

1 Samuel 11:1-15

Saul Defeats the Ammonites

In the last chapter, Saul has been chosen king, but is faced with a contingent of those who are disappointed in his selection and publicly dismiss him. With this transfer of power from judge to king still in flux, the King of the Ammonites takes advantage of the situation and the weak position of Israel to attack. It provides Saul an opportunity to display his God-given gifts of leadership, his trust in God and his military acumen.

This chapter describes events that led to the third and final confirmation of Saul as king. He had been anointed secretly by Samuel. Then chosen publicly by lot, indicating God's direct hand in his selection. Now his response to an enemy attack leads all the people to gather again and to disavow those who objected to Saul, and to "make Saul king" and - as Samuel says - to "renew the kingdom."

1 Samuel 11:1 - "Then Nahash the Ammonite came up, and encamped against Jabesh-gilead: and all the men of Jabesh said unto Nahash, Make a covenant with us, and we will serve thee."

"Nahash" means "serpent" in Hebrew. According to the Jewish translation, the wicked "have venom like the venom of a serpent, like a deaf cobra that closes its ear." (To cries of mercy, according to the rabbis). Such was Nahash. The rabbis said Nahash targeted Jabesh-gilead specifically to humiliate Saul, knowing the inhabitants were from his tribe.

One interpretation proposes that the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead were the "sons of Belial" who had dismissed Saul as king and slandered him. Thus they were attacked by a "serpent" Nahash in the same way the children of Israel in the wilderness were plagued with fiery serpents for having slandered both God and Moses (**Numbers 21:5-6**).

Jabesh-gilead was the one town that had not joined with the other tribes in the civil war against the tribe of Benjamin. Because they had not sworn to never give their daughters to Benjamin, the other tribes - who regretted their oath - killed them all except for 400 virgins, who were given as wives to the 600 remaining Benjamites. (see **Judges 19-21**). These couples probably resettled in Jabesh-Gilead.

The town is located east of the Jordan, and had little leverage against the Ammonite siege, and so tried to make an accommodation with the Ammonites.

Recall that the Ammonites were cousins of Israel, descended from Lot's younger daughter after Sodom was destroyed (**Genesis 19:30-38**). In fact, God commanded Israel not to harass them when they approached the Promised Land for that reason:

- **Deuteronomy 2:19** - " "When you approach the territory of the people of Ammon, do not harass them or contend with them, for I will not give you any of the land of the

people of Ammon as a possession, because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession."

But making an alliance or treaty with the Ammonites or Moabites was forbidden:

- **Deuteronomy 23:3,6** - "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD for ever...Thou shalt not seek their peace nor their prosperity all thy days for ever."

1 Samuel 11:2 - "And Nahash the Ammonite answered them, On this condition will I make a covenant with you, that I may thrust out all your right eyes, and lay it for a reproach upon all Israel."

Nahash was not a nice guy, but not too different from other pagan kings of this era. Later, **Amos 1:13** says that the Ammonites would rip open pregnant women in the territories they conquered.

Some rabbis interpret the "eyes" as the Sanhedrin, who were considered the eyes of the congregation (**Numbers 15:24** - "knowledge" = *ayin* or eye). Others note that the tribe of Benjamin are known as deadly slingers, who would be neutralized in war with one eye missing. Josephus notes that the left eye is usually under a shield, while the right eye is kept on the target. And if both eyes were gouged out, they would be of little use as slaves.

1 Samuel 11:3 - "And the elders of Jabesh said unto him, Give us seven days' respite, that we may send messengers unto all the coasts of Israel: and then, if there be no man to save us, we will come out to thee."

Nahash granted this 7-day reprieve because he believed no one would come to their aid, and he wanted to humiliate the whole Jewish nation. That's why he would "lay it as a reproach on all Israel." He knew Israel was also threatened by the Philistines, and had a new, inexperienced king.

1 Samuel 11:4-5 - "Then came the messengers to Gibeah of Saul, and told the tidings in the ears of the people: and all the people lifted up their voices, and wept. And, behold, Saul came after the herd out of the field; and Saul said, What aileth the people that they weep? And they told him the tidings of the men of Jabesh."

Saul had not yet taken up the affairs of state. There had been no official "coronation" and Samuel was still acting as judge. So Saul had continued with his family duties with the flocks and herds.

1 Samuel 11:6 - "And the Spirit of God came upon Saul when he heard those tidings, and his anger was kindled greatly."

The Targum says, "the spirit of fortitude from the Lord dwelt on Saul."

He instantly formulated a plan to gather the people, to save Jabeth-gilead.

1 Samuel 11:7 - "And he took a yoke of oxen, and hewed them in pieces, and sent them throughout all the coasts of Israel by the hands of messengers, saying, Whosoever cometh not forth after Saul and after Samuel, so shall it be done unto his oxen. And the fear of the LORD fell on the people, and they came out with one consent."

He mentions Samuel to add even more gravity to importance of his call.

This was a direct reference to the incident of the Levite and his concubine (**Judges 19:29**), which had led to the war against the Benjamites and resulted in the virgins of Jabeth-Gilead ultimately saving that tribe from extinction.

This was also a threat issued to the tribes from his position as king. To ignore this call would be tantamount to treason.

The rabbis infer that disobedience to Saul's call would either mean those people's own oxen would be slain, or that a pestilence would afflict their cattle.

But further, this also recalls Abraham's "horror of great darkness" and the cutting of the covenant, which indicated if either party to the covenant broke it, he would be split down the middle just as the animal sacrifices had been (**Genesis 15:12**). This act by Saul may have carried the same idea. The threat was stated ambiguously, meaning to imply all those indications.

1 Samuel 11:8 - "And when he numbered them in Bezek, the children of Israel were three hundred thousand, and the men of Judah thirty thousand."

Gathering these warriors was a calculated risk, because if the Philistines detected this troop movement, they might also attack from a different direction.

Bezek was the location of a victory of Judah over the Canaanites and Perizzites (**Judges 1:4**). But another explanation is that *'b'vezek'* means "with pebbles used for throwing with a sling" i.e., he took a pebble from each one, and counted them. (The Benjamites, as slingers, would have plenty of pebbles).

But numbering the people is always suspect, according to rabbinical tradition. In the wilderness, when Moses takes a census of the tribes, he doesn't count heads, but rather the half-shekels which each person gave. Here, pebbles are counted. Why? The rabbis say if Jews are counted individually, each are singled out, "and every action and thought is scrutinized in heaven, and this may arouse the Attribute of Justice." But if only objects are counted, the individual is subsumed into the larger group. Later, when David numbers the people by ordering an actual head count, a pestilence results (**2 Samuel 24**).

"with one consent" - or "as one man." This is the meaning of unity. It is represented in the New Testament as being "in one accord," having one mind, the mind of Christ.

- **Jeremiah 32:29** - "And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for the good of them, and of their children after them"

- **John 17:21** - "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me."

- **Acts 4:32** - "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul..."

1 Samuel 11:9-10 - "And they said unto the messengers that came, Thus shall ye say unto the men of Jabesh-gilead, To morrow, by that time the sun be hot, ye shall have help. And the messengers came and shewed it to the men of Jabesh; and they were glad. Therefore the men of Jabesh said [to Nahash], To morrow we will come out unto you, and ye shall do with us all that seemeth good unto you."

Victory

1 Samuel 11:11 - "And it was so on the morrow, that Saul put the people in three companies; and they came into the midst of the host in the morning watch, and slew the Ammonites until the heat of the day: and it came to pass, that they which remained were scattered, so that two of them were not left together."

"on the morrow" - i.e. on the third day, the morning after the messengers arrived back in Jabesh-gilead after talking with Saul.

This victory was the final confirmation - both to Saul and to the people - that Saul was the right choice for king.

1 Samuel 11:12 - "And the people said unto Samuel, Who is he that said, Shall Saul reign over us? bring the men, that we may put them to death."

Apparently Samuel had traveled with Saul on this military expedition. Now the people wanted to round up all those "sons of Belial" who had previously snubbed Saul and complained about him, and execute them as traitors.

1 Samuel 11:13 - "And Saul said, There shall not a man be put to death this day: for to day the LORD hath wrought salvation in Israel."

"The LORD hath wrought salvation in Israel" - Saul wisely and correctly attributes the victory to God and not to his own leadership. By not executing the "sons of Belial" he avoids a possible long-lasting vendetta that could plague his newly instituted reign. But also, since this victory was obviously due to God's miraculous intervention and not by Saul's skill, opposition to Saul had now simply evaporated.

1 Samuel 11:14 - "Then said Samuel to the people, Come, and let us go to Gilgal, and renew the kingdom there."

Again Gilgal is the focus - where the Ark and the Tabernacle were first set up when Israel entered the Promised Land. So they would travel there, 36 miles, back west across the Jordan.

1 Samuel 11:15 - "And all the people went to Gilgal; and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal; and there they sacrificed sacrifices of peace offerings before the LORD; and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly."

"They made Saul king" - But wasn't Saul already king? And what does it mean to "renew" the kingdom?

Originally, the people had wanted a king to rule them rather than God through a high priest or a judge. Now they understood the proper structure - God would indeed rule, but through the intermediary of a king, who would be His representative. But it was definitely God who remained in charge. So Saul was made king "before the LORD." With this higher understanding, the rabbis note, they were no longer referred to as "the people" but rather as "the men of Israel."

Despite being anointed and chosen by lot, Saul needed this victory to solidify the people in unity behind him. The word for "renew" is *ḥāḏaš*, which signifies a sword being polished and restored or repaired - really to remove whatever is obscuring its original glory. The doubts that had been obscuring Saul's glory as king were now rubbed away, revealing a shiny new sword. The kingdom (and Saul) were now "renewed" to what it was originally designed to be.

Although David is to be the ultimate type of the Messiah, Saul's "renewal of the kingdom" here gives us a little glimpse of what that spiritual kingdom means:

"Peace offering" is *shelem*, from the word *shalom*.

They sacrifice a peace offering and Saul rejoices with the people. The peace offering means God, the priest, and the offerer and his family and friends all partake of the same "sustenance," i.e. Christ as the one sacrifice. This is done in an atmosphere of joy - secure, accepted, whole, at rest and lacking nothing.

That is indeed a picture of the kingdom of God.