

1 Samuel 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] 1 Samuel chapter 11 Then Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh-Gilead. And all the men of Jabesh said to Nahash, Make a treaty with us, and we will serve you.

But Nahash the Ammonite said to them, On this condition I will make a treaty with you, that I gouge out all your right eyes, and thus bring disgrace on all Israel. The elders of Jabesh said to him, Give us seven days' respite, that we may send messengers through all the territory of Israel.

Then, if there is no one to save us, we will give ourselves up to you. When the messengers came to Gibeah of Saul, they reported the matter in the ears of the people, and all the people wept aloud. Now behold, Saul was coming from the field behind the oxen. And Saul said, What is wrong with the people that they are weeping? So they told him the news of the men of Jabesh. And the Spirit of God rushed upon Saul when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled.

He took a yoke of oxen, and cut them in pieces, and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel, by the hand of the messengers, saying, Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen.

[1:06] Then the dread of the Lord fell upon the people, and they came out as one man. When he mustered them at Bezek, the people of Israel were three hundred thousand, and the men of Judah thirty thousand. And they said to the messengers who had come, Thus shall you say to the men of Jabesh-Gilead, Tomorrow by the time the sun is hot, you shall have salvation.

When the messengers came and told the men of Jabesh, they were glad. Therefore the men of Jabesh said, Tomorrow we will give ourselves up to you, and you may do to us whatever seems good to you.

And the next day Saul put the people in three companies, and they came into the midst of the camp in the morning watch, and struck down the Ammonites until the heat of the day. And those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.

Then the people said to Samuel, Who is it that said, Shall Saul reign over us? Bring the men that we may put them to death. But Saul said, Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the Lord has worked salvation in Israel.

Then Samuel said to the people, Come let us go to Gilgal, and there renew the kingdom. So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the Lord in Gilgal. There they sacrificed peace offerings before the Lord, and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly.

[2:19] Saul has just been marked out as the crown prince of Israel. He is the man who would inherit the throne. However, he has not yet been anointed. In chapter 11 he must play the part of a judge first, and his first test is provided by Nahash the Ammonite.

The Ammonites are to the east of Israel. They threaten the Transjordan, and the Philistines threaten the south-west. Saul needs to deal with these twin threats. Nahash's name is significant.

It means serpent. Is Saul going to be the righteous Adam and protect the bride from the serpent? Will he crush the head of Nahash and his men? That's the question that we're asked at this point.

Nahash attacks Jabesh-Gilead. Jabesh-Gilead is some distance inside the territory of the Transjordan, and so to reach Jabesh-Gilead, the Ammonites would already have won several victories and conquered many parts of the land.

Jabesh-Gilead is a place that we have encountered once before, in the Book of the Judges, where it plays a very important role at the end. Jabesh-Gilead was the city that failed to respond to the summons to fight against Benjamin after the sin of Gibeah, when Benjamin was almost wiped out in the final chapters of the book.

[3:28] At that point, Jabesh-Gilead itself was destroyed, save for a remnant of its young women, whom the Benjaminites took as their wives. We should probably presume that Jabesh-Gilead has

subsequently become a sort of Benjaminite enclave within Gilead.

Now a man of Gibeah, Saul, is going to come to the aid of Jabesh-Gilead. Painful loose threads in Israel's past history are now going to be woven into a tapestry of redemption again.

What was Nahash's plan? The Ammonites' cruel humiliation of the men of Jabesh-Gilead would be a sign of dominance. It would render the men of the city unable to fight, they would not have perspective, as they would lose one of their eyes.

It would also send a signal to other cities in the land. Why do they give the men of Jabesh-Gilead this window of opportunity to send men throughout the land looking for help? Most likely because it gives them the opportunity to avoid the costly burden of siege warfare.

The Ammonites are not expecting anyone to come to the rescue of Jabesh-Gilead, and if the men of Jabesh-Gilead will surrender to them after seven days, it saves them many costly and difficult months of besieging the city.

[4 : 34] For the slight risk that some people will come to their aid, this is a gamble worth taking. When the messengers bring the news to Gibeah, the people all weep aloud. This might again recall the end of the book of Judges, where there are a series of events where the people weep about the fate of Benjamin and the bitter situation of fighting with their brothers.

We find accounts of this weeping in Judges chapter 20 verse 23, 26, and in chapter 21 verse 2. The messengers do not seem to be aware yet that Saul is the crown prince.

Saul will also prove his fitness for the office of king before he is raised to it. When Saul hears the news, the spirit rushes upon him like the spirit rushed upon Samson and came upon the other judges.

Saul acts in a judge-like capacity in this chapter, and he cuts up the yoke of oxen and sends them throughout Israel. This is a threat to anyone who won't assemble for their brothers in Jabesh-Gilead.

It's also an expression of the state of a divided nation. They must come together if they are to survive the twin threats of the Ammonites and the Philistines. And Saul notably calls them to follow him and Samuel.

[5 : 41] Saul is acting as if Samuel's son. This is reminiscent of the Levites' gruesome cutting up of his concubine and sending parts of her body throughout Israel in Judges chapter 19.

Just as that was a means of summoning Israel to avenge her death, so the cutting up of the oxen is a means to summon Israel to act on behalf of Jabesh-Gilead. Recalling the summons of Judges chapter 19 and 20 is important here, because the men of Jabesh-Gilead had failed to respond to that summons and were destroyed as a result.

Now a man of Gibeah, the city that first provoked that summons in the book of Judges, is sending out such a summons to Israel on their behalf. There is a sort of reversal of the past history here. Saul gathers 300,000 men from Israel and 30,000 from Judah. There is much debate about the meaning of such large numbers in scripture. More liberal scholars have often suggested that they are exaggerated for rhetorical or literary purposes.

Conservative scholars have generally taken them literally. However, there are other possibilities, with arguments for and against. One example is the possibility that thousand in such cases refers to a large unit, a unit that may have been considerably smaller than a thousand men in size, much as a Roman sentry could be considerably smaller than a hundred men in some cases, depending on the type of soldiers within them and the period of history.

[7 : 02] For instance, a sentry of veteran soldiers might only have 30 men in it. Whatever we make of this question, the number three is clearly important here, and that should remind us of the story of Gideon, who had 300 men divided like Saul's troop here into three companies.

Like Saul, Gideon went into the middle of the enemy camp in the morning watch and scattered them. After having won the victory in this manner, Saul shows grace and magnanimity in victory. He does not desire to destroy those who had originally opposed him.

He draws attention to the fact that God had granted the victory. At this point, Samuel summons the Israelites to Gilgal, and there Saul is proclaimed king. There is an epilogue to this story.

When Saul was killed when fighting against the Philistines at the end of the book of 1 Samuel, it is the men of Jabesh-Gilead who went to recover his body. 1 Samuel chapter 31 verses 11 to 13.

But when the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men arose and went all night and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the

wall of Beshan.

[8 : 05] And they came to Jabesh and burned them there. And they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh and fasted seven days. The story of Saul's kingship begins in Jabesh-Gilead and it ends in Jabesh-Gilead.

A question to consider. What significance might there be to the fact that the Lord delivered Israel in this chapter through Saul acting more in the capacity of a judge before he properly became king?