
Lesson 10: Organizing a Kingdom

Text: Chapters 17-18

In the story of Goliath we read of a solemn promise to the man who will fight the Philistine giant (17, 25):

And the man of Israel said:
Have ye seen this man that is
come up? Surely to taunt Israel he is come up. And it shall be that the man
who killeth him,
the king will enrich him with great
riches, and will give him his daughter
and make his father's house
free in Israel

וַיֹּאמֶר אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל
הֲרִאיתֶם הָאִישׁ הַעֹלֶה
הַזֶּה
כִּי לִסְרֹף אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל
עָלָה
וְהִנֵּה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־יִכָּנֹס
יַעֲשֶׂרְנוּ הַמִּלְחָמָה אֶלְעָשֶׂר
גְּדוּל
וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ יִתְּנוּ־לוֹ
וְאֶת בַּיִת אָבִיו יַעֲשֶׂה
חֶפְזִי
בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

What is the meaning of this “freedom” that is offered to the daring warrior?

It seems that gone were the old days when there was no king in Israel and “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21, 25). Israel now has a central government, and this carries with it many new duties. The Israelite is not “free”. Each family is required to pay taxes to the king, part of the harvest and of the livestock, and in times of war the males are called upon to join the army. Unlike the days when each tribe and clan could decide whether to come to the aid of another tribe, everybody now has to obey the king’s command. There are no longer any tribal wars; an attack in any part of the kingdom involves the entire nation. The king has no need to negotiate with each tribe and request its participation in the war. His fiat carries sufficient authority throughout the length and breadth of the land (11, 7).

And he took a yoke of oxen, and cut them in pieces, and sent them
throughout all the borders of Israel by the hand of messengers, saying:
“Whosoever cometh 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 צֶמֶד בָּקָר
וַיִּנְתְּתֵהוּ
וַיִּשְׁלַח בְּכָל־גְּבוּל
יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּיַד הַמַּלְאָכִים
לֵאמֹר
אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנו יֹצֵא
אֶתְּרֵי שְׂאוּל

וְאַחַר שְׂמוּאֵל
כִּי יַעֲשֶׂה לְבַקְרוֹ
וַיִּפֹּל פָּחַד ה' עַל-
הָעָם
וַיִּצְאֻוּ כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד

The legal foundation of the king's authority is in the King's Constitution which was promulgated by the prophet (10, 25):

Then Samuel told the people
the manner of the kingdom,
and wrote it in a book,
and laid it up before the Lord.

וַיְדַבֵּר שְׂמוּאֵל אֶל-הָעָם
אֵת מִשְׁפַּט הַמְּלָכָה
וַיִּכְתֹּב בַּסֵּפֶר
וַיִּנָּח לִפְנֵי ה'

We are not given the text of this constitution (“the manner of the kingdom”), but the Bible provides sufficient information about the king's rights to enable us to get a general view of this constitution. The people must pay tribute to the king to enable him to run his government and keep an army. The king has the right to request certain supplies and even seize private property considered necessary for government or army. He can enlist into his service anyone of the subjects of the monarchy. He alone appoints his advisers and military commanders. At times of war and emergency the king has practically unlimited sway over life and property. The king is anointed by God, and the man who dares rebel against him, or even to offend his honor, becomes an outlaw and is liable to receive capital punishment.

The first step in organizing the monarchy was taken by Saul immediately after the clandestine coronation at Mizpah. A small nucleus of warriors accompanied him when he returned to his home of Gibeah (10, 26). Possibly, this handful of soldiers did not amount to very much, and there was no lack of cynics - “sons of Belial”, worthless men - who despised Saul and his tiny bodyguard (10, 27). But to Saul this was only a beginning. After his success in the battle against Ammon and the public proclamation of the kingdom at Gilgal (chapter 11), Saul chose three thousand men and organized his army in two divisions. The larger division he led in person, and encamped in Michmas and Beth-El, whilst his son Jonathan headed the smaller division which was garrisoned in Gibeah (13, 2). Out of this small army grew a strong fighting force (14, 52):

And there was war against
the Philistines all the days
of Saul;
And when Saul saw
any mighty man,
or any valiant man,
he took him unto him.

וַתְּהִי הַמִּלְחָמָה הַזֹּאת
עַל-פְּלִשְׁתִּים
כָּל יְמֵי שְׂאוּל
וַרְאֵה שְׂאוּל
כָּל-אִישׁ גִּבּוֹר
וְכָל-בֶּן-חַיִל
וַיֹּאסֶפְהוּ אֵלָיו

Gradually these farmer-soldiers were welded into a well-organized standing army, which was headed by a permanent commander-in-chief (14, 50).

Thus, the institutions of monarchy were gradually established, and the farmer who used to “follow the oxen in the field” (11, 5) was now presiding over an independent kingdom. There was a national army, his authority unchallenged, who put an end to the anarchic “freedom” of the clans and tribes

Saul even established a Royal Court in his residence. This seems to be the implication of the list of names that appears at the end of chapter 14, where we are told the names of his wife, sons and daughters, and his commander-in-chief. These three verses (14, 49-51) contain the first Israelite register of the royal court. Saul’s family and entourage were now organized according to a royal protocol. Priority and seniority were assigned to everyone who was a member of the royal family and who was serving at the court. There were occasional formal dinners at the court, and at these dinners there was an official seating arrangement. The king was seated by the wall, by his side sat Abner the commander, and the members of the royal family and guests were seated in accordance with their seniority.

The Israelite kingdom had become a political reality. Energetically Saul worked on the foundations of his kingdom, strengthening its military power and enhancing the prestige and honor of the royal court. Yet, this splendid edifice was doomed. Saul had hardly established his rule and already there arose a new royal star that was beginning to eclipse the royal splendor of Saul. Young David appeared on the scene.