
Lesson 11: Early Years of David

Text: Chapters 16-22

It seems it was only yesterday when David was looking after his father's sheep. One day the venerable prophet Samuel arrived with the horn of oil in Beth-Lehem and secretly anointed the young David. Since that day David became the central figure of the history of his time. In the words of the Bible (16, 13):

And the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

וַתִּצְלַח רוּחַ ה' אֶל-דָּוִד מִהַיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיִּמְעַלֶּה

From the outset, the story underlines a significant difference between Saul and David.

Saul

He was higher than any of the people from his shoulders and upward (10, 23)

שְׂאוּל: וַיִּגְבֹּה מִכָּל-הָעָם מִשְׁכָּמוֹ וַיִּמְעַלֶּה:

David

And was ruddy, and with beautiful eyes, and goodly to look at. (16, 12)

דָּוִד וְהוּא אֲדָמוּנִי עֵם-יָפֶה עֵינָיִם וְטוֹב רֵאִי

Earlier, when Samuel saw the elder son of Jesse, Eliab, he was impressed by his stature. But God told Samuel not to anoint him (16, 7):

But the Lord said unto Samuel: "Look not into his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have rejected him; for it is not as man seeth, for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-שְׂמוּאֵל אַל-תִּבְט אֶל-מְרֹאֵהוּ וְאַל-תִּגְבֹּה קוֹמָתוֹ כִּי מָאַסְתִּיהוּ כִּי לֹא אֲשַׁר יִרְאֶה הָאָדָם כִּי הָאָדָם יִרְאֶה לְעֵינָיִם וְה' יִרְאֶה לְלֵבָב

Jesse brought seven of his sons before Samuel, and the prophet rejected them all (16, 9). There remained only the youngest, David, when he was brought before the prophet (16, 12):

And the Lord said:
Arise, anoint him,
for this is he

וַיֹּאמֶר ה'
קוּם מְשַׁחְהוּ
כִּי־זֶה הוּא:

Nevertheless, there are also some significant similarities between the two kings. Both were anointed in secret, and in each case the secret ceremony made them rebels against the established government. Neither of them could at first stake their claim to the Israelite throne, and finally achieved their goal only after many hardships.

Some commentators detect a discrepancy within the Biblical story of David's rise to power. There is, in their view, the prophetic version, in which David receives rulership of the kingdom from the prophet, and there is the political version, in which David ascends the throne by his own efforts. But there really is no contradiction here. In the Biblical approach to history the prophetic command and the natural sequence complement each other. There can be no series of cause-and-effect unless it has been willed by God. At the same time, the Divine Will does not act in a vacuum. The word of God is a seed that can germinate only in the soil of reality; it can sprout if it is furthered by unrelenting and self-sacrificing human efforts. This is how the Bible interpreted the history of those times, and undoubtedly would have thus interpreted the establishment of the modern State of Israel and its development.

The anointment of David did not immediately affect the political situation. Saul continued to occupy the throne of Israel. But the personal career of David took a new and decisive turn. He was called to the royal palace, at first to play on the harp in order to bring relief to the king who was afflicted by a nervous disease (16, 14-23). The king liked the minstrel and appointed him his armour-bearer (16, 21). But David was still only a likable boy who temporarily served at the royal court, and who would have eventually returned to his family's farm in Beth-Lehem.

The next dramatic change occurred when David killed Goliath (chapter 17). He became a close friend of Jonathan, the heir to the throne (18, 1). Saul gave him an army command (18, 5), and he excelled in the battlefield more than any of Saul's captains (18, 30). David married Michal, the younger daughter of the king.

Within a short time David became one of the most successful and popular men in Israel (18, 14 and 18, 16):

And David had great success
in all his ways;
and the Lord was with him.

וַיְהִי דָוִד לְכָל־דָּרָבּוֹ
מִשְׁכִּיל
וַה' עִמּוֹ

But all Israel and Judah

וְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיְהוּדָה

loved David;
for he went out and came in
before them.

אהב את־דָּוִד
כִּי־הוּא יוֹצֵא וְבָא
לפְנֵיהֶם.

His dazzling success brought him within easy grasp of the royal scepter. Was it not only matter of time, and a coincidence of events, before David would become king? But events took an entirely different turn, and David remained remote from the Israelite kingship. The future king had to trudge a long and troublesome road before he ascended the royal throne. No sooner had he become a popular general than he aroused the envy and jealousy of king Saul (18, 6-9):

And it came to pass as they came,
when David returned from the slaughter
of the Philistine that the
women came out of all the cities of Israel,
singing and dancing, to meet king Saul,
with timbrels, with joy, and with
three stringed instruments.
And the women sang one to another
in their play, and said:
Saul hath slain his thousands,
and David his ten thousands.
And Saul was very wroth, and the
saying displeased him;
And he said:
“They have ascribed unto David
ten thousands, and to me they
have ascribed but thousands;
and all he lacketh is the kingdom!”
And Saul eyed David from
that day and forward.

וַיְהִי כְּבוֹאָם בְּשׁוּב דָּוִד
מִהַכּוֹת אֶת־הַפְּלִשְׁתִּי
וַתֵּצֵאנָה הַנְּשִׂים מִכָּל
עָרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
לְשִׁיר וְהַמְחִלּוֹת
לְקִרְאֵת שָׂאוֹל הַמֶּלֶךְ
בְּתֻפִּים בְּשִׁמְחָה וּבְשִׁלְשִׁים.
וַתַּעֲבִינָה הַנְּשִׂים הַמְּשִׁחֹת וַתֹּאמְרֶנּוּ
הִכָּה שָׂאוֹל בְּאַלְפָיו
וַדָּוִד בְּרִבְבֹתָיו.
וַיִּחַר לְשָׂאוֹל מְאֹד
וַיַּרַע בְּעֵינָיו
הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה
וַיֹּאמֶר
נִתְּנוּ לְדָוִד רִבְבוֹת
וְלִי נִתְּנוּ
הָאֲלָפִים
וְעוֹד לוֹ אֵךְ הַמְּלוּכָה
וַיְהִי שָׂאוֹל עֹנֵן אֶת־דָּוִד
מֵהַיּוֹם הַהוּא וְהָלְאָה:

Saul had forgotten the terrible prophecy of Samuel that God had torn away the kingdom from him and given it to someone else (15, 28). Now that he saw the brilliant success of the young David, he could not help wondering whether David was the future king. Saul was angry, tried to kill David (18, 10-11), plotted his death in battle against the Philistines (18, 25). When David remained unscathed, Saul stood in awe of David (18, 15 and 18, 29). Again and again he sought to kill, and at last David had to flee the palace (19, 11-17) and thus begin his years of adventurous wanderings and escapades. He had to keep himself alive by various ploys, and once he even had to pretend to be raving mad (21, 11-16). In the course of his wanderings he gathered a small force of outlaws (22, 2):

And everyone that was in distress

וַיִּתְקַבְּצוּ אֵלָיו כָּל־אִישׁ מְצֹק

and everyone that was in debt,
and everyone that was discontented,
gathered themselves unto him;
and he became captain over them;
and there were with him about
four hundred men.

וְכָל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-לָו נָשָׂא
וְכָל-אִישׁ מֵרֵ-נֶפֶשׁ
וַיָּקֵי עֲלֵיהֶם לְשָׂר
וַיְהִי עִמּוֹ
כְּאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת
אִישׁ

The king's captain and national hero was reduced to lead a band of discontented men. In those days the throne was a far-away dream.

When David's fortunes reached their lowest point and his prospects looked hopeless, he began actively to prepare his future assumption of the leadership of the nation. He had to exert all his abilities, his diplomatic skill and military prowess, to overcome seemingly superhuman obstacles. He knew the time had come to make a human effort in order to fulfill the divine promise of his kingship.