)
29	Fell rage and black despair	soprano	Michal
30	Rack'd with infernal pains	recitative	Abner
31	O Lord whose mercies numberless	alto	David
33	Tis all in vain	recitative	Jonathan
34	A serpent in my boom warm'd	bass	Saul
35	Has he escap'd my rage	recitative	Saul
37	O filial piety	tenor	Jonathan

38	No, no, cruel father, no	tenor	Jonathan
40	Preserve him for the glory of thy name	chorus	

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Interval

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## Part II

### Scene 1 - *The Palace*

As the chorus complete their musing upon the hatefulness of “*Envy*”, Saul receives a further plea from Jonathan not to harm David. Saul, cunningly feigning to be reconciled to David, makes him leader of his armies, and bestows upon him his daughter Michal, who has all the time secretly loved him, instead of Merab who scorned him and has since been wed to another.

41	Envy eldest born of hell	chorus	
46	Hast thou obeyed my orders	recitative	Saul, Jonathan
47	Sin not O king	tenor	Jonathan
48	As great Jehovah	bass	Saul
49	Wisest and greatest of his kind	tenor	Jonathan
50	Appear my friend	tenor	Jonathan

### Scene 2 - *Elsewhere in the Palace*

A duet “*O fairest of ten thousand fair*” between David and Michal cements their love, and the chorus praise the ‘superior power’ of love to melt fury and disarm hatred.

53	A Father’s will has authorised my love	recitative	Michal
54	O fairest of ten thousand	duet	Jonathan and Michal
55	Is there a man	chorus	

### Scene 3 - *David’s house*

David has seen through Saul’s trickery, as a simple report of further Israelite victory under David’s command had enraged him resulting in another ill-aimed javelin whizzing towards David. Michal persuades David to flee the city as a messenger arrives from Saul summoning David to the court but it is too late - David has already escaped.

57	Thy father is as cruel and as false	recitative	David
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58	At persecution I can laugh	duet	David and Michal
59	Whom dost thou seek	recitative	Michal
60	No, no, let the guilty tremble	soprano	Michal

Scene 4 - *The Palace, The Feast of the New Moon*

Saul gloats upon the impending trap which he has laid for David but when he does not arrive, Jonathan attempts to cover for him saying that he had been called away to his father's house in Bethlehem. Saul immediately realises that he has been tricked and in fury hurls his javelin at Jonathan. He misses and Jonathan flees. It is perhaps worth pointing out here that Saul is the worst shot in the entire Old Testament. Greek chorus-like, the choir bewail Saul's accelerating descent into lawlessness - 'from crime to crime he blindly goes, nor end but with his own destruction knows'.

63	Sinfonia		
64	The time at length is come	recitative	Saul
65	Where is the son of Jesse	recitative	Jonathan
66	O fatal consequence of rage	chorus	

**Part III**

Scenes 1 & 2 - *Endor, The Witch's abode*

Saul, a broken man and forsaken by God, is gripped by remorse and fear at the scale of his crimes. Yet in one final insult to the Lord he commands the Witch of Endor to use her blackest magic to summon up the ghost of Samuel to seek his counsel, and the witch does so; "*Infernal spirits*". The ghost however has no words of comfort for Saul. Samuel foretells Israel's defeat in battle against the Philistines the next day and that Saul and his sons will perish. The Lord will crown David as the new king.

67	Wretch that I am	recitative	Saul
68	Tis said here lives a woman	recitative	Saul
69	With me what wouldst thou?	recitative	Witch of Endor & Saul
70	Infernal spirits	tenor	Witch of Endor
71	Why hast thou forced me?	recitative	Ghost of Samuel & Saul

Scene 3 - *Ziklag, the next day.*

An Amalekite comes to David with the news that the battle is lost and that Saul and Jonathan are dead. The Amalekite had happened upon Saul on Mount Gilboa, and finding him mortally wounded by his own hand had heeded Saul's cries to complete the task. David, who at no point has ever borne any ill-will against Saul, rages furiously against the Amalekite for having laid a hand on God's anointed one; "*Impious wretch!*" and orders the Amalkite to be immediately killed.

72	Sinfonia		
73	Whence com'st thou Amalekite	recitative	David, and an Amalekite

74	Impious wretch	alto	David
75	The Dead March		

As the chorus laments Israel's loss, David tearfully pays tribute to Saul whom, despite all that has gone before, he refuses to mock. The loss of Jonathan however is almost more than David can bear and in the ensuing "*Oh fatal day*" the beauty of Handel's artistry is at its most heart-rending.

Perhaps in some attempt to end such a tragic story on a note of hope, the Israelite Abiathar encourages his countrymen to weep no more but be glad at the dawning of a new era. In the rousing final chorus they urge the new king David by faith and obedience to God to succeed where Saul failed in the continuing battles against the Philistines:

*"Gird on thy sword, thou man of might. Pursue thy wonted fame;  
Go on. Be prosperous in fight, retrieve the Hebrew name."*

76	Mourn Israel	chorus	
79	Brave Jonathan	alto	David
80	Eagles were not as swift as they	chorus	
81	In sweetest harmony	alto	David
82	O fatal day	alto & chorus	
83	Ye men of Judah weep no more	recitative	Abiathar
84	Gird on thy sword	chorus	