

# THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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## LECTURE 66: CHAPTER 4

### THE KILLING OF ISH BOSHET (PART I)

#### I. REKHAV AND BA'ANA

Chapter 4 opens with a description of Ish-Boshet's reaction to the death of Avner:

(1) And when Shaul's son heard that Avner was dead in Hebron, his hands became feeble, and all the Israelites were affrighted.

We noted earlier Scripture's belittling attitude toward the personality of Ish-Boshet. Here we find another literary expression of this phenomenon: Scripture omits the name of Ish-Boshet, and suffices with the words "Shaul's son" (and so too in the next verse).<sup>1</sup>[1] This also follows from the contents of the verse, which describes Ish-Boshet's great feebleness and his absolute dependence upon Avner.<sup>2</sup>[2] This verse constitutes the background of this short chapter, which describes the humiliating murder of Ish-Boshet, which completed the unnecessary farce of his weak rule and split of the kingdom.

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1 [1] In Scripture, calling a person by his "family name" alone usually indicates a belittling attitude. See, for example, I *Shmuel* 20:30-31; 22:7, 9, 12.

2 [2] Why did Ish-Boshet's hands only become feeble at this time, when already after the argument with Avner it says, "And he could not answer Avner another word, because he feared him" (3:11)? It is possible that Ish-Boshet expected that in the end, Avner would return to him, and it was only with his death that his absence became an absolute fact. There may, however, be a different reason, which we will discuss later in the chapter.

(2) Shaul's son had two men that were captains of bands; the name of the one was Ba'ana, and the name of the other Rekhav, the sons of Rimmon the Be'erotite, of the children of Binyamin; for Be'erot also is reckoned to Binyamin. (3) And the Be'erotites fled to Gitayim, and have been sojourners there until this day.

Scripture describes at length facts that at first glance seem irrelevant to the story. First of all, Scripture notes that Rekhav and Ba'ana were from Be'erot, and therefore regarded as members of Binyamin, "for Be'erot also is reckoned to Binyamin." The implication is that there was room to think that Be'erot was not reckoned to Binyamin. The question may be raised: Why? The Radak explains that "perhaps it was on the border and people thought that it was not part of Binyamin; [and therefore] it informs us that it too was reckoned to Binyamin." This explanation is, however, difficult, for Be'erot is counted among the cities of the tribe of Binyamin (*Yehoshua* 18), but it is not mentioned as defining the tribal territory's borders, and thus it would seem that it was situated well within the tribal territory and not on its border.<sup>3</sup>[3]

It seems then that the verse must be understood in a different manner. The city of Be'erot is familiar to us as one of the four Giv'onite cities (see *Yehoshua* 9:17). Thus, it may be understood that Rekhav and Ba'ana were Giv'onites, and therefore Scripture found it necessary to emphasize that they are reckoned as people of Binyamin, for Be'erot is reckoned to Binyamin. This explanation is supported by the fact that Rekhav and Ba'ana's father was named Rimon, like the Aramean idol.<sup>4</sup>[4]

An objection may be raised against this proposal: If, indeed, Rekhav and Ba'ana were Giv'onites, how could they have been appointed as captains

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3 [3] Indeed, Be'erot is generally identified today with Al-Bira (near Ramalla), which is found within the tribal territory of Binyamin, and not on the border.

4 [4] The idol Rimon is familiar to us from the words of Na'aman, the commander of the Aramaen army, who, after Elisha cured him of his leprosy, apologized before Elisha that he would continue to accompany his master to his house of worship: "In this thing the Lord pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimon to worship there, and he leans on my hand, and I prostrate myself in the house of Rimon, when I prostrate myself in the house of Rimon, the Lord pardon your servant in this thing" (II *Melakhim* 5:18). See also *Zekharya* 12:11: "As the mourning of **Hadadrimon** in the valley of Megido."

of bands in Shaul's son's army? Anyone familiar with the circumstances of the period knows that there would be nothing unusual about such an appointment. Senior soldiers serving as mercenaries in an enemy camp is a common phenomenon in Scripture and outside of it. We already noted that Akhish the king of Gat was not especially surprised by David's desire (as understood by Akhish) to join him in battle against Israel, just as in David's army there were foreign soldiers, such as Achimelekh the Chitite (I *Shmuel* 26:6) and Itai the Gitite (II *Shmuel* 15:19). Giv'onite soldiers could also then have reached senior positions in Shaul and Ish-Boshet's army – especially in light of the fact that we are dealing with people who lived among the people of Israel as an inseparable part of the nation. This may be the reason that Scripture emphasizes that Rekhav and Ba'ana were regarded as "children of Binyamin."

According to this, we might also be able to understand the significance of what is stated in the next verse: "And the Be'erotites fled to Gitayim." Why did the Be'erotites flee, and why specifically to a Philistine area?<sup>5</sup> If we are dealing with Giv'onites, the matter is clear – it stands to reason that their fleeing is connected to the massacre carried out against them by Shaul,<sup>6</sup> as is mentioned below (21:2): "... now the Giv'onites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; and the children of Israel had sworn unto them; and Shaul sought to slay them in his zeal for the children of Israel and Yehuda."<sup>7</sup> It was only natural for the Giv'onites to flee to an area under the control of Shaul's enemies, just as David had found refuge by the Philistines when he was running away from Shaul.<sup>8</sup>

The possibility that Rekhav and Ba'ana were Giv'onites sheds new light on the chapter: it provides an additional motive for their desire to kill Ish-

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5 [5] The word "*Gitayma*" could relate to the city of Gat or to the city of Gitayim (*Nechemya* 11:33). Either way, we are dealing with a city under Philistine control.

6 [6] It is possible that the friction between Shaul and the Giv'onites stemmed from the origins of the family of Shaul in Giv'on, as was noted in the previous chapter (see I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 9:33-36).

7 [7] For this act, three years of famine were decreed on Israel, which only came to an end after they responded to the Giv'onites' demand that seven of Shaul's descendants be killed. We will in the future deal with this complicated chapter.

8 [8] See I *Shmuel* 21:11 and our lecture on it (Lecture 41 on I *Shmuel*), where we noted other instances in Scripture where people running away from a king found a haven by an enemy king, based simply on a common interest.

Boshet the son of Shaul, and thus take revenge against their nation's greatest enemy – in addition to their belief, which in the end proved to be a serious mistake, that David would reward them for their actions.

## II. THE NARRATIVE CONTINUITY

If indeed Scripture wishes to provide two different motives for the killing of Ish-Boshet at the hands of Rekhav and Ba'ana, this might also shed light on a difficulty in the verses describing Ish-Boshet's assassination:<sup>9[9]</sup>

(5) And the sons of Rimmon the Be'erotite, Rekhav and Ba'ana, went, and came about the heat of the day to the house of Ish-Boshet, as he took his rest at noon. (6) And they came thither into the midst of the house, as though they would have bought wheat; and they smote him in the groin; and Rekhav and Ba'ana his brother escaped. (7) Now when they came into the house, as he lay on his bed in his bed-chamber, they smote him, and slew him, and beheaded him, and took his head, and went by the way of the Arava all night.

These verses are very difficult in and of themselves. One striking difficulty is the matter of buying wheat mentioned in verse 6, which we will discuss below; for the time being we will assume that this should be understood in the accepted manner that Rekhav and Ba'ana entered Ish-Boshet's house together with wheat sellers (Rashi) or else they disguised themselves as wheat sellers (*Metzudat David*). At this stage, let us focus on the difficulty in the narrative continuity: How is it that after what was stated in verse 6: "And they smote him in the groin; and Rekhav and Ba'ana his brother escaped" – which implies that they already killed Ish-Boshet and escaped – it says in verse 7: "Now when they came into the house, as he lay on his bed in his bed-chamber, they smote him, and slew him, and beheaded him, and took his head"?

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9 [9] At this point, we shall skip over verse 4 – a parenthetical statement regarding Mefiboshet the son of Yehonatan, which is not an integral part of the story. Here we will only mention that the matter of Mefiboshet is noted also in the framework of the story in chapter 21 regarding Shaul and the Giv'onites, and this strengthens the connection between the two chapters. At the end of the discussion of our chapter, we will go back and examine the significance of the verse, and discuss why it appears here.

The commentators struggled to understand the relationship between the two verses. The Radak writes: "It seems that after they smote him and left, they went back into the house to remove his head in order to bring it to David, for they killed him because they thought they would thereby find favor in David's eyes." According to the Radak, verse 7 comes to say that after they already smote Ish-Boshet and ran away, the two changed their minds and decided that it would be better to take his head, in order to bring it to David and receive a reward. This explanation, however, is difficult for various reasons. It is not clear why they didn't do this from the outset? What caused them to change their minds, and why was it important for Scripture to mention this? And furthermore, if verse 7 comes merely to tell us that they went back to remove his head, why did it not mention only that? Why repeat what we already knew before, that Ish-Boshet lay on his bed?

The *Metzudat David* offers a different explanation: "Now it goes back to relate the manner in which he was smote; it first says that they killed him, and afterwards it says that they removed his head." That is to say, verse 6 speaks in general terms, whereas verse 7 spells out the details. But this explanation is difficult as well, for there does not seem to be any reason to describe the event in such a convoluted manner.

It seems then that these two verses cannot be read as one continuous narrative; rather, they must be read as two **parallel** accounts.<sup>10</sup>[10] According to this approach, we have a heading and two separate continuations:

(5) And the sons of Rimmon the Be'erotite, Rekhav and Ba'ana, went, and came about the heat of the day to the house of Ish-Boshet,	
as he took his rest at noon. (6) And they came thither into the midst of the house, as though they would have bought wheat; and they smote him in the groin; and Rekhav and Ba'ana his brother escaped.	(7) Now when they came into the house, as he lay on his bed in his bed-chamber, they smote him, and slew him, and beheaded him, and took his head, and went by the way of the Arava all night.

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<sup>10</sup> [10] In other words, Scripture brings in a most concise fashion "two aspects" of the assassination of Ish-Boshet. The theory of "two aspects" and its special application to the book of *Shmuel* was treated at length in our studies of chapters 8-18 of I *Shmuel*, and a special introduction was devoted to it in I *Shmuel* 9 (lecture no. 16).

The three first parts of each account note three parallel facts: Rekhav and Ba'ana's arrival in the house, Ish-Boshet's lying on his bed (these two facts are noted in the two accounts in the reverse order) and his being smitten. However, the two accounts differ from each other on one exceedingly important point: The first account describes how Rekhav and Ba'ana killed Ish-Boshet and then ran away, whereas the second account emphasizes how they removed his head and took it with them. What is the significance of this difference?

It seems that in this way Scripture provides two separate motives for Rekhav and Ba'ana's killing of Ish-Boshet. From the first account it would appear that their goal was the very killing of Ish-Boshet; this is understandable if they had some intrinsic motive for killing him, and this fits in with our proposal above that Rekhav and Ba'ana were Giv'onites, and therefore they had reason to take revenge from the family of Shaul. The aspect of revenge is perhaps reflected in the fact that they strike Ish-Boshet "in the groin" – just as Yoav struck Avner in the previous chapter "in the groin" (3:27) in revenge for the killing of Asa'el. From the second account, in contrast, the primary goal in killing Ish-Boshet seems to be to remove his head in order to bring it to David and receive reward. According to this account, Rekhav and Ba'ana would have killed Ish-Boshet even had they not had a personal reason to do so. The two different accounts, each of which, as stated, stands on its own, express in unique manner the fact that Rekhav and Ba'ana acted out of two different and separate motives.

### III. THE READING IN THE SEPTUAGINT

We mentioned earlier the difficulty relating to the wheat purchasers mentioned in verse 6. The verse is also difficult because it is not clear of whom it speaks: if it was Rekhav and Ba'ana who killed Ish-Boshet, why does it not simply state afterwards, "and they escaped," rather than, "and Rekhav and Ba'ana his brother escaped"?<sup>11</sup>[11]

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11 [11] It may be suggested that when Rekhav and Ba'ana arrived at Ish-Boshet's house, they found there wheat merchants, who had smitten Ish-Boshet, and Rekhava and Ba'ana escaped. According to this explanation, we can also resolve the redundancy mentioned above in a different way: Later Rekhav and Ba'ana returned to Ish-Boshet's house, made sure he was dead and removed his head. But this explanation also has its difficulties: Why does Scripture not say anything about these wheat buyers? What is the meaning of this coincidence – that precisely when Rekhav and Ba'ana arrived at Ish-

The Septuagint<sup>12</sup>[12] has a very different reading of our verse. Instead of the reading before us:

And behold they came thither into the midst of the house, as though they would have bought wheat; and they smote him in the groin; and Rekhav and Ba'ana his brother escaped.

the Septuagint reads:

And behold, the doorkeeper of the house was cleaning wheat, and she slumbered and slept, and Rekhav and Ba'ana his brother escaped.

Even though there are certain words that parallel the wording of the Masoretic text, the story is completely different. According to the Septuagint, at the entrance to Ish-Boshet's room sat a gatekeeper, who was busy cleaning wheat, but she fell asleep, and thus Rekhav and Ba'ana were able to escape **into** the house.<sup>13</sup>[13] In this way, all the difficulties listed above can be resolved. We understand the significance of the wheat in the verse, and why Rekhav and Ba'ana are mentioned by name only in the second half of the verse. Furthermore, according to this reading, there is no longer any redundancy in the passage, for this verse does not mention the smiting of Ish-Boshet.

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Boshet's palace, wheat buyers also arrived, and all of them with the same objective – killing Ish-Boshet?

12 [12] The reading of the Septuagint is also cited in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary. The Septuagint is a Greek translation of Scripture, composed in Alexandria in the third century BCE. Like any translation, it contains interpretation, and aggadic traditions were also added to it, but for the most part it is close to the Masoretic text.

13 [13] So too writes Josephus, who followed this reading in his book, "The Antiquities of the Jews," book 7: "So when they once found him alone and asleep at noon in an upper room, when none of his guards were there, and when the woman that kept the door was not watching, but was fallen asleep also, partly on account of the labor she had undergone and partly on account of the heat of the day, these men went into the room in which Ish-Boshet, Saul's son, lay asleep, and slew him."

The existence of such a strikingly different reading is a rare phenomenon, which requires that we relate, if only briefly, to the fundamental question to which it gives rise. It is possible to relate to this phenomenon in two radically different ways. On the one hand, we can be very happy to find this 2,300 year old reading, and assume that the Septuagint had a different, more precise reading of the Hebrew text than the Masoretic reading. On the other hand, we can reject this reading outright, and not only for traditional reasons, but also for scholarly reasons. There is a well-known principle that when there are two readings – one difficult reading, and one reading according to which all the difficulties disappear – it is generally the more difficult reading (*lectio difficilior*) that is the original reading, for it is reasonable to assume that the simpler reading was chosen to replace the more difficult one in order to resolve the difficulties, rather than the opposite.

It seems that in the present case we should adopt a middle road. On the one hand, there is a high probability that the text before us is the original one, and that we must deal with the difficulties it presents in the ways suggested above or in other ways. Nevertheless, we should not overlook the slight possibility that the reading found in the Septuagint indeed reflects the original reading, according to which the verse presents few problems. This uncertainty will remain with us until the arrival of the prophet Eliyahu.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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