

Moses: earth's meekest man

32. Into battle

John Mitchell

Israel, having skirted Edom, are resisted by Sihon and his people. They are overcome, and Israel, at last, have territory. Before long they defeat the notorious Og, king of Bashan, and add to their possessions. Two and one half tribes request this area for their inheritance, but promise to help the conquest of the Land over the Jordan.

THE CHILDREN of Israel turned a corner in more senses than one when they headed north on the desert road that fringed the eastern border of Edom and crossed into the territory of Moab. The hostility Edom had shown when they had the advantage of easily defended hill country evaporated when they were faced with a well-disciplined and organised Israelite army in open country. And as for Moab, who had said neither yea nor nay to the advances of Israel, they appear not to have felt threatened when the invaders were obviously avoiding their cultivated areas and were sticking to the desert highway.

Amorite opposition

True to their word not to inflict any damage or to squander resources, the children of Israel continued on the way to the boundary between Moab and the Amorites at the great and impressive gorge of the River Arnon where it flows into the Dead Sea, opposite Engedi. It appears that they camped on the south side of the valley while Moses sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, with a message similar to that which he had sent to the other territories, saying, "Let us pass through your country. We will not turn aside into any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the king's highway until we have passed through your territory".* Sihon, however, refused them passage and began to muster his forces ready to march out to battle against the Israelites.

For the opposing sides to have met across the great ravine that measured three miles from crest to crest and was 2,000 feet in depth was impossible. The only way for them to meet was inland in the desert, where Yahweh provided specially for His people, as on previous occasions. There

the Lord said to Moses, "Gather the people together and I will give them water"—which He did in a manner the Israelites afterwards celebrated in song:

"Spring up, O well!

Sing about it,

About the well that the princes dug,

That the nobles of the people sank—

The nobles with sceptres and staffs".

But there were greater songs to come in following the commandments of the Lord when He said, "Rise ye up, take your journey, and pass over the river Arnon: behold, I have given into thine hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land: begin to possess it, and contend with him in battle. This day will I begin to put the dread of thee and the fear of thee upon the nations that are under the whole heaven, who shall hear report of thee, and shall tremble, and be in anguish because of thee" (Deut. 2:24,25, AV).

God-given victories

So the army of Israel marched northward to meet the forces of Sihon, whose spirit the Lord had made "stubborn and his heart obstinate" in order to deliver him into their hands. "See," said Yahweh to Moses, "I have begun to deliver Sihon and his country over to you. Now begin to conquer and possess his land" (vv. 30,31).

The Israelites marched deep into Sihon's territory, as far as the plateau surrounding Mount Pisgah, overlooking the Dead Sea, before encountering the Amorites. There, at Jahaz, says the Divine record, "When Sihon and all his army came out to meet us in battle . . . the LORD our God delivered him over to us and we struck him down, together with his sons and his whole army. At that time we took all his towns and completely destroyed them—men, women and children. We left no survivors. But the livestock

* The narrative in this article is based closely on Numbers 21 and 32, so quotations from these chapters are not referenced. Quotations are from the NIV unless stated otherwise.

and the plunder from the towns we had captured we carried off for ourselves. From Aroer on the rim of the Arnon Gorge, and from the town in the gorge, even as far as Gilead, not one town was too strong for us. The LORD our God gave us all of them" (vv. 32-36).

How long the operation lasted is not stated, but to the Israelites it must have seemed like a transformation of their fortunes. From a landless, vagrant community, living in tents, they had almost overnight acquired a kingdom, and cities and houses of their own—and had had their appetites whetted for more. Their elation was so great as to inspire their poets to express their triumph over a nation that had reduced Moab itself in size:

"Come to Heshbon and let it be rebuilt;
let Sihon's city be restored.

Fire went out from Heshbon,
a blaze from the city of Sihon.

It consumed Ar of Moab,
the citizens of Arnon's heights.

Woe to you, O Moab!

You are destroyed, O people of Chemosh!
He has given up his sons as fugitives
and his daughters as captives
to Sihon king of the Amorites.

But we have overthrown them;

Heshbon is destroyed all the way to Dibon.
We have demolished them as far as Nophah,
which extends to Medeba".

The exploits of the Israelites had now brought them to the borderland of the Ammonites, another of their 'cousins' of ancient time with whom the Lord had told them not to tangle. Sticking, therefore, to the riparian lands of the River Jordan they by-passed Ammon in order to challenge another Amorite king, Og, the famous giant of Bashan, who slept in a bed measuring 13½ feet by 6 feet. Him and his forces they met in battle at Edrei and, aided by the Almighty, gained another absolute victory that extended their power and control for another hundred miles up the Jordan Valley to the slopes of Mount Hermon.

It was a victory ever after commemorated in responsive anthems in the temple services, giving thanks to Yahweh:

"To Him Which smote great kings . . . and
slew famous kings . . .

Sihon king of the Amorites . . . and Og the
king of Bashan . . .

And gave their land for an heritage . . .

Even an heritage unto Israel His servant"

(Ps. 136:17-22, AV).

Rich pastures

The total conquest of the Amorites opened up dazzling prospects of what could be achieved when the children of Israel, with God's help, invaded the Promised Land on the other side of Jordan. But it was the eyes of the men of the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh, that sparkled most at what had already been gained. As was stated earlier, it was they, of all the tribes of Israel, who had maintained their original status as cattle men when they lived in Egypt, and had brought their flocks and herds with them. The prospect before them, as described by Tristram, enthralled them: "The richness of the whole district was itself sufficient attraction for the invaders, for the oaks of Bashan, and the vast herds of wild cattle that roamed its forest glades and green meadows, were its boast and glory, while the landscapes and the pastoral wealth of Gilead were hardly less famous" (*The Land of Israel*, p. 562).

So the Reubenites and the Gadites, with their large herds and flocks, came to Moses and Eleazar the priest, and to the leaders of the community, and pleaded that this land should be given to them and that they should not be asked to accompany the rest of Israel across the River Jordan. Moses at first rebuked them, saying, "Shall your countrymen go to war while you sit here? Why do you discourage the Israelites from going over into the land the LORD has given them? This is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to look over the land . . . they discouraged the Israelites from entering the land the LORD had given them . . . The LORD'S anger burned against Israel and He made them wander in the desert for forty years, until the whole generation of those who had done evil in His sight was gone. And here you are, a brood of sinners, standing in the place of your fathers and making the LORD even more angry with Israel. If you turn away from following Him, He will again leave all this people in the desert, and you will be the cause of their destruction".

A solemn promise

The leaders of the affected tribes, however, maintained that their intentions were honourable. They came to Moses and said, "We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children. But we are ready to arm ourselves and go ahead of the Israelites until we have brought them to their place. Meanwhile our women and children will live in fortified cities,

for protection from the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until every Israelite has received his inheritance. We will not receive any inheritance with them on the other side of the Jordan, because our inheritance has come to us on the east side”.

On those terms, Moses himself was satisfied, but he warned the tribal leaders that if they failed to fulfil their promises they would be sinning against the Lord, and their sin would surely find them out. Moreover, the leaders of the other tribes needed to be informed, and to be made party to the arrangement. So Moses gave orders to Eleazar the priest and Joshua son of Nun, who would lead the people on the other side Jordan, that if the Gadite, Reubenite and Manassite elements of the army stayed the course, as they had promised, then when the whole land was subdued they were to be given Gilead as their possession. But if they did not cross over armed, they must accept a possession with the other tribes in Canaan.

On the eve of their crossing over Jordan, Joshua reminded these fighting men of their commitment to be in the vanguard of the Israeli army as it set out, under God, to conquer the land of Canaan. He said, “You are to help your brothers until the LORD gives them rest, as He has done for you, and until they too have taken possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving them” (Josh. 1:14,15).

For their part the men from east Jordan promised Joshua to obey him as their leader and to go wherever he would send them. So they fulfilled their duty and eventually were granted possession of the land of Bashan and Gilead that Moses had appointed for them. In so doing they gained their heart’s desire, but were separated from their brethren, and, in course of time, were first to fall away from Yahweh; and, cut off from their brethren, were the first to go into captivity.

[\(To be continued\)](#)