
Lesson 14: Captain of a Troop

Text: Chapters 29-30

David is one of the most fascinating personalities in the history of mankind. Much has been written about him in the prose and rhyme, and he continues to be an inspiration to painters and sculptors. David has also been a favorite subject studied by Bible students and theologians, who were struck by his amazing achievements. There is of course David the king and David the commander of a national army. But there is also David the young shepherd who conquers the mighty Goliath; and then we have the same David achieving fame for his playing on the harp. The list continues with David the conqueror, the statesman, the “anointed of the Lord”, the “sweet singer of Israel”, the father of a troubled family, and finally the old king at the end of his days. And yet, there is one facet of his life and personality that has been overlooked. It is the period when he was the captain of his troop.

This was one of his most difficult jobs, having had to keep in good grace with the Philistine king whilst not betraying his own people. This aspect was dealt with in the previous chapter; but also no less important is the question, how David managed the internal affairs of his troop. How did he stand up as a leader of a motley crowd of outlaws? Let us study the story of his captainship of the troop.

When David fled from Saul’s court he was at the height of his national fame as a warrior. He was the man of whom the Israelite women sang that he had “slain his ten thousands” (18, 7). No wonder he attracted a number of outlaws who were looking for a leader, and with his immense prestige he had no difficulty in organizing the troop. Within a short time he led his troop on a daring raid against the Philistines. David heard that the Philistines were attacking Keilah, which is identified with the ruin Qilah, some 12 kilometres north-west of Hebron. Promptly David decided to go to the rescue of Keilah, but his men protested (23, 3):

And David’s men said unto him:
“Behold we are afraid here in Judah;
how much more then if we go to Keilah
against the armies of the Philistines?”

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אַנְשֵׁי דָוִד אֵלָיו
הֲנֵה אֲנַחְנוּ פֹּה בְּיְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ
וְאֵיךְ כִּי־נֵלְכֶה קְעִלָּה
אֶל־מַעְרְכוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים:

Despite the danger, David led his men against the Philistines and saved the inhabitants of Keilah. At the same time he captured their cattle (23, 5), and thus brought some sorely needed income for his troop. David’s troop became famous and quickly grew in strength, from four hundred to six hundred (23, 13). Undoubtedly, the growth of the troop was connected with the capture of the cattle and the improvement of the troop’s economic position.

Despite his courage in battle he never needlessly exposed his men to danger, and when the Keilah area became too dangerous he led his troop “whithersoever they could go.” Often he escaped from one tight spot only to land into new trouble, but he did not hesitate to take risks. On one occasion, when he was pursued by Saul in the wilderness (26, 1-5) he led a few of his men into the midst of Saul’s camp (26, 6-12).

His success as an outlaw-chief did not turn his head and did not make him forget his standing as a prince of Israel and the “anointed by God”. He always remained the “perfect gentlemen”. Even Saul, who hated David with a ferocious bitterness, was impressed by David’s humility (24, 16-22 and 26, 21-25). The request he sent to Nabal was couched in extremely polite terms (25, 6-8). But when Nabal haughtily scoffed at him and refused to pay his dues to David’s troop for their services during the harvest (this was discussed above in lesson 12), David was quick to come to a decision (25, 13):

And David said unto his men:
Gird ye on every man his sword!

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד לְאֲנָשָׁיו
חַגְרוּ אִישׁ אֶת-חַרְבּוֹ

His anger was caused by Nabal’s ungrateful behavior (25, 21):

Now David had said:
“Surely in vain have I kept all that
this fellow hath in the wilderness,
so that nothing was missed of all
that pertained unto him;
and he hath returned me evil for good.”

וַדָּן אָמַר
אֵף לִישָׁקֵר שְׁמִרְתִּי
אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר לְזֶה בַּמִּדְבָּר
וְלֹא-נִפְקַד מִכָּל
אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ מְאוּמָה
וַיֵּשְׁבֵ-לִי רָעָה תַחַת טוֹבָה:

The adventurous life of a troop was full of dangers and excitements. David’s men took these things in their stride; they knew that they were not leading the life of the farmer “who dwelt safely under his vine and under his fig tree” (see I Kings 5, 5). But once they almost broke down under the emotional strain. Significantly this happened after they had settled with their families in Ziklag. David and his troop had been away for several days, and during their absence the Amalekites sacked Ziklag and captured the women and children (30, 1). When the troop returned all were shocked by the desolation they found in Ziklag, and they were angry with David. They held him responsible for recklessly leaving the town without protection (30, 6):

And David was greatly distressed;
for the people spoke of stoning him,
because the soul of all the people was grieved,
every man for his sons and for his daughters;
but David strengthened himself in the Lord
his God.

וַתֵּצַר לְדָוִד מְאֹד
כִּי-אָמְרוּ הָעָם לְסַקְלוֹ
כִּי-מָרָה גִפְשׁ
כָּל-הָעָם אִישׁ עַל בְּנָיו
וְעַל-בָּנוֹתָיו
וַיִּתְחַזַּק דָּוִד בַּיהוָה אֱלֹהָיו:

David overcame this crisis. He told his men to get up and pursue the Amalekites, and presently the troop succeeded in overtaking the Amalekites and recovering all the captives. But this was not the end of David's troubles. The distribution of the large amount of spoil they had taken from the Amalekites provoked a bitter quarrel. As the Bible points out, there were some wicked men in the troop (30, 22) and they argued that those two hundred men who stayed behind (30, 10) ought not to receive a share of the spoil. Once again David had to step in and use his prestige to settle the dispute. He laid down a rule (30, 24):

For as the share of him that gets down
to the battle, so shall be the share
of him that tarrieth by the baggage.
They shall share alike.

כִּי כְּחֵלֶק אֶחָד
וְכַחֲתָק הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל
הַבָּגָדִים
יִחְזְרוּ יִחְלְקוּ: