
Lesson 26: Saul and the Gibeonites

Text: Samuel II, Chapters 21-22

When a famine afflicted the country during three consecutive years, David was told by a prophet that the famine was a divine punishment for the grave sin that king Saul committed against the Gibeonites (19, 1).

Who were the Gibeonites?

They first appeared in ancient Israelite history when they obtained a “covenant” with the people of Israel through false pretensions. Their story was that they came from a distant country, and Joshua promised them on oath not to fight them. When the Israelites discovered that they had been fooled they were very angry but could not go back upon their solemn oath. Finally, a way out was found by making the Gibeonites “hewers of wood and drawers of water” for the temple (Joshua chapter 9).

The alliance with the Gibeonites lasted for centuries, until Saul - “in his zeal” (21, 2) - decided that the ancient covenant was no longer binding. But what actually did Saul do to the Gibeonites? The Bible implicitly hints at something which caused a feud which was settled only by the blood of Saul’s descendants. In a previous chapter of this book there is a clue that may help to throw some light on this story.

In chapter 4 we read of the murder of Ish-bosheth at the hands of two men, Baanah and Rechab, who were captains of bands and originated from Beeroth which was part of Benjaminite territory. “And the Beerothites fled to Gittaim, and have been sojourners there until this day” (4, 2-3).

Beeroth (according to most scholars identified with El-bireh near Ramallah), is a part of the territory of Benjamin, and is mentioned in the list of Benjaminite cities (Joshua 18, 26). But Beeroth is also listed as one of the Gibeonite cities (Joshua 9, 17). It now seems quite clear that what happened was that the Gibeonite inhabitants of Beeroth fled from their city when it was occupied by the Benjaminites. But why did the Benjaminites flout the alliance and drive the Gibeonites from their city?

The Gibeonite Cities were Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath-jearim (Joshua 9, 17). Gibeon itself is identified with el-Jib, about 8 kilometres north-west of Jerusalem and near Nebi-Samuel. Chephirah was on a site near modern Maaleh Hachamisha, Beeroth, as mentioned above was probably near modern Ramallah. Kiriath-jearim was near the site of modern Abu-Gosh. These cities formed a triangle extending between Ramallah in the north and Abu-Gosh in

the west, and this triangle was in the very heart of Benjaminite territory. To cap it all, Jerusalem itself was still occupied by the Jebusites. Against this background we can easily understand the zeal of king Saul - who was a Benjaminite - against the Gibeonites. Saul also had sound state reasons for his action, for the Gibeonites were occupying an enclave in the very centre of the Israelite kingdom. Saul was unable to conquer Jerusalem, but he was in a position to push out the Gibeonites.

The Gibeonites did not consider themselves a foreign element, and they were holding on to their alliance with Israel. History has borne out their stand, for they continued to be a part of Israel, although in their capacity as Temple slaves. Later they became known as "Netinim", meaning "given to the Temple as servants", they went into the Babylonian exile and returned with the rest of the exiles to Judea.

However, Saul looked upon them with suspicion for they appeared to all intents and purposes not unlike the other Canaanite people. Probably, Saul offered to move them peacefully to some other territory, but the Gibeonites refused on the strength of the ancient covenant. It was then that Saul forcefully evicted them from their enclave. Obviously, many Gibeonites were killed when they resisted Saul, and the rest dispersed in various parts of the country.