
Lesson 21: The Government of David

Text: Samuel II, Chapters 8-9

The ninth chapter of the second book of Samuel appears, at first glance, to consist mainly of the story of Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan- who was David's loyal friend although he was heir to King Saul- and the kind treatment he received from David. But a close study of the chapter would point to some rather significant political events.

By now things had changed considerably. It seemed a long time since the days when David was a hunted refugee. David was then pleading with Saul: "After whom is the king of Israel come out? After whom dost thou pursue? After a dead dog, after a flea (Samuel I 24, 14). Now it was a grandson of Saul who prostrated himself before David and said: "What is thy servant that thou shouldst look upon such a dead dog as I am?" (Samuel II 9, 8). It was the same humiliating phrase, but the speaker was now applied to a scion of the former royal house.

David received Mephibosheth with open arms. He took him away from Lo-Debar, which was in the south of the river Yarmuk, where Mephibosheth was living amongst the people of Gilead who remained loyal to the House of Saul. David brought Mephibosheth to the capital and said to him: "Fear not, for I will surely show thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father, and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually" (verse 7). For a royal descendant this kindness was not without its humiliation, but it nevertheless meant that Mephibosheth became an acknowledged member of the royal court. For the Biblical phrase "to eat bread at the king's table" implies much more than food. The people who "eat bread" at the king's table were part of the royal household and were influential in affairs of state.

Now, what was the nature of the royal court and who were its members?

In the story of this chapter opens with David's enquiry: "Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?" (verse 1). This enquiry is couched in words which indicate that it follows some previous history. The questions is what were the events which preceded and caused David's enquiry.

Chapter 8 relates David's conquests- "And the Lord gave victory to David whithersoever he went" (verse 14)- and goes on to describe his government. Verses 15-18 provide a list of the men who made up the royal court and who were joined later by Mephibosheth. This list is preceded by a description of the aims of David's government: "And David reigned over all Israel; and David executed justice and righteousness unto all his people" (verse 15).

Accordingly, the opening sentence of chapter 9 is connected with verse 15 of chapter 8. David was concerned that his government should do justice and kindness to the people, and so he

decided to bring Mephibosheth into his royal entourage “to show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake”. The story of Mephibosheth properly begins with verse 15 of chapter 8, and that is where chapter 9 ought to begin. The present chapter arrangement, as printed in the Bibles, is not of Jewish origin and it is faulty in many places.

King Saul had already a royal court, but David changed things also in this respect. With Saul the court was nothing but the royal family, for it consisted only of his close relatives (1 Samuel 4, 19-51). Saul’s court is small and self-contained, and it is run in accordance with strict patriarchal etiquette.

David’s court is entirely different. It is the government of a country and it consists of the army commander, the chief priests, the recorder and the scribe. There was also Nathan the prophet, and there was a special guard of the royal court. In later chapters we shall read of a councillor to the king and also of a “friend to the king”. At the end of the book there is also a list of “the mighty men” who distinguished themselves in battle and who were in charge of important military commands.

Saul had only one army commander (Abner). All the other matters of state were conducted personally by Saul. But in David’s great and expanding kingdom there was a group of men, a kind of “cabinet”, who assisted the king in the government of the vast realm. The Israelite monarchy had now a fully-fledged royal court.