

## Who was Nahash the Ammonite?

Nahash, a name that means “serpent,” is shared by possibly as many as four Ammonite individuals. However, it could also be the name of only one king.

The most well-known mention of Nahash is in reference to the king of the Ammonites. He threatened Israel before Saul was king. In fact, the fear of Nahash is one of the reasons Israel demanded a king (1 Samuel 12:12). He and his army attacked Jabesh-Gilead, east of the Jordan, and besieged the city, forcing them to beg for surrender. Nahash told the citizens they had the choice between death by the sword and having their right eyes gouged out. According to Josephus, these cruel terms of surrender were the usual practice for him. Nahash gave the city seven days to decide. Jabesh-Gilead reached out to the rest of the people of Israel for help. Their plea traveled throughout the land, and Saul, a herdsman at the time, responded by raising an army that decisively defeated Nahash and the Ammonites at Bezek (1 Samuel 11:1-11).

A more complete explanation for Nahash’s actions was discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls. An additional paragraph in 1 Samuel 11 says that Nahash conquered the tribal lands of Gad and Reuben, gouging out the right eye of all but 7,000 men who fled to Jabesh-Gilead (Scroll 4Q51 Samuel a).

The next mention of Nahash king of the Ammonites is his death, near the beginning of David’s reign. Second Samuel 10:1-2 says that David sent a message of condolence to Nahash’s heir, Hanun, because Nahash had shown David kindness. While the nature of this act of kindness is not explicitly mentioned, there is a tradition stating that, when David entrusted his family to the king of Moab (1 Samuel 22:3-4), the Moabite king killed them all except one brother, who then found refuge with Nahash. Jerome explains

that the goodwill between the Ammonite king and David was based on their common enemy—Saul. Josephus, however, wrote that King Nahash died when Saul defeated the Ammonites, which would make the Nahash David mourned a different person. It is not clear where Josephus—who lived 900 years after the fact—got his information.

Another possible Nahash is the father of Shobi the Ammonite, who provided food for David during his flight from Absalom (2 Samuel 17:27–29). One scholar posits that Shobi was merely a member of the Ammonite royal family, whom David spared when he captured Rabbah, the capital of Ammon (1 Chronicles 20:1–3). Thus, this Nahash was not a king of Ammon. Still, it is possible that Shobi was the son of the same King Nahash of 1 Samuel 11 and 2 Samuel 12 who had been kind to David, and Shobi returned the favor.

The name Nahash is also mentioned once in 2 Samuel 17:25: “Amasa was the son of Jether, an Ishmaelite who had married Abigail, the daughter of Nahash and sister of Zeruiah the mother of Joab.” First Chronicles 2:16 lists Abigail and Zeruiah as David’s sisters, so three possibilities exist within this one verse: 1) Nahash is another name for Jesse; 2) Nahash was Jesse’s wife; and 3) Nahash was Jesse’s wife’s first husband, so Abigail and Zeruiah were David’s step- or half-sisters. Scholars who identify this Nahash with the king of the Ammonites say that the monarch was Abigail’s father by a wife or concubine who later married Jesse. Others think the mention of Nahash is an error in transcription, and the name does not belong in the verse at all.

If Nahash the Ammonite is the same person in each of these verses, he had a massive impact on the monarchy and the people of Israel. If the mentions of the name refer to three or four separate individuals, the impact of those men is no less great.