

## Who was Rizpah in the Bible?

Rizpah was a concubine of King Saul's who played a minor role in two events in David's rise to power. Although David was anointed by Samuel to succeed Saul as king of Israel when David was quite young, David was content to wait for God's timing to actually become king. In fact, he executed Saul's supposed killer (2 Samuel 1:1-16) and did not kill Saul's remaining male heirs, defying the standard custom in many cultures. David paid particular respect for Mephibosheth, Jonathan's crippled son (2 Samuel 9).

Rizpah's part in the first event concerning David is very small. In 2 Samuel 3, Saul had died and David is king over the southern half of the kingdom, but Saul's son Ish-Bosheth has garnered support in the northern half. Abner, Saul's cousin and general, had been a rising star in Saul's court and now champions Ish-Bosheth as king. Possibly out of paranoia, Ish-Bosheth accuses Abner of sleeping with Rizpah, essentially charging him with trying to take Saul's throne for himself. Abner is incensed to the point that he immediately switches his allegiance and swears to support God's oath to "transfer the kingdom from the house of Saul and establish David's throne over Israel and Judah from Dan to Beersheba" (2 Samuel 3:10). Abner gathers support for David, including from Saul's own tribe of Benjamin, and visits David to declare his loyalty. David lets Abner leave in peace, but Joab, David's second-in-command, secretly calls Abner back and murders him (verses 26-27). David asserts his innocence in the matter and even takes part in the funeral procession for Abner. Shortly thereafter, Ish-Bosheth is murdered, too. David, who did not want to take the throne through intrigue against Saul's house, has Ish-Bosheth's assassins executed (2 Samuel 4).

While there is speculation that Abner did indeed sleep with Rizpah and that Rizpah was willing to transfer her own loyalties to the stronger leader, the Bible doesn't say. All

we know is that Abner denied being involved with Rizpah.

Rizpah had two sons by Saul, both of whom were spared when David came into power. Years later, when David held the northern part of the kingdom as well as the southern, Israel was struck by a famine that lasted three years (2 Samuel 21:1-14). David, recognizing that the famine may be a divine judgment against the nation, asks God if this is so. God affirms that the famine is punishment for Saul's massacre of the Gibeonites, who had been protected by a treaty since the Israelites first invaded the Promised Land (Joshua 9:1-27). The breach of contract was serious enough that God sent the famine in response. David approaches the Gibeonites to ask how Israel can make restitution, and they demand the lives of seven of Saul's descendants.

David complies with the Gibeonites' demand, taking the remaining seven sons and grandsons of Saul (except for Jonathan's son Mephibosheth) and giving them to the Gibeonites. After the executions, Rizpah stood guard over the bodies of her sons and the five others, sleeping on a rock on a bed of sackcloth and chasing away birds and wild animals. Rizpah did this "from the beginning of the harvest till the rain poured down from the heavens" (2 Samuel 21:10). For a body to be exposed to the elements and eaten by wild animals after death was a sign of dishonor and possibly even a curse. Rizpah's self-sacrificing devotion reminds David that he had neglected the bodies of Saul and Jonathan, which were held at Jabesh Gilead. David took Saul's and Jonathan's bones along with the remains of the seven who were executed by the Gibeonites and buried them properly in Saul's family tomb. In response, God lifted the famine.

There is controversy over the deaths of Rizpah's sons and the others who were killed by the Gibeonites. Some scholars believe David manipulated the event to get rid of his

rival's heirs without looking like a cruel usurper. Others believe that their deaths were God's intention as part of judgment on Saul's house. Another theory is that these men of Saul's family had been personally involved in the Gibeonite massacre, and their deaths were God's judicial punishment for their crimes.

So Rizpah played a role in two different stories of how David strived to take the crown God had promised without disrespecting (or destroying) the family of his predecessor. Her devotion to Saul's sons and grandsons also served to remind David that he had a duty to his former king and, as long as Saul and his descendants were not properly buried, his succession was not complete.