

2 Samuel 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Samuel chapter 17 Moreover, Ahithophel said to Absalom, Let me choose twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue David tonight. I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged, and throw him into a panic, and all the people who are with him will flee.

I will strike down only the king, and I will bring all the people back to you as a bride comes home to her husband. You seek the life of only one man, and all the people will be at peace. And the advice seemed right in the eyes of Absalom and all the elders of Israel.

Then Absalom said, Call Hushai the archite also, and let us hear what he has to say. And when Hushai came to Absalom, Absalom said to him, Thus has Ahithophel spoken. Shall we do as he says? If not, you speak.

Then Hushai said to Absalom, This time the counsel that Ahithophel has given is not good. Hushai said, You know that your father and his men are mighty men, and that they are enraged like a bear robbed of her cubs in the field.

Besides, your father is expert in war. He will not spend the night with the people. Behold, even now he has hidden himself in one of the pits, or in some other place. And as soon as some of the people fall at the first attack, whoever hears it will say, There has been a slaughter among the people who follow Absalom.

[1 : 15] Then even the valiant man, whose heart is like the heart of a lion, will utterly melt with fear. For all Israel knows that your father is a mighty man, and that those who are with him are valiant men.

But my counsel is that all Israel be gathered to you, from Dan to Beersheba, as the sand by the sea for multitude, and that you go to battle in person. So we shall come upon him in some place where he is to be found, and we shall light upon him as the dew falls on the ground.

And of him and all the men with him not one will be left. If he withdraws into a city, then all Israel will bring ropes to that city, and we shall drag it into the valley, until not even a pebble is to be found there.

And Absalom and all the men of Israel said, The counsel of Hushai the Archite is better than the counsel of Ahithophel, for the Lord had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the Lord might bring harm upon Absalom.

Then Hushai said to Zadok and Abiathar the priests, Thus and so did Ahithophel counsel Absalom and the elders of Israel, and thus and so have I counseled. Now therefore send quickly and tell David, Do not stay tonight at the fords of the wilderness, but by all means pass over, lest the king and all the people who are with him be swallowed up.

[2 : 27] Now Jonathan and Ahimeaz were waiting at Enrogel. A female servant was to go and tell them, and they were to go and tell King David, for they were not to be seen entering the city.

But a young man saw them and told Absalom. So both of them went away quickly and came to the house of a man at Bahorim, who had a well in his courtyard, and they went down into it.

And the woman took and spread a covering over the well's mouth and scattered grain on it, and nothing was known of it. When Absalom's servants came to the woman at the house, they said, Where are Ahimeaz and Jonathan?

And the woman said to them, They have gone over the brook of water. And when they had sought and could not find them, they returned to Jerusalem. After they had gone, the men came up out of the well, and went and told King David.

They said to David, Arise and go quickly over the water, for thus and so has Ahithophel counseled against you. Then David arose, and all the people who were with him, and they crossed the Jordan.

[3 : 25] By daybreak not one was left who had not crossed the Jordan. When Ahithophel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his donkey, and went off home to his own city.

He set his house in order, and hanged himself. And he died and was buried in the tomb of his father. Then David came to Mahanaim, and Absalom crossed the Jordan with all the men of Israel. Now Absalom had set Amasa over the army instead of Joab. Amasa was the son of a man named Ithra the Ishmaelite, who had married Abigail, the daughter of Nahash, sister of Zeruiah, Joab's mother.

And Israel and Absalom encamped in the land of Gilead. When David came to Mahanaim, Shobai the son of Nahash from Rabba of the Ammonites, and Machir the son of Amiel from Lodabar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogalim, brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, flour, parched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds and sheep and cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat.

For they said, the people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness. Hushai the Archite, the friend and the advisor of King David, has returned to the city of Jerusalem, intending to get close to Absalom and serve under cover for David, while David is in exile.

[4 : 40] Unsurprisingly, Hushai came under immediate suspicion, on account of his friendship with David and his seemingly unstable loyalties. However, Hushai answered the questions of Absalom shrewdly, claiming that his loyalties had only ever been to the throne, and that now Absalom was manifestly the divinely intended and nationally acknowledged king of Israel.

In this answer, Hushai both resisted the implication that his loyalties were unstable, and he flattered Absalom by implying that Absalom's claim and grasp upon the throne was so certain that Hushai's loyalty to him would naturally be absolute.

Having survived this initial test, Hushai is now in a position to prostrate the council of Ahithophel in chapter 17. Ahithophel's council is for him to gather 12,000 men, an overwhelming force relative to David's small band, symbolically representing all Israel too, to pursue after David that night and to come upon him while he is weary and discouraged.

David's men would flee, and David would be captured. There is a general consensus that Ahithophel's council is correct. His council is held in the very highest esteem more generally. However, Hushai had so successfully made the case of his loyalties, that even with an almost complete agreement, Absalom still turns to him to ask for his advice.

Hushai now has his work cut out for him. He has to make a case compelling enough to win everyone away from the shrewd advice of Ahithophel, who is held in the very highest of esteem, and he has to commit them to a much less successful course, all while not arousing any suspicions.

[6 : 09] The way that he does so is nothing short of masterful. It's a brilliant display of persuasive rhetoric. Shimon bar Efrat helpfully analyses the way that Hushai achieves this. He declares that Ahithophel's advice is not good this time.

This affirms the general goodness of Ahithophel's council, while disagreeing on this particular occasion. And he pauses before he resumes. This creates some tension and anticipation. In verses 8-10 he explores the weak points, or supposedly weak points, of Ahithophel's plan.

And in verses 11-13 he proposes an alternative. Hushai's response downplays the significance of his own advice. Essentially he says to Absalom, You know. You know all of this already about your father.

You don't need me to tell you. David is Absalom's father and surely Absalom would know him very well. Hushai is careful not to draw too much attention to the part that he is playing. Hushai is also concerned to conform his advice to Absalom's point of view.

Hence the repetition of Your father. Ahithophel's advice, by contrast, was sloppy in this regard. It concerned David, the king, and one man. He did not successfully present things from Absalom's viewpoint.

[7 : 19] Hushai emphasises that the people with David are His men. He underlines their intense loyalty, suggesting that they won't be so readily divided from David, as Ahithophel's council implies.

They aren't just people, as Ahithophel speaks of them. Hushai doesn't say a lot of this explicitly. He communicates it with the way that he frames things. Their subtle insinuation can often be more powerful than the explicit claim.

He frames the fact that David and his men are mighty men and enraged, as if these things are essential features of their character. And he underlines both of these characteristics. He uses

colourful illustrations.

A bear robbed of her cubs. Throughout, Hushai's language is vivid and compelling. He evokes the heroic period of David's life by his descriptions, with talks about bears and lions and all these mighty deeds.

Absalom and his men might have thought that they were pursuing an aged king, but David is still, at heart, the hero of Israel. He also, in response to an argument from Ahithophel founded on David's condition, focuses on David's character.

[8 : 21] He emphasises David's preparedness as a man of war, and suggests that there are a great many hiding spots he could use, giving a particular illustration. He suggests that David and his men might well be lying in wait for a pursuing army, ready to strike a damaging blow, and that rumours of David's strike against Absalom's men could easily spread, blowing up into tales of a great defeat, all serving to turn the tide against him.

The hearts of former supporters of Absalom would fail them, whereas he had previously spoken of David's men. When speaking of the men around Absalom, he merely speaks of them as the people who follow Absalom, implying that they could easily be divided from him if things turned sour.

He speaks about David's valiant men in the plural, but he gives an example of even the valiant man among Absalom's forces, insinuating that Absalom's men are of a very different calibre.

The valiant man is exceptional, not typical among them. He concludes by broadening his claim about knowledge. Not only does Absalom know these things about David, his father, all Israel does. Now things are set up for his alternative proposal. David's men are of such great quality that they can only be overcome by great quantity. Absalom needs to muster men from throughout Israel, and this will buy David valuable time.

[9 : 38] Again, Hushai is careful to make his language colourful and compelling. He uses similes drawn from nature, as the sand of the sea for multitude, and as the dew falls on the ground. His language is also redolent of the language of divine promise and truth, and so is much more calculated to receive a positive response.

The comprehensive references to Israel, all Israel, and from Dan to Beersheba, suggest not only the extensiveness of the force, but also Absalom's status as the commander of the entire nation.

Whereas Ahithophel foregrounds himself as the one who would work out his plan, Hushai constantly speaks of we, and more importantly, of you, in reference to Absalom.

All of Israel should be gathered to Absalom, and Absalom should go out before them. This plays to Absalom's aspirations. In the second part of the speech, David is passive, and his men's loyalty is downplayed.

Even if David uses the time he is granted to fortify himself in a city, and he is found there, the city can be torn down by the sheer numbers of people against him, and there will be nothing found of that city anymore, not even David.

[10 : 43] There is no mention of fighting. The victory will be almost a matter of course on account of the overwhelming force. Absalom and the men of Israel, who might be different from the elders of Israel who were mentioned earlier, are won over by Hushai's brilliant speech.

However, despite Hushai's shrewd rhetoric, it is ultimately the Lord that makes him successful. Hushai then relays the news to Jonathan and Ahimeaz, the sons of the priests, who would send the message on to David.

They are discovered, however, and Absalom's servants go looking for them, while they fled to Behorim, where David had been cursed earlier by Shimei. There they are hidden by a woman, who sends the men out in a different direction, and this is all reminiscent of the story of Rahab and Jericho.

They then bring the news to David, and they all cross over the Jordan that night. This might remind us of the story of the Exodus and being pursued to the Red Sea, crossing over the Red Sea by night, or perhaps also Jacob's crossing of the Jabbok.

When he sees that his counsel is rejected, Ahithophel goes, puts his affairs in order, and kills himself. This might seem to be an overreaction to the situation, but it is probably more likely that he saw ahead and recognised what was going to happen when his advice was rejected and Hushai's followed.

[11 : 56] Having crossed over the Jordan, David and his men came to Mahanaim, while Absalom crossed the Jordan in pursuit of him with all of the men of Israel. This associates David with Jacob. Jacob had spent time with Mahanaim when Esau's forces were coming out against him.

At Mahanaim, David receives aid from kings and others of the region who provide him and his men with various of the necessities that they need. A question to consider. Wisdom and shrewdness are common themes in this and the preceding chapters. What may be some of the lessons that we are supposed to draw about wisdom through these chapters?