

# David Defeats the Ammonites

Second Samuel 10:1-19

and First Chronicles 19:1-19

**DIG:** Who are the Ammonites (see commentary on *Genesis Fb - Let's Get Our Father to Drink Wine, and Then Lie With Him to Preserve Our Family Line*)? What do we know about Nahash (First Samuel 11:1-11)? Why might David be struck by an act of kindness from him? How surprised was David by the suspicion, shaving and stripping? Who started this war? Why? How did Joab manage the war on two fronts? What did he think about the goodness of God? How consistent is this with David's view? How does Hadadezer, an earlier foe, think he can out-manuever David? How did that turn out? How is God's goodness reconciled in all this gore?

**REFLECT:** In what area of your life are you feeling the need for "reinforcements?" Who can give you support? Do you feel like you are being attacked on both sides right now? Who or what is on your left? Your right? What good do you think the Lord might bring out this conflict? Are you foolishly regrouping, like the Arameans, to fight a lost cause anywhere? What *piece* of the problem are you holding on to, and therefore, forfeiting God's peace? How might you "win the war" by "losing the battle?"

986-985 BC

This chapter details the war mentioned more briefly in **Second Samuel 8:9-12**, but more importantly, it shows how the stage was set for David's sin with Bathsheba (see **Dd - David and Bathsheba**). The Ammonites had come into the story at the beginning of Sha'ul's reign, when they had made cruel threats to the city of Jabesh Gilead (**First Samuel 11:1**). But David succeeded in establishing good relations with its king, Nahash, and intended to do all he could to maintain that alliance.<sup>319</sup>

**The Insult to David:** In the course of time, Nahash, the king of the Ammonites, died and his son Hanun succeeded him as king. David thought, "I will show chesed (see commentary on **Ruth Af - The Concept of Chesed**) to Hanun son of Nahash, just as his father showed chesed to me." When this chesed was shown is not recorded in the Scriptures. **But the rabbis teach that Nahash, as an enemy of Sha'ul, had given David aid in his war with Ish-Bosheth.** So David sent a delegation to express his sympathy to Hanun concerning his father (**Second Samuel 10:1-2a; First Chronicles 19:1-2a**). A

change of sovereign was still the occasion for diplomatic visits, and David acted in the usual way when he sent his ambassadors to offer his condolences and affirm his continuing good will. The journey from Jerusalem to Ammon was about fifty miles or eighty kilometers.

When David's men came to Hanun in the land of the Ammonites, the Ammonite commanders said to Hanun their lord, "Do you think David is honoring your father by sending envoys to you to express sympathy? Hasn't David sent them to you only to explore Rabba and spy it out and overthrow it? David's treatment of the neighboring Moabites (Second Samuel 8:2) may have motivated the suspicions of the commanders. So Hanun reversed the policy of his father and seized David's envoys, shaved off half of each man's beard, Jewish men were supposed to keep their beards intact (Leviticus 19:27, 21:5; Deuteronomy 14:1-2). To tamper with a man's beard was a great insult. It was even more embarrassing to shave off half the beard! Then Hanun ordered his men to cut off their garments at the waist so their buttocks were exposed like prisoners of war (Isaiah 20:3-4), and it also meant removing the tassels on their robes identifying them as Jews (Numbers 15:37-41; Deut 22:12). Then he sent them away (Second Samuel 10:2b-4; First Chronicles 19:2b-4). This was regarded as a grave insult. The outrage was virtually a declaration of war and demanded a suitable response of equal, if not greater, force.

When David was told about this, he showed great sensitivity toward his men and sent messengers to meet them, for they were greatly humiliated. David knew it was a direct insult to him and not to them. The king said: Stay at Jericho, which is on the main road between Rabba and Jerusalem, till your beards have grown, and then come back" (Second Samuel 10:5; First Chronicles 19:5). This would keep them away from the public gaze, spare their outraged feelings and reduce the publicity of the national affront until David decided how he would avenge the deliberate insult.

**The Alliance of Ammon and Syria:** When the people of Ammon realized how seriously they had angered David, Hanun and the Ammonites sent a thousand talents of silver to hire paid mercenaries from Syria Naharaim, Syria Maakah, Zobah and Beth Rehob. Hanun realized that David must avenge the insult and so he anticipated an attack. Hanun and the Ammonites sent the thousand talents of silver to hire thirty-two thousand chariots and charioteers, twenty thousand Syrian foot soldiers from Beth Rehob and Zobah, as well as the king of Maakah with a thousand men, and also twelve thousand men from Tob. They camped near Medeba, while the Ammonites were mustered from their towns and moved out for battle (Second Samuel 10:6; First Chronicles 19:6-7). The combined forces of Ammon and Syria were quite formidable. The Syrians prepared to attack the flank of the Israelite army, while the Ammonites ahead defended their city of Rabbah.

On hearing this, it forced David to attack the Ammonites sooner than he had originally intended because of the Syrian alliance. David took no chances. He sent Joab out with the entire army of fighting men. The Ammonites came out and drew up in battle formation at the entrance of their city gate where they could retreat if necessary, while the Syrians of Zobah and Rehob and the men of Tob and Maakah were by themselves in the open country (Second Samuel 10:7-8; First Chronicles 19:8-9).

**The Defeat of Ammon:** Joab did not panic in the face of this formidable foe. He saw that there were battle lines in front of him and behind him. In front of him were the Ammonites, and behind him were the Syrians. If he attacked either force separately, his back would be exposed to the other. So he decided to attack both simultaneously. So he selected some of the best troops in Isra'el and deployed them against the Syrians. He obviously considered the Syrians to be the stronger army and took the most difficult task for himself. Then he put the rest of the men under the command of Abishai his brother and deployed them against the Ammonites. He decided to attack both armies simultaneously so as not to expose his back to the enemy. Joab said to Abishai, "If the Arameans are too strong for you, then I will come to rescue you. Be strong, and let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God. Joab was a brilliant general, but as a believer in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he understood that ADONAI will do what is good in His sight, in other words, Isra'el's fate was in God's hands (Second Samuel 10:9-12; First Chronicles 19:10-13).

Then Joab and the troops with him advanced to fight the Syrians, and they fled behind the protective walls of Rabbah. When the Ammonites realized that the Syrians were fleeing, they too fled before his brother Abishai and went inside the city. So Joab went back to Jerusalem and did not attempt a siege at that time because it was too late in the year and the rainy season was upon them (Second Samuel 10:13-14; First Chronicles 19:14-15). The Ammonite army was defeated, but the city of Rabbah itself was not taken. This would set the stage for David's sin with Bathsheba.

**The Defeat of Syria:** After the Syrians saw that Joab and Isra'el had routed them, they regrouped. Hadadezer had Syrians brought from beyond the Euphrates River; they went to the city of Helam, with Shobak the commander of Hadadezer's army leading them. When David's intelligence network informed him of the exact location of the Syrian forces, he personally came to lead the attack. He gathered all Isra'el, crossed over the Jordan River and went to Helam (Second Samuel 10:15-16; First Chronicles 19:16). The contrast between David's leading his own army in this situation, and later remaining behind in Yerushalayim (see De - [David and Bathsheba](#)) is noteworthy.

The Syrians formed their battle lines to meet David and fought against him. But they fled before Isra'el. The Samuel account of the battle describes David killing seven hundred charioteers, while the Chronicler describes David as killing seven thousand of their charioteers (Hebrew: *rekeb*). This discrepancy can best be resolved by understanding *rekeb* to mean *charioteers* in the Samuel account and *men of chariot divisions* in the First Chronicles account.<sup>320</sup> Both accounts, however, report that David killed forty thousand of their foot soldiers. (see Af - [The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh](#)). So significant was the outcome of this battle that David commanded the army himself and won a resounding victory. He also struck down Shobak the commander of their army, and he died there. When all the kings who were vassals of Hadadezer saw that they had been routed by Isra'el, they made peace with David and became subject to him. So the Syrians were not willing to help the Ammonites any more (2 Samuel 10:17-19; First Chron 19:17-19). Thus far the power, reputation, and territory of David are fully intact.

Chapters 9 and 10 concern David's *chesed*. As David showed his *chesed* to Mephibosheth (see Da - [David and Mephiboseth](#)), he also proposed to show his *chesed* to Hanun. Consequently, the narrative offers a positive characterization of David as a man of *faithfulness*. It is clear from Chapter 10 that David's *faithfulness* was not to be mistaken for weakness. David was very capable of keeping *chesed* with his allies; at the beginning of Chapter 10, he respects Hanun as an ally, albeit a subservient one. However, David was not to be taken advantage of, for he would respond decisively if his *chesed* was rejected. So the narrative presents the limits of David's *faithfulness* . . . beyond which he would act with all the eagerness for blood that marked his career. Chapters 9 and 10 form a kind of introduction to the tragedy now to be presented by the Ruach HaKodesh.<sup>321</sup>