

### 2<sup>ND</sup> SAMUEL

#### Week 3, chapter 2

David is now king of Judah and residing in Hebron. 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel chapter 2 gives us a very brief accounting of David's coronation and the circumstance is actually both odd and informative. A good question to ask is: why would a single tribe opt for a king over simply having a tribal prince or tribe leader? In other words, it is customary that there is a designated head of the tribe, and then the tribes are further sub-divided into clans such that each clan would also have a leader who is under the authority of the tribal prince. Clan leaders would have less authority, not more, under a king. Having a king makes sense when the goal is to set a man over the top of a number of tribes; a man who is above the several tribal princes. But that is not the case here.

I don't have a definite answer for this problem; but a reasonable speculation is that the clan leaders of Judah figured that there would for sure be a new king over the northern tribal coalition that was headed by King Saul before his death. And that since Judah didn't want that northern king over them, that it was better to anoint their own while there was a power vacuum up north. I think this fits well with the historical circumstances. The issue was a balance of power and perhaps even a hope that their man David might even become king over all of the tribes thus giving Judah a position of pre-eminence over the other tribes.

Let's re-read most of 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel chapter 2 to set the stage for today's lesson.

#### **RE-READ 2<sup>ND</sup> SAMUEL CHAPTER 2: 4 - end**

We're going to run into a lot of political intrigue over the next several chapters. So if you find that sort of thing interesting you're going to just love our study for the next few weeks.

The men of Judah who appointed David as king also inform him about the men of Jabesh-Gilead who displayed such great courage by braving the presence of the Philistines to retrieve the decapitated body of Saul from the walls of Beit-Shean and then to give him a proper burial at their city on the east side of the Jordan River.

Here we see one of the qualities of David that made him so dear to the Lord. It was usual and customary for a new king to purge his predecessor's accomplishments, family, and those who sympathized with the former king. But instead David reached out to the people of Jabesh-Gilead and even sought to reward them for their faithfulness to King Saul. Recall that the people of Jabesh were not only politically aligned with Saul but also they were closely related to him by blood, which is the foundational reason for their alliance in the first place.

David sent messengers to the leaders of Jabesh and said that because they had shown kindness to Saul that not only does he ask Yehoveh to show them kindness but that he, David, wishes also to demonstrate kindness to them. The multiple use of the word "kindness" is in the original Hebrew language "**chesed**". And **chesed** indicates the commission of a righteous deed that is beyond everyday kindness. It is an act of mercy and grace that mimics the kindness of God. But there is also present a very complicated Middle Eastern thought pattern and dialogue that is difficult for modern Westerners to spot. The underlying implication is that when we read of a person wishing **chesed** on another because of the other's own **chesed**, it is because the person who was on the receiving end of the righteous deed is unable to repay it himself. So in this case the citizens of Jabesh-Gilead showed **chesed** to Saul and his family, but since Saul is dead he obviously can't reciprocate with a righteous deed towards Jabesh. Such a thing is quite intolerable to Middle Eastern sensibilities and must be remedied.

We see this same concept in the Book Ruth between Na'omi and Ruth and Orpah. In Ruth chapter 1 we read this:

***(Rut 1:8-9 CJB) <sup>8</sup> Na'omi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Each of you, go back to your mother's house. May ADONAI show grace (chesed) to you, as you did to those who died and to me.***

***<sup>9</sup> May ADONAI grant you security in the home of a new husband." Then she kissed them, but they began weeping aloud.***

Here Na'omi is telling Ruth and Orpah that even though they did **chesed** towards her (in being good wives to her two sons and good daughters in law to her) that she is not in a position to reciprocate (as is expected) so she prays that the Lord will repay them. And then once they are provided with new husbands (as a divine act of **chesed**) that the new husbands will also repay. This idea of repaying good deed for good deed is very Middle Eastern. So since the deceased Saul and the people of Jabesh can no longer show loyalty and **chesed** to one another, David suggests that (in addition to God giving **chesed** to Jabesh) he will be the one who repays the people of Jabesh for their act of righteousness towards Saul, and that he is offering a bond of faith with them in place of the bond they had with Saul.

In verse 7 David exhorts them into accepting this offer by saying, "be strong and be brave". What would strength and bravery have to do with Jabesh accepting David's offer of repayment and kindness? Essentially it is because this repayment and kindness is all wrapped up in Jabesh establishing a covenant with David. David is asking Jabesh to break away from the northern tribal coalition and to instead become part of David's southern kingdom. David is asking that this group of men with such close ties to the tribe of Benjamin, Saul's tribe, transfer their loyalty to the tribe of Judah. David is suggesting that instead of Jabesh continuing an alliance under the house of Saul, they switch and become allied with the house of David. This indeed will take courage because their northern tribal coalition partners will not only be supremely unhappy with them for doing that, but might even try to punish them for what they would likely see as no less than treason. Jabesh's response to David's offer is not given. Considering what had happened to Jabesh-Gilead several decades earlier, when the mostly northern tribes of Israel punished them severely and nearly into extinction, their reluctance to jump at David's offer can be understood.

Verse 8 is a change of scenery. We move from David's southern headquarters in Hebron to the offices of the government of the northern tribal coalition, the Kingdom of Saul. Abner was Saul's top military commander (and he was also either Saul's uncle or his 1<sup>st</sup> cousin; traditions differ on the exact relationship) and the situation was that the north had lost their king (Saul) and there was only one son of Saul that remained alive to continue Saul's dynasty: Ishbosheth. Without doubt Abner was the real power in Saul's kingdom at the moment, simply because he had the might of the army behind him. Since **Ishbosheth** is a legitimate heir to the throne, Abner has little choice but to appoint him as the new king (Saul's dynastic replacement).

**Ishbosheth** is not so much a name as an epithet. It is unthinkable that a man would name his son "man of shame". So there is some disagreement on what his real given name actually was. Later in the Book of Kings we see mention of this same fellow but he is given the name of **Eshba'al**, and there is good reason to think that this may indeed have been his original given name. This name issue may seem trivial on the surface, but there is good reason to spend a

little time with this because it helps us to understand the ancient Hebrew mindset at this point in Israel's cultural development. Understanding these sorts of nuances is the key that unlocks many mysteries and difficulties of the Bible.

**Eshba'al** means, "Fire of **ba'al**". It's a name that speaks of strength; at least it does if one is a pagan. But would a Hebrew king like Saul assign a pagan name to his own son? Here's the answer: in reality **ba'al** carried a dual or even triple meaning at this time. **Ba'al** meant "lord" (lord as in the sense of master) from a generic standpoint, and it was used in reference to a person. But it was also a term that was regularly used in reference to spiritual beings; and when it was, it meant god (little "g" god). Thus we will see Biblical reference to the **ba'alim** (the **ba'als**, the gods, plural, many gods). But of course **Ba'al** was also the name (or better, title) given either to the Canaanites' chief god or at least to the chief male god (with his wife being Ashtoreth) depending on which Canaanite tribe or nation one belonged to. This structure is actually very parallel to a more modern day use of the word "lord". Lord can merely be a term used of royalty, or of someone who has authority. Lord can also be used to refer to God in a general sense, and Christianity especially will refer to God on a more personal basis as "The Lord".

By the time of David the Hebrews had borrowed the word **ba'al** and added it to their vocabulary, and they used it to mean "lord" in the sense of a person with authority. Thus both in the Bible and in other ancient Jewish sources will find Hebrew names incorporating the word "**ba'al**". It didn't necessarily mean a loyalty or dedication to the pagan god, **Ba'al** (although often it could). But it did reflect a very casual and un-pious attitude toward the Law of Moses and the Hebrew religion in general. But that's what happens to language; a word that means one thing is incorporated into a new language and it comes to mean something similar but not quite the same. And after a generation or two since the word was adopted, the use of it is done without thinking; no one bothers to challenge its real meaning or whether it is even proper to use it.

There is no reference to Saul turning his loyalty over to a pagan god, so very likely the name of his son, **Eshba'al**, was meant to be regal in nature: fire of the lord (lord meaning a human lord). However in later times there grew to be a great sensitivity among the religious Jews to the word or name **ba'al**. So the editors of some of Old Testament books determined that it was inappropriate for that word to appear in the holy texts and therefore they would not write or say the word "**ba'al**" because it was offensive to them. Thus when they copied the most ancient Biblical scrolls they substituted the word **bosheth** (which means shame) when they ran across the word "**ba'al**". Thus **Eshba'al** became **Ishbosheth**.

This idea of future scribes and editors adhering to a kind of religious/political correctness of their time that caused them to substitute one word (now deemed offensive) for another (that was religiously acceptable) is especially noteworthy when it comes to God's formal name, **YHWH**, which I have elected to pronounce Yehoveh (and others as Yahweh). The word "**YHWH**" (Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh) also became a sensitive issue around the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and while the word was retained in written form in the new hand-written copies of the Bible, in the margins of the scrolls a handful of other words such as **Adonai** (meaning lord, master), or **HaShem** (meaning the Name) or **elohim** (meaning God) were written so that as the scroll was being read out loud these words would be used in place of **YHWH**.

These sorts of variations in Biblical names and places, and these substitutions of words from one scroll or manuscript to the next have created all kinds of difficulties and controversies in Bible translation. But most of the time if we'll read what the ancient Hebrew Sages say about it, we'll find the reason for these changes (even if the reasons are rather dubious).

Let's move on. For some reason Abner decided to relocate **Ishbosheth** out of the northern region of Canaan and across the Jordan River to a place called **Mahanaim**; it was there that he formally appointed **Ishbosheth** as his father's successor. There are a couple of interesting aspects to what is happening here; one is to ask why it is that Abner would move **Ishbosheth** to the other side of the River in order to appoint him king? The reason is that it would be easier for **Ishbosheth** to set up his new government there because the Philistines now had too much control over the land that constituted Saul's old Kingdom. A second issue is: why would Abner want to crown **Ishbosheth** at all, since apparently he knew that God intended David to be the king?

It is clear that Abner had more respect for Yehoveh and His commands and decrees than did his former boss, King Saul. The ancient Sages and Rabbis have some interesting takes on this issue of what was in Abner's mind that caused him to go ahead and make **Ishbosheth** the new king despite his own admission (that we'll read in chapter 3) that he was well aware that David was Yehoveh's choice to be king over all of the Israelite tribes.

The Jewish commentary called **Bereishis Rabbah** states that Abner did not deny that David was to be king, but only thought that it was not yet the appointed time. This conviction had to do with a tradition that had evolved that the tribe of Benjamin was to supply at least two kings BEFORE David would become king. And this belief was due to a statement made in the Torah in Genesis 35:11 that God blessed Jacob (as he was returning from Mesopotamia and fleeing from Laban) by saying that "kings shall issue from your loins". This was taken to mean that since up to now there was no indication that any king had come from the sons already born to

Jacob, that these kings would be manifested in a not-yet-born son. Tradition says that the only son not yet born to Jacob was Benjamin. Therefore it was Benjamin that would produce these kings. And since the word is a plural that meant at least 2 Benjamite kings had to rule before David would assume the throne. Therefore (reasons the Rabbis) Abner was merely being righteous by insisting that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Benjamite king be installed (***Ishbosheth***), and then only thereafter would Abner help David become king. Abner was determined to fulfill the prophetic words of Genesis 35:11.

I am, frankly, a bit skeptical of this rabbinical reasoning. Not only does it seem that such logic is less than clear, but it also appears to me that there is better more straightforward answer present in the Scriptures; Abner was the now the real and undisputed power in the north and ***Ishbosheth*** was too young and incompetent to lead Israel on his own. Abner knew that by installing the weak and easily manipulated ***Ishbosheth*** as his puppet that he would personally control Israel using Saul's sole surviving son as a mere proxy, and at the same time appear to be doing the right thing in the people's eyes by continuing Saul's dynasty with his surviving son. At best Abner was manipulating the situation so that when David did assume the throne over all Israel; David would be forced into giving Abner a position of high status in the kingdom. At worst, Abner knew that God intended to make David king but hoped that under the right circumstances Abner could postpone David's coronation indefinitely to his own benefit.

Verse 9 explains that ***Ishbosheth*** was made king over Gilead, the Asherites, Jezreel, Ephraim, Benjamin and all of Israel. Gilead was generally the tribes of Gad and Reuben, located in the Trans-Jordan. The Asherites are seen as a copyist error and ought to read the Geshurites (and this makes sense). Geshur lay beyond the northern boundary of Manessah, on the east bank of the Sea of Galilee. We've seen mention of the Geshurites in earlier stories and later we'll read of David marrying a Geshurite woman and having a son with her. For whatever reason a political alliance with Geshur was deemed important.

The Jezreel is referring to the western slope of the Gilboa Mountains, which lies in ***Yisakhar's*** territory. ***Ephraim*** represents the heartland of Canaan and the designation in this case intends to include that part of ***Manessah*** that lies on the west bank of the Jordan. The idea is that it is the territory set aside for house of Joseph, through his 2 sons Ephraim and Manessah. Benjamin is that buffer territory that is sandwiched between the north and the south of Canaan. The term "all Israel" (in this context) means all the northern tribes, but NOT the southern tribes.

Why this kind of strange description that gives specific territories but then ends with "all Israel"? Why not just SAY "all Israel" to begin with? Because this was a progression; Abner's

strategy was to move **Ishbosheth** to an area he could operate in freely without Philistine influence and outside of any of Judah's (and therefore, David's) territorial claims. He chose Mahanaim in Gilead as that place. Step by step he would rebuild the northern coalition that Saul had constructed (but fell apart after his death) until **Ishbosheth** was finally accepted as king by all the Israelite tribes of the north. Thus it was that **Ishbosheth** was only gradually able to put together a kingdom, but it would begin at Gilead; next in his sights would be Geshur, then Jezreel, then Ephraim and Manassah, then Benjamin. That would complete the rebuilt coalition. Now of course we see that David must have figured out Abner's plan and so he had invited those leaders of the key city of Jabesh (located in Gilead) to be David's allies in hopes of derailing Abner's plan for **Ishbosheth**.

Verses 10 and 11 work together and explain that **Ishbosheth** only reigned for 2 years over Israel (the northern tribes), but David reigned for 7 ½ years over Judah. This presents an interesting chronology problem that I'll only spend a moment on (but if I don't someone is sure to ask about it). We know that David was appointed King of Judah at around the same time that Abner appointed **Ishbosheth** as Saul's successor. As we'll find out in the next chapter **Ishbosheth** lost his kingdom to David. So how do we account for the 5 ½ years of time difference? It seems logical that David and **Ishbosheth's** respective reigns should have been parallel and very nearly the same amount of time.

In a nutshell the general consensus of Rabbis is this: notice that verse 10 says that **Ishbosheth** reigned over "Israel" for 2 years. Israel (at this time) is what the Bible calls the confederation of northern tribes as it operates under one king. We talked earlier how it was Abner's strategy that **Ishbosheth** rebuild the coalition step by step, tribe by tribe UNTIL he has put the kingdom back together again and thus reigns over "all Israel". Therefore it took **Ishbosheth** 5 ½ years to gain all the territorial loyalties back, and only then did he rule over "Israel". Once that happened, he was on the throne only 2 years until David took over the northern kingdom.

In verse 12 a chance meeting between men loyal to **Ishbosheth** and men loyal to David occurred and the result would be war. It seems that Abner had business in his family hometown of Gibeon in the territory of Benjamin and he and his contingent of men stopped to refresh at a watering hole called the Pool of Gibeon. Since Judah's territory abutted this same place, **Yo'av**, a nephew of David and his current commanding military officer, and some of his brothers and other men also happened to arrive at this pool at the same time for the same reason. Imagine their surprise. What to do? Should they immediately engage in battle? Should one or the other withdraw? Abner (apparently rather impulsively) proposed that each side choose 12 men and they fight gladiator-style in representative battle. The idea is much like what happened with David and Goliath; rather than the full armies of the two enemies fighting one another each side would send out their champion. The two men would fight and the losing

side would consider it a defeat of their entire army, and leave the battlefield saving massive bloodshed.

The Pool of Gibeon has been located. It turns out to have been manmade; it was a large cistern carved out of the rock. About 40 feet in diameter and 80 feet deep, it caught the runoff from the surrounding area and stored the water. There is even a stairway carved into the walls of this cistern so that as the water level dropped the precious liquid could still be accessed.

The 12 pairs of fighting men eventually erupted into the other troops from both sides engaging in battle. The narrative seems to indicate that the reason this turned into a full-scaled battle was because there was not a decisive outcome from the representative warfare between the 24 men. Rather it seems that it was a draw; they all killed each other.

It turns out that Joab was there with 2 of his brothers **Avishai** and **Asahel**. It appears that as **Avishai** was the oldest, Joab was the middle child. These were David's nephews, sons of David's sister Zeruah. David's men got the best of Abner's men, and so Abner and his company of soldiers fled. Zeruah's 3 sons gave chase; but the youngest, **Asahel**, was a much faster runner than his brothers (the narrative describes him as being as swift as a gazelle or a deer). The youthful and fool hearty **Asahel** set his sights on the big prize, Abner, not giving it a thought that this grizzled old warrior had lived so long because he was a fierce and cunning fighter who didn't know how to lose.

As **Asahel** got closer in the foot race Abner looked over his shoulder and told the boy that he needed to rethink his intentions. The supremely confident Abner suggested that maybe it wasn't such a good idea that he should catch him because Abner would easily kill him and this would cause even more bad blood between the military commanders of the opposing kingdoms, **Yo'av** and Abner. But in youthful exuberance **Asahel** responded by turning on the jets. As he was breathing down Abner's neck Abner used a military trick that only the most experienced would dare to try.

Abner had sharpened the wooden handle end of his spear. As **Asahel** was ready to strike, certain that he was about to end the life of this old man of legendary status, Abner unexpectedly and abruptly stopped and without turning thrust the sharpened handle of his spear backward and Asahel literally ran into it and impaled himself upon it. Because **Asahel** had raced out ahead of everyone, it would take some time before the rest of the group caught up. When they did, they all froze in their tracks when they came upon **Asahel's** lifeless body.



The sight of their dead brother caused their adrenalin to flow and brought a second wind to **Avishai** and **Yo'av**; they sped off in pursuit of Abner, blood in their eyes and murder in their hearts. They caught up to Abner at a place called Ammah Hill (no one knows where, exactly, this is). But by then Abner's Benjamite troops had amassed around him and taken up defensive positions. As Abner saw Joab and his men approach he yelled out to him that it wouldn't serve either side to continue the bloodshed.

What Abner's words were about was trying to convince **Avishai** and **Yo'av** to put aside what was now a personal vendetta against Abner. This was no longer about military victory. After all, there wasn't any real need for a battle to have started at all since David and **Ishbosheth** were not at war. And so **Yo'av** responds in verse 27 by saying,

***"As God lives, if you hadn't said something, there is no doubt that the people would have kept following their brothers all night long."***

The meaning of his words is that it was Abner who instigated this. If Abner had not rashly suggested that the 12 representatives from each side fight each other, then all these soldiers wouldn't have died and **Asahel** would still be alive. Abner is responsible for it all in **Yo'av's** eyes, and especially for his younger brother's death. The dynamics of the entire situation have now changed. What before the incident at the Pool of Gibeon was a cold war of sorts between those loyal to David and those loyal to **Ishbosheth** had now turned into a family blood feud. Abner knew that this is what would happen and this is why he asked **Asahel** to turn aside and go after somebody else. Abner knew that otherwise he'd have to kill **Asahel** and the result would be an ongoing series of revenge killings between the two families.

In any case Joab knew that there had been enough bloodshed for one day, and that Abner and his men were in strong defensive positions. So he blew the shofar as a signal to end the fighting. Abner followed through and led his men on the trail north through the Arabah and back into home territory. The Arabah is a long rift valley that begins at the Sea of Galilee and extends all the way south to the Red Sea at the Gulf of Aqabah.

When both sides arrived home they counted their dead. The victory for David's men was overwhelming. They lost only 20 men, including **Asahel**, while Abner lost 360. In some ways this is to be expected. David's men were experienced and apt fighters, having followed David

for several years. These men were part of the 600 who had been with David through so much.

But as **Asahel's** brothers carried his body to the family burial plot in Bethlehem, **Yo'av** burned with desire for revenge. The truce arranged at Ammah Hill between he and Abner applied only to kingdom business; but the matter over Asahel's death was personal and between he and Abner alone. This was, after all, the Middle East where all blood feuds end badly.

We'll start chapter 3 next week.