
Lesson 20: David's New Conquests

Text: Samuel II, chapters 7-8

Chapter 8 is a very short chapter, far too short for the Bible student who wants to get a clear picture of David's political and military achievements. The chapter gives us a long list of conquests, but each conquest had undoubtedly its own story of anxious preparations, weary battles and political consolidation which followed the military conquest. David smote the Philistines (8, 1), and in a previous lesson we discussed the strategic aspect of the Philistine ascent to the valley of Rephaim in their attempt to dislodge David from Jerusalem. It goes without saying that every one of the other battles enumerated in chapter 8 was replete with events that could have filled many chapters. "And the Moabites became servants to David... then David put garrisons in Aram of Damascus... and all the Edomites became servants to David" (chapter 7, verses 2, 6, and 14). Surely, dramatic events must have preceded such remarkable military and political achievements. But the Bible presents us only with a terse synopsis which summarizes those events with a dry-as-dust list of conquests.

The growth of David's kingdom was heralded by the incessant cry of war. It was only king Solomon who was able to relax in peace and enjoy the fruits of his father's tireless warfare. But David's wars were completely unlike those of king Saul. For Saul never ventured beyond the frontiers of Israelite settlement. He fought against Ammon in Yabesh-Gilead, he waged war against the Philistines in Benjamite territory (near Geva), and subdued the Amalekites when they threatened the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Later he fought the Philistines in the area between Socha and Azekah, in defence of the tribe of Judah. Saul's wars were without exception defensive wars, and the Bible describes them as such: "So Saul took the kingdom over Israel, and fought against all his enemies on every side... and he did valiantly... and delivered Israel out of the hands of them that spoiled them" (1 Samuel 14, 47-48). But Saul never conquered non-Israelite territory; he had his hands full trying to keep his kingdom safe against enemy attacks.

David went out to conquer enemy territory. "And he smote Moab" (8, 2), but David was not satisfied with a passing victory. He consolidated his military success with a complete political conquest: "And the Moabites became servants to David, and brought presents" Israelite territory in Transjordan reached until David's conquest only as far as the river Arnon, which flows into the Dead Sea somewhere in its middle. Now David extended his monarchy's frontiers to the southern end of the Dead Sea. Some time later he pushed further south and took the land of Edom (8, 14). David's rule reached as far as Eilat, covering the whole of the southern part of Transjordan as well as the south of the Negev down to the Gulf of Eilat. Here, too, "all the Edomites became servants to David". His achievements in the north were equally impressive. More than half of Syria was incorporated into David's kingdom, and the remaining independent rulers became his allies.

David's conquests marked a new phase in Israelite history. Since Moses and Joshua led the invasion of Eretz-Israel, the Israelite military campaigns were planned for one purpose only, to obtain land for settlement. David was the first to fight in order to rule. The earlier mentality of defense now gave way to an exuberant drive for enlarging and strengthening the Israelite territory. The centuries of intermittent battles against enemy invaders had an important lesson to teach the new king. No longer

would the Israelites wait for the enemy to come. Rather, they were establishing new frontiers for the Israelite kingdom and thus they were evolving a new aggressive strategy.

David had many good reasons for his new policy. But it is significant that this policy is not given too much importance in the Bible. A small chapter merely lists the achievements, but there are no details and the praise which is given to David is restrained and tempered: "And the Lord gave victory to David whithersoever he went" (8, 14). On the other hand, chapter 7 describes at great length the agony of David when God denied him the privilege to build the Temple in Jerusalem. There are barely 14 verses in chapter 7 describing great military campaigns, but 29 verses in chapter 8 are devoted to the question of David's longing- and God's refusal to allow him- to build the Holy Temple.

Our sages of the Talmud had another way of cold shouldering David's conquests. "The conquest of Syria is regarded as a conquest carried out by an individual". It was not really a national conquest; it was merely the individual success of a brilliant military commander. Only conquests made for the purpose of settlement are regarded as national conquests, and such territories alone are permanently considered as part of the national territory of Eretz-Israel.