
Lesson 16: The Battle of Gilboa

Text: Chapter 31

The Philistines defeated Saul's army (31, 1 and 31, 6):

Now the philistines fought against Israel,
and the men of Israel fled
from before the Philistines,
and fell down slain in mount Gilboa.

וּפְלִשְׁתִּים נִלְחָמִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיָּסּוּ אַנְשֵׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִפְּנֵי פְלִשְׁתִּים
וַיִּפְּלוּ חַלְלִים בְּהַר הַגִּלְבָּעַ:

So Saul died, and his three sons,
and his armour-bearer,
and all his men,
that same day together

וַיָּמָת שָׂאוּל וּשְׁלֹשֶׁת בָּנָיו
וְנֹשֵׂא כְלָיו
גַּם כָּל־אֲנָשָׁיו
בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יַחְדָּו:

This defeat was of great importance at the time, but it had no lasting effect and made no enduring impression upon Israelite history.

When the Philistine hordes made their first attacks in the period of the Judges, the Israelite tribes were not in a position to defend themselves. They were unable to put up an organized and planned defense. Israelite successes against Philistines were feats of individual heroism, as in the cases of Shamgar (Judges 3, 31) and Samson (Judges 13-16). But in open warfare the Philistines were never defeated. They subdued one Israelite tribe after another, appointed governors who resided in the heart of Israelite territory and commanded strong and watchful garrisons. Furthermore, they made sure that the Israelites remained permanently weak (13, 19 and 13, 22):

Now there was no smith found
through all the land of Israel;
for the Philistines said:
“Lest the Hebrews make them
swords or spears”;

וְחַרְשׁ לֹא יִמָּצָא
בְּכָל אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל
כִּי אָמְרוּ פְלִשְׁתִּים
פֶּן יַעֲשׂוּ הָעִבְרִים
חֶרֶב אוֹ חַנִּית:

So it came to pass in the day of battle,
that there was neither sword nor spear
found in the hand of any of the people
that were with Saul and Jonathan;

וַהֲיָה
בַּיּוֹם מִלְחָמָה
וְלֹא נִמָּצָא חֶרֶב וְחַנִּית
בְּיָד כָּל־הָעָם
אֲשֶׁר אֶת־שָׂאוּל וְאֶת־יֹנָתָן
וְנִמָּצָא לְשָׂאוּל וּלְיֹנָתָן בָּנוּ:

but with Saul and with Jonathan his sons were found.

Throughout this period the Philistines held unchallenged sway over the land. Modern scholars have pointed out that if the Philistines had wanted to expel the Israelites from the country they could have done so without difficulty. They could have conquered parts of the country and gradually driven out the Israelites, and then settled in the conquered areas. But the Philistines set their aim at occupying the whole of the country in swift military conquests. The occupied territories were too large for their own settlement. Instead they left the inhabitants in their towns and villages and subjugated them.

This is where the Philistines differed from the Israelites. Israel was a big nation that came to the country with the intention of settling down. The Philistines were a fighting people who did not want to settle down, and since their population decreased as a result of uninterrupted warfare, they had no use for colonization of new territory.

Saul was the first Israelite leader who threw off decisively the Philistine yoke. He established an independent Israelite kingdom and set out to drive the philistines out of Israel. But the Philistines were not easily dislodged (14, 52):

And there was sore war against the Philistines all the days of Saul.

וַתְּהִי מִלְחָמָה חַדָּשָׁה
עַל־פְּלִשְׁתִּים
כָּל יְמֵי שְׁאֻל

The places where these battles took place indicate the nature and extent of this “sore war”.

The fight with Goliath was held “between Socoh and Azekah”, south of the modern Hartuv (17, 1). This is to say, in the territory of Judah.

In another passage we read of a Philistine attack upon Keilah (23, 1), about 20 kilometers from the Philistine border.

At the end of the second book of Samuel we are told of a courageous exploit by three of David’s soldiers. At the time the Philistine garrison was in Beth-Lehem (Samuel II 23, 14), in the heart of the tribal territory of Judah.

All this goes to show that the philistines carried the war into Israelite territory. The Philistines were on the offensive, and all the Israelites could do was to ward off their attacks. At last the Philistines concentrated their military might on a large-scale offensive which took them as far as Mount Gilboa, overlooking the river Jordan.

And yet, this overwhelming success did not change the course of history. They were unable to follow up and consolidate their victory. By then things had changed in Israel- the Israelites had become a united nation. They acquired arms, and although they had lost the battle of Gilboa

they were preparing for the next battle. Only now, belatedly, did the Philistines try to drive out the Israelites and colonize the conquered area (31, 7):

And then the men of Israel
that were on the other side of the valley,
and they that were beyond the Jordan,
saw that the men of Israel fled,
and that Saul and his sons were dead,
they forsook the cities, and fled;
and the Philistines came
and dwelt in them.

וַיֵּרְאוּ אַנְשֵׁי־יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֲשֶׁר־בְּעֵבֶר הַעֵמֶק
וְאֲשֶׁר אֶבְעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן
כִּי־נָסוּ אַנְשֵׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְכִי־מָתוּ שָׁאוּל וּבָנָיו
וַיַּעֲזְבוּ אֶת־הָעָרִים וַיִּנְסוּ
וַיָּבֹאוּ פְּלִשְׁתִּים
וַיֵּשְׁבוּ בָהֶן:

It was too late, and their colonizing attempt did not succeed. The Israelites recuperated and returned to the attack, and in the end the country became ארץ ישראל - the Land of Israel.