
Lesson 18: The Israelite Kingdoms - Mahanaim and Hebron

Text: Samuel II, chapters 3-4

Ish-bosheth was the only Israelite king who set up his court in Transjordan. The Bible informs us that Saul's commander-in-chief, Abner, established Ish-bosheth in Mahanaim, across the river Jordan, in the land of Gilead (Samuel II 2, 8-10). After the Israelite defeat in the great battle of the mount Gilboa the surviving warriors took refuge in Transjordan, where the Philistines never succeeded in gaining a foothold. Abner and Ish-bosheth had further reasons for selecting that part of the country. It appears that the tribes who lived in Transjordan were extremely loyal to the House of Saul. Moreover, we have reason to assure that those tribes were the most valiant and strong in Israel.

The Transjordan tribes were frontier people who were continually exposed to attacks from neighbouring peoples and marauding bands. Most of their history has been lost to us, but there are some significant allusions in the Bible which testify to their military prowess. In the first book of Chronicles (5, 9-10) we read that the tribe of Reuben, in the days of Saul, "made war with the Hagarites, who fell by their hand, and they dwelt in their tents throughout all the land east of Gilead." The same chapter tells of more military exploits that were performed by the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh. In verses 18-22 we read that they were "valiant men, bearers of buckler and sword, shooters with bow, and skillful in war... and they made war with the Hagarites, with Jetur, and Naphish, and Nodab... and the Hagarites were delivered into their hand, and all that were with them... and they took away their cattle... for there fell many slain, because the war was of God. and they dwelt in their stead until the captivity."

These brief allusions are a faint echo of great and victorious battles in Transjordan. These tribes ruled over the whole area of the Syrian desert, as far as the river Euphrates. And it appears that many of these battles, or perhaps most of them, took place during the reign of king Saul. This may have been, then, the cause of their loyalty to the royal House of Saul.

King Ish-bosheth was in a strong position. In the midst of the loyal transjordan tribes he was secure from the Philistine enemy. Ish-bosheth also had the loyalty of the other Israelite tribes, except for the tribe of Judah who "followed David" (2, 8-10). But Ish-bosheth was a weak man; although he had a good start he was no match for David, whose kingdom "waxed stronger and stronger" (3, 1).

What was the Philistine attitude to David's new Judean kingdom? It appears that the Philistines showed no opposition to David. Hebron was close to Philistine territory, and if they had not agreed to David's kingdom they could have easily deployed their victorious army against Hebron. The significant fact of David's rule in Hebron is that there was no war between Judah and the Philistines. Why did the Philistines not crush the budding and still weak Davidic kingdom?

The answer may be found in the character of the Philistine conquests (which we discussed in lesson 16). The Philistines had no plans to establish their own kingdom over the whole of Israel. This was beyond their military and administrative capabilities, and it also did not suit their temperament. Rather, they were interested in a fragmented and weak Israelite kingdom which was friendly to the Philistines. And they were convinced that David was the ideal man to lead this kind of Israelite kingdom. David had fled to Achish, king of Gath, and pretended that "he hath made his people Israel utterly to abhor him", and the philistine king believed that David was loyal to the Philistines (1 Samuel 27, 12 and 29, 6-9).

The Philistines also reckoned with David's military and political weakness. David had only the tribe of Judah with him, whilst the whole of Israel remained loyal to Abner and Ish-bosheth. It seemed reasonable to the Philistines that David would forever remain dependent upon their support and would be a loyal ally.

At that time David was careful to do nothing to disturb the Philistines' illusion about him. David made a realistic appraisal of his position. He was the anointed king, but his kingship depended upon the goodwill of the Philistines and his own Judean associates. After the murder of Abner at the hand of Joab, David's commander-in-chief, David said resignedly: "And I am this day weak, and just anointed king, and these men of Zermiah are too hard for me" (3, 39). He knew that he was only an "anointed king", and that he still had to become the real sovereign of Israel. Meanwhile, he was biding his time and posed as an ally of the Philistines. But subsequent events were to show that David was not idle. He diligently fostered his contacts with the northern tribes, until at last he became king of the whole of Israel.