

2 Samuel 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Samuel chapter 16 When David had passed a little beyond the summit, Zeba, the servant of Mephibosheth, met him, with a couple of donkeys saddled, bearing two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred bunches of raisins, a hundred of some of fruits, and a skin of wine.

And the king said to Zeba, Why have you brought these? Zeba answered, The donkeys are for the king's household to ride on, the bread and some of fruit are for the young men to eat, and the wine for those who faint in the wilderness to drink.

And the king said, And where is your master's son? Zeba said to the king, Behold, he remains in Jerusalem. For he said, Today the house of Israel will give me back the kingdom of my father.

Then the king said to Zeba, Behold, all that belonged to Mephibosheth is now yours. And Zeba said, I pay homage. Let me ever find favour in your sight, my lord the king.

When king David came to Bahorim, there came out a man of the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei, the son of Gerah, and as he came he cursed continually, and he threw stones at David and at all the servants of king David, and all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left.

[1 : 0 9] And Shimei said as he cursed, Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless man. The Lord has avenged on you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned, and the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom.

See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood. Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head.

But the king said, What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the Lord has said to him, Curse David. Who then shall say, Why have you done so?

And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, Behold, my own son seeks my life. How much more now may this Benjaminite? Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord has told him to.

It may be that the Lord will look on the wrong done to me, and that the Lord will repay me with good for his cursing today. So David and his men went on the road, while Shimei went along on the hillside opposite him, and cursed as he went, and threw stones at him, and flung dust.

[2 : 1 4] And the king and all the people who were with him arrived weary at the Jordan, and there he refreshed himself. Now Absalom and all the people, the men of Israel, came to Jerusalem, and Hithophel with him.

And when Hushai the Archite, David's friend, came to Absalom, Hushai said to Absalom, Long live the king! Long live the king! And Absalom said to Hushai, Is this your loyalty to your friend?

Why did you not go out with your friend? And Hushai said to Absalom, No, for whom the Lord and this people and all the men of Israel have chosen, his I will be, and with him I will remain.

And again, Whom should I serve? Should it not be his son? As I have served your father, so I will serve you. Then Absalom said to Hithophel, Give your counsel. What shall we do?

Hithophel said to Absalom, Go in to your father's concubines, whom he has left to keep the house, and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself a stench to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened.

[3 : 14] So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof, and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel. Now in those days the counsel that Hithophel gave was as if one consulted the word of God, so was all the counsel of Hithophel esteemed, both by David and by Absalom.

In chapter 16 of 2 Samuel, as in the preceding chapter, there is an itinerary of David's departure from the city and his ascent to the Mount of Olives. This itinerary involves a series of meetings and encounters, members of his household, groups of his men first, then Zadok and the Ark, Hushai, the Archite next, and now in chapter 16 he meets Ziba, the lying steward of Mephibosheth, and then Shimei.

Both Ziba and Shimei are people associated with Saul. Ziba was Saul's steward, perhaps his chief steward. We first encountered him back in chapter 9. David and his men are travelling out from Jerusalem and the realm of power, and the persons with whom David had surrounded himself in the past are being removed from him.

As he goes further out, he meets with men formerly associated with Saul, and there is a sort of reversion to the earlier stage of David's life, where he was pursued by Saul in the wilderness. David is going out into exile, and it is as if layers of his kingdom are being stripped from him at various points on the journey out towards the Jordan.

Ziba gives a great array of gifts to David, similar to the gifts that Abigail had sent to David when he went to attack Nabal. Ziba gives a false report about his master Mephibosheth, seeing an opportunity to gain favour for himself, and to ingratiate himself to David.

[4 : 50] This, we can imagine, would particularly have hurt David. When David had gone out into exile previously, he had enjoyed the support of Mephibosheth's father, his greatest friend and closest supporter, that the very son of Jonathan had turned against him would be a particularly cruel blow to David, especially after all of the grace that David had shown to Mephibosheth.

Ziba, however, as we will find out later, was lying. He does not seem to accompany David. In all likelihood, he returns to the city, where he can play both sides. David arrives at Behurim, which was the point where Paltiel, to whom Michael had been given after she was taken from David, stopped following her when he was weeping after her, back in chapter 3, verse 16.

James Jordan suggests that this is supposed to give us an impression of a boundary of a region of support for Saul. It is important to recognise that the opposition that David faces in the Benjaminite town of Behurim here is not the only reference to the town in the larger narrative.

Behurim here is the low point, but in the next appearance of Behurim, in the following chapter, David's loyalists, the sons of the priests, Jonathan and Himeaz, find support there, as we see Behurim as the low point here.

In the next chapter, it is the sign of the turning of the tide. Shimei is a man of the family of Saul, and he places curses upon David, and casts stones at him, accusing him of being a man of bloodshed against the house of Saul.

[6 : 13] Shimei's accusations are unsurprising, and they would seem to have some merit to someone looking from the outside. The Amalekite, who had claimed to have killed Saul, had gone to David for a reward.

Joab, David's right-hand man, had killed Abner in cold blood. Rechab and Baanah, the men who had assassinated Ish-bosheth, had also come to David for a reward. David had furthermore put seven sons of Saul to death for Saul's sin against the Gibeonites.

To someone who did not know the full reality of what had happened, this all looks exceedingly bad for David, especially with regard to the slaying of Abner, as David has not put away Joab, he is still his right-hand man.

Now Abishai, Joab's brother, wants to take the life of Shimei, but David restrains him. We might here think of the way that Christ, who had also left Jerusalem and ascended the Mount of Olives, restrained Peter when he wanted to strike with the sword those who came out against Christ to capture him.

At the end of this scene, David arrives at the Jordan, and he refreshes himself there. The scene now shifts back to Jerusalem, where Absalom and the Israelites, Absalom's supporters to the north, arrive in the city with Ahithophel.

[7 : 19] Hushai, David's counsellor, comes to Absalom and declares his loyalty. Hushai is deceiving Absalom in service of David, and this is one of a great many cases of deception in the books of Samuel, most of which are presented in a very positive light.

Deception in such a situation as Hushai was in, was quite licit. Absalom was a seditious man and an aggressor, who had no right to the truth, which he intended to use to destroy David, the divinely appointed king of Israel.

Hushai successfully explains his changed allegiance by suggesting that his allegiance had always been to the kingdom primarily, not just to the man who happened to occupy its throne.

His loyalty was to David the king, not to David the man. No change of allegiance had actually occurred then. Hushai's wisdom is clearly seen in this passage and in what follows.

He shrewdly refrains from answering the question that Absalom poses straightforwardly, but gives a two-part response that resists the implication of his unstable loyalties that is within Absalom's question.

[8 : 18] He presents himself as a man loyal to the throne, and what is more, he flatters Absalom by suggesting that the success of his coup is a sure thing, expressing the absoluteness of his loyalty to Absalom by claiming that Absalom is the one whom the Lord, the men of the court, and all of Israel have chosen as their king.

David is no longer David the king, but simply David the man, and he is no longer owed any loyalty. Hushai had been loyal to David when he reigned, but now Absalom had clearly taken David's place, and Hushai would be no less loyal to him.

Ahithophel was renowned for the shrewdness of his counsel, and Absalom turns to him for advice regarding what to do. Ahithophel advises Absalom publicly to humiliate his father by openly taking his father's concubines and lying with them.

This would be a sign of his father's emasculation and weakness, among other things. Sleeping with members of the former king's harem was a way of strengthening his claim to the throne. It also made the rebellion more absolute, closing off the possibility of reconciliation between the father and son.

People must take sides. In Genesis chapter 35 verse 22, Reuben had slept with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine, after the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel.

[9 : 32] This was a power play on Reuben's part. It asserted his dominance as the firstborn over his father and over Rachel's side of the family, who had always enjoyed Jacob's special favour.

Back in chapter 3, Ish-bosheth had, likely falsely, accused Abner of going into Rizpah, one of Saul's concubines. In 1 Kings chapter 2, Adonijah, after his failed coup, requested Abishag the Shunammite, likely again as part of another attempt to gain the kingdom.

All of this recalls David's original sin with Bathsheba too. Ahithophel, who gave the counsel, was Bathsheba's grandfather. The site where Absalom committed the act was the very place from which David had first looked out at Bathsheba.

There is a sort of poetic justice taking place here. David's own sins sowed bitter seeds that are now bearing a very bitter harvest, bringing the consequences back upon David's own head.

This all fulfils the judgment of the Lord delivered through Nathan the prophet, back in chapter 12, verses 11 to 12. Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this son.

[10 : 46] For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the Son. A question to consider. How does David's response to Shimei's cursing reveal a righteous response to divine judgment?

What might be some of the ways in which we might follow David's example?