
Lesson 7: Shadow King Assumes Power

Text: I Samuel Chapters 11-12

The assembly at Mizpah ended on an enthusiastic note. The people shouted: ‘Long live the king’ (10,24). But great care was taken to hide the true nature of the assembly from the Philistine rulers. Saul had to remain for some time a ‘shadow-king’, and his public assumption of royal power and authority had to be put on hold for the meantime.

Meanwhile the leaders who had attended the clandestine coronation returned to their homes anxiously awaiting the *dénouement* of their dramatic action. But not all of them were impressed by the newly anointed first king of Israel (10,27):

But certain base fellows said:
‘how shall this man save us?’”

And they despised him,
and brought him no present
But he was one that held his peace

וּבְגֵי בְלִיעֵל אָמְרוּ
מִה־יִשְׁעֵנוּ נָה
וַיִּבְזְאוּ
וְלֹא־הִבְיִאוּ לוֹ מִנְחָה
וַיְהִי כַמְתַרִישׁ:

The king too went to his home in Gibeah, accompanied by some loyal followers (10,26). Outwardly nothing changed in Saul’s life. He was still unknown and unrecognized, and each day he went to work in the field like any ordinary Israelite farmer. And yet, gone were the old peaceful days of farming. Saul was now the anointed king of Israel, and the people were anxiously wondering how he will assume the kingship. During this time of anxious expectation Saul was somberly biding his time, wondering when the great day will come.

At last this day came. It all began quite far from Saul’s home town, in the territory east of the river Jordan (11, 1-3):

Then Nahash the Ammonite came up
and encamped against Jabesh gilead;
and all the men of Jabesh said unto
Nahash: “Make a covenant with us, and we will
Serve thee.” And Nahash the Ammonite said unto them:
“On this condition will I make it with you,
that all your right eyes be put out;
And I will lay it for a reproach upon all Israel.”
And the elders of Jabesh said unto him:
“Give us seven days respite,
that we may send messengers unto all

וַיַּעַל נַחֲשׁ הָעַמּוֹנִי וַיִּחַן עַל־יַבֶּשׁ גִּלְעָד
וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָל־אֲנָשֵׁי יַבֶּשׁ אֶל־נַחֲשׁ
כָרַת־לָנוּ בְרִית וְנַעֲבֹדָה:
וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם נַחֲשׁ
הָעַמּוֹנִי בְזֹאת אֶכְרַת לָכֶם
בְּנָקוּר לָכֶם כָּל־עֵינֵי יָמִין
וְשִׂמְתִּיהָ חֲרָפָה עַל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלָיו זְקַנֵּי יַבֶּשׁ
הֲרַף לָנוּ שְׁבַע־יָמִים
וְנִשְׁלַחְתָּה מַלְאָכִים

the borders of Israel;
and then, if there be none to deliver us,
we will come out to thee.”

בְּכָל גְבוּל יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְאִם-אֵין מוֹשִׁיעַ אֲתָנוּ
וְיָצְאוּ אֵלֶיךָ:

The messengers of Jabesh-Gilead came to Gibeah. They may have heard of the assembly from Mizpah, but even if they knew nothing of the new king it was natural that they came to Gibeah for help, because the people of Jabesh-Gilead were related by marriage to the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 21, 11), and Gibeah was a central Benjamite town.

The messengers expected to receive help from the tribe of Benjamin, but what actually happened was entirely unexpected.

Saul was told of the brazen challenge of the Ammonite king, and he immediately acted with the authority of a king. He ordered all the tribes of Israel to rally (11, 7):

And he took a yoke of oxen
and cut them in pieces
and sent them throughout all of the borders of Israel
by the hand of messengers saying:
“Whosoever comes not forth after Saul
and after Samuel,
so shall it be done unto his oxen.”
And the dread of the Lord fell on the people,
and they came out as one man.

וַיִּקַּח לְצֹמֶד בָּקָר
וַיִּבְתְּמֵהוּ
וַיִּשְׁלַח בְּכָל-גְבוּל
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּיַד הַמְלָאכִים לֵאמֹר:
אִשֶּׁר אֵינָנוּ יֹצֵא אַחֲרַי שְׂאוּל
וְאַחֲרֵ שְׂמוּאֵל
כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה לְבָקְרוֹ
וַיִּפֹּל פַּחַד-ה' עַל-הָעָם
וַיֵּצְאוּ כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד:

Saul was residing in Gibeah, which is also called Gibeath-Benjamin and Gibeath-Saul, and has been identified with Tell el-Ful.

The remains of the ancient Israelite fortress can be seen nowadays from any high spot in the northern part of the New City of Jerusalem. Tell el-Ful is situated at a 45-minute walking distance on the road leading from Jerusalem to Ramalla. It consists of a mount of white ruins, and from a distance it appears like a hill on top of a hill. This is the site of King Saul's capital.

Saul led his army northwards to Shechem, there he turned north-east and finally encamped at Bezek, halfway down the road leading from Shechem to Beit-She'an. Thus he made ready to 'deliver' Jabesh-Gilead. The latter is identified, following Nelson Glueck with the ruins on the double hill that is called by the Arabs el Maqbara and Tell Abu Kharaz, on the bank

of Wadi Yabis which is situated east of the river Jordan overlooking the modern Kibbutz Tirat Zvi in the Beit-She'an valley.

From Bezek he took his army down to the plain of Beit-She'an, crossed the Jordan and surprised the Ammonites who beleaguered Jabesh-Gilead (11,11):

And it was on the morrow
that Saul put the people in three companies
and they came into the midst of the camp
in the morning watch
and smote the Ammonites until
the heat of the day;
and it came to pass, that
they who remained were scattered
so that two of them were not left together.

וַיְהִי מִמָּחָרֹת
וַיִּשֶׂם שָׁאֵל אֶת־הָעָם
שְׁלֹשָׁה רְאשִׁים וַיָּבֵאוּ בְּתוֹךְ
הַמַּחֲנֶה בְּאֶשְׁמֹרֶת הַבֹּקֶר
וַיִּכּוּ אֶת־עַמּוֹן עַד־הֵם הַיּוֹם
וַיְהִי הַנִּשְׁאָרִים
וַיִּפְצְאוּ
וְלֹא נִשְׁאָרוּ־בָם שְׁנַיִם יָחַד:

There remains, however, one difficult aspect of Saul's military campaign. What were the Philistines doing? How did they react to the military exploits of their subjects? Was it likely that they allowed the Israelites to organize an army?

The solution to this problem lies in the character of the Philistines and the aims of their conquests in Eretz-Israel. The Philistines came from what was in those days the Far West, the islands of the Aegean Sea. They brought with them a highly developed civilization, and they invaded Eretz-Israel in search after their successful invasion of the coastal plain. They looked down upon the local inhabitants as barbaric tribes, and their only interest in them was in subjugating them. To them all the peoples and the tribes who populated the country seemed to be a conglomeration of similar tribes, and they held all in equally low esteem. It is therefore not surprising that they regarded with equanimity the internecine warfare that went on between Ammon and Israel. Such 'internal' struggles appeared to be beneficial to the Philistine conquerors. Furthermore, the Israelites fought this battle against the Ammonites who were living in Trans-Jordan and were as yet free from Philistine dominion. The Philistines may have entertained the hope that the Israelite victory was paving the way for a Philistine invasion of Ammonite territory.

Little did they know that this time they were witnessing the military campaign of a new Israelite king who was soon to challenge Philistine rule.

We have no reason to doubt that the Philistines knew of the Israelite war and victory. But the Philistines had apparently no idea that the Israelites were led by a national king. It was only after the victory over Ammon that Saul came out of the 'underground' and was publicly acclaimed King of Israel (11,14):

Then said Samuel to the people:
"Come and let us go to Gilgal
and renew the kingdom there."

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל־הָעָם
לְכוּ וְנִלְכֶה גִלְגָּל
וְנִחַדְשׁ שָׁם הַמְּלוּכָה:

In the famous ancient historical site of Gilgal, near Jericho, the people ‘renew the Kingdom’. The proclamation was made at a place that was far from the Philistines, but this time it was not a clandestine affair. The coronation at Mizpah was attended by leaders who were invited by Samuel (10,17), whereas the ‘renewal’ was an open and public event (11,15):

And all the people
went to Gilgal
and there they made Saul king
before the Lord;
and there they sacrificed sacrifices of peace-
Offerings before the Lord;
And there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly.

וַיָּלְכוּ כָּל־הָעָם הַגִּלְגָּל
וַיַּמְלִכוּ שָׁם אֶת־שְׂאוּל
לִפְנֵי ה' בַּגִּלְגָּל
וַיִּזְבְּחוּ־שָׁם זִבְחִים
שְׁלָמִים לִפְנֵי ה'!
וַיִּשְׂמַח שָׁם שְׂאוּל
וְכָל־אֲנָשָׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד־מְאֹד: