

## CHAPTER 2

# Prelude to Monarchy

THE problems of Israel's own making were very real, as we have seen, but the immediate dangers were due to the pressure of her neighbours on all sides. Archaeology has shown clearly that between 1200 and 1000 B.C. many Palestinian cities were burned and ravaged, some of them more than once; Bethel, for instance, was severely damaged at least three times. So even without the evidence of the Book of Judges, it is plain that the promised land was the scene of no few battles between the days of Joshua and David. The Book of Judges, however, goes further than excavations do, and reveals the names of the enemies of Israel, and gives some account of the reason for their hostility. There were three main causes, in fact: the Canaanites, as the dispossessed people, tried on occasion to put back the clock and recover lost territory; the Philistines were imperialists, and wanted to extend their control, making their neighbours their vassals; and the Midianites and others were nomadic raiders who had no aims beyond emptying the barns of other people in order to feed themselves.

One of the early narratives of the Book of Judges (3:12ff.) throws light on the situation which developed in south Transjordan. The Israelites' predicament was occasioned by the territorial expansion of the Moabites, who were ably marshalled by their king Eglon. The Moabites were distant relatives of the Israelites and were their neighbours throughout their history.<sup>1</sup> Immediately east of the north end of the Dead Sea was located the tribe of Reuben, occupying territory once owned by Moab (although it was not the Israelites who had dispossessed them), and no doubt the Moabites, south of them, eyed the Reubenite land covetously. Also bordering on the

1. See below, chapter 14.

Reubenites were the Ammonites, closely akin to the Moabites, and the Israelite tribe found itself the victim of a pincer movement from the south and north-east. Without a king and without support from other tribes, Reuben was overrun.

Eglon found himself master of the land between the Dead Sea and the great desert to the east. Most of it is a plateau some 3000 feet in altitude; the mountains rise steeply from the Dead Sea well over 4000 feet below. The plateau is cut by occasional streams and gorges; the most notable river is the Arnon (modern Wadi Mojib), which had formed the boundary between Moab and Reuben. The soil is reasonably fertile, but the region has always been devoted chiefly to sheep farming; Deborah was soon to chide Reuben with tarrying among the sheep-folds (cf. Judges 5:16, RSV). The Dead Sea is a natural, well-named barrier to the west; by overrunning Reuben, Eglon gave himself the opportunity for further expansion westwards, just north of the Dead Sea. Just across the Jordan from here lies the city of Jericho; though the city itself lay in ruins, the oasis which had created the city was a valuable prize for Eglon. By now he was expanding at the expense of the Benjaminites; and not only did he take some of their territory, he took tribute from them.

But it was his greed for tribute that indirectly led to his downfall. The very man who brought it one year was able to assassinate him. This man was Ehud, who swiftly rounded up a small army of his fellow-tribesmen, who then came down from the hills west of the Jordan and stationed themselves at the fords across the river. The death of their king threw the Moabites into a panic, and they obeyed the natural impulse to make their escape homewards — straight into the hands of the waiting Israelite force, who were not slow to take advantage of the situation.

This exploit by Ehud effectively put an end to Moabite domination of Benjaminite territory, but the biblical record leaves us to guess what happened to Reuben, east of the Jordan. The Moabites may have left them alone for the moment, but the former were not long inactive, and it is certain that the Reubenites were never a force in Israelite affairs hereafter.

This whole episode had clear political implications, for those who had eyes to see. The Moabites' success revealed plainly the value of effective leadership; it was not until Ehud took matters into his own hands and showed himself an able leader that the Israelites had any hope of ejecting the Moabites. It is also noteworthy that the closely related Moabites and Ammonites joined forces to achieve their ends; whereas Reuben and Benjamin took no concerted action whatever, from first to last, apparently.

The Moabites were a small nation, and could never have dominated the whole of Israel; at best they could only have whittled away a peripheral piece of territory. In due course Israel was to lose

much of its original domain, without losing its own identity, so it is clear that the Moabites could have done little lasting damage. But had the Canaanites ever really combined to attack Israel, the Israelites would have been hard put to it to defeat them. The nearest approach to a full-scale Canaanite attack was the campaign headed by Sisera, and had it proved successful, the very heart of Israel would have been subjugated, and Israel as a whole might well have disintegrated.

The story of this campaign is told in ordinary historical narrative in Judges 4, and in a triumphant poem in the following chapter; naturally the approach of the two accounts is quite different, and it is not easy to piece together all the details. At times the compiler of the Book of Judges has, for brevity, telescoped events, giving the impression that two campaigns were one; and Judges 4 may be one such abbreviated narrative. However, assuming that there was one campaign and not a series, we gather that the man who set it afoot was Jabin, king of Hazor, a great Canaanite stronghold north of the Sea of Galilee. This city had been destroyed and burnt down by Joshua not so long before (Joshua 11:10f.), but evidently the Canaanites had retaken the site. It lay within Naphtali, not far from the north-east boundary of Israelite territory; and its strategic importance was later recognised by Solomon, who fortified it afresh (1 Kings 9:15). The site is now an uninhabited mound, which has recently been excavated by Israeli archaeologists.

The tribe of Naphtali was inevitably involved in the fighting that eventually took place; like neighbouring Zebulun, we read, they "risked their very lives" (Judges 5:18). But if Jabin was the moving spirit behind the confederacy, the man who led it into battle was Sisera, and the scene of conflict was not Hazor, but the Plain of Jezreel away to the south. As we have seen, the Plain was not commanded by the Israelites, but formed a barrier between Manasseh to the south and Zebulun and Issachar to the north. Here Sisera, with his nine hundred iron chariots, was long unassailable and "oppressed Israel harshly" (4:3). (The Iron Age was just beginning in Palestine, and the Philistines' use of this metal, and their determined efforts to hold the monopoly of it, gave them a great advantage in warfare.) It is evident that the confederacy was not limited to the Canaanites, for the name Sisera is not Canaanite, and the city of which he was king was called Harosheth-ha-goiim, "Harosheth of the (foreign) nations". His people were probably distantly related to the Philistines. From the Plain of Jezreel, Sisera was able to impose his will on the Israelites south of him, as well as north; it is noteworthy that not only Manasseh but Ephraim and even Benjamin, far to the south, responded to the call to arms when it came.

This grave threat to Israel's independence was eventually met,

fittingly enough, by united action on the part of Israelite tribes north and south of the Plain. The leading figures were the prophetess Deborah, who hailed from Ephraim, and Barak, whose home was in Naphtali; north and south indeed! The battle was pitched in Sisera's territory, and the Israelites were obliged to muster a huge army in order to counteract the enemy's chariotry. As long as he could, Barak kept to the hills, where the chariots would be of little use; his final camp was on Mount Tabor,<sup>2</sup> the highest hill rising in the Plain itself. However, he need have had no anxiety about the fearsome chariots, for nature itself rendered them useless; the battle took place beside the Kishon, and a sudden downpour caused the river to run high, with the result that Sisera's chariots were bogged down in the mud. His army was routed, and he himself fled, finding it quicker to travel by foot, apparently. He soon suffered the indignity of meeting death at a woman's hand.

It is considered likely that Sisera's defeat took place *c.* 1125 B.C.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter the northern tribes were untroubled for some time. The next danger was of a different sort, although once again Manasseh figured largely in the story. This time the aggressors were the Midianites, aided and abetted by the Amalekites and other nomadic groups; coming from the fringes of the desert to the east of Palestine, they travelled swiftly on their camels into more fertile country, and took what plunder lay to hand. Shrewd and cunning as desert raiders have always been, they knew precisely when the various fruits and crops were harvested, and timed their raids to perfection. The livestock, too, fell prey to them.

Once again, the Transjordanian tribes were conspicuous by their inaction. The people of Gad and eastern Manasseh must have been the first victims of the Midianites, and the fact that the raiders moved in force into the Plain of Jezreel, west of the Jordan, indicates that the Israelites east of the river were no danger to them. It also suggests that the Midianites had already made the most of the pickings in Transjordan, and were looking for more fruitful fields to plunder.

The situation at the home of Gideon, somewhere in the hills south of the Plain of Jezreel (Ophrah cannot be identified with any certainty), is also revealing. Gideon's own father, of the tribe of Manasseh (the western part of the tribe), had an altar to Baal on his property, although it must be said in his defence that he was not very concerned about it when his son pulled it down (Judges 6:30f.). So

2. Tabor has since the fourth century been identified as the Mount of Transfiguration; but on the whole, probability is against this identification.

3. Cf. J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (OTL: London, 1972) p.172; S. Herrmann, *A History of Israel?* (London, 1975) pp.117f. A. D. H. Mayes, however, wishes to date the conflict much later in the Judges era; cf. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, *Israelite and Judaeon History* (OTL: London, 1977) p.314.

much for the religious situation; as for the Midianite threat, it appears that the only defence against it which was so far resorted to was to match cunning with cunning, and to hide away the food and livestock. So we first meet Gideon "threshing wheat in the winepress", of all places (Judges 6:11).

No longer were the opposing sides Israelites and Canaanites; the whole settled population, however varied their ancestry, were forced to unite against the nomadic raiders. It was also inevitable that if the Canaanites were not to be exterminated, they would be ultimately integrated into Israel. But if the Israelites and Canaanites were to fight on the same side, it must be under Yahweh's banner; so Gideon's first move was to destroy the Baal altar, and to erect one to Yahweh. Not till that was done were the necessary military steps taken.

The details of the battle need no re-telling. It was certainly not weight of numbers that defeated the Midianites, nor did a cloudburst cause their discomfiture. Perhaps they were already unsure of the outcome (if we may judge by the dream one of them had on the eve of the Israelite attack), and the element of surprise was sufficient to overwhelm them. Gideon and his loyal band, together with reinforcements from Naphtali and Asher, pursued the raiders as they fled eastwards from the Plain of Jezreel. But just as the men of Ehud had seized the fords across the Jordan to the north of the Dead Sea, and thus prevented the Moabites from escaping unscathed, so now Gideon had made sure that the fords to the south of the Sea of Galilee were controlled; the tribe of Ephraim supplied the troops required for this manoeuvre. Even so, a considerable body of Midianites escaped across the river.

Gideon felt that it was not enough to chase the marauders back across the Jordan, and he sought to follow up his initial success by a campaign east of the river. Now was the opportunity for the settled population of Transjordan to play their part in squashing the Midianite threat, and Gideon invited the help of the two cities there, Succoth and Peniel. But apparently the local citizens felt that it would be imprudent to offend the raiders, who might return all too soon, once Gideon and his men had withdrawn to the far bank of the Jordan; and they refused even to provision Gideon's small army. None the less, Gideon achieved a second success against the fleeing raiders — and returned to bring down retribution upon the two cities.

The Abimelech episode (Judges 9) serves to show something of the state of affairs in central Palestine during the first half of the eleventh century B.C. In and around Shechem, in southern Manasseh, the Israelites and Canaanites were making common cause, and were endeavouring to organize an efficient system of government, but at the expense of the purity of the Israelite religion. The attempt was

far from successful, for two reasons: in the first place, the situation gave scope for unscrupulous adventurers; and secondly, jealousies between Israelites and Canaanites were only dormant, not dead. In the first flush of enthusiasm consequent upon the defeat of the Midianites, the people of Manasseh had invited Gideon to become their king, and if he refused the position,<sup>4</sup> it is evident that his family did exercise some sort of authority in the locality. Abimelech saw the opportunity of playing on Canaanite sympathies; as a son of Gideon, he enjoyed the respect given to his family, and as a Canaanite on his mother's side he was able to win full support from that section of the population. For three years he was king of Shechem, after he had killed off the full Israelite members of his father's clan. But he himself was Israelite in part; and cannot have pleased the Canaanite citizens of Shechem any too well, for presently a certain Gaal, presumably a Canaanite, was able to move into the city behind Abimelech's back, and win over the citizens to his cause. Abimelech took strong measures, and emerged victorious — but was mortally wounded in the process.

The Ammonite attack finally beaten off by Jephthah (Judges 10f.) in many ways paralleled the earlier Moabite campaign. Once again, the Gileadites (i.e. the Israelites in Transjordan) were easily overrun, and once again territories west of the river were affected. But for once the Gileadites found the will and strength to resist, through the agency of Jephthah, a man whom they had earlier driven into exile, and who had gathered round him a band of marauders to the north of Ammon. The Ammonites were soundly defeated and thrust back into their own territory.

Thus during 150 years, from the time of Joshua<sup>5</sup> till the early eleventh century, various Israelite tribes were harassed by enemies on the north and the east. But the worst threat to Israelite independence was still to come, from the south west: the Philistines. Hitherto the tribes of Judah and Dan had been remarkably free from the troubles that befell other tribes. Shamgar's exploit against the Philistines (Judges 3:31) was probably an isolated incident, for the Philistines had arrived in Palestine at about the same time as the Israelites, and no doubt needed some time to establish themselves before attempting to expand at the expense of others. Like the Canaanites, the Philistines engaged in a good deal of commerce by sea. In industry too, they were skilled; excavations have unearthed a number of their furnaces for smelting iron. Iron was not unknown in

4. The suggestion that Judges 8:23 is to be interpreted as Gideon's politely veiled acceptance of the royal position is intriguing but not altogether convincing.

5. 150 years if Joshua lived in the mid-thirteenth century as is generally held. However a fifteenth century date is not impossible in the light of the researches of J. J. Bimson, *Redating the Exodus and Conquest* (JSOT Supplement 5: Sheffield, 1978).

Palestine before the Philistines arrived, but it was they who introduced its use on a large scale. Iron-working was a skill they brought with them, but of course they needed the raw materials as well as know-how, and this requirement may have been one of the first motives that led them to extend their territory. As early as 1150 B.C., they began to expand to the south-east, into the arid region of the Negeb; copper and iron ore were plentiful down towards the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. Meanwhile the Israelites were making little use of this new and superior metal; by the time of Saul, moreover, the Philistines had ensured that they held the monopoly of the iron industry, which put the Israelites at a great disadvantage in the warfare between them.

The Philistines were not a political unity in south-west Palestine, but they were capable, both psychologically and in organization, of effective united action, as the Canaanites and Israelites rarely were. Each of their five chief cities, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath, was ruled by a *seren* or "lord" (possibly comparable with the Israelite "judges"); but these five chiefs acted in council when concerted action was necessary. As a result, their fighting machine was highly efficient and as well organized as it was well armed.

The most southerly of the Israelite tribes, Simeon, may have suffered when the Philistines expanded to the south east, though Scripture is silent on this point; Simeon was never a major tribe, and its territory gradually became virtually incorporated into Judah, its big northern neighbour. At first Judah, immediately east of the Philistines, escaped lightly, for the simple reason that she occupied a very hilly region; no doubt there were border incidents, however. But the tribe of Dan, north of Philistia, was not so fortunate; much of Dan, like Philistia, was situated on the coastal plain, and was without natural defence of any kind. No doubt the Philistine pressure developed gradually — there was no sudden "blitzkrieg" invasion. But it was very real for all that.

The only Danite who emerged as a "judge" was the colourful but not altogether admirable figure of Samson. Notable as his exploits were, it is significant that they never included leading an army against the foe; he acted single-handed, and his best efforts can have occasioned little more than minor set-backs for the Philistines. The Book of Judges notes that "the dead whom he killed at his death were more than those he had killed in his life" (16:30). He was an uncomfortable person to have in the vicinity, nevertheless, and we can well understand the Philistine endeavours to eliminate him.

The account of his death (16:23ff.) rings true in several details. The picture of the Philistines making merry is particularly credible, for beer-mugs have been unearthed time and time again by excavators of Philistine sites. Archaeology has also thrown light on the architecture of the house which Samson pulled down about his

own head; the larger Philistine houses frequently had a number of pillars supporting the upper part of the buildings.

But once Samson was dead, the tribe of Dan was left without a champion and without an army capable of withstanding the Philistines. No doubt many of them were overrun or driven out, becoming incorporated in Judah. One band of 600 men, with their families, however, had the wisdom to realize that discretion was the better part of valour, and they emigrated to the far north of Palestine, passing through many other tribal territories *en route*. North of the Sea of Galilee lies a plain (known as "The Finger", because of its shape) some 25 miles long, through which flows the Jordan at the start of its journey south; at the north-eastern edge of this plain, at the foot of the slopes of Mount Hermon, lay the unsuspecting Canaanite city of Laish, and upon it the Danites descended. Destroying it, they rebuilt the city and renamed it "Dan"; it became the traditional northern outpost of Israel, in the common phrase, "from Dan to Beersheba".

The Philistines and related groups mastered the whole of the coastal plain, as far north as the Carmel range. Then following the great road which led to Damascus, they turned inland, through the pass of Megiddo, and into the Plain of Jezreel, and so extended their control as far as the Jordan near Beth-shan. Thus they cut off the central tribes from those in Galilee, and indeed encircled the southern and central tribes on three sides. This in itself was a serious enough situation for Israel, but the Philistines were not satisfied; they meant to make the hill-country theirs too, and master the whole area west of Jordan. (In one sense they succeeded permanently, for the term "Palestine" commemorates their name to this day.)

This unhappy state of affairs is the background situation to 1 Samuel. Despite their extremity, the Israelites do not seem to have undergone a change of heart towards their God, but they did focus their attention on the central shrine, Shiloh, in the territory of Ephraim, where Eli was in charge, attended by Samuel. A strong Philistine army marched into western Ephraim, and at the first encounter at the edge of the coastal plain, defeated the Israelites soundly. The Israelites regrouped, but felt that there must be some way of ensuring victory. Their minds cast back, and recalled that when they marched from victory to victory under the leadership of Moses and Joshua, the ark of the covenant had gone into battle with them. Very well, it should now serve them again, as a talisman. But the ark, unattended by the Divine Presence it symbolized, proved a broken reed; the Israelite army was decimated, and the sacred ark captured, at the disastrous battle of Aphek (1 Samuel 4:1-11), *c.* 1050 B.C.

However, in the event the ark of the covenant brought the Philistines no pleasure, and before long they returned it. Even so,

they may have retained general supervision over it. It is very probable that they then proceeded to attack Shiloh and destroy the sanctuary there. While it is true that recent excavations have left the date of Shiloh's fall in some doubt,<sup>6</sup> the total silence from now on about this important sanctuary strongly suggests that it suffered destruction at the hands of the Philistines. At the very least the sanctuary would seem to have been abandoned, due to Philistine pressure.

6. Cf. M. L. Buhl and S. Holm-Nielsen, *Shiloh* (Copenhagen, 1969), pp.61f., where it is suggested that Shiloh may have fallen to the Assyrians, some three centuries later.