Lesson 13: David Amongst the Philistines

Text: Chapters 27-28

David wandered with his troop mainly in the area of Hebron, at first north-west of the town and later in a south-eastern direction. The troop was organized in Adullam and Keilah, not far from Beth-Lehem - David's birthplace. But this settled area was too dangerous for them, and they moved south of Hebron to the area of Ziph, Carmel and Maon, on the mountain range overlooking the wilderness of Judah.

After some time, David felt that the area was too close to Saul (27, 1):

And David said in his heart:	וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל־לִבּוֹ
"I shall now be swept away one	עַתָּה אֶסָּפֶה יוֹם־אֶחָד בְּיַד־שָׁאוּל
day by the hand of Saul.	אֵין־לִי טוֹב כִּי הִמָּלֵט אִמָּלֵט
There is nothing better for me then	אֶל־אֶרֶץ
that I should escape into the land	פְּלִשְׁתִּים
of the Philistines; and Saul will	וְנוֹאַשׁ מִמֶּנִּי שָׁאוּל
despair of me, to see me any more	לְבַקְשֵׁנִי עוֹד
in all the borders of Israel;	בְּכָל־גְּבוּל יִשְׂרָאֵל
so shall I escape out of his hand."	וְנִמְלַטְתִּי מִיָּדוֹ

So David travelled west to seek asylum with the Philistines in the town of Gath, which was formerly identified with Tell-Gath or some other ruin in the vicinity of modern Kiryat Gat, and today identified by most scholars with Tel-Zafit some 25 km north-east of Kiryat Gat, although this identification has never been confirmed. This was not the first time that David went to Gath. When he fled from Saul's court he tried to find shelter there, but the king of Gath did not know at the time of David's quarrel with Saul, and David barely escaped with his life (20, 11-16). But now David and his men were received with open arms. Akhish the king of Gath knew by then of Saul's bitter animosity towards David, and he was convinced he could use David for his own plans.

Gath was one of the ancient five Philistine towns: Ashdod, Ekron, Gaza, Ashkelon and Gath. Each one of these towns was really a small kingdom, and the kingdom of Gath occupied the area reaching down to the Negev. Gath was therefore in fact the gate to the Negev. It was also the most eastern of the Philistine kingdoms. Thus it bordered on the territory of the Israelite tribes of Judah and Simeon, and their allies the Jerahmeelites and the Kenites, whilst its southern border was exposed to attacks by the nomadic tribes of Amalek, Geshuri and Gizri. When David requested Akhish for permission to settle in the border-town of Ziklag (note that Ziklag is counted among the cities of the Negev in Josh. 15:31), the king of Gath thought that

David and his troop would greatly assist him in fighting border combats. David's men could settle down in Ziklag with their families and herds (27, 5-6), but in return Akhish demanded their help not only as defensive border guards but also in attacking the outlying settlements of the surrounding tribes. Akhish was of course chiefly interested in attacks upon the Israelite tribes, not only because they provided much loot (of which the Philistine was to get his share) but because the settled Israelites presented the real threat to the Philistine kingdom.

The king was persuaded that David and his men were ready to fight the Israelites. This was not unusual amongst this type of troop that consisted of outlaws. But particularly so in the case of David who was mercilessly pursued by the Israelite king Saul, assisted in this pursuit by the Israelite tribes. Akhish was therefore sure that David had cut his ties with Israel (27, 12):

And Akhish believed David saying: "He hath made his people utterly to abhor him; therefore he shall be my servant forever."	וַיַּאֲמֵן אָכִישׁ בְּדָוִד לֵאמֹר הַבְאֵשׁ הִבְאִישׁ בְּעַמּוֹ בְיִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיָה לִי לְעֶבֶד עוֹלָם:

David had to read warily in order not to arouse the king's suspicions. The Bible explains his method in chapter 27, verses 8-11.

David told Akhish that he attacked the Israelite tribes and their allies (verse 10), and thus gained the confidence of the Philistine king. David appeared to be one of those typical professional fighters, and Akhish had no doubt that he would be his servant forever.

David was indeed at that time a captain of a troop, but he was completely unlike the typical troop captain. In fact, he was a traitor to the moral code of these troops. For with them it was a sacrosanct principle that the troop had only one loyalty, to the tribe or clan who paid. But David betrayed this code of behavior. He was zealously loyal to his people although they pursued him, whilst he deceived the Philistines who gave him asylum at this time. Thus, David remained an Israelite first even at the most critical period in his life. The captain of the discontented remained the devoted and heroic son of Israel.